

BOOK REVIEWS

Literature, Language and the Nation: Proceedings of the Second General Conference of the Association of University Teachers of Literature and Language (ATOLL) held at the University of Zimbabwe, 24-28 August 1987 Edited by E. Ngara and A. Morrison. Harare, ATOLL and Baobab Books, 1989, 230 pp., ISBN 0-908311-11-7, Z\$30,00.

The range of papers in this valuable collection shows the desire of university teachers in the SADC region to address issues relating to the broad areas staked out in the title: language, literature and national consciousness. What is immediately and fascinatingly clear is the tension between regionalism and nationalism which a number of the essays suggest, either implicitly or explicitly. The continuing anxiety over the use of English as a national language is also evident in some papers, and another trans-continental theme which emerges from the essays is the increasing gap between the intellectual and the political élite in the post-independence era.

There is a surprising — given the stance of the nascent Zimbabwe on questions of gender during the liberation war — near-silence in the collection on issues of gender and its relation to literature, language and nationality. One of the few essays which deals with women and writing is Rosamund Metcalf's essay, 'The liberation of female consciousness in African literature'. Her provocative readings of Mariama Ba and Bessie Head (in *When Rainclouds Gather*) as writers trapped in the mythology of romance and her praise of Emecheta form a fascinating contrast to Phillip Dine's essay. Dine castigates the dominant 'realist' mode of Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (and by implication most of African writing in English!) as 'one more repressive colonial structure' and contrasts Lessing's early works with the Algerian Kateb Yacine's *Nedjema* which he characterizes as an anti-novel 'committed to the disorientation of the reader at every level' — a remark which could be fruitfully used for Dambudzo Marechera's fiction as well. Dine does not, however, see the ironies in this iconoclastic text, using the woman Yacine as a trope for the nation and thus reiterating the négritudist 'Mother Africa' iconography in which the figure of woman in Africa can be so easily trapped and turned into a symbol without any political agency.

Anthony Nazombe's review of Frank Chipasula's fine anthology of central and Southern African poetry (*When My Brothers Come Home*) usefully contrasts the modern poetry of Malawi with that of Angola and Mozambique. He is critical of the way in which Angolan and Mozambican poetry is burdened by revolutionary rhetoric and — in his view — ignores the myth and music of the country, unlike Malawian poetry which is full of subtle irony and ambiguity. Here Nazombe is in danger of a kind of easy formalism and of failing to address the different socio-political contexts of the two regions. His anxiety about the reduction of art to the level of 'mere propaganda' spills over into his discussion of South African poetry where he, interestingly, acknowledges the new importance of the intrusion of traditional forms with their own aesthetic. He does not, however,

acknowledge that so-called traditional forms rarely distinguish between art and propaganda — and are, in fact, usually full of both. Neither Nazombe nor Emmanuel Ngara, in his article on South African liberation poetry, seem prepared to enlarge the parameters of their discussion of poetry to include popular song, which can — in my view — be seen as a legitimate form of poetry and which is, in the African context, at least as viable a medium for social and artistic expression as printed poetry.

In contrast, the need to include the medium of song in any discussion of protest and popular consciousness is stressed in Joe Mbele's paper but, unfortunately, this paper gives the impression of being a survey which fails to engage at all closely with the dynamics of a particular tradition. Mbele does not raise questions about audience, about the relation between song and written verse and about which form takes precedence in popular awareness. Here the language question is crucial and we are reminded of Ngugi's nagging fear that English, however decolonized and localized it may be, can never be a popular language, or the vehicle of expression for the bulk of the populace.

One of the most innovative papers in the collection analyses an item of popular culture — the comic strip — and demonstrates how it subtly engages in wide-ranging political comment. Tim McLoughlin's usefully diachronic essay, 'The comic strip and Zimbabwe's development', shows the shifting interface of comic-strip and colonizer, comic-strip and aspirant-consumer and a range of other comic-strip conversations and commentaries. The colonizer's wishful image of the grateful and subservient Black man is mirrored in the pre-Independence *Parade* magazine character Ninepence; comic-strips were also used to depict myths of heroic fighters to the Whites. They can also, as the restless, shifty cartoon character of the 1970s, Haja-Kasaga, shows, catch the spiritual restlessness of the times just as subtly as the fiction of the same period — for example in the work of Mungoshi, Marechera and Nyamfukudza. In its accessibility and topicality as well as its ability to create healthy ridicule at a time of tension and dissent the comic-strip is indeed a sensitive and useful popular art form, in the same way as the song. McLoughlin's paper is the only one in the collection to consider popular art forms and literature in a single argument — and yet, if one is to be true to the production of culture in most parts of Africa today, surely this is essential?

The section of the book entitled 'Language' has several essays which deal at a very general level with the crucial issues of education, equality, national consciousness, and culture — all of which are inevitably suggested by this topic when discussed in an African context. Other essays are more specific and these are the more rewarding for the reader. Andrew Morrison tackles the possibilities of the development of a specifically Zimbabwean English, thus implicitly querying Ngugi's assertion of English as a cultural 'dead-end' for Africa. The paper by Ines Machungo and Gilberto Matusse on 'Language and literature in education in Mozambique' is far too general; nothing is analysed in depth and the potentially fascinating subject of multi-lingualism in Mozambique is not addressed in nearly enough detail.

The two contributions by Scandinavian scholars are somewhat uneven in quality. Preben Kaarsholm draws parallels between the democratization

of the Danish countryside in the 1930s and Zimbabwe's tradition of popular mobilization. Helge Rønning's essay, in spite of its alarmingly general title, is both wide-ranging and sharply focused and suggestive rather than prescriptive in its comparisons between Norway and Zimbabwe. This paper gives a clear historical sense of Norway's move towards a democratic national consciousness rather than a national consciousness fixed within the bourgeois élite. This was, he argues, possibly because of the basic egalitarian ideals of traditional Norwegian society and the role of a national culture based on popular institutions and traditions combined with an element of classic European learning and modern science.

Peter Mwikasa's challenging and tightly argued paper on the links between Sesotho and distant Silozi puts the question of the élitist role of English in Africa in the context of other workable possibilities involving African languages. He outlines the accidents of colonial and church history linking the two languages and suggests modern possibilities for print media which could supply a readership of 10 million Sesotho-Silozi-Setswana language speakers, a group which cuts across national boundaries. Mwikasa points out that indigenous languages, far from being divisive, can offer possibilities for regional unity which cut across national boundaries. He might have added that it also provides a bulwark against the flourishing of narrow ethnicities, but he does point out the irony of the fact that it is the South African government that has most exploited the propaganda and consciousness-raising potential of indigenous languages; for example, during the Namibian war of independence they introduced Silozi into radio programmes beamed at the Caprivi Strip aiming to win the 'hearts and minds' of the few Silozi speakers in that area.

To conclude: although in some ways this is an uneven book, it remains an important one. It gives the reader a sense of the diverse energies of scholars and teachers from the region wrestling with problems relating to the politics of culture and the cultural politics of nation and region. The book has no doubt already been of much use in cultural studies and courses on literature focusing on Southern Africa. It certainly deserves to be widely used. It could also provide a lead to educationalists and cultural policy-makers in SADC's troubled neighbour, South Africa. Most important of all is the sense of a carefully realized regional focus which transcends the often artificial boundaries and the fragile concept of the 'nation'. Perhaps, as the book half hints, in spite of its title, what is needed most is not nationalism but regionalism. Taken as a whole the essays in this collection give a sense of what that regionalism could mean.