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ESSAY REVIEW

A SURVEY OF THE PLAY INDLALIFA NGUBANI?

Many Ndebele writers have tended to glorify the traditional way of life of the Ndebele people in their novels or poems. Some of them have even suggested a return to the past. For example, S.O. Mlilo in her novel Lifile makes one of the characters, Sonkana, leave Bulawayo because of corruption there and return to the rural areas of Sizinda where he hopes things are still better than in Bulawayo. However, in their criticism of the present these writers fail to make it clear to the reader what that past which they are glorifying was like. They even make the reader feel that the past he must return to is static.

In the treatment of this subject of glorifying the past a break-through was made in 1976, in my opinion, by Ndabezinhle Sigogo. In his play, Indlalifa Ngubani? [Who is the Heir?], he makes the reader aware of the nature of the past that he is referring to. Furthermore he does not suggest a wholesale return to the past but instead he attempts to show that some aspects of the past are good and worth preserving whilst others need modification. In this essay it is intended to show how Sigogo has achieved this; in doing this, it will also be necessary to examine briefly some of the devices he has used to make his play appeal to his readers.

THE STORY IN BRIEF

The play is based on traditional conflicts that are associated with polygamist families. The head of the family is preparing to conduct umbuyiso which is to be followed by the allocation of the deceased’s property among his sons according to the rules laid down by custom. Mhlolo has two wives who are also dead by this time. The first wife is survived by one son, Mphunzo, and one daughter, Machibini. The second wife is survived by two sons, Luphondo and Phehlane. Mphunzo’s mother, however, was not the senior wife because she had two illegitimate children before marrying Mhlolo. Luphondo and Phehlane’s mother, the second wife, was considered to be a virgin when she married Mhlolo and so she became the senior wife. Therefore, even though Luphondo was younger than Mphunzo, he was the heir of Mhlolo’s estate because he was the first son of a senior wife. These procedures were laid down by custom and Mhlolo’s community regarded them as laws of the land which were to be followed. It was clear, therefore, that after the death of Mhlolo the headship of the family would pass to Luphondo.

What complicated the situation in Mhlolo’s case was that just before Mhlolo died he disclosed that Luphondo was not his real son but had been imposed on him. He had then declared that Mphunzo should be proclaimed his heir and head of family. A further complication was brought about by the fact that when Mhlolo made this announcement he had sent all people away except his younger brother Mandlempisi. Mandlempisi did not call anybody else to be his witness,

1 N. Sigogo, Indlalifa Ngubani? (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1976), 112 pp., $0.72.
2 Umbuyiso is a ceremony performed a year after the death of the head of a family. It is done in order to bring home the spirit of the deceased.
not even his elder sister Lomkhono. He first made this change known to his family and public on the day when Mhlolo was being buried. Instead of letting Luphondo hold Mhlolo’s spears as the body was being lowered into the grave he offered the spears to Mphunzo.

Although Mandlempisi’s actions at Mhlolo’s burial caused anger and concern no one had any chance to ask him to explain what he had done. The issue is not discussed for the whole year until it is raised when it is time to conduct the umbuyISO and share the property of the deceased among the children of the deceased. Then the suspicion and mistrust on both sides makes it very difficult for Mandlempisi to allocate the property between the three sons and in the end a quarrel breaks out between him and Mphunzo. In the fight that follows Mandlempisi murders Mphunzo.

**SETTING**

The play is set in the early days of settler rule in Zimbabwe. The way of life is traditional and European education and Christianity have had very little influence on people’s lives. However, Western influence is beginning to change the way of life. Mnkandla, one of the local tribesmen, has a cart, and Mphunzo is making an effort to acquire it. Mphunzo’s sister, Machibini, has a number of illegitimate children all fathered by workers from the mining settlements that have sprung up throughout the region. Mphunzo, too, is described as smoking a cigarette instead of using the traditional snuff. Thus, even if education has not yet had any effect, there is no doubt that the life of this community is experiencing change. In fact Machibini puts the idea across very well when she reacts to her uncle’s statement that customs have to be observed lest misfortunes occur:

*Ngokwakudala lokho malumami,*  
*Khathe si sekuyisilungu*  
*Kokh e lokho kakusasebenzi.*

That’s an out-dated idea, uncle; these are modern times. All these traditional procedures no longer apply (p. 15).

The elders, however, are hostile to this change and express the desire to maintain their traditional way of life. Machibini’s aunt, Lomkhono, agrees with Machibini’s uncle that customs should be observed.

This element of change, from the traditional way of life to what one might call ‘modernism’, is incorporated in the setting of the play as a means of aiding the projection of the theme of change from collective to individual responsibility. But throughout the play Sigogo projects the cause of the problem as stemming from the dichotomy between what the elders desire to see being done and what they actually do to achieve these goals. However, this is weakened by the writer’s inconsistency. When community elders accuse Mandlempisi of tackling family problems alone he defends himself by saying he consulted them, and there is no further statement to contradict this.

The action of the play is confined to a rural setting. It revolves around the homes of Mphunzo, Luphondo and Mandlempisi. In all the three homes action is dominated by beer-drinking. Sigogo is portraying beer not as, traditionally, food which gives man the strength and stamina to be able to continuously discuss crucial affairs; rather he is attempting to show how the young people are unable to
use it in its traditional way; they put beer-drinking before everything else and leave no time to consider important family issues. Even Mandela sometimes falls victim to this weakness. Lomkhono's statement to Luphondo and Phehlane is relevant to the whole family; it seems that the writer is projecting the idea that some of the family conflicts stem from this weakness, and she says:

Hmm. Kuyadliwa ho.
Utshwala yiyonanto eyaziwayo.
Aabantu bangacabanga nini-ke,
Nxa kuzakuthi bevuka phansi
Babe bengena emaghageni otshwala,
Babunathe baze babuyekele ngoba
Sekuphele amabele eziphaleni?

Alas, it is always beer-drinking. Beer is the only thing that's considered important. How then can anyone have time to consider important matters if they sit around beer calabashes as soon as they get up from sleep, and drink, and only stop when the granaries are empty? (p. 34).

Although I have emphasized that Sigogo uses setting to aid the projection of his theme it must be pointed out that sometimes there is some glaring discrepancy between the physical description of a scene's setting and what is explained by the words and actions of the actors. In Act One, Scene Two, the physical setting and atmosphere at Mphunzo's home are described as follows:


It is late in the evening at Mphunzo's place. There has been a drinking party. Many have left. Mphunzo, Machibini and Dumaza are still drinking. There is also an old woman called Lomkhono who is lying down half asleep (p. 14).

This description implies that there has been a large crowd drinking at Mphunzo's home that afternoon. Therefore, the following speech by Mphunzo the next day comes as a complete surprise:

Ngihle ngibone malumami ukuthi
Kukhona imihlolo engizayibona.
Kambe kwake kwenzeka ukuthi
Umuntu aphekele utshwala, ezweni,
Kungabi lamunu oyabunatha?

I felt that some misfortune was going to occur, uncle. How on earth does it happen that a man brews some beer for the community and nobody comes to drink it? (p. 48).

It seems the writer is using this to back up his characterization of Mphunzo and his sister Machibini which totally contradicts the description above. Furthermore because Lomkhono is lying down at Mphunzo's home it suggests that there are cordial relations between her and her brother's children. If Machibini's behaviour fighting with her aunt Lomkhono had been completely unexpected the whole family should have been rocked with anger, surprise and bewilderment; but their
reaction seems to suggest that it was bad behaviour, yet did not come as a complete surprise since it came from Machibini. This again contradicts the cordial relations implied in Act One, Scene Two.

This inconsistency in setting is also to be observed in the actions of some of Sigogo's characters; one realizes that inconsistency is not a trait of the character's personality but rather a reflection of the writer's weakness.

ACTION: ANALYSIS OF EVENTS

The events can be divided into three subsections concerning the house of Luphondo and Phehlane, the house of Mphunzo and Machibini, and Mandlempisi, the guardian and mediator. In summing up the portrayal of Mandlempisi it will be necessary to bring in Nkala — a close relation of the family through marriage — and Lomkhono because their portrayal complements that of Mandlempisi.

The house of Luphondo and Phehlane: This is the 'wronged' house which has been usurped in a manner contrary to custom. As Luphondo states the case (p. 24), it seems that nobody is following any rule or tradition. This statement forces the reader to find out what custom has laid down in connection with this problem. Furthermore, the two brothers attempt to state the tradition since they are aware of their predicament and at the same time are aware of their rights. This is so because they are well versed in the traditions of the family and tribe and this knowledge enables them to disentangle their problem. The possession of such knowledge is in itself a pointer to the nature of their personalities; they have appreciated, long before, the importance of knowing their roots.

The conflict is set in motion when they reveal that not only have they been displaced as heirs, but the new heir is threatening not to give them any share of the inheritance. The second threat is carefully brought in by the playwright to explain why the two brothers now feel so much more bitterness than before, because the denial of their inheritance touches on their very livelihood. Because of this they are ready to accept advice from Nkala, a relation through marriage. Nkala is aware of the importance of the inheritance to these brothers; therefore, to stimulate confrontation between the two houses he urges the brothers to resist Mphunzo should he try to take the cattle left in their care on their father's death. The reader is made to feel that this confrontation is imminent.

It is Luphondo and Phehlane who reveal the customs of these people as they elaborate their problem and explain why they feel they have not been given fair treatment. The treatment of this house brings out some of the issues that the play is concerned with. Arranged marriages were accepted in the past and family secrets were treasured by everybody; but owing to modern influences and conflicts it is becoming increasingly difficult to continue the system as it was practised. Luphondo and Phehlane can easily condemn Mphunzo for allegedly revealing the secrets surrounding Luphondo's birth and yet they boast that they themselves know the story very well. The writer is trying to show conflict between the desire to maintain the traditional status quo and the modern influence that tends to make people individualistic in their approach to problems instead of taking collective responsibility. Nkala's approach is even worse than that of Luphondo and Phehlane: as an old member of this community he knows all the channels that the two brothers could use to solve this problem of inheritance but instead he urges
them to confront Mphunzo, choosing a course that is bound to create more problems than it solves. He seems to have personal conflicts with Mphunzo and thinks that the only way to have his revenge is to encourage a confrontation between the two houses.

Luphondo and Phehlane are, therefore, being deliberately pushed off course by the people who should be playing a constructive role in advising them. Even their aunt, Lomkhono, does not urge them to seek audience with their uncle, Mandlempisi, in order to understand what he is doing; instead, she encourages them to fight Mphunzo. This encouragement, however, helps to keep the tension high and maintain the suspense of the play to the end because one is looking forward to the confrontation between the two houses.

The house of Mphunzo and Machibini: This house is a manifestation of modern trends, the modern generation that attaches no importance to its customs and traditions. Unlike Luphondo and Phehlane, Mphunzo and Machibini do not see any value in holding to their customs. It therefore comes as no surprise to find that Mphunzo shows total ignorance and lack of concern about his position. He does not seem to know that custom denies him the heirship which his dead father has just restored to him.

It is crystal clear that this apparent ignorance of their situation does not arise from the failure of society to impart that knowledge, but largely from their own personalities; they show total disregard for their own traditions. This is why Machibini can afford to say (p. 15) that the idea of following tribal custom is outdated. This behaviour of Mphunzo and his sister threatens the stability of their family and community as a whole. Mphunzo's new role makes him a very important member of both his family and community. As principal heir he is the spiritual leader of the family who establishes a link between the living members of his family and the dead, the ancestral spirits; but Mphunzo and Machibini are not interested in this aspect of heirship. They are concerned only with its material side. This portrayal helps to turn the reader against Mphunzo's house.

The quarrels that follow between Machibini and her aunt, Lomkhono, and that between Mphunzo and his uncle's wife, MaSithole, reveal the character traits of these two. The quarrel with his uncle's wife is unfortunate because it widens the conflict between him and his uncle, Mandlempisi. Mphunzo badly needs Mandlempisi's support because Mandlempisi is the only person in the family who is obliged to proclaim him heir of Mhlolo's estate; sadly, Mphunzo is not aware of this because of his ignorance of his tradition. He even ignores some of the crucial things of his society that demand that he should co-operate with others but instead he says:

\textit{Mina ngingumkhombo odla wodwa —} \\
\textit{Kangiphili ngigazi labanye sumkhaza.}

I am an umkhombo bird that eats by itself. \\
I do not live on the blood of others like a tick (p. 55).

This is what makes this a condemned house: it does not value any of the tribe's customs and traditions.

Mandlempisi, as guardian and mediator: Mandlempisi was given the difficult task of executing his brother's will — a will in conflict with the tribal laws. But the problem is not at all insurmountable. It is clear from what Luphondo says about

\textit{Mina ngingumkhombo odla wodwa —} \\
\textit{Kangiphili ngigazi labanye sumkhaza.}

I am an umkhombo bird that eats by itself. \\
I do not live on the blood of others like a tick (p. 55).
his birth that his mother had failed to honour the tradition of her people. She had divulged the secrets of the family. It was probably because of this that Mhlolo must have felt that what he had regarded as a top-level secret had become common knowledge. It was, therefore, humiliating to Mhlolo to think that Luphondo would become the head of the family after his death because he then considered that the world knew that Luphondo was not his son. Mhlolo's decision was delivered at a time when he would not experience the embarrassment himself and where it would be impossible to reverse the decision because the Ndebele culture stresses that one should not act against the wishes of a dying man.

However, what Sigogo is showing here is the disparity between conformity to tradition, which gives stability and security to the community, and the pursuit of personal interest, which runs contrary to tradition, destabilizes the community and causes much anxiety and uncertainty.

Mhlolo had the whole of tribal tradition open to him which he could legitimately have used to solve the problem created by his dishonest wife who had, no doubt, divulged family secrets. After all, according to Haba Nkomo who is about 95 years old and is an expert in Ndebele customary law:

A man was allowed to disinherit his heir but had to do it according to public expectation. The most common act was for the heir to be given his share of inheritance by the father before he died. This was normally done in public and the community knew that it meant that the son had been deprived of his status as the principal heir.

Rather than follow this course Mhlolo had chosen the easier way out trying to rectify a wrong decision with another wrong decision. The result is chaos.

Mandlempisi's actions as he executes his brother's will echo those of his brother. He wants to follow his community's traditions in running his affairs because he realizes that the stability of the community rests upon doing things which follow well-tried rules. But he fails to use any of the channels that are open to him to solve this complicated matter that his brother has placed in his hands. Sigogo emphasizes this desire of Mandlempisi by revealing Mandlempisi's attitude towards those who show no concern for customs. He condemns Mnkandla, a local tribesman, for exchanging his cart for Mphunzo's cattle because those cattle belong to the deceased, Mhlolo, and the traditional ceremony has not yet been performed. Mnkandla knows the tribal customs very well and is expected to observe them; as Mandlempisi says:

\begin{verbatim}
UMnkandla laye uyabe eyindoda embi, 
Nxa kuzakutlhi engumuntu omalala — 
Oyazi kakuhle imikhuba yesintu, 
Aihengisele umfana ingola yakhe 
Ngenkomo azaziyo ukuthi kazikalungiswa.
\end{verbatim}

Mnkandla — since he is an old man who knows the customs of the community — would be a bad man indeed if he should sell his cart to the young man in exchange for the cattle which he knows very well have not yet been cleansed since the death of their former owner (p. 37).

Following tradition is a mark of being committed to the community. Here
Mandlempisi emphasizes two important facts: that the elders of the community should be expert in tribal customs and laws and that they should also be seen to be custodians of those customs by setting an example in following them. Mandlempisi is naturally greatly perturbed when other people go against the tribal customs; as he stresses it looking at the terms of his brother’s will:

*Khathesi umhlababa wonke uyangisola,*  
*Ungisola usithi nqiyisigxanu sendodo,*  
*Uthi uMphunzo ulahlwa ngumalabuko.*

Now the whole community blames me; it says I am an irresponsible man; it says tradition has denied Mphunzo his right (p. 37).

Here again the emphasis is still on the community. The individual must conduct his affairs in accordance with the rules laid down by the community from time immemorial. Only these rules can hold the community together and promise a secure future for the generations to come. This is precisely what both Mhlolo and Mandlempisi are failing to do.

Throughout the play Mandlempisi displays this same weakness in dealing with his brother’s will. He even fails to see the importance of conducting *umbuyiso* according to tradition. It was important that this ceremony should be conducted in an atmosphere of peace and harmony in order that the spirit of the dead man be enticed to enter the home and ‘look over the family’. Mandlempisi conforms here to the Aristotelian type of tragic hero who ‘is neither a paragon of virtue and justice nor undergoes the change to misfortune through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake of great weight and consequence’.\(^4\)

While it is easy for Mandlempisi to condemn his brother for acting against tradition, it is not so easy for him to recognize his own shortcomings. He simply does not realize that he has at his disposal all the traditional tools for correcting this complicated issue. In the end, however, Mandlempisi finds that the approach that he is making is creating enemies everywhere. Since the community is not with him in solving the problem, it is clear that the result could not be other than disastrous, because, as Mkhulumi, Mandlempisi’s uncle, puts it:

*Ngoba laye uqiyisigxanu sendoda, Nkala,*  
*Kukuzo ukuthi izathi ibizwa kwabaphambili,*  
*Lokuhle indoda yindoda ngumadoda.*

It is because he is an unable man, Nkala. He doesn’t know that if you do not know how to handle a problem you should ask the elders; furthermore, he doesn’t know that a man is a man because of the other men around him (p. 78).

Whilst this portrayal of Mandlempisi is well done by the author, Sigogo falters towards the end when he again exonerates Mandlempisi from the weakness that he has displayed throughout the play. Towards the end, Mandlempisi repudiates the accusation that he did not consult other members of the family:

Nkala: *Izinto zonke lezi zikhathaza kanyaka*  
*Ngoba kubugxangana obunengi kakhulu*  
*Phakathi kwale indaba yakonNdlovu.*

All these things give us so much trouble because there are many people at fault in this affair of Mhlolo.

Mandlempisi: *Kodwa phela akusicala lamuntu, Nkala,*  
*Njengoba ngaka ngakunyenyezela:*  
*Lawe malumami ngakuushela.*

But then, it is nobody's fault, Nkala, since I once disclosed it to you. I told you also, uncle.

Mkhulumi: *Kodwa ngakhe ngakusola kakhulu*  
*Lokho kwenza kukamnewenu —*  
*Ukutyhi kuthi ngoba yena esetshona*  
*Kube yikhona ebhoboza isijuba esingako!*

But I told you there and then that I was totally against your brother's decision — that it was because he realized that he was dying that he divulged such secrets (pp. 107-8).

The writer does not make Nkala and Mkhulumi challenge the way in which Mandlempisi handled the affair; instead they concentrate on Mhlolo's actions. Challenging Mandlempisi would, in my opinion, have been more effective in bringing out the subject matter of the play and this would have helped to make the theme clearer. In the end, therefore, 'the excitement and animation which is often gained from the very way a story is told, which may result in a contrast between the fictional world created and that of everyday reality'\(^5\) is lost.

Before leaving this matter it is important to bring in two other characters who exhibit the same weaknesses as those of Mandlempisi, but on a lower level; these are Nkala and Lomkhono.

Nkala, like other elders in the community, is well versed in the customs of his people. He reveals this when he explains to Luphondo and Phehlane how the system of heirship works. In his explanations he reveals his keenness in upholding these customs. He accordingly hates Mphunzo and calls him a dog because Mphunzo has acted against community traditions in many ways. Although Nkala displays this knowledge and determination to uphold the customs his advice to Luphondo and Phehlane does not serve to perpetuate what he strongly believes in — the maintenance of customs. He advises them to confront Mphunzo and fight to the death, rather than to find means of approaching their uncle, Mandlempisi, and solve the problem in a way that would restore harmony between the two houses. His 'advice' ensures the destruction of Mphunzo which, in its turn, will bring bitterness, and possibly also the wrath of the spirits, on Luphondo's house. After all, tradition did provide a forum for settling disputes amicably. It is this contrast between what Nkala does and what he claims to do that makes his portrayal fascinating, and helps to bring out the theme of the play.

Lomkhono, the aunt of the three sons, for her part is aware of the imminent conflict between the two houses but takes a very long time to talk to Mandlempisi about it. When at last Mandlempisi tells her the story she offers no advice; nor does she later go around with her information to advise Luphondo and Phehlane. Lomkhono’s obligations lie with Luphondo and Phehlane. Like Nkala, she wants the confrontation to occur because that is the only thing that would ‘cut Mphunzo down to size’, and so she fails to play her traditional role meaningfully.

By juxtaposing the fictional world created by the writer with reality, the reader can perceive what the portrayal of the family elders is intended to project. Their chief weakness lies in omitting to do what their society expects. It is this sin of omission that leads them to embroilment in Mphunzo’s murder. Thus, when Mandlempisi murders Mphunzo he brings the wrath of the dead and of the living upon all those who are present: Nkala, Mkhulumi and Lomkhono. They pay for their failures.

**THEME**

The attitude of the writer explains the theme of the play. All the characters except Mphunzo and his sister, emphasize the importance of following the procedures that have been laid down by society. Luphondo and Phehlane discuss this (p. 23), surprised that their uncle supports Mphunzo’s claim. The critical reader is left in no doubt as to the writer’s intentions: to show that these people not only are well versed in their customs but also wish to perpetuate them. What those who are in a position to make sure custom is observed do reveals the theme of the play.

Sigogo is portraying the desire to maintain the status quo as the only way to ensure stability and security in society. It is for this reason that the community is shocked when they see Mphunzo proclaimed heir of Mhlolo’s estate rather than Luphondo. The desire to maintain the status quo is expressed by every elder in the community. Even Dumaza, Mphunzo’s uncle on the mother’s side, whom some members of the community accuse of being responsible for misleading Mphunzo, is shocked to hear Mphunzo deride his customs; and he warns him (p. 15) that he will meet disaster if he behaves that way. This idea is openly opposed only by Mphunzo and his sister who feel that a time of change has come when customs may be discarded. However, running parallel to this theme is that of man’s failure to realize his desires, caused probably by his inherent selfishness. Selfishness makes him fail to do that which will ensure that the good aspects of his society are maintained unchanged.

Mnkandla, a local elder who is alleged to have negotiated the sale of his cart to Mphunzo in exchange for Mphunzo’s cattle, no doubt knows that it is against tribal customs to negotiate the sale of Mphunzo’s cattle before umbuyiso has been performed, but nonetheless he negotiates with Mphunzo and makes the agreement contrary to the laws of his society. It can only be said that in doing this Mnkandla is urged by his own personal desires. He is afraid he might be outwitted by others wanting Mphunzo’s cattle. The result is the erosion of his society’s customs.

Nkala wants Mandlempisi to run Mhlolo’s affairs according to tradition, but simultaneously fails to advise Luphondo and Phehlane to act in a way that ensures that things will be done according to custom; instead he urges them to arm themselves (p. 31). This serves only to work against the customary peaceful determination of heirdom: if Luphondo and Phehlane win in this way it means that force has won over custom. Nkala advocates this because he sees it as the only
means of bringing about confrontation between Luphondo and Mphunzo. He wants Luphondo and Phehlane to discipline Mphunzo on his behalf. Throughout the play he defends the actions of Luphondo and Phehlane whenever they are being questioned by other elders, but without putting forward a positive plan of his own on how the problem should be settled. Whenever events occur as he has predicted simply because Luphondo and Phehlane are following his advice he feels himself a hero, without realizing how his own selfish interests are destroying his society.

The ‘falling apart’ (to use Chinua Achebe’s phrase) of Mhlolo’s estate represents the collapse of the customs of the community and not merely Mandlempisi’s failures — as the elders seem to suggest when they lay the blame for their problems on him. This they do because it is always easier to lay the blame on someone else — which is part of the message that the writer is trying to put across.

Finally, Mandlempisi fails also in much the same way as do Lomkhono, Nkala, and even Mkhulumi. He fails by not subduing his personal interests so as to deal effectively with a difficult situation. He fails to hide his prejudice for Luphondo’s house. As a mediator of this difficult situation he ought to have taken a neutral position and to have used the traditional tools at his disposal to settle the matter which would ensure the maintenance of the status quo. He not only fails to do this but also ends up murdering Mphunzo and then unintentionally boasting that this was what Mphunzo wanted. What clearly transpires, therefore, is that it is easy for him to condemn his brother for his decision and Mphunzo for his behaviour, but very difficult indeed for him himself to follow a course of action that would ensure that the ‘right thing’ is done. He fails to set an example to the younger generation on how disputes are settled; and in the same way the entire community fails with him. Machibini is, indeed, rude to her aunt, but does she deserve such brutal treatment from her? How does this help her acquire the right attitude towards her society? What about the children she is going to bring up?

The theme is indeed a tragic one not only because the play ends in the unexpected murder of Mphunzo — by his uncle who was supposed to be his protector — but also because the community has failed, in every respect, to maintain the status quo. The stability and security of the community as a whole is at stake. The changed times (Khathesi sekuyisilungu) that Machibini spoke of are indeed sweeping the community into an uncertain future — a future the nature of which the elders doubt and fear, but lack the wisdom to prevent. I would perhaps be misrepresenting Sigogo if I ended the discussion of his theme on this sad note, for there is still hope for the future — such as the interest shown by Luphondo and Phehlane in their customs and traditions. With Mphunzo dead and their own hands unstained, they can now take the heirship of Mhlolo’s estate unchallenged. Their personalities ensure for the society that they at least will uphold the institution of heirship.

**LANGUAGE**

It is fitting that this article should end with an examination of Sigogo’s language because it contributes a great deal to making the play a success. Throughout the play, Sigogo tries to make his characters reflect their rural background through their use of language and the images that they use. Their language is usually characterized by proverbs and figurative speech which is used to sum up
situations which would otherwise need lengthy descriptions. At the very beginning of the play Luphondo refers to the conflict between him and Mphunzo in the following way:

_Ithumba teliyana_
_Elamila mhl ubaba engcwatshwa selibhobka._

That boil which began to grow on the day our father was buried is now beginning to burst (p. 5).

The analogy is very effective. It makes the reader comprehend the nastiness of the conflict. Later on in the same scene Nkala sums up Mphunzo’s actions as follows:

_Mphunzo yinja…_

Mphunzo is a dog…(p. 10).

Again this evokes in the reader the rural images: dogs are not capable of showing the respect that is associated with human beings and this is what Mphunzo is doing.

Phehlane, too, uses such rural expressions that help create the intended atmosphere. When they meet Nkala at night, after realizing that Nkala is drunk, Phehlane’s words help create a jovial mood which makes Nkala feel relaxed in their company. He asks:

_Lamhla inkunzi_
_Hilutshaya ngaphi uhatshi Lsulhi kangaka nje?_

Where did the bull find such lovely pastures today, since he appears to have a full stomach? (p. 10).

The expression is not only appropriate but is typical of people well versed in their culture. The imagery that he has used helps to place the play in its true setting and creates an atmosphere that will be an aid to the understanding of the theme.

Even when the characters inject some humour in their speech it is derived from their rural background; for example, Mandlempisi compares his sister’s actions when she takes a piece of Machibini’s ear out of her pocket to taking out a snuff-box from a pocket. However, a distinction is noticeable when Mphunzo comes in: his images no longer reflect that ruralism but represent a move towards the changed times. When he tells his uncle that he is holding on firmly, he compares his grip to that of a cart’s spanner:

_Sengimbambe sasipanela sengola._

I am holding on tightly like a cart’s spanner (p. 19).

This use of language which incorporates the proverbs and idioms and makes use of rural imagery is part of the ways of speaking of the elders of this community. When Lomkhono realizes that Luphondo and Phehlane seem not to pay heed to her warnings about Mphunzo’s actions she makes the situation look graver than it is by likening Mphunzo to a ravenous jackal (p. 36) — which makes her views of Mphunzo’s actions and intentions absolutely clear.

Mandlempisi, like the other elders, uses language punctuated by proverbs, which he uses very appropriately to convey a vivid picture of the situation.
he refuses to discuss with Mphunzo whether he would agree to discuss the matter at a place other than Mphunzo's home, he uses a simple but effective expression that carries the intended connotations:

*Kangathandi ukwenza njalo*  
*Ngoba angamila ilunda elikhulu...*  

I don't want to do that, he could feel very important... (p. 87).

Only bulls have big humps and in a traditional cattle kraal there was always one bull which was expected to assert his authority over all the other beasts in the kraal. This is what Mandlempisi is conveying here. Earlier in the play he had used another very powerful expression describing the seeming quietness of Luphondo and Phehlane over the impending conflict between them and Mphunzo:

*Ilitshe limi ngoluthi madoda...*  

The stone is balancing on a stick, gentlemen...  
[i.e. the situation calls for scrutiny] (p. 48).

These examples demonstrate Sigogo's sensitivity in his choice of language. The expressions that he uses bring out the rural atmosphere of the play through the use of rural images and rural humour. All these combine to project the theme of the play. Thus the desire to maintain the good aspects of traditional life is incorporated both in the actions of the people and in their expressions.

**CONCLUSION**

Thus, although the play has some shortcomings it has unity and a sound theme which opens the eyes of the reader to wealth of past experience and understanding of man and his society. The play does not offer ready solutions but makes the reader aware of the nature of society and awakens the reader's consciousness in dealing with it.

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