

If it's written in English, is it really African literature?

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Dear Peter:

I gaped at my Zimbabwean friend when she told me what her husband "paid" for her in the traditional custom of **lobola**, or bride price. I was shocked not by the custom, but by the extraordinary items her parents requested. They made conventional African demands for cattle or the cash equivalent of 20 cows. But the bride's mother also wanted a fur coat and a refrigerator, while her father asked for a new suit and an expensive radio.

Across Africa, everyday life holds a bizarre mixture of tradition and modernity because the pace of change continues to accelerate. Here in Zimbabwe, people use the word "tradition" in the same way that some wear a magical charm: to feel in control of their world in a time of rapid change and uncertainty. If Europe had centuries to gradually adapt to colossal changes created in Western society by the industrial revolution, imagine the combined impact of the combustion engine, electricity, radio and television on this predominantly agrarian society.

The bitter experience of colonial servitude has not been forgotten by contemporary Zimbabweans, yet their search for an identity as Africans is complicated by the allure of the sophisticated global fashions exported by the United States. One important example of this cultural contest is television. Zimbabwe's traditional culture appears to be losing ground as the heritage of storytelling unsuccessfully competes for the attention of the country's children. Each week, on the two TV channels aired in Zimbabwe, people watch "Falcon Crest," "L.A. Law," "Star Trek," "Tour of Duty," "MacGyver" and a slew of other American television shows. Every other program is an old British film or a detective show set in London. Even for those without a television, a majority of the population, European and American movies, music, magazines and books inundate their society.

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If Zimbabweans want to retain and enhance their culture, they must figure out what's authentically African amid the worldwide media tidal wave engulfing them. Nowhere is that struggle for self-definition sharper than in literature, where a debate continues about authenticity in African writing. Should authors and poets communicate in English, the language of the colonial oppressors, or in the indigenous languages of Shona and Ndebele, which will reach fewer people? There are many answers.



**Barbara Makhalisa Nkala**

Barbara Nkala, who writes her novels and short stories under her maiden name of Makhalisa, has thought a great deal about language. Her career as an author began in 1970, as a student at Gweru Teachers' College, when she won a national writing competition with her novel "Qilindini." That initial book was a detective thriller written in her first language, Ndebele. She has continued to write in Ndebele, focusing on the inherent strength of women to rise above discrimination and ignorance.

"I feel people should write in their mother tongue," Nkala said, during our discussion in her office at a communications firm. "Our whole culture is stored in language, and literature is the storehouse for culture. I'm not saying that one shouldn't write in English, but I feel writing in our own vernacular is better. Some of our young writers think you can only write in English and tend to ignore their own languages."

After years of listening to non-Ndebele friends complain that they could not read her novels, Nkala wrote her only book in English: "The Underdog and Other Stories." Most people know that collection of short stories more than her other works because only a quarter of the population is of the Ndebele ethnic group.

Both Nkala and her husband speak Ndebele at home with their two children, yet she admits her daughter feels more comfortable writing stories and composing songs in English. It's not what Nkala would prefer, but living in the capital exposes her children to English more than Ndebele. In a typical day at

school, students have seven periods of different subjects taught in English and only two periods in Ndebele or Shona. Children speak their fundamental language outside class but hardly learn how to write a letter home in it. English becomes dominant.

"There is a lot of confusion about the transition from tradition to modern world," Nkala said. "Children no longer have tradition as a part of life. Students are imbibing a new culture that draws them quite far away. Children here are not Western, but not traditional. They are neither here nor there anymore."

At this year's Zimbabwe International Book Fair, many writers agreed with Nkala during a special seminar about language and literature. Three speakers each quoted a Kenyan author, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, who wrote a polemical book in 1987 called "Decolonising the Mind." Thiong'o may have summed up the feelings of an entire continent when he argued that as Africans, "we cannot develop our culture and literature through borrowed tongues and imitations." This book was his farewell to English as the tool of his craft. Since then, Thiong'o has written in Swahili and Gĩkũyũ, though his work is faithfully translated into English. To understand the strong emotions in Africa about the issue of language, one must understand "Decolonising the Mind."

In the central essay, "The Language of African Literature," Thiong'o tells how his early childhood was full of storytellers speaking Gĩkũyũ. He learned language was not just a mere string of words but a magical medium to convey dramatic images and perplex the mind with riddles and proverbs or delight the ear with musically arranged words. When he went away to a colonial school, the harmony was broken and English became the main determinant of his progress in education. Speaking a local language instead of English earned a child strokes of a cane on the buttocks or the humiliation of a sign hung around the neck proclaiming, "I AM STUPID" or "I AM A DONKEY." Thus native languages were associated with low status, humiliation and stupidity, and English denoted intelligence and accomplishment.

The result alienated an impressionable student from his own language and reality around him and prompted an identification with a foreign culture. "It starts with deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualisation, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies." While many great writers have been born on this continent, he said, their books are not African literature but a hybrid tradition that can be dismissed as an off-shoot of English literature, incidentally produced by African men and women.

Thiong'o called upon African writers "to do for our languages what Spencer, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them." An African writer must go further than simply eschewing the use of borrowed tongues, Thiong'o said. There is a specific political mission as well in literature. Writing in African languages, a writer can reconnect himself to the peasants and working class in Africa in a struggle to throw off a neo-colonial economic and political relationship to the West. He closed the essay by warning that writing in an African language is a subversive act that would be suppressed by the ruling minority on behalf of U.S. imperialism. Don't expect literary prizes, he cautioned, but jail cells.

Strong stuff. Yet all of it rings true for many African writers as well as for me. I remember reading books by Thiong'o at the University of California at Berkeley. At that time, I wanted to participate in what he called the "revolutionary struggle of the organised peasantry and working class in Africa to defeat imperialism and create a higher system of democracy and socialism in alliance with all the other peoples of the world."

I wince now at the clenched-fist rhetoric, like a generation older than me roll their eyes at the renewed popularity of peace signs, go-go boots and mini-skirts. But Thiong'o does elucidate the torn-between-two-worlds consciousness of urban Africa. And all serious writers, whether they are newspaper reporters or novelists, eventually recognize that what they write influences a reader's vision of the world, imparts ethical and aesthetic values and forms political opinions. Thiong'o is correct that words reinforce cultural beliefs about what's important or trivial, what's good or bad, what's beautiful or ugly and what is politically right or wrong. However, he leaves out what strikes me as a compelling argument for writing in the tongue of African tradition: the poetic beauty of the language.

Bobbie Jo and I attended a daily class of four hours in July for instruction on the basics of speaking in the Zimbabwean language of Shona. Although it was frustrating and exhausting, I quickly learned to appreciate the loveliness of Shona expression.

Our class of five students was drilled mercilessly by a Zimbabwean woman who used to teach drama in the high schools. The day would begin with greetings, a rapid fire exchange of five or six common salutations. We studied question and answer vocabularies on subjects ranging from gardening and cooking to physiotherapy and religion. We sang Shona songs, marching in place to the beat of a children's ditty about going to work like **Baba**, or father. We played traditional counting games, designed to trip up the tongue. We pounded our fists on the table as we chanted the refrain women sing as they pound corn meal into flour

for the evening meal. I had to be on my toes every minute of those four hours to catch each syllable spoken or I'd be lost.

Four years ago, while I was a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa, I became proficient in the Bambara language spoken in Mali. Having previously learned another Bantu language helps me tremendously when it comes to accepting a very alien sentence structure. In other European languages like French or Spanish, one sees familiar words and expects them to fall into line like English sentences. African languages are more complicated. Grammar on this continent has reflexive ligaments knotting the different syllables into one complex word expressing complete sentences of meaning. I guess German comes closest to Shona in structure, since large words are built out of several small ones. A typical question, for example, is "Muchazodzokerakozve here?"

**Mu-cha-zo-dzokera-ko-zve here?**

Mu is "you" in the polite form of address,  
**cha** is the future tense indicator, i.e. "will,"  
**zo** is "then,"  
**dzokera** is the stem of the verb "to return,"  
**ko** is a locative indicator meaning "there,"  
**zve** is "again" and  
**here** indicates it's a question.

So the two words mean: "You will then return there again?"

Then there were complex charts showing the grammatical classes of Shona nouns. There are 25 different groups, each with its own peculiar "basic subject concordance" that changes the structure of adjacent words. For example, class seven is for days of the week as well as anything that is short and round. **Chipunu**, for example, is "spoon." **Chingwa** means "bread." **Chidya**, "drum." Class eight is the plurals of class seven words: **Zvipunu**, **Zvingwa**, **Zvidya**. A simple phrase like "my spoon," **chipunu changu**, changes when in the plural noun class to **zvipunu zvangu**, or "my spoons." Got it? And there are separate noun classes for light things, skinny things, tiny things, tall and round things, extra large and extra small things, and abstract or countless things.

My personal favorite is class nine: Nasal nouns and the names of birds and animals. **Mombe**, which means "cow," is pronounced with a mooing "O" sound. **Imbwa**, or "dog," has a hard "G" sound that comes from somewhere in the sinuses. Thrown into this class for good measure are some modern words, like **motokari**, which means "motor car," and **mudhudhudhu**, which is a "motorcycle." That word nicely illustrates the wonderful musical sense in the Shona language, which has so many words with onomatopoeia. The sounds of Shona are pleasing to the ear, with buzzes and gulps and little burps of vowels and even something termed a "whistling fricative" by the textbook. It sounds very

nice in one of the most frequently used words in this language: **Zvakanaka**, a term that just zips off the lips and expresses the idea that "things are in the state of having become good."

Of all the words I've learned so far in Shona, my favorite is **Zimuzangara**. It was coined by the first older people who saw television in the 1970s and described it as "You see it, then it disappears." Our teacher told us the story -- apocryphal, I'm sure -- of an old man who came from the communal areas to visit his educated nephew in the city and smashed in the TV tube with an ax. He saw a rabbit on the screen and thought it bad to waste meat by letting the rabbit vanish before he could brain it.

Knowing the language, even in a rudimentary form, gives me some insight into the culture. For instance, the Shona people have an entire noun class for names of trees. We have a list of 30 or 40 common trees our teacher thought it important for us to know. Right. How many North American trees can you name offhand? Trees are important here because many traditional remedies derive from them. It's not surprising that the Shona word for "tree," **muti**, also doubles for "medicine." Other words recall the naturalistic images of country life. The word for dawn is a composite of smaller images: "fog on the water when the elephants are washing." Beautiful! And dusk is "the time when the visitors come asking for their relatives" or, in other words, when the time has come to find a place to spend the night.

The Shona language possesses an integrity of experience and a creative resonance. It's a natural heritage of Zimbabwe and a part of the country's cultural environment. No wonder that, in a crisis of identity, some African writers look to the language they speak with friends and family as an anchor in the storm.

A well-known Shona poet, Chirikure Chirikure, appreciated my enthusiasm for his mother tongue. In spite of his daily job, which entails writing and editing children's textbooks in English for a private publishing house, he remains committed to Shona verse. "My confidence is in Shona because it's a more functional language for me," Chirikure said. "I think in Shona, the images come, and then I translate into English when I talk. I think you get a stronger impact if you write it straight out in Shona."

This soft-spoken poet isn't a champion of Shona or against English. He believes the subject and style of a poem means more than the language used. Up to 1985, most Zimbabwean poetry was written in Shona but still remained trapped in Europe's highly structured and metered models, he said. Chirikure writes in blank verse, using a traditional sense of rhythm, lots of alliteration and strong images of contemporary topics like drought and the World Bank's structural adjustment program. Zimbabweans like it. Chirikure's latest collection of poems, "Rukuvhute," sold out its entire print run of 1,500 copies in the first year. Most other

poetry books printed in Zimbabwe usually sell about 20 copies a month, taking some four years to sell the full stock. He's proud to write poems for the common person -- so his parents who live in the countryside can understand them -- instead of writing for "academics to sit down and figure them out like a jigsaw puzzle."

Chirikure is now working with a Kenyan publisher to translate "Rukuvhute" into Swahili. The editor read the translated manuscript and felt a lot had been lost between the two languages. As a check on the translator, the editor asked Chirikure to make a literal translation into English. Chirikure was flummoxed. He had never felt the need to use English before.

"I found there are few things, proverbs and images for example, that can translate directly," Chirikure said. "Like I use the **masoso** plant as an image in one poem. It's a thistle that grows on the ground in thick vines and it's a strong image of torture and pain. I can't find a replacement for it in Swahili or English, since it seems to grow only in Southern Africa, so I lose the impact of that image. So in translation, one captures the overall idea and feeling but sacrifices the image."

When Chirikure showed me the translation of another poem, entitled "**Marutsi**" or "Vomit," he would not look me in the eye as he explained the discrepancies between the Shona and English version. He finally confessed that he recreated the emotion rather than the exact words in the original. A new poem resulted.

#### Marutsi

Kanyanisa!  
Kanyanisa zvose,  
mbovha, mabori,  
madzihwa, misodzi,  
dikita, urwa,  
marutsi, ndove!

Kanyanisa!  
Kanyanisa ndizvidye,  
ndichoka chido chako:  
chawatema hachikanukwi,  
chawarota chinotoitwa.

Kanyanisa!  
Kanyanisa undipe,  
asi ndangodya, hokoyo:  
Nidhakurutsira iwe  
    mumuromo  
    mumhino  
    mumaziso

uchabitirwa

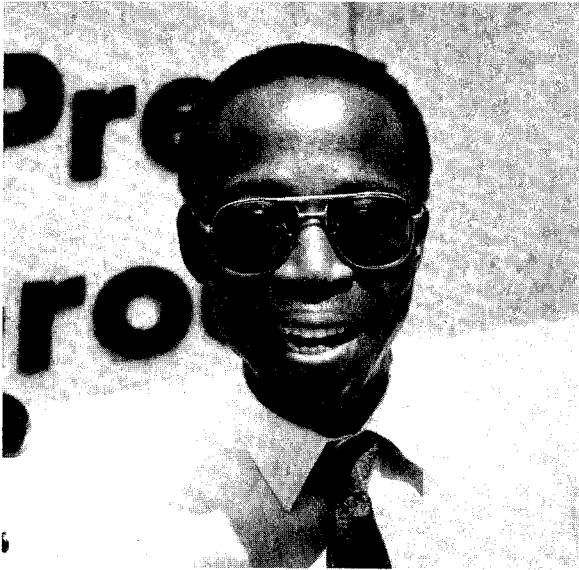
#### Vomit

Mix them!  
Mix them all ---  
saliva, blood,  
mucus, tears,  
sweat, pus,  
dung, vomit!

Mix them!  
Mix, and I will eat,  
for, that's your wish:  
thy wish has to be done,  
come rain come thunder!

Mix them,  
Mix, but beware!  
Once I have eaten,  
I'll vomit on you,  
right in your mouth  
                    nose  
                    eyes

You'll choke!



Chirikure Chirikure

The Shona word **kanyanisa** means more than just mixing, Chirikure said. It carries the idea of mashing and mashing together rotten things, so "mix" is more banal by comparison. Another word in the poem that pales in English is **hokoyo**. "Beware" is a more sedate word of warning. **Hokoyo**, explained the poet, is more urgent, desperate and immediate. "If you began to cross the street and a car was coming down the street, I'd say 'beware.' But if you stepped off the curb as the car plunged right past, I'd scream 'hokoyo!' See the difference?"

The most moving of the lines in the poem, really the emotional heart of the work, are the words: **chawatema hachikanukwi/chawarota chinotoitwa**. Chirikure translated them as "Thy wish has to be done,/come rain come thunder!" But it does not say that at all. Not even close. My knowledge of Shona may be elementary but I spotted the discrepancy right off and that made Chirikure embarrassed and apologetic. The phrase literally means: "No one will remark against your decision-judgment/What you dreamed has to be done." It's difficult for Chirikure to explain in English. "A decision might end up as a dream and might not actually be real," he said. "That's what dreams mean in Shona, unlike English. It's something that might be possible but might not. This poem is political."

One thing disconcerted me during our discussion. Chirikure wrote some of the poetry for his forthcoming collection in the United States, while on a fellowship at the University of Iowa. Now he is applying for another writing fellowship in Chicago. How can a Shona poet find inspiration in America? Chirikure said that time let him work without interruption and share ideas with other artists, yet admitted he threw out three-quarters of the Iowa poems because homesickness made his verse trite. "That nostalgia creeps in and there's a lot of emotion but no substance," he said. "That removal from your society, while it should give you a chance to analyze your society from a distance, instead finds you outside your society and wishing to get back in."

Another contemporary Zimbabwean writer, Shimmer Chinodya, also wrote his latest work at the University of Iowa. It was a very isolated time in his life, when he closed himself off from



other people, he said. He wrote in the late evening hours, when no one was about, then skulked back to his apartment to sleep.

"I was young and defensive," said Chinodya, who is now 35 and sits behind a desk at the Ministry of Education's curriculum development unit. "I was forced to take positions in Iowa and felt pressured to represent my country and my continent in a very provincial section of the United States. So I kept coming back to Zimbabwe in my head, digging more." He swung his long arm out over his desk, like an elephant's trunk, saying: "I was reaching out from Iowa with a long proboscis to sip Zimbabwean culture. That's the beauty of existing in two cultures. You can tap into two cultures and it's flexible. African writers have access to Western thought processes and the traditional world."

While he has never written anything in Shona, Chinodya confesses he has lied about it to avoid embarrassment. "I think the guilt remains," he said. "What am I doing writing in this language (English)? I know if Shona was more accessible to the world, I would do that. But at home, I speak only Shona and no English. There's something false about speaking English to my wife or children." I sensed he has found an uneasy equilibrium between his education in Western literature and his Zimbabwean subject matter. Chinodya seemed to be saying that English is valuable as an artistic medium, but too special for everyday communication with the wife and kids. Or is English too artificial to discuss real-life family issues?

Chinodya is such a successful writer that he need not justify his use of English, in which he wrote four popular novels and several children's books in drama, folklore and poetry. He is right that English is more accessible than Shona. When I look in any bookshop, English "thrillers" flood the shelves while local languages are tucked into a small corner. Ten years after Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, total school enrollment had risen 300 percent, with literacy jumping to 77 percent. Most educated people tell me they prefer reading and writing English.

Yet Chinodya sounded defensive when he argued that acclaimed authors like Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o can afford to condemn English as a



Shimmer Chinodya

tool of neocolonialism. Thiong'o, after all, has already written many novels in English and his resulting fame assures that his current works will be translated, he said.

"I think it's an outdated view to ask, 'Why are you writing in the colonizer's language?'" Chinodya said. "I think it's naive to think you express culture only in a language or that you can express it in clothes. Culture is more complex than the immediate physical things around you, or the medium of communication. I've stopped apologizing for my language, which happens to be English when I write. Now I ask myself, 'What do I do with this language in which I've found myself?' You can subvert it, make it African. Twenty years ago, I was obsessed with writing correct English. Now, I can fracture it like that."

An example of Chinodya's subversive tendencies with English is in his latest book, "Harvest of Thorns," which chronicles the life of a Zimbabwean man through his turbulent childhood in the 1960s, his life-or-death effort in the liberation war, and up to the present where he wrestles with his resentment at the lack of change in society after independence. Chinodya writes flawless and vivid English, using flashbacks and stream of consciousness, except for one brief and deliberate exception. In a funny and touching portrayal, Chinodya tells the story of how the protagonist's parents met, courted and wed in the mid-1950s. It began when 18-year-old Shamiso made a rare trip out of the native reserve to a town near her village and met a messenger boy at the colonial district commissioner's office who sent love letters.

Dearest, Daleng Shamiso Mhaka, I hope you no sarpraised by riciving this missive but I just decision to send you one because I have important news and this news I am keeping for to myself for some time. I love you very very very much. The day I seen you in the line outside my job I know I have found a pritty wife. You are the prittiest girl ever meet and to say pritty is telling god lie because you prittier than the word pritty. Your skin is like the mupichisi frute. Your eyes like black diemonds. Your lips is maroro chaiwo. When I met you that day I can't telling you I love you because I think you sister is your mother and I don't want you to thought I rush too fast. Now you know. Please please please please please please please reply because I cannot sleep at night thinking about you. I want to marry you and to call your Mrs Clopas Wandai J. Tichafa my wife. Yours in hope, Clopas Wandai J. Tichafa. P.S. If I can meeting you any place any time please telling me this ...

Chinodya's ear for the unsure English of rural people is perfect. I have encountered people speaking like Clopas Wandai J. Tichafa, who speak the fractured syntax of a Shona version of English. From my language lessons about expressing similes and resemblances, I know that young men in courtship traditionally made such complimentary comparisons. Some sound insulting, like comparing your lady love's neck to that of a donkey. In the past, however, strength made a woman desirable because a strong wife could work hard and help her man. More pleasing to the modern ear

is his allusion to **maroro chaiwo** or ice water, which some older people say has a sweet and satisfying taste. And a **mupichisi** or peach has velvety soft skin with its sweetness hidden underneath.

Sprinkled throughout the text of "Thorns" are many Shona words that cannot be understood even in context. Chinodya said Zimbabwean critics complained when, in a few instances in the book, he tried explaining those Shona words with obvious English references to help the reader. "It is a kind of colonialism to have to keep explaining yourself to non-Shona speakers," he agreed. That brought up the question of just who Chinodya sees as his audience: Zimbabweans or the larger English-speaking world? "The audience is the raw material I work with. I ask myself, 'Is this as close as I can get to the experience?' I don't sit down and say I'm writing for America or writing for Africans. The best audience for your writing is what you're writing about."



Chenjerai Hove

Nkala strongly supports writing in Ndebele and Chirikure prefers Shona. Chinodya writes from an English literature background but finds his themes in Shona culture. At the other end of the spectrum is Chenjerai Hove, who characterizes his writing as "African-English." It's an English language "gone native" by being intermingled with the Shona world view that already occupies his imagination. "There's an exciting interaction with our mother tongue that you can feel in a work of art," Hove said. "You find something new in it that you don't in English-English works."

At 36, Hove is an accomplished poet and author in both English and Shona. As a schoolteacher, he is certified to instruct both languages, though now he teaches literature at the University of Zimbabwe. As a reporter, he has worked for InterPress News Agency. And as a political activist, he has written articles in popular magazines calling for greater democracy and accountability in Zimbabwe. Hove is a lion among most of his contemporaries: Articulate, intelligent and iconoclastic. The younger generation of this country looks up to him like French youths decades ago looked up to Jean Paul Sartre, or like a sub-culture of Americans idolizes Bob Dylan.

The project of an African writer, according to Hove, must be to change the whole notion of a novel. African writers can use the tradition of storytelling to make a contribution to English,

so that the definition of the novel will never be the same again. "We are a people who also have a tradition of the story, because a novel is a story, and the way we put it down--the sound of it--contributes to the growth of the novel as a genre," Hove said.

In his first novel in English, "Bones," Hove used remarkable linguistic control to write in a poetic language that merges Shona idioms and rhythms into English. The award-winning 1988 book is about a farm worker named Marita whose only son joined the freedom fighters during Zimbabwe's war for independence. She leaves the countryside in a trip to the city in search for word of her son, but finds only torture and death at the hands of the Southern Rhodesia security police. Janifa, who would have become Marita's daughter-in-law, mourns her passing in this excerpt:

Now that the woman is dead, my heart swells. Marita, why did you insist on going alone? Don't they say a journey is two people? You know I would have come with you, if only you had whispered into my ears. I would have run away with you to the city where they say it's daylight from start to finish. Who knows, I would have helped you carry all those burdens of the heart which weighed so heavily on you. Burdens that ate into you like a sickness. Marita, the city is like the throat of a crocodile; it swallows both the dirty and the clean. Have you not heard how so many children run away to the city and then change their names until their own mothers cannot recognize the seeds of their own wombs? Was it not Maringa who brought the story of a girl who slept with her own father whom she had left a long time ago? But when the father followed her, he flowed with the desires of the city, sleeping with every woman who said 'yes,' until he ended up like the hen which ate its own eggs. Imagine, Marita, a man being his own son-in-law, his own grandfather, paying the bride-wealth to himself. Imagine the shame, Marita.

On the door of Hove's office at the university hangs a sign: "Writer in Residence." Hove is completely at home, taking occasional pinches of pungent snuff from a traditional tobacco bottle as he taps away at a computer keyboard. His shelves are crammed full of books from many cultures, with those of Latin American writers like Octavio Paz and Eduardo Galleano propped next to West African authors Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe. Hove feels no breach between his modern existence and country life, where people still plow their fields with oxen. Traditional culture, he said, still has much to teach. "When I go back home, I never feel out of place. Why? Because I have taken it upon myself to realize that I have a lot to learn in terms of language, world outlook, in terms of knowing myself much better."

The future of African literature, I believe, lies in the capacity of writers here to continue a dialogue between the old storytelling tradition and the modern media society by finding new ways of writing in **any language**. Judging from Barbara Nkala, Chirikure Chirikure, Shimmer Chinodya and Chenjerai Hove, I'm confident Zimbabwean culture will thrive in this time of change.

Sincerely,



Received in Hanover, NH, September 25, 1992