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TRADITIONAL SHONA POETRY AND MENTAL HEALTH

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AFRICAN ORATURE STUDIES are relatively underdeveloped despite their focus on one of the most dynamic aspects of contemporary African culture. There have been very few studies of Zimbabwean orature except, notably, those by Carter, Fortune, Hodza and Kahari.¹ The lack of interest in traditional African aesthetics is the result of prejudices and theories emanating from colonialist-evolutionist scholarship. These underlying prejudices derive from an equating of technological simplicity with artistic backwardness and therefore a conclusion that Africa is artistically undeveloped. However, in the past few decades this stance has been countered by the Africanist school of thought, which asserts that there is an African aesthetic which is very different from, but in no way inferior to, the modern European one. Thus it has almost become a platitude that there is an African aesthetic which is useful, proper and enjoyable.

However, interest has centered on anthropological, sociological, historical, ethnological and literary aspects of the African aesthetic. Little has been said about the effect of performing arts on the minds of the participants. But there are signs in the United States of America of an interest in the performing arts from a psychological and psychiatric viewpoint, although the emphasis so far has been on the performing arts of pre-literate societies. If sustained, this interest could resuscitate popular use of therapeutic art which was systematically marginalized by colonization.

Research in psychotherapy attempts to explain art in scientific terms. The discipline of psychology has proved that human behaviour is scientifically observable and analysable. It explains the impact of art on the mind in terms of the synchronized working of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, that is, those areas controlling the rational and logical activities of the individual work together with those controlling the creative and the imaginative.² Empirical and observational research has already shown

¹ H. Carter, 'Poetry and Society: Aspects of Shona, Old English and Norse Literature', *Zambezia* (1974), III, 11-25; G. Fortune, 'Shona traditional poetry', *ibid.* (1971), II, 41-60; A. C. Hodza (comp.) and G. Fortune (trans. and ed.), *Shona Praise Poetry* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, The Oxford Library of African Literature, 1979); G. Kahari, 'The history of the Shona protest song: A preliminary study', *Zambezia* (1981), IX, 79-101.

² A. Pasteur and T. Toldson, *Roots of Soul: The Psychology of Black Expressiveness* (New York, Anchor, 1982), 72.

that performing arts foster physical and mental health. It has been established that anxiety may be a characteristic symptom of neurosis. It is not clear, however, whether performed art is an actual therapy or a mere catalyst, or if oral art possesses curative or preventive qualities. If it is the latter then modern poetry therapy is a rediscovery of the therapeutic value of the oral performance. This puts performed poetry in the limelight not only as a living art but also as a health-giving practice.

A noticeable characteristic of performed arts, such as dramatic or ritual poetry, is that it has always involves the body, the emotions and the mind as a unit. Interestingly enough, theories of psychotherapy recognize that the unity of the body, the feelings and the intellect is fundamental to the well-being of the individual. This unity has a bearing on how well integrated one feels oneself to be in one's society. It has also been observed that children and adults who are deprived of art tend to suffer from insecurity and mental instability. Various forms of art have been used in hospitals in the treatment of patients with neurotic and psychotic problems. Modern psychotherapists and psychologists have found a therapeutic value in lyrical poetry and music. Similarly, Hanna finds that there is a therapeutic potential in the expressive and deliberate rhythmic movements which are integrated to poetry and dance.³ She observes that when people move synchronically they identify with each other. Their response to the same art forms gives them a sense of unity. She also discovers that repetition of the same movement reduces inhibition which allows repressed feelings to surface. Social and physical contact are found to reduce aggression and counter withdrawal symptoms. Dance also synchronizes the limbs, the imagination and the intellect. It makes the body function as a single entity, reducing fragmentation of the body and the mind. Leedy and Haldane have found that this art has an ameliorating effect on many physical illnesses including colitis, migraine, asthma, low-back pain, sinusitis, psychosis, neurosis and influenza.⁴

Although a comparative analysis of Western-type therapy and Shona therapy could be made, I do not attempt to do so here, neither do I wish to discuss art therapy itself. Rather, the intention of this article is to show that traditional Shona sung and danced poetry has a therapeutic potential throughout an individual's life from childhood to death. This perspective lays due emphasis on the Shona world-view which is part of their psychology. The traditional performing artist is his own patient and therapist and, because a performance usually involves two or more people, he is also his fellow participants' patient and therapist.

³ J. L. Hanna, 'African dance: Some implications for dance therapy', *American Journal of Dance Therapy* (1978), XI, 3-15.

⁴ J. Leedy, *What Poetry Is* (Quebec, Ladysmith, 1970), 26.

The performance of traditional Shona poetry is a holistic event involving both serious and light-hearted activities. Poetry lends itself to ritual and is often combined with other art forms such as music and dance. Traditional Shona poetry plays a part in the socialization of an individual; it regulates individual relationships, the interaction between members of society and role definition. It is an art which deals with feelings; its themes are human conflict, crises, unfulfilled and broken wishes and hopes, as well as joys. The Shona traditional community is thus a poetic community and its poetry nurtures its members. In the light of such observations Haasbroek hypothesizes that Shona poetry has healing potential.⁵

This may be observed in the very first type of poetry an individual encounters. Lullabies (*nziyo dzokuvaraidza vana*) calm children when they experience emotional and physical distress. As the mother or maid sings soothingly the music attracts and tranquillizes the restless baby. The effectiveness of lullabies is evident by their frequent use in oral cultures in many parts of the world. Among the Shona classic lullabies are *Mwana Ochema* ('The Child Is Crying'), *Shanga Yangu Yawa* ('My Grain Has Fallen Down') and *Mwana Anochemei?* ('Why Is the Child Crying?').

There is an all-pervasive poetic genre in Shona traditional custom, the *nhango*. *Nhango* poetry, which has many sub-genres, is part of the established procedure for observing traditional customs. It is well known for its power to socialize the young people and enable them to take on adult roles at the right time. The poetry mediates in secular and ritual procedures promoting consensus and conformity. It promotes social cohesion. It forms part of celebrations marking marriage and the birth of children and informs the conduct of courtship, of drinking parties, of debates, of hunting and of law trials. Observance of the 'proper' ways of doing things gives one group identity. Lack of observance leads to castigation and possible ostracism and alienation. Children's dramatic lyrics are part of this socialization process.

Through poetry children are taught many aspects of adult life, especially those which are punctuated by rites of passage. The children sing and act out roles which they are supposed to assume in maturity. The following song is one such example:⁶

Leader: *Pote pote*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Ndinotsvaka wangu*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*

⁵ J. Haasbroek, 'From Oracy to Literacy' (Salisbury, Univ. of Rhodesia, Dept. of African Languages, unpubl. lecture, 1970).

⁶ This classic lyric is known in various versions throughout Mashonaland.

Leader: *Musuki wendiro*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Anodzichenesa*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Somwedzi muchena*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Simuka hende*

Leader: *Pote pote*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Ndinotsvaka wangu*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Mukuyi wezwiyo*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Anozvitseteta*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Simuka hende*

Leader: *Pote pote*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Ndinotsvaka wangu*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Mureri womwana*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*
 Leader: *Anomunyaradza*
 Chorus: *Sakariende*

Leader: Going round and round
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: I'm looking for my own
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: Washer of plates
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: Who washes them clean.
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: As clean as full moon.
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: Stand up, let's go.

Leader: Going round and round
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: I'm looking for my own
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: Grinder of corn
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: Who grinds it fine
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: Stand up, let's go.

- Leader: Going round and round
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: I'm looking for my own
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: Maid for my child
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: Who soothes her.
 Chorus: That's why he's travelling
 Leader: Stand up, let's go.

The leading singer, who can be either a boy or a girl, stands up and sings the first and every other line while the rest of the children who are sitting in a circle sing the chorus. As the leader sings the last line of the verse he chooses someone of the opposite sex who supposedly meets the requirements sung of in the verse. He sits down and the chosen child takes over the leadership and in a similar fashion goes looking for a partner whose qualities are spelled out in the next verse. This song encourages free interaction between the sexes, which is an essential aspect of a heterosexual society.

Some children's songs fall into the category of *nziyo dzamahumbwe* (nursery songs). The following song is an example of this:

- Leader: *Zirume ravakoma rine mwoyo,*
 Chorus: *Hwerure*
 Leader: *Kuswerondibikisa masikati,*
 Chorus: *Hwerure*
 Leader: *Wareva seiko muramu?*
 Chorus: *Ndareva neshungu dzomwoyo.*
- Leader: My elder sister's husband is greedy,
 Chorus: *Hwerure*
 Leader: He makes me cook for him in the afternoon,
 Chorus: *Hwerure*
 Leader: What's the matter, sister-in-law?
 Chorus: I am mad about it, brother-in-law.

Other songs include *Sarura Wako* ('Select your mate') and *Amai VaChido* ('Chido's Mother').⁷ These teach boys and girls the interdependence of the sexes and the complementarity of roles and of the status of husbands and wives. Through them the children learn the social values of the wider society. These values are learned in the security of the group, the same group which enforces the laws of the game, thus teaching its members the importance of social acceptance and social control. Group dancing gives

⁷ The full text of all these songs may be found in A. C. Hodza, *Mitambo Yavakomana Navasikana Pasichigowe* (Harare, College Press, 1984), 51, 62, 67.

one group identity which is essential in a communal society. Although such dances do give dancers and singers a chance to distinguish themselves in an art that is acknowledged by all participants, it is also very similar to what the dance therapist Barbara Nassbaum terms 'group therapy'.⁸ Such dances help children cope with stage fright which is necessary if they are to become effective public speakers and to participate meaningfully in the activities of the community as adults.

The performance may also provide a healthy outlet for excess energy which is found at all ages. According to Freud, impulses which are socially unacceptable can be expressed in alternative ways.⁹ Some of the ways are healthy while others can cause neurosis. Adolescent moonlight dances (*nziyo dzavakomana navasikana pajenaguru*) involving songs are socially acceptable as well as healthy ways of ridding performers of energy built up from repressed feelings. In the dances boys and girls from neighbouring villages come together and dance and sing late into the night. Some of the songs deal with courtship, while others are expressive of more intimate relationships. *Jerusarema*, *mbende*, *chinyambura*, *shangara*, *jiti* and *mbakumba* are the names of such dances. In them dancers rid themselves of libidinal energy through lyrics and body movements which are suggestive of the fulfilment of their desires. At the end of the vigorous dances, people retire to their homes in full substitute-satisfaction. In a way the fatigue helps abate their desires which can have no immediate outlet. The same can be said of the highly figurative *nduri dzorudo* (courtship poetry) which allows the young people to express their romantic feelings in extravagant metaphors and similes. The expressions, which can be mistaken by an outsider as eroticism, are in fact useful in vocalizing and momentarily ridding the body of desires that may not be satisfied before marriage. This is an important psychological exercise in a situation where a strict morality could cause neurosis and crime.¹⁰

The Shona also sing and dance for pleasure. Musical instruments usually accompany the songs to heighten the feeling of pleasure. *Mbira* (thumb-piano), *ngoma* (drum), *marimba* (xylophone), *chigufe*, (a flute-like instrument) *chipendani* (a bow instrument) and *hosho* (rattles) are some of the common traditional instruments used for this purpose.

Village elders spend their leisure time listening to *vanhu vane nyambo/ndyaringo* (gifted speakers). The story-teller keeps his audience entertained by his captivating and highly dramatic (even satiric) narratives and graphic

⁸ Interview with Barbara Nassbaum, Harare, 1990.

⁹ Freud, the father of modern psychoanalysis, relates neuroses evident in European families in his period of study to repressed instincts. He generalizes this observation into a universal truth.

¹⁰ This is the subject of Fanon's Manichaean psychology as expounded in H. A. Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* (New York, Plenum, 1985).

descriptions whose focus can be social institutions, events, anecdotes, extended riddles and even dreams. The picturesque language approximates real life through its evocative language. Kinesthetic ideophones, idiomatic expressions and proverbs are used extensively in such art.

The poet Hamutyinei has transposed such tales into modern poetry. His poems largely contributed to the popularity of two anthologies, *Mabvumira Enhetembo* and *Nhetembo*¹¹ among people who do not usually read or enjoy printed poetry. The poem *Zinyoka Mugumbeze* ('Big Snake in Bed') is one such example:¹²

*Ndainge ndiri ishe zvake, Muzvinanyika,
Ndiri ndoga chikara kubva kudoro.
Chakanga chakandikiya kuti shwe,
Hwahwa hwaVaMuchikunye chipanda.
Ndaingunotsika matama enzira
Kudzadzarika.*

*Svikel mugota mangu surururu,
Rupasa rwangu chee, gumbeze pamusoro wazviona,
Hope dzikati tasvikawo changamire,
Hezwi ndava mungoro yavaShakabvu chinyeponyepo
Ndakatanga kunzwa kuti nyau nyau nyau.
Chati chipepuka chikati nhasi,
Iro gara riya tsvimbo nyoro ronditekenyedza,
Roteseketera kupfuura napaguwvu rangu,
Ndongonzwa kuti nyau nyau nyakata nhonho-o-nho.
Kuti chipepuka wanei midzimu yandikaka mbira dzakondo
Heri rojakacha mugumbeze rangu pasinai mugombedzi,
Rapakita kutsvaka zvinoda mwoyo waro.
Rakazoti rava muhuro mangu zinyakatira,
Pfungwa dzangu dzakaungana chiriporipo
Meso angu kuti bhaa, hana kurova hecho chigayo.
Ndakanyatsosimudza ruoko rwangu zvinyai
Ndokuwerevedza kutsvaka musorowaro,
Ndokuti tsanzvadzirei, tsanzvidzirei, tsanzva!
Ndokuti 'Makara asionani'!
Ndiye tsuku tsuku tsuku . . . dzamara fototo.*

I was the chief, owner of the land,
Alone from a beer-party.
I was undone by beer,
The beer was at Muchikunye's.

¹¹ Rhodesia Literature Bureau (comp.), *Mabvumira Enhetembo* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1969), *Nhetembo* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1972); Rhodesia Literature Bureau (comp.).

¹² M. A. Hamutyinei, 'Zinyoka Mugumbezi', in Rhodesia Literature Bureau, *Mabvumira Enhetembo*, 25.

I was staggering along the path.
 I entered my hut,
 Spread the mat, got under the blanket,
 Sleep quickly visited me.
 I feigned death for a while.

I started feeling a cold sensation.
 I couldn't wake up,
 The cold stick of the wilds was tickling me,
 It slithered past my navel.
 The sensation was very cold.
 I could not wake up, the ancestral spirits suppressed me.
 It surveyed my bed without being checked,
 It busily went on looking for the desires of its heart.
 When the cold was close to my neck,
 I suddenly recollected my thoughts,
 My eyes shot wide open, my heart beat very fast.
 Furtively, I moved my hand,
 I went on groping
 And then we clashed!
 I stealthily groped for its head,
 searched and searched and then . . .
 I said, 'two hostile forces have met'
 I squashed and squashed and squashed . . . until it stopped wriggling.

The narrator describes his drunken return from a beer party and his encounter with a snake in his bed, painting a vivid picture of a drunken man staggering home, making his bed and going to sleep. Next he describes how he was swiftly shaken out of stupor and inebriation by a cold sensation which he identified as a poisonous snake. He then boasts how he takes the snake by surprise and squeezes it to death.

The poem takes the reader or audience through an intense fearful experience of encountering a snake at close quarters. The reader empathizes with the narrator and the tension experienced by the narrator is relieved by the reader. The build-up and subsequent release of tension experienced in the reading (or hearing) of the poem relieves the audience of boredom or bad temper. This was the function of such poetry at the village council (*dare*).

Enjoyment of the poem may also be derived from the double meaning suggested in the word used for snake; '*zinyoka*', apart from its literal meaning, may also be a penis. When interpreted accordingly the meaning of the poem changes, reducing the encounter to a ridiculous, drunken, self-victimization. (High-school students tend to enjoy the second interpretation most.)

Modern psychotherapy observes that humour is a powerful antidote to anxiety. Expressing one's anxieties may also be effective in relieving

them. For example, in Shona tradition when a woman marries she leaves her home and joins that of her husband. She is expected by custom to respect and be subservient to her mother-in-law, who often competes with her daughter-in-law for the love and attention of her son. She is often naggingly critical and hard to live with and she may often scold the daughter-in-law. Since the mother-in-law is a highly respected person (*munyarikani*), she cannot be openly challenged or reproached by her daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law may, however, sing out her grievances in a critical poetic song known as *nheketerwa* or *jikinyira* — even if her mother-in-law is within earshot. The following song is one such example of the *nheketerwa* song:¹³

Vamwene vangu godo vanaro
Vamwene vangu godo vanaro
Ndiende kuhuni zvonzi tutsotso.
Ndiende kumvura zvonzi mabvongwe.
Ndigeze zvangu zvonzi ipfambi.
Ndirege kugeza zvonzi ipfende.

My mother-in-law is jealous
 My mother-in-law is jealous
 If I fetch firewood she says its too thin.
 If I fetch water she says its muddy.
 If I bathe she says I'm a prostitute.
 If I do not bathe she says I'm filthy.

The song is sung while grinding corn. It enables the annoyed woman to release her pent-up feelings both by singing and by vigorously grinding corn. This aggressive work-song helps her to cope with her mother-in-law's criticism and fosters the peaceful co-existence that is essential in communal village life. (It may also persuade the mother-in-law to try to be more accommodating to her daughter-in-law's seeming imperfections.) Such verbalization of anger is termed displacement or ventilation; tranquillity and self-restraint are the results of such displacement.

Similarly conflicts arising from polygamous marriages or extended family situations which are common in traditional Shona culture may also be verbalized in poetry; for example, women may express criticism of the behaviour of their husbands and of each other, as is the case in Ignatius Zvarevashe's poem *NdezvaVaNyachide* ('The Goodies Are for the Favourite [wife]'), a written poem which closely resembles this genre of oral poetry:¹⁴

¹³ I remember this song being sung in my childhood in the Chivi District, Masvingo Province, in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹⁴ Rhodesia Literature Bureau (comp.), *Nhetembo*, 51.

*VaNdingoveni mumvuri wavashe,
Changowanikwa chopiwa vashe,
Hwenyu hwava hweguyo nehuyo
Ini ndava ndekedzerwa yenyu.*

*Rinodyirwa nenyama nderaVaNyachide
Rinozipa souchi nderaVaNyachide.
Rangu zvangu rinopiwa mambwa avashe.
Harinaki asi tro raVaNyachide.*

*Mwana anobatwa waVaNyachide,
Wangu anorezverwa kuzvigunwe.
Munda unomemwa ndewaVaNyachide.
Munogarwa mumba ndomaVaNyachide,
Meguuriro munogarwa nepwere,
Vaeni vebvupa gobvu
NdavaNyachide,
Vedzimba n hete vanosairirwa kuguuriro.
VaNyachide vagara rugare nomuhuro;
Ini nenhamo ndoshungurudzwa.
Chava chigumegume chaMandiwanisa,
Svosvi yashe yaipfiga musuo nechuhuri chenyama.*

Miss Let-it-always-be-me is the shade for the husband,
Whatever is found is given to the husband,
Your relationship is that of a grinding stone and an upper grinding stone
I'm your chattel.

The favourite wife serves her sadza with meat.
It's the favourite wife's sadza which is as sweet as honey,
My sadza is served to the husband's dogs,
Mine is tasteless, the favourite's is delicious.

Only the favourite's field is tended.
The favourite's child is caressed,
Mine is only slightly tickled on the toes.
The husband lives in the favourite's hut,
Only children live in the unloved one's
Important visitors are entertained in the favourite's hut,
Poor ones are driven to mine.
The favourite is enjoying all the comfort.
I'm depressed by this predicament.
But I know its 'Mandiwanisa's happiness',
The favourite wife of the chief who would latch the door with biltong.¹⁵

¹⁵ This proverbial expression comes from a well-known anecdote about a woman called Mandiwanisa whose husband is so liberal that she becomes extravagant. Such allusions are very common in Shona critical poetry where morals are derived from actual experiences of people in the neighbourhood.

Here an irate woman criticizes her husband's favourite wife. She is bitter about her husband's attention to his other wife which has led to his neglect of her. This grievance is a common cause of stress in a polygamous family. Ideally, the husband is supposed to give equal attention to all his wives but frequently he prefers one, to the displeasure of the other(s). Instead of breaking down in tears or engaging in a physical confrontation, the wife articulates her anger in a *nheketerwa* which releases her emotional tension by verbalizing and thus exteriorizing her frustration.

Nheketerwa can also be useful in political circles allowing the people to criticize their chief and vice versa. If the people are confronted by a predicament of unusual magnitude and they fail to get guidance from their chief, they can express their displeasure about his failure to perform his duty. The poetry reconciles the chief and his subjects, modifying the love-hate relationship which is inherent in such a political structure. The poetry is referred to as *Kutuka mambo* (correcting a chief) and the reverse is called *Kurayiwa kwa Vanhu namambo* (the admonishing of subjects by a chief). Greater literary freedom of expression after the attainment of Independence created more latitude for the use of this mode of expression and some post-Independence Shona novelists and poets have produced and continue to produce works within the traditional genre criticizing political institutions. Even if the art does not directly lead to any change in the status quo it nevertheless provides an outlet for a great deal of frustration, anger and disillusionment with the new order.

The threshing song (*rumborwejakwara*) is another poetic sub-genre. The *jakwara* is a post-harvest communal grain-threshing party which is accompanied by beer and singing. The *jakwara* songs are characterized by ribaldry and lewdness which is a unique feature in the songs of a society which is characterized by a strict code of ethics and verbal modesty. The following Karanga song is an intriguing example of a *rumborwejakwara*:¹⁶

Chimboroni
Chandanonga muguyo?
Chimboroni
Chandanonga muguyo?
Chimboroni
Chandanonga muguyo?

What type of penis is this?
 That I picked up under the grinding stone?
 What type of penis is this
 That I picked up under the grinding stone?
 What type of penis is this
 That I picked up under the grinding stone?

¹⁶ This song used to be sung at threshing parties in the Chivi District in the 1960s.

A similar work-song was recorded from a group of married women in Chipinge who had been conscripted to work for a couple of weeks on rural roads.¹⁷ This entailed leaving their homes and being accommodated at the chief's homestead. They sang the song to any man who passed by their working party. As they sang they charged at him, tried to overpower and undress him and challenged him to make love to all of them. After tormenting and embarrassing him they would then release him. The song helped them to express their libido which had built up as a result of being away from their husbands for an extended period. Such a work-song is similar to the *jakwara* songs in which people are allowed to sing about village scandals, rumours and secrets. Such secrets are termed *chihwerure*. They may not be repeated in any other social context and neither can they be used to incriminate anyone if they involve a criminal offence. Such songs help people who are burdened with secrets and with rebellious and even vindictive feelings to express them in a controlled manner while engaging in an economically productive activity.

Religious poetry is useful in coping with fears which stem from Shona beliefs about good and evil. Incantations by a traditional healer (*n'anga*) are recited in the diagnosis and treatment of illnesses (*kushopera nokurapa*) and at inquests (*gata*). As the *n'anga* throws his divining sticks (*hakata*)¹⁸ he recites an incantation which is similar to the one that follows:¹⁹

*Nhai vari kumhepo,
Mukuru ari pano anochema nerokuti
Haazivi chakadya mwana wake.
Mwana anga ari mukukute zvakadai agomedzwa nei?
[anorova hakata]
Usahwanda zvako seri komunwe
Uyo! Uyo!
Buda zvako pachena tikuone.
Nhasi watatapurana nezvisingaviri,
Ndingopika naamai vangu vanoera bere.
[Akadzungudza musoro otona
Hakata dzake odzirovanisazve]
Daka ndereiko?
Chemaka tinzwe.
Unorweiko?
[Pava kacha]*

¹⁷ Recorded in Chipinge in 1989 by H. Dhlakama, an undergraduate research assistant in the 'Oral Traditions of Zimbabwe' project led by A. J. C. Pongweni, C. Dube and E. Chiwome.

¹⁸ *Hakata* may be sticks, stones or cowrie shells depending on the area of Mashonaland in which the *n'anga* practises.

¹⁹ J. Gombe, 'The Language of Purposeful Shona Gatherings' (Salisbury, Univ. of Zimbabwe, Dept. of African Languages and Literature, M.Phil. thesis, 1981), 139-40.

*Uu mhanduwe,
Nyaya iri pano yakakora muto.
Mwihimi wenyu ari makare mumusha menyu.
Ndiri kuona kuti munhu wenyu akaita zvokuposwa.
Paairwara anga asingati gumbo rangu
gumbo rangu, 'here?*

You who are in the spirit world,
This elder who is here
Is complaining that he does not know what killed his child.
What could have swallowed such a healthy person?
[He throws his *hakata* again]
Do not hide behind a finger
There you are! There you are!
Come out in the open for us to see you!
Today you have challenged the invincible.
I swear by my mother of the hyena totem.
[He shakes his head, picks up the *hakata* then throws them again]
What caused this irreconcilable hatred?
Spell that out!
What are you striving for?
[The *hakata* clatter on the ground]
Sir, the case that is before me is a serious one.
Your enemy is there in your village.
I can see that your child was bewitched.
When he was suffering was he not saying 'Oh my leg! Oh my leg!'

In this example the diviner is conducting a post-mortem in accordance with the funeral rites at the request of the bereaved family. He identifies the death as the result of witchcraft on the part of someone from the village. This is an acceptable solution to the consultants as it is widely believed that witchcraft is a frequent cause of deaths. In this way the *n'anga* expresses the villagers' fears and tensions which they cannot express without threatening peace and harmony. The fear and sense of insecurity caused by the occurrence of death is dispelled by the *n'anga*, who not only threatens the witch with death but also assures the consultants that the cause of the death is under control.

Some diviners and 'prophets' are possessed by spirits. While under possession (*kusvikirwa*) the *n'anga* becomes a mediator between the dead and the living and his diagnostic and healing incantations bridge the gap between the natural and supernatural. Illnesses are believed to be caused by natural and unnatural causes. Unnatural causes are handled with the help of diviners who can intervene on behalf of patients. Evil has to be expelled or ancestral spirits appeased as part of the long-term cure of patients. These incantations give the living the confidence that the universe is under control. They create a sense of oneness with the universe with

the *n'anga* as the contact point. Various ceremonies to appease aggrieved ancestors and herbal treatments follow this satisfactory explanation of the cause and treatment of the ailment. Divination poetry (*maga nama-zembera en'anga*) gives the sick person confidence and helps him to cope with his ailment and thus facilitates his recovery. Possession gives esteem to the spirit medium or *n'anga* who could otherwise be considered an ordinary person.

In the countryside rural people organize dance-song festivals after the harvest to thank the ancestors. A good harvest is attributed to the ancestors who are believed to prevent drought and to guard the crops against birds, insect plagues, animals and rival farmers who are believed to use charms (*divisi*) to achieve a good harvest at the expense of others. Such festivals celebrate a victory over natural and supernatural forces. Some poetry which is recited on the occasion encourages the ancestors to remember to perform their duties to the community. Such poetry helps the agrarian society to overcome problems they encounter in tilling the land and managing crops.

The Shona also recite and sing poetry to the spirit of the deceased family member in the *kurova guva* ritual which takes place a year after the death and burial of a respectable family man. It is believed that when such a man dies his spirit stays in limbo or wanders around until the performance of this ritual which reunites him with the family, including living and dead relatives. The performance of these rites helps to reconcile the minds of the living to the eventuality of death and helps dispel the pain of bereavement and the fear of death. The poetry which is recited on such occasions is called *nhembo* or *kudemba*. Its themes are the expression of sorrow and anger at the death of a loved one and at those forces which are believed to be the messengers of death. In participating in a ritual the people are able to give their pent-up feelings verbal expression and the ceremony rids the participants of tension which could interfere with their health. The two modes of therapy observed to be at work in this ritual are catharsis and paradox mediation. The death ritual re-affirms the value of life.

The Shona have a long tradition of war songs (*nziyo dzehondo*), some of which were a great help in fighting the war of liberation. One such example is as follows:²⁰

Wafa warova toisa musendere.
Wafa warova toisa musendere.
Wafa woyere toisa musendere.
Wafa nehondo toisa musendere.

²⁰ This war song was sung in the Masvingo Province in the 1960s by supporters of school soccer teams.

One who dies is gone we bury him.
 One who dies is gone we bury him.
 One who dies is buried.
 One who dies in battle is buried.

In this song the soldiers anticipate death in battle but sing about their fears and in so doing create a defence mechanism that insulates their minds from the fear of death and reconciles them to danger. The Ndaou people of Chipinge adopted an elaborate war song-dance, entitled *Muchongoyo*, which was originally danced by the conquering Nguni tribe led by Soshanganane at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the dance warriors sing and enact a battle. They dance themselves into a frenzy, attack an imaginary enemy, leap and charge, thrust their spears and clubs, and impersonate dying opponents. So, instead of waiting in fear to start a battle, the warriors sing and dance and their fear is replaced by courage. The dance is also an enactment of the military virtues which soldiers should possess. The strain arising from the fear of facing a hostile and possibly more powerful army is sublimated by such a dance and it also inspires them to want to defend the interests of their ethnic group.

Muchongoyo is similar to 'boast poetry' which is recited before a fight in order to intimidate one's adversaries. The boasts are formulaic praises of ancient fighters and are intended to transform timid men into brave fighters. Such poetry may be used to try and win the fight at a mental level before it starts physically or even to help to scare the enemy off and avert the encounter altogether. This partly explains the prevalence of *pungwes* during the liberation war.²¹ At the *pungwe* people sang political songs of defiance to encourage themselves to fight. This encouragement was very important to people who were not just fighting well-armed troops but who were also suffering from an inferiority complex which was the result of racial oppression.

Hunting songs (*nziyo dzokuvhima/dzechidzimba*) have more or less the same function as war-songs. To hunters, the forest is an ambivalent symbol of providence and uncertainty: the same forest which provides them with meat also shelters man-eating beasts. Although hunting is a dangerous enterprise men must hunt in order to provide their families with meat. Before uncontrolled hunting was interpreted as poaching and thus prohibited by modern law hunters recited poetry to enlist the help of the spirits who, according to their world-view, control game. Among the hunters would be a few men who were believed to be possessed by a *shavi*

²¹ A *pungwe* was an all-night political seminar featuring anti-imperialist songs. They were part of the guerrillas' political awareness campaign among the peasants during the war of liberation from the mid-1960s to 1979. *Pungwes* also formed part of their system of psychological warfare.

spirit which was believed to distinguish them as celebrated hunters (*hombarume*). A successful hunt was enacted at the beginning of the expedition and the songs and recitations gave both the experts and ordinary huntsmen the confidence to venture out and even to provoke dangerous animals. Without the ritual dance hunters would worry about danger and possible misfortune.

Poetry therapy is not confined to the rural areas. Migrant labourers also use it to acclimatize themselves to the alien city environment which is socially and psychologically at variance with the rural life-style to which they are accustomed. For example, Solomon Mutswairo wrote poetry in order to cope with homesickness while he lived in Natal, South Africa, in the 1940s. This is evident in his poem *Makomo eNyota* ('The Nyota Mountains'):²²

*Arroyevedza sei makomo eNyota
Akashongedza nyika yaMambo Chiweshe!
Zvinondifadza sei kana ndichirota
Ndiri mhiri yaSawi pedyo nokwaGweshe!*

*Kunyange ndova kure nenyika yeNyota
Ndichiri nyika dzino dzinenge masowi,
Zvinondifadza sei kana ndichirota
Ndiri mhiri kwaGweshe, pedyo kuna Sawi!*

Lovely are the Nyota mountains
That grace Chief Chiweshe's area!
Happy am I to dream
Of the land beyond Sawi near Gweshe!

Although I may be far from the Nyota area
As I am now in this unreal land,
I am filled with happiness as I dream,
Of the land beyond Gweshe, near Sawi!

In this poem homesickness is expressed through the portrayal of an idyllic image of the Chiweshe area (situated in the Mazowe valley). Reading or reciting the poem becomes a way of coping with feelings of isolation and loneliness.

In many towns and cities the migrant workers gather in recreation centres during the weekends and sing and dance to the traditional music of their distant home area. In this way they temporarily dispel the stress arising from the necessity of adapting to an alien urban existence and maintain a living link with their roots.

²² S. M. Mutswairo, *Zimbabwe: Prose and Poetry* (Washington, Three Continents, 2nd edn., 1979), 142.

When people from the same Communal Lands sing and dance together they experience a sense of belonging which is essential for their continued existence in the city. In so doing they dance out their fear of the city and attempt to stamp their identity on an alien environment, showing that they are coping with new challenges. New songs about the nature of city life are also composed and form new dances. These songs help the rural-based sojourners to come to grips with the ways of the city quickly. Modern writers who have left their home areas to settle in the cities or in other countries have written poetry to cope with similar problems of displacement. Many popular songs are composed to help modern Shona people cope with the sense of spiritual exile that comes with modernity and superficial political change. Thomas Mapfumo, a popular Zimbabwean songwriter, has given such music the name *Chimurenga*²³ because of its protest and nostalgic nature. The same can be said of modern writers such as Joseph Kumbirai, Chirikure Chirikure and Samuel Chimsoro who have often been termed crisis and protest artists.

Research should be undertaken to establish the actual therapeutic value of Shona performed art so as to find how it could be used in rehabilitation programmes as well as in primary health programmes. This indigenous and readily available resource could be incorporated in the treatment of stress-related illnesses to complement modern and often scarce drugs.

This claim is echoed by the musicologist, John Nketia:

Poetry (along with other arts) whether it be good or bad and at whatever level of crudity and refinement exists to fulfil a necessary biological function for a symbolizing class of life, that of helping to maintain psychological health and equilibrium.²⁴

In this way singers, composers and performers of poetry could find themselves making a more meaningful and valuable contribution to the nation.

²³ *Chimurenga* is the popular name for the war of liberation fought against the White settlers in Zimbabwe. It was fought in two phases, the first in the 1890s and the second in the 1960s and 1970s. Oral tradition has it that the name derives from Murenga, a legendary figure who is believed to be one of the progenitors of the Shona people. He was such a great fighter that brave men were described as being possessed by his spirit (*Mweya waMurenga*). The collective resistance of the Shona people was thus named *Chimurenga*. For the same reason Thomas Mapfumo named his political protest-songs *Chimurenga*.

²⁴ J. H. Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (New York, Norton, 1974), 22.