

A PAN-AFRICAN RESPONSE TO THE CLASSICS

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1. INTRODUCTION

During 1993, the two authors, in collaboration with Jessie Maritz (University of Zimbabwe), Maryse Waegeman (University of Malawi) and Diane Jorge (University of the Western Cape), embarked on a research programme which we have entitled "A Pan-African Response to the Classics". In order to assess perceived areas of similarity and difference between African society and the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome, we constructed a questionnaire which was issued to students at the Universities of Zimbabwe, Malawi, the Western Cape and Natal (PMB). Passages were culled, for example, from classical literature, philosophy, and from religious and political texts, and questions were set on them which aimed at eliciting critical comment, debate and information. It was hoped that, from the responses to the questionnaires, classicists in South Africa could be guided towards those aspects of the curriculum which could have most relevance for the university constituency of the future. Curriculum development was thus the major aim of the research project. Whilst it is impossible to give a detailed analysis of responses to the questionnaire,¹ it is hoped that this paper will give some indication of the range of response and interest generated.

2. METHODOLOGY

Twelve passages were selected from the following areas: Roman lyric and elegy, Greek epic, Greek social history, Greek philosophy, Greek tragedy, Greek medicine, Roman philosophy, Roman history, Greek comedy, Greek mythology and Roman epic. There were other areas (e.g. Roman law) reflected in the initial selection, but these were omitted in the process of pruning the questionnaire which had become too bulky. I selected the passages which were then vetted by Mr. Masoga who set the questions on them. A short introduction, placing the author and passage in context, preceded each passage. Personal information, which we felt would be relevant to the analysis, was elicited by a covering letter.

3. RESPONSE

Twenty-five students, representing the following languages and cultural groupings,

¹ The 18 page questionnaire is simply too long to reproduce here, but copies of it are available from the authors at the Department of Classics, University of Natal, P.O. Box 375, Pietermaritzburg, 3200, South Africa. We would like to thank the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, for awarding Mr. Masoga an internship which enabled him to work on this project; our enthusiastic collaborators mentioned above and the students who so willingly completed what must have been a daunting questionnaire.

completed the questionnaire: Chichewa (Malawi), Hausa (Nigeria), Kwanyama (Namibia), Ndebele (Zimbabwe), Ndonga (Namibia), Nyanja (Malawi), Sesotho (South Africa), Shona (Zimbabwe), Venda (South Africa), Xhosa (South Africa) and Zulu (South Africa). Of the students, 20 were male and 5 female and, with the exception of 4 of them, all had had some acquaintance with either classical language or classical civilization courses.

3.1 Responses to particular passages

(a) Passage One: Catullus 101 (farewell at his brother's tomb)

Respondents generally revealed an acute understanding of *more parentum* (101.7), aided by Guy Lee's translation of the phrase as "custom of the ancestors". One respondent (Ndonga, Namibia) explained the phrase as "rituals according to unwritten laws of the living dead", thus conveying the familiar African belief about the unbroken link between the living and the dead. Another (Shona, Zimbabwe) commented that Catullus was not acting independently, but was merely fulfilling existing customs: this perceived tension between independent action and the demands of traditional custom was evident in other responses. Nearly all respondents gave graphic accounts of their own funeral rites and offerings, e.g. most Zimbabwean respondents described the *doro remvura* at a person's death, during which beer and snuff are poured and sprinkled on the grave as a libation, and the *kurova guva* (lit. the beating of the grave) usually a year after death, during which the dead person is recalled to become an ancestral spirit, "to look after the living". That Catullus should offer funeral gifts at his brother's grave some time after burial was not surprising to many respondents: similarly, gifts in their cultures include beer, snuff and even knobkerries or old axes (for use in the next world) (Zimbabwe), seeds of mielies, beans or peanuts (Venda), food, clothes and even pet animals (Malawi).

(b) Passage Two: Homer *Iliad* 1.447-474 (Chryses' sacrifice to Apollo)

Surprisingly, only five respondents claimed that they had experienced an animal sacrifice for either the sick or the dead. Similarities (to Homer's description) were commented on: the elder in the village, diviner, healer or spirit medium officiates, the same slaughtering method is used and grain is scattered over the beast (Shona, Zimbabwe). Differences noted included the following: there is no priest as such, the sacrifice is offered not to a god, but to the ancestors, no altar is constructed (the ritual is performed in the homestead or at the kraal), only one bull, ox or goat are sacrificed at a time (except if the ritual is for a chief), dancing and the beating of drums occurs, snuff is sprinkled and beer poured on the beast before slaughter and the meat is cooked or roasted and eaten without salt (Shona, Zimbabwe). One Zimbabwean respondent (Ndebele) recorded that the beast's throat was not cut. The animal (a goat) was drowned in a bucket of herb-filled water; its stomach was removed and this was placed in a hole in the ground; beer was poured into the bag-like stomach; the ancestors were then given their share of the meat and were asked to protect the sacrificing family. Thereafter the stomach-bag was tied with animal skin and the rest of the meat was eaten without salt. On leaving the site, the people were forbidden to look back. Noting the differences from Homer's account, a Malawian respondent (female) described the *vimbuza* sacrifice for a sick person during which songs are sung to provoke the sick person (the one possessed with spirit), after which the person rises and tears up the animal (either a goat or hen) and then sucks its blood.

(c) Passage Three: Catullus 61 (a wedding hymn)

Respondents commented on similar features of the marriage ceremony which are celebrated in their wedding songs - the journey of the bride to the groom's house (Shona, Zimbabwe), the beauty of the groom and the riches or poverty of the bride (Ndebele, Zimbabwe), the bride's shoes and dress (Chichewa, Malawi), the man's shield and spear (Ngoni, Malawi). Many stressed that, like the Roman hymn, songs in their culture focus on the fertility of the couple and future children. "At times the terms or words used can be vulgar" commented one Zimbabwean respondent; a Malawian respondent amusingly noted that some songs sing about those ignorant of sex, who sleep during the day and then stay up all night asking questions and so avoiding action! The forced removal of the Roman bride from her mother's arms elicited varied comment: with the exception of the Malawian respondents, many felt that the weeping of the African bride and the general sorrow when she leaves home was comparable with the Roman situation. One Venda respondent (female) noted that the bride is forcefully taken by strong young men to her new home; women are then sent ahead to strengthen and encourage her.

(d) Passage Four: Two Extracts: Zenobius (3.98) And The Suidas (s.v. epaulia) (for details of the Athenian wedding ceremony: food, gifts, dowry etc.)

In response to a question about significant food eaten during African marriage ceremonies, some respondents claimed that the food had to be special, but they could not specify which food; others did not feel that there was any significance attached to the food eaten. One Zimbabwean respondent (Shona) recorded that the first chicken prepared for the bride at the groom's house should not be consumed; doing so would mean that she would not be able to withstand future temptations. Typical Athenian wedding gifts for the bride listed in the Suidas (golden ornaments, pots, soap, combs, furniture, sandals, boxes of perfume etc.) elicited an interesting range of responses: furniture, agricultural implements, money and domestic animals appear to be common Southern African gifts; in addition, a Xhosa respondent listed blankets for the bride's mother and a walking stick for the groom's father, a Nigerian (Hausa) mentioned calabashes, pots, sorghum and dry leaves for soup. Malawian respondents claimed that presents could range from matches to houses and cars! The Athenian dowry was inevitably compared with the bride-price paid, in many African cultures, by the groom or the groom's family to the parents of the bride. This practice was both favourably and unfavourably considered: some Shona, Xhosa, Hausa, Sotho and Zulu respondents thought that the paying of the bride-price was a sign of appreciation, a token of "love-friendship" between two families (Hausa, Nigeria). The implicit idea of "buying" one's wife or of considering the bride as a commodity was strongly condemned by one Malawian respondent (female): "... all the children will belong to the man's side ... it's more or less buying the bride, but we don't really want to accept it".

(e) Passage Five: Plato *Republic* 5.455d6-456b7 (Socrates discusses the role of women in the perfect state)

Of the respondents 67% agreed with Socrates' arguments that men and women have the same natural capacities for (in this case) guardianship. In this group, a Malawian respondent (female) supported Socrates by stating that it was true that women were as good as men: "Some women are weak, just like men; power needs to be shared equally by those who have the capacity". The remainder (all male) focussed on Socrates' statement that woman is the weaker of the two and so concluded that women cannot be on the same level

as men or have the same intellectual capacity. "Socrates is not realistic; our ancestors regard women as children", commented one of these respondents (Zimbabwe); another regarded Socrates' arguments as justifiable, "except that women should still be led" (Malawi). Twenty out of the 25 respondents believed that women were marginalised in their own communities and treated as second class citizens; the remainder (all male) claimed that women were treated well and were "offered equal opportunities by the government" (Zimbabwe). One Zimbabwean respondent (male) commented that there were "recently, movements for women's liberation, but these were still regarded with contempt and resistance by men"; another male respondent stated that women were respected when married, but were viewed with suspicion when unmarried (Zimbabwe); one Malawian respondent expressed himself as follows: "2/3 of women are treated as inferior to men; 1/3 try to be equal to men". Nineteen of the respondents believed that women play a very important role in the community and have a right to develop their abilities and capacities. The remainder (all male) believed either that women should be confined to domestic duties (Zimbabwe) or that the emancipation of women has resulted in crime and lack of discipline (Zimbabwe) or that equality with men is a European notion (Nigeria).

(f) Passage Six: Sophocles *Antigone* 446-470 (Antigone defies Creon's orders not to give the body of her brother a proper Greek burial)

Three respondents perceived a similar conflict between religious conviction and the law in the clash between the laws and rituals of the ancestors and the teachings of Christian missionaries (Zimbabwe); another commented on forced removals which compelled people to leave the graves of "our forefathers/mothers" (Zimbabwe); a Venda respondent remarked on the clash between ritual circumcision and Christian principles. The possibility of linking religious conviction and community obligations was favourably considered by 13 of the respondents - "this is an African view; every communal and social obligation has a religious dimension in itself", commented a Zimbabwean respondent. The remainder believed that this could lead only lead to conflict; "toleration is important" (Xhosa).

(g) Passage Seven: Hippocratic Text *Nature of Man* 4 (the theory of the four humours and their effect on health and disease)

In response to Greek concepts of balance and imbalance of the humours and the correlation of these to health and disease, three respondents perceived similarities. Disease could arise if one's blood was contaminated by foreign material from witches (Zimbabwe) or if there was lack or excess of bile and blood (Malawi) or if there was blood imbalance: "if somebody had a severe headache, they used to suck blood to keep balance in the body" (Namibia). In contrast, 40% of the respondents believed that disease was inflicted by witchcraft or the anger of the ancestors: "the ancestral spirits are angry with the people because they do not send them sacrifices; hence they inflict disease", commented one Malawian respondent. The remainder of the respondents linked health and disease to factors such as standard of living, population density, food, the environment and viruses. The belief that the health of the person and the health of the community are inextricably linked was reflected in four responses (Shona, Sotho, Chichewa, Ndonga). Only 5 respondents believed that health care was the responsibility of medical personnel (doctors, nurses, psychologists); 9 believed that health was the responsibility of Western-style doctors, village elders, traditional healers and ancestral spirits; the remainder believed that health was solely the preserve of ancestral spirits (Zimbabwe), diviners and prophets (Sotho), herbalists (Malawi) and traditional healers (Namibia).

(h) Passage Eight: Seneca *Letters* 47.10-14 (on the treatment of slaves)

That Seneca never argued for the complete abolition of slavery, but wanted the institution to become more humane, did not make his words less meaningful for 70% of the respondents, who admired his respect for the humanity of slaves. The remainder felt that he should have practised what he preached: "it should be noted that he was a hypocrite controverting what he taught by his practices" (Zimbabwe). One respondent felt that Seneca was in conflict over this issue, "caught up by the culture of his day" (Namibia). Almost half the respondents believed that there were forms of slavery existing in Southern African communities today, such as farmworkers paid with food (South Africa), tenant farmers in the tobacco industry (Malawi) and "house-girls and house-boys who are given left-overs" (Malawi). One respondent felt that peasant women were treated like slaves (Zimbabwe), another that "African capitalism went beyond the most extreme exploitation" (Zimbabwe). All except one agreed with Seneca's dictum: "Treat your inferior as you would wish your superior to treat you." Seneca's words elicited similar African sayings: "Seka usema wafa" - laugh and despise the downtrodden and crippled only when you are dead; for tomorrow it might be you (Shona, Zimbabwe). If you are on the back of an elephant, do not claim that you do not owe anybody anything (Chichewa, Malawi).

(i) Passage Nine: Plutarch *Life of Tiberius Gracchus* 13 (the provisions of the land law - distributing state-owned land to landless citizens)

All the respondents approved of Gracchus' measures for the re-distribution of public land to the landless poor. Reasons given were varied: this is democracy; the state is the people (Zimbabwe); the world has a divine origin and land belongs to the dead (Zimbabwe); ideas like Gracchus' could solve our land problems (South Africa); this will reduce the gap between the landowners and the landless poor (Malawi); the poor depend on land and agriculture for a living (Zimbabwe). Of the respondents 70% believed that re-distributing the lands of the wealthy amongst the landless poor was a good and just idea. "The misdeeds of forced removals should be corrected; rightful owners should be given back what belongs to them", wrote one respondent (Zimbabwe); another believed that land re-distribution of this kind would give the poor access to the land which would make them self-supporting, independent and less disadvantaged (Namibia). Those who disapproved of re-distributing the lands of the wealthy argued that the poor needed not only land, but the knowledge and means to farm it (Zimbabwe, Malawi). Re-distributing land could thus only ever be a partial solution to the land problems of the poor. One respondent stressed that the state must then provide the poor with implements to till the soil (Namibia). Of the respondents 68% believed that the wealthy should be compensated for land taken from them; "compensation is like a seal of the mouth; it appeases them so that they do not revolt in future" (Malawi). Those who felt that the wealthy should not be compensated argued that the wealthy had acquired the land illegally anyway (South Africa) or that the wealthy had deprived the poor for a long time (Malawi). One Namibian respondent believed that compensation was right and fair if the properties were actually bought and owned, but unfair if the land was illegally occupied.

(j) Passage 10: Aristophanes *Clouds* 961-999 (the debate between Right and Wrong over the rearing of children in the "good old days")

In response to the advice of Right, 60% of the respondents felt that young people in their communities today would react negatively, on the grounds that such advice would be considered ridiculously old-fashioned. The remainder believed that the young would react positively to the advice; "they would not be surprised as the food advice (in the old days, the young did not grab the best vegetables at dinner, as these were reserved for their elders) is practised in villages in Malawi". Half the respondents agreed that discipline today was understood as obedience to the elders and the community. Others stressed more individual aspects of discipline, such as self-respect and self-discipline. One respondent claimed that young people in his community regard discipline as colonialism; however, "the adults think it must be applied to mould the future generations" (Namibia). Of the respondents 50% believed that, in the past, mothers, grandmothers, aunts and older girls trained girls to be good members of the community, whereas fathers, uncles and older boys trained boys. Six respondents stressed the importance of initiation rites for this kind of education (Shona, Venda, Sotho, Chichewa, Ndonga); two referred to the importance of story telling with good characters and bad (Zimbabwe, Malawi); one respondent claimed that education took place informally, "while milking cows in the kraal, while working in the Mahanga field, in the kitchen, or whilst attending a wedding festival or funeral ceremony" (Namibia).

(k) Passage Eleven: Hesiod *Theogony* 147-206 (the birth of Aphrodite from the severed genitals of Ouranos)

Only two of the respondents (both from Zimbabwe, one Shona, the other Ndebele) perceived any sort of similarity between this creation myth and one of their own myths. "At a place called Guruuswa", runs the Shona version, "fell a huge, round ball which broke on hitting the ground. Out of it emerged a lovely figure with the face of a woman (Nwedzi). She drank the water and, each time she did, she bore all sorts of things - trees, stones, creatures". The Ndebele myth concerns Unkulunkulu, dwelling in heaven, who received a report that someone was riding his best ox. Opening a hole in the base of heaven, he tossed him out, accompanied by a woman. This couple bore children who became the first generation on earth. The opening in the base of heaven became the sun; the moon is the opening "of which the woman was made"; the stars are holes made by the trampling of Unkulunkulu's cattle. Of the respondents 70% believed that myths had an educative role in their communities; one commented that myths justify rituals (Zimbabwe); another that myths provide a sense of belonging (Zimbabwe); another that myths "bring man into contact with the real" (Namibia). The remainder of the respondents believed that myths confuse people (Xhosa) or that myths have no real significance in modern society (Malawi).

(l) Passage Twelve: Vergil *Aeneid* 4.393-415 (Duty-bound Aeneas prepares to leave Carthage, thus abandoning Dido to her fate)

Respondents provided many examples of epic heroines and heroes in their own cultures e.g. Mbuya Nehanda (heroine) and Chaminuka (hero) (Shona); Mzilikazi (Ndebele); King Moshoeshoe (Sotho); Gomani (Malawi). Amongst modern heroes listed were Jason Moyo, for his work in the liberation struggle (Zimbabwe); Chris Hani, for being prepared to

serve the nation and die for his convictions (South Africa), and Sam Nuyoma, for his charming humility, his love for children and his unique strategy in the liberation struggle (Namibia). All respondents stressed that accounts of the older epic heroes and heroines were transmitted orally i.e. through praise songs and stories at night (Malawi) and through spirit media and guerillas (Zimbabwe). In response to Aeneas' affair with Dido, four respondents (two of whom were male) claimed that the epic heroes in their cultures did not get involved with women, "for they would have become weak" (Zimbabwe). Those citing Mbuya Nehanda as an epic heroine argued that she related well to women who helped her in her tasks; one respondent, however, believed that Nehanda considered women to be betrayers of the struggle because of their sweet tongues (Zimbabwe, male).

4. CONCLUSIONS

A small pilot-study of this nature can never be conclusive, but it is clear that this sample of African students responded with vigour and interest to the following areas in the classical texts selected:

- (i) As expected, texts which focus on the ritual behaviour of the Greeks and Romans resonate keenly with an African audience and provide an endlessly rich resource for the intelligent discussion of similarities and differences. In this regard, marriage and funerary ritual is especially important. Other religious ritual (such as sacrifice) was not so important for these respondents, as many of them were clearly from urban backgrounds and had drifted away from features of African Traditional Religion, such as ancestral sacrifice. Thus it is not always wise to assume that one's black students will have experienced Homeric-style sacrifices!
- (ii) The relationship between myth and ritual is clearly also an area which generates much interest. African mythology is not "literary" mythology like Greek and Roman mythology, but is also shaped by centuries of oral tradition. Appreciating the kind of oral tradition which lies behind Homer, for example, can obviously be enhanced by a study of African mythology and its transmission. On a deeper level, the very meaning of myth can be debated and explored with students whose cultures still take myths seriously. Courses on comparative myth and ritual could thus be crucial to the survival of classics in South Africa.
- (iii) It will be noted that none of the above passages dealt exclusively with blacks or Africa in antiquity. This omission was deliberate, as it was believed that there was a great deal in classical texts which chimed in with the needs, aspirations and fears of black students, without being exclusive in focus. Problems such as the position of women in African society were raised by the passage from Plato's *Republic*; the acute problem of land and re-distribution in Zimbabwe and South Africa was explored through the politics of Tiberius Gracchus; familiar conflicts between traditional, religious beliefs and secular authority were brought to the fore by the extract from Sophocles' *Antigone*; the pressing issues of unemployment and exploitation, as well as the tension often engendered by the conflict between theory and practice (the academic and the activist?), became the focus of the response to Seneca's views on slavery. In other words, a study of classical antiquity can be made relevant to the situation of one's students, if the students are critically engaged and challenged by the relationship of the classical text to modern issues. Courses in political and moral issues in antiquity could well be very effective.
- (iv) Finally, it is also clear that comparative studies, particularly of ancient and modern cultures, have to be handled very carefully. Searching for simplistic points of

similarity without exploring differences can be dangerous. It can be patronising and can contain implicitly odious value-judgments of the following sort: "they (African cultures) are like us (the Greeks and Romans!) in some respects; therefore African culture must have some kind of worth". Furthermore, comparative studies can also result in false assumptions of this kind: "let us try and uncover the process which shaped Greek culture by studying a culture trapped in an earlier stage of evolution (i.e. African culture)". Pre-supposing uniform stages of development for all cultures is a Frazerian notion long ago discredited. In addition, words such as "progress", "advanced" and "backward" have to be used with great caution, if not avoided altogether. No-one would seriously describe the Greeks and Romans as generally "backward", even if they may have been so in some respects. Similarly, comparing aspects of African culture with the cultures of Greece and Rome does not imply that African culture is "backward". We need to strip comparative studies of these regrettably chauvinistic value-judgments. However, to bring aspects of Greek and Roman civilization into creative dialogue with features of African culture, without any of the above assumptions, can be stimulating and enriching for our students and could ensure that the study of classical antiquity has a secure place in university and school *curricula* in a future South Africa. Those in search of core disciplines for foundation courses in our re-structured universities need look no further than the study of classical civilization.

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