

Contesting Constructions of Cultural Production in & through Urban Theatre in Rhodesia, c. 1890–1950

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In this article I attempt to analyse three urban African performances; *Nyawo*, the tea party, and *Beni*. I employ the socio-historical analysis model which attempts to understand the relationship between the field of cultural production and the field of power. Historically the ascendancy to power of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe facilitated the assimilation of its culture and taste by virtually all of Western civil society. Colonisation in Rhodesia (in its blue print form) intended to use the same principle of extending English rulership and influence with the goal of transforming Rhodesia to be like the metropolitan state in manifesting the nature and will of the English in lifestyle, actions, activities and culture.¹ As evidenced by the nature of these urban African performances, domination does not necessarily result in absolute collaboration. Rhodesian discourse was both collaborated with and resisted by African cultural producers. I look at this element of collaboration and resistance through Ranajit Guha's (1997) frame of the articulation of power where domination implies subordination. In the case of colonial administrations, coercion seems to outweigh persuasion in the articulation of domination thereby denying absolute assimilation of colonial culture by Africans as was the case of civil society in Western Europe.

Rhodesian discourse and power

According to Michel Foucault (1976) discourse is an institutionalised way of thinking that intrinsically erects a cordon to define what can be written, performed or said about a specific topic. In theorising about the discourse on language, Foucault (1976) argues that the production of discourse is controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to clearly defined procedures. It, therefore, follows that a discourse is an invented truth manufactured by a dominant group in a society and peddled as the only acceptable way of thinking and doing things as Foucault adumbrates '[e]ach society has its regime of truth...that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true...' (1980: 131). Rhodesian discourse was a collection of

'truths' manufactured by European scholars (such as Hegel, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, De Gobineau, Linnaeus, Blumenbach and others) who formulated cultural frames that were applied by various European empires. Their ideas are often grouped together in postcolonial criticism as colonial discourse, which is/was a framework sometimes used by Europeans living in Africa and/or diasporic Europeans to represent Africans² as pathological or the inferior other. Rhodesians³ were influenced by philosophical and (pseudo-)scientific works of these scholars in their dealings with Africans. The whole vision of colonialism in Rhodesia was summed up by Cecil John Rhodes, the proprietor of the Chartered Company (British South Africa Company) that ran the country until 1922, who declared '[e]qual rights for all civilised men' (Mamdani, 1996: 17). The 'uncivilised' African would be subjected to a process of tutelage in order to enjoy the privileges of citizenship.

Rhodesian discourse covered a whole spectrum of intellectual activity including the field of cultural production (theatre, literature, drama, film, music, dance and fine art). Pierre Bourdieu provides a framework that post-colonial theory has appropriated to explain the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, and in our case between the dominant white Rhodesians and the dominated black Africans. The struggle in the Rhodesian cultural field over the imposition of the legitimate public imagery is inseparable from the struggle between white Rhodesians and African cultural producers to impose principles or definitions of human accomplishment. Bourdieu offers an explanation that is equally applicable to the Rhodesian field of cultural production, where he argues that:

The field of cultural production is the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definitions of the writer (artist)... In short the fundamental stake in literary struggles is the monopoly of power to say with authority who are authorised to call themselves writers ... it is the monopoly of the power to consecrate producers or products... (Emphasis added, 1993: 42)

This struggle to impose the dominant discourse is explicable in terms of what Foucault calls 'power' which resonates with Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of 'rule', although the two terms are not necessarily synonymous. Rule constitutes the coercive apparatus of the state established according to law in order to exclude, blockade and repress those groups who do not agree to the various forms of domination by the coloniser. Even where there is no evidence of non-compliance Gramsci (*ibid.*) argues that this apparatus is proactively put in place in anticipation of moments of crisis. However, power and rule would be fragile phenomena if they worked on the level of force, or to put it in Foucauldian terms, 'exercising itself only in a negative way' (1980: 59). Hegemony and discourse come in to supplement power and rule. Gramsci defines hegemony as 'the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general directions imposed on social life by the dominant group' (*ibid.*: 12). This consent given to Europeans by Africans comes 'naturally' due to the perceived accumulated prestige of the white cultural producers. This consent was given grudgingly in Rhodesia after both the

Ndebele and the Shona were defeated in the 1893 Anglo-Ndebele war and the 1996–7 Anglo-Shona war. Although force was occasionally used to recruit local labour and suppress black workers' strikes, colonialism proceeded in Rhodesia through the soft power of a discourse that persuaded Africans to view themselves as inferior to the white race. This came through a discourse embedded in a skewed education curriculum (Rodney, 1989; O'Callaghan, 1977) which promoted such values. This was reinforced by processes of economic and cultural undermining by the imposition of European systems in most aspects of life. Persuasion, however, was by far outweighed by coercion.

In order to get that spontaneous consent Rhodesians had to produce knowledge that justified the domination of Africans. It seems to me that power cannot exist without the knowledge which justifies it. Power, therefore, insists upon the production of discourses of a particular 'truth', which it forces cultural producers to speak and write about. Power will continually renew, recreate and modify itself until it is capable of institutionalising and professionalising every field including rewarding producers who further its pursuits. In a way, power, far from denying knowledge produces knowledge to serve it. Power and knowledge support and imply one another.

The Bourdieusian diagram representing the field of cultural production and the field of power can be reinterpreted and modified to dramatise the power relations between the Rhodesian field of power and the artistic field with its sub-fields of European theatre and African theatre. It will explain how African cultural producers resisted and collaborated with colonial authorities by demonstrating centres of sameness, difference and resistance.

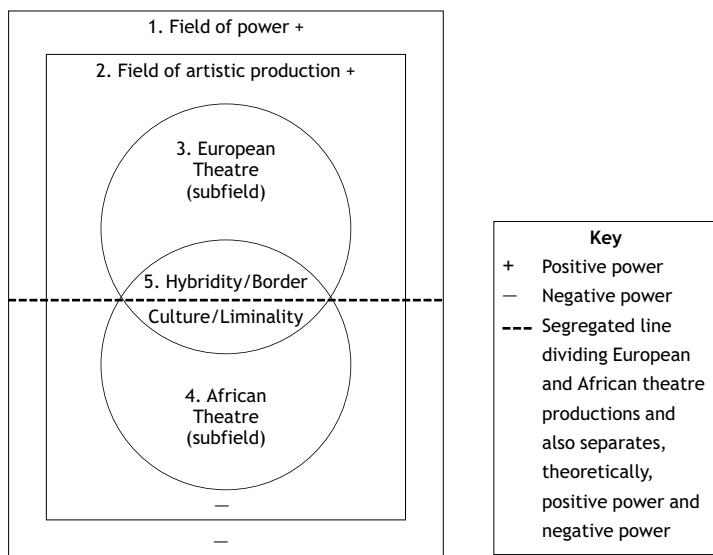


Fig. 1. The Field of Artistic Production

The field of power (1) is the one that generates the laws for social engineering as well as the ideology and discourse to justify its power. However, the field of power is weak on its own. It must depend on cultural structures for its coherence and justification. Something needs to supply an explanation for colonialism and this is the field of artistic production (2) which subsumes a variety of subfields within it. For our purposes, I have singled out two subfields (3) and (4) representing European and African theatre respectively. The imaginary broken line represents a racially segregated artistic field and also divides all fields into two polarities – the positive (+) and powerful pole which is occupied by whites and the negative (-) less powerful pole which is occupied by mostly black cultural producers. The artistic field is a site of struggle since agents who occupy available positions 3, 4 and 5 are in a perennial competition for two things – public imagery which must be allowed to float in the minds of people and symbolic and cultural capital. This is an unfair competition, particularly during the colonial period because agents occupying positions 4 and 5 (blacks) lack adequate power to decide on spaces where they can show their images as well as power to consecrate their artistes. The power to give these resources lies outside the field of African theatre. It lies with academics, publishers, critics and producers who are conduits of colonial power. As the black artist moves from the bottom of position 4 to position 5, the more capital s/he gets in terms of recognition, consecration and prestige. Because of the subjectivity and agency of the black playwright, there is a limit to which the artistic and political field can exert force on her creativity. The intersecting area represents the point of contact, sameness, and at the same time difference. This is the point of entanglement where hybrid texts are formed.

Even if blacks occupying positions 4 and 5 are subjected to the same pressures they resist them in different ways. Agents occupying position 4 have largely refused to succumb to the external structures and continue to produce traditional theatre. This explains the phenomenon of the co-habitation of both modernity and tradition in the same geopolitical space. These agents have customs and laws of their own that preserve them even against the harshest external conditions, for example ceremonial performances (weddings and coronations) continued to be performed. Ritual performances that had to do with the survival of the community such as the rain-making ceremony (*doro romukwerera*) continued even with stiff opposition from resident missionaries (McCulloch, 2000). However, for many communities, maintaining a positive relationship with nature was more important than obeying colonial laws such as the African Affairs Act and the Witchcraft Suppression Act which forbade such practices.

Sally Moore (1978) has provided anthropological theories of resistance that are useful to explain the production and maintenance of black performances in the early days of the colonial city. She argues that the process of regularisation of society through ideologies, social systems, laws, rules and force or the threat of it do not always produce what she calls 'situational adjustment'. This is as a result of continuous struggle between pressure to establish or maintain order or regularity and the attendant counter-activities and complexity that make life unsuited to absolute ordering. Imposed rules, customs and frameworks that

operate in a community, she argues, work in the presence of areas of ‘indeterminacy’, ‘ambiguity’, ‘uncertainty’ and ‘manipulability’. Social relationships and processes are in their nature mutable and to impose laws is an attempt to fix their mutability. She argues that order never fully takes place. Moore’s theoretical position aptly explains the existence of African performances in the then Salisbury and other mining towns even though both missionaries and colonialists had banned some of them. Bans and prohibitions did not always result in compliance, as can be seen in the following examples. On 18 August 1899 the British South Africa Company passed the Witchcraft Suppression Act which defined witchcraft as ‘the throwing of bones, the use of charms and any other means or devices adopted in the practice of sorcery’ (Statute Law of Zimbabwe, 1899: 295). This ordinance was used to ban *mhande*, a Shona traditional dance (Plastow, 1996). *Nyauo* was banned in the mid 1920s (Parry, 1999). The courtship dance (*mbende*), danced by the Zezuru (a sub-group of the Shona) was banned in 1910, but continued under an undercover name (*jerusarema*) (Asante, 2000: 44). Missionaries had the power to ban a dance which they thought was not consistent with Christian values and this had been the fate of *mbende*. The same missionary, however, reinstated the dance after a plea by the local chief in Mrewa⁴ (ibid.).

Ranjit Guha (1997) while talking about Indian experiences of colonialism concurs with Sally Moore and goes further to give his own reason for the failure of the colonial administration to achieve absolute assimilation of colonial subjects as had happened between the Western bourgeoisie and its civil society. He argues that colonialism relied on autocracy (instead of democracy), coercion and force in order to subjugate its subjects. In this kind of domination coercion far outweighed persuasion for there could be no colonialism without force. Guha calls this condition ‘non-hegemonic’ (where the term hegemony is used to describe a system of domination where persuasion outweighs coercion) and argues that domination cannot be absolute where force is applied more than persuasion. He proffers the argument that in this particular case the articulation of domination is followed by subordination which is characterised by both collaboration and resistance. This seems to be true when applied to the Rhodesian field of cultural production as evidenced by performances that reflect this condition of collaboration and resistance. Early African migrant workers did not become bewildered and passive aliens in a white world. Neither did they jettison their cultural baggage upon entering a predominantly white city.

Oral performance as collaboration and resistance

Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) between 1890 and 1930 did not have a standard Shona orthography.⁵ Missionaries translated the Bible and wrote books and pamphlets using dialect systems that they had independently developed in their areas of jurisdiction. It follows that there is no known written play that has survived to provide evidence of written drama during this period.

However, this is not to suggest that there were no African performances during the period 1890–1950, nor that the history of performance began with the arrival of Europeans. Since I am interested in how African theatre and performance responded to given socio-political conditions and experiences, it follows that I draw examples from the historical trajectory influenced by colonialism. Another interesting dimension of this oral performance period is that there is a general absence of Shona and Ndebele people from the repertory of urban performances, which is where real contact between Europeans and Africans was more pronounced.⁶ The urban space, therefore, presents a fertile case study of African cultural responses to colonial discourse. Paradoxically, a large proportion of the urban African population was drawn from outside Rhodesia. Most of the immigrants came from Malawi, Zambia, the DRC and Mozambique. While for towns located in drought prone areas like Bulawayo, the population of local Ndebele people was relatively higher, Salisbury (now Harare) was marked by a relative scarcity of Shona people.⁷ The significance of this is that the cultural life of the early urban dwellers in Rhodesia was dominated by northern ethnic groups. The lingua franca of most of the mining towns, settlements and cities was Chinyanja – the urban language of northern ethnic groups. It follows that performances, music and other forms of recreational culture had a northern flavour. According to Yoshikuni (1999) this trend began to change after 1950 when large numbers of Shona migrants settled in the towns – especially Salisbury. Before 1950, according to Yoshikuni, the Shonas in Salisbury were less than 40 per cent of the African population, however, he demonstrates that '[t]he proportion of Southern Rhodesian Africans rose from 41 per cent in 1951 to 72 per cent in 1962 and 83 per cent in 1969' (Yoshikuni, 1999: 120). It is thus not surprising that from 1968, we see an exponential growth of drama written in African languages as well as oral performances from the increasing numbers of urban Africans in Rhodesian.

Kirby (1974) has argued that African oral performances can be broken down into the following seven categories. They consist of simple enactments (such as *mahumbwe*/child role playing), ritual enactments (such as *doro romukwerera*/rain making ceremony), story-telling performances (*ngano*), spirit-cult enactments (*bira*/ancestor worship), ceremonial performances (weddings, coronations, *Beni*) and comedies (*ndyaringo*). However, the missionaries tolerated some of these, and banned others, particularly any performance modes that praised or worshipped what they perceived to be 'heathen' gods, like ritual enactments and spirit cult enactments. With a few possible exceptions, these remained banned in areas under full control of missionaries.

How then did oral performances collaborate with and resist colonial discourse? Going back to Figure 1 above, I would argue that there were oral performances that appropriated Western styles and mocked Rhodesian discourse from within by refusing to be wholly Western. These include tea parties and *Beni* performances. The other category of dances such as *Nyawo* were refused entry into the arena accepted by colonials. When *Nyawo* performances were banned they went underground and continued to be performed once at the start of each new moon out in the secluded darker areas of the city. The

banning, according to Parry (1999) took place in 1920. What is known, however, is that it was brought by immigrants from Malawi who came to Southern Rhodesia looking for work at the beginning of colonisation in the 1890s and throughout the early twentieth century. The other variation of *Nyawo* came from Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) via Zambian job seekers. According to Sambo (2002) Zambian immigrants brought what he calls the 'social Nyawo performance' while Malawian immigrants brought what he calls the 'mysterious type'. The mysterious *Nyawo* is a ritualistic performance played once a month. Although it is entertaining, its main purpose is efficacy achieved by initiating neophytes, giving supplication to the spirits of the dead and maintaining cosmic order. For this reason it is a religious institution only welcoming those who are born into it: the Chewa. The social *Nyawo* is non-ritualistic. It can be performed at social gatherings, dance festivals and galas for entertainment. There is no religious motif to it. Historical explanations, for example Rangely (1952) as cited by Sambo (2002) offer Tanzania and the DRC (formerly Belgian Congo/Zaire) as the origin of *Nyawo*. The performance moved further south into Malawi and Mozambique through intermittent migrations. Sambo, relying on the work of Rangely (ibid.) mentions that *Nyawo* or *Gule WaMkulu*, as it is known in Chewa language, was brought into Malawi by the Maravi people from Lubaland in the DRC. Oral tradition indicates that the performance was invented in Malawi during a famine as a way of getting food from villagers who came to watch this dance. A character called Phiri was later joined by dignitaries of the village wearing masks as they did not want to be seen as partaking in a somewhat demeaning way of getting alms from equally starving people (Sambo, ibid.). The performance developed into a masked dance. This is the performance that was brought to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) by young Malawians seeking for fortune from about 1900.

In the early 1900s *Nyawo* performance absolutely refused to collaborate with colonial demands. These early *Nyawo* performances were embellished with skin paintings, masks made of animal skins and feathers as a way of constructing characters. They put on masks of animals such as cows (*chimombemombe*) zebras and ostriches. With time, an element of collaboration with colonial discourse crept into the *Nyawo* performance, as evidenced by how the costumes changed from skins and feathers to cotton and synthetic fabric. Some characters were constructed from colonial and Catholic religious figures that were popular during the early days of colonialism to both emulate and mock them. In order to be larger than life, they developed masks that took on certain characters. Sambo (ibid.) has included a list of characters that *Nyawo* dancers played. Colonial figures that were satirised included the Native District Commissioner, the colonial figure who was authorised to interact with Africans in Tribal Trust Lands, as well as popular white characters in Western films and novels like James Bond. The dancer playing James Bond was adorned in a suit and put on a white mask to suggest a white person. The masked dancer playing the Native District Commissioner would be clothed in appropriate uniform complete with uniform, helmet and baton stick. Catholic figures that were satirised included Maria (the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus) who was dressed in white

apparel decorated with all kinds of ornaments and a white faced mask to suggest her white race. The Pope (Papa) was also another character played by the *Nyauo* dancers costumed in appropriate robes and papal emblems. Biblical characters like Simon were created with white or yellow paint on the face with a brunette wig to suggest a white person.

Never would a *Nyauo* dancer reveal his identity as a masquerade character. Performers rarely spoke to each other as this might reveal their identities to members of the audience who might recognise their voices. They made muffled sounds and sang, and the small apertures in the masks further distorted their voices beyond recognition. Owing to the aspect of violence in the *Nyauo* ritual, during the colonial era, a *Nyauo* dancer was a 'criminal' in a mask – never to be discovered because he committed crimes incognito and never admitted to them after the ritual was over. The mask offered another opportunity for resistance insofar as some masks presented white personas, often figures central to the Catholic faith. A *Nyauo* performance was a ritual dance where characters interacted with spirits from the graveyard, indeed, preparations for the dance originated from a *makolo*, a graveyard or a bush which gave the audience the impression that performers were not real human beings, but spirits visiting the human world, and for initiations the dance was performed in a bush clearing called *dambwe* in the case of male initiates and for the same space *tsimba* in the case of female initiates.

Thus for Catholic characters to emerge within such an intensely 'heathen' practice was an affront to Catholicism and Christianity. *Nyauo* dancers took turns to dance randomly and spontaneously according to the tempo and rhythm of the drum. To present a white persona (religious or political) amongst other mystical beings dancing in the most grotesque of patterns to an African drum was standing Rhodesian discourse on its head and exploding the 'preferred' and politically correct transparent image of whiteness. European bodies that came to Rhodesia carried with them a lot of cultural baggage. In other words they were cultural bodies that were supposed to radiate manners, values and comportment of what Shilling (1997) has called 'civilised' bodies. Throughout the medieval times and the court societies the European body became subject to expanding taboos transforming it into a site for an expression of behavioural codes (see Shilling, *ibid.*: 63–103). The Victorian and Edwardian body that came to Rhodesia embodied those values. To enact this 'civilised body' giving up its taboos and adopting the Bakhtian grotesque body in an intensely African ethnic dance was an insult to Victorian values. It was both tragic, shattering the preferred image, and comic, as it brought relief to Africans who played and/ or watched Europeans being satirised. It was affirming the European image through emulation and at the same time mocking it by caricaturing it. A white person in Rhodesia could not be created in a work of art through the agency of a black person. Who says a black man cannot play white? Look at what I can do to this white figure once I have become him. It seems like a form of Brechtian *gestus* where the actor while playing the character is offering a commentary on the character he is performing.

There were oral forms that also mimicked Western cultural productions.

Records of earliest urban African performances in Rhodesia (McCulloch, 2000; Makwenda, 2005; Parry, 1999) indicate tea parties and *Beni* dances as performances that celebrated and mocked Rhodesian discourse through mimicry. The tea party as a cultural production was appropriated from white Rhodesian elites. According to Robert Cary (1975) Lady Rodwell, wife of the Governor of Southern Rhodesia in the early 1930s was particularly fond of tea parties, and wives of white Rhodesian elites normally held tea parties in the morning where they congregated at the house of one of their colleagues to drink tea and dance to music from the gramophone (*ibid.*).

The earliest performance of a tea party held by Africans in Southern Rhodesia was in 1904 and it was organised by Tom Loiswayo for elite Africans of the Salisbury town. He also invited a white *Herald* editor (Parry, 1999). In Gwelo (Gweru), the capital of the Midlands province, the tea party dates back to 1905 when, according to Chimhete (2004), an irritable *Gwelo Times* correspondent complained of Africans hiring unoccupied houses in the townships ‘when they wish to indulge (in drinking) under the pretext of tea meetings at 2s 6d per head – ladies 1s 6d’ (*ibid.*: 54). When the Native Commissioner of Inyathi investigated whether there was prostitution and debauchery at these tea parties he discovered that African ‘tea meetings there resembled the cabaret favoured by Europeans’ (McCulloch, 2000: 136). Women put on the latest urban costumes copied from white ladies and the men put on the best suits money could buy. The Master of Ceremonies gave the whole event structure by introducing each performance which varied from sketches, song, and dance to theatre. These were performed in the living room of a house which more often than not proved to be too small for African audiences resulting in the party spilling over into the yard of the house, or in the case of lower class tea parties, a bush clearing adjacent to the house. The arena always took the form of a circle with guests sitting on chairs or benches or standing. Guests dined and drank non-alcoholic beverages while watching performances or while they danced themselves. The Master of Ceremonies addressed guests as ladies and gentlemen as opposed to the colonial terms ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ or African Male and African Female.

These descriptions suggest that the tea party was an ambivalent performance which both affirmed colonial culture and challenged it. In its various manifestations in most early Rhodesian urban and peri-urban centres the tea party was not a homogenous phenomenon. Black communities, inspired by the class structures of early white Rhodesian society separated themselves socially on the basis of their own class positions which were reflected in these tea parties.

There were two classes of tea parties – the African elite⁸ tea party and the African lower class tea party which also mutated into two types. The first African elites, who identified themselves with the white middle and lower classes, were South African immigrants (better known as ‘Cape boys’) who came together with the Pioneer Corps in 1890. These people earned better money because they had skills ‘in leather working, transport riding, smithing, building and market gardening’ (Parry, 1999: 55). For political reasons these black South African immigrants were not allowed to live in local Shona home-

steads through a Company⁹ ordinance passed in the mid 1890s (ibid.: 57). Apart from their skills they also brought what Parry calls 'a complex array of cultural baggage' which on the negative side comprised alcoholism and violent recreation and on the positive side social order and Christian values inculcated by mission stations in the Cape (ibid.: 56). Nowhere was this social order displayed as in the African elite tea parties. As time moved on African elites grew in number and formed associations to lobby for equal rights with whites, for example the 1914 Native Vigilance Association which demanded equal status with whites (ibid.), the 1920 Southern Rhodesia Native Association which petitioned the government to open special bars selling European liquor (Chimhete, 2004) and the 1923 Bantu Voters Association which represented the interests of thirty or so African elites who qualified to vote (Parry, ibid.).

After the Second World War in 1945, the manufacturing and tertiary sectors of the economy expanded and there were a greater number of African elites with disposable income. However, according to Weinrich (1973: 34) this class became powerless because its members competed for positions, money and even prestige; '... forces dividing them [were] stronger than forces uniting them'. It never became a strong political force. Ironically the strongest bond uniting its members was the aspiration to European lifestyles and the attendant frustration sparked by a caste barrier which denied them access to privileges enjoyed by Rhodesians. Both the aspirations and the frustrations are evidenced in the forms these tea parties took.

The Christianised African elite tea parties were held 'under the auspices of a white controlled religious body (often the Wesleyan church)...' (Parry, 1999: 58), however, those not held under the auspices of a colonial organisation served alcohol to participants and audiences. They played European music and ate and drank European food (fat cookies, cakes, rice, salads, roasted/fried chicken and beef) and beverages, often European Liquor.¹⁰ Makwenda (2005) recounts that African elites favoured Township jazz 'as this type of entertainment was associated with Western or "modern culture"' (ibid.: 28). Makwenda goes on to argue that during the 1940s elite tea parties often hired a one man band musician called a *Masiganda* (Shona) or *Omasiganda* (Ndebele) which is a corruption of the Afrikaans word *musikant* for musician. Popular musicians in the 1940s included Josaya Hadebe, George Sibanda, Sabelo Mathe, Jacob Mhungu and John White. Their music imitated Western country following trendsetters of the period like Jimmy Rogers, Louis Armstrong, Elvis Presley and others. Chimhete (2004) cites the musician Friday Mbirimi on the elite tastes of the 1940s and 1950s: 'it was the norm to go West ...local music was frowned upon, except for the manual worker' (ibid.: 39). When holding a tea party in a public hall like Mai Musodzi, which African elites called a concert, they played Western music from a gramophone and did ballroom dancing and a man usually paid a fee for dancing with a woman (Chimhete, 2004; Makwenda, 2005).

Lower class tea parties were patronised by lower-class Africans. They manifested in two slightly different ways. The first type was the house tea party which hired neighbouring houses near the tea party or adjacent compound¹¹ to

act as retreat zones for men wanting to have sex with hired girls (Chimhete, 2004). The second type of lower class tea party was affectionately labelled a 'speed bar' because of its associations with running at great speed if police raided the party. This was operated in a bush on the outskirts of a black township. The dance arena was a temporary enclosure constructed in the bush. According to a 1949 government report, to take a hired girl for a dance in the dance arena cost 3s 4d per record (*ibid.*). Both these types of tea parties served the traditional brewed beer mostly from a tea pot to disguise the contents (Makwenda, 2005). According to Chimhete conspiracy theories doing rounds in the 1940s popularised the view that municipal brew contained birth controlling chemicals and this endeared lower class Africans to the traditional brew. Instead of the tea and European food, music and European dances, these parties included traditional beer, African popular music and traditional dance as well as Afro-contemporary dance. Prostitution was also rife. The name tea party was a covert name for a beer party. From 1950 lower class tea parties transformed their name to *mahobho* parties after a popular musician composed a song entitled '*Aya Mahobho Andakuchengetera*' (These breasts I have kept for you). At big tea parties organisers hired bands to attract maximum performers and audiences at a cost of about £6–£10 (Chimhete, *ibid.*). Fully fledged music bands that were popular during this period were the Bantu Actors formed by Kenneth Mattaka in 1932 and the De Black Evening Follies who broke away from Mattaka in 1943 under the leadership of Mphahlo Mafusire (Makwenda, *ibid.*).

Although the obvious influence and aspects of collaboration with colonial culture is clear, one may ask whether these tea party performances resisted the colonial culture in any way? I would argue that these parties were not slavish imitations of the white elite tea party, but had their own customs included. However, it is in the lower class tea parties that one sees resistance most clearly – the music played was African pop – usually rumba from the Belgian Congo, traditional *mbira* music and a ghettoised version of Western Jazz called *tsavatsava*. According to Claire Jones (1992) the jazzy sound intrinsic to *tsavatsava* was derived from the music of the rural social dances. Jones singles out August Musarurwa as a *tsavatsava* musician who entertained lower class Africans at their tea parties in the late 1940s eventually recording his *skokiaan* in 1951, which was later adapted by Louis Armstrong and became a hit in the USA in 1954. The dances were improvised contemporary movements to suit the rhythm of rumba and *tsavatsava* music.

As Bhabha puts it, mimicry is 'an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners and ideas' (cited in Huddart, 2006: 57) and that it subverts in its slippage, in the way it differs from the source. This is a form of resistance to colonial discourse in a number of ways. While the production responds to colonial notions of respectability by copying Western values, it refused to be wholly assimilated, as seen by the exaggeration in the copying in the lower class African tea parties.

The second dimension of resistance lies in the ways in which the production refuses the fixedness of the African stereotype. Rhodesian discourse fixed the

African in one place as a savage and understood that savage on the basis of prior knowledge. When the 'savage' refused this position of stasis by being able to do what the colonial master could do, Rhodesian discourse created new stereotypes in order to maintain the status quo. For example, the Rhodesian Ministry of Information put together a booklet entitled *The Man and His Ways* (as an guide to understanding Africans in Rhodesia) which was distributed to white school children, tourists and members of the police force and army. Through that booklet the African was understood not through lived experience, but through prior knowledge. University sociologist M.F.C. Bourdillon complained about the African myths it contained:

... [it] allows the status quo to be maintained, with whites preserving their privilege. That's what's behind the development of this mythology: the instinctive realisation that if the mythology is exploded, the position is no longer justified. Therefore the mythology must be maintained at all costs (cited in Frederickse, 1982:16)

However, mimicry is a powerful challenge, as it breaks the stereotype causing anxiety in the coloniser. When the African refuses the fixed stereotype by being able to do what the European can do, then the coloniser is made anxious and must manufacture new stereotypes to once again fix the new African, otherwise colonialism would collapse. This search for respectability and acceptance into the colonial ruling order by blacks in Rhodesia caused much anxiety among early colonialists as evidenced by the *Herald* editor in 1904 who after watching an African elite tea party, wrote:

The black must remain the servant of the white and if such gatherings as these are permitted, the Tom Loiswayos and the rest of this race will ere long refuse to submit to the white, the dire consequences of which cannot be foreshadowed. (Parry, 1999: 58)

The Master of Ceremonies addressed audiences as ladies and gentlemen, thus promoting African 'girls' and 'boys' to the status of their European counterparts. The official titles for professional Africans were AM for African Male and AF for African Female. These appellations were dropped in 1953 when Garfield Todd ascended to power and replaced them with the European titles Mr or Mrs or Miss.

To add to that not all European theatres admitted African audiences or performers during this period (1890-1960).¹² The only social spaces available for Africans were council beer halls, opened only on weekends. Tea parties offered an alternative space for relaxation, performance and entertainment which did not respect colonial policy on African socialisation. Furthermore, if the colonial government did not want to acknowledge and respect African elites, elite tea parties, even if they were European in form and style became one of the many ways that African elites 'tried to shape their own sociability and determine how they spent leisure time' (Chimhete, 2004: 53). At some lower class tea parties especially those that took place in the bush (speed bars), participants performed traditional dances and drank traditional brew. This could be taken to mean that even if Africans were uprooted from their natal origins by relocating to the

European city, they tried to recuperate their culture in an urban context using an art form appropriated from English culture.

Another important aspect of resistance, especially after the Second World War, was ‘the winds of change’ that swept across Africa as nationalism. As municipal beer halls were seen by Africans as an extension of white hegemony they, according to Chimhete (2004) started to boycott council beer halls and patronised tea parties and later shebeens. This was a form of passive resistance to white domination. Related to this was the Africans’ response to laws banning them from drinking what was classified as ‘European beer’ (wines, brandies, whiskies, spirits, lagers and all clear beer) under the African Beer Act and the Liquor Act until 1957. Tea parties were an opportunity to usurp colonial authority by transgressing the law through drinking prohibited substances.¹³

The *Beni* dance is another example of oral performance that resisted Rhodesian discourse through mimicry. This dance still survives today in Zimbabwe, but it has its roots in Germany East Africa/Tanganyika (now Tanzania). The version that was brought to Rhodesia is the *Beni Arinoti*, (from *Harinoti*, meaning the perspiring or unclean ones) which was a friendly competitor of the Dar-i-Sudi which formed the Marine Band known in local language as *Beni Marini*. According to Ranger (1975) membership to the *Beni Marini* was restricted to free born Swahili *Khasa* while that of *Beni Arinoti* was open to all foreigners not originally belonging to the coast freemen. It is less likely that *Beni Marini* could have moved beyond its catchment area of Swahili freed slaves. *Beni Arinoti* was brought by ethnic groups from Malawi who took part in the King’s African Rifles that fought the Germans. When this military unit was disbanded at the end of the First World War in 1918, as was traditional in the early 20th century, the demobilised soldiers together with other young Nyasas, thirsty for opportunities in the more prosperous south, moved to the present day Zimbabwe and carried with them this cultural form.

Originally *Beni* was created by slaves rescued by the British Marines (navy) and put under the supervision of missionaries at Freetown. Earliest records (Ranger, 1975) indicate that when freed slaves tried to celebrate their freedom by playing African drums and dancing African rhythms, the hosting missionaries were riled by this behaviour and banned the drums which they perceived as ‘wicked’. If their own drums and dances were not allowed, then they could resort to playing and copying European ones and the closest ones were that of the military band which played in ships that had rescued them and continued to play after docking at the east coast harbour. Missionaries supported this shift by offering gymnastics and games alongside this music and rewarding those who excelled with a red coat with big buttons. The values of cleanliness and pride in a uniform thus encroached into the *Beni* dance. Ironically these symbols of European naval power – drums, music, the uniform, guns, and drills – served as an example of acceptable performance to the culturally starved freed slaves. According to Ranger (1975) *Beni* also grew out of traditions of dance competition in eastern Africa. The freed slaves chose what they wanted to include from African traditions. These traditions had undergone what Ranger (ibid.: 20) calls ‘intensive Arabisation’ in the late nineteenth century. Being close to Zanzibar,

these traditions also had strong Indian overtones. These diverse influences introduced new instruments, costumes and dance forms. The Arab elements were to become a cause for concern for colonialists and missionaries as will be explained below.

When *Beni Arinoti* moved to Southern Rhodesia in 1918 the 'quasi-military atmosphere of the compound endowed with its own emphasis on discipline, status, uniforms and barracks' (Phimister and Van Onselen, 1997: 8) provided a fertile hosting culture for its development. It moved down with the same European characteristics – military drills with dummy guns made from wood, dances which took the forms of a parade, procession or a march past and sometimes a platoon form. The songs were in Chewa or Nyanja. *Beni Arinoti* had a hierarchy of office bearers who wore uniforms and had titles of honour that replicated the British navy. The Port Herald Burial Society which hosted these dances, for example had the following titles of office bearers: King, Governor, Prince, General, Commander, Doctor, Bishop, Lord and King's Servant (Parry, 1999; Phimister and Van Onselen, 1997; Ranger, 1975). Although they were honoured during the performance, these office bearers performed administrative roles for the welfare of members. Organisation of this nature was normally discouraged by the colonial authorities as it didn't fit the frames of the African stereotype. However, as in other similar cases where an African performance or organisation had been banned, Africans responded by emulating the establishment of philanthropic organisations like the Red Cross which Europeans had founded. Phimister and Van Onselen (*ibid.*: 7) recount that in 1918, seven per cent of all black workers died during the Spanish influenza epidemic. Rhodesians during the same period started a number of voluntary organisations to make a contribution to the war and this capacity for organisation struck Africans who used the crisis as a reason to form their own voluntary organisations such as the Loyal Mandabele Patriotic Society 1915, Nyasaland Boys Club 1917 and Port Herald Burial Society 1918. It would have seemed ridiculous to stop Africans organising the burial of their society members during such a critical moment.

A number of things in the *Beni Arinoti* acted as a challenge to both missionaries and colonialists. First, even if the missionaries could see that most of the *Beni* elements were aping European models, they opposed African autonomy to choose what they wanted to appropriate from European styles and what they did not want. Choosing from African performances and Arab dances as was evident in *Beni* was taken as exercising too much freedom of choice. What Ranger (1975) has called the 'intensive Arabisation' of *Beni* was interpreted as a way of trying to spread Islam in a British Christian colony. Just as in Tanganyika, *Beni* in Rhodesia was met with bitter missionary hostility to the extent that the Southern Rhodesia Missionary Conference of 1930 recommended the banning of African dances in their areas of jurisdiction (McCulloch, 2000: 137). While they might have admired European styles, the secular innovations were unpalatable to their spiritual sensibilities. Both O'Callaghan (1977) and Jones (1992) agree that early missionaries in Rhodesia required African assimilation into European culture. They acknowledged

nothing of value from African culture. Converted Africans had to drop their tunes and style of singing to assimilate the European *a capella* style in four part harmony. All dances, including *Beni*, which brought innovations from elsewhere were despised. However, according to Jones (1992) missionaries in Rhodesia ‘repented’ from this notion of assimilation in 1954 with a programme which required the incorporation of African instruments and melodies in worship. This has become an annual event run under the auspices of the Ecumenical Arts Association still run today (Jones, 1992). Missionaries in eastern Africa had long changed their attitudes from the 1920s and 1930s relating to African performing arts. According to Ranger (1975) missionaries supported traditional dances which they found to be consistent with morality.

Second, colonial industrialists and mine owners also felt challenged by *Beni Arinoti*. The capacity for organisation by Africans was interpreted as a recipe for industrial action, particularly in the congested compounds. In Tanganyika this capacity for organisation in the form of *Beni* dance had produced strikes. A warning had been cabled to Southern Rhodesia that such organisations were ‘eminently capable of misuse for propaganda purposes’ (Phimister and Van Onselen, 1997: 9). The Compound Manager at Shamva confirmed fears from Tanganyika by viewing the Port Herald Burial Society formed in 1918 as ‘liable to lead to a great deal of trouble’ (ibid). In fact in 1927 a strike broke out at Shamva mine. Although some scholars attempted to link the strike to the Port Herald Burial Society, Ranger, depending on studies by Clyde Mitchell has concluded that the strike had no connections with *Beni* (1975: 138). The Chief Native Commissioner wrote a circular instructing that the leadership of *Beni* should be put under surveillance. The Chamber of Mines was perturbed by these reports of organised drill of *Beni* performances, and they ‘expressed the fear that the dance societies might become “the basis of labour movements”’ (Ranger, ibid.). Those fears were not unfounded as it later proved that the first labour movement the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU) was formed through the structures provided by African voluntary organisations (Parry, 1999).

Lastly, colonialists linked *Beni* dances to the rise of nationalism. This fear was given impetus by a Belgian rightwing journalist, Daniel Thwaites, who in 1936 wrote that *Beni* and its mutations constituted

... a cancerous growth of racial hatred deliberately cultivated on modern lines by a mastermind well versed in native lore with a profound knowledge of how to make the complicated appeal to native psychology... (Ranger, 1975: 138)

The use of military titles was interpreted as a preparation to take over the colony. To use them, according to the journalist, was a way of understudying Europeans for the inevitable takeover. For this reason, *Beni* was banned in the Belgian Congo in 1934 (now DRC), but there is no record of its being banned in Rhodesia. It simply caused anxieties in the missionaries and colonial administrators. There is no systematic study at the moment that has documented the number of *Beni* societies that existed between 1890 and 1950. What can be said with certainty, however, is that with the closure of mines in Zimbabwe and the

invasion of farms by ZANU PF militias and war veterans as well as displacement of workers of mostly Malawian origin, cultural life revolving around *Beni* dances has been emasculated. There are still *Beni* societies that perform at social and political galas in Zimbabwe. While in eastern Africa the dance died a natural death in the 1960s, in Zimbabwe it still exists. Some of the movements like the 'borrowdale' dance popularised by the *sungura* artist Alick Macheso have been incorporated into *Beni*. Probably what exists now is its mutation rather than *Beni* as it was in its 1918 form. However, it played a particular role in black Zimbabwean (peri)-urban culture in the early twentieth century as a form of cultural resistance to European performance forms.

Conclusion

In staging the various performances, Africans both submitted to and resisted Rhodesian discourse resulting in hybrid ambivalent works that both mocked and celebrated colonialism. The notion of hybridity which characterises urban performances was a way of survival and negotiating new identities in an otherwise hostile world which attempted to suffocate some African traditional performances. The contact between Europeans and Africans was not only physical, but cultural and in the latter allowing cultural transmission, less in the direction of the coloniser and more in the direction of the colonised owing to unequal power relations. Cultural criticism in Zimbabwe has tended to apply the 'dominant hypothesis' which portrays the coloniser's power as absolute and having the propensity to dislocate and denature African culture. Critics have failed to notice spaces of resistance where they were apparent in African performances. This necessitates an academic endeavour to return to social and cultural history to investigate forms that emerged during colonial rule and this article has attempted to illuminate sites and spaces in urban African performances where Rhodesian discourse was resisted and appropriated. I have tried to avoid the now tired debate about what constitutes theatre and what is not theatre. Our culture-specific values enter into our description of the social world, thereby affecting ideologically statements that we make, regardless of how factual or sincere we are. The notion of theatre and how it is understood in different discourses has been dealt with at length in my earlier work (1994), as well as by Schechner (1994) and Hauptfleisch (1997), to name but a few scholars. While articulating the performance features of the above urban African performances I argued that Rhodesian discourse was not absolute.

NOTES

- 1 Although direct rule (where Africans would be subjected to a single legal order defined by European law and native institutions would not be recognised) was the official administration policy in the nineteenth century, it was abandoned for Lugard's policy of Indirect rule by the 1920s which rested on three pillars: a native court, a native administration, and a native treasury. Colonialism's capacity for absolutism was checked (see for example Mamdani, 1996).

- 2 I am aware of the many layers of meaning around the term African(s) to a point where it is almost criminal to use the term carelessly without clarification. There are three types of Africans – black Africans, Arab Africans and European Africans. In this article the term African is used to refer to black Rhodesian Africans. This is also the sense in which ‘African’ was used by Rhodesians to refer to blacks. The terms African(s) and black(s) are used interchangeably for stylistic reasons in appropriate circumstances to refer to blacks residing in Rhodesia.
- 3 The term is deployed here as a descriptor of whites. The terms ‘Rhodesian(s)’ and ‘white(s)’ are used interchangeably in this article. Rhodesianness is not a singular category which accommodates only English white people. Everybody who according to law was white and resided in Rhodesia was a Rhodesian. Although the country began as Southern Rhodesia, it became Rhodesia from 1970 to 1979 and changed to Zimbabwe-Rhodesia after the internal settlement in 1979.
- 4 According to one version of recorded evidence, the chief went to the missionary and told him that he had dreamt the baby Jesus being born in Jerusalem (sic) and had seen a vision where all chiefs were coming to Jerusalem with presents singing and dancing *mbende* (which from then became *jerusarema*). The missionary was impressed and allowed the dance to be performed to commemorate the birth of Jesus.
- 5 Shona orthography was established in 1931 when the Doke report was adopted by the House of Assembly. Although the Ndebele alphabetic system was developed by the London Missionary Society in 1863, there is no record of written plays till the second half of the twentieth century.
- 6 Urban Africans were more exposed to Western values as they interacted with whites at workplaces and even lived with them (in the case of domestic servants). The urban space was under direct rule while the rural space was under indirect rule. The rural people were relatively less exposed to Western influence. The difference though was a matter of degree.
- 7 The reasons for this anomaly are varied and have been dealt with at length by Yoshikuni (1999) and Ranger (1985).
- 8 African elite is used here to refer to Africans who were Western educated, wealthy and practised a combination of Western and Judeo-Christian values (even if in some cases they were not religious). Weinrich (1973) has suggested an annual salary of £250.00 as a marker of elite economic life. This class of Africans included priests, pastors, doctors, nurses, social workers, lecturers, teachers, headmasters, school inspectors, clerks, traders and artisans.
- 9 Rhodesia was colonised by a chartered company – the British South Africa Company under a Royal Charter. After a white referendum, Company rule ended in 1922 and the Responsible Self Government took over power in 1923.
- 10 Only Africans with university degrees could drink European liquor according to the 1957 amendment of the African Beer Act. All other Africans were not allowed to drink it, but they used this tea party opportunity to evade the law. Since the 1920s the law on liquor was honoured more in breach than in compliance.
- 11 Compounds were tiny housing units in mining towns to house large numbers of African labourers. Phimister and Van Onselen graphically describe a typical compound. Large compounds were typically three-tiered: the inner or square compounds were used to house either short-term workers or recruited labourers. ...The huts of single workers surrounding the inner compound housed longer-term miners. ...Finally separated from both these tiers were the huts of married workers and their families – fully proletarianised workers, semi-skilled with above average wages – the group least likely to desert (1997:4).
- 12 City by-laws did not allow Europeans and Africans to use the same ablution facilities and in a sense the same theatres. This was successfully challenged in court by the Salisbury Repertory Theatre and the by-law was set aside. Reps theatre through a secret ballot in 1960 voted 419 for and 196 against admission of black audiences (see Cary, 1975). Admission of blacks from 1960 onwards depended on individual theatre houses.
- 13 Tea parties started to decline from 1962 when the African Beer Act was amended and removed all restrictions on beer consumption, allowing Africans to buy any type of beer. There was no need to disguise the drinking of beer under a tea party, but the economic benefit could not be ignored. According to Makwenda (2005) the tea parties slowly transformed themselves into shebeens, but carrying with them the same class tags – elite shebeens and lower-class shebeens.

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