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ESSAY REVIEW

BLACK LIBERALISM REVISITED

LAWRENCE VAMBE, a well-known Zimbabwean journalist, has recently published *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe*,[1] an autobiographical sequel to *An Ill-Fated People* which described his earliest years and the life of his ancestors. This new work begins in 1927 when he was ten years old and covers the period up to the early 1960s. The first seven chapters deal largely with aspects of rural life, and then the narrative moves on to the urban environment of Harare, after World War II, the ensuing industrial conflict, and the birth of a Zimbabwean nationalism.

From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, by being both autobiographical and historical, lends itself to assessment on two closely related levels. Firstly, in so far as it constitutes a part of the Zimbabwean literary response to the colonial situation, it can be classified with the so-called 'New World' novels.[2] At the second level, it can be criticized as a contribution to our historical understanding of the condition of black Zimbabweans' existence; in this aspect the book's literary qualities are secondary to its relevance.

In the first seven chapters we are given a sequential account of his years of childhood and adolescence.. There is a very noticeable element of artificiality in Vambe's endeavours to strike a balance between events which were objectively significant and those which made a vivid and lasting impression on his mind; a good example is the following description of the impression that the Great Depression is supposed to have made on him at the age of ten:

> What had appeared before to be a prosperous industrial complex booming and bustling with the movement of men and machinery, was slowly grinding to a halt as the twenties came to an end . . . What most of us in Chishawasha did not know was that the country was caught in the devastating grip of a world wide economic depression. We noticed from about 1927 that the noise from the mines' stamping mills grew more and more muted.[3]

This however seems to be a common failing in autobiographical works by Southern African writers. Gerald Moore's criticism of Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom* and of Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* can also be applied to Vambe:

> Since we do not in fact experience the recollection of our past sequentially but rather in a series of flashes, pools and exploding lines irradiating darkness, the art of unofficial autobiography seems nowadays to demand the development of new narrative forms.[4]

In the first part of the book, Vambe is at pains to find a link with the past, through such characters as his grandmother, Madzidza, and particularly

[1] L. Vambe. **From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe** (London, Heinemann, 1976), xiv, 290pp., £6.50.

[2] G. P. Kahari, *The Novels of Patrick Chakaipa* (Salisbury, Longmans (Rhodesia), 1972), 47-97.

[3] *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe*, 56.

[4] G. Moore, *The Chosen Tongue* (London, Longmans, 1969), 205-6.

his grandfather, Chief Mashonganyika, whose death in 1927 he takes to symbolize the end of an era. The striving for a link with the past is a characteristic of most African writing as Moore tells us:

> African writers have in the main sought to release the energies of the past by methods more humdrum direct and humane. They have not sought an artifact they could thrill to, so much as a grandfather they could recognize, a living and suffering man who knew what it was to make moral choices and to endure their consequences.[5]

This is an obvious and understandable reaction considering the denigration of the African past by European missionaries and administrators, but there is also the danger of painting too perfect a picture of the past. Chief Mashonganyika, the symbol of the past in Vambe's book, stands out as the paragon of all virtues:

> Though spare of body and a man of extreme humility, he had a remarkable presence. He exuded a kind of all-pervading love and a direct personal concern for each one of his people and they in turn had repaid him with a reverence and obedience that could only have sprung from their conviction that he was the supreme symbol of their tribal existence.[6]

The question may well be asked whether in the mid-1920s, at least thirty years, that is, after the imposition of colonial rule and capitalism on Zimbabwe, there was really an authentic tribal existence — or is this just nostalgia on Vambe's part for the supposed simplicity of the past?

Vambe's characterization follows the pattern of most African writing that deals with the impact of colonialism on African traditional society. As in Bernard Chidzero's *Nzvengamutsvairo*, we get the juxta-position of social groups, expressed through the characterization: the arch-traditionalists who are stubborn to change, those who try and find a *modus vivendi* between the new way of life and the old, and those who have unreservedly imbibed western civilization. In *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe* these three social groups are represented seriatim by: Madzidza, Vambe's grandmother, who is opposed to 'Chirungu', the European way of life;[8] Jakobo and Nherera who 'managed to keep one foot in the African world and the other in the European';[9] and finally John Nyamayaro who had bacon and eggs for breakfast and 'seemed to typify best of all the adaptable character of most of his generation and the urge to go the whole way in fitting themselves into the European way of life'.[10]

Vambe's characterization, however, is in instances oversimplified. The fact that as he puts it, he was at one time labelled a 'stooge', in spite of what he calls 'his past and present record in fighting discrimination and white supremacy in all its guises',[11] reduces his leit-motif to mere self-justification. One gets the uncomfortable suspicion when reading his characterizations that there is a conscious and rather vulgar attempt on his part to construct a geneological justification for his place in the struggle for the liberation of

[5] Ibid., 133.
[6] *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe*, 3.
[7] G. P. Kahari, 'Tradition and innovation in Shona literature: Bernard Chidzero's Nzvengamutsvairo', *Revue des Langues Vivantes* (1971), **37**, 78-80.
[8] *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe*, 4.
[9] Ibid., 15.
[10] Ibid., 12.
[11] Ibid., 263.

Zimbabwe. Thus concerning his uncle Jakobo we are told that 'what made him unusual was his lack of spurious African nationalism'; similarly of one of his cousins, we learn that 'Francis Kaseke showed no inclination whatever to enter the employment of a European . . . His motives were as political as those of Jakobo'.[12]

One asks then how relevant is *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe*, as an expression of the mass of black Zimbabweans' existence and how useful is it as an historical source?

It is quite obvious that Vambe can be classed alongside the South African black writers who, it has been said, 'wrote from the acrobatic position peculiar to African intellectuals in the 1950's, the audacious one of a young black who has a foot in the white liberal world and the other holding his place in the black proletariat of the township'.[13] Vambe's description of what he terms 'the lowest of the lowest' stratum of black society, reveals a certain superciliousness and lack of empathy. This is how he describes his first encounter with them:

> I found it difficult to believe that grown up human beings could live like the oxen and the mules which they were looking after and be proud of working under these conditions. I had never felt so superior before and the way to show it was not to stay there a minute longer than was absolutely necessary.[14]

In several instances, it is easy to detect the pangs of regret and frustration he felt because of the levelling effect of segregation, which denied the black middle class a place in the sun:

> We were 'native' and as 'natives' we had to share a common way of life, although we represented every level of human development, from the most primitive tribesman who could not use a lavatory seat properly or ran like a demented stone-age man at the sight of a whining ambulance to a university graduate.[15]

At the subconscious level *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe* is undoubtedly aimed at white readers in order to rouse their consciences to the frustrations suffered by the black intelligentsia. It is therefore not surprising that Vambe shows no definite commitment to any particular political ideology, and his political comments can best be summed up as liberal platitudes mingled with self-evident truths. Characteristically, there is over-concentration on such legislation as the Land Apportionment Act, the Industrial Conciliation Act, which assume for him a symbolical and mystical significance. He thus extensively defines and describes the conditions under which black Zimbabweans lived in a discriminatory system, but does not relate these conditions to the socio-economic structure of Rhodesian society.

This probably stems from his failure to comprehend the dialectical relationship between capitalism and racism:

> Not even the hard-headed industrialists in need of growing internal market, nor the white trade unionist, with all his doctrinaire support for just rates of pay realized how seriously handicapped the black

[12] Ibid., 13, 19.
[13] N. Gordimer, 'English language literature and politics in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (1976), 2, 141.
[14] *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe*, 31.
[15] Ibid., 195.

> workers were, nor recognized the deadening effect such a system could only have ultimately on society as a whole.[16]

Vambe thus echoes a main supposition of liberal ideology that modern capitalism in Rhodesia has been a functional socio-economic system characterized by racial inter-dependence:

> I also witnessed how inter-dependent the whites and the blacks were. Black servants were a necessity of life to every white person in his home, at his office and in every other sphere except in his thinking . . . By the same token, I realized that these working Africans could not do without the white either. Every black person who came into the town became wholly dependent for his very survival on the white people. He could not achieve any dream without the goodwill and assistance of the Europeans, who had the wealth and ran the system. I was beginning to realize that in the event of the white man pulling out, the African would be left with nothing more than shattered dreams. It was an interesting discovery.[17]

In the same vein, Vambe makes the naive and emotional assumption that racism in Rhodesia could have been circumvented by a change in white attitudes:

> their fear of speaking out against racial injustice led the Jesuit fathers to keep the minds of my people off questions of human rights and their future in Chishawasha itself. It was out of the egg of this fearful silence maintained by all liberal-minded and Christian people that the venomous serpent of the Rhodesian Front was to be born in December 1962.[18]

In spite of all the faults in the book that have been discussed so far, there is much of value in it for the historian, especially from Chapter 8 onwards. There are useful biographical sketches of African political leaders such as Charles Mzingeli, James Chikerema, Joshua Nkomo and others. Other aspects of interest which Vambe deals with are — the 'location system', housing conditions, the insecurity of African women in urban areas and the development of the African press.

It is unfortunate that he had to end the book in 1962 and did not take it up to the present. The part of the book which discusses the beginning of political consciousness is extremely useful to the student of African nationalism in Zimbabwe. He appropriately describes Harare as having been 'the breeding ground of Zimbabwe black nationalism as well as of its foremost thinkers and planners'.[19] One can trace the development of black political and social consciousness from the 'reformist consciousness' expressed by such bodies as the National Youth League and the Harare Civic Association and the Reformed I.C.U. (which did not go beyond mere protest at marginal living conditions in urban areas) to a dialectical awareness of the processes of marginalization,[20] expressed in the formation of militant nationalist parties dedicated to institutional changes and to a restructuring of the economy.

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[16] Ibid., 65.
[17] Ibid., 33.
[18] Ibid., 40.
[19] Ibid., 143.
[20] S. Amin, 'Accumulation and development: A theoretical model', *Review of African Political Economy* (1974), **1**, 24-5.