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UNRESOLVED TENSION, PERPETUAL
CONFLICT:
THE WORKS OF E. N. ZIRIMU OF UGANDA

Bede Ssensalo

The individual works of Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu, "The Hen and the Groundnuts," "Keeping Up With the Mukasas," "Family Spear," "When the Hunchback Made Rain," and "Snoring Strangers," could collectively be called a panorama of paradoxes. In each, simple characters, catapulted between traditional African customs and the ways of modern "progressed" society, enact psychologically complex scenes. In each, Zirimu manipulates terse dialogue between innuendoes of social (and some say political) realities to create a sense of mystery defying conclusion: the dramatic action builds, a climax is achieved, yet the psychological conflict is never totally resolved.

"The Hen and the Groundnuts," a very short, seemingly autobiographical short story, examines the distinction between the manner in which girls and boys are raised in a typical African household, from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old girl charged with the responsibility of preparing an evening meal while the other siblings are left free to play. Distracted by the shouts and laughter of the other children and prompted by her own "not fair" assessment of the situation, the girl abandons her culinary duties to join in the outdoor games. There, the uninviting glances of her brothers coupled with the early termination of the game cause her to return to the kitchen where chickens are feasting on the groundnuts "which were to make the sauce for supper." Flabbergasted, disgusted, the girl decides to "punish" the chickens and manages to hit one on the head with a pestle. However, when the bird falls "lifeless just near the fire," her momentary jubilee ends. Fearing the wrath of her parents, she makes numerous futile attempts to revive the listless chicken-vaseline applications to its head,

"rocking it like a baby," fanning it with a banana leaf--until plunging into a basin of water finally produces the desired awakening. The next morning, when the mother remarks that she failed to taste arachis groundnuts in the sauce the night before, Zirimu's protagonist says, "I held my peace." Indeed she did, and thus the inner conflict continues. Never did she ask her mother the question she addressed to herself when overcome with feelings of self-pity: "Why should the boys be playing and enjoying themselves while I alone labour for greedy sakes?" Never did she express her self-proclaimed right: the "right to play as well as anybody else." Never did she verbalize her resentment for one of the most prevalent of African customs - the subjugated servile role of women.

In the one-act play "Keeping Up With the Mukasas," which takes place in an upper-middle class household in Buganda around 1962, Zirimu parodies one family's attempt to duplicate the material accomplishments of its neighbors, the Salis, and, at the same time, traces the family's present state of dissolution. The first of the two scenes overflows with pain: everyone is hurting; no one is satisfied; there is always something new and more modern, like what the Salis own, needing to be purchased. Zebia, the mother, is a genteel, martyr-like character, self-sacrificing and ever-aware of what constitutes wealth and what her family cannot afford. As the protector of her children, she is alternately the peacemaker or the scapegoat right in the middle of her husband's increasing insensitive tirades. Mwebe, the father, has alienated himself from his wife and children. His young sons, allude to but never seen, stay of his sight and his daughter, Namata, discusses his tyrannical behavior with her mother. "Why is Father always so brutal? Always hitting or shouting at somebody," she asks. Zebia explains that Mwebe, after losing his office job in town to someone who supposedly could speak better English, simply changed. No longer in the big house near town, the embittered Mwebe "had to work very hard and the harder he worked the more impatient he became." Mwebe, on the other hand, claims to be "content" with what he and his family possess, although his words throughout the entire first scene negate his professed satisfaction:

I am going to change this radio for a better one...
I'll see what I can get for this one first, and then
find out how much a new one like the Salis's will cost...

They're [the Salis] getting a new car. He must be
earning a lot. She was using an electric iron...

Yes, I have to wait till it pleases him [Sali] to talk to me. He was always below me in class, but because he could afford a secondary education and I couldn't, that puts him above me on the social scale! I won't have it.

We can have our meals on time at least, even if we aren't educated, can't we? Surely you don't need to have gone to school to know that.

By the way, did you know Namata went to ask Sali's daughter to help her with her homework?

You let other people feel their superiority over us by allowing yourself to depend on them. First you let her [Namata] go and use their sewing machine, so I take the trouble to borrow money in order to buy one. Then you borrow that woman's sash; and now this.

The scene ends with Zebia and Mwebe exploding at each other; she berating him for his irascibility, for the terror he instills in the children; he denigrating her for her stupidity, for her perpetual "lean look of discontent," for not giving him his meals on time, for caring more for the children than for him, and for being selfish and ignorant. At that point Namata returns to the room with her father's requested lunch. He, however, does not want it because "it's long past lunch time."

In the second and final scene of "Keeping Up With the Mukasa," Zirimu's masterful use of irony comes to the forefront. An hour after the close of the first scene, the Salis, husband and wife, come to call. Unable to visit long because they have yet to eat lunch, Mrs. Sali and Zebia go outside to examine the Salis's new car while the men tend to their business inside. Confiding to Mwebe that his wife is "the plague" of his life, always wanting things and always insisting upon having her own way, Sali complains about the expense he incurs sending his children to boarding school (because his wife said they "couldn't go to day school like everyone else's"). He tells Mwebe that the new car (which his wife pestered him to get for two years) is beyond his means: "I don't think I can afford to run a car, let alone pay a debt on top of that. Don't be surprised if I end up in prison." After the Salis leave Mwebe apparently realizes that his gripes against his family are superfluous. Musing to himself about Mrs. Sali he says, "Lord, what a woman; I wouldn't get a wife like that for all the fine cars and houses

in the world." Namata then runs into the house looking for her mother and instead finds her father who, in a complete about-face, becomes interested in the trifling affairs of his children. As he asks his daughter's permission to accompany her outside to survey a picture his youngest son has drawn on the ground, the play ends - and the reader is left wondering if this marks the beginning of a new Mwebe? Will he be able to balance his desire to acquire the implements of modern technology with his emotional and psychological responsibilities to his family, as grounded in African tradition? Or, will he continue striving to "keep up with the Mukasas," neglecting all else during the course of his endeavor.

"Family Spear," Zirimu's one-act radio play, explores another avenue of the conflict between traditional and modern Africa, this time through a newlywed groom's almost schizophrenic attempts to adhere to the rites of the old custom and his bride's efforts to please both him and his family. The drama begins with the groom's mother Debya and her sister-in-law Nnakidde discussing the peculiar behavior of the groom's father Seekisa - in particular, his over anxiousness to see his son married and his driving away all of his four married daughters as well as the unmarried one after the couple's wedding so that, contrary to custom, no one would be left to attend to the bride other than her mother-in-law. While Zirimu's characters never divulge the exact nature of the relationship between Seekisa and his son Muweesi, the animosity between them becomes obvious in the earliest references to the family spear, the symbol of a family's lineage, of power passed down from father to son, from generation to generation. Nnakidde, upon entering the newlywed's quarters, wonders why "these people keep the family spear in the children's front room these days." Later, Debya entreats her to "take it [the spear], and keep it in *your* house." "Take it to your house and keep it safe there," she begs. Though Nnakidde refuses, the two finally discuss the real problem - the trouble of the old custom - and recount various disasters which befell other families because of it: a father burning himself alive along with all of the family sheep and goats because his son "would not let him touch his bride the way a father-in-law has always done"; a young man killing himself with a spear "rather than allow his father to break his bride for him." Indeed Zirimu foreshadows the balance of the play when the women concur, "This wrenching free of the past will cost us much blood."

In the next sequence of dialogue, that between Muweesi and his bride Birungi, Zirimu again alludes to the dilemma; this time, however from the perspective of the young couple. Muweesi, who originally had insisted that "all the marriage rites be done according to custom," has

drawn an invisible line of demarcation relative to those customs which he refuses to bring into the open. Avoiding a direct confrontation with his father, he instead releases his frustrations on his wife who is making a simultaneous attempt to please everyone - her husband (who does not know what he wants or at least will not say), her father-in-law, and herself. The momentum builds, the inevitable occurs; Birungi makes "the sacrifice," Muweesi raises the family spear against his father, and the couple sets out into the night. Again, the real conflict is never resolved; the family is divided against itself and no one purports to be able to help.

By way of contrast, the protagonists in Zirimu's two-act religious satire, "When the Hunchback Made Rain," attempt to take their problems directly to God. Trespassing onto God's forbidden inner sanctuary in quest of rain, two desperate peasants, Kaboggoza and Nsereko, encounter God's serving girl Nabikolo and set before her their plight: withered crops, starvation, general misery, and God's continued neglect despite their regular offerings. As she ushers them out Nabikolo reassures them, "We will find a way of bringing the rain." Exit peasants, enter God - shouting for his shoes, shouting for water, lamenting the trials of being God. "Do you think it is a laughing matter to listen to thousands of humans, begging for millions of trifles which do not carry the slightest meaning to me, one way or the other," he asks Nabikolo. "What does it all matter to me? What does your lot think I am," he continues. "I can't change the earth any more than I can make a fig tree bear mangoes," he says. Persuaded by the girl to relieve himself of some of his "silly duties," God gives the power to make rain to the hunchback Kirabira, his attaché or guard of sorts, and tells him to be sure to attend to the peasant Kaboggoza's request. Although literally a hunchback is one with a hump on his or her back, for Zirimu Kirabira symbolizes all who would intercede between man and his God, e.g., priests, ministers, witch doctors, and the like. After God and Nabikolo have left the sanctuary and while he is supposedly guarding the outer gate, Kirabira returns to God's inner sanctuary to help himself to more of the millet brew supplied by the peasants. Drunk with power, drunk with drink, the hunchback encounters Nsereko and begins bullying him. Nsereko, while begging for mercy, discovers the hunchback's intoxication and threatens to let God know "you keep drunk on duty." To circumvent this, Kirabira tells Nsereko to fetch the rain sheet "lying there, somewhere by the gate...and water your miserable shamba." The act concludes with Kirabira sitting down to attend his drink.

The second act begins with Kaboggoza dragging Nsereko and interrogating him. "Why does rain come to your shamba, and not to

mine," he asks. Nsereko, attempting to evade the issue, implies that receiving the rain must be one of the mysterious workings of God. Finally, however, unable to withstand Kaboggoza torturing him any longer, Nsereko spills the truth. Next Kaboggoza, searching for and finding the hunchback in a drunken stupor, begs for rain only to be verbally assaulted by Kirabira. In a fit of rage he kills the hunchback then hides the body in the mango tree as he enacts a plan to make Nsereko believe that he, not Kaboggoza, murdered God's servant. As planned and Nsereko leaves for God's Court to report his misdeed. After a short while an elated Nsereko returns and tells Kaboggoza he learned God had offered a secret reward to anyone who would rid him of the nuisance Kirabira. He had only returned to make sure the hunchback was really dead. In light of the reward, Kaboggoza confesses to the crime and goes to collect what turns out to be nothing more than the wrath of God. Sentenced to death by the Almighty, Kaboggoza now understands: "When a poor man kills, let him be killed; when a big man kills, let him be richly rewarded; and when God kills, that is the law." Zirimu's sentiments perhaps?

"Snoring Strangers," originally performed in 1973 under the title "Taabu y'Asungwe," is an allegorical tale about two very simple men attempting to walk away from a plague only to discover it has wreaked havoc everywhere. The play opens in a village somewhere between life and death just before dawn, with Basajja making a futile attempt to converse with Byanaku, who has drifted off into sleep. As morning approaches the two hear sounds of humming and murmuring, sounds of people intoning prayers, which swell, then subside, then die away completely. Basajja wants to leave. He senses something eerie about the village and says he does not trust the people there (although he has only seen one person and did not even see his face). The reason he distrusts them, he says, is because "you *feel* them and you can't see them." By midday the two have decided to continue their journey but, weary from travel and lack of nourishment, neither can remember the direction from whence they came. As they begin to argue, passersby in the unidentified host village look on. After a while one of the hosts gives Basajja a map which he and Byanaku regard intently, only to find the exact same features - swamps and forests and grasslands - in every direction. The hosts find this amusing as they begin to enact a bizarre pantomime which the strangers interpret to mean that they may rest in the village only if they sleep quietly. Any noise (such as snoring), they conclude, will be sufficient cause for their death. Now Basajja and Byanaku are really determined to move on, and in so doing, Basajja stumbles and falls over a dead body. They then reconsider their origins

decision to leave, thinking perhaps they were a bit nasty to abandon their hosts in the middle of the night without even saying goodbye. Tired, Byanaku lies down and goes to sleep, snoring all the while. Following suit, Basajja does likewise. While they sleep the hosts return carrying bundles of twigs with which to light a fire. Now another ritualistic pantomime begins, this time with the hosts burning the strangers' bedding (the two have been awakened) along with their old clothes. Feeling lighter and more comfortable, Byanaku no longer is anxious to leave the strange village. On the other hand, Basajja, still hungry, is even more desirous to depart. All the while, the sound of drums is increasing and "people run helter skelter screaming in terror...as if they're pursued." Finally, a man and a woman recording the number of people dead stop to examine Basajja, who refuses to remove his clothes. Pronouncing him dead they turn to Byanaku. "Most certainly alive," they write before they begin to walk away. Basajja tries in vain to convince them that he, too, is very much alive. If so, they tell him, "then you have no right to be here; this place is only for the dead." Basajja, indignant, entreats Byanaku to follow after them and find out what it all means. When he returns the play ends. Byanaku informs Basajja that the man and the woman, "they who were here just now," are dead. "It's the plague," he says, "even here...there's no running away."

This "it's everywhere" theme runs rampant throughout Zirimu's works, "it" encompassing everything that relates to the Ugandan people. In the above play the plague could perhaps have been symbolic of the dis-ease (uneasiness) so prevalent during the Amin regime. A certain degree of discomfort "affected" everyone throughout the country - "even here, there's no running away." The relationship between God and the peasants in "When the Hunchback Made Rain" is perhaps indicative of a growing disillusionment among the populace concerning religion and/or again, the Amin regime. In a semi-soliloquy Kaboggoza asked, "Do the thin limbs of our children please you; does human misery amuse the Almighty?" Likewise during times of adversity the people often ponder, "Has God forsaken us? Is he too busy to concern himself with our trifling affairs?" In "Family Spear," the father-versus-son, old-versus-new conflict is just as provocative. Walking away from an unpleasant set of circumstances as Muweesi did does not rectify anything; the problem does not go away or disappear; and, in fact, it becomes even more of a problem - a family unit is dissolved and without unity there is no strength. A similar everyday happening occurs in "Keeping Up With the Mukasas." A man, Mwebe, so bent on trying to match the accomplishments of his neighbors, bails to recognize the wealth he has

at home; he is so caught up in the advances of the modern world that he forgets the richness of the family structure and his role in preserving family unity. And finally, in "The Hen and the Groundnuts," the girl's anger for failing to release her resentment for the subjugated role of women has allowed a sore to begin to fester deep inside where one day it may erupt, either outwardly like a volcano destroying all within its path or inwardly like a dreadful cancer eating away at the very core of her being. In an interview with June Deckter, Zirimu once said that theater in Uganda is more socially oriented (meaning that it is not necessarily political) "and, therefore, it cannot help...concerning itself with a reflection of what's going on among the people." In this vein, the works of Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu are exemplary.

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