

Drama, Religion, Witchcraft and the Absurd in Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombi?*

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Abstract

*Religion has always been a great component in the socio-cultural and economic development considerations of Africans. Many African dramatic works attest to this. The trend denoting religion with less impact to play in the search for individual and communal freedom – physical and spiritual – is limited but present. Emerging scepticism and literature show that man, as the creator of his problems, must also be the manufacturer of the solutions. This paper examines representations of the impact of religion— Christianity and Traditional beliefs, which include witchcraft, magic and superstition as well as the deployment of absurdism, for the struggle for socio-political freedom by a group of South African youths, in Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombi?*. The findings suggest that religion and religious beliefs, if not well conceived, understood and impacted, can be stumbling blocks towards achieving religious, socio-political and economic freedom.*

Keywords: Absurdism, magic, witchcraft, religion, South Africa, superstition, xenophobia

Introduction

Brett Bradley, a South African playwright, was born in 1967. He has been described as “The whiz-kid of transformed drama” (Knox 1998) and “South Africa’s edgiest director” (Krouse 2003). These *nom de plumes* are not farfetched, considering the dramaturgical innovations he has brought to bear on his post-apartheid South African plays. The thematic foci in most of his plays like *Orfeus*, *iMumbo Jumbo*, *The Prophet* and the anthology, *The Plays of Miracles and Wonder: Bewitching Visions and Primal Hi-Jinx from the South African Stage* are replicated in *Ipi Zombi?*. The version of *Ipi Zombi?*, examined in this article, is taken from Graver’s anthology, *Drama for a New South Africa* (1999: 201-219).

Bradley’s *Ipi Zombi?* explores the worldwide attitude to the myth of religion (especially the belief in witchcraft) and its precursory communal fear of the unknown (Winkelman 1992). In appraising this thematic issue and other related ones through this play, Larlham (2009:7) posits that Bailey has been

... variously charged with trespassing onto sacred cultural terrain and hailed as a trailblazing visionary forging the way toward a new South

African theatre – a theatre capable of accommodating the complexities and collisions of belief, tradition, aspiration and imagination that characterize life in that country today.

Ideological Relevance of *Ipi Zombi*?

Written as a faction (fact and fiction), the play dramatises real events leading to the deaths of twelve school boys from a bus accident, and the after-effects where some women were accused of witchcraft (and of having orchestrated the boys' deaths). These 'witches' were assumed to have turned the dead boys into zombies; unthinking, controllable and desouled human bodies kept in their wardrobes. All these occurred in 1995 in the Kwazulu-Natal town of Kokstad, South Africa.

The play, written to observe the South African psyche especially during the post-apartheid period, presupposes that the euphoria of the end of apartheid was waning and reality was dawning on the country. The period brought about poverty instead of plenty, xenophobia instead of unity, and exclusion instead of compatibility and inclusion. The people, especially the blacks, were socially and psychically returning to the fear-filled and oppressive days of the apartheid period. It is a mythical ritual-drama which portrays a convoluted world where nothing is as it is and nothing could be taken for granted. Bailey depicts the inner thoughts of South Africans.

Avenue for Social Expression

The justification for this type of play stems from the socio-political, religious and economic travails the country stepped into after Nelson Mandela's term. It was in this world of imbalance that the blacks, who fought for their country's 'freedom', could not have footings in general aspects of life even with fellow blacks in government.

After struggling against their oppressors, whites especially, the blacks turned on themselves and foreigners amongst them. The palpable communal fear, which comes across in the play, is regarded in *Plays and Miracles* (2003: 85) as "the fear of the wilderness in the human psyche, in society". Bailey attempts using the myth of witchcraft as an avenue to scrutinize what the period of wilderness meant to the people: of walking into freedom without being free, of being represented in government without being considered. The people saw themselves betrayed by their own and left to the vagaries of life.

The play examines an approach the people utilized to show their disaffection towards the development: an inward attack on themselves. This was directed at the underprivileged, the poor, foreigners and generally people seen as not belonging or conforming to the new norm of opposing the new but floundering black-controlled governments that came after Nelson Mandela's. The people, unable to attack the government, found ways and means of making their betrayal felt.

The Society and Witchcraft

Bailey examines the myth of witchcraft through various eyes: the accusers, the accused, the police, the religious leaders (traditional and modern) and others. He discovers that the belief in and fear of witchcraft permeates the society and can be triggered, just like in the play, by an innocuous statement of and a rumour based on the words of an eleven year old girl (Larner 1981). The play, like the real life event, accepts that twelve schoolboys died in a Kombi bus crash. The root of the trouble is based on two accusations: that the accident was caused by fifty witches who were 'seen' at the scene; that the dead boys were kept in the wardrobes of the witches as zombies. Colleagues of the dead boys, therefore, took the law into their own hands, tried the women in absentia and through jungle justice, killed some.

The myth of witchcraft is not limited to Africa. According to Evans-Pritchard (1937) and Awolalu (1979:79-91), the presence of witches and the practice of witchcraft is universal. Its existence is not only in the present as it has existed in different civilizations and amongst different peoples: Europeans (Smyth 1973), Azandes in Africa (Evans-Pritchard 1937), Yoruba and Nupe in Africa (Duerden 1975) and in the United States of America (Awolalu 1979). Witchcraft is said to be rooted in the word 'wit' (to know). Its practitioners are supposed to be wise in the derivation and application of their supernatural powers (Ehrenreich and Deirdre 2010). It is the application that has been termed as negative. Therefore, witches are seen as evil. Awolalu (1979:84), in his examination of witches and witchcraft amongst the Yoruba (in Nigeria), posits: "... witchcraft is intangible; it is not anything that can be handled or touched. Witchcraft is projected from the mind - it is psychic".

The illustrations above attest to the very reason the play could not establish the presence and action(s) of the witches. The accusations and actions of Senti and his accusing gang are based on hear-says and jungle justice: there is no shred of evidence to back their position against the accused.

Krotch: We need evidence, where's the evidence?

Boys: No need for evidence! No need for evidence!

Krotch: What about the law! What about the law?

Boys: We are the law! We are the law!

Senti: Comrades, let us kill these criminals without delay.

Fire: Viva the spirit of killing the witches – Viva! Viva! (*Ipi Zombi?* 215)

Bailey, in maintaining a neutral stand towards explaining the (non)presence of witchcraft through the lives, psyche and problems of South Africans, has not been specific. He has only been successful in showing that the common people suffer where there are socio-political, economic, and religious problems (Levin 2008). This position tallies with the submission of Awolalu (1979:87) on witchcraft, its myth and sociological implications:

Thus, witchcraft is brought in to explain misfortune. When anxieties and stresses arrive in social and domestic life, when things do not go according to plan, when there is barrenness or sterility, depression or

misery, ghastly accident or premature death, failure in business, in academic or other pursuits, the Africans pick on witchcraft as the cause. In this way, things that otherwise would have been difficult to explain, easily find explanation.

Prevailing Socio-textual Myths

The text shows that myths can be specific periods and time bound but will still be representative of all their types in a timeline infinitum. The factual happenings related in the text's fictional rendering are said to have occurred in "Bhongweri Township, not even six hours drive from where we are tonight, not even three years ago from this night" (*Ipi Zombi?* 203).

For Bailey, a mythopoeist-playwright, the play discusses ever-present issues in any stressed society. The "six hours" and "three years" are epitomes of both the immediacy and the antediluvianess of the issues which are relevant at any time on the eternal mythical time frame. The fear expressed in the play is not a new thing. It is immemorial in the mythic annals of the human race. Its presence is still felt in present and developing civilizations. The fear, an innate one, is

a story of something bigger than all of us, ... about something that eats people bones and everything ... turning the people against each other, making children kill their own mothers, and eating the people of that town. (*Ipi Zombi?*, 203).

This communal fear is inbred, dwelling just below the human consciousness waiting for ignition by human situations, appearing unsolvable and unexplainable by ordinary justifications (Middleton and Edward 2013). Bailey assuages and brings into the open this mythical, unnameable and palpable human fear of the unknown. His focus is to induce a catharsis that would help ameliorate this ever-recurring and ever-worsening reaction of the human psyche to situations it cannot fathom. Larlham (2009:15) reports:

Bailey casts himself ... as a spokesman for a newly imagined spiritual collectivity - even as a theatrical saviour, bringing a life-giving injection of ritual energy to a dying art form.

The other mythical fear expressed relates to witches and witchcraft. Witchcraft has existed from time immemorial and witches have always been feared and hounded, even unto death, for their real and assumed actions (Smyth 1973, Duerden 1975, Awolalu 1979). This fear is not time bound as it cuts across human time-line. While exploring this mythical fear of witchcraft, Bailey brings to the fore the social implications in respect of the social status of the victims. Over the centuries, and in most societies, witches that have been hounded, exposed and killed by various means, and have mostly come from the lower class. Meersman (2007:2) alludes to this when he writes that Bailey "uses not our fears, but our sympathies for the blind, the forgotten, the broken and the voiceless in order to torture us".

This universal, mythical theme has permeated, from eons, the human collective unconscious. Bailey does not see it stopping as he preaches for an evaluation of situations (scientifically), before accused are condemned. Towards the (non)existence of witches, he displays neutrality. He advocates that justice should be seen to be done in the sort of situations played out in the text, not minding the time-frame (now or in the future). Accordingly, in this situation of the common man against himself, there is no vanquished and no victor. The thematic lesson is that man should change in his quest of hounding others (especially the underprivileged) on flimsy sectional, tribal, situational, religious, economic, social and political divides and excuses.

The mythical themes examined in the text dictate that characters become universal instead of being limited to their environment. Each aspect of life portrayed has its own type of policing against the negative forces which attack the people's communal life: the religious and the physical. On the physical stratum, Cop represents the governmental arm which enforces peace. At the religious level, Sangomas represent the ancient traditional beliefs while Priests are for the modern Christian tradition. These three policing forces are shown to be incapable of fighting and arresting the 'fear' pervading the society.

In lieu of these, a new force made up of youths "cleaning this town" arises. It is led by Senti, Zol and Fire. It challenges the old ineffectual policing traditions and voyages into a new mythic world of disputing with the gods, while fighting the witches who are assumed to wield mystical powers. According to Narrator, Senti's group embarks on its jungle justice campaign because

For six weeks those bodies lay there in the mortuary. Sangomas came, but they could not bring life back to those bodies, they were saying "no, there are too many witches in this place, the witches eat holes in our power. This thing is too strong!" And what can our ancestors do and what can even Jesus do when this thing is eating a community? (*Ipi Zombi?*, 218).

The group's actions are based on the flimsy accusations of the symbolic characters - Steve and Crotch (and the eleven-year-old Malaksa). Like Malaksa, in real life, Steve declares accusingly:

Ja, now I'm remembering ... as we went off the road I saw fifty females in front of the taxi, just watching, with no clothes on, naked, undressed (*Ipi Zombi?* 204).

This accusation is based on fear, stress, hallucination and despair. It stems from the deep pain of the loss of his twelve friends. This type of accusation is prevalent in the hounding of witches: the more irrational the accusations, situations and information, the more the people are jostled into believing the accuser. Usually, there are no concrete evidences: it only needs an accusing finger to be pointed at

one, or for one to be accused of being a non-conformist (Duerden, 1975:78-79). This is supported by the decisions and actions of the boys (*Ipi Zombi?* 214). Characters like Mambamba (mother to one of the dead boys) and Mrs Magudu, therefore, become victims. These underprivileged women have, in their own ways, been touched by the pain of the loss. These women and others paid the supreme price not because their accusers found them evidentially guilty, but because according to Duerden (1975:13),

. . . it is particularly the poor and underprivileged individuals who are reputed to be guilty of witchcraft, because they are the ones who are particularly prone to resentment.

Intombi 'Nyama, another character, is a full representation of the present world. The playwright uses her to show the universality of belief in witchcraft; an urban superstar who becomes the mouth-piece of the dead boys in a séance where the zombies ask for freedom from inside the cupboard. There is also Devil who is in all places; goading the characters to misbehave and causing havoc, mistrust and insecurity. The choir resorts to “umbrella opening”: a symbol serving “as a shield against the evil” committed by the group in opening the coffins.

While the playwright puts the audience in suspense in respect of the (non)presence of witchcraft, he gives the picture of the zombie boys who exit the cupboard:

Inside waits a group of white-painted boys, naked but for loin-cloths, arms twisted behind their backs and wearing long narrow African masks. They throng out onto stage, bobbing like vultures, and gather to feed on MRS MAGUDU and to menace the crowd. (Ipi Zombi? 217)

These “white-painted” zombies replicate a belief expressed by Duerden (1975:92) on the use of ceremonial white. White might not mean angelic or innocence as . . . the use of white in rituals implies restriction rather than purification.

The restrictions imposed by painting an individual in white patterns or dressing him in white clothes are the same as the restrictions limiting him to his own compound and preventing his dirt, which is an extension of his soul remaining behind to become confused by other souls.... However, everything that is white and bright ... may become dangerous to creative individuality.

The dead boys theoretically become separated from the living and cannot behave as ordinary humans anymore. This is also expressed in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* where Ezeulu is painted white to represent him as half god, half man: he could not behave generally like other humans: he could not simply go on a journey.

The success of this work lies in Bailey's powerful juxtaposition of the symbolic physical and spiritual lives of the people. He draws the limitations of their practice and advocates for the infusion of another force, the humanity of man, to operate at all levels of their lives. Meersman (2007:3), in an overview of Bailey's works through the eyes of the audience, attests:

Bailey is familiar to festival audiences for incorporating ceremony and sacrament within productions. These works were aggressive - about fire, blood and bones. Bailey broke down our defences with drums, screams, knives and broken glass. Possessed, we as audience, joined in with his Bacchae. One left his theatre charged up by the adrenalin of the experience, renewed through catharsis, liberated by the irrational

...

Universality of the Presence of 'Fear'

Bailey's thematic focus is the examination of the old but ever-present mythic fear that propels man to act in the irrational: a destructiveness which can have a hold on individuals, groups and societies (Otten, 2006: 4). This blind fear is exhibited through the hounding of the witches. The reason for the deaths of the school boys is the assumed actions of the fifty witches said to have been seen at the accident site. Bailey sees the aftermath action of the dead students' colleagues as

... something bigger than that, something that brings a fear inside people, like a dirty thing so they look at their neighbours and say to each other: "she is the one" or "he is the one". This is a story about this thing, this thing that is all around us, just waiting to come inside. (*Ipi Zombi?*, 208).

In allowing this 'thing' to occur, man reverts to his primal origin of believing in non-factual, non-scientific and non-evidenced psyche. Nothing is concrete in all the evidences brought against the accused but they are condoned because of man's primal and mythic fears of the unknown. Most of the evidences are of the hysterical and hyperbolic, coming from the stressed and convoluted environment and people:

Doctor: the bodies were all there on the side of the road covered in those blankets but there was no blood -twelve dead boys and no blood - and then I felt the pulse of one but it was dead, but when I lifted up the blanket, the face it was shaking like this shaking like this ... (*Ipi Zombi?*, 206)

Gogo: Durban! Durban, they were coming from Durban, and as they reached that that that sharp curve, the kombi just fell, and they saw Mambamba flying on a loaf of bread with the other witches – fifty of them! (*Ipi Zombi?*, 206)

Krotch: And one of them cried: "Xolani! Xolani! I want to kill you" (*Ipi Zombi?*, 206)

Boys: Even us too – we saw them – washing her taxies – our dead brothers (*Ipi Zombi?*, 213).

And under the same hysterical and fearful mood of being accused of witchcraft, Mambamba turns to the audience and calls all of them witches! (*Ipi Zombi?*, 207). This fear stems from the negative and evil actions of witches on their victims. Again, these women's accusations are rooted on sociological and folkloric reasons bordering bothering on xenophobia (the witches are called "cockroaches" [*Ipi*

Zombi?, 217] just like the Tutsis were called in the Rwandan genocide), revenge, suspicion, envy and poverty. Accordingly, the women are killed on these reasons:

Boys: She hates us because we are young - and she is too old - and
we
love her daughter! (*Ipi Zombi?*, 213)

Boys: She lives alone in a big house. (*Ipi Zombi?*, 214)

Steve: She has a big cat, a big cat, a big black cat! (*Ipi Zombi?*, 214)

Boys: She has *uhili* - a dwarf - a *tikoloshe*! (*Ipi Zombi?*, 214)

When Krotch calls for order in the forms of the minutes of a meeting, provision of evidence against the women and invitation of law enforcement agents, he is silenced:

Boys: No need for evidence! No need for evidence!

Boys: We are the law! We are the law! (*Ipi Zombi?*, 215)

Bailey balances his neutrality with the presentation of the zombie boys and their sufferings; both done through Intombi 'Nyama. This character, originally a twelve-year-old girl, is role-played by a superstar. The words and actions of this twelve-year-old do not match the magnitude of her accusations and their repercussions.

Bailey showcases a situation, which in reality, happened in post-apartheid South Africa where xenophobia took over the psyche of the people: all centred on insubstantial accusations. In the accusations against witchcraft and witches, one can only, like Bailey and Awolalu (1979:88), maintain neutrality as

...not every case of witchcraft accusation is a genuine one.

Witchcraft, viewed in this way, looks like an African way of projecting a philosophy of life, an attempt to explain the problem of failure, sorrow, pain or death. While we share the view that the people sometimes 'cry wolf' when there is no wolf, we want to underline the essential fact that there are genuine cases of witchcraft practice in Yoruba land and in Africa as a whole.

The examination of this 'thing' - this 'fear' - epitomized in witchcraft, witches and the killings of the underprivileged and innocent by Senti's group, is for humanity to be able to look the fear in the face, conquer it and move into realms of consideration, unity and love (Beckwith 1991). If this is not done, Bailey paints a bleak future for humanity:

Narrator: We build our fences up and up and up, even with thorns and with aloes. In the morning they are broken and the mielies are gone. There is something bigger than all of us - something worse than you can imagine. There in the river. There in the veld ... You lock your doors at night and close the windows, but it creeps inside, in through the keyhole ... in while you sleep, in while you breathe. You wake up in the morning and this thing has been inside you and then you are so empty. You wake up too quickly - it is still inside you, and then you are lost ... (*Ipi Zombi?*, 219)

Archetypal and Symbolic Emblems

Birds, in the text, are harbingers of witches, witchcraft and the presence of evil and, therefore, fear. According to Intombi 'Nyama,

The day the birds came, it started. I watched them and I knew it was coming. They came over from the forest in flocks, flock after flock after flock, black birds like I'd never seen before flying so quietly and blocking the stars ... They came from the forest, all night they came - flying, flying The old man said there would be great feasting, but me - I knew it was the end of the world. (*Ipi Zombi?*, 203)

From prehistoric period, birds have been venerated and feared depending on the myth ascribed to the particular bird and the region concerned. Basically, they are seen as messengers of the gods – negative or positive - and harbingers of impending events. Intombi 'Nyama sees the birds as divining tools. Through a bird, she comes into the 'knowledge' of what happened to the dead boys (*Ipi Zombi?*, 209).

Another archetypal figure - the snake - represents evil and witchcraft as it eats "his children with his big snake mouth" (*Ipi Zombi?*, 209). It depicts the witches accused of killing their own children. Mr Magudu professes the innocence of his mother because, "I ... never saw a snake or even a bird living insider her room ..." (*Ipi Zombi?*, 215).

Traditional doctors, diviners and witch doctors existed in pre-industrial societies (and even in present societies where the environment and the peoples' psyche still allows for it). Witch-doctors, in the play, act as diviners who, according to Duerden (1975:111),

are responsible for discovering when people are hiding dangerous or valuable secrets. It is clear that a diviner can exercise great power in a society because he is the individual who decides whether a member of a particular group is of a mind to preserve the group by his behaviour or whether he is more concerned with the profitability of his own self-seeking.

Three Sangomas find evidence of witchcraft in the environment as they retrieve "evil talismans - a goat skull bristling with pins, a bottle of oily liquid" (*Ipi Zombi?*, 207). These are neutralized but the Sangomas still could not eliminate the witches.

In a re-creation of and allusion to the Biblical Pilate washing his hands off the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Boys wash their hands in a bucket after killing some witches. They intend portraying their innocence in the killings as;

Witches are held responsible for misfortune or death by using their mystical powers and they are capable of an infinite amount of trickery in hiding deceits. (Duerden, 1975:83)

The Absurd Stage

The setting is a mythic allusion to the principle of faction - fact and fiction. Voodoo, myth, magic and rituals are the import of the play. Meersman (2007:3) posits that Bailey

has stripped away the speaking parts and the dramatic monologues Seated in a ritual circle surrounding a fire, it is remarkable how much more effective this is than character acting. We respond directly to the myth and the archetype of the story.

The stage is filled with the paraphernalia of voodoo, magic and myth: inclusive are the props, characters' costumes, the audience and the cast sitting arrangements:

. . . *the cast are sitting in a ring around the perimeter of the arena on mats and are wrapped in blankets facing inwards, heads down, singing softly* NARRATOR *tends a central fire, moves around slowly checking candles* . . . (*Ipi Zombi?*, 202).

The acting arena is not just a stage; it is a space where issues are examined.

Bailey presents the play as a reality. There is a connectedness with the past through the part of Intombi 'Nyama in representing the eleven-year-old accuser, Malaska. Again, the playwright transports the audience to the exact place and time of the boys' burial ceremony. Narrator confirms:

Now, I hope you are following this story? It is 15 October 1995, and we on the sports field of Karl Malcolm High School with five thousand people and twelve coffins . . . (*Ipi Zombi?*, 210)

In life, each person takes on various parts at various periods and under different situations. The text thrives on role play. According to the Stage Direction, the actors belong to an acting group, The Natives, and each "play[s] several roles with the help of larger-than-life costumes" (*Ipi Zombi?*, 202). Parts like Chorus, Women, Men and other characters are swapped continuously between the actors.

Narrator is both story-teller and actor. This story telling device is also utilized by Steve and Krotch. They tell the women their fantastic version of how the accident happened. The audience is not left out: it is part of the realism exhibited in the play. With this, Bailey communalises the story: the events happen in a specific community. They affect the community which contributes to finding solutions to the problems. Mambamba and Senti see the audience as *the* community: Mambamba accuses it as possessing witchcraft (*Ipi Zombi?*, 207) while Senti addresses it as representing students. Bailey presents few actions as happening concurrently. This is mythic as he is able to collapse time: the past, present and future to a point wherein they affect and effect changes in the community (Esslin 2009). This situation is depicted in the interview of Mr. Magudu and during the killing of his mother, Mrs. Magudu (*Ipi Zombi?*, 205-206).

Conclusion

Bailey, in *Ipi Zombi?*, has been successful in examining the issues of witches, witchcraft (as derivatives of socio-religious beliefs) and the concomitant fear in consonance with the effects they have on societies. His ability to infuse traditionalism with modernism through absurdist applications along with socio-religious beliefs stand the play out as one that examines mythic-related concerns of

South Africans and beyond. This conclusion agrees with Hodgkin's (1963: 278) idea on the thematic focus of African art and literature:

African art is essentially a collective art done for everyone with the participation of everyone. It is a practical art It is a committed art: the artist mirrors his people, his time, his history, but he mirrors them from a definite personal point of view. And it is an art which virtually goes on all the time.

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