

# Reconfiguring the Absurd?

## A Reading of Robert Serumaga's *A Play, Majangwa* and *The Elephants*

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## Abstract (Luganda)

Ebiri mu kitabo kino byava mu kunonyeereza kwe nnakola nga ngerageranya engeri omuwandiisi Serumaga gy'awundawundamu obukodyo bw'abawandiisi b'emizannyo obwa "abusaadi" (the absurd)<sup>1</sup>. Okutwalira awamu, nze njamba nti Serumaga awunda endowooza nnakazadde eya abusaadi, eyagunjibwaawo Martin Esslin, mwattu n'agifuula ekisoko mwayita okuggyayo amakulu amakusike agali mu mizannyo gye: *A Play* (Omuzannyo), *Majangwa* (lino nno linnya lya muntu ate era lya muzannyo) ne *The Elephants* (Enjovu).

Bwe nnekenneenya emizannyo egyo waggulu, nnakizuula nti amakulu agali mu mizannyo egyo gekuusa bya nsusso ku mirerembe n'obusambattuko ebyaliwo mu Uganda mu myaka gy'e 1960 n'e 1970, Milton Obote ne Idi Amin we baafugira ensi eno. Era nnakizuula nti wadde ekisoko kya "abusaadi" mu mizannyo gya Serumaga kyekuusa ku ngeri omuwandiisi Samuel Beckett gye yakozesaamu endowooza nnakazadde eya "abusaadi", era ne kikunukkiriza ku byayogerwa Esslin ku ndowooza eyo, wamma Serumaga ye akikozesa bulala. Tuyinza okugamba nti azannyisa endowooza ya "abusaadi" n'agifuula ekisoko mu ngeri ey'enjawulo.

Olwo mpumbawumba ne njamba nti Serumaga awundawunda endowooza ya "abusaadi", n'agijjamu ekisoko n'akikozesa okutulaga ebyaali bitagenda bulungi mu Uganda mu kiseera we yawandiikira emizannyo *A Play*, *Majangwa* ne *The Elephants*.

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<sup>1</sup> I could not find an equivalent word for "the absurd" in Luganda. Therefore, I tried to Lugandanise it into "abusaadi"

## Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of Robert Serumaga's reconfiguration of elements of theatre of the absurd into what I call the absurdist idiom in his plays. Through a close reading of his plays *A Play* (1967), *The Elephants* (1971) and *Majangwa* (1974), I argue that while Serumaga's overall mode of dramaturgical representation is cast in an absurdist idiom, this style is being adapted and consciously reinvented by the playwright for his own purposes, not least in response to his contemporary situation. Further, I argue that Serumaga's concerns are in intimate conversation with conflict situations of the late 60s and early 70s in Uganda; a period during which human existence seemed to have been rendered meaningless by the successive political regimes of the time.

The study also looks at the possible influence of Beckett on Serumaga through because a basic connection involving Serumaga, Beckett and the Absurd has been familiar to critics such as Eckhard Breitingner, Andrew Horn and Rose Mbowa. Finally, while I grant that there are elements in *A Play*, *Majangwa* and *The Elephants* that gesture towards the Esslinian notion of the absurd, I argue that Serumaga in his plays goes beyond and does more than the absurd. My overall conclusion is that rather adopt a theatre of the absurd per se, Serumaga reconfigures elements of the absurd into an absurdist idiom which he uses to present his concerns in a unique way.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my dear mother Nakate Cotrida and dad Mubiru James William.

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I must point out that all errors in this thesis are my own responsibility.

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# Introduction

## Robert Serumaga and the absurdist idiom

In this thesis, I explore Robert Serumaga's use of the absurdist idiom in his plays. Robert Serumaga is a Ugandan playwright who wrote his plays in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He is a playwright whom Eckhard Breitingner (in Banham, ed. 2004:259) describes as "the only Ugandan playwright of international reputation in the 1970s." Serumaga's published plays include *A Play* (1967), *The Elephants* (1971) and *Majangwa* (1974). A close reading of all these plays, as well as the critical responses to his theatrical convention reveals that his plays contain overtures to the mode of theatre that Martin Esslin (1960:4) collectively describes as theatre of the absurd.<sup>2</sup> However, whereas it may appear that theatre of the absurd practitioners tend to run away from a straightforward engagement with politics, Serumaga's plays engage with large socio-political issues of their time in a largely allegorical language. I will argue that while Serumaga's overall mode of dramaturgical representation is cast in an absurdist idiom, this style is being adapted and consciously reinvented by the playwright for his own purposes, not least in response to his contemporary situation.

Serumaga's concerns are in intimate conversation with conflict situations of the late 60s and early 70s in Uganda. It was a period during which human existence seemed to have been rendered meaningless by the successive political regimes of the time. Further, it was a period during which Uganda was in a state of re-structuring itself after the rule of former President Milton Obote, and grappling with brutal power machine of then-president Idi Amin from 1971 to 1979 (subsequently overthrown by Ugandan exiled forces and Tanzanian armed forces).

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<sup>2</sup> I provide details of the major tenets of Esslin's notion of theatre of the absurd in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis

## **Background**

Idi Amin's regime in Uganda was characterised by a wide range of brutal acts which included extra-judicial killings. It also had destructive effects on the national economy. In general, it was a situation that led to a number of questions about the meaning of life. Further, it was a period during which people experienced much socio-political turmoil in their day to day existence (Kaahwa 2004; Breitinger 2000; Kiyimba 1998; Gibbs 1974; Nazareth 2000). In a sense, the 1960s and 70s in Uganda can be seen as similar to the turmoil of the aftermath of the Second World War period in Europe, and in both cases, an absurdist style found significant resonance. Correspondingly, perhaps, playwrights like Serumaga used this trying time as fertile ground to write plays that could indirectly reflect the events that were taking place at the time. For example, the civil disruptions in which David's family died in *The Elephants* (discussed in Chapter 4) call to mind Milton Obote's Republican coup d'état of 1966 in Uganda. Overall, as a result of forces they can hardly comprehend, Serumaga's characters are usually withdrawn from society and keep to themselves, just like characters in Beckett's plays – such as Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, or Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*.

## **Serumaga and the absurdist idiom**

I acknowledge at the outset that several other studies have previously made the connection between Beckett, the Theatre of the Absurd and Serumaga's plays. One scholar who has made an impressive study of Serumaga's plays touching on the Esslinian notion of the absurd is George Bwanika Seremba (2008), in his doctoral thesis titled "Robert Serumaga and the Golden Age of Uganda's Theatre: Solipsism, Activism, Innovation (1968-1978)". As suggested in the title of his thesis, Seremba's analysis responds to what he, following Andrew Horn (1978:22-49), designates as the "golden age of Uganda's theatre, between 1968 and 1978". Further, Seremba (2008:7) interrogates "the question of individualism, or its extreme

form - solipsism, on the one hand; and activism, or a social conscience, on the other". Seremba (ibid.) also "examines the question of theatrical innovation" as played out in Serumaga's plays. Overall Seremba takes exception to Andrew Horn (in Harding, ed. 2002:97-111) who in his article "Individualism and Community in the theatre of Serumaga" makes a sweeping proposition that Serumaga is an artistic promoter of solipsism; one who privileges the individual over the community in his plays. Instead, Seremba (op. cit.:79) argues that Serumaga's overall vision, though seen through a "so-called absurdist idiomatic choice" is to make a case for activism.

My present study differs from Seremba's and Horn's in three major ways. First, I look at how Esslin's specific critical concerns in the monograph *Theatre of the Absurd* (1960) might have influenced Serumaga. This is because other studies have largely ignored Esslin's specific contribution, or have simply assumed that the style of the theatre of the absurd simply exists in a vacuum, rather than being defined in particular ways through Esslin's work. After all, the diverse playwrights Esslin discusses did not conceive their own work as contributing to some pre-existing genre of "the absurd"; so we need to trace Esslin's retrospective critical construction as a distinctive influence on later work like Serumaga's.

Secondly, my study looks at the possible influence of Beckett on Serumaga through a close reading of *A Play, Majangwa* and *The Elephants* while making comparisons between the two playwrights. I do so mainly because a basic connection involving Serumaga, Beckett and the Absurd has been familiar to critics such as Breitingner (op. cit.:256), Seremba (op. cit.:96-97), Horn (op. cit.:98-9) and Rose Mbowa (1996:90). On her part, Mbowa (ibid.) directly links works by dramatists like Serumaga and Fagil Mandy to the theatre of the absurd, noting that "because of its heavy symbolism the absurd form did not take root, although it resurfaced at the dawn of Obote's second rule in 1980, once again communicating a people's loss of hope and helpless plunge into an endless nightmare of futile existence. This mood was expressed in 1981

in Fagil Mandy's *Endless Night*" (ibid.) Mbowa further likens Serumaga's *Majangwa* to Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which plays, according to her, are well-known pieces of absurd drama. In a different but related tone, Kasule (1988:8) notes that Serumaga's tours and attendance of an international university in Dublin influenced his theatre, because "his theatre operates within the experimental mode, and as one who attended a European University he shows a remarkable influence by European writers on his plays and theatre style." It is possible that Serumaga could have interacted with Beckett's plays while in Dublin or London.

Finally, my study extends the conversation on Serumaga's plays beyond theatre of the absurd per se. While I grant that there are elements in *A Play* and *Majangwa*, especially, that gesture towards the Esslinian absurd, Serumaga goes beyond and does more than the absurd as presented by Esslin. Therefore, at selective points in this thesis, I examine the shared textual and dramatic correspondences between the plays of Serumaga on the one hand and Beckett's on the other. This is mainly because even a casual look at the plays of the two authors reveals that both represent characters in various states of stasis on the stage. Moreover, since Serumaga's first published play, *A Play* (1967), appeared after many of Beckett's plays, it is plausible to argue that Serumaga could have re-configured aspects of Beckett's dramatic mode in the construction of, say, *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Endgame* (1957), *Happy Days* (1960) and *Play* (1963).

### **Why Serumaga?**

But one question remains to be answered: why Serumaga? Two principal reasons are behind my choice. First, I am interested in how Serumaga's plays reconfigure a multiplicity of folkloric materials and fuse them into an absurdist idiom, while also offering a complex reflection on socio-political phenomena. Secondly, as Breitingner (2000:3) says, Serumaga is an

icon in the development of Ugandan theatre. For example, he was the first African President of the Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies at Makerere University (ibid.). Yet, ironically, Serumaga has attracted minimal attention and critical analysis, especially in Uganda. However, as I write this thesis, Serumaga's plays are being read and performed especially in the National Theatre of Uganda. Thus, Serumaga occupies significant and evolving space in the theatric culture of Uganda, which requires further critical attention.

In this thesis, I aim to demonstrate that Serumaga's absurdist idiom undergoes a kind of journey of growth: from its initial launch in *A Play*, through its operationalisation in the frame of spectatorship in *Majangwa* and, finally, to a re-invented formula in the form of absurdist realism, mediated through the lenses of concealment and exposure in *The Elephants*.

In chapter 1, I explore evidence for connecting *A Play* to Esslin's notion of theatre of the absurd, identifying several features which might fit some of Esslin's terms. My discussion proceeds to demonstrate that a close reading of *A Play* suggests that Serumaga also goes beyond the assumptions behind Esslin's theatre of the absurd. I also explore how *A Play* can be read as being in conversation with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. However, I emphasise that neither Serumaga nor Beckett, strictly speaking, adhere to some pre-existing style called the Theatre of the Absurd. Rather, I argue, Serumaga makes use of what I describe as an absurdist idiom; a flexible dramatic strategy by which he gestures towards but also critically engages this style. Overall, I agree with Seremba (op. cit.:80) who says that "Serumaga's choice of the 'absurd' was not only an aesthetic one; it can also be described as a key component of his thematic universe and survival kit, enforced on him by the hegemonic order which characterised the regimes of Milton Obote (1966-1971) and Idi Amin (1971-1979)".

In Chapter 2, I show how an absurdist reading of spectatorship in *Majangwa* remains an ever-present possibility throughout that play. I observe that mutual acknowledgement and recognition between human beings seems always in the process of breaking down. I claim that

in *Majangwa*, like in *A Play*, Serumaga makes use of an absurdist idiom in order to expose and criticise a diseased state of society. Then, as in Chapter 1, I conclude that Serumaga's *Majangwa* goes beyond the Absurd by offering positive models of acknowledgement and healing. In Chapter 3, I argue that *The Elephants* is a play about concealment, exposure, realism and the absurd. I emphasise that unlike in *A Play* and *Majangwa*, in *The Elephants*, "the absurd" and "realism" are in a productive, mutually interrogating relationship. An apparently "realist" situation may turn into something disorientingly "absurd"; yet situations that, on the face of it, seem absurd can have an underlying psychological and social rationale. It is this ongoing productive interrelationship between realism and the absurd that provides the site for concealment and exposure in the entire play. Hence, I conclude in this chapter, that Serumaga's absurdist idiom as played out in *The Elephants* is an absurdist idiom re-invented if taken in comparison with its use in *A Play* and *Majangwa* as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

The Conclusion to this thesis argues that the absurdist idiom in Serumaga's plays is efficacious in so far as it engages individual and communal issues in a unique manner. Reading Serumaga through the lens of an absurdist idiom provides an alternative window through which his play can be appreciated, away from the conventional study based on isolated items such as setting, theme or character. I also discuss whether Serumaga's *A Play*, *Majangwa* and *The Elephants*, in a way, have echoes of Samuel Beckett albeit in a Ugandan stage context, given that I compare Serumaga and Beckett at certain points in my analysis.

Finally, I suggest areas of further research in relation to Serumaga and the absurdist idiom, posing the question: is the absurdist idiom not the strategy of the twenty-first century since there seem to be no certainties, real or imagined, anymore? To what extent were Esslin's words prophetic when he said that "the spectators of theatre of the absurd are thus confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world without faith, meaning, and the genuine freedom of will. In this sense, the theatre of the absurd is the true theatre of our

time (Esslin 1960:6)? And to what extent does Serumaga offer a fruitful, potentially transformative response to this situation?

# Chapter 1

## The absurdist idiom in *A Play*

### Introduction: Theatre of the absurd, *A Play*, and the absurdist idiom

The Ugandan scholar George Bwanika Seremba (2008:80) has posited that “Serumaga’s signification could well be described as an intricate balance between the exposure of the abominable realities of those precarious times to which he was responding, and his inevitable attempts to evade the censor, as well as ensure his very survival in Uganda. This he does through an embrace of the so-called absurdist idiomatic choice.” Seremba (ibid.) tells us that it is possible that Serumaga embraced the notion of the absurd, in part, due to his six years as a student at Trinity College, Dublin, as well as his theatrical experiences as an actor and theatre goer in London, where he spent two years before his official return to Uganda in 1968.

In this chapter, I take the cue from Seremba’s observation and apply the term “absurd” to refer to the quality or condition of existence in a seemingly meaningless and irrational world which pervades Serumaga’s plays. Specifically, I explore Serumaga’s *A Play* focusing on the depiction of its central figure, Mutimukulu. I agree with Seremba that the term “absurdist idiom” is a fruitful starting-point for discussing Serumaga’s dramatic strategy in *A Play*. However, I will argue that Serumaga in *A Play* also subtly questions and goes beyond any wholesale embrace of the tenets which are associated with theatre of the absurd.

I emphasise, then, that Serumaga does not simply apply what Esslin describes as features of absurdist theatre as a template in *A Play*. Instead, Serumaga engages with larger issues, especially in reference to Uganda’s socio-political terrain of the 1960s and 1970s. Serumaga adopts what Seremba describes as the “absurdist idiomatic choice” (ibid.) primarily as a strategy to critique some key issues in the socio-political landscape of Ugandan at the time



he wrote and published *A Play*. Thus, the absurd is Serumaga's dramatic idiom of communication rather than the overarching dramatic intention in *A Play*.

Theatre of the absurd, briefly, is a term which Martin Esslin (1960) coined to describe the kind of drama which to him was depicting situations that were devoid of purpose. With time, "absurdist theatre" has come to be one of the most important critical tools in the appreciation of dramatic texts. Martin Esslin) derives the spirit of his coinage "theatre of the absurd" from the playwright Eugene Ionesco whom he cites as having said that "the absurd is that which is devoid of purpose ... cut off from his religious metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become useless, senseless, and absurd." (Esslin 1966:239-40.) These plays sometimes display a dreamlike strangeness of a world seen from outside, as if cut off from reality. To Esslin, the plays comprise "a quality of nightmare and display a world in constant, and wholly purposeless, movement" (ibid.) Thus, in his search for a category in which to place the plays of Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Arthur Adamov, Esslin found "theatre of the absurd" the appropriate descriptor.

In the ensuing discussion, I will offer specific evidence for connecting *A Play* to Esslin's notion of theatre of the absurd. My discussion will proceed to demonstrate that Serumaga goes beyond the tenets of Esslin's theatre of the absurd if one does a more close reading of *A Play* from a different angle. This is most especially so if one does a close interpretation of Mutimukulu, its central figure. In my view, *A Play* is much more of a committed play than for instance Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which Vladimir and Estragon can be seen as despair-ridden portraits of radically unattainable desire, modelled on Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimism<sup>3</sup>. By contrast, Serumaga seems to subtly point towards a desirable change, if we read

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ulrich Pothast, *The Metaphysical Vision: Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Art and Life* and Samuel Beckett's *Own Way to Make Use of It* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 202.

his characters closely, implicitly distancing his stance from the purposelessness that Esslin would ascribe to “absurdist” plays.

Finally, I will explore how *A Play* can be read as in conversation with Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* because Beckett is one of the playwrights whose plays Esslin claims make use of theatre of the absurd, and an admitted influence on Serumaga himself. However, neither Serumaga nor Beckett, strictly speaking, applies aspects of some pre-existing style called the Theatre of the Absurd, even though Serumaga on his part could have been influenced by certain ideas put forward by Esslin and certain aspects of Beckett’s plays. What, then, Serumaga makes use of is what I describe as an absurdist idiom; a dramatic strategy by which Serumaga alludes to and reshapes features of “absurd drama” that had become well-known through Esslin’s work. Seremba (op. cit.) tells us that it is possible that Serumaga embraced the notion of the absurd, in part, due to his six years as a student at Trinity College, Dublin, as well as his theatrical experiences as an actor and theatre goer in London, where he spent two years before his official return to Uganda in 1968. It is there that he is bound to have encountered a form that would be able to carry, the very core of how he felt, what he saw, and in a manner that brought him closer to an indigenized theatrical sign.

### ***A Play: Conversation with theatre of the Absurd?***

The action of *A Play* takes place in a poorly furnished living room that belongs to the central figure of Mutimukulu, an old man whose wife, Rose, has been killed in unclear circumstances. He appears wary from the start, and from his conversation with his housemaid Martha we learn that he is an irritable man. Further, Mutimukulu seems to be tormented by guilt. However, Serumaga does not clarify the reason for Mutimukulu’s guilt. Later, the figure of a talking human Head appears in his dream and warns him of the dire consequences of his past actions. The Head also calls upon him to tell the truth or else the truth shall devour him. Subsequently,

Mutimukulu digs deep into his past for answers as to the death of his wife. As the play progresses, Peter and John, two young men, are coerced to take part in the re-enactment of an imaginary murder scene, reflecting on the possible events which might have surrounded the murder of Rose. All the three insist that the wife is not dead. To prove it, Mutimukulu ‘parades’ his wife, gives the two men guns and orders them to shoot her. They shoot her dead. A crowd gathers outside and demands for the body as well as the people who shot her. It is from this point that Peter and John start playing games about their own forthcoming death.

In the ‘Heaven’s Gate’ game, John has just been hanged and he goes to Heaven to be met by Peter (a reference to St. Peter) at the gates of Heaven. Peter and John talk about death casually as though it is an everyday occurrence to them. Peter however gets bored with the game and suggests his own game: their public hanging. They act being present at their hanging and they identify a number of people they know in the crowd. The Head’s speech is immediately followed by two characters: Old Man and Young Man. The two, upon arrival, engage Mutimukulu in a dialogue that reveals crucial fragments of Mutimukulu’s past. Then, John and Peter, who are the other guests Mutimukulu has invited, arrive with Rose, Mutimukulu’s former wife now dead. John and Peter, among others, were invited ostensibly to celebrate Mutimukulu’s wedding anniversary, but they are also dead, just as Rose is at this moment in the play. It is then revealed that John and Peter met their death at the same time that Rose did.

By the end of the play, Mutimukulu seems to have lost his mind. He is also seen with a gun, a sign that he may possibly have murdered his own wife, perhaps the source of his present state of guilt. However, throughout the play the two young men, John and Peter spend most of their time at “play”. The two spend most of their stage time at play, as they keep reminding Mutimukulu of his human vulnerability. They keep playing games, which include the game of Heaven’s Gate (p. 48), the game about death (p. 47); the game of the wife's re-murder (p. 32-4); and the game of the hanging (pp. 52-3); hence the source of the title *A Play. A Play* clearly

contains overtones of the mode of theatre which Martin Esslin collectively describes as “theatre of the absurd.” As we shall see, this mode of theatre includes a dreamlike strangeness and helplessness as well as the use of the absurd as a modern form of religious drama.

But that is not all there is to it. Serumaga wrote his plays during what one may describe as a post-and-within-conflict period in Uganda, a period when human existence in Uganda had been rendered precarious by successive political regimes as well as the overall socio-political conditions that were prevailing in the country at that time. For instance, Milton Obote’s regime that ran between 1962 and 1971 was characterised by intolerance to any sort of dissent. Detentions without trial and sectarian violence, particularly towards the Baganda people of central Uganda comprised the order of the day. This was followed by the reign of Idi Amin between 1971 and 1979, which was characterised with brutal acts, wanton killings and destructions of physical and social institutions.

In general, this precarious existential situation led to a number of questions about the meaning of life. Thus, one possible interpretation of *A Play* is that it engages with the playing of political games in which the ordinary citizens are the pawns. I think that this is where Serumaga’s deployment of the absurdist idiom is most evident. It is also possible that Serumaga found the absurdist idiom helpful in avoiding the government censorship which pervaded all spheres of life including theatre. In other words, the absurd became a way of criticising the political excesses of the times in manner that would shield the artist from trouble.

*A Play* was written in 1967, a time of social-political crisis in Uganda. The major protagonist Mutimukulu is depicted as someone tormented by guilt, though the reason for this is never clarified. John and Peter, a pair who are in reminiscent of Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, are also part of the action. The play was performed soon after the “rape” of the Royal Palace of Baganda in 1966, when the then Prime Minister of Uganda ordered the Uganda National army to storm the seat of Buganda’s monarchy on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1966.

It opens as Mutimukulu, a dignified middle-aged and unsteady man “wearing a dark, faded suit, also carrying a briefcase, walking stick and bowler hat, weighing heavily on him, ... stands and switches on the light. To his surprise, it lights. He lifts up the telephone and it also works” (p. 54). He then wonders what went wrong. It seems from the onset that the status quo is that of a domineering gloom; with an ironic reference to malfunction when there is after all a bit of light. He doubts whether “the country’s credit facilities” had so improved to the extent that they could consider the likes of him “a very important customer – V.I.C” (p. 54) meaning that, the country is so indebted that it cannot afford to provide the basic services such as regular power supply to its citizens.

Overall, there is absurdity or illogicality surrounding Mutimukulu. In the course of the play, as Mutimukulu interacts with the characters of Martha his domestic help, Old Man, Young Man, Peter and John, the apparition of a human Head, the voice of Rose (his former wife, now dead), we realise that the planned anniversary does not happen after all. There is a mix-up of dates, places and personalities involved. The action in *A Play* can be generally described, in Esslin’s terminology, as “bewildering”, in which we witness “nonsensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention” (Esslin, op. cit.:3). As a result, “it is often unclear whether the action is meant to represent a dream world of nightmares or real happening” (Ibid.) We encounter illogicality and incongruity at the beginning of the play when Mutimukulu, for instance, in his characteristically cynical temperament changes his mind abruptly and rejects the dinner for which he has just ordered Martha to cook. He says to her, “And Martha, please try to add enough food to the salt will you, love? (*she huffs and turns to go*).” (p. 55)

In Mutimukulu’s utterance we realise that instead of “add enough salt to the food” he reverses the terms. This enhances the sense of incongruity, absurdity or illogicality that surrounds Mutimukulu. It may not surprise us therefore when the same Mutimukulu in a

nagging tone softly grumbles, “By the taste of her food you would think she was the pillar of salt herself” (p. 55). This of course invokes the transformation of Lot’s wife as she looks back on the crumbling Babylon being punished and destroyed behind her. There are implications here of a world turned violently upside-down, as well as an indication that turning to look back may be dangerous and even fatal.

The dialogue of *A Play* is often drawn from an absurdist idiom. For instance, in much of the verbal exchanges in the play, characters get bogged down in endless repetitions. Generally, dialogue gets out of hand as the words go counter to the actions of characters. Using Esslin’s framework, one might infer that as human beings we are basically helpless in that we cannot control even that which we think we possess: our own language. Some examples may help to demonstrate this conflict between words and the actions of the characters in the play. At one point, Old Man, Young Man and Mutimukulu discuss the meaning of life. They alternately wonder if life is about work, drinking or thinking. Correspondingly, Mutimukulu advises Young Man and Old Man, “I think it is time you stopped covering up your own weaknesses, with your hybrid philosophies and meaningless verbiage.” (p. 61)

From an Esslinian perspective, the absurd would repudiate the effectiveness of language to communicate concrete human experiences. The phrase ‘meaningless verbiage’ might easily be taken to point to an inbuilt failure in words to explain the essence of life. It is the kind of dialogue that reminds me of Fritz Mauthner’s view on language (admired by Samuel Beckett) when he asserts that “our critique of language has taught us that even the most concrete concept does not provide any experience, but only the appearance of experience that therefore even the brilliant richness of pictures painted by a poet of thought cannot transcend the boundaries of a language” (Notes on Mauthner, p. 387).

Many things in *A Play* are not easy to explain in terms of cause and effect, a situation that enhances a sense of apparent illogicality. Instead, to borrow another description from Esslin

(op. cit., 3), *A Play* presents “a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention.” In *A Play* we find episodes that appear nonsensical if read against those conventions in which a play follows a clear-cut plot structure, neat dialogue and unity of impression through the central themes and ideas. The reader may wonder, for example, why Mutimukulu is hesitant to look back on his actions when he says “The wound has crusted over, I have no desire to reopen it. A wife murdered under the very nose of her husband, and on their wedding anniversary” (p. 67) Mutimukulu could be aware of the consequences of his past actions, so he could be thinking that if time has passed and made the wound crust, he too may go unpunished.

However, if “crime-is-dry-meat-that-never-rots” – to use the Head’s words – his punishment is ordained. But there is no clear-cut causality being enacted in the play at this moment. Moreover, Mutimukulu sounds remorseful when he murmurs, “A wife murdered under the very nose of her husband, and on their wedding anniversary” (p. 67). Thus, he could be guilty of murder or conspiracy to murder. Perhaps he is aware that even if he reopens the wound it will not help solve the present absurd situation he finds himself in. The utterances of the Head enhance this sense of guilt, as partly captured in the following passage:

*(calling out of the sleeping Mutimukulu)* Mutimukulu, Mutimukulu, do you hear me?

*(Mutimukulu moves in his bed but says nothing)* Mutimukulu,

There are horns in the head of night

To clear spiderwebs from our sight.

An eagle, evil creature of the skies,

Lies dying in a trap set here on earth.

While you slept, they captured your ghost

And buried it at the foot of the baobab tree.

They played calabashes and burnt a centipede,

And now I see an owl perched on your roof.

Soon the vultures will arrive

*(Mutimukulu groans nightmarishly. A haunting horn joins in with other instruments.)*

Mutimukulu, what have you done? *(A Play, 56-7)*

The referents in the Head's speech are revealing. We get a premonition; a warning or a foreboding of something undesirable that is to befall Mutimukulu's household shortly, but this something remains blurred throughout the play. Although there is some kind of foretelling, there seems to be no means of stopping it.

There is more to Mutimukulu's musings that Esslin's theatre of the absurd would account for. It is important to note that in the portrayal of the speech of the Head to Mutimukulu, Serumaga leans heavily on folklore to portray a general sense of retribution. For instance, among the Baganda people from whom Serumaga was born, a proverbial saying which can be loosely translated as "That which flies in the sky, you trap it on earth" underlies the Head's "An eagle, evil creature of the skies, Lies dying in a trap set here on earth." It points to the inevitability of facing consequences for what we are trying to avoid. In this sense, therefore, it seems that the Head is telling Mutimukulu that whatever heights a human being attains, he or she will have to face the consequences of their past actions, in one way or the other.

Regardless of the truth of what happened (which the audience never learn), what matters now is that Mutimukulu is bearing the burden of the consequences of his past actions. Haunting questions as to who killed his wife, or if he could have prevented the killing, all aggravate the absurdity which surrounds Mutimukulu. There is a looming sense of guilt in the atmosphere of



the play at this stage of reading or watching its performance. Perhaps that is why the Head addresses Mutimukulu in the following terms:

**Head:** I am Mukasa, god of thunder and lightning. I am crime-is-dry-meat-that-never-rots. I am poison, which once eaten will show up some time. (*A Play*, 57)

The considerable authority given to the Head's words, with associations of ritual, prophetic vision, and the god Mukasa, suggests that Serumaga is emphasizing that as human beings we have to bear the consequences of our own actions, rather than attributing those consequences to an a-moral state of absurdity.

One of the bewildering experiences, in the context of the absurd, involves the inevitability and omnipresence of death among the living. The theme of inevitability of death is partly revealed when Mutimukulu says:

Mother nature, with wombful of earthquakes, breathing storms and hurricanes, and my dear friends, giving birth to you pointless, stragglings minions, who delude yourselves for a while before your mother nature turns around and eats her own brood, like a ruddy crocodile (*breaks into wild laughter as he sets down the bottles and begins to pour*) (*A Play*, 58).

In *A Play*, there is an intricate web of relationships involving death, apparent helplessness and nothingness, especially in the face of nature. Serumaga partly depicts a sense of insignificance and impermanence of human beings in the overall equations of the universe when Mutimukulu says that "and too often, I fear, we jump; only to spike our bottoms on the jutting undergrowth, and be rocked to eternal sleep by our own mother nature" (p. 59). We also realise that the entire

dialogue which runs from page 60 to 63 of *A Play* – involving Old Man, Mutimukulu and Young Man – entails questions about life and death. Each of the three characters can be read as representative of phases of life: Young Man: youth; Old Man: old age; Mutimukulu: middle age. One can then say that at every phase of life, humans are revolving around the wheel of nature. Although experienced differently by each individual, no one seems to have any interest in changing his or her current situation.

*A Play* on the whole presents a bewildering experience, “a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention.” (Esslin, op. cit., 3) The boundary between the dead and the living in *A Play* is blurred. For example, the moments in which the Head (pp. 56-8) – as the god Mukasa – and Mutimukulu’s dead wife (pp. 68-9) appear and intermingle with the living are a clear demonstration of the bewildering absurdist atmosphere in *A Play*. In addition, we realise that Old man and Young Man are presented as allegories of the past and the present rather than real-life-like characters acting on the stage. Through Mutimukulu, Serumaga can be said to represent “a dreamlike strangeness, uselessness, senselessness or absurdity of the characters and situations” (Esslin, op. cit.) in *A Play*. The sense of dreamlike absurdity that we encounter in the play is partially brought out through Mutimukulu’s musings. For instance, we hear from him:

There is always something round the corner, till you turn the last corner to come face to face with a hole. Then a voice tells you: that hole there is your grave. Die and get into it before the rain makes it soggy. And you have just a moment to look back and see all the creatures you trampled underfoot in the worthy pursuit of your ambition; they all look at you and point a score accusing finger – in there sweetie, in there. And you might even be glad to jump into your grave. (p. 56).

The characters in *A Play* are marked by an instability of identity. They often seem to be segments or compliments of one another, rather than stand out as clear-cut individuals. One does not get the impression of Serumaga's characters as representing particular standpoints as one would get in a well-made play or a comedy of manners, for instance. Old Man and Young Man seem to be divided selves of Mutimukulu's conscience, as he reminisces about his past and examines his present and future life. Although they and Mutimukulu have divergent views about life, going by their utterances, they seem to be just alternative sides of the same self. Young Man believes life is good to be lived for its own sake. On the other hand, Old Man thinks this view of life is illusory and unrealistic while Mutimukulu thinks life is "no more than a communal dream. A grand feast at which guests partake of illusions and excrete hard convictions." (p. 59) Young Man wonders why a man full of experience might be so bitter:

What evil misfortune might have turned a man so bitter? You were my hero once, Mutimukulu. The chief of this village. A man of principles and convictions. But now you talk like another body inhabited by another soul. (p. 59).

From this passage one can argue that Young Man is part of Mutimukulu's conscience, in a manner similar to the working of "pseudocouples." According to Anderton (2016, 119), the technique of pseudocoupling, first mentioned in Samuel Beckett's novel *Mercier and Camier* (1946) and perfected in *Waiting for Godot* (1953), encapsulates the bind and bond of the necessary other. It implies a problematic togetherness between two entities, since the relationship is at once required and antagonistic.

In the case of *A Play*, Old Man and Young Man interact vis-à-vis Mutimukulu in a manner suggesting that they are inseparably bonded, with each uttering words that echo the other, and yet they sound like they have the freedom to disagree. One can therefore argue that Old Man and Young Man are two alternative versions of Mutimukulu. Who, then, is

Mutumukulu? This lack of individuated identity points to the possibility of reading *A Play* as representing characters and situations via an absurdist idiom.

Serumaga presents some aspects of the meaninglessness of life with a touch of black humour. To put it simply, black humour refers to a humorous way of looking at or treating something which is serious or sad, in the fashion one can call serio-ludic – serious and simultaneously ludicrous. Following the observation by Old Man, the challenge in life is to “try to capture an ambition. For too often it melts as you do, and slips through the gaps between your fingers” (p. 60). This suggests that ambition should be for its own sake and not for any real purpose as it is futile to attempt to get hold on to it. His view is summed up in the allegory of the rat-race as “a merry-go-round, with you people riding on the backs of great, big, huge, rats (60).” If we conceive the rat to be a big idea, ambition, nation, company or the like, then this means that life is a helpless dependence on empty desires.

When one imagines humans riding on the backs of rats, one cannot help but laugh at the insignificance and powerlessness of human action and motive. Therein lies the essence of black humour, humour derived from pity for ourselves as we struggle within a framework of predetermined helplessness and insignificance. Absurdity is at this point achieved through the analogy of human actions and motives as riding on the backs of rats. That we should laugh at our helplessness is not just comic, but pathetically comic. Life is depicted as “a game so ardently played, yet without point.” (p. 60) Moreover, Old Man contends that the only benefit for work is death and a coffin in the end, though he later argues that “if everyone kept away from work, all drinks would be free, because there would be no money in the country to buy anything.” (p. 61) The humour here is directed at notions of work, in relation to motivation and benefit. However, if people do not work, then, who will produce the free drinks? Here, as elsewhere, Serumaga seems to direct a veiled attack on the social systems of capitalism as opposed to socialism. It is perhaps a humorous attack on Milton Obote’s move to the left, which was the

official government policy aimed at building a socialist Uganda, a policy which was very unpopular and which partly led to his overthrow in 1971. These political overtones point towards one way in which Serumaga goes beyond the theatre of the absurd as advanced by Esslin. In the following pages, I attempt to demonstrate some of the ways in which Serumaga's *A Play* enters into critical dialogue with the Esslinian notion of the theatre of the Absurd.

### ***A Play: Beyond conversation with the Absurd***

Throughout *A Play* Mutimukulu is portrayed as a lone individual who sees himself increasingly losing grip on reality, but also one who often confuses the stressful present with a more blissful past or vice versa. However, using Mutimukulu as a stage idiom, Serumaga touches on larger social issues. While the immediate source of tension in *A Play* can be said to be between Mutimukulu and his wife Rose as they struggle to reconcile their competing sense of reality in both the past and the present, they echo larger conflicts defining the Ugandan society of the late 1960s and 1970s. As Mutimukulu interacts with his friends and acquaintances – Peter and John, Old Man and Young Man – the themes of meaning of life and death, especially the inevitability of death in the face of political oppression, are brought to the forefront.

The lonely Mutimukulu might draw our sympathy due to his lack of company. However, as portrayed in *A Play*, he pretends not to need any company. This contradiction is suspect in the context of the Baganda people whose culture informs much of Serumaga's drama. Among the Baganda people, the solitude of a bereaved individual or family is not a private matter. Bereavement not only unsettles the immediate victim of loss, such as Mutimukulu here, but also all the people around that individual. Therefore, the decisions made by Mutimukulu, mixing the motivations of a bereaved individual with those of a leader or chief, can be regarded as dictatorial. A chief's decisions, by all standards, cannot be a private matter. Such decisions must have an effect on the people under the leader's charge. It is partly this failure to realise

that as a leader Mutimukulu is not just another individual that partly contributes to the absurd situations he finds himself in.

We have seen how *A Play* might lend itself to an absurdist interpretation because of its atmosphere of nightmare and unreality. However, dreamlike as the events in *A Play* maybe, Mutimukulu's musings about his dead wife Rose, for example, can also be read as a political allegory. After all, Esslin (op. cit., 4) himself argues that what he describes as theatre of the absurd plays "make sense, though perhaps not obvious or in conventional sense, they also give expression to some of the basic issues and problems of our age, in a uniquely efficient and meaningful manner, so that they meet some of the deepest needs and unexpressed yearnings of their audience". Thus, Esslin too admits the potential allegorical efficacy of what he describes as the absurd. As Gikandi and Mwangi (op. cit.:161-2) point out, *A Play* "is set in the contemporary period – indeed, its central actions take place in 1967, the year of its publication – and its initial audience had no doubts that the events narrated in the story emerged out of their own cultural, social and political concerns."

The following exchange between Mutimukulu and Old Man points towards this complex of issues:

**Mutimukulu:** (*To the Old Man*) Now, you there, you ought to know me well; where is my wife? You heard me: where is my wife?

**Old Man:** (*fumbling*) She is dead. Is there something wrong? (*Mutimukulu turns with triumph to where the two men were a minute ago.*)

**Mutimukulu:** I knew you were dead...this is just a ...(*He is stopped in his tracks by the empty space. He looks all over the stage, followed curiously by the Old Man.*) (*A Play, 70*).

The exchange shows that Mutimukulu is possibly guilty of not doing something to prevent the death of his wife. The exchange can further demonstrate the helplessness of human beings in real life. But it can also be read as a political allegory.<sup>4</sup> Mutimukulu's ill-fated marriage to Rose can be compared with the political alliance between Milton Obote's Uganda People's Congress (UPC) political party with the Kabaka Yekka (KY) party. KY was the official political mouthpiece of the Buganda Kingdom immediately before Uganda gained independence from Britain in 1962. It is this alliance that Milton Obote exploited and, through it, assumed the Prime Ministership of the new nation called Uganda. It is this very alliance that Obote violated soon after, with dire consequences for the whole country. It can therefore be argued that the KY-UPC alliance died in the very act of creating of it, for it portended turmoil straight away. It was like "the end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (Hamm, in *Endgame*; p.45).

In Luganda, which is Serumaga's indigenous language, the name Mutimukulu literally means "Old Tree" (Muti = Tree; mukulu = old.) In the context of the play, however, the name could mean "Dictatorial Boss" or "Important Ruler." Thus, in Mutimukulu's very name lies a suggestiveness of his unjust and domineering traits that point to his dictatorial character. The metaphor of towering, like a tree, over the people cannot be missed. For the *muti* to become big, important or ruler it had to have been nurtured somewhere, just like the UPC-KY alliance was politically nurtured by the Baganda people whom Obote he betrayed later. More bits of Uganda's political history can help at this point.

Prior to gaining political independence, Uganda's Milton Obote who was the leader of the UPC party wooed the Buganda establishment and the result was the KY-UPC alliance. Many people have described that alliance as a political marriage of convenience. With the support of KY, Obote's UPC won the majority of seats in the Legislative Council and Milton

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of political allegory in Ugandan literature, see Abasi Kiyimba. "The Ghost of Idi Amin in Ugandan Literature". In. *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), pp. 124-138. Published by Indiana University Press. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3820535>. Accessed: 08/10/2016 17:09.

Obote became the first executive Prime Minister of Uganda. Milton Obote received the instruments of power from the British on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1962. However, the alliance was short lived. On May 24<sup>th</sup> 1966 Obote ordered the Uganda army under the command of Idi Amin to invade the seat of Kabaka Yekka. The King's palace was attacked, there was plunder and the reigning King Muteesa then was forced into exile in Britain, where he died in 1969. After Obote had consolidated his power, he abolished all traditional institutions including kings and declared Uganda a Republic in 1967. Atrocities continued in the Buganda region until Idi Amin overthrew Obote later in 1971.

During the dialogue between Mutimukulu and the Head, the latter reveals his identity in the words:

I am Mukasa, god of thunder and lightning. I am crime-is-dry-meat-that-never-rots. I am poison, which once eaten will show up some time. Death holds no secrets for me, and I dig guilt out of the darkness of men's souls... when you meet me on the other side of the raised ground, truth will become a leopard with horns on its head. Will you let it eat you, or will you speak out in its face? (p. 57).

In order to further appreciate the symbolic significance of the Head, the reader or audience may need to know something of what 'Mukasa' represents in the mythology of the Baganda people.<sup>5</sup> Among the Baganda people of Uganda, Mukasa is the head of the pantheon, and he is male. Mukasa is the deity of plenty, the god of truth and justice. From the Head's words and the stage representation of Mukasa, we note that he is a dual god of plenty and retribution. We also get to know that Mutimukulu is a fraudulent character who is hiding the truth, too weak to face the

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed account of the ways of the Baganda see Sir Apollo Kagawa's *The Customs of the Baganda* (Columbia University Press, 1934).



bitter truth of his past. He is also revealed as one who fears the likely consequences of the crime he may have committed, a crime that remains shrouded in his continuous grumbling in the name of philosophising. Mutimukulu is therefore depicted as a deeply fraudulent character who is hiding a crime. That is partly where his absurd philosophy is coming from. However, his fraudster traits become even more progressively apparent as the play progresses towards its conclusion.

To cover up his fraudulence, even if temporarily, Mutimukulu defends himself through his absurd philosophies. He delves into his past consistently more than he does the present. To this extent, he can be described as escapist in his philosophies about work, life and death. This portrayal is unlike in Beckett's plays where the absurd is an inherent feature of the world, not just an aberration of the mind. Mutimukulu is depicted as a man who was deeply involved in a crime that makes the current world around him absurd. But there is potentially a moral code or "right order" that could be restored, perhaps through repentance. In *Waiting for Godot*, by contrast, such possibilities are consistently mocked: "Vladimir: Suppose we repented. Estragon: Repented what? Vladimir: Oh...(*He reflects.*) We wouldn't have to go into the details. Estragon: Our being born?" (p.11). Mutimukulu's assumed absurdism, however, is a willed deviation from certain moral imperatives. Indeed, a world or a mind gone mad does not necessarily indicate that the universe is meaningless. One can argue that Serumaga subverts somewhat the familiar assumptions of theatre of the Absurd and instead adopts an absurdist idiom in expressing his views about life through the character of Mutimukulu.

From Mutimukulu's utterances we can deduce that he is an unjust character. For instance, he says:

There is always something round the corner, till you turn the last corner to come face to face with a hole. Then a voice tells you: that hole there is your grave. Die and get into it before the rain makes it soggy. And you have just a moment to look back and

see all the creatures you trampled underfoot in the worthy pursuit of your ambition; they all look at you and point a score accusing finger – in there sweetie, in there. And you might even be glad to jump into your grave. (p. 56).

From the preceding quote, we can make at least two interpretations. One is that it is humanly tempting to manipulate others and even harm or destroy them along the way in order for individuals to fulfil their ambitions. But more importantly, Mutimukulu has himself surely trampled on other people while in pursuit of his own ambition, as he reveals in his own musings. In this way, he is one who has broken a moral law. He himself has been and is still unjust or unfair toward others. Moreover, Mutimukulu disrespects the people around him: Old Man, Young Man, John and Peter. This disrespect is a pointed mark of the trait of dictatorship that seems to characterise Mutimukulu. For instance, in the play-within-a-play game of voting, he bluntly says, “well, this my house and nobody is going to vote in it” (p. 77). This outburst occurs when the four characters are enacting a voting session in one of the plays-within-a-play episodes in *A Play*. That there is no democracy in his house is a stage metaphor for the dictatorship out there, with Mutimukulu presenting himself as an Almighty-God figure with absolute power.

Serumaga depicts a sense of insignificance and impermanence of human beings in the overall equations of the universe. We experience this depiction through the presence of the Head, who is in all matters superior to the human Mutimukulus, the Head who dwarfs all around it. There is a suggestion in this depiction of the Head, I think, that man must look elsewhere, other than his immediate surroundings, in his search for that ultimate certainty. However, even the Head seems to be characterised by an uncanny presence. One is then reminded of the notion that matters of God are beyond human understanding. It not surprising, perhaps, that such matters are best represented in a dreamlike manner, as if characters are a unique kind of transfiguration or a visitation from a deity. Furthermore, the dreamlike situations enhance a sense of uncertainty and timelessness since a person undergoing transfiguration or experiencing

a godly visitation can hardly be expected to maintain his or her human sanity. What he or she experiences can only be described as dreamlike. Talk of the Head, in the context of *A Play*, inevitably provokes further discussion of the religious dimension of the absurd idiom, since the world is full of a variety of searches for the ultimate, searches that are largely elusive but which remain metaphysical.

In order to appreciate the religious dimension of the personified character of the Head, the reader or audience may need to know something of what 'Mukasa' represents in the mythology of the Baganda people.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned before, among the Baganda people of Uganda, Mukasa is the head of the pantheon, and he is male. Mukasa is the deity of plenty, the god of truth and justice. These attributes are partly revealed in the Head's own pronouncements:

I am crime-is-dry-meat-that-never-rots. I am poison, which once eaten will show up some time. Death holds no secrets for me, and I dig guilt out of the darkness of men's souls...when you meet me on the other side of the raised ground, Truth will have become a leopard with horns on its head. Will you let it eat you, or will you speak out in its face? (p. 57).

Moreover, the Head's coming onto the stage is announced with a flourish that is similar to the therapeutic songs performed during a typical divination session among the Baganda. The flourish is captured in the stage directions part of which I have to reproduce here:

*A drum sounding alarm, plays in the distance and rises in volume and intensity, then a flute and tapping rhythms on calabashes, which are played quietly* (p. 56).

His exit is marked in similar manner:

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of the ways of the Baganda see Sir Apollo Kagawa's *The Customs of the Baganda* (Columbia University Press, 1934).

*The drums rise and the flute declares the truth. As they do, the light goes out on the Head. Then the two men limp from the wings and close in on Mutimukulu.*

That the two men should limp and that Mutimukulu has to be rendered inactive through sleep if he is in the presence of the Head signifies the godly essence of the Head. Further, that the Head, the stage representative of the god Mukasa, should appear at this point to announce his attributes and provoke Mutimukulu into attesting to his own guilt shows that the land is without justice, and that individuals like Mutimukulu themselves are devoid of truth. The overall implication is that Mutimukulu and company should be looking to a superior power to absolve them from their wrongdoing. Moreover, the Head comes in the form of an angelic herald that is reminiscent of the Biblical Gabriel but who, unlike Gabriel, has visited Mutimukulu with forebodings of undesirable events which will befall Mutimukulu's already troubled conscience.

Serumaga makes reference to Biblical texts when he introduces Martha, who over-salts Mutimukulu's food - or over-loads his salt - at the beginning of *A Play*. In our world of common days, salt is very important as it adds taste to food. However, salt in combination with the name Martha resonates with the biblical text of "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. (Matthew 5:13) It is therefore significant that Martha puts too much salt in the food, or too little food in the salt, and thus spoils what could pass as food. The food is therefore to "be thrown out and trampled underfoot", something that shows that Mutimukulu's hopes to regain bodily energy are dashed. On a larger scale, this subverted version of the Biblical salt of the earth signifies the chaotic environment in which the characters of *A Play* operate. Food becomes a stage metaphor. As if he has just discovered a vital secret, Mutimukulu declares:

*(Calls out)* Martha! Never mind the food, just lock up and go home. Use the back entrance.” (p. 56).

This means he did not eat the food, so Mutimukulu remains in a state of unfulfillment even in alimentary matters. Hence, the religious dimension of *A Play* cannot be missed at this point. One is further invited to the Biblical scene in which Jesus pays a visit to the sisters Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. In the scene, while Martha was preoccupied with the worldly aspects of preparing food for Jesus, Mary chose the ultimate in the sense that she opted to converse with Jesus. When Martha complained, Jesus is said to have replied:

Martha, Martha, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. (Luke 10: 41-2).

That Martha has corrupted the food with too much salt, or the salt with too little food, and therefore rendered it inedible could be interpreted as Serumaga’s message that there is no ultimate certainty even if one tries to prepare for any eventuality. Tellingly moreover, Mutimukulu is not amused that Martha should announce the food with disinterest, food that is corrupted anyway, as if it had no salt or worthiness. This texture of value and importance of food is necessary to renew the hope in this otherwise hopeless situation. As I observed earlier, to Martha it is a routine to prepare food while it is trouble and effort for Mutimukulu. That is why he enlightens Martha thus:

*(repeating her tone)* the food is ready, sir; the food is ready, sir! Of course it’s nothing to you. Food is just something you find in the kitchen, put in a pot and boil, isn’t it?

Well if you knew how much trouble, how much effort it takes me to drag those scraps of food by the scruffs of their necks from the Indian shop to that kitchen, you wouldn't have the nerve to stand there and talk as if nothing had happened. (p.55).

Of course Mutimukulu's utterances here and elsewhere in the play can be interpreted variously. However, in the context of the religious dimension surrounding the character of Martha as the domestic servant, much can be implied.

In Luke's gospel, already referred to in the preceding paragraph, Martha was in the company of her sister Mary who chose God, through the Son Jesus, as the ultimate certainty in contrast to Martha who concentrated on earthly things symbolized by food preparation, and other domestic chores. The assembly of Martha and Mutimukulu in this particular scene indicates the expressive absence of Mary. Expressive, that is, in the sense that Mary's absence denotes the essence of certainty that she stands for in her engagement with Jesus in conversation, while Martha concentrates on earthly and therefore elusive things. No wonder, then, that Mutimukulu keeps hankering for the unattainable, as it is revealed in the course of the entire play. It is as if the reader or audience has to work out this religious riddle involving Martha, Mary and Jesus in juxtaposition with the assembly of Martha the domestic help and Mutimukulu in the play. But it is a riddle that can only be worked out by a reader who is knowledgeable about the Christian Bible.

### **Conclusion: *A Play: Serumaga versus Beckett?***

In *A Play*, Serumaga seems to attribute the sense of the absurd to Mutimukulu's crime, a crime replaying itself, as the root problem of his current predicament. In this way, the conventions of the Absurd are only used to portray what an absurd world comes out of such crimes, invoking the Biblical "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). Therefore,

Serumaga's position – both religious and political – is much more normative and assertive than the spirit of the Esslinian theatre of the absurd that emphasises the helplessness of man. Perhaps if the audience sees the repetition of actions or crime they can do something about it. Serumaga's use of the absurdist idiom therefore can function as a dramatic exposure of pathology, or even a kind of therapy of social ills. Where, for instance, Beckett's characters find themselves in an already absurd world in which they struggle helplessly, Serumaga's characters are seen not only to have created the absurd world in which they find themselves: they are also invested with the potential to redeem themselves out of those absurd situations.

The following extract is a good example of how Serumaga's *A Play* goes beyond Esslin's notion of theatre the Absurd:

**Old Man:** Escaping from the prison of your own folly. Life has a substance and a shadow. And more often than not, we chase the shadow and miss the substance. The fault lies with us, not with nature. (p. 59)

Where the Esslinian theatre of the absurd would have characters that are essentially disempowered and hemmed in by an absurd life, Serumaga's Old Man, as quoted above, advances the essence of life as "substance." By contrast, Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon who cannot see a way out of their absurd situation in *Waiting for Godot*: waiting for a Godot who never appears, failing to disentangle from each other, they are even unable to kill themselves. So they have to continue waiting. On the contrary, Serumaga's Old Man recognises man's contribution to the causes of the absurd situations he finds himself in.

It is significant that *A Play* was first produced and performed in Kampala in October 1967 (*Majangwa*, 49), hardly a month after Milton Obote's government had officially abolished

kingdoms and declared Uganda a Republic.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore possible to interpret Rose's appearance in the form of a voice risen from the world of the dead as Serumaga's reminder to his readers that Obote's attempt to put the kingdoms to death was a futile act. In a way the dreamlike events which appear absurd in *A Play*, exemplified by the interaction between the living and the dead, are used to give expression to some of the basic issues affecting the Ugandan theatre audiences of the 1960s and 1970s, through the medium of an absurdist idiom. Yet there is a constant ambiguity here: one *can* always conclude that man's actions are always futile because of the existence of a kind of an antagonistic power that lies beyond his control.

That Mutimukulu has an irresistible propensity to re-enact his wife's murder, ironically reveals violent and murderous tendencies in him. It seems his subconscious is inhabited by the urge to kill, here symbolically represented in the re-enactment of Rose's murder. Mutimukulu's inclination to violence and murder is played out in the scene where John and Peter re-enact the murder of Mutimukulu's wife. In the scene, he threatens the two re-enactors with a gun. The two then, in the re-enactment, fire their guns at her. Mutimukulu's immediate response is to accuse the two of the foul act, thereby exonerating himself from any complicity in the murder. However, he progresses into an apparent mental instability. Symbolically, then, Mutimukulu is unconsciously acknowledging wrong-doing and his guilt is apparent: it is just that he wants the people around him to think otherwise. It can be seen, even at this moment, that Mutimukulu is an integral part in the process of engendering the absurd situations that surround him. It is not easy to persuade readers of *A Play* that Mutimukulu finds an already-made absurd world waiting for him to grapple with. He partly creates the absurd world that characterise the situations in *A Play*.

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<sup>7</sup> David Kibirige writes: It was on September 17, 1967 when Obote abolished the three tribal kingdoms of Ankole, Buganda and Bunyoro - in addition to the Chieftaincy of Busoga. From then on, the country assumed the status of a republic. URL: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200409200404.html>. Accessed 08.10.16 17.30.



Finally, Serumaga shows that Mutimukulu has the power and potential which he can possibly harness and mobilise for his own rehabilitation or destruction as well that of other characters he interacts with. For instance, his possession of a gun can be read as symbolic display of power. The gun has of course been known to shift power relations fundamentally in human history. In addition to the fact that the gun is an instrument of coercion, and therefore a source of power, means that whoever possesses a gun is associated with power, for good or ill. After all, it is evident that Mutimukulu might be part of the cause of his wife's death. Beckett's characters, on the contrary, are presented as essentially powerless, who only find themselves surrounded with absurdities they cannot untangle.

It is because Serumaga challenges and unsettles the Esslinian theatre of the absurd and comes up with a new strategy that is only akin theatre of the absurd that I claim his is an idiom – absurdist as it were. Since it is an idiom, a peculiar manner of expression, Serumaga's absurdist idiom is not static. It communicates to the living reader or audience, so it has to change with the times. Hence, in the next chapter, I explore Serumaga's absurdist idiom through the lens of spectatorship. That way, I will explore the extent to which Serumaga offers a fruitful, potentially transformative response to the socio-historical situation of his time.

## Chapter 2

### *Majangwa, Spectatorship and the Absurd*

#### **Introduction**

*Majangwa* is a play about spectatorship: about seeing and being seen, and about the possible meanings of the gaze. Majangwa is a “worn-out drummer-entertainer” (pp. 24-5) who is on the road with his wife, Nakirijja. The two met years ago when Majangwa was at the height of his powers, a drummer at the chief’s court playing for a wedding. Now they are outcasts, after having put on live pornographic performances for five shillings in Kampala. They are on the run from the eyes of the police; and mutual recognition between the two of them has started to break down as they quarrel about the meaning of their past. Majangwa has concocted a bizarre scheme that he claims will bring them healing: they will seek out a certain place where lovers often come after having been to the cinema, and there *they*, Majangwa and Nakirijja, will become peeping-Tom spectators, thereby perhaps symbolically reclaiming the power of the gaze in order to dominate their surroundings once more.

Along the way, they pass by an area associated with the mythological village of Tanda, where Death was supposed to have been chased underground (pp. 44-45). At one point, through the eye of imagination and of dream, this mythological spectacle is reenacted on stage. In the last scene of Serumaga’s play, rather than turning peeping-Toms, Majangwa and Nakirijja are instead abruptly confronted with a dead body, dumped by the wayside by a murderer. While Majangwa wants to burn the evidence, hide it from sight, Nakirijja mourns the dead man and then departs alone (p. 51). These last scenes broaden their dilemma considerably: the difficulty of ever looking straight at death, the idea of recognition by the gods (alluded to in the ‘promise

of rains' of the title) and the idea of a persecuting, murderous totalitarian gaze are all present here.

In this chapter, I will show how an absurdist reading of spectatorship in *Majangwa* remains an ever-present possibility throughout the play. Mutual acknowledgement and recognition between human beings seems always to be breaking down; the gaze of objectification and domination is everywhere; and death is always waiting in the wings, ready to confront a terrified and helpless spectator. However, there is also evidence that this play is, like *A Play*, making use of an absurdist idiom in order to expose and criticise a diseased state of society. I will examine this hypothesis under two headings: the totalitarian gaze, and the objectifying gaze of modernity. Ultimately, I will argue that Serumaga's *Majangwa* goes beyond the Absurd by offering positive models of acknowledgement and healing, which point towards hope despite the ever-present possibility of breakdown.

### **An 'Absurdist' reading?**

In ordinary usage, the adjective 'absurd' describes something wildly unreasonable, illogical, ridiculous, silly, opposed to reason or inappropriate. Used in the appreciation of drama, particularly in the phrase "theatre of the absurd", the term takes on a different meaning. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the term "theatre of the absurd" was coined by the drama critic Martin Esslin, to describe in general the nature of plays written by playwrights Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Plays by these playwrights question the nature of human existence by presenting a world without logic or objective morals, while also subverting conventional dramatic language, plot or narrative style. Instead these playwrights seem to ask: what is reality? Is reality verifiable? What is the meaning of human existence? Can language itself still be used to meaningfully communicate between human beings? Is there such

a thing as character, personality, or individuality? In general, what Esslin describes as absurdist plays depict a world without clear meaning and involving the isolation of the individual.

Esslin did not only coin the term “theatre of the absurd”, he also suggested the salient features of those plays he designated as absurdist. Resting mainly on existentialist philosophy, most particularly that associated with Albert Camus, Esslin posits that absurdist plays tend to have features that include “a bewildering experience, a barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention” (Esslin, op. cit.:3). For Esslin, absurdist plays have no clear framework or logical motivations, the action does not proceed logically and, overall, show the world as an incomprehensible place. For that matter, the audience is unable to ever understand the full meaning of the events, or to understand the characters. Events occur without normal motivations, they are random, or they are moved by “the demented caprice of an unaccountable idiot fate” (ibid.) Put differently, absurdist plays present a more complex version of reality, with no conclusive answers but not totally without meaning. Thus, such plays achieve their effects by the use of allegories and symbolic representations. In that sense, Esslin concludes, “theatre of the absurd is the most demanding, the most intellectual theatre” (Esslin, op. cit.:14). Against this background, we shall see that an absurdist reading remains an ever-present possibility throughout *Majangwa*. My discussion here touches on three themes: a consistent pattern of decline for the main characters from drummer-in-chief and high-esteem dancer to live porn act; a breakdown of mutual acknowledgement and recognition in *Majangwa* and *Nakirijja*’s relationship; and the final rupture of the project of reclaiming power through spectatorship.

In the characters of *Majangwa* and *Nakirijja*, we note a consistent pattern of decline, from drummer-in-chief and virile dancer respectively to live porn. It is a pattern that may be taken to reveal the pornographically objectifying gaze as the underlying nature of human desire, as well as an allegorical descent of society from a high to a low moral state. We read, for example,

Majangwa's nostalgic retort to Nakirijja when the former accosts him about his apparently impotent hopes of revival:

**Majangwa** ...Majangwa, yes, that's me. (*pause*) I remember them, admirers; lovers of the drum and the lyre and the fiddle. There was honour at the chief's court. We gathered to make songs and meanings and connect our souls to the earth. You could hear the dead whisper above the sound of drums and in the voice of the man with the fiddle (p. 25)

Majangwa goes on to extol Nakirijja's former dancing agility, "...You were dancing, like an echo of my soul, you were dancing" (p. 26). Later, there is an attempt to maintain or even recreate his original drumming performance in the palace, at weddings. But, gradually, Majangwa turns into something else, a degenerated performer at best, well captured in the following reflective exchange:

**Nakirijja** ...And me, still on the pavement, stream of life stopped, shadows swaying, trying to sit up. (*pause*) Can you look back at *that*? Now that your powers are gone and your friends have abandoned you, can you look back on your life?

**Majangwa** I can. What I can't I look back at without puking my guts is the society which paid to watch us.

**Nakirijja** Oh, come off it.

**Majangwa** Oh, come off it what? Uh? What pleasure did they get out of seeing

and not doing? Little men with ten-cent coins in their palms and their hands in their pockets watching the sun and hoping for rain! (p. 15)

Majangwa and Nakirijja have descended into the degenerates they are, to the extent that they express discomfort in turn at their present status. It is this descent both as artists and as individuals that points to the absurd in their personal development in the course of the play.

On the surface, it can be said that Majangwa is playing a blame game, trying to find scapegoats for his past mistakes. But Majangwa and Nakirijja, from their utterances at this point in the play onwards, can also be read as stage symbols of a society that has lost direction and needs regeneration, a society that needs a cure. Yet we note that the healers – in the frame of Majangwa and Nakirijja – are as sick as the society they seek to heal, hence the overall sense of the absurd here.

We have seen that for Majangwa, the real meaningful performance was when he played the drum in the palace and at the wedding. His present sense of degeneration bears much on him so that he cannot find clear and proper solutions. Majangwa, at this moment, is acting by himself and perhaps for Nakirijja, but he no longer holds the crowds. But still there is an attempt to recreate something that is lost in this degenerated character. Implicit in this attempt to recreate himself is that there was once an appropriate performance and community recognition, a ritual performance that was meaningful for these characters beyond themselves. However, there is also a haunting implication that all this was illusion from the start. The larger question, perhaps, is that Serumaga opens up the play with suggestions of an unsettling concern with the relationship between the actors and the viewers of any play, including the play of real life, thereby inviting us further into evaluating not only the actors but ourselves as well.

It is also interesting to note that neither Majangwa nor Nakirijja can escape from their past. Their inability to escape from their past, a past that has created a largely meaningless and

bewildering experience, is the main motivation for their yearnings to somehow return to their original selves. They think that one way out of this life of stasis, degenerate as they are, is to change roles with the crowds; now the couple will be the spectators, to watch and judge the others. Perhaps Majangwa will be cured from watching others just as the crowds used to seek a form of therapeutic release from watching the couple's pornographic performances.

Majangwa emphasises this possibility of changing roles with the crowds when he says, "You got it all wrong. Tonight, they'll be the performers and we the owners of the five shillings." (p.23). The viewer will become the observed; the performer will become the audience. Hence, the viewer's and the actor's roles are transposed. Yet what Majangwa hopes to be the ultimate liberating spectacle from his degeneration is revealed as a mirage. They are finally confronted with a dead body rather than a live spectacle.

As the play progresses we also realise that throughout their interaction in the play, there is a breakdown of mutual acknowledgement and recognition in Majangwa and Nakirijja's relationship, a breakdown that parallels the Hamm/Clov relationship in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. The relationship can be represented in terms such as "mutual need equals mutual torture", "the disillusioned slave picking at the master", or "marriage" as a cannot-live-with-you-or-without-you arrangement. The following extracts from *Endgame* can help to illustrate that nature of relationship:

CLOV: Why do you keep me?

HAMM: There's no one else.

CLOV: There's nowhere else.

[*Pause*]

HAMM: You are leaving me all the same

CLOV: I'm trying (p. 14)

CLOV: So you all want me to leave you.

HAMM: Naturally.

CLOV: Then I'll leave you.

HAMM: You can't leave us.

CLOV: Then I shan't leave you. (p. 29)

In similar manner, Nakirijja and Majangwa, in spite of apparent disagreements and disappointments, the couple remains glued together until the end of the play when Nakirijja moves into the audience. For instance, in her exchange with Majangwa she retorts, "If I don't share the purpose, why should I share the journey?" (p. 10) and later, "some women have shoes. I guess they have husbands", (p. 17) perhaps to signify that Majangwa is no longer valid as a husband; let alone one to travel with to whatever destination. However, we see no attempts on her part to leave him

I consider an absurdist reading of *Majangwa* particularly productive when confronted with what may be called "the scenes with Death" in the play. These are scenes which include a stylistic departure from "normal" perception of reality, and can be fruitfully related to such disruption as a feature of absurd drama, within the Esslinian realm of dreamlike and bewildering experiences. Furthermore, in the scenes of Death, Serumaga introduces the idea of Death as always in the wings, waiting, relentlessly, and the desperate avoidance of having to face death in a manner comparable to Vladimir and Estragon's dialogue, or Pozzo's "astride of a grave" speech (p. 89).

The "Death" section of *Majangwa* (pp. 46-51) does not read like normal play action but rather like a traditional performance of a myth or legend, while the immediate audience is under a spell, so to speak, at certain crucial moments. Characters often speak in invocations, rather



than normal dialogue. In this section, Majangwa narrates the Kintu myth of creation and origination of the Baganda, in his own way. This is blended with the legend of origination of the rivers Mayanja Kato and Mayanja Wasswa whose necks the road cuts across, as revealed in Majangwa's earlier part of the narrative. With Nakirijja's counter responses acting as a prodding agent and prompter for him to go on narrating, Majangwa recounts parts of the Kintu myth as well, focusing on the part to do with the origin of Death – called 'Walumbe' in the Luganda language – whose mythical abode, as believed by the Baganda people, is a place called Tanda.

It is in this section that members of the cast that include Kintu and Nambi the mythic progenitors of the Baganda ethnic group, Kayikuuzi (literally 'Excavator' of Death) and Death are brought into action. The section is particularly enhanced for effect by the use of mime, as partly shown in the stage directions:

*(A crowd of villagers as described enters and enacts the described sequence.)* and

*(Enter Nambi, chased by Death: panic. Then the chase of Death.)* (p.48).

Notably, these scenes of Death take place while Majangwa and Nakirijja are asleep. Can we assume the scenes are a collective dream? Overall, the section functions as a form of ritual performance to some deity, seeking some form of intervention in the lives of the people represented in the symbolic performance of certain parts of the myth. It is an invocation that precedes but is part of a healing process that both Nakirijja and Majangwa, on the one hand, require, and a prescription for societal healing on the other.

My final example is the final rupture of the project of reclaiming power through spectatorship, by the arrival of the dead body, when Majangwa's 'pointless quest' is confronted by death. All through the play, Majangwa expresses hope for revival and regeneration. His

occasional partial optimism (however shattered by the end of the play) is especially reflected in “the Promise of the rains” phrase in the following exchange:

**Majangwa** There’ll be thunder tonight.

**Nakirijja** Why?

**Majangwa** The sky is red in the west.

**Nakirijja** That’s not the reason. That’s the sign. I asked for the reason.

**Majangwa** Reason? Who can divine the ways of thunder or plot its path? Only thunder knows. I can only speak of its coming; when the sky is red in the west.

*(silence)* Promise of the rains...(p.16)

Folk belief in divine signs and the belief in Kiwanuka, a Thor-like deity of the skies, responsible for thunder and lightning and rain is at play here. However, when the rains finally come for Majangwa, they are thunderous: a dead body that is dumped on their road by anonymous murderers. It is certainly not the anticipated couple who might perform a sex act in the car for Majangwa to watch as a cure for his own impotence. The spectacle comes to them, but as a negative irruption.

Therefore, Majangwa’s hope is partially realised, but only leads to another frightening and bewildering array of new tensions. Moreover, Majangwa had earlier on demonstrated some intuition when he cautioned Nakirijja thus, “There are other truths and forebodings. You have to trust the winds not to blow ill.” (p.16). As the play closes, we realise that although a dead body, whose current state of lifelessness has been ostensibly caused by unnamed murderers, is the boon Majangwa and Nakirijja receive, all is not lost. Majangwa makes an attempt to subvert this unwelcome spectacle. In the stage directions we read that Majangwa “*attacks the body violently, beating it as he insults it. Then he notices his wife running off stage*”. It is as if

Majangwa, now in the role of the mythic Kayikuuzi, as seen in the scenes of Death, is re-enacting the fight between life forces and forces of Death, earlier enacted in parts of the Kintu myth.

Majangwa's final utterances and actions as well as Nakirijja's going off into the audience are also significant in terms of mythic reconfiguration and transpositions:

**Majangwa** Come back. I will burn the body. I will destroy the evidence. No one will ever know the truth. Come back. (*But she goes off into the audience. Spot on the audience as he follows her, calling her name. Exit.* (p.51)

In his ritual-like attack on the dead body, Majangwa perhaps means to signify a fight against forces of evil. From a political perspective Serumaga may even be taken to propose a case for activism against forces of oppression, here symbolised by death. We get a temporary feeling of victory over death; although a sense of the futility of this violent display is also very much part of this scene. Also relevant here is the popular closing expression of the Kintu myth, "*Abaana ba Kintu tebaligweerawo ddala*" – loosely translatable as "no one can ever wipe Kintu's descendants off the earth's surface". If we invoke the power of strategic omission, we can say that Serumaga dramatically makes a call for self-defense and recovery in Majangwa, in the final analysis. Secondly, as Majangwa calls after Nakirijja and follows her into the audience we are shown that roles can be and are transposed. The audience has now become the actors and the actors have become the audience: the next move is ours. It is a situation that plays with the whole notion of spectatorship.

The arguments of the last paragraph point towards the possibility of a new way of seeing and being seen – acknowledging the other as a process of healing – in the play. If Serumaga explicitly presents this avenue of possible healing at the closure of *Majangwa*, then theatre of

the absurd is therapeutic and the play ultimately goes beyond the realms of theatre of the absurd as conceived by Esslin. This is the focus of my discussion in the next sections of this chapter.

### **A diseased society: The totalitarian gaze**

The term “gaze”, as ordinarily understood means simply to look intently, steadily and with fixed attention. However, as used in contexts of visual culture, the concept of gaze refers to the awareness that one can be viewed, of having – or being – an audience. In practical terms, the spectator can offer a gaze or the actor can demand a gaze. What we end up within a play, then, as a form of visual artefact that is always performed before an audience, is that actors look at each other; they look at the paraphernalia and props on the stage; they look at the audience and vice versa. However, all this looking is not disinterested, and it functions in a complex way.

Therefore, in my exploration of the absurdist idiom in *Majangwa*, I will examine the idea of acknowledging or truly seeing another person, taking in the other’s perspective, and achieving mutual recognition as alternatives to the absurd. The gaze can function as an objectifying and distancing mode of interaction, in contrast to modes of establishing a sense of community or interpersonal communication in the play. I therefore argue that political violence is analysed in this play as a form of spectacle intended to teach submission. Furthermore, I consider the pornographic gaze as a distortion of the erotic; as well as the difficulty of gazing or looking directly at death. Serumaga ultimately calls upon us to acknowledge that death is with us, and by accepting this fact we are potentially cured of despair. The denial of the fact of death only creates more suffering, epitomized by *Majangwa* engaged in a futile exercise of kicking a dead body.

Of course, the symbolic presence of the police throughout is significant in the play in so far as the characters are trying to avoid their controlling gaze. Furthermore, I will discuss historical parallels with Ugandan society, including the allusion to extra-judicial killing in the

arrival of the murdered body at the end of the play, the talk of hiding the evidence, and related phenomena, which can be associated with the totalitarian gaze. When one reads the following extract, which I quote at some length, a lot can be revealed about the totalitarian gaze, albeit in conversation with the pornographic gaze.

**Nakirijja**      (*relentless*) Katwe market, lunch-time. A few strokes of the drum and the depraved crowd forming about us like so many flies around a festering wound, clutching their cocks, mouths open like interlocked dogs, and those eyes, those eyes as you prepared to take me. “Five shillings, Majangwa, five shillings!” I curl up inside me every time I remember that hand stretching out to collect the prize, the same hand that in a minute would come round me for a paid embrace. “Five shillings, Majangwa, five shillings.” Five lousy shillings in your pocket and your trousers would go down. Like a flame tree sprouting flowers, you’d stand before me, and I in my silly spell would prepare to receive you. Then down on the pavement, right down on the concrete, before those gaping eyes, to give pleasure to the crowd. (pp. 12-3)

From the extract above, we can read an allegorical representation of that hegemonic control that characterises totalitarianism. Here, it is the cash - the five shillings - that is the agency of subjugating both Majangwa and Nakirijja. Secondly, the power of the paying crowd is significant, in so far as the hegemonic control over Majangwa and Nakirijja a is concerned. It is that control which the crowd achieves - unknown to them - in a process that is similar to the process totalitarian power goes through before total subjugation of the subjects.

First, on the part of Majangwa and Nakirijja, it is sex for pleasure and as a fulfilment of their marital life. Then it becomes sex for pleasure, for both performer and audience, the crowds,

including the pleasure of money in its spending and in its being earned by the couple. The third and final stage of this process is that of hostage-taking: Majangwa and Nakirijja come to a point when their pornography is performed as a necessary ritual. As Nakirijja points out, the two are under a spell. The pornographic gaze assumes new, if allegorical meaning; for the working of a totalising authority is not very different from the way the crowd objectifies the couple and turns them into mere spectacle; and the way the couple, in turn, seems to be helpless while in the presence of the paying crowd.

In a way, the totalitarian gaze works alongside that of modernity, and functions in similar manner. As I have pointed out in the previous section of this chapter, the objectifying gaze of modernity ultimately crystallises into subjugating the people. Behind all the seemingly euphoric cheering in the Astaldi scene of the play lies a basic madness: Majangwa and Nakirijja are cut short when they realise that, actually, the tractor wheels had destroyed *the anthill* and therefore killed the *queen ant*. They are disturbed, that is, they suffer a kind of madness. They recognise the destructive forces of modernisation, the subjugating machinery represented in the tractor, on the natural order: the anthill and all that it signifies. This is Serumaga's allusion to the destruction of the Buganda Kingdom by the Oboteist brand of modernisation, which, when through characters like Majangwa, led to an situation of debasement for the Majangwas.

Moreover, the allegory of Majangwa and Nakirijja transforming into mere spectacles points to that process that subjugates people. One is reminded of Majangwa's utterance, "And in the cloud of dust as the machine wreaked destruction upon the anthill, white ants like petals riding the wind, flew away, away, away from the earth, away from the red cloud, away from the destruction and into the hands of the waiting people who caught and ate them alive." (pp. 32-3) Furthermore, that Majangwa and Nakirijja hate the gaze of the crowds, hate their gaze, but had to perform live pornography all the same could be read as a parallel to the couple's futile attempts to avoid the gaze of the police

later in the play. There is a symbolic presence of the police throughout the play. They are being watched, in the manner which Seremba would equate to “an acute postcolonial pathology that many a Ugandan knew, but very few dared to speak of or name as the sick society got even worse: walked and waited for what appeared, ever so briefly, as a form of postcolonial deliverance only to find themselves even more worse off.” (op. cit.: 62). Interestingly, the suggestion that the couple was or is being or will be watched throughout is provided in the opening stage directions of the play, as the setting is described thus, “The road runs across the stage so that the audience eavesdrops on the proceedings from a cliff (or is it a ditch?) on the other side of the road, opposite the side where the action takes place. (p. 6). In the part of the stage directions which I have just quoted, there is a suggestion that there is a an eye which is hovering above the couple, although Majangwa and Nakirijja are trying to avoid being seen.

One can draw historical parallels between Majangwa and Nakirijja’s attempts to avoid the totalising gaze, with the Ugandan society both in symbolic and real terms, as when the couple is confronted with a dead body towards the closure of the play. The unexpected confrontation with the arrival of the body of a murdered person at the end the play is, by all standards, an allusion to extra-judicial killing. Such madness as the ever-presence of death and the destruction of the anthill and the Queen mother are powerful allusions, and elevate the “Astaldi” playlet and the murder scenes of the play to historical, political and cultural symbolism. In such madness lies that iconic representation of the absurdist political experiments by politicians, particularly of the Obote category, in Uganda who were bent on subjugating all and sundry. One way of achieving this end was to ensure a ubiquitous presence of watchful eyes, through such means as declaring a state of emergency in their areas of interest. As Seremba observes, when Serumaga returned to Uganda from his studies in Dublin, Ireland, he found that “gone was the monarchy, and with it, Sir Edward Mutesa, the Kabaka of Buganda.

Obote's infamous, 'pigeon-hole' Constitution was now the law of the land. In other words, illegality and hegemony, the irrationality of it all, had become sacrosanct, and were now enshrined in 'law'. Buganda, the region, together with its name, could no longer be found on the map of Obote's Uganda. The Baganda and their sympathisers were still nursing their wounds, mourning their dead, and branded with physical, psychological, and psychic scars" (op. cit.: 39-40)

Let me conclude my discussion of the totalitarian gaze, in respect of Uganda's history, with the following extract from Seremba (op. cit.: 181-3):

Seremba's Obote's 'display' would have been in the Kampala suburb of Nakulabye. Only two years after Independence (1962), with Obote as Prime Minister, a dispute over the contentious, so called lost counties, to which both Buganda and Bunyoro had claims, was 'resolved' in Bunyoro's favour. The Baganda were disappointed and restless. Obote used their democratic protests as an opportunity to let the army loose on the Baganda. The result was the Nakulabye massacre, which, as Mbowa observes, took the lives of 'innocent Baganda school children and civilians'. The playwright Byron Kawadwa also lost his father in the same panoptic 'exhibition'. Then, on 24 May 1966, the army, under then-Colonel Idi Amin, was ordered to storm the palace of Sir Edward Mutesa. The battle of Mengo unambiguously served to intimate to the Baganda and other like-minded Ugandans that Nakulabye was a comparatively civilised episode. After the pogroms that came with the battle of Mengo, the writing was on the wall: Obote had unequivocally intimated, 'to the citizen', if one may invoke Fanon's words (cited a little earlier), 'that he [was] in continual danger.' Submission and silence were the intended orders of the day.



From Seremba's information, cited above, we can see that the ever-watchful eye that follows Majangwa and Nakirijja, culminating in the arrival of the dead body, parallels with the Oboteist totalitarian gaze, in the context of subjugating especially the Baganda people of Uganda.

### **A diseased society: The objectifying gaze of modernity**

There is no doubt that one central theme in Serumaga's *Majangwa* is that of a diseased society that needs healing:

**Nakirijja** (*passively*) Yes, we were the pus of a very diseased society.

**Majangwa** On the contrary, we were the wound; the opening through which society got rid of its excess pus. The cure of a diseased people which has to hide behind closed doors, drawn curtains and five blankets just to sleep with their wives. (p. 15)

With such utterances, combined with the reduction of ritual drumming to pornographic spectacle, we get a sense of a traditional culture that has been assaulted and depleted by modernity. The movement from that older culture to the sale of live porn for money signifies the reduction of authentic desire and ritual to money. Another aspect of this is the replacement of traditional performance spaces with that of the cinema. It is a connection which reduces Majangwa, formerly the prize drummer in the land to someone who pathetically wishes to become a Peeping Tom. If Majangwa's performance feats can be reduced to this, then the internalisation of the need for the gaze-as-objectifying-power is completed. Moreover, he mistakenly believes that this is a path to new self-assertion. More generally, then, the burning of the drum, the building of the road by Stirling Aitaldi, and the destruction of the symbolic

anthill are all spectacles that point to the assault on traditional culture to a possible point of no return.

The scene of road construction in collision with nature and culture, concretised in the violent encounter between the caterpillar tractor and the anthill is perhaps the loudest spectacle on-stage in *Majangwa*:

**Nakirijja** Don't be too anxious. *(pause)* Who burnt our house?

**Majangwa** How should I know? Somebody who wished destruction.

*(Silence. A car passes. They wait till its sound dies in the distance. Silence.)*

**Majangwa** And when he reached the village of Tanda he came face to face with the anthill

**Nakirijja** Who?

**Majangwa** Stirling Astaldi...*(They laugh.)* In the middle of the projected road stood an anthill. There it was, a termite mountain painfully raised out of the red earth, nurturing in its maze of cavities white ants, big driver ants, small driver ants and the queen ant – sedate, proliferous, fat; a world concealed beneath a piece of rising ground. But the road had to go on. Another act of murder. So they started the big yellow machine. *(He starts it)* Big white man and his yellow machine set against an anthill. *(tractor noise made by Majangwa)* And the people gathered to witness the adventure of metal against the earth.

*(He makes tractor noise and assumes the role of Stirling Astaldi.)*

“Get out of my way you people! Get out! Bloody Africans!”

Then a big iron axe rose and fell upon the palace of the queen and the people shouted.

**Majangwa and Nakirijja** Heh!!!

**Majangwa** And in the cloud of dust as the machine wreaked destruction upon the anthill, white ants like petals riding the wind, flew away, away, away from the earth, away from the red cloud, away from the destruction and into the hands of the waiting people who caught and ate them alive. (pp. 32-3)

Serumaga’s reconfiguration of myth crystallises the objectifying gaze of modernity. It is of course well-known that the British were the colonial masters of much of East Africa, including Uganda. Therefore, when Majangwa refers to ‘Big white man and his yellow machine’, he is clearly referring, historically speaking, to one aspect of the sequels of British modifying efforts in the now post-colonial Uganda. Incidentally, many road-constructing paraphernalia in Uganda remains yellow in colour even in our own times. Moreover, from the 1960s to about the end of the 1990s, Stirling Astaldi, Mowlem and Solel Boneh were the most significant road constructing companies in Uganda (Salongo Kawawulo, 65. Interviewed on 01.08.2016). In the metaphorical confrontation of anthill and tractor, the anthill is a passive and non-resisting sufferer of the tractor’s onslaught. Symbolically, the anthill that Stirling Astaldi destroys can be read as a political allegory on several levels.

First, the anthill – ‘*ekiswa*’ in the Luganda language – is an alternative stand-in name and natural icon for the Buganda kingdom and its people. “The queen ant” (p. 34) – ‘*Namunswa*’ – is the alternative title of the *Kabaka* (King), for he has absolute control over the

kingdom; but only on behalf and for the common good of the people he leads. Destroying the anthill is therefore representative of the destruction of the Buganda kingdom. This is exactly what Milton Obote did. First, he ordered his forces to attack the Kabaka palace where they unleashed terror. Later, in the infamous 1967 Nakivubo Pronouncements – the main stadium in the capital city at the time – he banned and outlawed, by decree, all kingdoms in Uganda. When Majangwa says, “Then a big iron axe rose and fell upon the palace of the queen and the people shouted”, we not only get a direct reference to the attack on the Kabaka palace. We also get a sense of the brutal force that Obote’s forces must have used then.

Secondly, it is significant that the destruction of the anthill, in the process of constructing the road, takes place at Tanda, a name which alludes to the place of Death in Baganda mythology. Hence, one could say that the roadworks, far from being an agency of modernity in a positive sense of development, become an agency of destruction and death. Therefore, the duality of death and modernity operating within the same agency of the road is an aspect of the absurd in itself but goes beyond and points to a reconfiguration of myth for purposes of protesting what were Milton Obote’s excessive force on the Baganda people in 1966. Serumaga thus seems to be depicting his opposition to that species of change which can only come through brutal force. Accordingly, he not only presents the spectacle of violence by way of modern machinery as a means of ensuring submission, but also raises his own voice against political excesses; in whichever version of modernity it may be packaged.

Finally, Majangwa’s utterance, “And in the cloud of dust as the machine wreaked destruction upon the anthill, white ants like petals riding the wind, flew away, away, away from the earth, away from the red cloud, away from the destruction and into the hands of the waiting people who caught and ate them alive,” reconfigures and transposes the proverbial Luganda saying “*Olusala ebyayi luleetera munyeera kusaasaana*” – whoever cuts the banana fibre off the stem destroys its inhabitants. Interestingly, white ants are a delicacy among the Baganda. If

Serumaga's Majangwa equates the people, whose cultural being has been destroyed, to white ants flying away only to be eaten alive, he portrays what he thinks of as cannibalistic greed for power on the side of Milton Obote and his forces.

I now turn to the symbolism of the drum, within the overall framework of the objectifying gaze of modernity. Majangwa says, "They burnt our house. How can you forget? The flames, the smoke, the ashes. They burnt our house and all our belongings. (*heavily, after a pause*) They burnt our drum too. (*silence*) Why did they burn our drum? (*silence*) Well, after that we had no strength against the audience. We had to beg. Do as asked." (p.31). This extract is perhaps the most explicit reference to the 1966 coup which Milton Obote staged against the people of Buganda in the name of modernity to be found in the play. To the uninitiated, Majangwa's speech here may sound as ordinary or as 'confused' as any other bewildered frustrated victim of circumstances, including self-made circumstances, or as simply a reference to some unfortunate event in his life with Nakirijja.

However, it is important to note that the drum is a very important cultural icon among the Baganda people. The drum is the icon of the collective consciousness of the Baganda. The drum is the symbol of the kingdom whose rulers are supposed to do all they can for the well-being of all the Baganda people irrespective of their different social standings (Paul Mukwaya, 62. Interviewed on 16.07.2016). A few explanations may help to further clarify this point.

In the Luganda language 'enjoma', 'drum', has many meanings and carries strong associations with the ontology of the entire people. 'Enjoma' can be used to collectively refer to the princes and princesses of Buganda, in whose hands the traditional administrative powers of the kingdom are invested. When a new king assumes office, the Baganda will say "*alidde enjoma*" – 'He has eaten the drum'. Finally, the Baganda have a very neatly woven clan system whose leadership is epitomised by the king, 'owner of the drum'. The king is the crest or zenith – 'entikko' in the Luganda language – of the clan structure of the Baganda people. Every

individual or community is therefore directly and indirectly responsible to the king, the Kabaka. The Kabaka, in turn, is also responsible for the entire people under his care.

Therefore, burning or breaking or any other act of destruction meted onto the drum is among the Baganda tantamount to a symbolic burning an entire people's cultural sensibilities. But we remember that Majangwa was the chief drummer at the palace. Therefore, the burning of their drum assumes a powerful symbolic significance. It is symbolic of the destruction of a collective consciousness of the Baganda. That is why I argue that the burning of Majangwa's drum is not simply an act committed in the spirit of the absurd. Instead it is a depiction of Serumaga's aversion to Obote's excesses against the Baganda people in that 1966 coup.

Many of elders I interviewed<sup>8</sup> on the topic of the 1966 coup said that all they could see in the palace during and after the attack by armed forces loyal to Obote in 1966 were fire, smoke and ashes. The people's collective consciousness was, indeed, metaphorically reduced to ashes. The society was effectively reduced to a life of beggarliness and helplessness and therefore there was a need to reverse the situation. One may therefore, conclude with Seremba (op. cit.:181) when he says that "while the drum signifies the monarchy, the anthill is a more palpable and complex, symbolic embodiment of the monarchy, as well, the society at large; a people and a culture. That is all literally wiped out by the uneven technological might of the road builders. It is not so much a confrontation between two adversaries, as it is a walk over."

### **Conclusion: Acknowledgement and healing beyond the Absurd**

A key point where we can see a move beyond the absurd in *Majangwa* is provided by Majangwa's words here: "don't let us remember only the wounds and count nothing but our scars. There were other things too" (p. 27) and "You are mistaken. There is more to life than the last moment. Many moments precede the end; it cannot all be in vain" (p. 27). Indeed, the

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<sup>8</sup> See list at the end of the thesis

ritual drumming scene described by Majangwa is not simply another version of the potentially-pornographic gaze: the scene, more importantly, shows a community celebration, a mutual submission to the dance, a form of communication as well as a channel of possible renewal, rebirth or regeneration. Similarly, the relationship between Majangwa and Nakirijja was not always as corrupt as it is now, and at times this is acknowledged in their communication. There is real sympathy between them: the two cannot really do without one another. The problem is that the relationship has become distorted, gradually, as they submitted to the objectifying gaze and the temptation of money.

The observation in the preceding paragraph brings me back to the Death scenes. This mythology does not simply point to the ‘absurdist’ idea that Death is always waiting and threatening to undo any human project. It rather points to a culture where Death has a particular place, as part of an order, a larger pattern which includes obedience to the gods, proper mourning, and kinship with the dead. Arguably, it is this pattern which has become disrupted. The intrusion of the Death scenes is therefore potentially itself a sign of healing: acknowledgement of Death’s proper place instead of a denial or attempt to control it. Nakirijja’s response to the dead body, mourning it as if it were one of her own kin, is also significant. Hers is an act of acknowledgement of the unknown other, including sympathy for another as the beginning of healing. Thus, the audience is confronted throughout this play with the question ‘what kind of spectator do we want to be’.

As we read the play, we cannot help but realise that there is need for recognition between Majangwa and Nakirijja. Both characters have a strong yearning to be recognised: Majangwa wants to transfix the crowds, while Nakirijja is yearning for fulfilment through becoming seen as a fertile woman and not simply as an actor in Majangwa’s performances. However, the couple is also attempting to run away from being seen. This contradicts their yearning to be recognised, and creates a sense of the absurd. For instance, Majangwa says:

It is good going. Yes, that's it. We must get going. Eh? What do you say? Kampala is too crowded, too frustrating, complicated. Got old bank notes stuck up its behind and don't you think I don't know about *that*. (pp. 10-11)

The passage above does not only highlight the couple's attempts to run away from being seen and judged by the crowds. It also contains a suggestion that the old bank notes bring back echoes of the notes they used to receive as pay and motivation for performing live pornography. It is interesting to note that the couple is attempting to run away from coming into the spotlight but, at the same time, the two are yearning for *re*-recognition. There is something here of the objectifying gaze: looking at each other as if just an object and attempting to enact a kind of sexual fantasy rather than connecting them as human beings. This apparent contradiction between two opposite yearnings is one interesting way in which Serumaga expresses the absurdity that surrounds the couple's past and present dilemmas. Those passages where Majangwa describes their past together, their meeting through the dance and drama, also have a powerfully effect on Nakirijja. The performance could work but does not any more.

For Serumaga, in *Majangwa*, what divides the actors and the spectators is a thin line, dependent only on timing. The play thus opens up more possibilities of interpreting actor-audience interaction, not least through reconfiguring and transposing mythic aspects. We should note that, for instance, the play closes at its beginning and begins at its closure. *Majangwa* opens with Majangwa calling after Nakirijja, who is evidently following him. It closes with Majangwa calling after Nakirijja whom he follows. Two points stand out. One is that this circularity is a major feature of the plays which Esslin would describe as theatre of the absurd: Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* begins and ends with Vladimir and Estragon waiting, *Endgame* begins and ends with impotent attempts by Clov to depart from Hamm, and *Play*



closes on the stage direction “Repeat *Play* exactly”. In the circularity signalled in *Majangwa*’s opening and closing gestures we see Serumaga pointing towards the opening and closure formulae of myth narratives.

Myths are meant to be told and retold perpetually. Myths are also meant to reassure their audiences. Performance of myth also differs according to the interests of the performer, occasion and audience. Similarly, Serumaga seems to suggest that the action of *Majangwa* can and should be re-enacted, since the play’s closure is also its beginning. Indeed, Serumaga’s manipulation of the actor-audience dynamics, especially in the last scene of the play, suggests that the story of *Majangwa* and *Nakirijja* is also our story. They may act as we watch; we may act as they watch.

Ultimately the challenge of the last scene is that we must either follow *Majangwa* into further decline or *Nakirijja* as she chooses a different path, a more realistic path than that of *Majangwa*. This, again, shows how Serumaga’s *Majangwa* pushes its audience beyond the absurd and towards the real choices they themselves will need to make. I can therefore conclude that in *Majangwa*, Serumaga’s absurdist idiom mutated from a closeness to the Esslinian theatre of the absurd features to an absurdist idiom which is operationalized through the notion of spectatorship.

## Chapter 3

### *The Elephants: the absurdist idiom re-invented*

#### **Introduction: Concealment, exposure, realism, and the absurd**

*The Elephants* is a play about concealment, exposure, realism and the absurd in the manner of what Michael Meredith (2011) defines as the genre of absurd realism. For Meredith (2011:9-14) absurd realism:

Is not against Realism or Humanism. It's not Abstraction or Formal Logic or Positivism. It's not art for art's sake, and it's not about heteronomy of life, of urbanism, of function. Absurd Realism produces a space in which the search for meaning in something both vague and concrete is highly encouraged. No stable grid, no absolute datum. Language itself is in continual transformation and renegotiation through its use, misuse, and need for our strange construction of ontological relevance.

I will argue that in *The Elephants*, “the absurd” and “realism” are in a productive, mutually interrogating relationship. An apparently “realist” situation can turn into something disorientingly “absurd”; yet something that on the face of it seems “absurd” such as uncertainties about memory or identity, can turn out to have underlying psychological and social rationales. In this chapter, I claim that there is an ongoing productive interrelationship between realism and the absurd in Serumaga's play; for it is this interrelationship that provides the site for concealment and exposure throughout.

As the play opens, *The Elephants* reads like a straightforward psychological drama very much like what Michael Meredith defines as absurd realism: the characters in *The Elephants* are readily comprehensible to the audience, but they progressively descend into incomprehensibility as the play moves towards closure. Unlike *A Play* and *Majangwa*, *The Elephants* opens in a very realistic way: with a calm setting and clear-cut character roles; with nothing unusual about anything. As revealed in the stage directions, the play is set in an area “Situated on the headland, overlooking an expanse of water: a university” (p.1). This context brings to mind three symbols – headland, water expanse and university – which symbolise a society at its intellectual best; with knowledge from the land of the head spreading out in universality. Water has from time immemorial been known as life-supporting element, the “skyscraping constructions” that “rise in a series of little boxes” (Ibid.) confirm the view, in an ordinary sense, that this is a community of great advancement. It is intended to be a highly populated settlement. Surprisingly the occupants of the skyscrapers are “layabouts from Africa, Asia, Europe and from elsewhere in the world.” (Ibid.) This affirms the view that the condition being represented in the early sections of *The Elephants* is of universal affect.

There is an overall state of idleness and doing nothing that typifies the life style of the characters on the sixth floor, the immediate setting of the play. Through this idleness, Serumaga, I believe, ridicules the presence of such a glamorous physical feature in such a place of high learning. Moreover, the stage is “a room, set out in bed-sitter fashion but without the starkness of the undergraduate type. It is quite fashionably set out in a kind of Chelsea asceticism” (Ibid.) The foreign décor is apt to have an influence on the young students that enroll at this university. The wide open window upstage is the connection between the occupant of this tiny room and the world out there with all the beauty of nature and the society in the island and country beyond. From the description of the setting of *The Elephants*, it is certain that Serumaga has a very important message to share but he is concealing it from the ordinary audience, like a riddle that

whose meaning is accessible to only those for which it is intended. This concealment is enhanced by the fact that the characters operate from “the corner room in the block structure”; thereby suggesting that the characters are secluded, or exiled in some form of concealed environment, physical and otherwise.

As the play progresses, we note that disillusionment, fantasy and deliberation occupies David and Maurice who became friends as a result of the handiwork of misfortune “David is a Research Fellow in African Literature and Musicology” (Ibid.) who devotes much of his time to creative writing. It is this creativity that he uses to recreate the story of Maurice’s dead parents as well as well as Maurice’s subsequent exile into an active communication that creates a new, if ephemeral, identity for the latter. Maurice, a refugee from far beyond the waters, in a francophone territory had fled his country when he was pursuing philosophy at the local university. When he fled and met David, his interest changed to painting: he exiled himself into a new field that involves creativity.

More important is that when David had asked Maurice to “help with research, especially in French” (p. 2). Language and creativity had become the most important source of livelihood and survival for the two. It remains to be seen how long they could hide behind the curtains of language and creativity. Nonetheless, the letters which David write to and from to Maurice’s parents, parents who do not exist, changed Maurice’s life for a reasonable length of time, at least. This new life Maurice augments with the artifacts that he paints, artifacts that brighten his life, and his emotional space. However, unlike Maurice, David is the bright-and-early type whose life is about getting up and going forward and not sleeping or sitting, sulking over nothing.

There is something of optimist in the early sections of *The Elephants*. For instance, David’s repetitive use of the phrase, “quite an achievement” (p. 2) and Maurice’s wordless “grunts” (ibid.) in reply sets the contrasts between David’s optimism and Maurice’s pessimism:

the two can be read as two sides of the same conscience. Meanwhile, Maurice continues to sleep and could fall down and get hurt unlike the gecko that is well adapted. What happened yesterday and today could happen in the future too but circumstances change. When David tries out what he did yesterday expecting the gecko to fall down, something else happens; “something flies at him. He emits a sound of fear ... it falls on the floor; it is the newspaper thrown by the newspaper boy” (p. 4). Fear and uncertainty combined leave Maurice half sitting and David “moving away while trying to shake it off his body” (ibid.) Knowledge of what it is brings relief and confidence, signifying that ignorance can be a source of fear and ineptitude. “Maurice reclines again. David opens the first newspaper and shakes it. Goes quickly through to the end” and remarks that it was amazing how much the journalists had achieved in “journalistic-hide-and-peek” (Ibid.) It is at this stage of the play, the descent towards the absurd begins to take shape.

From the preceding account, it is clear that *The Elephants* is set in a largely realistic environment, with characters whose motivations can be discerned as one reads on. By contrast, in Serumaga’s early plays, we cannot successfully construct who the characters such as the Head, Peter and John in *A Play*, or Kayikuuzi and Nambi in *Majangwa* really are, or from whence they come. We just have to read – or watch and listen to – them in a more symbolic than realistic way. In that way, we can recognise the interrelationship between realism and the absurd at work in the play.

In *The Elephants*, however, Serumaga effects a dramaturgical shift. The characters, especially David, expose both their individual and collective malaise through various forms of concealment of their true identities. In this chapter, I conceive of concealment in much the same way as Thomas Nagel (1998:4; 2002:4) who points out that “concealment includes not only secrecy and deception, but also reticence and non-acknowledgment. There is much more going on inside us all the time than we are willing to express, and civilization would be impossible if

we could all read each other's minds.” In *The Elephants*, as David creates a story about Maurice’s identity, he conceals his own past. It is when the play plunges into madness that we start to suspect that the stories about the characters in the play could be invented; at this point a perfectly ordinary situation descends into something unsettlingly absurd and mad. The sense of concealing the past through the invention of stories about the characters’ past or the invention of stories as a way of controlling the past comes to the fore as we move towards the play’s closure.

What we get in *The Elephants*, finally, is a sense of madness and uncertainty and the effects of the two which keep escalating; and this leads us into asking questions such as: what is going on? Can we trust *anything*? This unique style of “mutual interrogation” of absurdism and realism emerges will the overall focus for my exploration of the re-invented absurdist idiom in *The Elephants*. This unique style contrasts with the kind of dramatic technique we have been seeing in, *A Play* and *Majangwa*, in which we witness supernatural and mythic characters interacting on the same dramaturgical plane. By contrast, in *The Elephants* Serumaga is using absurdist conventions in a much more implicit way, within a much more realistic framework. This shift in Serumaga’s use of absurdist conventions displays the development of his own dramatic style within his career

### **Elements in an Absurdist reading (I): Escalation from realism to uncertainty and madness**

Towards the close of the play conventions of the absurd to do with madness and lack of epistemological certainty emerge as the most pervasive elements of *The Elephants*. The following examples can help illustrate this descent. First, David begins to reproduce the information he has about Maurice – information that turns out to be his own creation – to Jenny. As I pointed out in the previous section of this chapter, the story that David invents and narrates is a version of David’s own life story; in the sense that David and Maurice can be seen as two sides

of the same conscience. David will later deploy the story to convince Maurice that his parents were killed during a period of civil strife. Secondly, the Old Man, an apparent madman who wanders in off the street in search of the hospital, is the one who knows the password of survival: “YES” (p. 21). He even seems to be realistic in whatever he says and what he does while in the elite company of Jenny and David.

In the scenes where the Old Man appears and later is reported dead (p. 19; p. 29), it is notable that neither Jenny nor David has any remorse or empathy for the Old Man even when Richard announces that the latter has been knocked over by a car. Yet, the Old Man, in this context, can be seen as symbolic of their collective conscience as a community of fellow human beings; for when the Old Man comes back to the same room for the second time, we can see that the solidity of these individuals begins to develop cracks in response to his questions. At this point, one can think of the room, as described in the preceding section, as a form of hospital and the Old Man was not mistaken, after. It appears absurd, too, that the supposedly mad Old Man is the one who, in reality, acts real. Now, one question emerges from this scenario: is madness a variety of cure, healing or escape from individual trauma, and the world’s dilemmas and turmoil in general? Perhaps yes, but if so, then the world is absurd.

### **Elements in an Absurdist reading (II): Exile as concealment**

Each of the central characters in *The Elephants* operates within a unique type of exile: none of them is at ease any longer. Characters are exiled because of man-made calamities in their own countries. As the play progresses, especially towards the end, the conventions of the theatre of the absurd to do with madness and lack of epistemological uncertainty emerge as the most pervasive elements of *The Elephants*. The keynote of the sense of exile in the play resides in David’s outburst to Maurice to “quit that nonsense, There are no such lands as motherlands: just a lot of fatherlands and we are the illegitimate sons of the fatherlands. They can accept us

or reject us; disown the genes, disclaim the blood. Fathers are not like mothers. They shed no blood, and have no cords to cut” (pp. 7-8).

David only falls short of saying that it is the fathers, the male gender of the human species, which kill and create exiles such as Maurice into exile. As David tries to dissuade his friend from getting too sentimental about returning home well knowing that Maurice has nowhere and nobody to return to except himself is in itself a situation of exile that the former imposes on the latter. This is because David cannot reveal the bare fact that both are parent-less to Maurice as yet. All that David does up to the end of the play is to conceal n Maurice’s as well as his ow true identity.

By way of reasoning to dissuade Maurice from returning to his past, David explains “your country is that country which gives you acceptance, recognition, a chance... fame” (p.8) likening Australia and America to his situation where there are many Africans but they have not looked back to return to their native countries. Instead, they have become tourists and Peace Corps or entertainers (Ibid.) This point is performed with deeper imagery of the socks being recovered from where David has been sitting. It dramatically suggests that David is sitting on Maurice’s journey, concealing all and thereby exiling Maurice into the realm of near-anonymity. Here, David’s concealment and exiling of Maurice functions like a riddle; momentarily concealed but to be concealed in the mad scene that concludes the play.

However, Maurice does not understand that to David, he is the spider-lily plant that has been contained in a pot on the balcony: double-exiled as a political refugee as well as, currently, an exile within David’s concealing antics. It is this disparity in the David-Maurice relationship that partly gestures to the absurd. Maurice does not call the present country of residence his because to him “the island is only a resting place (p. 9). Instead, through the window of hope, Maurice admires to the extent of becoming envious even as it is rare hope over the water and waves in the lake separating and at the same time joining him to his home. For nearly six years,



he has not touched his relatives yet the waves seem to have a high chance of doing so. “The small waves down there in the lake, they break, sidle up the banks, lick the stones for sustenance, and then retreat. Then I think, they must do the same to the other side of the water. To my home. Sometimes I go and toss a pebble or two into the retreating waves, and hope that may be the pebble will reach the other side; that something I have touched will float on the wave and as it breaks, the pebble will stay on the other side, my side. You never know, one day those not so little sisters might pick it up, playing on the beach. They won’t know it, but still...” (Ibid.) unravels the sentimentality of his yearning for restoration and reunion through nature and its barriers. He yearns for a process of de-exile.

I now turn to the unravelling of the entire riddle and dénouement of exile in the play by asking whether Maurice will get to his home and if he does, whether he will return to David at the sixth floor. Maurice’s words, “Well, you never know. (*Pause.*) I must be getting on. I’ll be late. See you later” (p. 9) are very powerful in communicating a determination and resolution to move forward and a spirit of enchantment on the part of Maurice. Going out into the uncertain future can be traumatizing and yet Maurice is not cowed. He sets out to get his travel documents not for keeps but to start on a new journey of crossing the lakes and rivers, go over Islands and valleys to meet his parents, relatives and friends in his motherland.

Although David attempts to dissuade him against taking the first step towards achieving his goal, Maurice not only resists him, he tactfully or intelligently out reasons him. This leaves David pensive, empty and lonely but he does not give up hope. “He comes back to the center of the room where he stands, he looks at the paintings again: picks up the newspaper and goes to the window. He looks out.” These are the actions of a man who is determined to move on under whatever circumstances. It is now time for exposure: Maurice is ready to break the chains of exile and rupture, in the process, the concealment that has been the hallmark of David’s epistolary tricks.

Finally, although David has done his best to conceal the truth of Maurice's past, the proposed marriage between Jenny and Maurice opens the can of worms. In anger, Jenny reveals and displays the letters that had hitherto held Maurice in exile in more than the political sense. In the face of hopelessness, Maurice grabs David and beats him up as he moans. The final moment of release from different forms of exile comes when David's mental health dims with the light and his madness returns as the lights go out. At this moment, the symbolism of the hollowed up elephants comes into full force: David, Maurice, Jenny, Richard; and all have been exiles in one way or another. However, their state of exile cannot be concealed forever; a pointer to the fact that, as in *A Play* and *Majangwa*, Serumaga does more and goes beyond the features of theatre of the absurd in *The Elephants*.

### **Elements in an Absurdist reading (III): The metaphor of the hollow elephant**

The metaphor of the hollow elephant provides a site for exploring the absurdist idiom in the play. We hear Richard tell the others in the following exchange:

**RICHARD:** ...*When a pygmy decides to eat an elephant, he does not kill it.*

What he does is he gets inside it, and starts eating it away. The elephant +- experiences only a slight discomfort, until the pygmy strikes some vital part. It could be lunch time or dinner time. That's when the elephant falls. Do you know that?

**JENNY:** No.

**DAVID:** Well, when you see a herd of elephants, eating grass and thorns, there's probably a pygmy inside every one of them. So I told Richard he was a big elephant, with a little an inside him, eating away. He will weaken. In fact elephants do weaken considerably. In the end they are no better than just big mice (p.32)

It is only a matter of time for anyone to discover who they really are. We are all hollowed out elephants until we break down into pieces, fractured and re-assembled. But we may not know this ourselves; in an absurdist register, this amounts to a sense of nothingness in a world without meaning, and a world in which the individual is lost. As Richard's metaphor of the proverbial elephants emerges, we wonder if we all are not just hollowed up elephants, awaiting that moment of "calmness" as Old Man says of death (p. 23). This goes for the human mind as well. Are our identities imaginative creations and re-creations of stories like Maurice's, which will conceal truths about us until we cannot conceal them anymore? Do we, like David, expose our inner traumas, dilemmas and general malaise in the very act of concealing such truths about ourselves? Do we expose our inner selves through our very acts of concealment?

One of the proverbs of the Baganda people may underlie this scene: *Akamegga enjovu kenkana wa*. This means that even a tiny animal can win a wrestling contest with an elephant: appearances can always be deceptive. Behind the facade of stability and an apparent realism of the central characters in *The Elephants* lies a unique sense of fragmented and unsettled lives, with troubled individuals and a diseased community. After Richard has referred to Jenny and David as a couple of elephants, (p. 29) Jenny asks, "Why did he call us a couple of elephants", upon which David answers, "because that's what *he* is" (Ibid.) Presently, David explains something about Richard's state of hollowness in the following terms:

DAVID: Perhaps. Anyway, I told him something was eating him, some object unknown to himself was tugging at his insides and breaking off little edible pieces. That's what was happening to him, and that's why he was running away, to Africa, to academic seclusion (read exile), to some obscure and unimportant type of poetry. I do not think he is a charlatan. I think perhaps he is lost. (pp. 31-2)

Later on, David tells Jenny, “I told Richard he was a big elephant, with a little man inside him, eating away. He will weaken. In fact elephants do weaken considerably. In the end they are no better than just big mice” (p. 32). However, a close reading of other characters, as depicted in *The Elephants*, reveals that even David and Maurice are hollow elephants; because behind the facade of their apparent sense of stability lies the trauma caused by the loss of their parents during a period of armed strife.

### **Realist backgrounds (I): Trauma and madness in a diseased society**

As I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, Serumaga presents the events in *The Elephants* in a manner similar to the Meredithian notion of absurd realism. We may at this point say that in *The Elephants* Serumaga presents realistic characters in circumstances so extreme that it is absurd. This amounts to another reconfiguration of Serumaga’s use of the motif of a diseased society and the search for healing which we first encounter in *A Play* and then again in *Majangwa*. The difference is that in *The Elephants* the idea of being diseased is more evidently based in realism than it is in the other two plays, hence the mutual interrogation between realism and the absurd. The following extract partly demonstrates this aspect of *The Elephants*:

**JENNY:** This is not play-acting, and there is no script to life.

*(Silence. Jenny looks at watch.)*

**OLD MAN:** *(past David)* This is the sixth floor, isn’t it?

**DAVID:** Yes.

**OLD MAN:** Oh, good! *(David and Jenny look at one another.)* I was looking for it.

**DAVID:** Were you?

**OLD MAN:** Yes. (Pause.) I was on the second floor yesterday. (Pause.)

Everybody there was sick. (p.18).

The second floor of Uganda's national referral hospital has been a reserved area for casualties and patients inflicted with cancerous ailments since the opening of Mulago Hospital in 1913 up to the present day. What perhaps comes closer to the absurd is the fact that the Old Man remains an unexplained character throughout the play; he just appears and disappears and then reappears until he is announced dead. However, through the instability of the identity of the Old Man and his on and off appearance on stage we are drawn into realising that there is disease in both immediate settings of the play: in the university, no less than in the national hospital. Symbolically, the university, the seat of all learning, is repeatedly confused with a hospital. Perhaps the two settings are mutually interchangeable.

Furthermore, there is potential and actual madness throughout *The Elephants*. Characters frequently speak from within their trauma. For instance, David is traumatised by the circumstances in which his parents were killed while Maurice speaks from the trauma of being a refugee. Further, there is something of the futility of desire implicit in the erotic entanglements in the play as well as David's opposition to Maurice's intended marriage to Jenny. If we place David's opposition within the context of a tripartite relationship involving David, Maurice and Jenny we note a playing out of sexual antagonism through the objectification of Jenny. Ironically, Jenny becomes a unifying object for the two traumatised persons, a kind of urn into which both David and Maurice momentarily release fractions of their trauma as each seeks a fleeting cure from their fractured lives. For instance, we witness David and Maurice seeking therapy in their conversations with Jenny almost throughout the play. A striking example of therapy-seeking conversation is when David gives his own version of Richard's hollowness thus:

JENNY: I don't see what that has to do with being an elephants.

DAVID: (*Takes her glass and fills it*) That's because at heart even you are a tourist. Do you know the pygmies? Well, they have a most sophisticated way of eating elephants. Poisoned darts and all that are figments of tourist imagination. When a pygmy decides to eat an elephant, he does not kill it. What he does is he gets inside it, and starts eating away. The elephant experiences only a slight discomfort, until the pygmy strikes some vital part. It could be lunch time or dinner time. That's when the elephant falls. Did you know that?

On the surface of it, David's explanation may sound like a story to pass time, or a story to educate Jenny – the tourist, so to speak. However, his narrative about Richard is in a way an attempt to seek solace from his own trauma. It is like he is projecting his own hollowness to Richard. By the end of the play, it emerges that he, David, is himself a hollow elephant, metaphorically speaking.

Finally, like Majangwa and Nakirijja in *Majangwa*, Maurice nurses dreams of reviving himself, dreams that feed on the hope of returning to his motherland one day. Maurice seeks a form of psychological cure from the loneliness and trauma he suffers as a refugee. He says:

....Sometimes I go down and toss a pebble or two into the retreating waves, and hope, that maybe the pebble will reach the other side; that something I have touched will float on the wave and as it breaks, the pebble will stay on the other side, *my* side. You never know, one day those not so little sisters might pick it up, playing on the beach. They don't know it, but still... (p. 9)

Recalling the lens of spectatorship used in the previous chapter, we realise that in *The Elephants* there is need for healing through being recognised and recognising the other as well. Moreover, the need for cure or healing from trauma is reminiscent of Mutimukulu's search for release from the past, a release from his current state of impotence, Nakirijja's yearning for a conception, or Majangwa's yearning for a recovery of his sexual virility. Indeed, all the characters in *The Elephants* are in need of some form of cure.

Like in *Majangwa*, there is a yearning – latent and apparent – for recognition, and the need to be seen and appreciated: to see others and to be seen by the others, as realised in the following dialogue:

DAVID: ...They invited him to be the compere at a Shaggy Dog Show. That's public recognition for you. The road to fame. And all he wants is to 'go home'. (*He is still at window, looking out.*) Across the lake into nothingness. I'll bet they even don't have Shaggy dog Shows where he comes from. (p. 14).

It is perhaps Jenny who most emphasises the need for healing when she explicitly says, "It makes me feel so small and deprived; a harsh thing to say, perhaps. But to think that so little has happened to me in my twenty-five years of life fills me with an emptiness that is in dire need of purging" (p. 40). It is the Jenny, too, who suggests a possible process of healing, the need "to discover the centre of the storm within oneself" and "a sensuous search for the soul in oneself" (p. 41). The question one may ask is whether hollow elephants can ever get healed.

It is the Old Man who recognises the first step for a cure: namely that death is a reality which cannot be wished away, in the midst of a sick society in which aspirin is a pervasive presence (pp. 19-29). A meaningful search for either individual or collective cure, or healing, should therefore begin with the recognition that death is with us. This recognition eludes the elites in the persons of David, Jenny and David: they all live a life of self-delusion and self-

denial. This life of delusions motivates David to create and disseminate a certain version of identity he wishes for both himself and for Maurice. As David confesses:

**DAVID:** I have been a mother and father and friend to him

**JENNY:** Well, you can't own him. He *will* go to his parents!

**DAVID:** (*slowly, but very loudly*) MAURICE DIOP HAS NO PARENTS! (p. 46)

and later we read:

**JENNY:** (*stunned*) W-h-a-t-?

**DAVID:** Maurice Diop has no parents. They're dead. Killed during the same fighting which made him a refugee (pp. 46-47)

This is on one level a politically explicit commentary on the adverse effect of violence and war. What was implied in the demolition of the anthill in *Majangwa* is experienced directly in *The Elephants*. However, since David has confessed to being mad, it is difficult to believe his narratives. So, we remain in suspense, thus highlighting an absurdity of sorts. But it is an absurdity emerging out of concrete human violence and failures to recognize and acknowledge other human beings. As David himself confesses to Jenny, "Yes, I have built a life for Maurice through the written word. It is a web of existence: father, mother, brother and two sisters. Real to him. In here! (*Shows the letters*) I have written it all" (p. 49).

### **Realist backgrounds (II): Socio-political malaise exposed through concealment**

The phenomenon of refugees is a site for exploring socio-political malaise in *The Elephants*. We find that the effects of war enhance the emergence of further social disintegration, thus



deepening the sickness of an already sick society. Uganda, Serumaga's country of birth, is well known for receiving and taking care of refugees. In the opening stage directions, we learn this:

*In this room, David and Maurice live. David is a Research Fellow in African Literature and Musicology. But lately, much of his energy has been devoted to creative writing. Maurice is a refugee from the neighbouring Francophone territory across the water. (p.1)*

While granting that *The Elephants* as a more explicitly political play than *A Play* and *Majangwa*, we can observe that the play opens on a realistic note, in so far as the socio-political history of the interlacustrine region of East and central African region is concerned. Against the background of this refugee crisis, we find the Old Man confusing a University Hostel with the Hospital's sixth floor:

**OLD MAN:** ...Anyway, I said, 'Yes.' And she said, 'Sixth floor, sir.' She actually called me 'sir'. (*Laughs.*) So I went home and came back today. It's very nice here.

(Inquiringly:) No aspirins?

**DAVID:** No.

(*Old Man laughs*)

**DAVID:** I am sorry. You are on the *right* floor, but the wrong building.

**OLD MAN:** What?

**DAVID:** This is the university. Not the hospital. (p. 22)

Thus, confusion of the Old Man could imply a critique of Uganda's failing health and education institutions at the time of writing. The same confusion can, however, be read as a symbol to show that these elites could be as sick as their counterparts in village hospitals. Further, confusion and failure by the Old Man to locate the right physical space of the hospital denotes a failure by the elite especially to recognise others, and hence a breakdown of mutual acknowledgement.

From a very basic psychological perspective we note that David tells Jenny about his own trauma while pretending to be relating Maurice's. In this way, David projects his own trauma onto Maurice's life story. In addition to asking if this kind of recognition is therapeutic, we may add others: is David telling the truth in the first place? Can we know? Is he manipulating Maurice through his kind of stories? To what extent are we, as readers or theatre audience, also to be merely built or made-up characters in someone else's story? These are philosophical and potentially absurdist questions that arise out of the play and become part of the ambiguity of its ending.

### **Concealment, exposure and healing: beyond the absurd**

As we have seen, *The Elephants* addresses critical questions about identity. The creation of identities as a result of violence, war and also fictional creativity is of importance here. When David says, "you know, I shudder to think what would become of the modern artist if he lost his ability to mystify and confuse. Art no longer deals with revelation but concealment" (p. 7), he captures a sense of the absurd here, but his utterance also points to his own role as an artist who conceals his own past as well as that of Maurice, deploying his creative power over words by creating stories that conceal the truth of their past. What we get in the final analysis is the image of the human being as a kind of tabula rasa, on which those with power, including the

power of artistic creativity, can inscribe an identity. The ruler can be seen as an artist and the artist as a ruler: both can create and un-create other people's identities.

Furthermore, Jenny's fragmented existence also suggests that humankind can be seen as a kind of artefact that is never finished, in need of perpetual re-creation:

**DAVID:** Is it finished?

*(Maurice stops and looks)*

**DAVID:** is it?

**MAURICE:** *(with irritation)* What do you mean?

**DAVID:** I mean, is it ready for exhibition?

**MAURICE:** You talk as if the two were one and the same thing. How can it be finished? Ready? Yes, it is always ready. But finished? No. (p. 6)

At the same time, her fragmented existence can be a pointer to the notion of the absurd in life in general and the absurd essence that we come face to face with at the closure of *The Elephants*. Therefore, like the proverbial hollow elephants, human beings live fragmented lives but engage in futile attempts to create preferred versions of existence through such media as stories, typified by David's narratives about himself and the others. But the attempts to create in the service of looking for a cure should not be lost on us. The very act of creating can provide ephemeral release from trauma, at least.

However, we should note that art as invention and medium can also be manipulative and an act of violence in itself. Art can be used to manipulate relationships through words: which raises the question: who has the power over words? The idea that David attempts to create a fictional life for Maurice can be seen as an act of violence towards Maurice because it is, potentially, a repetition of the very violence that created the refugee Maurice. This becomes

evident in Maurice's disavowal of motherlands, implicitly pointing to the fatherland he wishes to impose on Maurice through his creative paternity:

**DAVID:** Now, quit that nonsense, will you? There are no *motherlands*: just a lot of fatherlands and we are the illegitimate sons of our fatherlands. They can accept us or reject us; disown the genes, disclaim the blood. (p. 7)

This search for meaning in the play can be realised through the questions: can we trust the stories that David tells us about his own past and that of Maurice? Are we to have only his word for it? This question increases the sense of unreality of everything that becomes swamped by David's madness, a madness that is perhaps symbolic of the nation of Uganda at that time Serumaga wrote *The Elephants*. It is a question which creates doubt, and loss of authenticity and trust. It is a question which demonstrates that Serumaga's re-invented absurdist idiom very much comes close to some elements of theatre of the absurd in *The Elephants*. This turn marks Serumaga's next stage of his playwriting career; a turning away from an obvious deployment of some thematic strands and character types that are close to theatre of the absurd elements to a re-invented version of an absurdist idiom.

More importantly, Serumaga uses the absurdist idiom for activist ends rather than for the sake of merely depicting absurdism in life. For that matter, we are not to limit our gaze onto characters as individuals but to see them within a larger frame or as human stage metaphors. For instance, we are to take the Old Man's password code as YES, and say "Yes to a common humanity, Not to individualism," or solipsism (Seremba op. cit.:229). "YES" should be used as Serumaga, in his introduction to *The Elephants*, himself advises only "whenever the going gets tough, but not as a 'yes' man". We should have the sense to reason on what is happening around and say yes to serve the bigger good of a common humanity and to our own individual selves.

There is need to recognise the plight of the others, if our community is to be healed, in whatever form and however momentarily.

## **Conclusion**

Serumaga experimented with theatre of the absurd elements more explicitly in his first two plays, *A Play* and *Majangwa*. However, we see him taking a new stylistic turn of incorporating the absurdist idiom into a more basically realistic play in *The Elephants*. Esslin (1972: 423) seems almost to have predicted Serumaga's re-invention of the absurdist idiom when he said "if certain aspects of theatre of the absurd have thus naturally and smoothly reintegrated themselves into the mainstream of the tradition, others have clearly contributed to the negative and disruptive trends which tend towards the destruction of the tradition itself and its replacement by new and as yet unheard-of forms". A play which starts on a realistic note descent into situations of the absurd until the final rupture: with David's madness, which exposes what has been hitherto concealed in self- and other- narratives.

There is a unique manner in which Serumaga, in *The Elephants*, presents characters in different forms of exile as each of them yearns for a cure from one form of concealment or the other. Thus, Serumaga in *The Elephants* goes beyond the absurd through deployment of a strategy in which the absurd and realism mutually interrogate each other; a mutual interrogation which affords us new insights in Serumaga's *The Elephants*: as the characters struggle out of their exiled lives. The metaphor of hollowed up elephants is especially vital in advancing the idea that whatever seems realistic at one moment may descend into the realm of the absurd. Therefore, it might be interesting for the reader of *The Elephants* to appreciate the mutual interrogation between realism and the absurd.

## Conclusion

### **Serumaga's *A Play*, *Majangwa*, and *The Elephants*: The absurdist idiom and beyond**

#### **Introduction**

In this thesis, I have argued that Serumaga's use of the absurdist idiom is the overarching connecting thread in his plays. In other words, an absurdist reading is an ever-present possibility throughout the three plays I have examined. In *A Play*, Serumaga launches the absurdist idiom; in *Majangwa* he invests the absurdist idiom with the lens of spectatorship; and in *The Elephants* he re-invents the absurdist idiom altogether; reconfiguring the idiom into an absurd realism, along the lines of Meredith's explication of the concept of absurd realism.

I have claimed, in general, that Serumaga does not apply anything like an existing dramatic approach or fixed genre called theatre of the absurd. Rather, he reconfigures aspects of features that gesture towards theatre of the absurd as espoused and propounded by Esslin, who developed the notion of the absurd from readings of plays by Adamov, Beckett and Ionesco, among others. In reconfiguring the features that are akin to absurdist theatre, Serumaga injects an efficacy in his dramaturgy that goes beyond the parameters of the theatre of the absurd per se.

The absurdist idiom affords Serumaga's plays an elasticity in negotiating the tensions involving the individuals and the communities that his plays represent. Thus, in *A Play* we can see the protagonist Mutimukulu appearing closer to the lost individual, equivalent to the absurdist character that is largely helpless, as Esslin would perhaps argue. On the contrary, I have argued that Mutimukulu's apparent stasis can be read as an allegory of the political stasis

that was the result of Milton Obote's republican coup in Uganda in 1966; a stasis that flowed into the Amin regime between 1971 and 1979 in the same country.

In *Majangwa*, Serumaga re-casts his absurdist idiom and the lens of spectatorship becomes the key method and theme in his portrayal of the couple, Majangwa and Nakirijja, as they fall from glory into a sordid life style. As we have seen, Serumaga in *Majangwa's* search for revival and regeneration and Nakirijja's final move into the audience at the closure of the play may be seen as positive models that suggest a possibility of renewal. In that way, it would be an exaggeration to describe Serumaga as a playwright who presents a hopelessly pessimistic atmosphere. Moreover, when Nakirijja moves into the audience, her action marks a radical departure from, say, Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon and Hamm and Clov who only stop at attempting to take a step to move away from their current state of stasis but never do so in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* respectively. Finally, in *The Elephants*, Serumaga's absurdist idiom repeatedly flips into its near opposite: realism. *The Elephants* starts from realistic situations and events but gradually descends into a madness which is akin to the madness witnessed in what Esslin would call theatre of the absurd plays.

### **Echoes of Beckett on a Ugandan stage?**

I would like to conclude by considering the comparison throughout this thesis between Serumaga's plays and Beckett's. Am I suggesting that reading of Serumaga is in a way a reading Samuel Beckett on a Ugandan stage? In Chapter 1, I pointed out that previous scholars such as Seremba (op. cit.), Horn (op. cit.) and Breitingner (op. cit.) have made connections involving Serumaga, Beckett and theatre of the absurd. Indeed, as I explain the working of the absurdist idiom in its changing shades across the three chapters of this thesis, I show some similarities between features of the absurd in general and some aspects of Beckett's plays in particular. In the following sections of this chapter, I present three illustrations, in addition to the several that

I have provided in each of chapters 1, 2 and 3 in form of comparison, to show that one may fruitfully trace a Beckettian influence on Serumaga, but that there are also limits to that influence.

First, when Nakirijja in *Majangwa* protests, “I have to stop” as she “*sits and touches her feet – pain*” (p.7) and later we read in the stage directions that “*Nakirijja shakes her shoe vigorously and looks into it again. Nothing has come out*” (p.17), one is reminded of Beckett’s Vladimir who continuously experiences pain in his boot throughout *Waiting for Godot*. It may not be surprising that this scene involving trouble with shoes starts at the beginning of both plays. Secondly, there is the following passage:

**Nakirijja:** It is a long distance between two rivers

**Majangwa:** Two rivers! Two rivers! Is that too long a distance for you? Two rivers: that is only the space between two births; two bursts of the womb and the eternal flow of the waters. (p.7)

Majangwa’s reference to the two rivers as “only the space between two births; two bursts of the womb and the eternal flow of the waters” reverberates with Pozzo’s assertion in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (p. 89) when he says that “they give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more.” Thirdly, Majangwa repeatedly suggests that “It is good going. Yes, that’s it. We must get going. Eh?” (p.11), but he never actually makes a move to go anywhere. It is a situation which echoes the absurdist stasis that we encounter throughout Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

Nonetheless, these echoes are ultimately put to a different use. In *Majangwa*, for instance, there is a running thread of the couple attempting to run away from being seen, a situation which ironically contradicts their yearning to be recognised. Still, the couple’s attempt



to run away from being seen, from being judged by the crowds, contains a suggestion that the two are yearning for re-recognition at the same time. Hence, theirs is not a hopeless case. This is unlike Beckett's W 1, W 2 and M who, throughout *Play*, are continuously traumatised by the prospect of being seen. Finally, when Nakirijja moves into the audience at the closure of *Majangwa*, the roles of actor/performer and audience are being suggestively transposed. Perhaps Serumaga, in the transposition of the actor/audience roles, is suggesting that basic human situations do not really change. Rather, it is the performer and the settings that differ from one period to another. Or, he is suggesting that Nakirijja can be a potential model for those who seek solutions for their problems.

### **Suggestions for further research**

In the process of examining Serumaga's use of the absurdist idiom in his plays, I realised that a lot can be done in the area of research as regards Serumaga as a dramatist as well as an innovator of dramatic strategies, in his own right. There is something more and beyond the all-knowing and sweeping generalisations that Serumaga is an individualist, displayed by Horn (1982:22), for instance, when he claims that Serumaga's characters suffer an apartness as "the inevitable consequence of a radical individualism, tending distinctly towards solipsism, which characterises all his central characters." Interestingly, Horn (op. cit.:22) somewhat contradicts himself when he adds:

It is not that the social and political are absent, for they form the necessary back-drop to each of his five plays and his novel ..... However self-indulgent they may be, these artists and intellectuals (characters) live in a terrifying loneliness. The sensitive individual of heightened, if distorted, perception must face alone the horrors of failure, public exposure and painful self-knowledge. Serumaga is

concerned with both the agony of self-discovery and tragic collapse of the gifted deceiver.

In my exploration of Serumaga's use of the absurdist idiom, I have taken exception to Horn's (op. cit.) position that Serumaga's characters are self-indulgent individualists, who, having been rejected by society, bury themselves in secluded settings. Mutimukulu in *A Play*, Majangwa and Nakirijja in *Majangwa* and the entire cast of *The Elephants*, are all seen yearning for recognition. We also see them trying to look for solutions for their various forms of diseases and traumas.

Finally, I see considerable potential in studying Serumaga's plays from new alternative perspectives, even if those new perspectives are akin to absurdist readings. One possibility is a cross-cultural study of his theatre, especially from an archival perspective. A useful source is the *Voice of Uganda* Newspaper of October 1975 which gave sustained coverage of Serumaga's theatrical performance in Uganda and abroad. The other possibility is to study the impact his theatrical innovation of the absurdist idiom had on the original audiences versus what impact the recognition of that innovation can have on contemporary audiences. Furthermore, it may be interesting to examine how theatrical conventions have been evolving in Uganda since the times of Serumaga and his contemporaries. The first step in that direction could be a historical survey of theatre practices in Uganda.

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## Appendix 1

### List of Interviewees

<b>SN</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Date interviewed</b>
1.	Namagembe Teopista	53	01.08.2016
2.	Matayo Kivumbi	71	16.07.2016
3.	Kawawawulo Salongo	65	01.08.2016
4.	Mukwaya Paul	62	16.07.2016
5.	Wassanyi Serukenya	78	20.06.2016
6.	Kamya Godfrey	80	16.07.2016