

HENRY TAYALI
 Zambian Printmaker
The Best of Africa, Toronto
 February 3-23, 1980

"We live under the impact of political and social change from which we cannot isolate ourselves." In an interview given to *NewAfrican*, Zambian artist Henry Tayali sought to explain the context of his art. More recently, North Americans were presented with an exhibition of his prints at The Best of Africa gallery.

Henry Tayali is one of a growing number of African artists who not only work in Western media but who also have something more than a passing knowledge of non-African art history. Born in 1943 in Senanga, western Zambia, Tayali pursued a conventional Western-style education leading to a diploma in fine arts from Makerere University in 1971. From 1972 to 1975 he worked toward a master's degree in fine arts at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf, West Germany. Since 1976 he has been associated with the University of Zambia's Institute of African Studies, where he is currently a lecturer in African art.

Although in Zambia he also has a reputation as a painter, Tayali's Toronto exhibition featured twenty black-and-white woodcuts. His prints are rather small, never exceeding 50 centimeters, and printed on a relatively poor grade of paper—a reliable supply of art materials is a problem that few African artists have overcome. The editions are small, averaging about 25 in number.

Despite their relatively small size, Tayali's prints can only be described as powerful. He is very much an *engagé* artist—one of the few in Africa—and the picture he paints (or rather, prints) of Zambian society is not a pretty one. A sense of near-despair pervades Tayali's prints, although on occasion he retreats to the

reassuring embrace of the Africa-that-was. In the *NewAfrican* interview (June 1979), Tayali talked at length about the socioeconomic situation he treats in his art: "I see the African continent engaged in a process that Latin America has already passed through: people abandoning the land and the village where life has a framework, strict norms. They go straight into the town where there is another kind of jungle with different or no rules, where they become disoriented, live in shanty towns, and earn a miserable pittance that . . . cannot cover their bare necessities. The result is so sad. My art is concerned with the suffering of the people and I want it to be the echo of that suffering. I see the problems of the continent, and in particular the high speed of its development. I am just recording what I and my people feel, but I do not attempt to provide answers to our problems."

Some of Tayali's prints, in intent and intensity, match those of great printmakers like Kollwitz and Géricault. *The Corner Bar (and That's What Killed Their Nation)* is not a prohibitionist's rail against demon beer but a lament for a people whose soul and body are in such a sorry state that there is nothing left but to drink. It is a theme that recurs in *Drinking Party* and *The Bar Closes at 22 Hours*.

Our Daily Bread (Hard to Get Something to Eat) cries out to us for a solace we cannot or will not give, staring at us with large, child-like eyes verging on tears—or is it terror? The same bleak sense of abandonment pervades *They Drift into the Cities*. Why? What will become of them? Will they return to the land, turn to crime, or simply disappear? Tayali gives no answer, but the problems are posed in such a discouraging way that only an immense act of will or faith can maintain one's optimism.

Henry Tayali seems destined to play an important role in modern African art. The fields

of tourist art and lightweight decorative arts have long been well represented, along with an increasing number of works recording tradition or making superficial observations of daily life. However, little has yet appeared that dissects the "spirit of the times" in contemporary Africa. Some South African artists have attempted this, as has Malangatana in Mozambique. But "liberated" Africa has produced few artists who have followed Daumier's dictum, "Il faut être de son temps." Tayali has chosen that road. Let us hope that in the future he will speak to us and to his fellow Africans with increasing acuity of the tragedies—and, let us hope, the triumphs—of modern Africa.

Bob Barle
The Best of Africa



HENRY TAYALI. WOODCUT *THE CORNER BAR (AND THAT'S WHAT KILLED THEIR NATION)*



AFRICAN POLITICS
 by Henry Tayali (Zambia)
 lino-cut