Zambezia (1981), IX (i).

ESSAY REVIEW

SHONA ORAL POETRY*

IN HER MAGISTERIAL survey of *Oral Literature in Africa*, published in 1970, Ruth Finnegan concluded the section on Panegyric with the following observation:

> Praise poetry, and in particular the Southern Bantu form, is among the best-documented types of African oral poetry. Nevertheless, much remains to be studied . . . Though many texts have been collected, particularly from South Africa, full discussions of these are less common, and further detailed accounts are now needed of specific forms in particular areas.[1]

Shona Praise Poetry by Aaron Hodza and George Fortune is just such a detailed account of the traditional poetry of the Shona-speaking peoples of Zimbabwe, and lives up to the high standards of scholarship and production established by its predecessors in the Oxford Library of African Literature. It is welcome not only because of its manifest achievement in the collection and preservation of Shona tradition, not only because this study of Shona poetry contributes significantly to our understanding of the Southern Bantu traditions of oral poetry and to the comparative study of oral poetry in general, but also because studies by Fortune and Hodza on Shona traditional poetry have established this field as peculiarly their own and their full-length treatment of the tradition raises scholarly expectations accordingly. Those with high expectations will find them abundantly fulfilled in *Shona Praise Poetry*; all readers must lay the volume down impressed by its detailed historical, ethnographic, and linguistic commentary, by the range of texts presented for discussion, and by the intimate insight that the texts afford into the traditional life of the Shona peoples.

The first issue of *Zambezia* in 1969 was graced by an article contributed by Fortune, the first editor of the journal, on the history of writing in Shona. In his conclusion he wrote:

> There is a great need at this stage to compile anthologies of the oral literature in order to make available authentic collections of the traditional praises, myths, stories with their songs, proverbs, children's word games and nursery rhymes. These are rapidly disappearing from use and memory, especially in the towns where radio, television, sports and other forms of entertainment are taking the place and time given to the traditional arts and where the traditional oral 'classics' no longer figure in the education of the young in a living, effectual way.[2]

Shona written poetry has had a very short history, dating back only some thirty

*A. C. Hodza (comp.) and G. Fortune (trans. and ed.), **Shona Praise Poetry** (Oxford, Clarendon Press, The Oxford Library of African Literature, 1979), 401 pp., £16.00.

[1] R. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, The Oxford Library of African Literature, 1970), 146.

[2] G. Fortune, '75 years of writing in Shona', *Zambezia* (1969), I, i, 66.

years. The first anthologies were dominated by poetry of Western inspiration, but contained some poetry written in traditional style. In 1971 Fortune contributed another article to *Zambezia* with the aim of setting the new poetry in a traditional context: 'Informed criticism and appreciation of the work of modern poets, particularly when they continue the past, is only possible in the light of an understanding of the oral, pre-literate tradition out of which it has grown'.[3] By 1971 Fortune had been joined at the Department of African Languages at the University of Rhodesia by Hodza, who had volunteered his assistance in the collection and preservation of Shona traditions; the 1971 article cited a number of poems collected by Hodza. In 1974 Hodza published a book on the culture of Shona clans,[4] and in an article in *Zambezia*[5] on two genres of Shona oral poetry Fortune made extensive use of extracts from a manuscript of Shona traditional poetry assembled by Hodza. It is necessary to refer to some of these forerunners of *Shona Praise Poetry* since, although the book does cite other articles by Fortune on Shona history and linguistics (where his work on speech register in particular has been noteworthy), nowhere in the book are the earlier publications on Shona literary tradition mentioned. Perhaps this reticence may be attributed to an excess of modesty; nonetheless, the sixteen-item bibliography (p. 395), which includes items that are not referred to in the text and omits many items that are, is quite inadequate and stands as an unfortunate deficiency.

In 1971 Fortune offered the following six-part typology for Shona spoken or intoned (as distinct from sung) poetry: praise poetry of clans (*nhetembo*); praise poetry of people (*madetembedzo*); didactic poetry (*nhango*); critical or 'blame' poetry (*nheketerwa*); funeral elegies (*nhembo*); and entertaining narrative poetry (*ndyaringo*). In his 1974 article, Fortune treated *nhango* (didactic) and *ndyaringo* (entertaining) as complementary poetic genres; *nhetembo* and *nheketerwa* formed another complementary pair, as did *nhembo* and the *madetembedzo* produced during courtship. As other forms of praise poetry contrasting with the clan praises (*nhetembo*), Fortune mentioned praises of others (*madetembedzo*), and autobiographical 'boasts'. *Shona Praise Poetry* presents the poems in a three-part classification, first proposed by Fortune and Hodza in 1974:[6] clan praises, praises of persons, and boasts. The comparatist especially will welcome the ascending prominence given in this sequence to the boasts.

The texts themselves are prefaced with an introduction by Fortune, divided into three sections. In the first section (pp. 1–27), the poetry is set in a social and cultural context. There are brief references to the history of the tradition, brief comparisons with the Zulu tradition of *izibongo* and notes on surviving traditions concerning the Rozvi kings, the waning of whose power may have led to the disappearance of court poetry similar to that found among the Zulu. Also in these pages are detailed notes on Shona clans, especially on their totemic structure, on the office of the *mbonga* and on kinship, and a brief note on social roles and social

[3] G. Fortune, 'Shona traditional poetry', *Zambezia* (1971), II, i, 41.

[4] A. C. Hodza, *Ugo hwamadzinza avaShona* (Salisbury, Longman, 1974).

[5] G. Fortune, '*Nhango* and *ndyaringo*: Two complementary poetic genres', *Zambezia* (1974), III, ii, 27–49.

[6] G. Fortune and A. C. Hodza, 'Shona praise poetry', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* (1974), XXXVII, 65–75.

registers. The second section, on the types of praise poetry (pp. 27–42), presents Fortune's justification for the tripartite classification of the texts, with notes on each type. The traditional clan praises—no new clan praises are now composed (p. 31)—refer to the clan totems, to ancestors of the clans, to significant events in clan history and to qualities exemplified by clan members, and are used to thank or express pride in a member of the clan. Praises of persons are original compositions produced during courtship in honour of the loved one or produced as a tribute to someone performing a valued social function; after marriage, the poem composed and memorized during courtship may be retained and offered as a tribute to the spouse. The third group of Shona poems, boasts, are composed about themselves by young men to intimidate rivals or by older men in some social or professional capacity. The third section of the introduction (pp. 43–116), on the form of poetry, is twice as long as the preceding two sections, and offers detailed notes on phonology and morphology, and on certain structural features such as parallelism and linking.

The main body of the book (pp. 119–394) comprises an edition and annotated translation of sixty-four Shona poems. The poems were assembled by Hodza; the introductory notes and annotations are the work of Fortune, who includes valuable passages on the traditions of each of the clans whose poetry is included (mainly Tembo, Soko and Moyo, but there are also *nhetembo* of the Zvimba, Chasura, Gutu, Nyandoro, Matope and Mhari clans). Each poem is preceded by an individual note that usually includes reference to the kind of occasion on which it might have been produced and a literary comment, and there are copious footnotes accompanying each text. The literary comment is usually confined to structural matters, which Fortune sees as the key to Shona poetic aesthetics (of one poem Fortune remarks, 'This poem is a fine composition showing a mastery of the devices on which the best Shona poetry is built, viz. linking and the use of parallelism in controlled imagery. The structural side of parallelism is often expressed by the use of structures of a very abstract kind' (p. 328)), and which he has treated in a separate article in *Limi*,[7] and the footnotes usually supply ethnographic, linguistic and clarificatory data. Particularly impressive in this presentation of Shona texts is the wealth of ethnographic material offered to supplement them, the range of the selection and the intimacy of some of the examples. The range deserves special comment. Predecessors of this volume in the Oxford Library of African Literature that treated Southern African traditions[8] present or consider almost exclusively praises of chiefs or prominent figures. These may well constitute an important body of poems, may indeed dominate their traditions, but they are by no means the only form of poetry in the tradition. Since the appearance, in 1968, of Cope's book on Zulu oral poetry (*izibongo*), for example, Douglas Mzolo[9] has contributed significantly to our knowledge of Zulu

[7] G. Fortune, 'Frames for comparison and contrast in Shona poetry', *Limi* (1977), V, 67–74.

[8] See, on Tswana, I. Schapera (ed.), *Praise-Poems of Tswana Chiefs* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, The Oxford Library of African Literature, 1965); on Zulu, T. Cope (ed.), *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, The Oxford Library of African Literature, 1968); on Sotho, D. P. Kunene (ed.), *Heroic Poetry of the Basotho* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, The Oxford Library of African Literature, 1971), and M. Damane and P. B. Sanders (trans.), *Lithoko: Sotho Praise-Poems* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, The Oxford Library of African Literature, 1974).

[9] D. Mzolo, 'Zulu clan praises', in J. Argyle and E. Preston-Whyte (eds), *Social System and*

clan praises, and Elizabeth Gunner[10] has published an important article on *izibongo* produced by Zulu women. *Shona Praise Poetry* offers us greater insight than any of its predecessors into the varieties of oral poetry current in the community. It also offers us the poetry not of specialists but of ordinary people in the course of their daily lives: a mother thanking her daughter, or a man praising his wife in the act of lovemaking. Not since Guma[11] afforded us texts of secret Sotho initiation traditions have we been presented with Southern Bantu folklore on such a level of intimacy.

A major problem confronting an editor of traditional texts is the number of disciplines he finds impinging on his material and demanding attention. Significant aspects of oral poetic traditions lie within the domains of disciplines such as anthropology, comparative literature, ethnology, folklore, history, linguistics, psychology or sociology, and no editor can be expected to command so wide a range of disciplines; his work will be satisfactory to some, perhaps to most scholars, but inevitably disappointing to others. The commentary in *Shona Praise Poetry*, reflecting the editors' scholarly interests, is strongest on linguistics and ethnology, offering much to interest the anthropologist and the historian; it is less satisfactory, however, for the folklorist and for the student of comparative literature. The folklorist will wince when he reads that

> Mr. A. C. Hodza has collected and compiled all the poems in this volume. They have all been drawn from the people to which he belongs, sometimes as poems almost entire, more often as fragments of poems which have been forgotten, and which have been assembled by extensive field-work. Occasionally he has contributed original lines of his own, composed within the tradition (p. vii).

It may well be that praise poems in this tradition consist of discrete lines or groups of lines which occur in no fixed order in oral variants, so that one can assemble these 'praises' from a number of informants and put them together to form the most complete version of 'the praises of a clan'; it may well be that this or a similar practice was followed by Zulu poets or by Elias Lönnrot in compiling the Finnish epic *Kalevala,* published in 1849;[12] it may well be that Hodza followed this practice consciously in an effort to preserve the dying traditions of his people; it may well be that Hodza is himself a traditional poet and that his additions are accordingly wholly traditional; it may well be that sometimes—by no means always—his informants are cited (e.g. pp. 132, 153). But the folklorist will not be satisfied with the names of Chikomba, Mandeya II, Zindi and Muparutsa as Hodza's informants for the text he produces as 'The clan praises of the people of Mutasa's clan' (pp. 130 ff); he wants to know what Muparutsa actually said when he thanked Chikomba (say) by reciting his clan praises on 17 March 1972 (say) in the presence of specific members of the community. If necessary, the collector

Tradition in Southern Africa: Essays in Honour of Eileen Krige (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1978), 206–21.

[10] E. Gunner, 'Songs of innocence and experience: Women as composers and performers of *izibongo*, Zulu praise poetry', *Research in African Literatures* (1979), X, 239–67.

[11] S. M. Guma, *The Form, Content and Technique of Traditional Literature in Southern Sotho* (Pretoria, Van Schaik, 1967).

[12] E. Lönnrot (ed.), *Kalevala* (Helsinki, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1849).

should present variants of the same text (as Damane and Sanders sometimes do). The contemporary folklorist no longer wants to read that 'the likely context' for a published text 'would be a beer party and such a recital part of the entertainment' (p. 327); he wants the actual text produced during a specific beer party as entertainment. Only rarely do Fortune and Hodza supply information about specific performers and contexts (e.g. p. 352).

Both the folklorist and the comparatist might well be interested in an issue such as the role of improvisation in the Shona tradition. It would appear from the commentary and from the manner in which the texts are presented that the texts are held to be memorized. When a lover composes a poem, he adds to the fixed praises of his beloved's clan specific lines he has himself deliberately composed (p. 291); in context, does the Shona performer ever add to the fixed praises improvised lines referring to the occasion? Only once in the commentary (p. 346) does Fortune allow for this possibility, but a few of the texts contain lines that seem to refer to the unique context of their performance: a man praising his wife to his intimate friend (*sahwira*) starts

> This one of mine, my friend, stands quite apart,
> Not to be compared with others we see here.
> This one of mine blesses all she touches, a woman beyond
> compare . . . (p. 336).

How would this text differ from the poem produced by the same man about his wife if his *sahwira*, or other wives, were not present? Would a wife who praises her blacksmith husband at work in the presence of customers who participate in her performance use the same words on another occasion?

> Today this place is full of noise and jollity.
> The guiding spirit that enables my husband to forge makes him do
> wonders.
> All those who lack hoes for weeding, come and buy!
> Hoes and choppers are here in plenty.
> My husband is a craftsman in iron,
> Truly a wizard at forging hoes.
> Ah, here they are! They have come eager to find hoes.
> Ah, the iron itself is aglow, it is molten red with heat,
> And the ore is ruddy and incandescent . . .(pp. 352 ff).

It seems as though there might well be an element of improvisation in Shona oral poetry, which enables the performer not only to repeat a memorized text but also to comment on the situation confronting him at the moment of performance, and this is of critical interest, not only to the folklorist and comparatist. The Tswana, Sotho, Zulu—and now Shona—traditions have always been presented as if the poetry were memorized; Xhosa poetry produced by the *imbongi*, on the other hand, is primarily improvised. Is the Xhosa tradition unusual in this respect, or—as I suspect—is the element of improvisation in the neighbouring traditions more significant than has been allowed for by collectors and editors?

With the appearance of this study of Shona oral poetry, we are now in a better position to propose hypotheses about the South-Eastern Bantu tradition in general: points of difference and of congruence become more readily apparent, and they can provide the stimulus for the posing of leading questions. What is the relation

between the poetry of the traditions of those peoples (like the Shona and the Sotho) who support totemic systems and those (like the Zulu and the Xhosa) who do not but who might once have done? Is the prominence of animals in the poetic imagery of the latter two traditions merely for metaphoric purposes or did it originate in a totemic system? Is the geographic imagery in Xhosa poetry in any way related to the Shona penchant for reference to the burial places of ancestors? If the Shona, Sotho and Zulu traditions are primarily memorial, why did the poetry of the Xhosa *imbongi* become primarily improvisational? If the Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu traditions still retain poets associated with the chiefs (*liroki, iimbongi, izimbongi*), why did such a figure (*rombe*) disappear from the Shona tradition? We are better equipped to deal with problems such as these as pieces are added to the mosaic of traditions in southern Africa.

Perhaps the greatest contribution that can be made in the field of comparative studies of the Southern Bantu poetic traditions is to our understanding of the nature of the poetry itself and of its function in society. The clan praises that are so prominent a feature of the Shona tradition—which can readily be seen to generate the other forms, even the praises of chiefs—consist of statements on the character of the totem both flattering and unflattering, citations of chiefs' names and burial sites, allusions to the qualities of the clan members (usually in terms of qualities of the totem), allusions to history. The mixture of praise and blame is a characteristic of all the southern traditions where the poet often also enjoys the licence to use ribald language with impunity, as in the Shona tradition (pp. 262–3); the praise poetry of the southern traditions usually places the subject in a genealogical context, refers frankly to his physical and moral attributes, and alludes elliptically to significant events in his career. One is dealing here with praise poetry (*nhetembo* or *madetembedzo*) as distinct from narrative (*ndyaringo*). One is dealing here with a genre common in Africa,[13] also known as panegyric or eulogy, and a genre common elsewhere in the world (compare some of the biblical psalms, for example, or modern Cretan funeral laments recently described by Alexiou[14]); Gregory Nagy[15] has argued persuasively that such a form predates the classical Greek epic. Eulogy is emerging as a significant genre in the literary and cultural history of diverse peoples, yet we know less about it than we know about epic. We need more studies like that of Fortune and Hodza on living traditions of eulogy so that we may better understand the form of poetry in civilizations distant in place and time, and the function of that poetry in society. The clear location of Shona eulogy within a ritual system of ancestor veneration, evident also in the Zulu tradition, makes such a connection plausible for the Xhosa tradition and for other ancient traditions such as the Anglo-Saxon, the Old Norse, the Celtic, and indeed the whole Indo-European complex. The connection between Shona clan praises and the autobiographical 'boasts' has implications for our understanding of the practice of ritual boasting common in the traditions of early medieval Europe. Thus the living

[13] See S. A. Babalola (ed.), *The Context and Form of Yoruba Ijala* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, The Oxford Library of African Literature, 1966), and H. F. Morris (ed.), *The Heroic Recitations of the Bahima of Ankole* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, The Oxford Library of African Literature, 1964).

[14] M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974).

[15] G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979).

traditions of Africa have significance far beyond the continent in the twentieth century.

Shona Praise Poetry stands as a major contribution in the preservation of Shona tradition. It is also a detailed and scholarly study of the oral poetry of the Shona-speaking peoples of Zimbabwe that offers material of critical relevance to our understanding of the genre of eulogy, of poetry in the South-Eastern Bantu traditions, and ultimately of the development of literature.

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