

The Wrath of
Napolo

By the Same Author

Poetry

- Napolo Poems* (Manchichi)
Napolo and the Python (Heinemann)
A Referendum of Forest Creatures (WASI)
The Return of the Forest Creatures (WASI)
The Elections of the Forest Creatures (WASI)
Breaking the Beadstrings (WASI)
The Vipya Poem (WASI)

Plays

- The Rainmaker* (Popular Publications)
Wachiona Ndani? (Dzuka Publishers)
Sister Sister! (WASI Publications)

Novel

- The Basket Girl* (Popular Publications)

Children's Literature

- Bird Boy's Song* (WASI Publications)
Caves of Nazimbuli (Popular Publications)
Child of Clay (Popular Publications)
Operation Kalulu (Popular Publications)

Short Stories

- Tell me a Story* (Dzuka Publishers)

Folklore

- Malawian Oral Literature* (Center for Social Research)
Napolo ku Zomba (Manchichi)

Criticism

- The Culture of Democracy* [with Moira Chimombo] (WASI)

General

- Directory of Malawian Writing* (Dept of Arts and Crafts)

Translations

- Achiweni Wani?* [trans. *Wachiona Ndani?* by A. Mbwana]
(Manchichi)

The Wrath of
N a p o l o

A novel by

Steve Chimombo

WASI Publications

2000

First published 2000 by:

WASI Publications
P O Box 317
Zomba
Malawi

ISBN 99908-48-06-8

Copyright © Steve Chimombo 2000

Reprinted 2003, 2004

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the copyright holder.

Front cover design © Samson Kambalu 1999

Back cover photograph by Moira Chimombo

Printed by Lightning Source Inc.

Dedication

To the more than two hundred souls who lost their lives when the *M.V. Vipya* sank off Florence (now Chitimba) Bay on 30th July 1946. Except for the memorial plaque at Mangochi Boma, and a few scattered references, they were all but forgotten. They are the ones who inspired my earlier long poem, *The Vipya Poem*, and this epic novel.

Acknowledgements

Although I was originally inspired by the sinking of the *M.V. Vipya* in 1946 on Lake Malawi (then Nyasa) and the subsequent court hearings, the present story is entirely fictitious. Mandania and the characters living in that country do not exist outside the pages of this story.

I do, however, wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Malawi Railways for giving me access to the material they had on the *Vipya* saga; the National Archives and Chancellor College Library for the same. My gratitude extends to Lake Services and the Department of Tourism.

My deep appreciation also extends to the survivors and their relatives who gave me more direct insights into the original tragedy. They extended the dimensions of my perceptions of the event. The rest belongs to the realms of the imagination.

Finally, my family's part needs to be mentioned, too. They are the ones who made the original inspiration possible. The sheer endurance of living with me when I was in the grips of inspiration, writing at odd moments, disappearing into the field, and their help in putting the manuscript onto the computer reached epic proportions. I am grateful for their supportive and understanding role in this venture.

Contents

Chapter One: The <i>Maravi</i> Memorial	1
Chapter Two: The Day of the Corpses	36
Chapter Three: Signs of the <i>Mwera</i>	74
Chapter Four: Burial at Your Own Risk	104
Chapter Five: The File of the Dead	145
Chapter Six: The <i>Maravi</i> in Court	177
Chapter Seven: The Maravi Action Group	206
Chapter Eight: The <i>Maravi</i> – Fifty Years On	253
Chapter Nine: The Media Steps In	295
Chapter Ten: The Gathering <i>Mwera</i>	326
Chapter Eleven: Preludes to Adventure	355
Chapter Twelve: Venture to the Lake	382
Chapter Thirteen: A Cruise on the <i>Yandama</i>	417
Chapter Fourteen: In the Wake of the <i>Maravi</i>	448
Chapter Fifteen: On Phimbi Island	476
Chapter Sixteen: The Bay of Corpses	509
Chapter Seventeen: The Rally of Tears	558

Chapter One

The *Maravi* Memorial

- 1 -

The memorial stand on the banks of the Mpsa River at Gombe said simply:

MV MARAVI MEMORIAL
IN MEMORY OF THE 200 PASSENGERS AND
CREW WHO LOST THEIR LIVES WHEN THE
MARAVI SANK ON 30th JULY, 1946

‘Poor souls,’ Thokozani murmured in a subdued voice. ‘That’s quite a lot of people dying in one go.’

They had stopped at Gombe Boma, just before the bridge joining the district to Mbulu Trading Centre. The Queen Victoria Memorial dominated the whole place, even competing with the nsangu trees around it. It was a brick and concrete structure like the Kings African Rifles monument in Mtalika commemorating the fallen heroes of the First World War. On the west bank of the Mpsa, almost on the sand, was the Hotchkiss gun, its yawning muzzle aimed menacingly across the waters at the marshes and reeds opposite. Gombe had been one of the famous slave trading posts of the last century. The gun had been on an old warship patrolling the river and lake beyond, fighting the Arabs, the Swahili, and their local middlemen.

‘I would have died in it too,’ Nkhoma told his family, as he paused to take some photographs.

Thirteen-year-old Fatsani turned to his father, seeking more information. Nineteen-year-old Titani was also quietly attentive.

‘You mean on the *Maravi*?’ Fats sounded excited.

‘Yes, but for the merciful Chauta.’

‘What happened?’ Fats could not contain himself.

'My parents took the earlier trip down south. Before they had reached their destination overland they heard the *Maravi* had foundered. I was less than a year old then.'

'What was the *Maravi*?' Titan came in.

'All I can remember is that it was a cargo and passenger ship following a weekly schedule, port to port, round Lake Tamanda.'

'Why were you on it?' Titan continued.

'Your grandfather had been transferred from Ngoma to Kamba. He was going to take up his new post in the south.'

'What happened to the ship?'

'As far as I know it's still where it sank. I don't remember hearing it had been salvaged.'

'That's odd,' Thoko observed. 'I thought they always salvaged their ships.'

'They say she sank in one of the deepest parts of Tamanda. Kuya Bay is famous for its cross currents. Most ships give it a wide berth.'

'But that's way up north,' Titan pointed out. 'Why is there a memorial here?'

'I don't know. I guess they wanted it to be with the other museum pieces. The Lake Tamanda museum is just down there, you know.' Nkhoma pointed. 'It's all part of our national heritage.'

'You mean this is a glorified place of death?' Thoko indicated the tower on one side and the gun on the other.

'Don't be morbid,' Nkhoma remonstrated.

'Let's go and eat.'

Benches and other concrete seats were dotted around, almost on the sand. It was an ideal stopover for almost any part of Lake Tamanda. You could sit there all day watching the muddy green and blue waters flow below you. Dugouts flitted to and fro, competing occasionally with motor boats. Some motor boats were moored on the banks higher up, where the women had staked their claim. Through his binoculars Nkhoma could see some bathing barebreasted, wet *zitenje* clinging to well-rounded bottoms. Others were washing clothes on upturned rocks or in buckets and basins in the shallows. Nearer still, directly in front of the picnic spot, little boys splashed or wrestled in the waters completely naked. Nkhoma aimed the camera he always carried over one shoulder. Those who noticed posed for him.

'How can you allow him to take photos of you like that?' a woman shouted behind him.

Nkhoma turned to look at her. She went on her way on the path parallel to the river. He wondered whose values she was adopting. The river and lake population was not famous for its modesty. In fact the first republic of Mandania could not hide its embarrassment when it passed the infamous Indecent Exposure Act. In spite of enforcement by the police and the notorious Censorship Board, the government had to contend with foreign tourists who came to the lake resorts to sunbathe, some in the nude, thereby encouraging the locals to continue what they had done since time immemorial. As was its wont the government resorted to double standards; the Act did not apply to designated areas like holiday resorts, so the natives of the river and lakeshore were free to roam with or without scanty clothing. The rest of the country, tourist or not, had to comply with the Act.

In any other country, women could wear miniskirts, trousers, or even hot pants. When the women's wing of the Mandania Congress Party complained that the Act discriminated against women, the wrath of the government turned on the men: they could not wear flares or bell-bottoms, or sport long hair, fashionable then, not even international visitors. The campaign strategies of the then opposition had exploited the Act to the full: if they were voted into power all restrictions on dress would be abolished. That's why his wife was now in trousers. Under the previous government Thoko would have been stripped naked right there and then, and bundled unceremoniously into one of the several detention camps erected for what were called dissidents, rebels and subversive elements.

Nkhoma watched his wife supervise the transfer of food from the car to the picnic site. She was wearing a home-made top and slacks from the local *chitenje* cloth, and flat sandals. The outfit made her look taller and slimmer than her 1.65 m. She wore her hair loosely combed in a faint imitation of an Afro-hair style that was no style at all. 'I'm going swimming and holidaying,' she had declared when he had commented on her hair, 'not to a fashion parade.' She was more conservative for her secondary school job. The Ministry of Education was slow to move from the dictatorial first republic to the democratic era ushered in by the second.

Nkhoma himself had put on his white college commemorative T-shirt for the drive. It was thin and cool enough for the heat of the drought they seemed to have brought with them. It did not hide the slightly protruding belly; rather, it emphasized the middle of an average Mandanian. The white highlighted the few grey hairs which

had begun to sprout prematurely on his black head. The sandals allowed more air between his toes. The blue jeans did not. They could not decide whether to be cool or hot. In his attire he could pass for anyone: executive, lecturer, businessman on holiday at the lake.

‘You could at least open the boot and get the basket out,’ Thoko reminded him.

‘Here.’ Nkhoma gave the keys to Fats. ‘You’re big enough to do it.’

Thoko looked at him with mock disgust. He watched her with the kids bringing the food basket from the boot and containers from inside the car. Titan insisted on wearing his floppy oversized cotton shirt and equally floppy trousers. He said kids of his age liked floppy clothes nowadays. Fats wore a plain T-shirt and cotton trousers. Both kids wore the plastic slippers common in all markets.

‘What did you bring?’ Nkhoma asked lazily as the basket and containers accumulated around the bench.

‘Roast chicken, boiled potatoes, salad and bread.’

Thoko placed the items, some in plastic bags, on the concrete slab. She proceeded to open them with a delicate brown hand.

‘Just the right stuff for a hangover,’ Nkhoma said.

‘I thought you stopped having hangovers,’ Thoko remarked.

‘What can you do when you have to move from press conference to reception to national celebration day? You don’t see me drinking minerals for a whole evening discussing international intrigue, do you?’

‘Some people do.’

‘They’re not successful journalists, then. No one likes sober reporters.’

‘It’s a myth easily dispelled.’

‘I’m not about to explode any myths.’

Nkhoma investigated the bag of chicken, taking out a huge breast which he immediately sank his teeth into. He concentrated on the meat without salad or potatoes. They spoil the main meal, he always said, when he was eating meat or fish without *nsima*.

‘What are those birds, Dad?’ Fats had been eating looking up at the overhanging branches.

‘*Machete*,’ Nkhoma announced after a quick glance up. ‘They’re spirit birds.’

‘What do you mean?’