

# The Depiction of Forests/ Trees and Malawi's Rural Landscape in the Poetry of Lupenga Mphande and Zondiwe Mbano

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This paper explores and analyses the ways in which forests/trees and Malawi's rural landscape are depicted in the poetry of Lupenga Mphande and Zondiwe Mbano, from an ecocritical perspective<sup>1</sup>. It focuses on Mphande's collection *Crackle at Midnight* (1998) and Mbano's poems, especially those that appear in *The Unsung Song: An Anthology of Malawian Writing in English* (2001). Both Mphande and Mbano come from Malawi's northern district of Mzimba. Unlike the central and southern regions of Malawi, northern Malawi has a lower population density and still retains a lot of trees, forests and bushes. The districts of northern Malawi boast the highest forest cover percentage in the country. Besides, northern Malawi is the location of the country's largest forest reserve and Africa's largest man-made forest, the South Viphya Forest Reserve. With the exception of that part of the region which is

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<sup>1</sup> There are several definitions of ecocriticism (Buell 2005; Heise 1999; Rueckert 1978 in Glotfelty 1996:xx), and as a burgeoning field of literary criticism, it is still being defined. However, Glotfelty's definition broadly captures what ecocriticism is all about. Glotfelty simply defines (and broadly too) ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (1996:xviii). The name of this branch of literary study is still being negotiated. Ecocriticism is also known by names such as green cultural studies, ecopoetics, and environmental literary criticism.

occupied by Lake Malawi, northern Malawi, which development-focussed people describe as the forgotten region, is characterised by great highlands. The most magnificent of these are the Nyika Plateau and the undulating Viphya highlands. The rolling landscapes and lush forest areas of northern Malawi in general, and Mzimba district in particular, offer unspoilt wilderness of great scenic beauty.

Mphande's and Mbanu's origin from a place of so much scenic beauty has had an influence on their poetry not observable in the works of other Malawian poets. Most Malawian poets, including Mphande and Mbanu, are social critics. Their poetry exposes the follies of dictatorship and tyranny. The themes of 'detention and torture, tyranny ... and despotism, exile and alienation, and disillusionment' (Chirambo 1998:17) with Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda's authoritarian and dictatorial leadership (1964-1994), find expression in their poetry.

The focus by critics on the political or anti-Banda/MCP (Malawi Congress Party) messages in Malawian poetry, while commendable, has led to the sidelining of other interesting issues such as the depiction of forests or trees and Malawi's rural landscape in the poetry. The works of Mphande and Mbanu show a concern with 'rural dwellers and how they relate to their environment' (Chipasula in Mphande 1998: vii). These two poets have a

keen eye and a sharp ear, and [their] poems teem with sensuous images of cicadas ... hills, ridges, valleys, trees, grasslands, streams, and brooks (Chipasula in Mphande 1998: vii).

Mphande and Mbanu both show ecological awareness and, at least in the case of Mphande, displeasure at the destruction of trees and the pollution of the land.

Trees, grasslands, hills, valleys, and rivers are ubiquitous in Mbanu's poetry; out of the seventeen poems that appear in *The Unsung Song* only two make no mention of trees. Mbanu uses trees for various ends. He uses them to show his sensitivity to Malawi's seasons and how seasons affect nature, that is, humans, plants and animals. In the poems under study Mbanu comments on the three Malawian seasons: the hot dry season (September–mid November), the hot rainy season (mid November - April), and the cool dry season (May - August). In the poem

'Beware, Millipede' (2003:131), the only poem by Mbanu analysed here that does not appear in *The Unsung Song*, Mbanu uses the behaviour of *msangu* tree as a marker of seasons. In the poem, the fact that the *msangu* is growing new leaves shows that the hot rainy season will soon be over and the cool dry season would follow. We notice this in the first stanza where the persona declares:

Now that the *msangu* tree  
Is bringing forth leaves  
adieu rain, adieu visitor

Mbanu's evocative description of the land during the hot dry season (which follows the cool dry season) in this poem reveals the keenness of his (poetic) eye. In fact evocative visual images permeate most of his poems. It is at this time of the year when

From above, the sun stares harsh  
Over lands scorched brown  
And wildfires lick the land to ash

Here he offers us a picture of a land sweltering under the relentless African sun, an ideal weather for bushfires. But more importantly Mbanu reveals his prejudice against the *msangu* tree. Much as it is useful to birds that 'twitter [while] building / Nests' which dangle like 'succulent fruit' up in the *msangu*, the tree, like the baobab, is useless to those running away from the scorching sun because, as he puts it, 'under the *msangu* are thorns / And the baobab gives no shade'. Here the value of the *msangu* tree is judged by its usefulness to human beings, especially those seeking relief from the blazing sun. Mbanu's homocentric attitude here is the attitude of many Malawians, if not most human beings. The thornier the tree, the more useless it is for human beings, even as a provider of shade. The worth of a tree is therefore judged by its use to humanity. The non-instrumentalist transpersonal ecological view which acknowledges the connectedness of all entities on the planet—as "leaves" on an unfolding "tree of life"—and encourages 'a psychological identification with all phenomena' (Eckersley1992:62) is remote to him.

We also see the importance of trees as providers of shade in a land reeling from the blows of an angry sun in ‘Nyumbani’s Tale’, (2001:244-245) where a hunter (trapper) runs to the comfort of the shade offered by a *katope* tree after setting his trap for a monitor lizard. The importance of trees in a land punished by the hot African sun cannot be underestimated. And, as I mentioned above, Mbano judges their value instrumentally.

Mbano demonstrates his sensitivity to the plight of life under this harsh sun. In ‘A Prayer’ the persona pleads with the sun to allow rain to fall and feed the parched land:

Blazing sun  
Staring from above  
Wink at times;

Let your eyelids  
Rain down  
Tears of pity.

Green in fields  
Green in the wild  
Stoop under you (2001:250).

The heat of the sun is proving too much, and plants, both in the field and in the wild, are suffering (‘Stoop under you’).

The hot rainy season and the cool dry season and their effect or impact on grass, trees, and animals are hinted at in ‘Lake Kazuni’ and ‘The Lingazi’—a lake and a river respectively. In the former, which reads like a panegyric to the small lake, Mbano details the destruction caused by a rainstorm whose water fills up the lake. The violent storm tears down ‘youthful boughs’ (2001:239), smashes the brood of a dove whose cry is described as a dirge and capsizes a fisherman. Here the effect of the storm negatively affects human beings, plants and other animals. Humanity’s elevated position on the ‘Great Chain of Being’ is of no consequence as people become fellow sufferers of the consequences of capricious nature. The acts of capricious nature are also mentioned in ‘The Lingazi’. This poem celebrates the lovely and peaceful river whose

water 'purls tunes / Salutory', and 'leaps sportively like / A hare' over stones before spreading out '[e]ffervescently' (2001:240). In the poem the impact of the cool dry season on nature is highlighted. The season comes with cool and sometimes strong moist south-easterly winds called Chiperoni. The Chiperoni winds normally occur in the period from May through August and typically cause overcast conditions with drizzle on windward slopes along the Northern lakeshore and in many areas in the south of Malawi. In this poem these July winds charge like a menacing madman, forcing 'craven grass and leaves' to 'rasp and rattle in terror'. In spite of this the sun is lambent, inviting the speaker to rest on a rock by the river.

On reading Mbanu's poems one gets the feeling that he uses forests, hills, and trees as aspects of technique<sup>2</sup> or style, either in simile (as in 'Song of Nyavitima' [2001:226] where love is compared to a tree which sprouts but soon withers and dies) or in the creation of moods such as peacefulness, violence or sorrow. In 'Silence Returned', for example, Mbanu enables the reader to see the landscape as he travels from Salima Secondary School, where he once taught, to Madisi by car (which he calls 'Machine of men') to deliver the body of a Form One student who was killed by a village boy while escorting a primary school girl-friend of his (Mbanu 2001:256). In the poem the reader is invited to see the green hills, the bumpy road and sandy tracks the travellers follow, the yellow sun that 'crouche[s] / Around whiteness', farms, forests, and the foot of the 'forlorn hill' which is home for the dead student. The description of the hills as green, yet dry, and the sun as yellow and 'crouch[ing] / Around whiteness', helps to capture the sombre mood under which the journey was made (2001:255).

Furthermore, Mbanu's reference to forests in his poetry reveals the terror and fear that forests evoke in Malawians. In the traditional imagination of many Malawians '[t]he forest manifests power, natural and supernatural power, with its unlimited scope for mystery' and it inspires a feeling of 'awe tempered with fear' (Obiechina 1975:47). In 'Honeybird', which describes a quest for honey (the sweet things of life which do not come without pain / suffering or struggle), Mbanu talks of the preparations one makes before embarking on a journey into the forested hills. In the poem the forest is said to be cold and

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<sup>2</sup> Technique is understood in this paper as 'the sum of working methods or special skills' of a writer (Holman & Harmon 1986:499).

wet—underlining the physical suffering that one who ventures into it has to undergo. The persona carries an axe, a spear, and a club in preparation for whatever danger he is likely to encounter there. In a country where lions and leopards roamed the forests and villages even in broad day light not long ago, one does not want to take chances. Here we see forests associated with danger and physical suffering, places where no-one would want to linger. This ‘forest phobia’ (Nygren 2000:13) relates to the attempt to clear inhabited areas of trees and bushes so as to remove the danger associated with them. Only recently has the reforestation drive attracted the attention of many Malawians in the rural areas.

In ‘Sunset over Mparayi’ Mbano reveals his nostalgia for his home—Lukonkobe. Here he wistfully describes the elongating shadows as sunset approaches, and the behaviour of the villagers in readiness for the approaching night: cattle are brought home, girls come to the village from fetching water, and men walk home from a hunt in the forests. In the poem Mbano romanticizes village life, a rare aspect in his poetry, as he is aware of the struggle the villagers go through to survive as demonstrated in ‘A Widow’ (2001:250-251). Visual images of elongating shadows as evening approaches, of cattle shuffling from grazing grounds with boys riding them, of ‘hungry fires’ licking pots on verandas; and aural images of whistling and chanting boys, and of girls yodelling wistful songs, paint a picture of a sweet home that Mbano who now lives far from it (in an urban area in Zomba), has all but lost (2001:263). The forest in this poem also figures as a place where humans acquire necessities such as honey and meat, as we see men walking home from a hunt to be welcomed by their happy wives and children excited by the prospect of eating meat. The implicit message here is that wanton destruction of forests would lead to the disappearance of such a happy rural life since game will no longer be available. Forests in Malawi, as in other parts of the world, provide rural people with fuel wood, poles, timber, bush meat and other foods, agricultural tools, and medicinal plants. But the destruction of forests in this poverty-stricken landlocked country is well underway as we shall see in Lupenga Mphande’s poetry. Activities such as clearing forests for agriculture, wood fuel gathering, brick making, commercial logging, and curing tobacco, among others, increase the extent

of deforestation every year (Ministry of Natural Resources 1996:4).

Mbano’s sensitive portrayal of nature and the landscape reveals his

ecological awareness although he does not explicitly advocate the conservation of the forests and scenic beauty of Lukonkobe. Mphande shares similarities with Mbano in his depiction of Malawi's rural landscape: trees, hills, valleys and rivers. Like Mbano, Mphande has a keen eye for, and a sharp ear to, the environment. Adrian Roscoe says this of Mphande:

No one paints physical Malawi better than Mphande; no one is quite so sensitive to the scattered graces of its hills and waters (1977:138).

I agree. Mphande's poems, especially the ones in the first half of *A Crackle at Midnight* abound with flowers, trees, grass, birds and hills. In 'On the Vipya' we encounter the persona sitting 'in a sea of pink grass high up the Vipya plateau' surrounded by 'wild flowers [that] sparkle like stars against / [a] lake breeze that blows the grass to endless waves'. The place is '[a]ll quiet save sounds of hill birds in the distance' and the persona 'watche[s] two blue cranes pirouette a love dance' (1998:5).

Similar descriptions of his home are found in 'Thoza View', 'What I Like Best', 'Where I Was Born', 'Visiting Friends', 'Returning to Thoza', and 'Shrine Revisited'. In these poems woods and hills feature a lot and hills are the most forested areas in rural Malawi. This is consistent with Malawi's northern landscape which is characterised by highlands, rolling hills and valleys. The opposite, however, holds true for urban areas such as Blantyre which have very high population density where the hills surrounding the city are farmed heavily in spite of their prohibitively steep slopes, resulting in massive soil erosion (Stoddard 2005).

In 'Thoza View' (1998:24) Mphande offers a romanticised view of Thoza. Here the persona shows us the view of Thoza which he likes. This is

the view of Thoza [that] from ridges below [is]  
laced with springs,  
Patchwork fields lush and green,  
staggered with mlombwa trees  
And boulders pocked with grey  
that trail hills to the lake.

He also likes

walking spacious woods  
on edges peopled with sunbirds,  
Rambling criss-cross waves of fields  
that dot the landscape.

In the poem the persona reveals the relationship between the people of Thoza and their forest environment when he tells us that ‘In season bee hunters swarm the hills, / [and] yodel to honey-guides’. As we saw in Mbano’s poetry, here too the forests and hills are a source of honey for the villagers. Mphande continues to paint a beautiful and romantic view of Thoza with its

Rain-washed hills [rising] shrouded in green canopies  
and wafts of lilac fragrance  
Permeat[ing] village dwellings along greenbanks [sic]  
with reeds flowering in white

—before wistfully concluding that ‘Only in Thoza, and only here can you bask / in so much sunshine’. No doubt, this observation is triggered by his experience in the United States with its cold winters.

A similar romantic view of Thoza can be seen in ‘Where I Was Born’. In this poem, where Mphande also laments his exile and alienation, he does not lose sight of the beautiful Thoza landscape. He writes:

Follow cow tracks skirting lush fields dotting the country side  
And ascend a staggered range of hills. You’ll see towering  
Families of cumulus spread like birds over brooks to crest  
Into brilliant white against the blue.  
If you come to Thoza peak and see green hills  
That merge with clouds, listen to songs of leaves  
In the wind, look for wispy edges of hail crystals  
In raindrops and think of me, dear friend, in the place  
I was born (1998:39).



The 'lush fields dotting the country side' and 'staggered range of hills' only reside in his memory now. However, as Mark L. Lilleleht observes, Mphande's

memory of a place, a memory that stretches well beyond the poet's own mind and into the memory of the land (1999),

is a captivating feature of his poetry. But, upon his return to Thozza captured in 'Returning to Thozza', possibly after 1994, Mphande notices that the landscape is not much different from what he left behind in 1984. 'After years of absence / browsing in concrete jungles abroad' (1998:59) (that is, his stay in urban centres of America) he drops off a bus 'at Thozza junction' one 'glorious morning' and stands

silenced by a presence in the air  
emanating, [he] was sure, from solitary  
outcrops of rocks scattered over ridges [while]  
[i]n the valley below the deciduous [plants]  
were abloom, and [he] bathed in wafts  
of blossoms of season, struck by promise  
of happiness and joy (1998:59).

While Mbano is wistful about Lukonkobe, Mphande is wistful about Thozza, his home. Mphande's description of Thozza reveals his nostalgia for his country and home village from which he is exiled. His descriptions of the landscape certainly give the impression of a very beautiful place and create an atmosphere of tranquillity and peace. But this 'nostalgic romanticism' (Lewis nd) also belies the harsh social and economic realities under which the people live. In 'What I like Best' and 'Cutting the Millet Stalks' Mphande romanticises hard, back-breaking work. In 'What I Like Best' (1998:37), the persona tells us that s/he likes

best ... the view of a village  
From atop an opposing ridge  
To watch a farmer work his field,  
Till the land for better yield

*Syned Mthatiwa*

Youths carting produce across a gully  
Yodel to the sun in the valley,  
Women sing in chorus around the byre,  
Tell stories around a fire.

While, in 'Cutting the Millet Stalks' (1998:20), we get a picture of the persona and his family

Invading the field from all sides  
With knives and whetstones slung  
By shoulders, and in a swoop ... squat [,]  
Hopping like frogs in season, warbling  
In chorus, reaping the field bare.

In reality these activities are not as pleasant and interesting as they are made to appear here. They involve a lot of perseverance and hard work.

A significant aspect of Mphande's poetry, an aspect ignored by his critics, for instance Mark L. Lilleleht and Simon Lewis, is the author's conservationist attitude. While in Mbanjo's poetry this can only be inferred from his sensitivity to the landscape, Mphande is explicit in such poems as 'Bushfires', 'Along the Rift Valley', 'Snapping of an Old Tree', 'A Crackle at Midnight' (the title poem), and 'The Fig Tree'.

In 'Bushfires' (1998:27), where he describes a bushfire on Malosa hill in southern Malawi, one of Malawi's forest reserves, Mphande laments the destruction that bushfires cause to trees. He dismisses the myth that,

bushfires are good for forest: they clear  
the undergrowth for new sprouts,  
provide pasture for grazing, and assist  
the hunter with game.

For him, 'old trees wail in summer blazes / to the chagrin of the sun and thunder', or simply, bushfires destroy trees. The destruction of trees / vegetation, and even property, caused by bushfire is also shown in 'A Crackle at Midnight' (1998:33), where a bushfire rages through a village at night. In 'Along the Rift Valley', Mphande details the destructive nature of tobacco farming, both to the soil and the environment,

polluting the air and destroying life. In her essay titled 'Development Discourses and Peasant-Forest Relations: Natural Resource Utilization as Social Process', Anja Nygren emphasises that:

environmental changes are inextricably linked to social and political processes and that social relations of production are central to an understanding of deforestation (2000:13-14).

This is very true of Malawi, especially with regard to tobacco farming. Tobacco forms the backbone of Malawi's foreign exchange earnings. Up to 80% of Malawi's foreign exchange earnings come from tobacco export which the locals fondly call Malawi's green gold. Tobin and Knausenberger claim:

No other country devotes as much of its agricultural land to tobacco as does Malawi, and no other country is as dependent on tobacco for its export revenues as is Malawi (1998:407).

The successive governments in Malawi have always strongly supported the tobacco industry through subsidies and tax breaks, a thing that has led to the crop's domination of Malawi's export market (Poitras 1999). Before 1990 tobacco was grown on estates by means of the tenant system. The tenants who stayed on the estates grew tobacco using resources borrowed from the estate owners, to whom they later sold their tobacco. The estate owners in turn sold their tobacco at the auction floors situated in the three regional cities: Mzuzu in the north, Lilongwe in the centre and Blantyre in the south. Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda's dictatorial regime favoured large estates rather than smallholder farms because, as Tobin and Knausenberger observe,

[I]eases for estates and licenses for burley production provided instruments for political and economic patronage to be distributed to those in the private sector as well as to politicians and senior civil servants. Recipients provided both support for and loyalty to [the] autocratic government. To complement the patronage, government policies encouraged and subsidised the cost of growing burley tobacco on estates (1998:407).

Following the World Bank and USAID-driven structural adjustment programmes, the Malawi government liberalised the tobacco industry in 1990. Today smallholder farmers are able to grow tobacco wherever they please and sell it directly to the auction floors. The government of Malawi and its willing creditors (World Bank and USAID) have encouraged the production of tobacco as an export crop not only as a means of earning foreign currency, but also as ‘a way of promoting development in the rural areas’ (Poitras 1999) where 85–90% of the population lives, through the returns the farmers earn from their sales. Whether the tobacco industry has indeed helped in promoting rural development in Malawi is a highly debatable question, however.

Tobacco might be important to Malawi’s economy, but studies have linked its production to deforestation in a country where this is a problem. Large tracts of forest are cleared by estate owners and thousands of smallholder farmers to pave the way for tobacco farms. A lot of trees are also cut down to be used for the construction of sheds for curing burley tobacco or to be burnt as fuelwood for the flue-cured variety of tobacco. This exposes the soil to rain and wind and makes it susceptible to erosion. Besides, tobacco depletes soil nutrients such as nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus more than other crops such as maize and cassava (Tobin and Knausenberger 1998:414). The situation in Malawi as far as the tobacco industry is concerned exemplifies Nygren’s claim that:

deforestation involves much more than the physical act of felling trees. It is a process of change in the people’s land tenure and land-use systems, in their social stratification and power relations, and in their environmental perceptions and cultural constructions—a process of change that has to be examined from a diachronic perspective (Nygren 2000:13).

In the poem ‘Along the Rift Valley’ (1998:22), Lupenga Mphande shows his awareness of the deleterious effects of the tobacco industry to the environment. Not long before, the persona observed

villagers rise with dawn  
[to] plough behind teams of oxen, singing, ...

making maize fields lush and broody after the rains.

But

Now tobacco farmers  
mount tractors at noon, rip  
the soil sour, and thrive.

Worse still,

Puffs of smoke blight through  
valley air and drown for ever  
love songs of thrushes.

In this poem Mphande exposes the negative effects of tobacco farming to the environment. This exposure also comes through in 'The Fig Tree'. In 'The Fig Tree' (1998:44), the persona gets news that an ancient fig tree that stood close to his compound back in his village will have to be cut and the wood sold to tobacco farmers. His displeasure at this piece of news is clear in his halting voice when he tells us:

But now, I hear, times being as they are,  
The council [of elders] has voted to cut the tree down  
And barter the wood away to tobacco farmers.

Fig trees play an important role in African villages. Because they are evergreen, they offer refuge from the blazing sun during the hot months. Village elders often hold council under a fig's shade. But in this poem the new economic system necessitates that this important tree be cut down. Here Mphande shows his awareness of tobacco's contribution to deforestation in Malawi. In a similar vein 'A Dance in the Kraal' takes a swipe at modern agricultural methods for spoiling the soil with residues from pesticides. The negative effects of pesticides such as DDT, dieldrin, aldrin, and heptachlor are fairly well-known to the world today, which is why they have been banned around the world, including in Malawi (Tobin and Knausenberger 1998:422). The tobacco industry in Malawi used these chemicals before their negative side-effects were known. In 'A Dance in the Kraal' (1998:46), Mphande blames these '[h]ealing

herbicides that soured the healthy earth' for the perennially poor harvests that lead to malnutrition and heavy child mortality.

The Malawi government's support of the tobacco industry led to loss of fertile arable land for many rural Malawians in the 1970s and 80s. Government sometimes leased land belonging to villagers to estate owners, and the government's decision was final. In the 'The Noose' (1998:96), government snatches fertile arable land from villagers and gives it to an estate farmer. In the poem a government agent reads a decree to the village elders which tells them that

the village  
land ... had been sold to an estate  
farmer and [the villagers] were to move at once  
to the hills.

Unable to admit such a huge loss, the village chief, headman Chidongo, hangs himself.

The poem 'Snapping of an Old Tree' (1998:30-31) can be read at two levels. The first level is to see it as an obituary for an old *muwula* tree that stood for years in a village but later weakened and crashed to the ground. The fact that the foot of the tree had served as a playground for children and a hiding place from the sun for elders to discuss weighty village matters, is enough for the villagers to feel sad over its loss. On a different level it can be read as an allegory for the passing of a village elder. In both cases one cannot ignore the fact that Mphande finds trees important literally or for metaphoric use in poetry.

Although Mphande's attitude to trees is instrumental or anthropocentric in some cases, one can still see that he has respect for the intrinsic value of trees and nature. His poems show that he is interested in the conservation of the trees and natural environment of his beloved Thozha.

Mphande's and Mbanjo's attitude towards forests, trees and nature in general departs from what is considered the traditional view of nature in Africa. Emmanuel Obiechina sums up this view very well with reference to West Africa and I quote him at length here. Obiechina writes:

The traditional world view [in West Africa] has an important

bearing on attitudes to nature and this in turn is reflected in the novels. It implies a mystical yet utilitarian outlook on nature instead of an externalized appreciation of it in forms like fine landscapes, beautiful flowers, cascading waters or the colours of the rainbow. In this tradition the beauty of the particular tree comes to be inseparable from its 'vital' property, demonstrable in pharmaceutical or magical efficacy or the shade it provides from the heat of the sun. The uniqueness of a particular stream or wooded landscape resides in some supernatural manifestation, either as the abode of a communal deity or a local spirit identifiable with the destiny of the community (1975:42).

This view, which is sometimes taken as the traditional African world view, should be considered with caution. For me the assumption commits a fallacy of hasty generalisation. To begin with, the idea of a 'West African' or simply 'an African' needs careful interrogation. There is no generic African. Africa is made up of different people with different sensibilities. There is no single African sensibility with regard to nature or the environment from North to South, East to West. Even the idea of a traditional world view is a heavily contentious one. There is no one tradition for all African peoples. As a youth growing up in rural Malawi my childhood friends and I used to sing songs of praise for some of the neighbouring hills; praising them for their majesty and beauty. We enjoyed the scenic beauty of flowers that came with the first rains too. But none of us had read an English novel or lived in an urban setting to acquire an externalised aesthetic view of nature.

Obiechina further observes that in West Africa today,

[n]ature is being recreated in the urban settlements as it is in the

industrialized parts of the world; and individuals, especially the educated middle class, are beginning to develop modern aesthetic attitudes towards nature and modern concepts of it. The Western aesthetic outlook tends to affect to an increasing degree Africans who live in the urban environment or who have been brought up on Western literature (1975:50).

One might be tempted to attribute Mbanjo's and Mphande's nostalgic and romantic rendering of their rural landscape to their western sensibility, since both are products of western education and live in urban areas. (Obiechina himself does this to some characters in West African novels in his *Culture, Tradition and Society in West African Novel* [1975]). This however would carry the indefensible assumption that their sensibility is mediated by western education, without which they could not have appreciated the unique beauty of Thozha or Lukonkobe. Besides, the fact that these are the only Malawian poets of note to so clearly exhibit an ecological awareness downplays the influence of western education or even exile. Other Malawian poets, some of whom have been exiled, such as Jack Mapanje, Frank Chipasula, Felix Mnthali and Steve Chimombo, are not as consistent in their dealings with the landscape, trees and forests as the two poets discussed above.

Granted that humanity is part of nature and our building of cities and scarring of the landscape should be seen as nature taking its course, as Edward Picot argues in *Outcasts from Eden: Ideas of Landscape in British Poetry since 1945* (1997), the fact that we are aware that our destructive tendencies to the environment may backfire and hurt us is enough to motivate us to treat the environment with care and respect. In this age and era of environmental crisis sensibility like Mbanjo's and Mphande's may have more commendable conservationist potential than the so-called traditional African world view which sees nature as providing for humanity forever. Moreover, the ecological awareness of Mphande and Mbanjo is very important now, at a time when village life in Malawi is encroaching on forest reserves, threatening endemic species as well as 'some of Africa's finest scenery' (Newton 2001). The demand for firewood, more land for agriculture, wood for curing tobacco, and wood products for construction, which leads to loss of thousands of hectares of indigenous trees each year will surely lead to catastrophic erosion, extinction of endemic species and 'will also have [a negative] aesthetic impact on the country's landscape' (Newton 2001).

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