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An Interview with Obert B. Mlambo on the Occasion of the Monograph, Land Expropriation in Ancient Rome and Contemporary Zimbabwe: Veterans, Masculinity and War (London: Bloomsbury, 2022)

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A Short Profile of the Author

Obert Bernard Mlambo teaches Classics in a Global/African context at Rhodes University, SA. He is also a comparatist, whose research interests include among other things, Roman history, Ancient North Africa, colonial and postcolonial Classics, and the issues of violence, gender, politics, and land in the ancient and contemporary worlds. He has held teaching and research positions at the University of Zimbabwe and the Institute of African Studies and Egyptology, University of Cologne, Germany. He is the author of *Land Expropriation in Ancient Rome and Contemporary Zimbabwe: Veterans, Masculinity and War* (Bloomsbury, 2022). His recent publications include:



- 2024. *The Palgrave Handbook of Violence in Africa*, with Ezra Chitando (eds.), London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2024. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Men and Masculinities*, with Ezra Chitando, Kopano Ratele and Sakhmuzi Mfecane (eds.), London: Palgrave Macmillan.

The Interview

How did you get the idea for the topic?

OBM | The idea for this book occurred to me in 2014 while having drinks at the senior common room bar of the University of Zimbabwe with a war-veteran of Zimbabwe's Independence War. His love for

*This interview was originally published online at the Author Profiles of Isegoria Publishing C.I.C., see: <https://isegoriapublishing.co.uk/author-profiles/f/mlambo-obert>. It is published here revised and updated to accompany the publication of review of the author's book.

Latin, and especially for Caesar's Gallic Wars, which he claimed to have shaped his valorous attitude to war, caused me to ponder the need to explore the study of Classics. I have recently discovered through Alex Chula's excellent book *Goodbye, Dr Banda: Lessons for the West From a Small African Country*, that Caesar's *Gallic Wars* were also dear to the former president of Malawi, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who insisted on their value and appeared to take pride in identifying himself with Julius Caesar. At the official opening of Kamuzu Academy in 1981, Banda addressed a huge crowd of people to which he lectured on the importance of classical education and declaimed page after page of *The Gallic Wars* in the original Latin (Chula, 2023: 108). I have therefore found it rewarding to explore the Classics not just as a Western phenomenon for a Western audience but something of broader human relevance, involving intercultural comparison.

Moreover, during the decade of violent land seizures of white-owned farms, at several village-mobilisation meetings in my rural home, some teachers who had studied Classical Studies at the University of Zimbabwe made references to examples from Classical Antiquity. Among them, they pointed to the Gracchi land redistribution program of Republican Rome and that of Peisistratos of Athens during the Classical period as a way to encourage support for land redistribution in Zimbabwe. That is when I started to jettison the artificial separation of Africa from the West, which tended to ignore areas of similarity while looking only at areas of conflict in knowledge construction. Such an attitude does not help foster a friendly interaction between African and Western cultures. Thus, my basic idea of the topic was framed by a need to move beyond Western supremacism and simply reject Western culture and Classics as something irrelevant to an indigenous African context.

How long did it take you from conception to publication? How long was each phase?

OBM | The conception of the idea to write this book to its publication took me about seven years. The research and writing phases started in earnest in 2016, taking place partly in Cologne, Germany, and Switzerland.

What were major breakthroughs, the Road-to-Damascus moments?

OBM | Major breakthroughs and Road-to-Damascus moments in this book project occurred when I won a DIES (Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies) Grant funded by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) for travel and training in Proposal-Writing for Research Grants in Cape Town in 2014.

The main challenges with the nature of my study involved methodology issues and how to justify comparing disparate societies: ancient Rome and modern Africa. A problem of historical inquiry confronted me in dealing with narratives from ancient Rome and modern Africa. The issues involving the antitheses of time and perpetual change also posed serious challenges to this book, as I had to utilise material from different time periods and geographical spaces. I managed to overcome these through the training I received.

Soon after graduating with a certificate in Proposal Writing for Research Grants, I proceeded to apply for a Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellowship to develop my proposal into a book. My application was positively reviewed by the Humboldt reviewers, earning me in the process postdoctoral funding at the University of Cologne in Germany. This was a major breakthrough in terms of funding for research and supporting the authoring of this book.

What is more, my academic host at the University of Cologne, Professor Dr. Thomas Widlok, is a specialist in the Cultural Anthropology of Africa with some training in Latin and vast experience and knowledge in cultures and societies ancient and modern. His contribution to some of the methods and arguments I use in my book related to cultural comparison had a significant impact. He also facilitated

my becoming a Visiting Scholar at the Global South Studies Centre of the University of Cologne, where I obtained tremendous opportunities in terms of academic interaction with scholars from across disciplines of specialisation.

What was the biggest surprise you encountered when authoring the book?

OBM | The biggest surprise occurred when my research led me to discover the existence of something similar to Roman masculinity in Zimbabwe, which I discuss in Chapter Two of my book.

Did you have to revise any initial assumptions or ideas of yours after research?

OBM | I underestimated the role of women's actions and their voices in the late Roman Republic insofar as the struggles for land were concerned. On the surface, it appears as if women in the Roman Republic were passive in the land expropriation processes. Nevertheless, my comparison of ancient Roman and African women's struggles with patriarchy shone a light on the cultural logic of female power in gender discourses and practice. Exploring such practices in the book allowed for discussing how patriarchal order was challenged, questioned, and creatively subverted even in patriarchally very rigid societies, such as the Roman Republic.

Is there a particular topic that did not make the final cut and does not feature in your book? If yes, are there any plans to publish this as a standalone paper?

OBM | There is a need for further research on the role played by women in the land struggles during the period covered by this study, both in the Late Roman Republic and in an African context. Perhaps a starting point is the role played by Cornelia, the mother of the two Gracchan brothers, Tiberius and Gaius, in the political careers of the two agrarian reformists. Another avenue to explore this issue might be by tracing a development marked by the identification between Ceres and Empress Livia, which started under Augustus and was continued by her son, Tiberius. However, since my thesis was mainly focused on veterans, I did not dwell on these interesting aspects.

There is also an interesting theme that emerged as I grappled with Late Roman Republican politics. I discovered that the tensions between the Senatorial oligarchy and the younger crop of politicians, such as the Gracchi, revealed another dimension to the political crisis in the Late Roman Republic. This crisis was the crisis of intergenerational tensions, which are also playing a role in African politics. This book partially alluded to how it played out in Rome, where I touched on the concept of masculinities. How they were constructed and how they shaped politics in the first century BCE Rome, and the contests between Marius (older) and Sulla (younger); Pompey (older) and Caesar (younger); Antony (older) and Octavian (younger); and the Senate (older people) and Octavian (whom they called a boy). The African case has illustrated a similar tension between younger and older politicians. There seems to have been this quest for a new approach to problems by the younger generations in the two political landscapes. While this book confined itself to the politics of land distribution and the role played in the same by politicians and veterans, there is a need also to attempt a comparative study of intergenerational tensions in politics in separate publications.

How was your interaction with your publisher?

OBM | The Bloomsbury staff were fantastic throughout all the stages of publication. The process was smooth and flawless. I would like to particularly mention Lily Mac Mahon and Brenna Akerman for their exceptional professionalism and collegiality!

Where did you write it (location, but also settings, e.g., office, home, a café)?

OBM | The book was written in more than one place. I feel very personal about my offices housed in the Institute of African Studies and Egyptology at the University of Cologne and the University of Zimbabwe. This is where I did most of the writing of my book. The Library of the Fondation Hardt in Vandœuvres, Switzerland, an institute for the study of Classics and Antiquity, also provided a tremendous opportunity for research and writing. Interestingly, parts of the book were also written in unusual places, such as planes, trains, buses and other means of transportation or elsewhere. Indeed, ideas might occur to the unsuspected mind (at least in my case) while having drinks or a meal at a restaurant, and instinctively I would quickly jot down my thoughts while I was still remembering them.

What does the future hold for you, Obert? Any plans or ideas?

OBM | The future is bright and beautiful, as I am finalising a book with my colleague and scholarly friend, John Douglas McClymont. The book is provisionally titled *Classics and Africa: Intercultural and Postcolonial Dialogue*, and explores the identity of Classics in sub-Saharan Africa. The attempt to break free from Western cultural hegemony has implications for the teaching and study of the Classics in Africa. The book broadly constructs and explores a new guiding framework for studying Classics in any context in general and in Africa in particular. Epistemology, metaphysics and ethics are examined in constructing the framework. The epistemology we favour is an objective one that tries to avoid undue politicisation of issues while remaining sensitive to the issues of prejudice and the decolonisation of the mind. The metaphysics favoured, *inter alia*, looks at human nature as a universal, and tries to rescue Aristotelianism from the racial misconceptions of Aristotle himself. Additionally, in an attempt to find relevant ethical principles for Classics, the book looks at the cardinal virtues of the Classical philosophers from the viewpoint of a particular African culture, particularly the Shona culture of Zimbabwe.

I am also co-editing a forthcoming *Palgrave Handbook of Decolonizing Knowledge in Africa*. What is especially interesting is that the volume features a whole section with contributions to decolonising the academic discipline of Classics. Part of my idea is to make Classics contribute to current global debates. Classicists from across the globe for example, David Konstan, Richard Whitaker, Michael Lambert, Samantha Masters, David van Schoor, Jackey Murray, Mathias Hanses Samuel George Powell and many others are contributing to the current handbook. Palgrave MacMillan's books have an extensive readership, so our chapters will take classics to the global community. The contributions, broadly speaking, centre on the connection of the Classics and Africa in teaching, study, and research, reflecting on profound questions and angles of investigation. Issues of interest include the representation of blacks and the legacy of Classics in the lived realities of Africans historically, socially, and politically. The authors discuss topics such as race, knowledge construction, and the representations of blacks both in Classical literature and through the lens of Classics as an instrument of colonialism. Then, they broadly illuminate the value the field of Classics still has for a decolonised Africa, when analysed correctly, and proffer discussions regarding how Africans might view or evaluate the Classical heritage.

How did you get into Classics? What sparked your interest? What was your journey like?

OBM | My interest in Classics was influenced by my mother, who herself received a minimum Classical education. Her love for Latin inspired me to pursue a career in the field of Classics. My journey to qualifying with a degree in Classics up to the level of DPhil in Classical Studies was quite exciting as

very enthusiastic lecturers taught me, to wit Dr John Douglas McClymont, Dr Eric Thomas Knight, Dr Jessie Maritz, and Mr Callinicos. I have also immensely benefited from my scholarly friends, Professor Jeffery Wills and Dr Alexander Thein, who provided valuable advice during my DPhil research.

My journey to a DPhil qualification was also fortunate, as it led me to meet and interact with Professor Cathleen Coleman. Although she did not read my entire DPhil thesis, she gave valuable advice for the first four chapters of my thesis and made some incisive comments through personal correspondence while researching my thesis at the Hardt Foundation in Switzerland in 2013. I have also been very fortunate to receive student bursaries from the Classical Association to attend conferences in Edinburgh and Durham.

Professor David Konstan, whom I first met in Edinburgh in 2010, and then again in Switzerland in 2013, has been a dependable scholarly companion. He has supported my career in multiple ways, including writing support letters for grants and fellowships. He was also kind enough to preface this book, for which I am immensely grateful. I attribute much of my success to the support that he rendered.

The FIEC was also instrumental in supporting the Classical Association of Zimbabwe, of which I have served as President, by sponsoring me to attend its annual meetings. This enabled me to create networks with many Classicists across the globe. I have hitherto thoroughly enjoyed my career as a Classicist through the support I have received in my academic and professional journey.

What about Classics in your region (short- and long-term)?

OBM | The challenge bedevilling the discipline of Classics at the University of Zimbabwe is that Classics has been affected by the political struggle for freedom from colonial rule by the Liberation War political party, ZANU-PF. Such a struggle has led to attempts to break free from Western cultural hegemony, which, in turn, have eventually spilt over to affect the teaching and study of the Classics at the University of Zimbabwe. Recently, under a new education strategy known as Education 5.0, a large-scale reorganisation of the University curriculum was undertaken, emphasising indigenous rather than Western priorities. These included an emphasis on innovation and industrialisation, in which the staff of Classics were forced to come up with courses that were compliant with the new thrust. This resulted in the fashioning of modules that sought to address the new thrust, such as: “Classical Thinking and Social Transformation”, “Classical Perspectives on Innovation”, and “Classical Approaches to Development”. In addition, the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy was renamed the Department of Philosophy (*sic*) Ethics and Religion. Distinct Classical Studies programs no longer exist under the new regime, although the former Classics staff have been offered courses within degree programmes related to Religious Studies. The Greek and Latin Language courses still exist as elective courses on offer to students willing to study them.

What can the community of Classics do? Are there any fresh ideas region-specific that can apply to Classics worldwide?

OBM | The community of Classics worldwide must continue to work closely together to support our discipline. There is, I feel, an urgent need for Classicists in Southern Africa to support each other in defending Classical education. Younger scholars must also be encouraged and accommodated as the future of the discipline in the region is in their hands.

What would you like to do if you were not a classicist?

OBM | I have never worked in any capacity ever since graduating from University, save as a lecturer in Classical Studies. Therefore, it is difficult for me to imagine anything outside the only career which

I have known. Maybe I could have considered pursuing a career as a footballer, a profession for which I have great respect.

Any tips for new authors of academic books?

OBM | My simple advice to new authors of academic books is that being courageous and keeping busy is the key to achieving one's objectives in academic life. It is always rewarding to keep pursuing innovative ideas and to ask new questions about one's scholarly field of interest. Not writing should never be an option.