

This paper seeks to show that there is still very little Shona literature published in Zimbabwe. It remains a minority literature – even though Shona is spoken by at least 75% of the total population – compared with that published in English, the mother tongue of about 8% of the population. This paper briefly discusses the colonial and current language policies that have promoted this state of affairs. The continued marginalization of Shona literature in the face of current vigorous attempts to improve the situation is illustrated. Challenges faced by writers and publishers who try to write and publish in indigenous languages are discussed. Finally, the paper emerges with possible practical suggestions on how Shona literature could flourish in an environment dominated by English.



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

## Writing and publishing in indigenous languages is a mere waste of time:

a critical appraisal of the challenges faced by writers and publishers of Shona literature in Zimbabwe

Enna Sukutai Gudhlanga & Godwin Makaudze



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# Abstract

This paper seeks to show that there is still very little Shona literature published in Zimbabwe. It remains a minority literature – even though Shona is spoken by at least 75% of the total population – compared with that published in English, the mother tongue of about 8% of the population. This paper briefly discusses the colonial and current language policies which have promoted this state of affairs. The continued marginalization of Shona literature in the face of current vigorous attempts to improve the situation is illustrated. Challenges faced by writers and publishers who try to write and publish in indigenous languages are discussed. Finally, the paper emerges with possible practical suggestions on how Shona literature could flourish in an environment dominated by English.

Chinyorwa chino chakananga kuratidza kuti uvaranomwe hweChiShona muZimbabwe huchine uwandu hushoma chose. Kunyangwe zvazvo vatauri vemutauro uyu vakawanda zvekusvika zvikamu makumi manomwe nezvishanu kubva muzana (75%) kana kupfuura, uwandu hweuvaranomwe hwacho huchiri pasi chose kana zvichienzaniswa nehvakatsikiswa muChiRungu icho chingova rurimi rwaamai rwevanhu vangangoita zvikamu zvisere chete kubva muzana (8%). Chinyorwa chino chinojekesa nepapfupi mitemo yezvekushandiswa kwemitauro yaiveko panguva yeutongi hwevachena uye iripo nhasi iyo iri kupa mamiriro ezvinhu akada. Zvikonzero zviru kuita kuti uvaranomwe hweChiShona hurambe huchitarisirwa pasi zvisinei nematanho ari kutorwa kuedza kuhusimudzira zvinojekeswa muchinyorwa chino. Zvigozhero zvinosanganikwa nazvo nevanyori nevatsikisi vezvinyorwa mundimi dzevatema zvinotsanangurwawo. Kwekupedzisira, chinyorwa chinobuda nematanho angatorwa kuti uvaranomwe hweChiShona hukurumbirewo munharaunda ino inokosheswa ChiRungu.

## Introduction

The factors affecting literary production in Zimbabwe arise partly in the colonial period, but some are of a post-independence making. Literary growth is something that needs to be examined both quantitatively and qualitatively. Sadly, the growth of Shona literature falls short in both aspects. Ironically, for the past 16 years – 1990 to 2006 – Zimbabwe as a country has undergone many experiences that should have challenged writers as well as publishers to produce topical and thought-provoking fiction; but in the case of writing in indigenous languages like Shona and Ndebele, this has not happened. By contrast, the country has witnessed a steady growth of the right kind of literature published in English. Against the rich background of a possible boom in literary production, very few books have been published in Shona as compared with those published in English, despite the fact that Shona is spoken by more than 75% of the total Zimbabwean population. In the few that have been published in Shona, the issues dwelt on are quite trivial and peripheral. Why is that so?

There are many contradictory forces at work during the production of literature published in indigenous languages. Among the issues hindering literary development in Shona are: language policies, lack of economic resources due to the underperformance of the state economy, lack of guidance in creative writing and general fear among writers who do not want to risk their lives and security by exposing reality as it is.

## Policies regarding language

A number of policies on language have had a negative impact on the growth of literature written in indigenous languages.

### Colonial language policies

Some of the factors that hold back the production of Shona literature are colonial language policies. During the colonial period, English was considered the official language while Shona and Ndebele were vernacularized. The language policy of the time dictated that the mother tongue was to be used in the lower primary school, that is, in basic education (Campbell & Gwete 1998). Those few Africans who succeeded in progressing beyond the basic education stage subsequently switched to English as the medium of instruction and communication. In secondary and higher education, the language policy was silent on the position of Shona in the curriculum. Initially indigenous languages were not taught in schools and universities. Shona was introduced as a subject at Ordinary Level only in 1957 for African schools. In former group A schools, it was introduced in 1964. It was imperative to pass English at Ordinary Level. The first group of Shona students enrolled at the University of Rhodesia in 1963, and in all cases, English was the medium of instruction even for the subject,

Shona. No serious learning was ever considered possible in the indigenous languages. The language policy, then, forced students to strive to pass English; it was later to affect the attitude of the public and thus the development of literature in Shona and English.

### Current language policies

The language policies prevalent during the colonial period are painfully present in independent Zimbabwe. Even today, Shona is still marginalized. The legal status of languages in the country is set out in the Education Act of 1987. According to this Act, English is the official language, while Shona and Ndebele are national languages with restricted official use (Campbell & Gwete 1998). The Act still states that the home language (mother tongue) should be used as a medium of instruction in the first three years of primary education, and English should be used from the fourth grade onwards (Gudhlanga 2005). Despite the country's much acclaimed sovereignty, English is still a prerequisite for obtaining a job and acceptance into colleges and universities (Chiwome 2002). This has continued to reinforce in the public (parents, schools, teachers and writers) the same colonial attitudes towards language.

### Teaching language policies

The language policies as outlined above also influenced schools and universities to adopt certain policies in their teaching of various languages and subjects. In line with the national language policy on the medium of instruction in post-elementary education, schools designed their own local teaching policies to ensure that pupils gain proficiency and pass the English language exams. So, in most schools in colonial times, and currently, the use of Shona was and is outlawed except during a Shona lesson. In some cases, the Shona lessons were conducted in English as another way of improving the pupils' grasp of the important language. Until 2004, at Advanced Level the medium of instruction and examination for some aspects of the Shona subject was English.

Such occidental language policies were indirectly reinforced even in the way Shona was taught at institutions of higher learning. At the University of Rhodesia, Shona studies inclined more towards language structure at the expense of literature, affecting the growth of the latter. One former university student, Thompson Tsodzo, recalls his university days in an interview with Chiwome (1996:8) and says:

At the time our studies were in English. Shona was based on language study. The Head of Department, Professor Fortune was white. I felt that what we were learning was not conducive to developing Shona literature and culture and I continuously challenged my professors until Professor Fortune one day called me and told me in confidence that he was also frustrated by the situation and that he had taught many African students in the university and none had written anything so he was teaching what he could teach best.

With the advent of independence, the African Languages Department at the University of Zimbabwe boasted many black lecturers whose interests lay in literary analysis. However, the new university curriculum inclined more towards literary criticism, with little emphasis on the cultivation of creative writing skills. For the few students who later became writers, the tendency has been to chronicle events without being creative. Yet creative writing is “the capacity to be innovative; to invent, to place elements in a way which they have never been before such that their beauty is enhanced” (Chiwome 2002:15). So, post-independence university education seems to have produced good literary critics who lack much-needed writing skills to develop the literature in indigenous languages. While some countries like Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria have produced many writer-critics in the persons of Ngugi waThiongo, Okot p’Bitek and Chinua Achebe, sadly, this is not the case for Zimbabwe.

## Publishing policies

Commercial publishers in the then Rhodesia and current Zimbabwe are in the business of selling words. Publishing companies belong to private agencies whose policies are guided by profit rather than developing Shona literature (Chiwome 1996). The book industry itself is foreign-owned. Longman, one of the publishing houses, is part of the English-based Longman International Publishers. The College Press, which publishes educational books, is 40% owned by Macmillan and 40% by the wealthy English Peach family (ibid). Weaver Press and Baobab Books are also foreign-owned. All these publishing companies are concerned with profit-making, with the exception of Mambo Press which receives subsidies from the Catholic Swiss Diocese. The concern with profit-making is highlighted by Quentin Seddon (1966:91), who says, “When a publisher gets a manuscript, the major question he or she asks is, ‘Will it sell?’” This concern with profit-making is fundamental to the publisher. Thus marketing reduces a work of art to a commodity, and a work of art is considered good when it sells fast. Consequently writers and publishers tend to produce literature that is marketable, yet may be qualitatively poor.

## People’s attitudes

The afore-mentioned language policies have influenced people to develop certain attitudes towards English and indigenous languages and their literatures.

## Attitudes towards indigenous languages and English

Owing to its peripheral use, Shona was a language associated with rural poverty and backwardness from which successful candidates were expected to dissociate themselves (Chiwome 1996). In contrast, English came to be viewed as a gateway to success. Candidates aspired to passing English, the language without

which there would be no valid Cambridge school certificate (Chiwome 2002). Parents and teachers, consequently, both then and even today, are eager for their children to pass English and do not bother much if they fail Shona; in fact, they are proud when their children fail Shona but pass English. Despite all the rhetoric about promoting indigenous languages, parents continue to send their children to schools where the medium of communication is English. They do not want their children to learn Shona. Hence the texts they recommend to schools, and buy, are those that would boost their children’s proficiency in English – which results in a predilection for English fiction.

## Attitudes towards literature

The view among many indigenous language speakers is that to speak is to speak English and to read literature is to read literature written in English. In Zimbabwe, the books that were – and are – considered good enough to grace school libraries are in English and not Shona. Commenting on the idea of a library in most African schools, Willias Masocha, a longtime manager of Longman Zimbabwe said, in an interview with Chiwome (1996:8), “You find when people talk of building up a library they mean English books. You get big donations of English books and people feel honoured. If you make similar donations in Shona people do not feel honoured”.

The prestige associated with English has made even some indigenous language speakers choose it for their creative writing. Marechera explains why he chose to write in English and not Shona: “It never occurred to me. Shona was part of the ghetto demon I was trying to escape. Shona had been placed within the context of a degraded mind wrenching experience from which apparently the escape was into the English language and education” (in Veit-Wild 1988:7).

So, through colonial and neo-colonial education, Zimbabweans have been made to look down on literature published in indigenous languages. Publishers therefore cannot commit to producing literature in these languages when people despise and denigrate them. Both writers and publishers know this fact so they tend to dance to the tune of the market.

The other reality is that some publishers favour certain kinds of literature. For example, currently Weaver Press and Mambo Press are promoting short stories. An exacerbating factor is that it has now become too expensive for publishers to produce long texts, hence the inclination towards short stories. This means that writers have to compete in a narrow field, and also that literary development in other genres, such as the novel, poetry and drama, gets stifled.

## Attitudes towards reading

In Zimbabwe there is no reading culture, and it is worse still for literature written in indigenous languages. When people buy Shona books, it is not because they enjoy reading them. Rather it is because those books are prescribed for

study in schools. The only Shona literary manuscripts that can be accepted for publication or reprinting, then, are those prescribed as setbooks in high schools, colleges and universities. Only textbooks and prescribed setbooks are in demand. These can sell and guarantee a profit for the publisher. A Longman marketing manager interviewed by Chiwome (1996:48) lamented thus:

One of the reasons for the few publications in the novels area is the realisation that Zimbabwe as a whole does not seem to read for leisure. Even supplementary books are meant for the school ... The market is so small we cannot publish for it ... Unless we cultivate a reading culture we will continue to rely on schools ...

The market for the book industry in Zimbabwe is thus supplied and controlled by the Ministry of Education that prescribes school setbooks.

### Attitudes towards writers

Publishers tend to have a preference for established writers as opposed to new and upcoming ones – they usually do not want to risk publishing material from someone whose prowess they have not established. Some writers like Charles Mungoshi, Ignatius Zvarevashe and Chirikure Chirikure have made names in the publishing industry, while it is difficult for budding writers to make a breakthrough. In some cases, promising writers have complained that their drafts are usually condemned by publishers as unpublishable but ironically, the same drafts, with minor adjustments, may resurface with the same publisher but under the name of a different author.

## Constraints faced by writers and publishers of Shona literature

A number of factors, including the market size, publishing setup, state of the economy, incentives, state censorship, as well as the lack of tutelage in literary writing, affect both the quantitative and qualitative growth of Shona literature.

### Small and unfavourable market

Owing to the policies and attitudes discussed above, there is no substantial market for Shona literature in Zimbabwe. The number of students studying African languages continues to have little economic significance for the publisher. Very few students opt for these languages especially at secondary, high school and tertiary level. Worse still, those who do opt to study these languages will usually have been stigmatised as low performers in prestigious commercial and science subjects where the medium of instruction is purely English. Then, for those who study indigenous languages at tertiary level, the student grant has been so eroded by inflation that buying books is now more of a luxury. These students rely on their parents who are often poorly paid or unemployed and cannot afford to

buy expensive books. Consequently, in this unfavourable market, publishers are usually unable to cover their production of Shona literature.

Such a state of affairs can have unfortunate consequences. In some cases publishers have had to produce Shona books that have typographical errors because they cannot afford to pay for the amendments. The novel *Tambaoga Mwanangu*, for example, was published as *Tambaoga Mwan'ngu* because there was no money to correct the mistake in the last word (Chiwome 1996).

### Few publishing houses

The paucity of literary texts in Shona does not mean that people are not writing. Rather, there is a lot of publishable material queuing up in publishing companies. In circumstances where there are many publishing companies, writers could always take their manuscripts to the next publisher if the first one delays or rejects the material. In Zimbabwe, however, there are just too few publishers to accommodate writers in Shona, Ndebele, and other minority languages. As a result, the publishing of literature in indigenous languages is outweighed by the demand for literature in English, and some Shona books are only published five, and even eight, years after they have been accepted for publication.

### State economic collapse/severe economic challenges

Since the early 1990s, Zimbabwe has been facing severe economic challenges – such as the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme, droughts, negative publicity, a decline in exports, high inflation and a shortage of much needed foreign currency for the procurement of resources. As a result, the money that the government could have been channelling towards the development of fiction, by cushioning publishers, is channelled towards the procurement of food and fuel, and demands in the health sector. Lack of government subsidy has forced publishing companies to ask writers to fund the initial publication of their work so that, when the book fails to secure immediate sales, the publisher does not suffer a loss. The amounts charged are usually high – beyond the reach of many upcoming or even established writers, further impeding the production of Shona literature.

### Lack of literary awards

There appear to be no literary awards for books published in indigenous languages. Consequently writers and publishers tend to shun Shona and publish in English where they have chances of winning NOMA and Commonwealth Prize for Africa awards. Authors who resorted to writing in English include Chenjerai Hove, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera and Dambudzo Marechera, among others. Once these English publications are best sellers they become setbooks for many universities worldwide. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

(1958), Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* (1988) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) have received international recognition and have been translated into a number of foreign languages, encouraging writers and publishers to produce English literature, which has a wider market.

## Lack of guidance in creative writing

Shona fiction still remains minority literature in terms of quality, partly due to a lack of guidance in creative writing. Many writers would, for example, complain that the Zimbabwean situation at the moment is such that they cannot tackle real and pertinent issues and treat them objectively. This is because there are no workshops or courses on creative writing which could suggest to writers the kind of themes they could deal with, as well as various ways of handling them. It is clear from the way that some writers present their work that they lack such skills. Again, it is clear that those who do not even attempt to write for the fear of risking their lives lack the technique with which such workshops equip writers.

## State censorship

In the then colonial Rhodesia the Literature Bureau acted as a censorship board. Literature produced in indigenous languages with the intention of being published could not be subversive – Bureau editors made sure that the literature produced was “healthy”, “sound”, and in line with the socio-political context of the day. Hence literature produced in indigenous languages was preoccupied with moralizing and didacticism. Even in independent Zimbabwe censorship of literature is still a common feature. In order for one to become a publisher in present day Zimbabwe, one needs to conform to the terms of the Media Commission and this, in a way, is a censorship board. Worse still, the country has also adopted the controversial Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), which forbid anyone to write about someone without their consent. The laws make it difficult for potential and established writers to expose reality objectively for fear of retribution from the authorities if their works are critical of the state.

Critical literature is not tolerated by the state; voices of dissent are sometimes quashed and, in some cases, texts get removed from the bookshelves. When such things happen both writers and publishers suffer heavy financial losses. An example is Hove's *Masimba Avanhu?* (Is it really people's power?) (1990) which challenged the government that took control at independence to adhere to its pre-independence promises and to be accountable. The book was in circulation for a short time but suffered an immediate ban thereafter. The situation was worsened by the fact that it was published in Shona, a language easily understood by many literate Shona people. The government viewed it as unfit for public consumption, thus quashing the potential growth of litera-

ture. This is saddening, given the fact that there are so many topical issues in Zimbabwe at the moment – issues appropriate as subjects for creative writing; but the fear that the government can descend on any writer and/or publisher who is viewed as ‘misrepresenting it’ scares anyone in the business of literary production. Much has taken place that scares people: recent invasions of farms, factories and industries, and destruction of illegal structures. These all contribute to a fear of the unknown to both writers and publishers.

The challenge that most Shona writers face in this case, then, is to have the courage to be responsible and stand as the voice of the voiceless (Ngugi 1981); as the sensitive needles of society (Mpahlele in Ngugi 1972); as rulers who pass judgment on what is good and what is bad (p'Bitek 1986); and as teachers who teach society on its wrongdoings and how to create a more humane society (Achebe 1975); as well as historians who expose life as it is lived by society (p'Bitek 1974). After all, a writer need not offer excuses for writing (Achebe 1975). Publishers, too, are challenged to become relevant to society by promoting and publishing literature that aims at improving the lives of the people.

## Possible intervention strategies

The following suggestions, if properly followed, could possibly promote publication of Shona literature in Zimbabwe.

### Elevating Shona language to official status

Indigenous languages like Shona and Ndebele should be elevated to official status. They should be made compulsory for a valid Ordinary Level certificate and should be pre-requisites for admission to colleges or for obtaining a job (Gudhlanga 2005). Once this is done the low esteem associated with indigenous languages will disappear for they will also be a gateway to success. Also, students entering universities, colleges, or any tertiary institution should compulsorily do a communication skills course in either Shona or Ndebele. Once African languages are made official and are being studied, publishers and writers could then unreservedly write and publish in those languages.

### Introduction of a creative writing course in indigenous languages

The Ministry of Education and Culture, working together with the Ministry of Higher Education, should make sure that a creative writing course is introduced into the high school syllabus, and into tertiary level education. Once this is done, students of either Shona or Ndebele literature should be taught creative writing in their studies. Essay competitions in indigenous languages could be organized, helping to shape future writers and boost production of quality literature in indigenous languages.

## Coordinating with neighbouring countries

In order for Zimbabwe to have a bigger market for Shona literature, it should co-ordinate with neighbouring countries that also speak Shona. For example, Shona is widely spoken in the Manica Province of Mocambique. Responsible authorities in both countries should make it possible for Shona literature to be shared between the two countries. Furthermore, the examinations should be set and co-ordinated by the same board. This should apply not only to Shona but to all the other languages that are shared with Zimbabwe's neighbours. Writers would then be willing to write in indigenous languages like Shona since they would have a market outside the country.

## Literary workshops organized by the publishing industry

The publishing industry also needs to play a more positive role. The Zimbabwe Book Publishers' Association has joined the Literature Bureau in sponsoring literary competitions. The Zimbabwe International Book Fair (ZIBF) 2004 also took a positive step when it gave awards for the best 75 books in all three of the national languages of Zimbabwe, i.e. Shona, Ndebele and English. At the ZIBF 2005 the Zimbabwe Book Publishers' Association gave awards for good books in the three languages mentioned above. However, they could go a step further and use the more positive approach of sponsoring workshops that promote fiction in indigenous languages. The workshops should, among other things, help writers see and appreciate their responsibilities in society, the topical issues they should write on, as well as the stylistic devices they can use to convey such burning issues. The blame on censorship should also be partly shouldered by the writers who are unable to use techniques that help them put across their social visions without offending anyone in particular. A good example of how to use such techniques is Mabasa's *Mapenzi* (1990), which satirically and metaphorically exposes issues like corruption, immorality, irresponsibility of leaders and the looting of the war victims' compensation fund. Despite being a realistic portrayal of issues, it has not suffered from censorship because it is well crafted.

## Partnership of the textbook and the novel

Further, publishers could innovate by creating a partnership of textbook and novel. This could be used to marry the publisher's objective of making profit and the nation's desire for good fiction in indigenous languages. In an interview with Chiwome, Irene Staunton, founder of Weaver Press, Zimbabwe, argues that good novels could be subsidized by textbooks, which are the company's money spinners (Chiwome 1996). Once a few good novels have been published they will pay for themselves and the other average books that are good for cultural development would sell. In that way, the publisher could build a reputation for being the producer of good quality textbooks as well as novels. Raymond

Choto's *Vavairo* (1990) was published as an implementation of this policy of self-sufficiency of fiction. Such a scheme would, however, take time to complete and needs patience, a rare virtue in business.

## Establishment of a Translation Centre

This paper has lamented the existence and continued growth of serious and more useful literature in English as compared with that in Shona. The quantitative and qualitative boom in Shona fiction could be promoted by the establishment of a Translation Centre, one where trained and experienced translators translate good works of art from English into Shona. The Ministries of Higher Education and Education, Sport and Culture, together with the corporate world, could join in this venture so that funding does not become a problem. In this way, works of high quality currently available only in the English language – for example Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (1982) p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966), among others – could be made available in Shona. This possibility is illustrated by the fact that one of the most celebrated Shona novels, *Tsanga Yembeu* (1987), is a translation of Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* (1984). Thus Shona can have works of a similar value and quality to those in English and ultimately appeal to the taste of the Shona reader. A Shona Writers' Association should also be formed so that it coordinates and spearheads these translations from English. This association could also enhance literary writing by encouraging people to produce new fiction in Shona, and organizing workshops to train budding writers.

## Conclusion

It is true that Shona literature in Zimbabwe may not be well developed – but also that it never will be unless Shona speakers decide to use their language in creative writing. If we hesitate, who will do the duty for us? If we fall back, can we complain that others are rushing forward? Thus a decision should be made to elevate indigenous languages to official status, and immediate steps should be taken to spread the use of African languages in a wide range of domains. Once this is done, countries would be able to preserve their cultures. Language and culture complement each other: language is a vehicle for culture – culture cannot flourish in the absence of language, especially in written form.

## Endnote

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