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## REVIEW ARTICLE

**A Critical History of Shona Poetry** by Emmanuel M. Chiwome. Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1996, 151 pp, ISBN 0-908307-44-6, \$80.

This book is an account of Shona poetry, both oral and written, the former immemorial and continuously alive, the latter variously inceptive, depending on the changing social climate in which it has been written and published. The period covered is a brief forty years, the mid-50s to the mid-90s, dramatically divided into the pre- and post-independence dispensations. Dr Chiwome's presentation describes the poetry, both oral and written, in the different social and historical contexts that condition, or have conditioned it, showing how it reflects the sentiments of Shona communities and individuals at different moments of their history. In his evaluation of the written poetry, his stance, reminiscent of 'socialist realism', predisposes him to favour themes which are 'mainstream' and broadly political, almost to the extent of merely tolerating others broader or narrower in their purview than the colonial issue.

Reverting for a moment to a decade earlier than the mid-50s, for someone commencing a serious study of Shona in the years after the 1939-1945 war, there was little published literary material to complement, illustrate and enliven the several linguistic introductions to the language available. There were small collections of folk tales in school readers, somewhat lifeless through being reduced to print, and without the theme songs through which audiences participate in their performance. Hugh Tracey had begun to record performances of stories, songs and music, thus opening a chink into the world of Shona orature, the variety and genius of which was only to be revealed much later. Shona was a school subject, but was notoriously badly taught and unpopular with teachers and pupils alike. No wonder! An exercise which should ideally have been an extension and development of the children's early language learning by means of the exciting and communal *zvidobi*, *zvindori*, *magure* and other sung or spoken games, was reduced, in school, to the teaching of grammar and composition! It was only in 1970 that a 'literature component' was introduced into the RJC syllabus.

Mutsvairo, who was to compile a number of children's formative games and songs in a little publication entitled *Kambuyamuderere*,<sup>1</sup> had begun to compose verses of a different kind in the 1950s. These were first circulated in a stencilled collection of nineteen poems entitled *Madetembedzo eChiZezuru*.<sup>2</sup>

1 Cape Town, OUP, n.d. pp.16. A later booklet of the same kind by S.M. Mutsvairo was entitled *Tagutapadare. Poems for Children*, Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1982, pp.47.

2 Produced from Howard Secondary Department, Glendale, Southern Rhodesia, n.d.

They were exercises in the application of the metrical devices of English poetry to Shona with a view to introducing formal poetry into the language which, not previously having been written, seemingly lacked it. A number of his verses, and those of other writers using similar methods of composition, found their way into print in the late 1950s in a newspaper called *The African Weekly*. A competition organised by this paper in 1959 for the best *Madorimbo* (Poems) attracted over two hundred entries. The first prize was awarded to W. B. Chivaura for his *Kunewe Hama* (To you Kinsman). The second and third prizes went to L. C. Chidavaenzi and I. C. Chiketa respectively. All this literary effort was inspired by the desire to give Shona a new and literate poetic expression. *Pfungwa ngadziputike semaruva* (Let thoughts break out like flowers) cried Chivaura in his prize-winning poem. But the flowers through which the thoughts struggled for expression were artificial, alien both in form and content to the native poetic tradition of the poets who were unaware, or at least neglectful, of their own age-long and living legacy of poetic forms and genres. Realisation of these was to come later, and the creation of written poetry more in continuity with the oral, in a process well described by Donatus Nwoga as

'a reversal of what might be considered the natural process'. Instead of having a base of indigenous tradition into which new elements are introduced, we see our poets starting from the outside tradition and then becoming aware of their own tradition — because they are first literate in a foreign language and their first formal study of poetry is of the foreign language poetry.<sup>3</sup>

This *Critical History* is concerned with both oral and written poetry and the book consists of two complementary parts which deal in turn with each of these modes of existence. In addition, the complex relationship between the two is a theme which keep reappearing as the historical and critical account progresses. There is also an intervening chapter which could be regarded as a link between the two halves, and which deals with the enigmatically titled *Soko Risina Musoro* by Herbert Chitepo.<sup>4</sup> The title means literally 'A tale with no head', perhaps 'a senseless story' or 'an aimless word'. Chiwome expounds well the sense he can find in the three cantos. The first depicts the harmonious hierarchical society of the past. The second implies the destruction of traditional authority and all that depended on it. The third takes refuge in hope for a new future, but without any reference to concrete developments from which the

3 Donatus I. Nwoga, 'Obscurity and commitment in modern African poetry' in *African Literature Today*, No. 6. *Poetry in Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1973), 34. Quoted in a lecture entitled: 'Kumbirai and the Development of a Poetic Taste or Sensibility' by John Haasbroek at the University of Rhodesia in 1975.

4 Chitepo, H., *Soko Risina Musoro*. Translated and edited with notes by Hazel Carter (OUP, 1958), vii, 63.

dispossessed could take heart. The long poem lacks unity of form and clarity of vision. But Chiwome finds merit in it as carrying 'the modernist germ' which was to influence the work of later poets (p.36), and as evidencing a nationalist thrust relevant for its time, the colonial period (p.44). Advocate Chitepo was unfortunately not permitted to see the outcome of his hope.

Chiwome provides a fine and full description of the oral poetry, in Chapters 1-5, in its service and expression of life. After a preliminary chapter roughing out general concepts especially pertinent to oral poetry, he devotes separate chapters to its imagery, rhythm and its functions and motifs. Shona poetic imagery is multiform and ubiquitous, creative of poetic forms, as in proverbs and the dramatic *ndyaringo*, and in filling them brimful with meaning. The oral poet, *nyanduri*, is eminently a master of imagery. The rhythm of oral poetry is described with reference to the recurrent use of the features, both structural and semantic, which create the poetry. The chapter entitled 'Functions of Shona Oral Poetry' gives body to the description of popular poetry as serving and expressing life. In it the different genres of spoken and sung poetry are matched with the social institutions to which they contribute meaning and continued life. Chapter 5, 'Motifs in Shona Oral Poetry', seems oddly titled since the term 'motif' denotes a dominant element in a piece of artistic work. Yet this chapter deals with the performance of spoken and sung poetry but, as such, is richly illuminating. As a senior lecturer in the Department of African Languages and Literature at the University of Zimbabwe, Dr Chiwome combines critical expertise with his experience as a participant in the performance of oral poetry in order to further the understanding and appreciation of this rich heritage, a task envisaged and undertaken by the Department from its very beginning in 1960.

With the treatment of the oral literature as a background the author turns to critical history in the six chapters that remain. They deal with the written poetry in collections published between the years 1959 and 1994 and tell an interesting literary and historical story. In the first two anthologies, *Madetembedzo Akare Namatsva* (Poems Old and New, 1959)<sup>5</sup> and *Mutinhimira Wedetembo* (The Music of Poetry, 1965),<sup>6</sup> most of the poets wrote as if in their work Shona poetry was being born. In these early little books the traditional poems contrast oddly in form and style with the new, although already there is evidence of a shaping influence from the oral tradition, as in the work of Kumbirai and Muzenze. Chivaura was the most prolific and admired by his contemporaries, and Chiwome devotes

5 Shamuyarira, M., Chivaura, W., Mutsvairo, S., *Madetembedzo Akare Namatsva* (Cape Town, OUP, 1959), 32.

6 Musiwa, C. (Ed.), *Mutinhimira Wedetembo* (Salisbury, Longman, 1965), 44.

a number of sympathetic pages to his pioneer work. In it the influence of English poetry is so strong as to make it appear 'like an appendage', as Chiwome says (p.60). His criticism of Kumbirai at this point is reasonably appreciative, though the poet's themes are described as 'trapped in domesticity (in fact, human and, especially, youthful experience) and nature' (p.61) as if such should not have been subjects of poetic expression.

The three further anthologies edited and published by the Rhodesia Literature Bureau, *Mabvumira Enhetembo* (The Harmony of Poetry, 1969), *Nhetembo* (Poetry, 1972), and *Gwenyambira* (The Music Maker, 1979),<sup>7</sup> are treated in Chapters 8 and 9, entitled respectively 'Subsequent Colonial Trends' and 'Consolidation of Earlier Trends — The Rise of the Colonial Tradition'. The introductions to the anthologies bear witness to the increasing popularity of the writing of poetry, making the task of selection by the editors an invidious one. Mungoshi, himself a poet, contributes a very eloquent and moving *Musumo* (Introduction) to *Gwenyambira*. He proclaims the wide scope of poetry and emphasises the indispensable need for sincerity and truth for any genuinely personal poetic expression. In a pregnant sentence quoted by Chiwome (p.48) he says, *Nhetembo yakamirira chokwadi, nokudaro kuedzesera manyepo* ('Poetry stands for truth, falsity results from imitation'). He said this, not only to urge written Shona poetry to develop in continuity with the oral heritage of the language, but also to insist that it should come from the heart. *Nhetembo ndipo parere mwoyo wako . . . Pamwoyo wako ndipo pachitubu choupenyu hwako, pamanyuko ezvose zvauri* ('Poetry is where the heart lies . . . Where your heart lies is where the spring of your life gushes forth, it is the source of all that you are').<sup>8</sup> Further he stressed that poetry is not just for the eyes but for the ears as well, involving a fully human communication between poet and public. Chiwome describes this as having come to pass in the post-independence period in the performances of Chirikure's poetry at public gatherings (p.115). He also adverts very appositely to the therapeutic value which poetry can exercise, a remark prompted by the pleasure evoked by Hamutiyinei's work (p.74).

In his Preface Dr Chiwome acknowledges the influence of a study of the colonial condition by the Tunisian, Albert Memmi, entitled *The Coloniser and the Colonised*,<sup>9</sup> upon the critical stance he adopts. M. Memmi analyses colonial society in terms of a radical antithesis between the two parties,

7 Rhodesia Literature Bureau (ed.), *Mabvumira Enhetembo* with *Nhanganyaya* (Introduction) by J.C. Kumbirai, 1969, pp.139; *Nhetembo* with *Nhungamidzo* (Introduction) by O.C. Chiromo, 1972, pp.228; *Gwenyambira* with *Musumo* (Introduction) by C.L. Mungoshi, 1979, pp.214 (Gweru, Mambo Press).

8 Mungoshi, C.L., *Gwenyambira*, p.11.

9 Memmi, Albert, *The Coloniser and the Colonised* (London, Souvenir Press, 1965).

the colonist, necessarily an exploiter, and the colonised, by definition exploited. The benefits of the relationship between the two are secured to the coloniser, and only those which tend to preserve the coloniser's privileged position are yielded to the colonised. Chiwome applies this interpretation to the introduction of education, literacy, writing and the production of, among other things, written poetry among his people.

In artistic terms the colonisers urged writers to produce art that would free the colonisers from the blame of exploitation by making the suffering of the colonised appear natural . . . Through writers, the colonialist ideology found its way into the Shona culture (p.viii).

Dr Chiwome uses the analogy of Manichaeism to characterise the system in which the captured and domesticated culture of his people existed in relation to the colonial power. Just as it was the Manichaean ideal to liberate the captive Spirit from its imprisonment in Matter, so Dr Chiwome seeks to liberate the literate poetry in his mother tongue, the oral genres of which he has already celebrated, from the colonial influences which have infected it in its development. Concentrating first on the poetry published by the Rhodesia Literature Bureau he subjects it to a process of 'deconstruction', trusting it to discredit itself by being placed in its historical context of a subject people moving towards independence. Deconstruction, as a critical method, involves the selection of a particular privileged standpoint from which to criticise a piece of literature. Chiwome's standpoint is socio-political. As a Zimbabwean patriot it is perhaps understandable that he should be so disappointed in finding so little radical protest in the poetry, and, as a cultural purist, so little of real interest in the subjects chosen. He stigmatises the poetry in the Literature Bureau's anthologies as the work of poets alienated from their own culture and betraying in their work the acceptance of the values and myths of the colonial society. These they propagated and perpetuated through work which, in so far as it was read, influenced the outlook of the people at large. They have contributed, through their accommodation, to the maintenance of the subordinate condition which a foreign culture, regarding itself as superior and exclusive, had assigned to the people in whose very language the poetry was written. Judged by Mungoshi's criterion of truth and sincerity could such poetry be anything but false?

When *Mabvumira Enhetembo* came out this reviewer remembers having responded with delight to a development of the written poetry no longer imitative but inspired by the models of oral tradition. These promised to provide poets with a medium for genuine and uninhibited personal expression, and their readers with poetry to which they could naturally and appreciatively respond. In an article entitled 'Shona Traditional Poetry' I wrote,

When it first appeared, in the work of Chivaura and Mutsvairo, written poetry in Shona was a new departure showing no continuity with the oral tradition. But gradually more and more account has been taken of the forms and devices of spoken art so that, in the work of Hamutyinei and Kumbirai in the latest anthology, it is clear that the earlier poetic tradition is finding a new and developed literate expression.<sup>10</sup>

This welcoming recognition occurred at the beginning of the article to which I have referred and which was devoted to the description and illustration of the genres of oral poetry as known at that time — 1971. This was a task which had not been attempted before and needed to be done, if only to show how germane to Shona culture the new written poetry was.

Chiwome states that the neglect of orature as a source of inspiration by Western-trained poets was due to their regarding it as too evanescent and quaint to gain them a niche in the literary revolution. He quotes my recognition of the beginnings of a contrary trend but, surprisingly, interprets it as being 'in the vein' of the alienated would-be poets (pp.viii-ix). Further he interprets my use of the term 'earlier', (omitted from his quotation through an oversight), as meaning 'outmoded', whereas, in its context, it merely means 'pre-existent', without any implication of its having ceased to be. Then he pounces on the word 'developed', in the phrase 'developed literate expression', as inferring that the pre-existent oral poetry is to be regarded as undeveloped. From the context of my article it should have been clear that the term 'developed' was used to qualify 'literate expression'. In the work of Hamutyinei and Kumbirai the oral poetry was finding a new expression in writing, a process which was providing us with a more developed literature very different from the written poetry of the past. In fact we could now hope for a more authentic written poetry. In the process of yielding itself to be written, oral poetry could of course itself develop, for example in its application to new situations or in greater internal consistency, but still contributing out of its own resources and devices. Neither of these implications suggest the 'colonialist evolutionist' interpretation which Chiwome, in his zeal to 'deconstruct', reads into my use of the word 'developed'. I have dwelt on this incident as it is an example of the oral and written poetry being in relation to one another, and also because it illustrates a tendency to intemperate judgement to which Dr Chiwome, in his generally well-argued and illustrated treatment, is sometimes prone.

Another sympathetic observer who hailed the orally inspired work in *Mabvumira Enhetembo* was John Haasbroek. In a review entitled 'Some Great Shona Poetry' he wrote,

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

Shona poetry can only be great if it works through genuine Shona experience, and expresses itself through Shona beliefs and values and the vast symbolism of the Shona world that is already there and waiting for Shona poets to draw upon. Only imaginative experience which is truly Shona, and therefore deeply felt, will ring true and sincere as Shona poetry.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of this stirring of indigenous creative life within the field of literature, was there a release of more great Shona poetry? In his review of the poetry in the three anthologies listed above, all of which is characterised as colonial, clearly Chiwome does not think so. 'Thematically the poetry is easily distinguished by its focus on traditional and contemporary social issues from a narrow domestic moralistic viewpoint. Poets moralise around, or satirise, bad personal habits' (p.62). When they do criticise or stigmatise social evils they do not deal with their causes, 'urbanisation, industrialisation, and pauperisation' (p.64). He credits the poets with succeeding 'in restructuring the conceptual universe of the indigenous people and thereby preparing them for industrialisation' (p.88). This influence, if true, would have had to be achieved through the schools, but still be a surprising feat by work otherwise not widely read. Contrariwise, 'The poetry has little bearing on the revolutionary consciousness that was spreading from the mid-50s' (p.88).

Writing from the viewpoint of a generation after the publication of the poetry of the anthologies, and from the standpoint of its political relevance to the major political and social changes brought about by independence, Chiwome finds it only of limited interest. The reservations he constantly voices in his appreciation of one poet after another have more than a hint of the patronising stance which he detects in the moralising of poets like Kumbirai. He does not do justice to this body of work which made an important contribution to the development of a Shona written poetry. It was an assertion of an aspect of Shona culture, an expression of liberation contemporary with the political aspirations beginning to stir and which, one might argue, was a not insignificant moment in the move towards independence. The lack of any overt expression of critical political consciousness in the poetry itself, which Dr Chiwome regrets, was due to the constraints imposed on the Literature Bureau, probably the only means of publication for these poets. Chiwome agrees that poets should write on any subject they want. The social institutions of Shona life, and the styles and forms in which they find oral poetic expression, were obviously subjects to which the poets were drawn. In the light of deconstruction Chiwome regards poems thus inspired as token nationalist

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11 Haasbroek, J., 'Some great Shona poetry', a review article in *TINA* (Teachers in the New Africa), May 1970, p.27.



gestures yielding to the principle of bantustanism, or as betraying a narrow domestic moralistic viewpoint. Readers of poems like Hamutyinei's *Havachagoni Mbuya Vangu* or Mandishona's *Hecho* must see them as being far more than this.

In his treatment of Kumbirai's lively and imaginative responses to his encounters in the round of life, situations never contemplated by the old Africa, but with which, as Kumbirai shows, the old Africa's poetic resources can adequately and authentically deal, Chiwome betrays surprising incomprehension. For example, Kumbirai's tender obituary address to his mother,<sup>12</sup> in which he offers her the poems she has inspired as substitutes for the grandchildren his choice of life as a celibate priest has denied her, is clumsily interpreted as a denunciation of traditional religious beliefs (p.66). It is something much more subtle. It is an attempt to represent his relationship to her, and that of his poetic work, in the light of the Shona institutions of naming children and of ancestral inspiration. The poems he has wrought as medium under her inspiration are to be the progeny which will afford her continued life. His metaphorical use of these institutions of Shona religion implies no lack of respect for them. But with their aid he hopes to affirm his filial love beyond doubt, and interpret his own vocation, in terms which she, and his readers, may not find completely incomprehensible.

Kumbirai's poems need no special pleading as they are their own defence. They are alive and as fresh today as when they came from his ingenious and imaginative store of idiom and imagery. His *nhango* (pieces of moral advice and instruction), for example the Kiplingesque *Ndingati uri munhu*, are both timely and timeless, not tied to one phase of history, and not disqualified for not being explicitly political. He is a poet for all seasons and his work will endure.

The poetic work which I know best is that of Aaron Hodza. In it we find both revolutionary consciousness and an intimate and proud regard for his culture. The first is voiced in his unpublished *Misha Yava Matongo*<sup>13</sup> which begins thus:

Dzimba nemisha zvaparadzwa nechakauya,  
 Chisingazivikanwe mavambo nemagumo acho  
 (Our homes and villages have been destroyed by this contagion.  
 Unsuspected in its coming, its outcome still unsure)

And in his *Nondo Mumbizi*.<sup>14</sup>

Chokwadi vazvinazvita mune chitema.  
 Ndimi makakonzera vana ujoki.

12 Kumbirai, J., *Mabvumira Enhetembo*, p.41.

13 A poem in this reviewer's possession.

14 Hodza, A., *Ugo Hwamadzinza AvaShona* (Harare, Mercury Press, 2nd Ed., 1987), 44.

(Truly you mission people are to blame.  
You who've turned our young to prostitution.)

Hodza has been hailed as 'Zimbabwe's pre-eminent, indefatigable and gregarious ethnologist' for his work on *Shona Praise Poetry*.<sup>15</sup> In the opinion of Herbert Chimundu 'it was Hodza's work which started the conscious cultural revival through poetry which led to the compilation of three anthologies by editors J. Haasbroek, E. Majaya and T. Shumba of heavily cultural and situation-oriented poetry'<sup>16</sup> over the years 1978-1983. Earlier, in 1972-1973, J. Haasbroek had published and commented on samples of a variety of oral poetic genres in the weekly newspaper *Moto*.

Hodza also compiled a collection of protest songs with a radical political content for reference in the Department of African Languages prior to 1980. In the *Chimurenga* war sung poetry was a natural means for rallying morale and participation. Chiwome describes and assesses well the poetry that celebrated the dawn of independence and urged the nation to build a new Zimbabwe in collaboration, as ants combine to build their anthills. This was the message of the veterans, Mutsvairo and Kumbirai.<sup>17</sup>

Well into the first decade of independence the anthology, *Chakarira Chindunduma*,<sup>18</sup> edited by Musaemura Zimunya, dealt with the triple and interrelated themes of colonialism, under the title of *Makunun'unu* (Hardship), the subsequent victory, as under the title of *Muchindunduma* (Wartime), and *Mhururu* (Jubilation). Chiwome shows well how the three sections reflect the experience and understanding by the poets of these three moments in their history. At the end of *Mhururu* a new note of protest is heard in such poems as *Pamuromo Chete* by Felix Manyambiri (Empty rhetoric) and in the inspired adaptation by Chenjerai Hove of the old satiric song *Chemutengure*. It establishes a continuity between the era of the settlers' ox-wagons, when the *munhu* (person, inhabitant of the land), caught up in the invading economy, was characterised by the dew-laden trousers of the wagon driver, or the sandals made from cut-up motor tyres, and that of the present, post-independence, era when the *munhukadzi* (the inhabitant's wife) is characterised by the pot she carries on her head, a curiosity for tourists to photograph from the wagons of today, the safari caravans. Their landless condition and status is still the same.

15 Pongweni, Alec J.C., *Shona Praise Poetry as Role Negotiation* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1996), viii.

16 In an article in typescript in this reviewer's possession entitled: 'An Assessment of the Achievement of Zimbabwean Writers in African Languages', p.6.

17 Cited by Chiwome in his discussion in Chapter 10, entitled: 'War and Independence Poetry', of *Nduri dzeZimbabwe* (Harare, Longman, 1981).

18 (Harare, Longman, 1985).

The challenge of the post-independence period to build an equitable society has been largely evaded or postponed. It has produced a remarkable poet, Chirikure Chirikure, who speaks on behalf of the neglected majority. Dr Chiwome devotes several pages to his work, his personal anthology, *Rukuvhute*<sup>19</sup> (an umbilical cord, 1990), and the edited anthology of poems collected by him entitled *Tipeiwo Daririo: Mazwi Matsva Munhetembo*<sup>20</sup> (Please Give Us the Stage: New Voices in Poetry, 1994). Chirikure represents the most promising of the three trends which Chiwome detects in the development of written poetry since the beginning. It is not too conservative, yet not too innovative to the extent of rejecting the past, and it enlists poetry in the struggle for the betterment of tradition-based Shona society. The other two trends fall on either side of this middle-ground, the first consisting of the invention of new forms and idiom to capture the ambivalent colonial experience, and the other ignoring change in order to continue with traditional poetry in its conservative form and idiom. Chiwome cites Chivaura and Hodza, among others, as personifying respectively these two extreme trends.

Both Chirikure and his contemporary Chimsoro detected early the unreality of the continuing independence celebrations and the expectations of *gutsaruzhinji* (plenty for the people) which proved a mirage. Those who had reason to celebrate independence were those who had occupied the positions, and taken over the life styles of the previous ruling elite. The poets satirise the decadent values which the entrenchment of privilege, supported by the abuse of power, have encouraged, 'bribery, nepotism and other forms of corruption in the public and private sectors' (p.107).

In its effort, not only to deal with abuses, but also to inspire 'socially redeeming action', Shona poetry faces formidable difficulties. Readership and the market are limited. More seriously the use of English, not only as a means of participation in the modern world, but also as the main medium in which Zimbabwean life is conducted, continues to relegate the African languages to a local and domestic function. The appearance of monolingual dictionaries like the recently published *Duramazwi ReChiZezuru*<sup>21</sup> will go some way towards showing that these languages are capable, given time to develop, of performing all the communicative and mediating functions at present discharged by English in the national life. What is needed is the vision and the will to implement the neglected area of development and revival. Poetry written out of a dedicated identification with the aspirations and frustrations of the people, as well as being rooted in, and flowing out of, the oral tradition, could help to nurture it. Chivaura's broadcast poetry,

19 (Harare, College Press, 1990).

20 Discussed by Chiwome in his Chapter 12, entitled: 'New Voices in Poetry'.

21 H. Chimhundu and Assistants (Eds.) (Harare, College Press, 1996). xxxv, 504.

for all its strangeness, was a popular programme in its day. The work of the socially committed and socially sensitive poets of whom Chiwome has given such an encouraging account, could surely be similarly broadcast and thus contribute, through both the spoken and written media, towards restoring the language, and its poetry, to their rightful places in the lives of the people, enabling them to exercise, through greater participation in affairs, greater control over their lives.

*United Kingdom*

G. FORTUNE