

## **Bold innovations at Great Zimbabwe University: The case of literacy in Zimbabwe's marginalized languages**

*Fortune Sibanda<sup>1</sup> and Richard S. Maposa<sup>2</sup>*

### **Abstract**

*The world over, the status of marginalized languages continues to generate diverse and competing political discourses. During the colonial period, Lusophone, Anglophone and Francophone countries sidelined indigenous languages. This created a centre-periphery relationship between these colonial languages and indigenous languages respectively. In the post-colonial period, linguistic re-configurations ensued. Whereas this time the western languages prevailed on the basis of prestige, indigenous languages tended to be recognized on the basis of numerical superiority and linguistic affiliation of the ruling elite. This created sites of struggle that continue to re-play colonial linguistic imbalances even today. This study reflects on the literacy initiatives that promote marginalized languages in Institutions of Higher Learning in Zimbabwe. It argues that the Zimbabwean education system has stultified minority languages. Thirty years after independence, Zimbabwe is still grappling with embryonic programmes to resuscitate the status of marginalized languages through mother tongue literacy initiatives. Specifically, the study focuses on the literacy campaign efforts of Great Zimbabwe University on its mandate to promote indigenous languages in Zimbabwe.*

**Keywords:** *marginalized languages, indigenous languages, colonial languages, mother tongue literacy.*

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<sup>1.</sup> Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe. e-mail: sibanda35@gmail.com

<sup>2.</sup> Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe. e-mail: maposars@gmail.com

## Introduction

Worldwide, the question of marginalized languages is topical and continues to attract the attention of politicians, policy makers, human rights activists and academics. As cited in Tshuma (1999:6), the founding South African President, Nelson Mandela, is one famous political leader who insightfully observed that “without language, [people] cannot share their hopes and aspirations, grasp their history, appreciate their poetry or savour their songs. I again realized that we were not different people with separate languages. We were one people with different tongues.” The foregoing insight is instructive universally in the context of literacy initiatives in contemporary Zimbabwe. Every language provides a window that mirrors and constructs human reality regardless of people’s language, race, gender, class, age, creed and nationality. Whilst language undergirds the vitality of human existence, it has also generated conflict situations in some societies.

Historically, linguistic wrangles have been common, such as in Eastern Europe. In that part of Europe, Turkey provides a good example of a place where linguistic genocide occurred. The Kurdish language in Turkey, though spoken in Iraq, Iran and Syria, was suppressed. Some stern measures were taken against the so-called ‘Kurdish minorities’ who, *inter alia*, advocated the use of Kurdish in the public domain such as the media, demanded the teaching of and in Kurdish and gave their children Kurdish names to express their cultural identity (Tshuma, 1999:6). This form of linguistic marginalization (and the struggle against it) is a case which evoked human rights discourses because the European Union and the UN had hitherto turned a blind eye to the issue. This was despite the fact that the UN Charter, Article 27 of 1945, categorically states that “In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right to enjoy their culture, to profess and practice their own language” ( cited in Tshuma, 1999:6). Similar linguistic marginalization has also been evident in Zimbabwe since the colonial times.

Zimbabwe’s population stands at about 13 million. The languages spoken in the country include ChiShona, IsiNdebele, English, XiChangana, TshiVenda, Sotho, Nambya, Hwesa and Tonga. The linguistic landscape is diverse, confirming that the Zimbabwean society is multilingual in nature. However, this diversity does not translate into linguistic equity, and not every language is accorded the same status and recognition. This creates a linguistic anomie (Arasanyin, 1999).

Yet, language is regarded as the most significant ingredient of human identity as it is a guide to social realities, and it defines experiences for its speakers. This insight is succinctly captured in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis formulated in 1931 in which language is regarded as responsible for shaping the ideas of the linguistic group that speaks it (Samozar and Porter, 1985; Maposa, 2011). Hence, everyone's language deserves respect because it is the necessary condition for identity which justifies mother tongue literacy in all societies.

Throughout the colonial period, African languages and African cultures were denigrated, and through successive legal frameworks, became marginalized. In the Zimbabwean context, English was highly rated as the official language and the language of education, administration and business, to the detriment of indigenous languages. While English enjoyed dominance, the indigenous languages were suppressed and denied an equal status as that of English. Such imbalances have been carried forward into the post-colonial period where English is joined by ChiShona and IsiNdebele as the languages of the ruling elite. Linguistic elitism is sometimes connected to numerical superiority. For instance, ChiShona and IsiNdebele languages have more speakers than other languages in Zimbabwe. This, and the fact that the political elite come from the ethnic groups who speak these languages, is how these two indigenous languages have become dominant. The above insight is comparable to the Malawian situation under Kamuzu Banda. The language policy during his presidency reflected imbalances created during the colonial period. President Kamuzu Banda was a Chewa from the central region of Malawi. As a result, ChiChewa became the language of power and administration such that it was manipulated by the ruling elite to entrench dictatorship in Malawi from 1964 to 1994. While it is argued that Kamuzu Banda tried to promote local African languages in Malawi, the attempt degenerated into a politics of exclusion as other Malawian languages like Tumbuka in the northern region and Nyanja in the Southern region were marginalized. The Malawian educationist, Gregory Kamwendo (1997) criticised the lopsided government policy that imposed ChiChewa language and culture in Malawi at the expense of other languages. This classical Malawian scenario typifies the plight of some languages in Zimbabwe today. Yet, it is generally upheld in academic circles that a reader, particularly of one's mother tongue, is invariably an empowered reader.

This study observes that there is a serious case of marginalization of some indigenous languages in Zimbabwe. On the one hand, this

marginalization reflects the spin-offs from the colonial era. On the other hand, the continued marginalization of languages in post-colonial Zimbabwe reflects a tactful manipulation of indigenous languages by the indigenous political elite for political expediency. Therefore, this study is a bold attempt to delve into the politics of language in Zimbabwe, with a focus on Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL). The research grapples with the question: To what extent are indigenous marginalised languages promoted through innovations at Great Zimbabwe University? As such, this study is stimulated by the call to reinvigorate African cultural diversity through language in contemporary times.

### **The language situation in Zimbabwe**

The language situation in Zimbabwe, like in several African countries, is complex and sensitive. The linguistic landscape of Zimbabwe comprises three national languages, namely, English, IsiNdebele and ChiShona, which are stipulated in the Education Amendment Act of 2006. The latter are dominant due to their numerical superiority in post-colonial Zimbabwe. IsiNdebele language is dominant in the three Matabeleland provinces whereas ChiShona language is dominant in the remaining seven provinces. By accident of colonial imposition, English is the official language of business transactions and administration in Zimbabwe.

In the educational sector, English, ChiShona and IsiNdebele languages have been accorded the same legal status, but in practice English remains dominant in instruction, examination and certification. In terms of educational instruction in schools, IsiNdebele and ChiShona enjoy the same status as English up to Grade 3. Thereafter, English takes over up to tertiary level (Gudhlanga and Makaudze, 2005:4). In terms of certification, for instance, a student who has finished basic Ordinary level education is considered to have passed only if he/she has passed a minimum of five subjects, including English. However, a student who passes any of the indigenous languages and other subjects but not English, is deemed to have failed to achieve basic education in Zimbabwe. This is a replication of the colonial language policies that placed more value on a foreign language – English. As Rwambiwa (1995:96) rightly notes, “the continued policy that does not accept African languages as substitutes for English in our schools, colleges and universities is not only causing humiliation to our people, but [it also undermines] the advancement of millions of talented Africans who excel in all other subjects but fail English at O-level”. This means

that the English language occupies a central position while indigenous languages, are relegated to the periphery in the education system in Zimbabwe.

As a number of linguists have shown, the ChiShona language cluster consists of several ethnic dialects like Manyika and Ndau (Eastern Zimbabwe), Korekore (North East Zimbabwe), Karanga (Central Southern Zimbabwe), Zezuru (West Central Zimbabwe) (Alfandega et al., 2008:4). From these Shona dialects, Zezuru and Karanga (in this order) have dominated the rest of the dialects under the auspices of making 'Standard Shona' orthography. This situation is due to a number of factors, among which are political, historical and geographical considerations. For example, Zezuru is the language of Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe and therefore occupies the conceptual centre for all indigenous languages. Accordingly, this explains why in the Doke Report on the *Unification of the Shona Dialects* (1931), Zezuru was used as a yard stick for determining the linguistic value of other ChiShona dialects (Chimhundu and Gronvik, 2004: iii). This scenario has been retained in post-colonial Zimbabwe.

The post-colonial language policy in Zimbabwe is flawed at best, at worst non-existent. There is a lack of explicit national policy on indigenous languages. The colonial legacy implicitly placed Zezuru and Karanga at the top of all local languages whilst the rest were relegated to a 'minority' status. The ruling elite were predominantly drawn from the Zezuru and Karanga language speakers who manipulated language for political expediency. This is a reproduction of the colonial situation that suppressed mother tongue literacy. Therefore, colonial imbalances were re-played. The political elite retained the oppressive non-democratic language policy in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

New directions in the education delivery system were mapped out following the Nziramasanga *Presidential Commission Report on Education and Training* (1999). One major area that was suggested by this report was that of language planning. Francis and Kamanda (2001:225) posit that language planning is a move towards introducing a systematic language change by an organized board usually within the levels of the government. They further note that language planning has both a public and a private side. In fact, language planning is informed by the ideological and political interests of the ruling elite. As asserted earlier, the colonial language situation was a result of the colonial policymaker's engagement in 1931 of a white South African language

expert, Professor Doke, to prescribe the status of indigenous languages in colonial Zimbabwe. In the same light, the post-independence government followed the same principle and model of identifying the language problems that would result in language planning. Hence, on the eve of the New Millennium, a noted educationist, Dr C.T. Nziramasanga was tasked with leading a Commission of Inquiry into the education system in Zimbabwe. One principal area which the Nziramasanga Report recommended was on curriculum change and innovation especially on the state of indigenous languages in Zimbabwe. The Doke Report (1931) and Nziramasanga Report (1999) are being cited to show that the language situation has had a long history in Zimbabwe that can be linked to the debate on mother tongue literacy initiatives. This study reflects on how the IHL are tackling the issue of marginalized indigenous languages and working towards their empowerment, harmonization and institutionalization in order to develop literate citizens in these languages. Therefore, the study focuses on the literacy initiatives and activities at Great Zimbabwe University (GZU), *viz-a-vis*, the status of TshiVenda and Xichangana as examples of the marginalized languages in Zimbabwe.

### **Great Zimbabwe University and marginalized languages**

Great Zimbabwe University is one of the several state-run IHL in Zimbabwe. It was created through an Act of Parliament in 2002. The mandate of this university as stated in its vision is to be the centre of excellence in Creative Arts, Culture and Technology. In pursuance of its vision of being the national reference point for the promotion and preservation of culture, GZU has added TshiVenda and XiChangana to the list of indigenous languages that are being taught at undergraduate and postgraduate degree levels. TshiVenda and XiChangana are currently two of the several marginalized languages that have been included in the GZU curriculum, joining ChiShona and IsiNdebele. ChiShona has been taught at university level, specifically at the University of Zimbabwe since 1958 and IsiNdebele was added as a university discipline in the 1970s. This is why ChiShona and IsiNdebele assumed national status side by side with the English language. However, the major loophole was that these two indigenous languages were taught and developed through the medium of English. This reflected the dominance of English at the time.

A new dispensation is being undertaken at GZU in the form of indigenous languages curriculum programme. The university's

programme seeks to empower mother tongue speakers of TshiVenda and XiChangana to become literate in their own languages. This would go a long way to meet community needs and provide the Venda and Shangani communities as well as their children opportunities to learn through their mother tongues. The GZU programme began in 2007 when a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between GZU and the University of Venda (Univen) in South Africa. Part of the terms of MoU was that Univen would help GZU with TshiVenda and XiChangana lecturers. GZU, through the Faculty of Arts, and in collaboration with Univen and its MerMathiva Centre for African Languages, Arts and Culture, is offering this unique programme on developing the teaching of TshiVenda and XiChangana. GZU is the first IHL in Zimbabwe to teach TshiVenda and XiChangana at degree level. As part of its mandate to develop culture, GZU is using each of the indigenous languages on offer as the medium of instruction and examination. This implies that ChiShona language is being taught and examined in ChiShona and likewise for each of XiChangana, IsiNdebele, and TshiVenda languages. This is a great stride towards the localization, indigenization, contextualization and nationalization of indigenous languages and it goes a long way in enhancing the identity of the speakers of these languages in Zimbabwe. Thus, the marginalized indigenous languages are slowly being moved to the centre through the literacy initiatives and activities at GZU.

One significant way through which GZU is promoting the TshiVenda and XiChangana languages is through its recruitment policy. There are several dimensions to the recruitment process. In order to enrol the TshiVenda and XiChangana speakers into the Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme, affirmative action is applied. In the conventional system of recruitment of students at GZU, applicants must have attained at least five Ordinary level passes including English language and at least two Advanced level passes ranging from grade 'A' (equivalent to 5 points, the highest in performance) to grade 'E' (equivalent to 1 point, the lowest in performance). But when it comes to the TshiVenda and XiChangana applicants, the recruitment generally follows a different principle. Whereas at least five Ordinary level subjects, including English language, are required of them, there is a waiver on the Advanced level criterion. Through affirmative action, the applicants are required to be fluent speakers of either TshiVenda language or XiChangana language. A proficiency test may be held to verify the level of fluency of the applicants. Thus, the mother tongue literacy education in these

marginalized languages begins with an oral examination in order to recruit the right candidates.

Another motivating way by which GZU encourages students who study TshiVenda and XiChangana as marginalized languages is that such students are offered on-campus accommodation. Although these students pay for their own accommodation, securing residence is a privilege given that accommodation is limited at GZU. As a new university, GZU is still struggling with its expansion programme including setting up infrastructure, yet it has a large enrolment that exceeds the available accommodation space. In terms of staff welfare for the visiting support lecturers from Univen, GZU has reserved accommodation for them. This is a way of supporting the literacy initiatives for the XiChangana-TshiVenda programme. In terms of funding, the XiChangana and TshiVenda students are privileged to access a government loan that is given to selected students in the form of Cadetship. The beneficiaries of the Cadetship loan are the needy students whose forms go through a selection process by the Students' Affairs Welfare office after which they are recommended to the Ministry of Higher Education for the disbursement of funds. However, in line with the university's effort to empower the TshiVenda and XiChangana students, GZU gives a recommendation for them to access Cadetship given that the XiChangana and TshiVenda programme is a national programme meant to empower marginalized societies by supporting their languages.

GZU produced its first crop of graduates in TshiVenda and XiChangana in 2010, but their graduation ceremony was held in October 2011. The inaugural group of 20 graduates completed the Bachelor of Arts degree in which XiChangana and TshiVenda languages were major subjects in their programmes. More than half of those graduates who specialised in the indigenous languages were females (Maponga, 2011:2). Out of the initial group of graduates, the university has taken a bold step of recruiting four of the most talented graduates (two females and two males) as Assistant Lecturers to teach TshiVenda and XiChangana in the Faculty of Arts. Because these Assistant Lecturers support visiting lecturers from Univen, it is hoped that they will form the nucleus of the new generation of local human resource for teaching and developing literate citizens in TshiVenda and XiChangana, not only for GZU but also for the whole of Zimbabwe. These local lecturers will be expected to provide leadership in developing the orthography of TshiVenda and XiChangana so that the literacy initiatives could be enhanced. While some books on TshiVenda and XiChangana written by



South African authors have been donated to GZU, the problem is that the South African and Zimbabwean orthographies on these languages are different. This is one other area that the local experts are grappling with through mother tongue literacy in support of curriculum innovation and change at GZU.

The University has also encouraged the Assistant Lecturers in TshiVenda and XiChangana to further their studies in order to develop academically. Along the same lines, GZU has funded some Staff Development Fellows (SDFs) to study for the honours degree programmes in TshiVenda and XiChangana. The hope is that these SDFs will eventually replace the visiting support lecturers from South Africa. As a new generation of experts in XiChangana and TshiVenda, they are expected to undertake the translation of various texts and documents from other languages such as English, ChiShona and IsiNdebele into TshiVenda and XiChangana. These local experts, as enlightened readers and as empowered leaders, will be expected to intensify the process of empowering their respective communities so that they become literate citizens. Thus, GZU has an important stake in the promotion of mother tongue literacy among the marginalized language communities. For instance, in light of the constitution-making process that is currently in progress in Zimbabwe, these promising language ‘Turks’ have the responsibilities to translate and interpret the constitution so that the people from their communities can understand issues affecting their lives. Once these communities begin to articulate and appreciate national affairs affecting them through the medium of their own mother tongues, they become literate citizens and empowered communities. Therefore, in this case, language becomes a lens through which communities translate reality and this reality is part of their identity and ultimately part of their heritage.

Through the efforts of GZU, the mother tongue speakers of XiChangana and TshiVenda are beginning to benefit from the embryonic literacy initiatives. Some of the students and assistant lecturers acknowledge the contribution XiChangana Promotion Association in holding cultural galas and giving speeches that nurture confidence and pride in the Shangani communities. The keenness of GZU in developing a literate citizenry and a participatory society is evident in the way they support and participate in these cultural events. In fact, every year, during the cultural week and the Dzimbabwe Arts Festival, Shangani and Venda groups from their respective communities and students at GZU are invited to showcase their talent through music, poetry and

dance that promote indigenous languages and cultures through ‘edutainment’.

At another level of developing literate citizens, publishers in South Africa and Zimbabwe are answering the call of GZU to empower the mother tongue speakers of marginalized languages. For instance, Longman (South Africa) has provided books in TshiVenda, Sotho and XiChangana that have been transformed to suit the local Zimbabwean context. For instance, the examples used localised versions to reflect the Zimbabwean experience. These are some of the literary resources that are being utilised in schools for teaching marginalized languages. In addition, the Zimbabwe Publishing House in collaboration with the Xangani Promotion Association has managed to introduce a XiHlengwe Series for Primary Schools in Zimbabwe to support the literacy initiatives in the Shangani communities. Notably, the pioneering stream of GZU students in XiChangana, some of whom are now Assistant Lecturers, have contributed to the writing of the Grade 1-7 series for teachers and pupils. The titles of these XiChangana texts include *Hluvuko waHina (Our Development): Buku YaMudyondzisi (Teachers' Guide)* written by S.K. Madlome, A. Mapindani, H. Mavunda, H. Pikela and P. Zumbo published by ZPH in 2010. The XiChangana pupils' books series for Grade 1 -7 were written by C.L. Chauke, S.K. Madlome, A. Mapindani, H. Mavunda, H. Pikela and M. Sithole in 2010 entitled *Hluvuko waHina (Our Development): Buku YaVadyondzi (Pupils' Book)*. The series in XiChangani are already in use in the primary schools to enhance the literacy levels of children from the Shangani communities.

The marginalized Venda and Shangani communities are also exposed to the reading of translated and transformed multiple texts in their mother tongues. These texts include the Bible, songs used in church hymnals, the National Anthem and some pamphlets from non-governmental organizations such as Family Aids Caring Trust (FACT) and Plan International to disseminate diverse information to the marginalized communities. However, this study established that there has been no significant progress made to promote literacy among the Shangani and the Venda community. For instance, the National Anthem is still to be translated into TshiVenda. There is also no association comparable to the Xingani Promotion Association among the Venda. To cover this literacy lacuna in mother tongues GZU has made some inroads through their human and intellectual resources as an institutional strategy for community engagement that empowers and develops literate citizens in TshiVenda and XiChangana. Thus, GZU is

an ‘engaged university’ (Watson, Hollister, Stroud and Babcock 2011) with a unique duty to listen, understand and contribute to the social transformation and development of a literate citizenry and participatory society. The Shangani and Venda communities are enabled to realise their specific community needs through the learning of their mother tongues. This is how language becomes a carrier of a people’s culture. This suggests that to ‘kill’ a language is to kill a people’s culture that eventually negates effort towards sustainable development.

### **Trends in indigenous language literacy: Some reflections**

In post-colonial Africa in general, indigenous languages, just like indigenous cultures, are being marginalized by us, with the external help from interested parties due to globalization as a new form of colonialism. For example, some people wrongly equate intelligence with the ability to speak English (or a European language). It is a misnomer when people believe that all things Africans import such as cell phones, cars, TVs, radios, computers and satellite dishes, for instance, are manufactured by people who have learnt and mastered the English language. The authors of this paper are convinced that Africans are the masters of their own destinies. In this regard, IHL in Africa should adopt measures to upgrade indigenous languages through curriculum innovation that prioritises mother tongue literacy. It must be noted that no country in the world has fully achieved socio-economic development while depending on a foreign language at the expense of indigenous language. A leaf can be plucked from economically vibrant post-colonial countries like South Korea, Malaysia, China and Japan that have elevated their indigenous languages to the same levels as other European languages (Rwambiwa, 1995: 37). In the context of Zimbabwe, the ‘look East policy’ that heavily influences the government’s foreign policy must start by elevating the use of indigenous languages in its conduct of business, powered by a ceaseless community engagement in literacy initiatives and activities such as those of GZU.

There is no doubt that the dispensation at GZU is done in the spirit of the African renaissance by developing mother tongue literacy among the marginalized communities. This resonates with the pan-African agenda whose quest is to reclaim African heritage and move it from the periphery and back to the centre. The colonial language policy on literacy grossly sidelined indigenous languages; yet these used to take a centre stage in the life of the classical Great Zimbabwe State. Today the Great Zimbabwe Monuments are a World Heritage site, a

fact which is inspirational to the vision of GZU. In fact, GZU derives its name from the Great Zimbabwe Monuments such that its niche is meant to creatively promote the status of the African heritage and culture, including indigenous languages. This makes it imperative for GZU to engage the marginalized communities so that they can be proud and feel equal to other Zimbabweans.

### **Summary and recommendations**

This study has shown that language problems emanate from the ethnic diversity that obtains in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, the issue of ethnicity is a product of the colonial legacy in Zimbabwe. The problems of language in Zimbabwean were initially determined by the colonial policy makers who practised unbalanced literacy campaigns to the detriment of some indigenous languages. The Doke Report (1931) on the *Unification of Shona Dialects* triggered the process of ranking languages. While English emerged as an unparalleled official language of business and administration, indigenous languages like IsiNdebele and ChiShona were accorded national status ahead of other local languages. The ‘other’ indigenous languages like TshiVenda and XiChangana were deemed as ‘minority languages’ and were sidelined in the literacy initiatives and activities. The use of the tag ‘minority language’ is ideologically charged. It is prejudicial and carries conceptions of the centre-periphery dichotomy. This dichotomy is a form of linguistic marginalization. The study has shown that it is mistaken to marginalise other linguistic groups because language is a lens through which people express their culture, identity and other realities. Every language and culture contributes to humanity’s understanding of the world. It should be realized that all development starts with self-development and self-development itself is what constitutes the essence of a human resource development in any society. Therefore, language plays a critical role in enhancing self-development (Adjibolosoo, 2000:4). Notably, people who learn and read in their mother tongue become empowered and enlightened leaders. This is a vision that GZU, though still in its embryonic stages of growth as an IHL in Zimbabwe, is championing through a curriculum innovation that values indigenous languages.

In the light of the above observations, the following recommendations are made:

- African universities and colleges should proactively revise their admission policies on indigenous languages to facilitate the ad-

vancement of education by those who are talented but have no aptitude in the English language.

- There is need to strengthen capacity building within Africa in collecting and analyzing data to support intervention measures that address barriers that impede the vision of literacy for all by 2015 in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
- As fountains of knowledge and information, IHLs should consider how reading and writing in indigenous languages could be harnessed effectively in order to open up the socio-cultural futures across Africa and the world at large.
- The Zimbabwean government must interrogate a wide range of approaches to literacy that promotes reading for all in families and communities by setting up rural libraries and developing reading materials that are written in the indigenous languages.

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***The Pimp and the Preacher***  
**Gerald Gibbs, (2006)**  
**Lincoln, Nebraska: iUniverse, pp. 280**

The last part of this novel's blurb on the back cover reads, 'After reading *The Pimp and the Preacher*, one may ask if this is just a scandalous novel or if it is possibly true". Gerald Gibbs provides us with a critical and penetrating view of the state of the church which preys on the ignorance of its members in America's black community that is itself in a state of decline. This story is, in many respects, similar to what obtains in African countries such as Botswana. In recent years in Botswana, there has been a proliferation of 'prosperity churches', mostly of West African origin whose priests aggressively demand tithes and hefty offerings from their congregations. The unsuspecting church members are in most cases desperate for employment, cure for sicknesses and general prosperity. In the past two years or so the government of Botswana has had to intervene by deporting some of the unscrupulous foreign pastors and closing down some of the churches after it was discovered that they were not registered with the relevant authorities.

The novel starts with the main character, Clyde Robinson, being released from prison after spending more than twenty years without communicating with the outside world. After telling his fellow inmates that he was going back to pimping, they advise him to get involved with the church because this is how money and fortune are made these days. On arrival at his home he finds that his mother had long died and his black neighbourhood in Philadelphia has deteriorated. Churches have mushroomed all over the place but the pastors are not doing anything to help lead the community to prosper, let alone provide alms to the poor. Instead the priests use the pulpit to amass personal wealth. Simon, Clyde's elder brother has become a pastor and tries his best to encourage him to come to church, but Clyde is taking his time.

He links up with “Peaches”, a divorcee and an old business partner during his pimping days. Clyde, who lives at his late mother’s house becomes Peaches’ close friend and she helps him open a profitable brothel patronized largely by priests. Clyde and Peaches also go to church together and she is quite impressed by his knowledge of the Bible which he read while he was in prison. He uses his biblical knowledge to show Peaches how the priests, whom he portrays as false prophets were “pimping” the church.

Clyde attends the annual black pastors’ convention in Tennessee where he witnesses, first hand, moral corruption of astronomical proportions, and some younger pastors’ debauchery. He is present at some well attended seminars where priests unashamedly deliver talks on how to make maximum profits from unsuspecting church members, and how to turn them into obedient and willing tithers. The shocked Clyde, who has recorded the proceedings at the convention and threatens to expose the rot that has taken place. However, the pastors plot his assassination by sending hit-men to blow up his house. This happens in his absence, and the innocent Simon who had paid a visit is the one killed instead.

Another important aspect of this novel is Gibbs portrayal of black people as not keen to support one another. He shows that they prefer to patronise businesses owned by Asians in the black community. For instance, when Clyde returns from prison he notices that a number of formerly black owned businesses have been taken over by Asians who make profit from the black community but do not have any social responsibility towards the community. “Pretty Boy, take some time and look around for yourself. You’ll find out we don’t own hardly anything in our communities. Asians just came to this country, but they own just about all the businesses in the black community” (p.79-80).

Worse still, when Clyde gets a job in a warehouse he realizes that the business owner is overcharging his clients. Clyde tries to be considerate and helps a black client by repairing his air-conditioner without charge. However, a few days later the client reports Clyde to his boss and he is sacked. A similar sentiment is usually expressed in African societies such as Botswana. There is a strongly held view that Batswana do not support each other’s businesses. Even until recently government departments preferred to acquire services and goods from foreign owned businesses or from outside the country.

Peaches believes that there is a conspiracy to deny black people



useful information about how they can improve their lot. She gives examples of how highly informative and useful television programmes were struck off unceremoniously because they were seen as empowering black people (p.78). Peaches also tells Clyde about a perception or stereotype held by non-blacks that “...every black man sits on a corner, drinks beer and gets high. They also think we are all lazy and don’t want to work” (p.152). There is also a belief that a certain kind of alcoholic drink is deliberately sold only in the black community in order to be drunk by the black men who then succumb to prostate cancer (p.152-153).

The deplorable state of the black community is also blamed on the lack of what Clyde and Peaches view as incapable political leaders and preachers. This results in lack of confidence in the leadership by the black community. Low self-esteem on the part of the black people is not helped by the characters’ derogatory reference to other blacks as “Negroes”. In a number of instances Gibbs novel mirrors Chika Onyeani’s polemical sledge hammer entitled *The Capitalist Nigger*.

Following Simon’s death, Clyde, assisted by Peaches, opens soup kitchens and shelters to cater for the growing army of homeless blacks in his neighbourhood and beyond. He forces the Asian shopkeepers to make contributions to his course, and those who do not cooperate have their businesses boycotted, which leads to their eventual closure. His initiative is also meant to rebuild and empower the black community economically in order to gain self-respect and dignity.

While the novel presents an interesting and critical view of the materialism in the black church and the deterioration of the black community in an American city, it is not very well edited. There are some typographical errors. The novel is also written like an academic text book with subtitles in some parts of the chapters. These subtitles and chapter headings destroy the element of suspense as they hint at what a reader should expect next. Chapter ten is also far too long, and covers different themes. One feels that it should have been split into several chapters.

Information for the second paragraph of chapter eleven (pp.224-223) seems to be in a wrong place and should appear in a different chapter. The conclusion (pp.275-278) also spoils the flow of the story. It should have been brought somewhere in middle of the novel as a dialogue between characters not as a separate conclusion like in an essay or text book.

It could have been helpful for Gibbs to provide a historical dimension in his novel, for instance by demonstrating the role played by the church in the campaign for civil rights and other good courses in the history of African-Americans before it got derailed by self-serving pastors. Nevertheless, this novel contains some useful insights about the state of the black church and community in the United States in the twenty-first century. There are also parallels that can be drawn between the secular and materialist orientation of some preachers of the black church in the United States and some African societies as shown above.

**Reviewed by**

*Christian John Makgala<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1.</sup> Christian John Makgala is a Professor in the Department of History, University of Botswana. Email: makgalac@mopipi.ub.bw