

Tonga.Online

A Development Project in Binga District, Zimbabwe

Peter Kuthan*

For Tonga people like me, there is something deeply biblical about the word Mulonga, yet it is a modern story too. One of massive but unshared technology. One of plentiful water but perpetual drought. – Dominic Muntanga¹

Since its launch in 2001, the Tonga.Online Project has focused attention on education, access to information, and promoting a Tonga voice on the Internet. The aim is to provide people in the remote Tonga area of Zimbabwe (and the Tonga across the Zambezi river in Zambia) with access to the most advanced communication tools so that they can represent themselves to the outside world and reflect upon the social, political and economic environment of both the global and local village in which they live today.

The Valley Tonga are the third-largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe and some of the most marginalised people in the country. In the past they were largely cut off from the benefits that accrued to other Zimbabweans, especially those in urban areas. In 1957 they were forcibly removed from the fertile shores of the Zambezi river to make way for the building of Kariba dam, which brought electricity to the rest of Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) and huge benefits to the

nation in the form of commercial fisheries and tourism. Until the early 1980s, which saw the building of schools, clinics and roads, these benefits all but completely by-passed the Tonga.

Much has been written about the harm done to the Tonga through displacing them and abandoning them on arid land.² The social disruption was a cataclysm, with families being split and members cut off from each other because of the barrier presented by the dam and, in 1964, the new political border with Zambia.

To add insult to injury, the Tonga were stigmatised as dangerous, deformed, sub-human, and practitioners of witchcraft who hate outsiders. During the time of the settler regime, they were looked upon as occupants of some kind of 'human national park' to be preserved like game for the amusement of tourists. While these myths and crimes of the past need to be exposed, the constant harping on about past ills has its drawbacks, the most serious being that it feeds into the victim-perpetrator mentality that has colonised the minds of millions in the so-called developed world and has also colonised the minds of millions in Africa.

* This article is based on project documentation written mainly by Keith Goddard, the late Director of Kunzvana Trust, who pioneered the promotion of Tonga music and the Tonga.Online project, in collaboration with and updated by Peter Kuthan, Chairman of the Austria Zimbabwe Friendship Association, Linz, Austria.

The Tonga.Online Website is at <<http://www.mulonga.net>>, and Peter Kuthan can be contacted at <argerzim@silverserver.at>.

¹ Founder, Council for Zimbabwe <<http://www.zimcouncil.org>>.

² For example, Elizabeth F. Colson, *The Social Consequences of Resettlement: The Impact of the Kariba Resettlement upon the Gwembe Tonga* (Manchester University Press, 1971).

Strangely enough, the enforced move provided the Tonga with a small jewel. Shortly before the flooding, the ethno-musicologist, Hugh Tracey, was invited to the valley by the Livingstone Museum to record on tape examples of what were believed to be the last vestiges of Tonga culture before it vanished for ever; he recorded over sixty examples of Tonga music.

Previously, these recordings were unavailable to the culture that produced them; now, through the International Library of African Music (ILAM) Website,³ and the newly established Internet connection in Binga (although with poor connectivity), this historical legacy, which was transferred from analogue tape to vinyl record and, more recently, digitised (and stored for safety reasons in a Norwegian mountain beyond the Arctic Circle), has the potential to be reclaimed by the people of the Zambezi valley.

Despite their harsh living conditions, the Tonga have always adhered to their cultural heritage and ways of communicating oral traditions that are generations old. The Tonga maintained their identity by organising around what remained of their culture and, because the culture was dynamic, it helped them face and adapt to the massive challenges that their new environment presented them.

One could perceive the Tonga people as a digital community per se because of their music. Their unique Ngoma Buntibe Music is a kind of binary or digital music in its own sense, since one musician masters one note only by contributing a short blow on an antelope horn to an incredible storm of sound and stamping movements.⁴

The Tonga.Online project's Website derives its domain name, *Mulonga* [river], from the

Tonga language. The name reflects the history and the needs of the Tonga people. At one level, the Zambezi has become a symbol that tells a modern story of the development of massive but unshared technology – the construction of Kariba dam on Tonga homeland. *Mulonga* constantly evokes memories of how the Tonga people were displaced.

At another level, the constant flow of the Zambezi is a symbol of continuity which, today, represents the needs of the Tonga people both to communicate amongst themselves and with others, and to preserve and develop their rich cultural heritage. The Tonga.Online Project seeks to establish and expand the communication infrastructure using modern tools of information and communication technology (ICT).

A number of school-based telecentres have so far been established, and these already cater for the larger community, with more schools having been earmarked for such kind of development. Even across the lake in Sina-zongwe district in Zambia, the establishment of a computer centre has been supported by the Austria Zimbabwe Friendship Association (AZFA), while the Tonga.OnAir project, an initiative of young radio enthusiasts from Radio FRO in Linz, Austria, has helped set up a community radio station.

⁴The journey of the Ngoma Buntibe group Simonga to the 1997 Festival of the Regions in Upper Austria and the participation of a joint Simonga-Maliko ensemble from both sides of the river at the Parade at the European Capital of Culture, Linz 2009, emphasised the beauty, distinction and resilience of the Tonga culture, in particular the Nyele horns of Ngoma Buntibe music.

The musical texture of these horns debunked the myth of Africa being the continent of bongo drums where everyone has rhythm: Simonga and Maliko in Austria would not have sounded out of place in the concert halls of any contemporary music festival. In addition, the presence of the musicians in Austria raised the profile and gave visibility to the Tonga in an unprecedented way. See <http://visp.machfeld.net/parade_09>.

³<<http://www.ru.ac.za/ilam>>.

The existing fourteen Information Technology Centres (ITCs) in five primary schools (Binga, Manjolo, Siachilaba, Mucheni, Sina-zongwe) and nine secondary schools (Binga, Manjolo, Sianzyundu, Tinde, Pashu, Kari-angwe, Lubimbi, Lusulu, Siabuwa) are up and running but suffering from aging or outdated hardware, erratic or limited power supply, and poor or non-existent connectivity. Tyunga secondary school has received computers, but still has neither solar power nor generator and is very far from the grid.

Because of the welcoming attitude and backing from Binga Rural District Council (BRDC) the Tonga.Online project has been able to accommodate and offer its services at and from Binga library, which offers services to the general public at the centre of town opposite the Binga Museum and Binga Craft Centre. The library was established a few years ago, with support from Danish development aid organisation MS,⁵ with a starting package of books that has never been supplemented since.

Only recently, Tonga.Online managed to ship in a consignment of hardware from Austria designated for the library containing computers, flat screens and other components, as a donation from the Austrian Association of Public Libraries,⁶ the Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and Voest Alpine Intertrading. The project is now in a position to establish and run an IT centre that is not school-based and therefore more easily accessible to the wider public and Tonga community.

The so-called Public Access Point (PAP) facility complements the existing library with electronic equipment and software to



This rusty sign indicates one of the functions designated for Binga library

access information and knowledge resources like Wikipedia or Project Gutenberg and other encyclopaedias, or, more specifically, Edubuntu and newsfeeds like Pambazuka News.⁷ The project's Website has over the years become a rich resource base itself.⁸ The PAP provides space and enough workstations for training and for the dissemination of information through printing.

In the long run the Binga library will be enabled to serve the community as its true Parliament Constituency Information Centre, as it was designated for (see the rusty billboard in front of it). The challenge for Tonga.Online and the BRDC is therefore to equip the PAP with the relevant information to create a better-informed community and more transparent local government.

As a first step, the project has to establish a routine and relevant support for easy and open access for all. It will be crucial to use this modern information tool to collect, archive and disseminate local knowledge and to create relevant content. In this regard, the

⁵ <<http://www.ms.dk/sw2564.asp>>.

⁶ <<http://www.bvoe.at/en>>.

⁷ <<http://en.wikipedia.org>>; <www.gutenberg.org>; <<http://edubuntu.org>>; <<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/>>.

⁸ <<http://www.mulonga.net>>.



The Tonga.Online project's computers in Binga library

major functions of the Tonga.Online studio (currently based at Binga high school) and its efforts for media development are about to move to the library in order to encourage public usage and participation.

Access to information has become a crucial question of human rights, hence the relevance of this project as a tool to spearhead debate, accountability and empowerment among the Tonga people. There is also a huge educational potential for the Tonga.Online project in this remote part of the country, where no institutions of higher learning exist. It lends support not only to higher levels of education but also to rural livelihood and human resources development.

The Tonga.Online project has sometimes been met with severe criticism and has been viewed by some as a luxury gimmick. People have questioned the importation of dozens of computers into schools where there is still a lack of basic text books or stationery. But this linear view of history and development that suggests stone must precede paper, paper precede computer, and computer precede the Internet is dangerous and simply deepens the divide between the haves and have-nots.

Textbooks are expensive; most information

available over the Net is free (if the trap of proprietary software is avoided – the project is promoting free and open-source software (FOSS) such as Edubuntu). It makes perfect sense for the Tonga to leapfrog over the paper revolution and enter directly into cyberspace.

Tonga.Online is using the space provided by ICTs, the Internet and platforms such as regional and international festivals to dramatise a specific example of how technology can be used to reclaim history.

This is poignant when you think that the Net continues to be one of the vital tools for communicating in and between nations that are throttled by restrictions on people's rights to information and in communities which are often seriously misrepresented in other parts of the world.

The Tonga.Online project was initiated by Kunzwana Trust and the Austria Zimbabwe Friendship Association, with support from the Dutch NGO, HIVOS, and the Austrian Development Co-operation. Recently, the project has been merged into Basilwizi Trust, a Zimbabwean NGO based in the Tonga area and focusing on advocacy and education. Its Website, <<http://www.basilwizi.org>>, will be available soon.