

Zim's collective memory, conscience preserved in Together

The Financial Gazette, Friday, 13 January 2012 11:48

Diana Rodriguez

Modern African writers and poets, like the griots or praise poets in earlier times, hold a special place in society. While the job of the griot was to give praise to the traditional chief of the tribe, by virtue of his important position, the griot was able to throw in a fair amount of criticism, without being called to task. Today's African writers have a similar function: by telling it like it is, they are able to preserve the memory of the nation, while acting simultaneously as a collective conscience.

Two such writers are baby boomers, Julius Chingono and John Eppel. Both spent their early years in Rhodesia, survived the liberation war and enjoyed the heady first years of an independent Zimbabwe. The stories they tell in *Together*, a joint publication by amaBooks Publishers of their poems and stories, date mostly from the year 2000, vividly recalling the country's 'lost decade'. In these troubled years, land reform displaced almost a million farm workers and their dependents, savings were lost forever, and an ageing population whose children fled to the Diaspora in search of jobs, was left to fend for itself in a country without food security or law and order.

In 2012, medical aid societies are functioning again, and supermarkets stock every kind of food. Memories of past privations are but dimly remembered, until the reader happens upon *The Pact* by John Eppel. Four elderly widows, Jean, Mavis, Harriet and Dorothy, pool their resources by moving into Dorothy's 'large, rambling house in Burnside. When a large pot of soup the ladies are making for thirty street kids is overturned by troublemakers, Mavis is severely burned. Not being able to afford medical aid, her friends treat her burns with aloe vera cut from the garden. Their ministrations fail, and before Mavis dies, the ladies enforce the pact they made, that 'if ever life became too much of a burden for one of them, all four would die together, by sharing one of Harriet's milk tarts, laced with a deadly Chinese-made rat poison.'

What begins as a jolly narrative of four good friends playing at becoming writers in their 'Scribbling Club', doing good deeds and managing to get by, descends into mass suicide and tragedy.

The Dread Gentleman by Julius Chingono recalls 2005, a year of elections and violence, and the notorious 'Operation Murambatsvina' when thousands of displaced city dwellers lost their livelihood and the average age expectancy for Zimbabwean women dropped to 34 years. The hero of the tale is a dread-locked businessman who had lost a business in the 'tsunami' of Murambatsvina. He undergoes a purifying process performed by three Vapostori in spotless white robes, their heads clean-shaven and shining with 'an abundant application of petroleum jelly.' Talking loudly above the sungura music 'churning' from a nearby jukebox, the apostles throw holy water on the pavement and nearby Durawall and declare that the gentleman's future

enterprise will be blessed and that 'the public will see good in the goods that will be sold here'.

Chingono's light touch and humour make him a good companion to any avid reader. As a man of the people, he makes us aware of the difficulties of surviving in Zimbabwe: but he also brings the life and laughter of the townships and the ready wit of conversations during long ET rides into our immediate experience. At times John Eppel's elegant and stylish prose lulls us into a false sense of security. Beautiful images in his poetry evoke the scent of buddleia, cestrum and syringa blossom. But before you can say *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, he shows us 'mounds of household rubbish dumped along our public ways', lamenting that our 'houses reek of poverty, anxiety . . . even terror.'

Whether Chingono and Eppel will be judged as activists, writers or poets, will depend on you, the reader. Sadly, Julius Chingono passed away in 2011, but John Eppel is just getting into his stride. Keep a close eye on 'amaBooks Bulawayo for future offerings.