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THE MARQUIS DE SADE: FIRST ZIMBABWEAN NOVELIST

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IT SHOULD BE understood from the beginning that the Marquis de Sade [1] never came anywhere near Zimbabwe. Nor, for that matter, was it called Zimbabwe, though he does mention the name in another context.[2] Nor, again, did he devote an entire book to this subject, but rather one part of the first volume of his novel *Aline et Valcour, ou le roman philosophique.* On the other hand, his sole reason for introducing his sub-hero, Sainville, to this part of Africa was to enable his imagination to conjure up an archetype of the ignoble savage and to discuss certain side issues with the Portuguese, Sarmiento; and he had read a very little about southern Africa and knew a little about the geography. This puts him on a par with some more recent writers about this country, and since he wrote *Aline et Valcour* between 1785 and 1788 he was without a doubt the first novelist ever to set part of his work in Zimbabwe.[3] If it was not to be the best work of Zimbabwean fiction, at least the tradition can be shown to have started with a world-famous writer who, like some later novelists, wrote from prison — in this case, the Bastille.

Most of this article is devoted to a paraphrase of Sainville's adventures in Africa in order to make this obscure work available to an English-reading public, and the footnotes relate de Sade's picture to the reality as we know it; but in view of the contentious nature of his view of Africa, a few points should be made in advance. De Sade sets out to make the kingdom of Butua as revolting as possible, and it might easily be supposed that this was no more than a crude racist slur upon Africans. De Sade was rather more subtle than that. In the first place, the horrors of Butua, for which he hypocritically makes his narrator apologize in advance to the *salon* of Mme de Blamont, are certainly no worse than those of the societies of Europe described in some of his other works, and in fact de Sade's view of the human race was so cynical that it would hardly have been likely that he would have regarded Africans as being any different. De Sade, however, was also making a comment upon the concept of the noble savage of Rousseau, although he did not seem to

[1] Donatine Alphonse François, Comte de Sade (1740 - 1814), is incorrectly known as a Marquis to the public, but as this version of his title is so widely known it is retained in the title to this paper. I am indebted to Mme Andrea Mercier for her checking of my paraphrase of de Sade. Any errors remaining are mine alone.

[2] He refers to 'Zimbaoé', but by this he means the capital of the Mutapa state in the north, where until 1759 the Portuguese had maintained a garrison. De Sade's source for the geographical knowledge he displays remains unknown, but was probably a French translation of a compendium of the Portuguese publications on the area. His interest in the light thrown on human societies by the voyages of such writers as Cook and Bougainville was obviously considerable.

[3] Gilberty Lely, Preface to the edition of *Aline et Valcour ou le roman philosophique, écrit à la Bastille un an avant la Révolution de France par le Marquis de Sade* [1795] (Paris, Union Générale d'Editions, 2 vols, 1971), I, 636 - 41.

regard the noble savage as an absolute impossibility. Indeed, as soon as Sainville leaves Africa he moves to the Pacific, where on Tamoé he finds 'a government which could serve as a model for all those of Europe'.[4] It is, of course, significant that in the view of an eighteenth-century European the noble savage should be found in the South Seas rather than in Africa, but it does show that even de Sade did not think mankind beyond hope.

The bulk of *Aline et Valcour,* an epistolary novel in the style of the times, does not concern us here. The sub-plot of Sainville and Léonore is found in the letter from Deterville to Valcour, and concerns the tale told by the young captain of the regiment of Navarre, Sainville, and of his world-wide search for the young Leonore. She had been kidnapped in Venice; and, after pursuing her around the Mediterranean, Sainville heard of just such a young woman on a ship sailing for the Cape and set out to follow her there. However, his barque is wrecked on the reefs around 'l'île Saint-Mathieu' and he is left floating on a plank at sea. On the second day after the shipwreck, Sainville is cast ashore on the Angolan coast, 'between Benguele and the kingdom of Jagas',[5] and decides to march to the Cape, through the land of 'Cafrerie' and the land of the 'Hottentots'.

He decides to move inland from the inhospitable coast, and stumbles across the scene of a recent battle between the Jagas and the people of Butua.[6] The Jagas have won, and under the tree in which he has taken refuge they barbecue and eat their prisoners. Horrified, he goes on, but is then captured by a Butuan patrol. He is taken to their capital with its huge and beautiful palace of timber and canes. As he points out, no European has been there before, even though the Portuguese would like to use the area as a route between their western colonies of Benguela and those of 'Zimbaoé', 'near Zanguebar and Monomotapa'.[7] (At this point, he apologizes to his listeners for the brutality of the scenes which he is about to describe.[8]) The palace of the king is guarded by black, yellow, mulatto and pale women, all of these (except for the last who are little and stunted) are big, strong and aged between twenty and thirty. All are absolutely naked — not even wearing loincloths which cover other African

[4] Ibid., I, 10.

[5] De Sade's reference to the cannibalism of the Jagas, who were indeed in the region of the port of Benguela in the previous century, is not entirely based on his imagination, obsessed though he was by the subject. The Portuguese had frequently claimed that the Jagas were cannibals.

[6] De Sade's belief that the territories of the Jagas and of Butua (modern south-western Zimbabwe) were adjacent was based on Portuguese sources dating as far back as the 1580s. This belief, which underlay Portuguese strategy up the the 1880s, was probably based in turn on the difficulties encountered in establishing the correct longitude of the two side of Africa. Until accurate chronometers made this possible, maps regularly underestimated the width of Africa.

[7] As noted above, this was part of Portugues thinking. He presumably excepts Sarmiento from his comment that no European had been there before. Butua was the south-western part of Zimbabwe, the centre of the Khami culture. First mentioned in 1512, it was under the rule of the Torwa dynasty until after 1683, but then fell to the Changamire dynasty of Rozvi, which ruled it until the arrival of the Ndebele in the late 1830s.

[8] See above, fn. 2.

people — and carry bows and arrows.[9] Although the palace has only one storey, it is huge. A guard of six of the most beautiful and biggest women stands outside the king's throne-room, where thirty, less military girls attend the king and a bloodstained, breasted, goat-horned, serpent-bodied idol which stands above the still-breathing bodies of the latest sacrifices. To his surprise, he finds himself speaking in Italian with an old Portuguese, Sarmiento, who had been captured twenty years earlier. Through him, he tells the king, Ben Mâacoro, his story.[10] The king laughs heartily to learn that Sainville has undergone so much for the sake of a girl:

> You are mad, you Europeans, to worship the female sex; a woman is made for play, not to be worshipped; it offends the gods of the country to give girls the worship due to gods. It is absurd to give authority to women, very dangerous to serve them; it defiles your sex, it degrades nature, it is to become a slave of those who should be your slaves.

The king, examining Sainville's naked body like a butcher, decrees that he be assigned to the king's pleasures. Sainville, indignantly, asks if the king has not enough women as it is. Sarmiento points out that it is precisely because the king is sated, and that, in any case, corruption is the source of life. In the end, Sainville is ordered to become Sarmiento's apprentice. This involves, in the first place, a lecture from Sarmiento on their present home. Butua lies between the Hottentots on the south, the Jagas on the west, the Lupata mountains on the east and the lands of King Monoemugui on the north, a land as big as Portugal.[11] Every month, a tribute of women arrives at the king's court from each part of the kingdom and Sainville, it turns out, will be 'the inspector of this type of import'. He is to examine their bodies, but without actually enjoying them, on pain of death. This tribute usually amounts to 5,000 women, of whom about 2,000 are to be selected: 'If you like women, you will without doubt suffer, to be unable to see their faces, but to hand them on without enjoying them.' Apparently Sarmiento had convinced the king that the taste of a European was superior in this regard. The four classes of girls are: the strong who do guard duties, and the weaker ones, of whom those between twenty and thirty do garden and corvée duties, those from sixteen to twenty years are sacrificed, and those below sixteen serve the king's pleasures. Also reserved for the king's pleasures would be any White girls, who are not currently available, but whom the king wishes to acquire. On learning, however, that his duties involve only the selection of the girls and not the direct supply of them to the king's desires of the moment, nor

[9] The idea that African rulers had female warriors, while correct in the case of Dahomey, was misplaced here. De Sade was probably influenced by Portuguese sources dating from Duarte Barbosa's reference in *c.*1518 to the Mutapa having a force of 6,000 armed women. This, in turn, is almost certainly based on a misunderstanding of the term Karanga by which the Mutapa's own people were then known: literally, it meant 'chief wives', but it was an honourable term applied to men.

[10] 'Mâacoro' bears a faint resemblance to the Shona word *mukuru* (great person) but this is probably coincidental.

[11] Very basically, the location of 'Butua' is correct.

the torture of those chosen for that purpose, Sainville's principles crumble, and he accepts the job.

At Sarmiento's dinner-table that night Sainville recoils when he thinks that the Portuguese is saying grace over a dish of roast leg of girl. (It is actually roast Jaga.) At this point the text veers off into a long philosophical argument between Sarmiento and Sainville, beginning when Sarmiento argues that it is right to follow the customs of the country and overcome one's prejudices; he even offers his pet monkey as food, if Sainville feels so dainty. Sainville replies that, in that case, wars will be made for the sake of meat. Sarmiento contends that man's nature leads him to destruction, and, in natural terms, this is not negation but transformation, death and corruption leading to reproduction, and therefore war is not criminal. Sainville retires to bed, refusing Sarmiento's offer of a (live) girl or boy for the night, detesting his opinions but grateful for having met him.

The next day while touring the area, the Portuguese briefs Sainville on the condition of women in the country: 'It is impossible to paint for you, my friend, the degradation in which the women of this country exist.' Rich and poor agree that to have many is a luxury. Women do all the work in the fields and houses under the whips of their husbands and are the butts of every evil whim of the men. These customs, two in particular, restrict the population almost to destruction. One is the belief that a woman is impure for eight days before and eight days after her period, leaving only eight in which she is fit to serve man; the other is that a woman is not touched by her husband for three years after each birth; in addition, from the moment a woman becomes pregnant, she is exposed to the contempt of everyone and denied access to the temples, and she does not dare to appear in public. Sarmiento feels that these practices might have been sensible in a period of over-population, but that they are ridiculous in Butua's present circumstances; as it is, the nation will be extinct in a century. The king follows the same custom, indulging in unnatural sexual practices to prevent conception, and if he should forget himself and make one of his women pregnant, she is killed. Women are locked up, punished, condemned to death for the least thing, or sacrificed. For this and other reasons the number of women attending the king is constantly on the decline. Nor may a pregnant woman work in the fields. Sarmiento thinks that there are no more than 30,000 people left and that ultimately the Jagas will conquer, although they are tributaries at present: all they need is a leader. As far as Sarmiento is concerned, the corruption of Butua is not necessarily a bad thing, for he sees the whole of nature as a cycle of growth, decline and fall, so that the vices of the Roman emperors were a necessary part of a grand natural process. 'The evil which a man does is only relative to the climate in which he lives. Do you need a universal virtue, when the national virtue suffices for happiness?'

A long time ago, Sarmiento continues, the Portuguese wanted to take Butua to link Moçambique and Benguela, but the people have never agreed. No, he has never tried to press for this. After all, he was exiled to the African coast for embezzlement in the diamond mines of Rio de Janeiro

SAINVILLE AND THE CAPTIVES OF THE KING OF BUTUA (from the original edition of *Aline et Valcour*).

where he was a manager: 'I have, according to the practice of Europe, put my fortune before that of the king, and been indiscreet and not sufficiently underhand.' As long as he has studied man, with his wise laws and superb maxims, he has noticed that it is always the most guilty who is the happiest. No, it is by adapting to the customs of the country that one becomes successful, as he has become in Butua. Sainville will never be allowed to leave Butua, in case he should let the Portuguese know of its weakness. 'Why should the Portuguese want these countries like Butua?', asks Sainville. 'Don't you know that we Portuguese are the brokers of Europe, supplying Blacks to all the traders of the world?' To Sainville's criticism of the slave trade, Sarmiento replies that the fact that some nations are strong and some weak proves that not all men are equal, any more than the helots of Sparta or the pariahs of India. 'The restraint of equal duty is a myth, my friend, it might work between equals but not between the superior and inferior,' Sarmiento tells Sainville. Europe enslaves Africa for the same reason that a butcher supplies meat. Everywhere the strong are right, can you think of anything more eloquent? Sainville points out that Portugal has applied just this policy in Brazil only to fall subject to the English, who have become the true beneficiaries. Sarmiento replies that this is partly because of the French Bourbon grip on Spain, which has forced Portugal to subordinate its own industries to those of England: 'This is the epoch of our ruin.' They continue to discuss the causes of the decline of Portugal, and both are more or less agreed that the real cause of this is Portugal's subservience to the Catholic Church and the influence of the clergy in general and the Inquisition in particular.

They then met a party of twenty tribute-women under escort on their way to the king. Sainville wonders how he will know how to choose women who will please the king; Sarmiento says he will point out the desirable features of their bodies, and Sainville will look to Sarmiento for guidance. Sainville does in the end manage to make a selection. Sainville's enquiry as to the king's need for so many women leads to a long discussion of the nature of sexual attraction . . . variety excites the 'animal spirits'.

The next day it turns out that Sainville has chosen well, and that the king spent the night in debauchery, purifying himself in the morning with the sacrifice of six victims. (Sainville declines Sarmiento's invitation to watch this.) Sainville is conscience-stricken to have chosen them in the first place, whereupon the Portuguese points out that a general feels no remorse when, having defeated the enemy with his right wing, he loses the men of the left wing in the process. Besides, those born in hot countries are more accustomed to brutality than northerners such as the Frenchman, and in Butua where animals drop dead in the heat of the summer between October and March . . . heat is a source of moral corruption. Sainville, he adds, tries to apply a universal law to all climates.

Sainville goes on to describe more of the cruelty practised by the men of Butua upon the women, even sons upon their mothers.

Like Poland, Butua is divided into eighteen provinces, each under its chief, who can deal with his subjects as he likes. 'It isn't that they have no

laws in this kingdom: perhaps they are too many; but they all tend to put the weak under the strong' on the same lines as in the household. The subject has rights only over his food and his land; all the rest belongs to the chief who sends a tribute of women, boys and food to the king four times a year but who receives a tribute himself. 'The crimes of theft and murder, absolutely nothing among the great, are punished with the most extreme rigour among the ordinary people, unless they commit them in their own homes.' The chiefs save up criminals and then get together to torment them to death as a kind of festival, followed by an orgy. The king does the same on a larger scale. The king, given sufficient excuse, can execute any of his chiefs, though they would rebel if he over-reached himself. The eldest son of a chief succeeds his father, reducing the mother and sisters to servitude, unless he should marry one of them, though that is much the same as subjection; if the mother is pregnant, she is made to abort her child. If the king dies, the chiefs engage in nine days of exploits of bravery against prisoners, criminals or among themselves, after the fashion of the Jagas, and the bravest chief in these atrocities becomes the next king, unless he himself succumbs in the suceeding nine days of debauchery, in which case the selection process starts again. (It is for this reason that kings care nothing for their children, because unlike the chiefs they have no hereditary succession.) The general slaughter is immense.[12]

Each chiefdom sends archers and pikemen to the war, according to the needs of the time. The religion is as dominant as that in Spain or Portugal. Each chief has a religious chief under him, and a hierarchy of priests under him, serving a local idol like that in the capital. The snake is much revered.[13] The mixed snake-human image reflects the idea that the Creator made animals as well as men. Sixteen victims from each province a year are sacrificed. Priestly education of the youth involves the teaching of a complete submission of women to men and of men to priests, chiefs and the king. The priest-teachers take the virginity of the girls in school, according to the law. Only those destined for the king are saved, but the rest — boys and girls — are deflowered on certain festival-days by the priests. In the capital, however, the king undertakes these duties. (The discussion then veers off into an argument on the relationship of homosexuality to the birthrate.) Crimes against religion are punished even more severely than in Europe, usually by death.

They have no writing and hence no sense of history. Their only exports are rice, manioc and maize to the Jagas, who live in a land too sandy for crops and who send fish in exchange. Quarrels over this trade often lead to wars. They know nothing of politics and live for the present. There is a limited knowledge of astronomy. The basic food is maize, fish and human flesh, for which they have public butcheries. Monkey flesh is valued. They make a

[12] This may be a reference to the *pemberaçõens* (from Shona *kupembera* (to dance for joy)) or ritual combats recorded by the Portuguese as taking place on the death of a ruler.

[13] De Sade was quite wrong to impute idolatry to the Shona: the Portuguese made it clear that it never occured in Shona religion. But in a private communication, Dr M. F. C. Bourdillon has indicated that among the Tavara there are vestiges of the kind of snake cult found in religions north of the Zambezi. This, too, was pure coincidence.

spirit out of maize which is drunk neat or with water. They also preserve yams. There is no currency or equivalent. About twelve houses make a village and seven or eight villages a district. If the district rulers offend the king, the villages are burned; often the villages refuse to obey these junior despots, who have little authority, whereupon a massacre follows.

There is no allowance made for those unable to earn a living; they fall victims to the rich and end up as sacrifices. The priests act as doctors, demanding their payment in women, boys or slaves. Each chief has his harem, guarded by men who dare not step over the mark. Each harem has a senior woman in charge (her children are legitimate) and she keeps her rank as long as she does not fall pregnant too often. The hunters use poisoned arrows to get their game, but they do not eat these poisoned animals, which include wildebeeste and giraffes. The people are very black, short, energetic, with short curly hair and beautiful teeth, healthy and long-lived. They are lewd, cruel, given to vengeance, superstitious, treacherous, angry, lustful and ignorant. The women are the most physically perfect, but the cruel treatment they receive means that few live to fifty; they are the only makers of pots, baskets and mats. White women are a special target of the king, who gets some from the Jaga coast and buys others. There is no remorse at the death of a relation or friend, of whatever age. The old are considered better dead, for then they can suffer no more. The dead are simply left below a tree with no more ceremony than for an animal. If they die healthy, they are eaten. They recognize souls, but have only a vague concept of them. The good and the bad alike are thought to live beside a beautiful river with ample White women and fish. 'Death is a sleep after which you wake.' Sarmiento, as the king's favourite, gets bribes in the form of peasants' daughters.

Sainville stays three months there and one day he goes to the assistance of a woman who collapses in the fields. To protect her from her husband, he takes her and her children into his house. Sarmiento feels that this act of kindness is against the law of the land. However, Sarmiento then tries to overthrow the king, and is executed. Sainville, though declared innocent by the king, is much disturbed. He even misses the Portuguese. After delivering five squads of girls to the king, Sainville then tries to join a raid on a group of White women at a small Portuguese fort on the frontiers of Monomotapa, at a moment when the passes in the mountains are left unguarded because of a war between the Bororés and the Cimbas.[14] Even if Léonore is not there, he might be able to escape. But Ben Maacoro,guesses his reasons. The raiders go without him, drive the Portuguese out of Tete on the northern border of Monomotapa, and seize four White women. After a long and embarrassing examination of their bodies (one in particular) — for their faces are veiled — he passes them on to the king. The next day, the king is strangely disturbed, and Sainville decides that he may have failed in his job and decides that it

[14] The wars of the 'Bororés' (Romwe) and 'Cimbas' (Zimba) took place in the late sixteenth century. The Butuan raid on Tete, while introduced by de Sade to provide a climax to his 'Butua' episode, may reflect the Changamire Rozvi campaigns of the 1690s.

is time to leave. He hands his rescued woman over to the least unsuitable of the Butua men. Three days after the arrival of the White women, he manages to leave the country and without delay finds himself in the Hottentot country beside the Berg river,[15] and soon arrives at Cape Town, after only eighteen days of travel. He learns that someone like Leonore was aboard the *Discovery*, commanded by Clark in Cook's fleet, which had called recently. So he sets out in pursuit of Cook in a Dutch vessel bound for Tahiti . . .

To conclude, de Sade's *Aline et Valcour* tells us nothing about eighteenth-century Africa but it does throw light on the personality of the most peculiar man who chanced to be the first Zimbabwean novelist in the sense used above. Its summarization here is intended as no more than a rather dubious gift from History to other disciplines in the hope that they may be able to make some use of it.

[15] It is amusing to note that, as long as it was necessary for Sainville to observe the customs of Butua and to converse with Sarmiento, it was impossible for him to escape, yet as soon as the plot requires it, he may do so: 'With one bound, our hero was free'. Sainville's average of about seventy miles of walking a day to Cape Town was remarkable, but accuracy was hardly de Sade's strong point.