

# Imagining the future nation: A critical appreciation of Emmanuel Ngara's vision in *Songs from the Temple*



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This article analyses Emmanuel Ngara's collection of poetry *Songs from the Temple*. It argues that through some of the poems in this collection, Ngara forges an anti-colonial nationalist discourse that problematises hegemonic colonial narratives, which claimed that the black subaltern did not have history, culture and civilisation prior to the colonial interloper's presence. Ngara's main strategy in unseating these accounts is to lay claim to a flourishing precolonial culture of the Shona people on one hand, foregrounding their history and cultural symbols, and on the other through the use of artistic elements from the oral traditions of their society. This article contends that the incorporation of orature into Ngara's written narratives of resistance disrupts and subverts hegemonic definitions of written poetry in as much as it anchors his nationalist vision in cultural spaces that the black subaltern has the potential to identify with.

'n Visioen van die toekomstige nasie: 'n Kritiese waardering van Emmanuel Ngara se nasionalistiese visie in *Songs from the Temple*. Hierdie artikel analiseer Emmanuel Ngara se digbundel *Songs from the Temple*. Die argument word gevoer dat Ngara 'n anti-koloniale, nasionalistiese diskoers in sy gedigte bevorder. Dit problematiseer die hegemoniese, koloniale narratiewe wat te kenne gee dat die swart ondergeskikte nie oor 'n geskiedenis, kultuur of beskawing voor die aankoms van die koloniale indringer beskik het nie. Ngara se hoofstrategie om hierdie aannames te bevaagteken, is om die florerende pre-koloniale kulture van die Shona mense voor te hou. Aan die een kant word hul geskiedenis en kulturele simbole beklemtoon en aan die ander kant die kunselemente van hul mondelinge kultuur. Hierdie artikel redeneer dat die inkorporering van oratuur in Ngara se geskrewe narratiewe van verset, die hegemoniese definisies van geskrewe digkuns ontwig en ondermyn, alhoewel dit sy nasionalistiese visie in kulturele ruimtes anker, waarmee die swart ondergeskikte moontlik kan identifiseer.

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that Zimbabwean poet Emmanuel Ngara, through some of the poems in his poetry collection, *Songs from the Temple* (Ngara 1992), locates his voice of resistance to colonial hegemony as well as the identity of the envisioned post-independence nation in the precolonial past of the colonised. In the process, the discussion further contends, Ngara incorporates orature into his poetry to prove that the precolonial cultural heritage that he revisits had viable systems that transmitted its values according to worldviews that emanated from it as a site of identities. Ngara's stance in the poems that are analysed challenges the colonial gaze's tendency to condemn everything indigenous and precolonial as either inferior or backwards. The collection *Songs from the Temple* that is discussed in this article is the only substantial artistic work to date by Ngara, who is more renowned for his work as a literary critic than for his creative output. His sizeable corpus of literary criticism includes works such as *Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel* (1982), *Teaching Literature in Africa* (1984), *Art and Ideology* (1985) and *Ideology and Form in African Poetry* (1990). The hallmark of Ngara's critical and theoretical work is its use of Marxist literary theory to investigate how ideology impacts on both content and form of African writing. Ngara has also edited collections of criticism on African writing, namely, *Literature, Language and the Nation* (1989) and *New Writing from Southern Africa* (1996) both of which engage, from various perspectives, with African literature, written both during and after formal colonialism.

Although *Songs from the Temple* was published 12 years after Zimbabwe's independence, it includes many poems that Ngara wrote in the late 1970s, during the height of the armed struggle against colonial rule in the then colony of Rhodesia. At that time, the literary output of many Blacks from Rhodesia reflected the influences of the war and the wider anti-colonial nationalism on their creativity, and as Roscoe and Msiska (1991:97) observe, '[t]he liberation struggle constituted a

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central point of thematic focus for poets during this period'. But the widespread preoccupation with the liberation struggle did not necessarily mean that black writers projected an unproblematic commitment or clear attachment to anti-colonial nationalist project. Rather, as Veit-Wild (1992:245) notes, some important literary works written during this time by black writers express 'bitterness and disillusionment with nationalism'. This disenchantment is particularly evident in the writing of Mungoshi (1975), Nyamfukudza (1980) and Marechera (1978). One of the reasons for this is probably that, in many African countries that had already attained independence in the 1960s and early 1970s, nationalist ideals and the aspirations of the masses had already been betrayed by the new leadership. But paralleling this writing of disillusionment was also a literature that expressed fervent hope and a clear attachment to the ongoing anti-colonial nationalism, and one of its salient features is an attempt to rediscover the colonised's precolonial past and reconnect with a culture that was systematically denigrated by colonial representations. In this respect, Veit-Wild (1992:249) observes that '[t]he rediscovery of the past was an important theme [during this time], especially marked' in the early poetry of Musaemura Zimunya, one of Zimbabwe's prominent poets of this generation. Some of the poems that Ngara wrote in the 1970s and are collected in *Songs from the Temple* share a similar streak. With specific regard to *Songs from the Temple*, Killam and Rowe (2000) argue that:

this volume ... shows an energetic commitment to a pan-African past of Cheikh Anta Diop's historical research, Zimbabwe's recovery of Great Zimbabwe, the temple of the title, which becomes a metonymic extension of the pharaonic Egypt. (p. 175)

Ngara's commitment to a Pan African past is also evident in some of his post-independence poems in the same collection, where he evaluates the significance of independence, in the context of the values represented by symbols of the precolonial past such as Great Zimbabwe and the pyramids of Egypt.

As already mentioned, in this article, I argue that as a strategy to frame his nationalist vision in *Songs from the Temple*, Ngara evokes the precolonial past of his Shona society, whose legacy and cultural symbols he re-presents and celebrates mainly through some artistic elements from the oral traditions of that society. Orature is a term coined by Ugandan critic Pio Zirimu, and according to Mphande (2003:416), it means 'something passed on through the spoken word, and ... it comes to life only in a living community'. The fact that orature is preserved and disseminated through the spoken word distinguishes it from literature, which by definition refers to written language. In this respect, Mphande further observes that:

where community life fades away, orality loses its function and dies ... [because] it needs people in a living social setting... Thus orature grows out of tradition, and keeps tradition alive. (p. 416)

Mphande's observation points to the fact that orature is passed from generation to generation and that it has social

and political functions that reflect the cultural ethos of the specific preliterate society in which it evolved. Orality's centrality to the social and political structures of preliterate societies highlights that it is communal and therefore community centred, and some of the specific roles it plays in these communities' systems are delineated as follows:

[it is] a strategic tool for non-literate societies in their consolidation and socialization processes and its spoken nature guarantees its widest circulation ... it can ... be used to praise or criticize those in power. (Mphande 2003:416)

A similar view with regard to the communal functions of orature is shared by Gunner (2007), who notes that:

Orality needs to be seen in the African context as the means by which societies of varying complexity regulated themselves, organized their present and their pasts, made formal spaces for philosophical reflections, pronounced on power, questioned and in some cases contested power, and generally paid homage to 'the word', language as the means by which humanity was made and constantly refashioned. (p. 67)

An important feature of orature, from the brief discussion above, is its indispensability from the social and political domains of preliterate societies. This makes it both an invaluable source of identity and a means of preserving and transmitting cultural traditions and history from generation to generation. These characteristics suggest that orature is context bound, and this calls for oral texts to 'be interpreted within their wider political and social contexts' (Mphande 2003:417). In other words, for orature to survive and to be effective, the existence of a well-defined community is important.

Because orature is primarily structured around the spoken word, its execution is principally through 'performance, which combines sound, action and performance' (Mphande 2003:416). Orature's performance repertoire 'draws its power from specific language features, such as alliteration, repetition, rhyme, rhythm, mnemonic, ideophone, antithesis, parallelism, assonance, allegory, euphemism and synecdoche' (Mphande 2003:417), devices whose function is to make it appealing and 'therefore easily remembered' (p. 417) by live audiences.

When African authors incorporate orature into their written narratives which re-engage with the past and reject stereotyping colonial representations, the aim is often to use it as a subversive tool. In these narratives of resistance, orature can be appropriated as a counter-discursive tool; proof of a past civilisation in places that colonial narratives claim to be backwards and the result, at level of form, is the alteration of the 'purity' of the written mode as it is understood in the West. However, the change that occurs when orature and the written mode interact is mutual because in the process, the former too is transformed by the latter, resulting in a hybrid text, in which both traditions are stripped of their originality. One of the most salient manifestations of the new hybrid is the language that emerges – 'a new "english" for the colonised place ... [which]



is irredeemably different from the language at the colonial centre' (McLeod 2000:26). An almost similar notion of difference is recognised by Spencer-Walters (1998:1), who observes that the introduction of orature in the written text authorises 'a new distinctive aesthetic that is rooted in African culture and continuous with oral and written texts in European... languages...' The 'new distinctive aesthetic' that emerges conjures the fact that orature enters the written form in a fragmented form and not as a whole – it has to be accommodated and work within the written mode. However, this does not in any way suggest that the written text limits the expressive capabilities of orature; if anything, as Talib (2002) argues, it expands them.

Some post-colonial critics consider the change that occurs to the written text as having a decolonising effect on African literature (Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa & Ihechukwu 1983:2) because it avails to African authors more effective, expressive methods and linguistic techniques (Furusa 1998:188), which in turn, adds to their post-colonial voices' challenge to colonial domination and knowledge systems, 'a grounded authenticity of expression and vision' (Irele 2007:78). The apparent authenticity and rootedness in such works emanates from the inseparability of orature and its associated elements from the black subaltern's 'total field of social and cultural experience'. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986:16) provides more elaborate insights into this process when he asserts that '[I] language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world'. If such writing has palpable advantages because it asserts a national culture in an idiom that is located in the racial other's worldview, there is also a danger that it might fail to communicate effectively to an audience that does not share the same social and cultural background with the author, if major changes are made at the level of language, when a new 'english' is authorised (Talib 2002:102). Talib's concern is that if radical changes are made at the linguistic level, narratives of resistance might fail to address the very imperial centre to which the subaltern has to prove his humanity. Although valid to an extent, the problem with Talib's apprehension is that it seems to only privilege and legitimise the imperial centre as the audience that should have an 'unproblematic' access to the post-colonial text.

In the same vein, it is imperative to take cognisance that the infusion of orature in the written mode does not 'dominate' the latter, but rather 'stretches' it in as far as it becomes accommodative of subaltern narratives that it previously excluded. Correlated to this is the fact that the subaltern's resistance narratives that lay claim to a precolonial culture are never pure. Vambe (2004:20, quoting Jameson) observes that they are 'profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the representation of the symbol'. The heterogeneity arises partially because claims to a national culture, as already underlined, are simply answering to discourses and knowledge systems initiated by a conquering Europe and in the process, narratives of resistance often have

to 'borrow their cultural resources from various sources: indigenous oral traditions, Christian symbols and colonial and post-colonial institutions' (Vambe 2004:20). This in turn makes it impossible for them to fully retrieve an original precolonial culture. Thus, even though in *Songs from the Temple*, Ngara 'mines' (to use Talib's 2002:102 term) from the traditions of his native Shona culture, to both subvert the colonial grand narrative and to endear his nationalist narratives to the subaltern whom he galvanises to restore their distorted history, the colonial subject also remains part of his audience.

## ***Songs from the Temple: Charting alternative histories for the nation***

An important starting point into appreciating Emmanuel Ngara's anti-colonial nationalist vision in *Songs from the Temple* (Ngara 1992) is to analyse the poems that are overtly preoccupied with the polemical subject of art, its functions and the artist's role. These poems generally capture the slant of Ngara's artistic preferences and poetic orientation in this collection. The poem 'A Time to Dance' sets the context for appreciating the tenor of Ngara's poetic voice as follows:

You ask me why I sing a song  
To the buried god of a vanished kingdom.  
You ask me why I raise my feet  
To dance the dance of bygone world.  
You ask me why I drum a drum  
To a god moulding with the passage of time.  
Let me tell you this and tell you once and for all:  
The songs that I sing are no songs to a dead god.  
The dance that I dance is no dance  
to a vanished kingdom.  
I sing my songs to the buried bones of the fathers.  
I dance a dance to the stolen bones of the fathers.  
I drum my drum to the sleeping bones of the fathers.  
I have seen them with these my eyes  
in their winding sheets.  
I have seen them displayed in Rome, London  
And the Paris of the Euroids. (p. 15)

The poem's meaning rests on the words 'dance', 'drum' and 'song' that are repeated throughout. These words denote more than the obvious meaning of being forms of music because they are used in this context as metaphors signifying the persona's artistic and thematic preferences. In this case, his choice is to celebrate an obscured history: the 'buried god of a vanished kingdom/... [and the] ... bygone world'. Although the reasons for his history's obscurity are not disclosed, there are strong suggestions that this is because of colonial misrepresentations that historically embarked on systematic misrepresentations and suppression of the colonised's history and in places, often claimed that the colonised did not have a past. This is hinted in the last two lines of the stanza, where the persona claims to have seen his history: 'the sleeping bones of the fathers', 'displayed in Rome...[and] London'. The lines also capture the irony that, while the history that the persona celebrates and seeks a reconnection with might be 'obscure' to the colonised subject, who has legitimate reasons to be aware of his past, it is



nonetheless 'well-known' and paraded in the colonial metropole. Furthermore, these lines figuratively point to the stripping of the African continent of its history, often carried out through the looting of its artefacts by the colonisers from cultural sites, such as Great Zimbabwe. At a literal level, the lines seem to point to the remains of Africans who died in Europe during the slave trade and of those who were killed during the early period of initial resistance to colonialism and had their remains shipped to Europe as trophies or spoils of war. The violence of both the slave trade and colonial conquest of Africa forms part of the continent's history that colonial versions of the past have always sought to suppress.

The fact that the persona considers his art as 'dance', 'song' and 'drum[ming]' whose vision is principally committed to the recovery of a subverted history, implicitly subverts the act of writing, in favour of integral aspects of music performance in both preliterate and literate Shona society. With regard to the role of music in precolonial Shona society, Kwaramba (1997) observes that it embodied aspirations and expectations of people; it was sung and performed at various occasions to express joy, happiness, love, sorrow, etc. Thus, in this context, the persona choice of these elements of music as metaphors of his artistic creativity is designed to express the communal focus of his art. It is also significant to note that the artistic vision that is charted and defended in this poem is conveyed through devices such as repetition, initial linking and rhyme, which cumulatively create a musicality that renders the message mnemonic, thereby suggesting that the poem is meant to be performed before an audience. This is illustrated in the stanza quoted below as follows:

The songs that I sing are no songs to a dead god.  
The dance that I dance is no dance to a vanished kingdom.  
I sing my songs to the buried bones of the fathers.  
I dance a dance to the stolen bones of the fathers.  
I drum my drum to the sleeping bones of the fathers. (p. 15)

The repetition of the words 'songs' and 'dance' in this stanza places emphasis on the terms that enunciate artistic creativity, in as much as they bring focus on the persona's commitment to the history that he seeks to recover. The repetition also has a minimalistic effect that shears off any detail that might divert attention from the persona's principal focus. As a result, the sustained emphasis that the persona puts on his vision to reclaim and vocalise a history largely ignored by colonial narratives problematises colonial discourses' assumptions that the educated Africans were 'saved souls' (Fanon 2007:258), eternally grateful to the white subject for having 'rescued' them from the barbarism and backwardness of their native culture and past.

The concerns raised in 'A Time to Dance' analysed above are echoed in a slightly different way in the poem, 'Murmurs of a Novice', where the persona locates his art in the histories and mythologies of ancient Egypt. The stanzas below illustrate the point:

The drum I beat was carved and warmed by the flint  
And fire of the Pyramid furnace  
The song I sing was sung by the Oracle of the Sacred Temple

And the tune played on the harp of the Queen  
Of the most melodious muses

The dance I dance marks the rhythmic movements  
Of the sons of Ramses

My tale is the tale of their victories, their hopes  
And my cry – oh master players, dancers and singers –  
My cry is the cry of the sons and daughters of Gaia. (p. 6)

The shift from showing commitment to a Shona past in the first poem to an Egyptian one in 'Murmurs of a Novice' broadens Ngara's vision of a Pan African past. It stems from an awareness of the 'shared' history of dispossession on the continent and the existence of a rich cultural heritage prior to colonial conquest. In the quoted stanzas, the precolonial civilisation of Egypt is among other things symbolised by references to the pyramids and Pharaohs ('the sons of Ramses') – ancient rulers of that country. Fanon (2007) explains the often continental thrust of anti-colonial nationalist narratives as follows:

The native intellectual who decides to give battle to colonial lies fights on the field of the whole continent. The past is given back its value. Culture, extracted from the past to be displayed in its all its splendour, is not necessarily that of his own country. ... The culture which is affirmed is African culture. (p. 253)

Fanon's explanation does not imply that anti-colonial narratives essentialise and oversimplify African cultures, but rather, it stems from his observations of the generalisations of colonial discourses. Fanon argues that 'colonialism's condemnation [of the racial other] is continental in scope' and for the coloniser, the 'savage' Negro, 'was neither Angolan nor Nigerian, for he simply spoke of "the Negro"' (2007:253). Against the backdrop of such homogenisations, Fanon further argues that the native intellectuals' concern is to forge their resistance narratives 'from the same point of view as that of colonialism' (2007:254) with the aim to prove that a 'Negro culture exists' but not to suggest its homogeneity. Ngara (1992) expresses the same point, in his preface to *Song from the Temple*, when he explains his references to symbols of Egyptian civilisation and their connection to Great Zimbabwe as follows:

the African artist has the duty not only to recall the history of the particular nation to which he or she belongs, but also to encapsulate the capabilities and aspirations of Africa as a whole and to ... establish a link between the experience of his or her particular nation and the history of the continent in general. It is here that the ... stone monument of Great Zimbabwe finds a parallel in the monoliths of the Pyramids of Ancient Egypt so that the two become a common set of symbols which connects the consciousnesses of the people of Zimbabwe with the consciousness and cultural heritage of the rest of the continent, linking the distant past, the near past and the present, and overcoming barriers of time and space. (p. xi)

In this respect, the persona in the poem 'Murmurs of a Novice' sees his role as that of passing on the history of his precolonial African past, as highlighted in the lines: 'My tale is the tale of their victories, their hopes/And my cry – oh master players, dancers and singers/My cry is the cry of the sons and daughters of Gaia' These lines are significant for the



manner in which they emphasise the communal function of art in precolonial Africa, revealed in how they immerse the persona into his continent's history, as part of it and also as having a responsibility to his community, as a conduit through which that past is disseminated. Of equal importance is the fact that the persona perceives the history that he reveals as no ordinary history, but a sacrosanct one, which he is obliged to repeat because it has a long tradition as conveyed in the lines: 'The song I sing was sung by the Oracle of the Sacred Temple/And the tune played on the harp of the Queen'. At this juncture, it is important to note that the theme of a long tradition of history that the persona foregrounds is aligned to the style of the poem, especially its direct form of address, which suggests that he is speaking directly to an immediate audience. This is in line with the communal function(s) of art in preliterate societies, where it has to communicate recognisable and shared values from the past, for the benefit of the community and in this poem's scheme of things, the poet's role is to merely pass on these traditions.

The artistic vision espoused in the two poems analysed so far, anticipates the style and thematic concerns of other poems in the collection, such as 'Stirs in the Temple' and 'The Bird and the Vision', whose nationalist discourses revolve around political and cultural symbols from the precolonial past of the Shona people. These two poems primarily make use of two connected artefacts – Great Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Bird – as symbols of an enduring precolonial culture, which despite colonial attempts to subvert the African past continued to be symbols of inspiration and rediscovery for the colonised who aspired for independence. Great Zimbabwe is the remains of an ancient and derelict city in Zimbabwe that is believed to have been built during the late Iron Age by the Shona-speaking people, while the image of the bird derives from the soapstone carvings of birds – 'archaeological relics called the "Zimbabwe Birds"' (Matenga 1998:1) that were found at the ruined city. In the poem, 'Stirs in the Temple', Great Zimbabwe is imagined as a temple, a sacred site and habitat of the spirit of God (Mwari) and the Zimbabwe bird is symbolised by the bird/eagle. The first stanza of the poem reads:

The Temple lay in ruins for a hundred years  
Mwari lay buried and groaning for a hundred years  
But the soul of the temple continued floating  
The spirit of Mwari continued floating  
And the ancestral emblem, the Fish Eagle,  
Never ceased to flap its wings  
For I saw it flying over the dilapidated temple  
Circling the Temple and ministering to the spirit  
Of the buried God.  
They chained our hands and minds  
And captured the Temple  
They brought us the Vulture which sucked our souls  
And swallowed our gold and drove our cattle  
To their kraals  
They brought us the Dove  
But a dove begotten of the eggs of the Vulture  
They concealed the Eagle and muffled its voice  
Mutapa was chained, the Temple was a ruin  
And Mwari breathed the breath of a dead god. (p. 23)

The first stanza of the poem is structured like a tale, and significantly, it is recounted in the past tense through which the persona recollects a past of colonial conquest, primarily revealing the chicanery that resulted in the imposition of colonialism and loss thereof, on the part of Africans – material dispossession, oppression and cultural dislocation. The history of a past dislocation that this stanza is preoccupied with is tellingly broached using the definite article '[t]he' which precedes the word '[t]emple' and is followed thereafter by the inclusion of other symbols and images, notably the 'the Dove', 'the Vulture' and 'the Fish Eagle' that are deployed to register the processes of colonialism and the roles played by both a conquering Europe and its victims in this saga.

The Temple, as already mentioned, represents Great Zimbabwe, the dove Christianity, the Vulture predatory colonialism that subjugates and exploits the colonised Blacks, while the Fish Eagle symbolises the carvings of soapstone birds that were found at Great Zimbabwe. Although the images of the vulture and dove symbolise opposite qualities, predator and prey, respectively, the persona yokes them together, to capture the predatory nature of colonialism and the victimhood of Africans that it preyed upon. The two images are also deployed to capture deceit that often accompanied colonial conquest – the fact that in some parts of Africa, conquest occurred under the guise of spreading 'civilisation', especially through Christianity. The lines, 'They brought us the Dove/But a dove begotten of the eggs of the Vulture/They concealed the Eagle and muffled its voice', make use of paradox to register with immensity the speciousness at the heart of the narratives that eventually resulted in the conquest Africa. At the same time, the persona maintains a sense of community through the collective 'us', which suggests that he is part of the audience that he addresses and like them, a victim of the history that he narrates. Thus, in this context, the temple that was captured does not only signify the ruined city of Great Zimbabwe and its immediate precincts, but the entire colonised space that was 'paralysed' by colonial presence. In fact, the 'hundred years' for which 'the temple lay in ruins' is almost the same time (95 years) that Zimbabwe spent as a colony.

In the second stanza, the poem's narrative focus shifts to a present which is imagined as having power to redeem the colonised space from colonial domination:

But now the soul of the Temple stirs  
The spirit of Mwari wakes the sleeping stones  
And Mutapa's ancestral emblem flutters wings of battle  
Rising from the rising  
And reciting the prophecy of the Manifesto.  
Listen, oh listen, the Temple Bird sings the war song!  
Listen, oh listen, the spirit of Mwari proclaims  
The war dance!  
I say hark, the Temple vibrates with the war dance!  
Hark and hearken, the ancestral lion is possessed  
And roars the prophetic roar  
That shakes the heart of the frightened usurper  
And shakes the temple walls into walls of life! (pp. 23–24)



The shift from the past to the present is signalled by the conjunctive '[b]ut', which shows that the colonised space that was silenced, is now 'stirring', awakening and rediscovering itself, through the armed struggle: 'The war dance! / ... / That shakes the heart of the frightened usurper'. In this regard, the 'stirs in the temple', of the poem's title figure and celebrate the rise of a nationalism that revives the identity and history of the colonised by among other things, reclaiming the suppressed cultural and religious sites of their precolonial society. This is vocalised in the call: 'Listen, oh listen, the Temple Bird sings the war song! / Listen, oh listen, the spirit of Mwari proclaims / The war dance! / I say hark, the Temple vibrates with the war dance!'. In these lines, the persona assumes the voice of a public crier, announcing an important message to his community. There are also strong suggestions that the persona's vision in the second and last stanzas of the poem was influenced by the legend of Nehanda, one of the leaders of the first *Chimurenga* – an uprising against colonial rule from 1896 to 1897 – who was killed by colonial authorities for her role in the rebellion. Just before her death by hanging, Nehanda is said to have prophesied that her bones shall rise at a later stage, 'to win back freedom from the Europeans' (Lan 1985:6). From the time of her death in 1897, Nehanda's prediction has been passed from generation to generation of Blacks and '[a] powerful and prolific oral tradition grew up around her name' (Lan 1985:6), and this tradition formed an integral part of anti-colonial nationalist discourses right up to the attainment of Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. In this respect, Ngará's poem is only one of the many artistic compositions, such as Mutswairo's novel, *Feso* (1956), which exploited the legend of Nehanda to establish a connecting tradition between the first *Chimurenga* and the Second *Chimurenga* of the 1960s and 1970s. In the poem, Nehanda's prophecy seems to be implied in the lines: 'Hark and hearken, the ancestral lion is possessed / And roars the prophetic roar'. This view is further reinforced by the leitmotif of rising / awakening that recurs consistently throughout the poem. The leitmotif is also emphasised through the use of alliteration, evident in lines such as 'The spirit of Mwari wakes the sleeping stones', where the 's' sound is repeated to create a rhythmic and mnemonic effect that makes the message memorable. This also has an impact on the tone and the mood of the poem in the last two stanzas, where the mood is ebullient and the tone fervent at the signs of the colonised space rising to reclaim its history and in the process assert its independence. Generally in these closing stanzas, the persona's voice sounds dramatic – 'Listen, oh listen, the Temple Bird sings the war song!' – and it differs considerably from the elegiac tone of the first stanza where he is preoccupied with a history of loss and oppression.

If the symbols of Great Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Bird are used in 'Stirs in the Temple' discussed above, to frame both the process of colonial conquest and the colonised's struggle against it, in 'The Bird and the Vision', the same symbols are appropriated to reflect on post-independence Zimbabwe, where they are primarily used to appraise the status quo in terms of the vision of the liberation struggle:

The Eagle that once proudly flapped its mighty wings  
 And frightened the parasitic Vulture  
 Has had its plumes and its feathers plucked  
 And now sits flapping tired little vans like a sitting duck.  
 As the great Eagle fell like a thunderbolt  
 From its great heights  
 A whole vision flashed by and was wiped away from my eyes  
 And in its place a dark cloud like a great curtain  
 Descended  
 Followed by voices of confusion and despair:  
 Where, where is the promised kingdom?  
 Where, where is the reconciliation of sceptre,  
 purse and sickle?

Some say the Eagle has temporarily perched  
 In order to grow new and powerful wings  
 With which to scale the skies  
 But I see the vulture growing new feathers  
 upon its old feathers  
 And soaring higher and with greater fury  
 than ever before  
 Higher and more daringly than the Eagle  
 could ever dare. (p. 71)

The different historical periods – the liberation struggle and post-independence – are marked by the adverb of time 'once' in the first line, which prefigures the betrayal of the past goals that occurs in the present. The poem registers nationalist aspirations and ideals through the image of the soaring Eagle: '[t]he Eagle that once proudly flapped its mighty wings / [a]nd frightened the parasitic Vulture'. By contrast, the bathos of the derailment of nationalist values in post-independence is conveyed through metaphors that suggest maiming and loss of power: 'The Eagle that once proudly flapped its mighty wings / Has had its plumes and its feathers plucked / And now sits flapping tired little vans like a sitting duck'. In this poem however, the vulture seems to symbolise the phenomenon of neo-colonialism, which is also as predatory and exploitative as colonialism as suggested in the lines 'the vulture is growing new feathers / upon its old feathers'.

Overall, these images create an introspective tone, which gives rise to a mood of despair that in turn foregrounds the persona's struggle to come to terms with a nascent post-independence disillusionment in a way reminiscent of some early post-independence Zimbabwean writings, especially witnessed in the works of Marechera (1981) and Hove (1985). The matter-of-fact and yet revering reference to the Zimbabwe bird as 'the ancestral, emblem, the Fish Eagle' implies that it is an indigenous symbol, whose significance is communally understood and shared by the previously colonised, whose cultural heritage was destroyed by colonialism. Mock (2012) explains that it is important for national symbols to be positioned in some identifiable and binding history because:

[A]lthough symbols may have very different meanings in the national context than they had to their pre-national cultures, they would not have the power that they do if they did not have some authentic resonance to at least some element of those pre-national cultures. (p. 23)



Apropos to this, there is a sense that the persona's desolation is not merely a lament for the betrayal of the ideals of the liberation struggle but also of a culture and tradition because, this poem, like others already analysed, partially subverts modern ideologies that spurred the nationalist struggle and etches the roots of the new nation in the precolonial past. This transforms the bird – 'the ancestral emblem' – into a symbol of tradition and continuity, thus making it possible to read the poem as registering the bathos of betrayal in the context of the enthusiasm seen in 'Stirs in the Temple' already discussed. The poem uses the bird, the same symbol used to ratify the liberation struggle in 'Stirs in the Temple' to invite self-introspection within the same ideological framework that propelled the liberation struggle.

If in 'Stirs in the Temple' and 'The Bird and the Vision', Great Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Bird, are appropriated as sources of inspiration for the liberation struggle and for evaluating post-independence betrayal, in the poem 'Elegy to a hero', they are used to appreciate the sacrifices made in creating the new nation. Written in epic-like form, and in the fashion of Shona praise poetry, the poem mainly relies on hyperbole to celebrate the contributions of former Zimbabwe National African Liberation Army (ZANLA) commander Josiah Tongogara towards the liberation struggle and ultimate realisation of the post-independence nation. Part of the poem reads:

He was not of this planet  
 The hulk of a warrior whose orbs glinted  
 Like the glare of the sun  
 The man of stone with bones of metal  
 A giant walking on metal stilts  
 Marching through a volley of bullets  
 For a decade and a half  
 Braving prison, fire, the storm, the gun  
 His glinting and armoured steel legs  
 ...  
 Had I but tears enough to mourn  
 The fall of the lion that came roaring  
 From the loins of Mutapa  
 The lion man that mapped the road  
 That led to the gate of the ruined Temple  
 And revived the ancient song of the Sacred Eagle. (p. 27)

The poem imagines Tongogara as an extraordinary figure whose sacrifice during the second *Chimurenga* is unparalleled, as suggested in the line 'He was not of this planet'. This particular line casts him as above the temporality of ordinary people and its hyperbole is also extended to the physical description of the ZANLA commander as a colossal figure: '[t]he man of stone with bones of metal'/'A giant walking on metal stilts'. This matches his imposing physique to the grandness of his incomparable sacrifice for the nation. However, such exaggeration also manifests the masculine nature of discourses on nationalism in Zimbabwe; they tend to magnify male power and virility at the expense of women's contributions. The exaggerated and the highly celebratory tone with which Tongogara is described make the poem sound like an epic. And in true epic style, where the epic hero is regarded as an embodiment of the values of his society's

civilisation and its traditions, the persona weaves Tongogara's achievements into those of past generations of Shona kings, of the great Mutapa dynasty whose heroic achievements in the Shona past (although not the subject of this poem) epitomise the power, majesty and pride of precolonial civilisations. In its heydays, the Mutapa State that these kings founded stretched from modern day Zimbabwe to parts of Botswana, South Africa, Mozambique and Zambia.

The poem's association of Tongogara with the Mutapa genealogy affords the late commander an autochthonous and ancestral identity, which implies that his heroism and sacrifice were to reclaim and restore the precolonial empire and its culture built by successive generations of the iconic Mutapa dynasty. The significance of this vision is accentuated by the already mentioned image of the 'Temple' (Great Zimbabwe), which is featured in the poem as the destination of the hero's sacrifice that 'led to the gate of the ruined Temple' and 'revived the ancient song of the Sacred Eagle'. Equally important in grasping the full import of the persona's vision in this poem is the fact that even though these cultural sites, on which it and some of the poems already discussed etch their nationalist narratives are derelict, their dereliction has nothing to do with colonial agency – they were abandoned and ruined centuries before. Ngarra utilises them so as to frame his nationalist narrative around cultural locations that have a potential to unify, that attest to the logic that the racial 'Other' has a cultural heritage and history worth restoring and reconnecting with, so as to destabilise the ideological base of a colonial nationalism, which rejected the existence of black civilisation, particularly historical evidence that Great Zimbabwe was built by local Shona people whom, it claimed, lacked the aptitude to construct such sophisticated structures.

## Conclusion

The discussion of Ngarra's poetry in this article has demonstrated that he chooses his society's shared culture and precolonial history as sites on which to rally his nationalist discourses. The forte of immersing his nationalist discourses in the subaltern's indigenous cultural sites is that it localises his vision in as much as it gives his voice a sense of authenticity, which resonates with the collective consciousness of the other. As a corollary, this underlines the fact that the relevance of anti-colonial nationalist discourses does not exclusively derive from re-presenting the subaltern's past and the associated cultural symbols in contestation with the colonial metanarrative, but also in the act of representing that past in a way that expropriates narrative authority from the colonial interloper. Ngarra's nationalist discourses in the analysed poems, like many other marginalised narratives of identity and nationalism operate from the periphery; they contest existing identities and acquire their currency from 'making visible' and legitimating the suppressed accounts of both history and identities of the nation. Both the past of the nation and its future are figured and mapped out as connected by a linear memory, in which the imagined existence of an 'illustrious' national culture in the past is supposed to mediate in the



present's interaction with the nation. The post-independence nation in Ngora's imagination is a synergy of both the other's narrative practice and a rejection of the colonial systems of knowledge.

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