

Keith Goddard in discussion with others
involved in the *Tonga.Online Project*

MULONGA

The *Tonga.Online Project*

For the 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 Muntanga

A collaboration between the Austria-Zimbabwe Friendship Association (AZFA) in conjunction with KUNZWANA Trust (Harare, Zimbabwe) and the Valley Tonga using the medium of culture.

The *Tonga.Online Project* (www.mulonga.net), represented at Ars Electronica Festival 2002, is the most recent phase in an extended cultural relationship between the Zimbabwe-based KUNZWANA Trust (in conjunction with the Austria-Zimbabwe Friendship Association) and the Tonga of the Zambezi Valley who live on both sides of the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe. The springboard was the people of Siachilaba, a village 60 km from the main town of Binga, and in particular the Ngoni Buntibe music of the group called Simonga.

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 which accrue to other Zimbabweans, especially those in urban areas. In 1957 they were forcibly removed from the 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 commercial benefits to the nation in the form of tourism around the lake. Until the early 1980s which saw the building of schools, clinics and roads, these benefits all but completely bypassed the Tonga. Much has been said about the harm done to the Tonga through displacing them and abandoning them on arid land. 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 British 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. Whilst 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.

The avoidance of begging bowl politics is why the KUNZWANA/AZFA cultural relationship with the Tonga has little to do with humanitarian aid. It has not involved food drops, grinding mills or the building of clinics. It is founded on the principle that cultural identity forms a vital function in terms of human survival. When forcibly removed to make way for the building of Kariba, the Tonga lost everything includ-



ing the fixed assets of their material culture such as their shrines. Their cultural styles were automatically transported with them because they filled no extra space and could not anyway have been separated from the bodies being moved. 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. Put very simply, the Tonga invested heavily in their culture and this meant they survived.

The expression 'cultural identity' is understood as the sum total of the cultural references through which persons and groups are defined, manifested and with to be recognised; cultural identity implies the liberties inherent to the dignity of the person and integrates in a permanent process cultural diversity, the personal and universal background, memory and the project.

United Nations Declaration on Cultural Rights Project

Strangely enough, the enforced move provided the Tonga with a small jewel. Shortly before the flooding, the ethnomusicologist, 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 South African International Library of African Music (ILAM) website and the newly established internet connection in Binga, this historical legacy, which was transferred from analogue tape to vynal record and more recently digitalised and stored for safety reasons in a Norwegian mountain inside the Arctic Circle, has the potential to be reclaimed by the people of the Zambezi valley.

This reclamation is expressed during the Ars Electronica Festival through the process of a loop. The 1957 recordings are downloaded from Norway to ILAM in South Africa and then streamed to Linz and transmitted to SW Radio in London which broadcasts to Zimbabwe. People in Binga hear the recordings and then, through a series of interviews, comment on them through a phone link to SW Radio. These reactions are broadcast to Linz and form the basis for further discussion and reflection in both Binga and Linz during the festival, especially through the Radiotopia global network of artistic communication.

The style of the cultural collaboration between KUNZWANA/AZFA and the Tonga people has sometimes met with severe criticism. Referring to a 1997 concert of reflections on Tonga music by six contemporary music composers which took place in Siachilaba, some people asked what the point was in bringing obscure electro-acoustic music to the Tonga when local bands have no instruments. They queried the expense involved and the appropriateness of bringing to the Tonga a music

which to many western ears is symptomatic of the cultural decay of the so-called developed world. One person asked angrily why we did not spend the money on fixing the broken grinding mill at the local business centre.

A few years later they also questioned the importation of dozens of computers into schools where there are no basic text books or stationery. They asked why thousands of Austrian shillings were spent on bringing large numbers of Tonga musicians to Austria when children have to walk 12 kilometres to school every day. Now they are questioning why an internet project is being introduced to a rural population when people there have asked for income-generating projects for basket makers or a new clinic. Human beings are more than bodies with stomachs to feed. We are also thinkers with ideas. The journey of the 30-member Ngoma Buntibe group, Simonga, to the 1997 Festival of the Regions in Upper Austria and the voyage over the Totes Gebirge (a Stadtwerkstatt *Kunst und Krawall* project) emphasised the beauty, distinction and resilience of the musical 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 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.

It is high time that those who volunteered to provide the tonga with internet services also provide them with the much needed basics of life

By CHITUMWA on Wednesday, November 28, 2001

In short, the basics that I think Tonga people need are tools not products. We have been left behind under the same presumption that what we need should be defined by [other] people.

By Dominic Muntanga on Wednesday, December 05, 2001

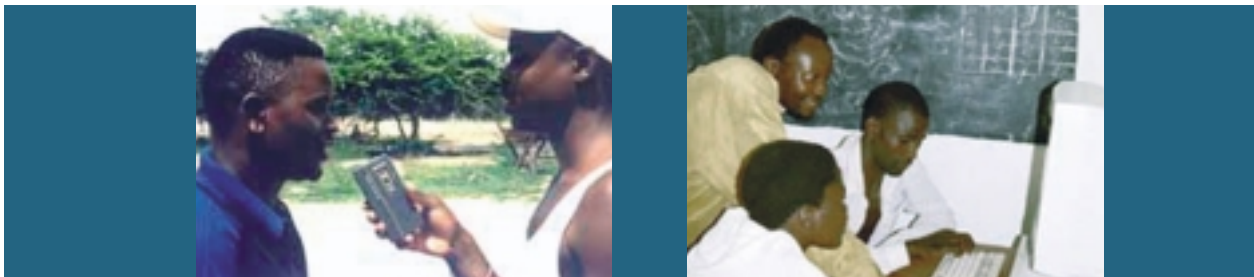
The linear view of history and development that suggests stone must precede paper, paper precede computer and computer precede internet, is dangerous and simply deepens the divide between the haves and have-nots. Text books are expensive; most information available over the net is free. It makes perfect sense for the Tonga to leapfrog over the paper revolution and enter directly into cyberspace. The grinding mill mentality is one of the worst expressions of patronage. This was borne out when a local business did the job herself. Joyce Mangoro installed electricity at the business centre, fixed the existing grinding mill and built a second one. The mills work because they belong to an enterprise that has a vested interest in ensuring they are properly maintained.

Nevertheless, in terms of social development, there have been a number of collateral benefits (or positive side effects) which have resulted from the collaboration. In terms of building up infrastructure, electricity will be installed at a school in Siachilaba in order to accommodate the second internet centre in the area. In terms of economic trade, a class in a business school in Linz-Auhof now runs a project called Auhof Basket Company (ABC) which imports and promotes Tonga baskets from the Binga Craft Centre. In terms of the music business, payments for a CD and performances of Simonga also mean general improvements in living standards.

One of the threats of globalisation is that the less powerful run the risk of being over-

Keith Goddard

whelmed by the more powerful. But we need to be careful about censoring what we communicate and share because of some misguided belief that it will recolonise minds that are vulnerable and unprepared. If we decide on what is suitable for the Tonga to consume and to experience, we put ourselves on the same level as those who patronise Africa as the continent of the begging bowl. By maintaining the attitude that the Tonga are to be preserved and left to their own separate development smacks of apartheid and continues to propagate the exotic myths of racial and sexual others that were used by colonialism to subjugate the colonised and keep the colonisers safe from what was called racial contamination. Besides, nobody can stop globalisation: it is not possible to stem the tide of history even if some want to and think that they can. The idea of the internet expresses the human right of everyone to receive and impart information: our accompanying responsibility is to ensure that its expansion is properly shaped and that the powers and advantages globalisation brings are available to all and not just to a privileged elite. At the moment, access remains extremely uneven.



The *Tonga.Online Project* has been viewed by some as a luxury gimmick. Connecting the exhibition 'Tracing the Rainbow' at Landesmuseum in Linz with the Tonga initially seemed an expensive and bizarre idea with no visible benefit accruing to the Tonga. By the end of January 2001, it was clear that not only was internet connectivity wanted in the area but that Binga High School had a room prepared and was simply looking for the computers to fill it.

The *mulonga* website has raised issues regarding representation. It was designed by Austrian artists, Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber. It is text-based and structured around a series of discussion platforms which encourage debate. Bitter and Weber were conscious of the pitfalls of representing communities as the exotic others rather than communities representing themselves. During the exhibition a few work stations were set up in a sparsely furnished room. The project focused on one simple word: communication. In contrast to much of the rest of the exhibition which displayed huge numbers of subtly-lit artefacts, the **Tonga.Online Project** room, designed by Thomas Schneider, used bold neon lighting. Discussions going on over the web were pinned to the walls during the exhibition. Pictures on the walls were kept to a bare minimum and images confined to few video loops. Representation and visibility at Ars Electronica Festival present a number of management problems for *Tonga.Online*. At the symposium, Dominic Muntanga, as a Tonga representing Bwaaca Trust, can speak with authority (albeit as a relatively privileged person within his community) but I am white, live in Harare and do not

speak Tonga. Although I have been involved with the people of Siachilaba for over ten years, my full-time work at present is not in music but in the field of human rights and sexuality.

Elsewhere during the festival, Tonga.Online is represented through a number of reference points: in Radiotopia, in the Klangpark and on Radionight and through a few physical work stations linked to the *mulonga* website. But in real space streaming, where huge amounts of information are being transmitted, there is competition for space. The difficulties are exacerbated by simple differences of bandwidth: the telephone lines in Binga do not allow for the transmission of large amounts of information. The project, therefore, still needs to fight for visibility and attention and ensure that its message is clear and understandable. To compound the difficulties, the project is not physically at Ars Electronica Festival but somewhere else in the world. Tonga.Online needs to ensure that the community in Binga has equal opportunity to be directly involved with its representation at the festival.

The Tonga presence at Ars Electronica Festival, however, provides fresh platforms for debate centring on whether the project is really a vehicle for art production or simply an amorphous, unfocused and pretentious social project masquerading as art. Perhaps these are niceties to occupy western European artists whilst the Tonga see the internet as a practical technological tool for social development but Tonga.Online is not confined to one space; it exists in Binga and it exists in Harare, in Linz and in Vienna, places which differ hugely from each other in conceptual thinking. *Mulonga* has become one of the major sites for shaping negotiation between these geographical sectors and the politics of space.

For something to be a cultural construction, it needs to have identity and it needs a frame otherwise there is no opportunity for critical evaluation. Tonga.Online is obviously only one corner of a much larger space involving creative exchanges between musicians and artists in Austria and Zimbabwe, each of which has its individual framework and reference points. Its presence at Ars Electronica Festival continues the theme of communication but now, because the Tonga are genuinely online, this theme expands into questions around oral tradition and ways in which communities like the Tonga have been storing and organising information and communication in the past versus organising information and communication using the internet.

If nothing else, Tonga.Online is using the space provided by the Ars Electronica Festival to dramatise, through means of the *mulonga* loop and the feedback within it, 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 nations throttled by ever-increasing restrictions on people's rights to information and in communities which are often seriously misrepresented in other parts of the world.

Supported by Österreichische Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, Kulturland Oberösterreich, LinzKultur, TechWorld, Silverserver, O.K Centrum für Gegenwartskunst, Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum