Deciphering Signification in Kabwe Kasoma's *Black Mamba II*: A Semiotic Reading of Props and Language

Cheela H. K. Chilala
The University of Zambia

Abstract

This paper is concerned with a semiotic reading of the play Black Mamba II, a historical play dealing with Zambia's fight for independence. It springs from the position that, apart from the traditional forms of critical approaches, the semiotic approach also serves well as a tool of textual analysis. Semiotics is concerned with the interpretation of the signs of the text. The signs can be verbal or non-verbal and signify meaning to the audience. The signs in the play include words in the dialogues and stage directions, objects such as props, furniture, costume and characters. This paper, however, focuses on linguistic signs as well as props. It is concerned with how cultural variables affect the projection and interpretation of the meaning of the signs in Black Mamba II. Ultimately this paper seeks to demonstrate that semiotic reading of the text can help enrich the reader's understanding of the meaning.

Key Words: Semiotic reading, signification, props, interpretation of signs, meaning of signs, linguistic signs, historical play, Black Mamba II, Kabwe Kasoma, resemiotisation

Introduction

Kabwe Kasoma's play *Black Mamba II* is largely influenced by historical events leading up to Zambia's independence. The author acknowledges that the main source of information for the play is *Zambia Shall be Free* (1962), an autobiographical work written by Zambia's first president Kenneth Kaunda (Sumaili 1991: 91) and *Black Government* by Kaunda and the Rev Colin Morris; *Zambia* by Richard Hall; and *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa* by Robert Rotberg (Etherton 1976: 35). The play, however, is not a mere reflection of raw history but a blend of historical fact and fiction.

Black Mamba II owes its title to the words of one John Gaunt, at one time a District Commissioner in the then Northern Rhodesia and one of the most powerful politicians. He said: 'They tell us to come to terms with the black Nationalists. Pah! We might as well come to terms with a black mamba' (Kaunda 1960: 3).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Semiotics and Interpretation

As this article focuses on the cultural interpretation of the semiotic qualities of *Black Mamba II* it is imperative to discuss the relationship between culture, semiotics and the play. The semiotic reading of a text is different from ordinary reading because it proceeds from the premise of interpreting the signs of the text.

A sign, according to Clarke (1990: 1), is 'any object of interpretation, a thing or event that has significance for some interpreter', adding that the sign 'can stand for some object for this interpreter' or 'signify an action to be performed'. A sign may also denote 'a gesture, a signal or something

standing deliberately for something else' (Martin and Ringham 2006: 175).

In his work *Principles of Semiotic* (1987: 12), Clarke provides some etymological data on the sign. According to him, the Greek term for sign was '*to semeion*' (plural, '*ta semeia'*). The term eventually led to the evolution of the Greek term '*semiotikos*', which means an observer of signs, or one who interprets or divines the meaning of signs. The word 'semiotics' is therefore an anglicised version of the 'semiotikos'. Semiotics, therefore, is the science of signs or, as Cobley and Hansz 1997: 4) state, 'the analysis of signs or the study of the functioning of sign systems'.

Semiotics is concerned with how meaning is produced, whether through verbal or non-verbal signs. As Martin and Ringham (2006: 175) state, 'what interests the semiotician is what makes an utterance meaningful, how it signifies and what precedes it on a deeper level to result in the manifestation of meaning'. In the context of the play, therefore, the signs include words in the dialogue and stage directions, objects (props, furniture, etc), characters, character traits, symbols, motifs and actions.

Signification

The key theorists of semiotics are Charles Sanders Peirce, an American logician and physicist, and Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and psychologist. While Peirce is credited with coining the term 'semiotics', de Saussure called his science 'semiology'. Though working independently, the two arrived at conclusions that were strikingly similar. Solomon (1988: 14-15) states that the duo 'established the foundation for the fundamental semiotic conviction that the

meaning of a sign is not to be found in the *object* to which it appears to refer but in a *concept* that functions within a culturally constituted system.'

According to de Saussure and Peirce, meaning is deduced through a process of signification – which is in effect a relationship between the signifier and the signified. Signifier and signified represent two fundamental levels of language. While the term signifier principally refers to the concrete world of sound and vision, the term signified, on the other hand, refers to the concept or idea expressed by the signifier. This article's concern is not only to identify the signifiers used by Kasoma and their cultural significance, but also the signified meanings and their cultural significance.

Culture and Interpretation

Signs only derive their meaning from context, and context is usually linked to culture or cultural orientation. Writers create their works in the context of their cultural experience. In other words, as Chen and Starosta (1998: 33) argue, 'our perception depends on our cultural experiences' and that 'a person's culture has a strong impact on the perception process' (35) because culture 'not only provides the foundation for the meanings we give to our perceptions, it also directs us toward specific kinds of messages and events' (35). Culture, however, is not homogenous. Every person's culture is determined by the society in which they grow up or are nurtured. Thus Inge (1981: ix) is of the view that culture is 'a mirror wherein society can see itself and better understand its own character and needs'. It may therefore be argued that Kasoma, like any other writer, was influenced by his culture when writing *Black Mamba II.*

While there are many definitions of culture, Chen and

Starosta (30) perceive culture as 'a negotiated set of shared symbolic systems that guide individuals' behaviours and incline them to function as a group'. They further state: 'Culture can be a set of fundamental ideas, practices, and experiences of a group of people that are symbolically transmitted generation to generation through a learning process. Culture may as well refer to beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are used to guide our behaviours and to solve human problems' (25).

This article is therefore concerned with identifying the ideas, practices, experiences, beliefs, norms and attitudes that constitute the cultural terrain of Kasoma's play. It is also concerned with the cultural significance of the signs in the play as this determines the meaning of the signs and, as Bal (1977: 220) states, semiotics 'applies to virtually every cultural object'. The signs of *Black Mamba II* take a variety of forms. For the purposes of this article, however, we shall focus on two: properties and language.

Findings and Discussion

Properties

There are a number of properties, or props, that make for interesting interpretation and are critical to the overall understanding of the play.

Machila and Nsaka

Captain Goodfellow first appears in Scene One ferried atop a *machila*, a stretcher-cum-chair which, in African societies, is generally reserved for important personages, especially chiefs and kings. Thus, when Goodfellow uses the *machila*, it ceases to signify African authority. On the

contrary, it signifies Goodfellow's (and by extension the colonial authorities') disregard for traditional authority and an imposition of their own.

The *machila* in this context also serves as a reminder of the colonial master's imposition of power on the African people. The fact that the *machila* places the District Officer over the heads of the African carriers is a symbol of the power hierarchy in colonial Africa, reminiscent of the concept of 'the horse and its rider'. The African serves the colonial master who has the privilege of riding on the back of the oppressed.

There is also a sense in which the *machila* stands for the desecration of sacred cultural icons by the colonial authorities. This disregard for traditional icons is extended to traditional leadership. Hence, Goodfellow disrespects and even humiliates Headman Chibesa Kunda. The lack of respect also extends to 'sacred' places such as, in the case of *Black Mamba II*, the *nsaka*, which is traditionally the place where the village elders sit to discuss important matters. It is where important decisions affecting the village are made.

However, Goodfellow, when he arrives in Chibesa Kunda's village, decides to do his 'business' from the *nsaka* (Scene One). The 'desecration' consists in the fact that, instead of using the *nsaka* to discuss matters that are for the good of the villagers, Goodfellow uses it to perpetuate an alien agenda – that of the oppressive colonial regime. The irony is that instead of being the sacred place where problems are solved, the *nsaka* now signifies, not only the intrusion of the colonial authority on traditional power structures, but also the disruption of the African cultural life.

The *machila* and *nsaka*, therefore, help us to interpret the undercurrent of cultural conflict in *Black Mamba II*. The

two, as signs, also help us to grasp the themes of the play, particularly those evolving around the clash of cultures and power structures. However, we are only able to detect and determine the nature of the relationship between the *machila* and *nsaka* on the one hand, and what they signify, on the other, when we understand the cultural significance and meaning of the two icons. Similarly, if we do not understand the pre-eminence of the *nsaka* in the Zambian village set-up, we will not see Goodfellow's use of it as a violation, but merely as a gesture of goodwill on the part of the villagers.

Sjambok

The sjambok, which also has symbolic value, largely signifies the cruelty of not only Goodfellow as District Commissioner, but, since Goodfellow is a composite character, also signifies the cruelty and inhumanity of the colonial system. Ultimately it signifies the disruption of the cultural ethos of the colonised people. The African traditional ethos demands respect for authority, especially when the bearer of the authority is elderly. Yet, in *Black Mamba Two*, Goodfellow exhibits nothing but utter disregard for Headman Chibesa Kunda and the authority and traditions he represents. Chibesa Kunda, from Goodfellow's perspective, must bow to colonial authority; Chibesa Kunda's cultural values must equally be subject to western cultural values.

As Goodfellow runs through the village tax register he discovers that Chipayeni, a rebellious former Askari, has defiantly stayed away from the proceedings at the *nsaka*. Angered, he berates the Headman (Scene One):

> You fat pig! You said these were all the people
> there were in this village. What is that baboon

> [Chipayeni] doing there? (*stamping furiously*) I am not going to sit here all day long waiting for undisciplined baboons to come to answer the tax register. If you can't discipline your people, I will discipline you myself. (*to the messenger*) Give him five *fikoti pamatako*. [Give him five strokes of the sjambok on the buttocks]

The Messenger promptly obeys the order, and the poor Headman 'is cruelly beaten and left lying in a sorry heap' (Scene One). The old man's humiliation is ruthless and total. The sjambok represents the forceful disruption of Africa's cultural life and the fact that resistance to western cultural disruption would be met with force.

Tax Register

The register, to a large extent, plays the same role as the sjambok in the unfolding of the plot. It is, in effect, another form of disruption of the people's way of life – their cultural ethos and power structures. The tax register was used to impose hut tax on the people during colonial times. According to this tax system, which the villagers loathed, every able-bodied young man was required, by law, to pay hut tax. Only the old were exempted from paying it.

In order to raise the money required to pay the tax, however, the young men were forced to leave the village and work in the mines. This meant abandoning their families, wives and, ultimately, their way of life. This led to loss of cultural values, but it also meant the villages lost a valuable resource – the young men. One of the young people who,

in the play, are said to have left the village to work on the mines is Chekapu Nkole, and when Goodfellow is given this information, he advises the Clerk to write 'Copper Mines' against the name of Nkole (Scene One, 39).

Drums

The drum in *Black Mamba II* is associated with African song and dance. Historically and culturally, African song and dance are characterised by the use of the drum. The drum, traditionally, is used for a variety of situations, including funerals, weddings, initiation ceremonies, *inter alia*. There is hardly an African rite of passage which does not involve the use of the drum.

In *Black Mamba II*, the drum is used in two diametrically opposed situations. In the first case, it is used to welcome Goodfellow to Chibesa Kunda's village. A group of villagers welcome Goodfellow outside the village with song and dance, while another group, gathered in ring-formation around the *nsaka* where Goodfellow will sit, are said to be 'clapping and chanting to the accompaniment of the drums' (Scene One, 39).

In this context, the drums signify Goodfellow's attempt to use traditional tools to legitimate the colonial enterprise. He appropriates the pomp and ceremony that are associated with receptions accorded eminent persons. The 'welcome' is not genuine as the villagers are forced to do it. It is quite revealing that the song of 'welcome' sung by the villagers builds its lyrics around the sjambok. The villagers 'praise' the sjambok of the white man, using the local language, which he cannot understand. The English translation says:

> The whiteman's sjambok
> Is very strong (and is constantly used)
> And when you see it
> It makes your heart sink
> (The heart) has sunk again today…..

It is important to note that, although the drum is in this case largely used to welcome Goodfellow, it is, to a lesser extent, also used to mock him. There is, therefore, a subtle use of the drum as a means of protest. In the second case, on the other hand, the drum is directly used as a tool of resistance to the oppressive system. In Scene Five (61), Nkumbula, Kaunda and Kapwepwe address a crowd of supporters outside a courtroom. When they are through, they depart, and the crowd, stirred up by the men's speeches, turns to traditional song and dance as a way of expressing their resistance to the system and support for the struggle.
Kasoma describes the situation thus (61):

> The crowd breaks into commotion, with chest-beating and threats. Then they start drumming, singing, and dancing traditional dances. They dance the Ngoni war dance, and later the Siomboka; the first to *signify* the fight for independence, and the second the crossing of the colonial river to the land of Independence (emphasis mine).

The playwright helps us to understand the contextualisation of the Ngoni war dance and the Siomboka dance. However, in order to have an even deeper and more accurate

interpretation of the two dances as sign-vehicles, we need to first understand their cultural significance.

The Ngoni war dance, like most African war dances, is intense, and is linked to the tribe's past military engagements. It is, therefore, a demonstration of pride and bravery, as well as of the determination to overcome the enemy. In the broader context of the play, therefore, the war dance signifies the determination of the oppressed people to triumph over the oppressor.

The Siomboka, on the other hand, is a dance associated with the Kuomboka ceremony of the Lozi people of western Zambia. During the ceremony the King of the Lozi, the Litunga, crosses the flood plain to dry ground. His people also cross the flood plain to the safety of dry ground. Hence the singing of the Siomboka. In the context of the play, therefore, the Siomboka signifies the African people's conviction that they would one day manage to cross the river of colonialism. The song and dance ultimately send an important message not only to the colonialist but also to the Africans who need to join the fight for freedom.

It is important to note that the interpretation of the drums, dance, and songs as sign-vehicles changes according to the context. In other words, the signs are transformable. In other words, the sign-vehicles can be recontextualised and resemiotised. That is to say, the drums, dance and songs can be used in different contexts (recontextualisation) and during that process, their meaning shifts (resemiotisation). (See Kress and Leeuwen, 1996; Kress, 2010; and Iedema, 2003).

This reflects the dynamic nature of cultural icons, and the fact that they can be abused and manipulated. Another

example of a case where sign-vehicles change their meaning according to the context is that of the donation of food items. When Goodfellow completes the tax collection exercise, he demands food from the villagers. The villagers bring hens, cocks, millet flour, and eggs, while the Headman himself brings a goat. Kasoma notes, in the stage directions, that the villagers give the food 'begrudgingly' (Scene One, 44).

The fact that the villagers give the 'gifts' against their wish is culturally significant because, according to African culture, visitors are supposed to be treated with the utmost respect and care. If Goodfellow were a welcome visitor, he would not have to demand food from the villagers. They would, on the contrary, bring the food voluntarily. The unwillingness of the villagers to feed Goodfellow and his entourage, therefore, is a serious indictment of him and the system he represents.

According to the culture of the villagers, in fact, what Goodfellow does amounts to theft, as does the tax collection. While addressing the villagers at Chibesa Kunda village Kaunda asks them whether Chipayeni, who was whipped and then sent to prison for defying Goodfellow, had done anything wrong: 'You all know our brother here, Mikaeli Chipayeni, has just returned from prison. What did he do? Did he kill a person? Did he steal *mwisa'*s [colonialist's] woman? Did he steal *mwisa*'s money or clothes?' (Scene Three, 47)

Amid the murmuring of the villagers, one of them shouts, 'It was in fact the *musungu* [white man] who was coming to steal our money, our hens and eggs' (47). These words are received with all-round laughter and 'shrill ululations' from the women (47). The ululations as a sign-vehicle, in this context, are a cultural form of expressing approval and

support for what is being said. By contrast, when Kaunda finishes his address, the villagers demonstrate voluntary support for the cause of the African National Congress (ANC). Those with money buy the membership card, whereas without money pay for it in kind: 'they bring hens, eggs, millet in baskets, and beans and groundnuts in pots' (Scene Three, 54).

Thus, whereas in the case of Goodfellow the food items stand for rejection of the colonial cause, in the case of Kaunda they stand for goodwill and the acceptance of the freedom cause. The sign value of the food items is transformed from one situation or context to the other.

Bicycle and Guitar

Scene Two starts with Kaunda travelling on a lonely stretch of sandy bush road on his way to Chibesa Kunda village. He is pushing his bicycle up a hill and an old guitar is strapped across his back. It might appear contradictory that Kaunda is using the bicycle and guitar, which are products of western culture, while at the same time rejecting western rule or colonialism. However, there were some good things about western culture and civilisation that Africans could adopt. The bicycle and guitar, therefore, signify those icons of western civilisation and culture that African culture needed to absorb or co-exist with.

Any realistic fight for political freedom, as a matter of fact, needed to appropriate those aspects of western civilisation and culture that could be turned into tools for enhancing and strengthening the fight for freedom. The bicycle enhanced mobility, especially in the remote rural areas such as Chibesa Kunda village, and was therefore a means of reaching the

oppressed people. Similarly, the guitar was a means by which Kaunda spread the freedom message through music.

Another good example of appropriation of western cultural tools for the enhancement of the freedom struggle is the attainment of some degree of western education by the leaders of the freedom struggle. The more educated they became, the more enlightened they became, making them more effective leaders than those with no education. Much of this education, at that time, was obtained through mission schools. Hence , during the brawl at the 'Whites Only' café in Kitwe (Scene Four), one of the white patrons, a miner, shouts at Nkumbula: 'You can speak English all right, you *spoilt mission kaffir*, but you are not literate enough to read the notice on the door that says: No dogs allowed' (emphasis mine).

Language

The language used, especially in dialogic contexts, to some extent reflects the cultural convictions of the characters or interactants. For example, when Kaunda addresses the villagers in Scene Three, he begins his speech with a culture-specific salutation: 'Mothers and fathers; brothers and sisters; sons and daughters of the soil' (47). Such a salutation makes sense in the African cultural milieu where one considers every elderly person as 'mother' or 'father', and every person young enough to be one's child as 'son' or 'daughter'. One's peers are 'brothers' and 'sisters'.

The cultural consciousness on the part of Kaunda is very important to the success of the struggle because, by starting with such a 'culturally correct' salutation, Kaunda makes the villagers feel that he is one of them and that they are a

part of the struggle. Goodfellow cannot use such ways of addressing the villagers, and even if he tried it would be to no avail because, as far as the villagers are concerned, he is only a *mwisa,* or stranger (47). The contrast is absolute: Kaunda is a brother, son, and father; Goodfellow is a *mwisa*. The sense of belonging to each other is reciprocated by the people, as is eloquently illustrated by the Headman's address of Kaunda as 'my son' (51). Kaunda, in turn, says, 'Thanks, my father' (51). In the broader context, therefore, *mwisa* does not qualify to be addressed as brother, sister, father, mother, son or daughter. This is largely because the racially and culturally polarised colonial society, as exists in *Black Mamba Two*, cannot allow for such salutations.

This fact is demonstrated in Scene Four when Kaunda and Nkumbula are confronted by angry whites at the café in Kitwe. When Kaunda orders two sandwiches from the white girl serving at the counter, she responds in shock: 'Boys are not served from the counter, you kaffir!' Kaunda retorts, 'I am not a boy. [*shows his beard*] Do boys in your country grow beards?' (55) If one does not understand that this conflict is rooted in cultural conflict, one might think the two are merely being sarcastic to each other. However, this is a serious and historically accurate cultural conflict that is ultimately an epitome of the cultural conflict in the larger colonial society.

From the perspective of the girl, which is seasoned with cultural and racial bias, all African men are 'boys', regardless of their age. From the perspectives of Kaunda and Nkumbula, on the other hand, the girl has no respect for elders, whom she should be addressing with the same respect with which she addresses elderly white men or her parents. Kaunda, however, does not address her as 'daughter'

either. Instead, he addresses her as 'my dear girl' (55). The white girl vigorously objects to being addressed as 'girl', despite the fact that she is indeed a girl. Red with anger, she rants: 'What? You… You… a kaffir addressing me as "girl"? GET OUT OF HERE YOU BLACK MAMBA!' Thus, in the scheme of things, elderly African men are 'boys', but white girls are 'ladies'. Similarly, as Goodfellow reminds Nkumbula at the police station, the Africans cannot address a white woman as 'woman', but only as 'lady' (57).

Conclusion

While some sign-vehicles are universal in nature, others are culture-specific and can therefore only be interpreted in relation to their cultural context. Thus, while some aspects of the language used in *Black Mamba Two* are of universal application, others can only be understood in relation to the Zambian cultural context. Similarly, the props used in the play generally have cultural significance, and it is therefore important to understand the cultural context in which they are used. The same can be said of some aspects of the cultural setting of the play – the *nsaka* being the best example. Unless we understand the cultural significance of the *nsaka,* we cannot understand the cultural significance of Goodfellow's behaviour. Through an analysis of the culture-related sign-vehicles of *Black Mamba Two* we have been able to establish the centrality of race issues and cultural conflicts in the play.

References

Bal, M, 1994. On Meaning-Making: Essays in Semiotics, Sonoma: Poleridge Press.

Chen, G and William, S., 1998. Foundations of Intercultural

Communication, Needham Height: Allyn & Bacon.
Clarke, D. S., Jr., 1990. Sources of Semiotic: Readings with Commentary from Antiquity to the Present, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
Clarke, D. S., 1987. Principles of Semiotic, London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Cobley, P. and Jansz, L., 1997. Semiotics for Beginners, Cambridge: Icon.
Etherton, M. (Ed.), 1976. African Plays for Playing Vol 2, London: Heinemann.
Iedema, R., 2003. Multimodality, Resemiotization: Extending the Analysis of Discourse as Multi-semiotic Practice. *Visual Communication*, 2 (1), 29-57.
Inge, M. T. (Ed.), 1981. American Popular Culture, Vol 3, Westport and London: Greenwood Press.
Kasoma, G. K., 1976. The Black Mamba Two. *African Plays for Playing*, Etherton, M.(Ed), 33-66.
Kaunda, K. and Morris, C., 1960. Black Government? Lusaka: United Society for Christian Literature.
Kaunda, K., 1962. Zambia Shall be Free, London: Heinemann.
Kress, G., 2010. Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication, New York: Routledge.
Kress, G. R., and Van Leeuwen, T., 1996. Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, London: Routledge.

Martin, B. and Ringham, F., 2006. Key Terms in Semiotics, London: Continuum.
Solomon, J., 1988. The Signs of our Time: The Secret Meanings of Everyday Life, New York: Harper & Row.
Sumaili, F. K. M., 1991. Zambian Writers Talking, Lusaka: Printpak Zambia Ltd.