

Anthology Vol. 1: Chapter 3 Summary

THEATRE, WAR, AND PEACE IN UGANDA

by Charles Mulekwa

In “Theatre, War, and Peace in Uganda,” playwright and scholar Charles Mulekwa discusses the important role that Ugandan theatre artists have played in reflecting and decrying the conditions of war and oppression and in expressing the Ugandan people’s longing for peace.

Mulekwa highlights two contemporary Ugandan playwrights, contextualizing their work in the country’s rich history of performance, from ancient indigenous rituals to the colonial infusion of Shakespeare to the astute, politically charged works of post-colonial artists. Mulekwa posits that the most powerful theatre in Uganda today draws on both indigenous and western forms in order to speak to the deepest sorrows and hopes of a nation that has been disrupted by colonialism, dictatorship, and war for more than a century.

Context

In a tongue-in-cheek tone, Mulekwa describes the creation of Uganda as a sort of “let there be light” gesture enacted by the British colonial powers. The ethnic groups indigenous to the land were thrown together and told to behave as one country. Under British rule, Mulekwa writes, “The social, political, and cultural infrastructure, which had hitherto been under local custodianship, shifted into foreign hands: leadership roles were usurped, land was grabbed, territories were redefined, and new ways of being were imposed.”

The violence committed by the colonial powers included the degradation and suppression of indigenous culture and performative practices. As part of their Anglification project, the British built Uganda’s National Theatre, a grand forum for showcasing western culture. Ugandan artists were forbidden from staging performances there until after independence was won.

Independence came in 1962, but dreams of peace and prosperity in Uganda were not realized. Since independence, Uganda has been ruled by a series of dictators, and war has touched almost every region in the country. Most recently, a war between the Ugandan military and a rebel army has ravaged the Northern region killing tens of thousands of people and displacing millions. For more than twenty years, both sides have brutalized the civilian population, abducting children, brainwashing them into soldiers, and committing egregious violence against anyone who gets in their way.

Throughout the post-colonial period, theatre artists have been brave truth-tellers and

critics of the status quo. In the first few decades after independence, many playwrights and performers were threatened, exiled, or killed because of their outspoken work—which called attention to the abuses of those in power and spoke for the people who were yearning for peace. The National Theatre—once an embodiment of colonial oppression—has at last become a forum for indigenous artists to support the struggles of the people. As Mulekwa puts it, “This monumental cultural landmark has been both a theater of oppression and a theater of the oppressed; it has been both a site of violence and injustice, and a force for justice and peace.”

Thirty Years of Bananas

Mulekwa discusses Alex Mukulu’s epic play *Thirty Years of Bananas*, written for the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Uganda’s independence and performed at the National Theatre. The play is a razor-sharp critique of the “madness” (i.e. “bananas”) that had plagued the country for three decades. Through a series of non-linear narratives, the play tells the story of how the dream of independence was corrupted by authoritarian regimes and war. *Bananas* is set in a number of public places, including a market, a football stadium, and a museum. At each stop, something about the excesses and abuses of power is revealed.

In *Bananas*, the nation’s leaders are caricatured and mocked. But Mukulu doesn’t let the rest of the people of Uganda get off easily either. As Mulekwa says:

Mukulu incriminates ordinary Ugandans, the people who complacently cheered as old leaders were forced out and new, equally terrible leaders were ushered in, all the while the country looting itself to nothingness. Mukulu calls out the people’s complicity in the terrible presidencies, the coups and counter-coups, and the several wars, all of which have occurred since 1962.

Forged in Fire

The displacement, disruption, and longing caused by war are the central themes of Okello Kelo Sam’s play *Forged in Fire*. The play is a semi-autobiographical story about a man (also named Okello) from Northern Uganda who marries a woman from Central Uganda and settles his family there because the North is being torn apart by war.

Through the action of the play, the main character’s internal struggle is revealed: he longs to return home, but he cannot. He is anxious to perform a sacred and fundamentally important ritual—to bury the umbilical cord of his child in his homeland—but it isn’t safe for him to do so. As Mulekwa explains: “The national boundaries instituted during colonialism are so insignificant that Okello feels virtually lost in this central region of Uganda. ‘I am in a foreign land,’ he says.”

Facing the Past, Imagining the Future

Thirty Years of Bananas and *Forged in Fire* both mix western and indigenous theatrical forms to great effect, re-envisioning traditional and colonial practices to create a new contemporary Ugandan genre.

Both plays contribute to peace by validating the experiences of those who have suffered and simultaneously challenging them to take responsibility for their future. Mukulu's *Bananas* asks its audience plainly: "What have you done for your country?" And the audience for *Bananas* was one of the largest and most diverse the National Theatre had ever seen. The play had an exceptionally long run, and it drew people from all of Uganda's major ethnic communities.

Staged only in the United States, for university audiences, *Forged in Fire* was a more intimate and modest production. Okello wanted to bring to life for western audiences—who might be able to influence their own communities and leaders to take action—the effects of war on ordinary people in Northern Uganda. This, Mulekwa says, "is so important because it's so easy to distance ourselves from the brutality of war when we hear it described in terms of numbers of casualties."

Mulekwa asserts that the most powerful role the theatre can play in peacebuilding is to ask the question, "What does it look like and feel like to be living in war?" "These questions," he says, "help us examine the human condition. When we see our own condition on stage, it becomes less terrifying, less impossible to discuss...we can step back and think about it with a little bit of distance, and we can begin to imagine what ought to be done."

More from "Theatre, War, and Peace in Uganda":

- This chapter provides vivid descriptions of *Thirty Years of Bananas* and *Forged in Fire*. It includes short excerpts from the plays and the playwrights' own thoughts on their works.
- Mulekwa also writes extensively about the effects of the epistemological attack by the colonial British on indigenous ways of knowing, believing, and being. He discusses the role in indigenous cultures of rituals that have been performed since long before the British arrived, and he highlights the damage done by the imposition of western culture.
- The author also reflects on what he sees as the main challenge for Ugandan theatre and peacebuilding today, which is widening its reach—providing more people with access to the theatre as playwrights, directors, actors, and audiences.