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RESEARCH REPORT

TOWARDS A ZIMBABWEAN AENEID:
A PEDAGOGICAL EXERCISE

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IF THE CONCEPT of a Zimbabwean *Aeneid* sounds forced, consider for a moment the historical setting: a country that has recently been involved in a bitter civil war with the accompanying horrors of bloodshed, violence, divided families, destroyed lands, a disrupted society, a ruined economy, massive unemployment of war veterans, and a re-distribution of land. Think of the impact, in such circumstances, of a leader whose official policies are reconciliation, a return to the land, the development of transport, and an emphasis on morality and family life, on extended civil rights and on forging a unity from conflicting and minority groups. Think of the effect of a growing patriotism on the national language and its literature, which had previously been subordinate to a far older, far more sophisticated literature in a foreign tongue.

This description applies both to Zimbabwe and to post-Actium Rome, the period that saw the creation of the *Aeneid*. With this in mind, students doing a course on Virgil in Classical Studies I at the University of Zimbabwe were asked to 'Explore the possibilities of a Zimbabwean *Aeneid*', or, to phrase it differently, 'If Virgil were to write his national epic in Zimbabwe today, what would he write?' The resulting essays fell into two broad categories: those that featured a legendary hero and those that were concerned with recent history.¹

One legendary hero is Tongarara. The story begins further back, however, in the time of his grandfather, Maponderaki, when a great spirit medium, Mapira, prophesied the birth of a son (Mapondera), a great war and a flight to the South where a man of Maponderaki's lineage would found a great new nation. In Tongarara's twelfth year the invasion comes, and he and his father, Mapondera, flee with their fetishes and ritual garb and a large following. By the time he is eighteen Tongarara is their undisputed leader. When Mapondera dies, his body is mummified and carried along with his people. After many long journeys, many battles, desertions by his followers and attempts on his life, Tongarara arrives at Makungurubwe, 'the place of many stones', where he builds an altar, consecrates the place and builds Great Zimbabwe. His decision to found the city is confirmed by his *svikiro*, or oracle. The surrounding tribes are vanquished and Tongarara becomes the founder of a great city and a great people.

Another legend tells of people travelling from the north and of a prophecy by Ambuya Nehanda² that the place of settlement destined by the gods for their

¹ The stories are summarized here as told by the students.

² Ambuya Nehanda was a spirit medium and prophetess who lived in the Mazowe area of

home was between two rivers, the Zambezi and the Limpopo. Some of the migrants travelled east and too far south, but were eventually reunited (in fulfilment of another prophecy by Chaminuka³) in the face of a common enemy, the 'kneeless men' (i.e. men who wore trousers). This struggle continued for several generations but eventually led to the founding of a united nation comprising, as Ambuya Nehanda had prophesied, remnants of all these groups and the 'kneeless' newcomers. Incidentally, the prophet Chaminuka was killed by the Ndebele king, Lobengula, for allegedly prophesying lies, but before he died he predicted, correctly, continuous drought. This drought took place in the early 1880s and was seen as the fulfilment of his prophecy.

Most students, however, concentrated on the struggle for political independence as being suitable material for a Zimbabwean epic. As one student put it, because there is no sea in Zimbabwe and consequently no epic voyages like that undertaken by Aeneas, a Zimbabwean epic has to substitute time for distance and depict the problems and hindrances encountered between 1896 and 1980 on the journey to Independence. There were some surprising analogies. What follows is an amalgam of ten essays.⁴

Zimbabwe before 1896 and Troy before the Trojan war were both enjoying relative economic, social and cultural prosperity. Both countries were invaded by foreigners and, despite some initial successes, were defeated by them. Both peoples lost heroes in the struggle — Hector in Troy, Ambuya Nehanda and Kugubi (Sekuru Kagubi) in Zimbabwe — but in both cases these heroes gave their people a promise of future greatness. When Aeneas wished to continue fighting, Hector's ghost ordered him to stop his resistance, take his household gods and leave Troy so that he could found a great city in the future. The dying Ambuya Nehanda prophesied that her bones would rise to avenge her death and that glorious days would follow; resistance was to cease until this happened. In both Troy and Zimbabwe homes were destroyed and relatives lost, typified in the *Aeneid* by Aeneas losing his home and by Creusa's death.

In these essays Robert Mugabe is seen as the Zimbabwean Aeneas. Both men are exiles at some stage; both are true leaders, encouraging and inspiring their men; both are combatants but prefer peace to war; and both provide food for their people (Aeneas shoots a stag for his shipwrecked men and Mugabe supplies food-relief in times of drought). Both are orators and spokesmen for their people; both are loyal, dutiful and committed to a mission and cannot stop half way (Aeneas has to leave his attempted settlement in Crete, and Mugabe is not satisfied with the creation of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia). Both earn honorific titles — 'Pius Aeneas', 'Baba Mugabe'. Both heroes lose companions on the way. Anchises, Palinurus and Misenus are compared to Tongogara, Chitepo and others, and the funeral games held on Sicily have their equivalent in the soccer matches and celebrations on Heroes' Days. Both leaders receive spiritual aid

Zimbabwe in the late nineteenth century and was instrumental in encouraging the Shona uprising against the White settlers, now known as the First Chimurenga (1896-7). She was executed on 27 April 1898, but her memory became a source of inspiration in the liberation struggle.

³ Chaminuka was one of the leading spirit mediums in central Mashonaland in the nineteenth century.

⁴ By E. Chihwehwe, S. Chikwiro, C. Chiyangwa, M. Madzadzavana, E. Mangoya, J. Mapara, R. Masaraure, D. Mutembwa, M. Musundire, E. Sakala.

and encouragement before the final stage of the struggle, Aeneas from the Sibyl and in the Underworld, and Mugabe from Chief Tangwena.

The supernatural element is stressed in the essays. A belief in the Underworld is common to both ancient Roman and traditional Zimbabwean cultures, and in both societies the living can communicate with the dead. In Zimbabwean traditional religion, spirits can be invoked by dropping snuff. The spirits form a hierarchy similar to that of the classical gods and, like them, can influence life on earth. Dreams, omens and wonders sent by the ancestral spirits encourage the heroes, just as the classical gods influence Aeneas' movements. In Zimbabwe traditional rites to the spirits take place in caves or under trees, and this custom is compared to Aeneas' sacrifice to Hercules made outside Evander's city on the site of the future Rome. One difference noted is that the ancestral spirits did not form opposing parties in the struggle for Independence in Zimbabwe, as Venus and Juno did in the *Aeneid*. Zimbabwean fighters were supported by the ancestral spirits and Mwari priests, who helped them all.

Various analogies are found for the obstacles faced by Aeneas. Ian Smith is compared to Juno, doing everything in his power to prevent the hero from reaching his destination. In this interpretation, as Dido, manipulated by Juno, causes Aeneas to deviate from his task and so causes a delay in the founding of the new city, so Sithole, manipulated by Smith, defects from the Patriotic Front, so delaying the coming of Independence. In a different interpretation, Dido represents materialism and a love of luxury, a temptation to turn from the liberation struggle for the sake of financial benefits offered by the Rhodesian regime. Aeneas' grief when he has to leave Dido to found his new city is also compared to Mugabe's sorrow at his prolonged absences from his wife during the struggle for Independence.

Enemies and allies in the *Aeneid* also have their parallels in Zimbabwean history. The burning of the ships in Sicily by the Trojan women is compared to the action of traitors within the ranks of the freedom fighters and to incidents such as the Chimoio massacre. Aeneas rebuilds his fleet at Carthage; Mugabe builds up forces in Mozambique and Zambia. In both cases neighbours become allies, and some are killed. Turnus, led on by false promises, goes to war; Muzorewa, banking on Smith's promises, recruits auxiliary forces. Rutulian attacks on the Trojan camp are compared to attacks on camps in Mozambique. Turnus is compared to the colonists who refuse to accept change or defeat, whereas Drances is compared to the 'enlightened' ones who do so. Amata's refusal to let Lavinia marry Aeneas is compared to the split between ZAPU and ZANU, which delays destiny but cannot prevent it. After the war in Italy and the defeat of Turnus, the Latins retain their identity and the promised city, destined for greatness, is eventually built; in Zimbabwe there is a policy of reconciliation, a place for minority groups, and a general rebuilding programme is begun.

Student essays are not epic poetry, and in a search for a Zimbabwean *Aeneid* one must also look at what has actually been written. Zimbabwean writers are concerned with national heroes,⁵ but if, however, one is thinking of

⁵ See S. Mutsaers, *Mapondera: Soldier of Zimbabwe* (Harare, Longman Zimbabwe, 1983). In the preface (p. 4) he compares the classical stories, unfavourably, with the Zimbabwean ones.

Unlike the naïve stories of the Greeks whose heroes and heroines lived and fought in a mythical world, the story of Mapondera and his contemporaries, Nehanda, Kugubi,

epic poetry⁶ it is probably true that in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere, the medium of large-scale written⁷ narrative is the novel.⁸ A writer such as Charles Mungoshi sees his poetry as an exercise for his prose.⁹ Most poems written by Zimbabweans are short, though some of the themes — for example, war, national consciousness, and an awareness of and an identification with the land — also occur in epic poetry, particularly in the *Aeneid*.

Zimbabwean poets are influenced by their native oral traditions as well as the literary traditions of Europe, Africa, America and Asia.¹⁰ Some learned Latin at school,¹¹ and allusions to classical mythology occur in their work.¹² At

Kamota and Dzivaguru, is a story of true human beings of flesh and blood whose lives ended in death at the hands of strangers who signed false treaties when they were weak and used terrible weapons and ruthless oppression when they were able to destroy the people whose lands they had invaded.

⁶ The question of whether an epic is necessarily poetry can, of course, be debated. The narratives of Amos Tutuola have been described as 'prose epic, i.e. a sub-genre of the novel' (Chinweizu, et al., *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature: Volume 1: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (Washington, Howard Univ. Press, 1983), 23) and 'a continuation in English of the African genre of heroic epics' (ibid. 22). See also T. Couzens, 'Sol Plaatjie and the first South African epic', *English in Africa* (1987), XIV, 41–65, where the influence of Virgil on Plaatjie's work *Mhudi* (London, Heinemann, African Writers Series 201, 1987) is discussed.

⁷ Oral epics in Africa present an enormous field which can supply interesting parallels and insights into Greek epic. For a discussion of form, style and content of both heroic and historic epic in the Congo Republic, see D. Biebuyck, 'The epic as genre in Congo oral literature', in R. M. Dorson (ed.), *Folklore: Selected Essays* (Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 1972) and D. Biebuyck, *Hero and Chief: Epic Literature from the Banyanga* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press, 1978), quoted by Chinweizu et al., *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, 72–3.

Poems of the Swahili hero, Liyonga, were preserved orally until the early nineteenth century, and then were written down by Swahili scholars to become in turn the inspiration for written epics', J. Mpanje and L. White, *Oral Poetry from Africa* (Harlow, Longman, 1983), 3.

⁸ For a discussion of heroic epic, romance and the novel as equivalent forms in different social formations, see Chinweizu et al., *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, 28–9.

⁹ F. [Veit]-Wild, *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1988).

¹⁰ This is true of other African poets, such as Christopher Okigbo, who read Classics at the University of Ibadan, and whose work brings together classical and African allusions to create his 'fable of man's perennial quest for fulfilment' (C. Okigbo, *Labyrinths* (London, Heinemann; Ibadan, Mbari Publications, 1971), xiv). In 'Heavensgate' the celebrant is likened to Orpheus; in 'Lament of the Drums', references to Palinurus, Aeneas' helmsman, are interwoven with references to elephant tusks and to the long drums which symbolize the spirits of the ancestors; the double-headed axe is a symbol of sovereignty in Crete and of traditional Ibo society.

¹¹ In F. [Veit]-Wild, 'Survey of Zimbabwean Writers: Educational and Literary Careers' (Harare, the Author, 1989), 24 per cent of the Group I writers (those born between 1917 and 1939) and 6 per cent of the Group II writers (born between 1940 and 1959) give Latin as their favourite subject at school. Zimunya won a prize for unseen translation in the annual competition run by the Classical Association of Central Africa (M. B. Zimunya, personal communication).

¹² See particularly M. B. Zimunya's poems: 'Humiliated' ('hand of Caesar', l. 7), 'Monstrous' ('blind as a Cyclops shot in the eye', l. 11), 'Roads' ('Black Icarus', l. 18) and 'Mountain' ('compel us to roll the stone up dzimbabwe', l. 20, with its suggestion of Sisyphus) in his *Thought Tracks* (Harare, Longman, 1982), and Dambudzo Marechera's 'Primal Vision' ('And from Olympus Zeus flew to trape Fair Leda and Helpless lo', l. 12) in Wild, *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*, 141. In Marechera's *The House of Hunger* (London, Heinemann, African Writers Series 207, 1978) there are references to, *inter alia*, *Lysistrata*, *The Satyricon*, *The Golden Ass*, Demosithenes, Batus, Hippocrates, Pan, Greek vases, the Trojan Horse, and Pandora's box. Wild comments: 'In the debate about the decolonization of African literature the question has been raised whether it is appropriate for African writers to use alien, imported imagery (for example, from Greek mythology) and literary forms. Of

present Latin is not taught in government schools and the new generation of writers will not have had exposure to classical writers in the original. A number of school children and students are, however, introduced to them in translation, either at school, for example by English teachers referring to the *Odyssey* to explain Tennyson's 'Ulysses', or at University through courses in Classical Studies. That this classical background may still be influential is evidenced by a poem in honour of the late President Samora Machel of Mozambique that appeared in the *Herald*, 24 Oct. 1988, which referred to him as Aeneas the True, and also as the oracle Teiresias. The poet, Albert Nyathi, was at that time a first-year student at the University of Zimbabwe studying Classical Studies I, which includes courses on Homer and Virgil.

In the main, Flora Wild's summary is apt: 'There has not been a long and broad tradition of literature in this country, and the individual writer has been exposed to so many different experiences and influences that it has not been possible to shape a coherent body of national writing and to develop a positive national literary identity.'¹³ If by *Aeneid* one means a full-length literary national epic in poetry there is as yet no Zimbabwean *Aeneid*.

Where does all this leave one? Has this exercise served any useful purpose? I suggest that its main value is pedagogical:

- 1 In both categories of essays various themes emerge: exile, suffering, destiny, war, supernatural involvement, success through struggle, political and social readjustment, reconciliation — in fact, all the themes of the *Aeneid*. Students must have a grasp of the philosophy, as opposed to the story, of the original before they can find an analogy, and even if some comparisons are far-fetched they are an indication of personal critical analysis as opposed to rote learning of a textbook or paraphrasing from a bibliography. Too often students are guilty of plagiarism in assignments, and too often it is the teacher's fault for setting — and rewarding — a topic that can be copied. If our aim is to produce thinking and critical, as opposed to merely knowledgeable, students, topics of comparison can prove useful — provided, of course, one does not set the same questions year after year.
- 2 Students proved quick to see similarities between their own cultural and religious beliefs and those of the classical world. It is an indication that there are points of contact in what originally seems to be an alien world to African students. It is a generally accepted educational principle that one works from the known to the unknown; it is far easier to motivate students and show the universality (and relevance?) of Virgil when one has a known starting point. Teachers need to find out and know these points of contact for future use; they may, indeed, have to learn them from their students.

Learning and teaching is a two-way process. To give one example: to most twentieth-century Eurocentric classicists offerings to the spirits and

all the poets in this book, Dambudzo Marechera is the one who does this in the most definite, broad and erudite way and he is the most conscious of it' (Wild, *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*, 21).

Marechera's experience of two opposing cultures becomes apparent in the passage in *The House of Hunger* (p. 30) where he describes his two selves arguing, one in Shona, the other in English, with French and Latin voices in the background.

¹³ Wild, *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*, 25.

the journey through the Underworld are part of a literary tradition, an interesting device within the structure of the epic, an allegory possibly, with historical and political overtones, but scarcely something to be taken literally. It is clear that to at least some Zimbabwean students the spirit world is a factual reality, and in that respect they are probably far more in tune with Virgil and his first readers than the teacher is; they can sharpen the teacher's appreciation of the impact that the *Aeneid* must have had on its first audience as well as deepen his understanding of Roman religion.

- 3 It is clear that there is still a strong oral tradition in Zimbabwe concerning legendary heroes, and that new legends and heroes are in the making.¹⁴ Oral tradition is also influencing lyric poetry. A study of this process could well be enlightening for the study of the origins of Greek epic¹⁵ and the change from oral to written forms of literature.¹⁶
- 4 Knowledge of the classics has influenced Zimbabwean writers and continues to do so. Marechera, especially, experienced the universality of the classics. He says: 'The ghosts which hover over Great Zimbabwe are the same as those which tormented Troy, those which overwhelmed Carthage, those which watched over Aeneas.' He justifies his own work: 'The poetry though when it is good, is immortal. Hence the self-consciousness of the structure, the form. And the selective use of myth and legend — the refusal to be bound by any period of human history.'¹⁷

¹⁴ M. B. Zimunya, 'Revolution', in his *Thought Tracks*:

My brother wrote to tell me
that where once we gathered mushroom[s]
things explode and legends and myths
are born, and ideas emerge: there for the picking.

¹⁵ Some comparative work in the field of folktales and Greek epic has already been done. See, for example, D. Page, *Folktales in Homer's 'Odyssey'* (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, the Carl Newell Jackson Lectures, 1972). Page shows how episodes in the *Odyssey* (the Lotus-Eaters, the Laestrygonians, Circe, Aeolus, the cattle of the Sun, the Sirens) bear resemblances to folktales in many other lands. He defines the folktale 'as concerned with creatures of grotesque form and supernatural powers, living in an imaginary world' (p. 17) and is at pains to suggest that Homer suppressed or modified the magical elements to make the stories credible.

R. Carpenter, in his *Folk-Tale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press, Sather Classical Lectures 20, 1956), takes a similar position: 'like the hybrid monsters of eastern imagination when they came under Greek artists' hands, the northern *Märchen* had to be re-formed and retold in more natural human terms before a Greek literary audience would accept them' (p. 70).

Further research into audience reaction to such tales in different parts of the world where magic is credible and where the spirit world is considered as real as the physical world might have led to a different conclusion, namely, that the Greek audience was not as rational as twentieth-century scholars believe, and that only a brief allusion to the magic was necessary as the audience would have known the rest.

For a discussion of Lord and Parry's work on modern oral poetry in Yugoslavia and its significance for the understanding of Homeric epic (A. B. Lord and M. Parry, *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs* (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1955) and A. B. Lord, *Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), see G. S. Kirk, *Homer and the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), ch. 6.

¹⁶ For a discussion of oral poetry, see R. H. Finnigan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977).

¹⁷ Quoted in Wild, *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*, 136-7.

Nyathi's work presents an interesting case of the way an outside influence may work on a creative mind. It is not a great epic. It is a young man's response to the political events in his homeland, influenced by his reading of the works of older poets in a different tradition. It is comparable in length to the First Eclogue, which was a young Latin poet's comment on the political events of his day, written in the idiom of a Greek poet who had lived long before him. When it appeared, few people could have foreseen that he would write a national epic to rival Homer.

There is no way of knowing whether a comparable literary epic will appear in Zimbabwe. It can only be said that at least some of the essential ingredients are present — a strong oral tradition featuring legendary heroes and the world of spirits interacting with men; a poetic comment on current political events; and the influence of a literature from a different country. Cross-cultural studies can be a source of inspiration to the poet, and a fruitful pedagogical approach for the teacher.