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THE FIGURE OF THE ANCESTOR IN BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION

One of the most distinctive figures of contemporary Black Women's fiction is that of the ancestor, the tribal elder, who, according to Toni Morrison, is "a sort of timeless" person, "whose relationship to the characters is benevolent, instructive and protective, and who provides a certain wisdom". Not only does the ancestral figure's presence determine the success or happiness of the protagonist, his/her absence is "frightening... threatening", to the extent of causing "disarray in the work itself"¹. The ancestral figure is the model self, secure, healthy, whole, armed with an unshakeable self-assurance and a finely developed ethical code, all of which elevate her to the stature of a religious, archetypal figure. She often combines, in varying degrees, the features of the two most powerful characters of the traditional oral narrative of Africa - the fiercely protective mother/mammy, who watches over and shields her children from harm, and the mysterious and supremely knowledgeable conjure woman, who draws on the supernatural spiritual powers of the ancestors². Past and present, the individual experience and communal lore, the natural and supernatural intersect in the figure of the ancestor; s/he highlights the strengths of the race and of the individual, and she passes them on to the children. Three contemporary novels by Black Women writers, Gloria Naylor's, *Women of Brewster Place*,

¹ T. Morrison, *Rootedness - The Ancestor as Foundation*, [in:] *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, ed. M. Evans, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York 1984, p. 343..

² Cf. B. Christian, *Shadows Uplifted*, [in:] *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, eds. J. Newton, D. Rosenfelt, Methuan New York 1985, p. 206.

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* use the figure of the ancestor to draw attention to the quality of wisdom necessary to make personal, spiritual and social progress in our day and age.

Gloria Naylor's *Brewster Place* is an artificially conceived "bastard child" of a corrupt city administration, an initially promising housing area, which is eventually dead-ended and orphaned by the municipal government. As if in defiance of its fate, though, the area develops a distinct personality, a streetwise savvy born of the stubborn resilience of the women living there: "Like an ebony phoenix each in her own time and with her own season had her own story"³. The book is a novel of seven such stories, with the narrative spotlight shifting from woman to woman as each gradually progresses towards a greater understanding of herself and others, aided by the supportive network of friends. It is the sympathetic intelligence of Mattie Michaels, the dotting mother betrayed and abandoned by her beloved son, which sees to the personal development of many of the characters. A failure as an individual mother, Mattie has emerged chastened and strengthened from the ashes of a personal disaster to now assume the part of a beneficent, compassionate and understanding community godmother, her beaming maternal presence a spiritual support to all the struggling women. Mattie's philosophy, always that of boundless and unquestioning love, changes as she ages; her initially selfish, grasping and crippling motherly love, defeated by her son's rejection, matures into a generous, patient and tolerant emotion, a loving guidance which frees and does not bind the self:

Sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is a time for silence. A time to let go and allow people to hurl themselves into their own destiny. And a time to prepare to pick up the pieces when it's all over. Mattie realized that this moment called for all three⁴.

³ G. Naylor, *Women of Brewster Place*, (referred to as WBP) The Viking Press, New York, 1982, p. 5.

⁴ WBP, p. 70.

The most poignant of the relationships is Mattie's love for Lucielia Turner, the young mother saddled with an irresponsible and selfish lover, for whom she undergoes an abortion, and who terrorizes her with his petulant demands. As Eugene threatens to leave her yet again, her child Serena is electrocuted in the kitchen. Ciel plunges into a deadening grief, which, but for the aggressive intervention of Mattie, would annihilate her:

Mattie stood in the doorway, and an involuntary shudder went through her when she saw Ciel's eyes. Dear God, she thought, she's dying and right in front of our faces.

"Merciful Father, no!", she bellowed. There was no prayer, no banded knee or sackcloth supplication in those words, but a blasphemous fireball that shot forth and went smashing against the gates of heaven, raging and kicking, demanding to be heard [...].

She sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her ebony arms. And she rocked... Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time... She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it - a light silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled - and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal⁵.

Mattie's own painful experience provides her with the knowledge necessary to empathize with Ciel and her loss, but she draws on the psychic resources of all the suffering mothers of the past in her defiant struggle for the girl's will to live: "She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors"⁶. She is Ciel's guide through the underworld populated by the spirits of the prematurely dead children and their despairing mothers; she supports Ciel in the necessary anguish of identifying

⁵ WBP, p. 103-104.

⁶ WBP, p. 103.

with their grief, but insists on the girl's rebirth and return to the world of the living. Ciel does come back to life, but she flees Brewster Place's dead-end sterility and prepares to start anew with her white boyfriend; yet although she has moved out of the community, she takes with her the courage loved into her by Mattie. The lessons of the past will stand her in good stead when she stakes out her individual claims in the white world.

Ciel grows out of the streets of her youth, but in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman, the middle-aged juvenile, must turn back and salvage the family past before he can begin to think of his individual future. Milkman's quest for the hidden gold of his father's sister, Pilate, the ancestor - figure of the novel, lures him into a mythic trip south, to his family's village, into an initiatory hunt and to the houses of his long-neglected people, where he sifts through the memories of the past, the personal dramas of love and death. It is there that he relives the events of his father's and grandfather's youths, and there he learns of his great - grandfather's literal flight back to Africa, and his desertion of his large family. As Milkman reconstructs the history of his ancestors, he experiences a growing sense of pride in their accomplishments, in his relatedness to them; as his sense of identification with the forefathers and mothers increases, it leads to dissatisfaction with his own immature and undisciplined self. It is through comparison with the heroes of his family's past that Milkman's own personality comes into focus, as he judges his own actions against those of others. There is no gold at the end of his journey, no material reward, but the knowledge of one's own strengths and weaknesses, the untolding of one's wings, the mastery of the soul, the secret of flight that awaits the humble pilgrim into the past. As Dorothy H. Lee writes:

In yielding to the soul (air), you win control of it. In union with the whole (community), you can define the part (self). In losing personal ego, you find it. Most wonderfully, transcendent follows the discovery of the self⁷. As Milkman realizes, "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it"⁸.

⁷ D. H. Lee, *The Quest for Self-Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison*, [in:] *Black Women Writers...*, p. 354.

⁸ T. Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (referred to as SS) ed. A. A. Knopf New York 1977, p. 337.

Milkman's flight would not be possible without the inspired steering of Pilate, from the moment that Milkman first visits his aunt in her forbidden house, he knows that "nothing, not the wisdom of his father, nor the caution of the world could keep him away from her"⁹. Pilate is the very stuff of childhood dreams, the navel-less woman leading a semi-outlaw existence in the timeless atmosphere of her house, her mobile mouth forever humming songs of comfort and enchantment. A woman outside the mainstream of life, no stranger to loneliness and rejection, she answers only to her daughter, Reba, her granddaughter, Hagar, her own conscience and the ghost of her father, who has been appearing to her all her life. Pilate's sole material possessions, the bag of bones which lures Milkman into his search for the missing gold, and a brass box earring containing her name denote the valuables of the soul - one's debt to the dead, the sense of responsibility for and commitment to others, and the personal identity derived from the knowledge of names. As Macon Dead, the materialistic brother remarks, "Pilate can't teach you a thing you could use in this world - maybe the next, but not this one"¹⁰ - her creed being completely antithetical to her brother's crude philosophy of ownership - "Own things... Then you'll own yourself and other people too"¹¹.

Pilate's bones and earring are the amulets which confer upon her supernatural powers greater than the powers of mere material ownership. The bones symbolize her communion with the dead, and her name, the power of her own self. In African thought, according to Janheim Janz, 'magara', the life principle, the force that animates people and makes them true human beings, exists in its pure form only in the dead; wise people are nearer to the dead and share in their nature, but at the same time, the living fortify the powers of the dead by the strength of their belief and their sacrifice. In this way, the living and the dead depend on each other for their power and can mutually strengthen one another¹². Most importantly, as long as one is remembered and ho-

⁹ SS, p. 36.

¹⁰ SS, p. 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Cf. J. J a n z, *Muntu - An Outline of the New African Culture*, Grove Press Inc., New York 1961, p. 111-112.

nored, one is not completely 'dead', but simply 'a human being without life'. It is through the knowledge of the name that one lives on in the memory of one's descendants the name which is the repository of the fructifying life force, Nommo, the source of all life¹³. Names link the dead with the living, and are the priceless legacy of the ancestors, as they are the germs of personality and identity.

By flaunting the questionable name bequeathed her by her illiterate father, Pilate is freely admitting her personal debt to her kin, her people, the ancestors. Hers is a highly significant name - she is a pilot, leader and guide, one who both knows and shows the way. As a woman with a man's name, she transcends all gender distinctions, in Morrison's own words, she is the apogee of all that is best both in both the male and female¹⁴. At ease with both the sensual and the spiritual, the factual and the intuitive, she is the magician of the whole self. Pilate's magic is also the magic of her dead ancestors, and especially of her father, whose ghostly advice guides Pilate's actions, and who has always been her only reliable support. She and he are one, and responsible for each other in the same way that Pilate and her brother were once one before Macon in his greed for gold forfeited his blood ties and consequently, the spiritual power dormant in his own soul. Although Pilate apparently chooses to die, by divesting herself of the earring with the name, following her final interment of her father's bones, her "death" is in fact the inevitable consequence of her commitment to her father. The burial of the ancestors is tied to the relinquishment of one's own spirit (magara), but this is no definite, irrevocable death, as long as the name lives on in the memory of the descendants, the essential life force of the dead, the Nommo, will continue to nourish both the living human beings and those human beings without life¹⁵. Physical death is not total death; far worse to be dead-in-life, like Milkman's father, Macon Dead, whose callousness, greed and ruthlessness estrange him from his family and

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 125-126.

¹⁴ Cf. Morrison, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Cf. Janz, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

whose squeamishness about his past, and indifference to the lore of names ground him in the spiritually sterile world of ownership - real estate. At the end of his quest, Milkman is less the son of his parents, Macon and Ruth and more the child of Solomon, the original flying ancestor, and of Pilate, who masterminded his conception and saved him from his own after when he was unborn.

Pilate is the archetypal figure, the primal earth mother¹⁶ and the wise elder, who represents knowledge, reflection, insight, intuition, as well as the moral qualities of goodwill and readiness to help¹⁷. As mother, she is love, but hers is not the self-indulgent, rapacious, and ultimately murderous love of Hagar, nor the self-pitying love of Milkman, but the nurturant, generous, protective yet liberating, all-encompassing love for both the living and the dead, her final words being; "I wish I'd a knowed more people, I would a loved them all; if I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more"¹⁸. This understanding and concern of Pilate for others is the consequence of her life as an outlaw of communities on account of her smooth, navel-less belly. Offended by people's unreasoning fear of her, she "threw away every assumption that she had ever learned and began at zero; first of all she cut off her hair... She gave up, apparently, all table manners and hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relations"¹⁹. Her profound sense of responsibility not just for the living but also for the dead, comes from her interpretation of her dead father's admonition:

You can't just fly on off and leave a body... He meant that if you take a life, then you own it. You responsible for it. You can't get rid of anybody by killing them. They still there and they yours now²⁰.

¹⁶ Cf. L e s, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

¹⁷ Cf. C. G. J u n g, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairy Tales*, [in:] *Four Archetypes*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1973, p. 100.

¹⁸ SS, p. 336.

¹⁹ SS, p. 149.

²⁰ SS, p. 208.

Responsibility, the willingness to take on and share in somebody else's pain and pleasure, exercises the self and prepares it for flight. Pilate could, as Milkman belatedly discovers, "fly without ever leaving the ground"²¹, her mind and spirit's freedom outstripping the necessity for physical flight. Pilate wielded her magic on the ground, in the name of love; flight to her was a mystical frame of mind with which came the responsibility of piloting other children trying their wings; it implied involvement, not desertion.

Children should be taught to fly, because children are the key to tomorrow. "Children are our glory"²², proclaims the psychic healer, Minnie Ransom of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* underscoring the importance of healthy descendants to the cause of late twentieth century humanity. However, the last quarter of the century has seen the destructive influence of air, water, ground and people pollution: environmental pollution of the nuclear waste seepage from the Claybourne Transchemical Power Plant, and the contamination of the hearts and minds of the people in the Movement by doubt and confusion of purpose. Psychological and emotional exhaustion has crippled even the most active and irreplaceable members of the community. It is a state of emergency. "The children are spoiling"²³, warns Minnie Ransom, so it is her task, as an accomplished and respected healer, to return the most endangered child of the community, the fifty year old Velma Henry, to the fold. Velma, the tireless activist of the controversial and unorthodox Academy of Seven Arts unable to come to terms with the schism brewing in the Movement and her own inability to reconcile warring factions and heal the split within, chooses to desert her cause, her family and her own self, opting for suicide. The desperate attempt fails, and she is brought to Minnie who will attempt to piece together the fragmented self, to break into the "smooth, sealed and inviolate"²⁴ surface of Velma's resistant consciousness.

²¹ SS, p. 336.

²² T. C. Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*, (referred to as SE) Random House, New York 1980, p. 62.

²³ SE, p. 61.

²⁴ SE, p. 5.

Pilate dwelled on the margins of respectability, but Minnie Ransom, the modern-day priestess of the cult of health, with her unorthodox techniques of matching frequencies with patients and flooding them with her own healing energy, has full community support and approval. The medical staff of the Infirmary sanctions the healings and attests to their efficacy, which is bolstered further by the dutiful healing prayer of a dozen citizens, the Master's Mind. However, Minnie, flesh and blood herself, has a spiritual mentor, Old Wife, who is the ancestral know-how behind the healing touch. In chorus they deplore the psychological weakness and frailty of spirit of the children of the end of the century:

What is wrong, Old Wife? What is happening to the daughters of the yam? Seem like they just don't know how to draw up the powers from the deep like before... All this waste. Here we are in the last quarter and how we gonna pull it all together and claim the new age in our name? How we gonna rescue this planet from them radioactive mutants?²⁵

This is no time for squabbling and conflict, more than ever before, the moment calls for a united front against the forces of social and personal destruction, a policy of "wholeness". Minnie understands well the implications of "wholeness": "Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you are well"²⁶. However great the temptation to relinquish control and yield to self-pity, one should nevertheless attempt to rise to the challenge of responsibility and work towards a new awareness of the self, and a new health, both the individual and the group must constantly strive towards adjustment to the demands of the moment, and both must agree to be reshaped and reborn. Thus, the critical moment of regaining Velma for her self and her people takes place while Claybourne readies itself for the annual Spring Festival, its last-ditch effort to bring the antagonistic camps of the Academy together.

²⁵ SE, p. 46.

²⁶ SE, p. 10.

Velma's conflict is the conflict of the community; social progress having been made through heavy reliance on the tools of conscious political and economic action, the unconscious spiritual power immanent in the individual self has been ignored and neglected. Trapped between the seemingly incompatible camps of the "psychically adept" and the politically aware, Velma could do little but withdraw from both, in despair. Minnie, on the other hand, has no qualms about marrying the spiritual to the political; the act of self-health is a political act, in which the power of individual, whole selves serves the community in its struggle for justice, equality and well-being. Minnie's parascientific methods have been scientifically acclaimed and are used to treat the political activists of the Movement.

The survival of the individual and of the group is linked to the recognition of salt as being the ingredient indispensable to growth. In her youth as a well-educated Bible college student, Minnie was seized by the inexplicable primeval urge to get down on her knees and eat gravel and pebbles. As a salt-eater, Minnie now mediates between the ancient spiritual forces of the loas, the ancestors, and of the people, the living and the "deathless dead, salt being the "Nommo", the life force of nourishment²⁷. The salt of the past feeds the children of tomorrow. The salt marshes that Velma, who also has the gift of healing, visits, the images of the primordial mud mothers, the incident of healing the snake bite with salt - these, the visions arising in Velma's consciousness during the seance are the cravings of her malnourished soul, and the unconscious needs of the spiritually deprived Movement. Minnie is on friendly terms with the mighty ancestral forces, the neglected loas, for she has the whole knowledge, the Intelligence, the real intelligence, the wisdom of life, the knowledge of the nature and of the relationships of the world which is denied to the white people²⁸. Minnie Ransom's education is not complete; like all people she has yet much to learn and understand, but she is the spokeswoman for the venerated ancestral forces of the forefathers, the loas,

²⁷ Cf. J a n z, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122-123.

which idle away their hours in a faithless world, but which can and should be summoned for help -

Called upon so seldom they were beginning to believe their calling in life was to keep a lover from straying, make a neighbour's hair fall out in fistfuls, swat horses into a run just so and guarantee the number for the day. They were weary with so little to perform²⁹.

Power beckons power - as Minnie zeroes in on the energy - deficient area of Velma's body and invokes the powers of the loa, Claybourne experiences a mysterious thunderstorm and the moment of extraordinary electrical discharge affects all of the individuals grappling with their problems in the town. The thunderstorm marks a searing moment of transformation and insight into the well-springs of being, into each person's profound, inexhaustible psychic resources. Suddenly, personal energy is mustered, channelled and directed towards certain social goals; henceforward, the people's decisions and choices will be marked by a newly-acquired sense of purpose and commitment. Under Minnie's healing hands, Velma too has gathered strength, her self coalesced, she emerges, "rising on steady legs", her shawl dropping to the stool like "a burst cocoon"³⁰.

Where Mattie Michaels was locked into a decaying residential district, and aiding the children who were fleeing it, and Pilate lived on the fringes of an increasingly modern and impatient town, Minnie Ransom fights alongside the rest of her people, spiritually spearheading the community's sometimes uneven march into the twenty-first century. Minnie attests to the relevance of the determined, incessant struggle of the mud mothers for survival to the efforts of their descendants insists on the self's almost limitless capacity for regeneration on its essential resilience. The wisdom of the past has not been rendered obsolete by modern conditions; wedded to the techniques of today it can be applied to the issues of tomorrow. The willful, indomitable spirit of the ancestors is for the taking:

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³⁰ *SE*, p. 295.

One would run the back road to the woods... not hiding out in Wordsworth or Kerouac, excusing the self from social action, but running to the woods in the hopes of an audience with the spirits long withdrawn from farms and gardens all withered and wasted, bringing eagle-bones whistles or gourd rattles... anything one had to place on a tree-stump altar to lure the saving spirits out to talk and be heeded finally... And found, would open up and welcome one in before the end, welcome one in time to wrench time from its track so another script could play itself out... In the dark of the woods the ground shaking underfoot, the ancient covenants remembered in fragments, one would stand there, fists pummeling the temples, trying to remember the whole in time and make things whole again³¹.

The people have been warned-attention must be paid to the spirits within if progress is to be made.

The experience of the ancestral figure points to the importance of the individual's will and courage to endure and to heal. As Minnie says: "When you hurt, hurt", but she performs at the Infirmary, on the walls of which there are engraved the words "Health is my right". Otherworldly wisdom does not forestall suffering; the unfolding of the self is the continual and tedious process of hurting and healing, learning from the pain. Mattie learns the error of her smothering love through her son's callous rejection, whereas Pilate spoils Hagar with love so that when she is unable to secure Milkman she dies of emotional insatiability and Minnie almost loses Velma, unaccustomed as she is to such ferocious psychic resistance to her touch. The suffering of their children and their own grief makes these women sensitive to the needs of other children, however old they may be. Age is no barrier to either personal growth or psychological need.

The reclamation of lost children is the major concern of the ancestral figure. Children often wander aimlessly, in the grips of despair, lacking in self-worth, or self-faith, suffering from blandness of character resulting from a salt-free diet (Milkman). The figure of the ancestor is the child's guardian on her/his difficult journey towards self-hood, bearing down on her/him with the whole force of her ancestral, timeless wisdom and profoundly human love, her own actions and advice mapping out the child's

³¹ SE, p. 247.

path through the demanding initiatory experience into adulthood. Hers is the influence that inspires a person to take risks, to dare to learn to fly: to leap, perhaps fall, to rise and try again. The children are challenged to take on the burden of involvement and responsible love, which expands the horizons of the self, and teaches true intelligence:

Taking over a life. That was not hunting as the sisters explained it, sang it, acted it out. To have dominion was not to knock out, downpress, bruise, but to understand, to love, to make at home. The keeping in sights the animal; or child, man or woman, tracking it in order to learn their way of being in the world. To be at home in the knowing. The hunt for balance and kinship was the thing. A mutual courtesy. She would run to the park and hunt for self. Would be wild. Would look³².

A critical requirement for all growth, individual or communal, is faith in the self and its ability to shape reality and destiny. Eleanor W. Traylor points out that *The Salt Eaters* is "subjunctive", not "indicative" in mood: "If we wish to live, if we wish to be healthy, then we must will it so"³³. Potentiality becomes reality in the same manner as a mere creature becomes a human being, through the magic of the word and name, in which the ceaselessly generative, ancestral force of *Nommo* manifests itself. In an increasingly irreligious present, the ancestral figures are custodians of the race's creative religious traditions: the race's belief in the creative power inherent in the word and the name. Speech, incantation and music are therefore the tools of the ancestral figures' trade - Pilate's song brings relief even to Macon Dead and it is Minnie's tireless coaxing and humming which chips away at Melma's protective shell. As Janz points out, the force, responsibility and commitment of the word, the awareness that the word alone can alter the world, are the chief characteristics of African culture³⁴, and so it is this tradition of the transformative, redemptive value of will and word that the ancestors are trying to pass on to the younger generations.

³² SE, p. 267.

³³ E. W. Traylor, *Music as Theme: The Jazz Mode in the Works of Toni Cade Bambara*, [in:] *Black Women Writers...*, p. 69.

³⁴ Cf. Janz, p. 133.

Love and lore, the lessons of both individual and tribal experience, are synthesized by the ancestral figure into a model, archetypal mode of conduct. It is the love for all others, blood kin and tribal kin, those already dead, and those who have yet to learn to live which is the key to the secrets of individual and collective survival and identity, locked in the ancient lore of the name; at the same time the word's magic is fuelled by the loving intention. When invoked in the name of love, the word works miracles. When the ancestral figure reclaims the children, she performs an act of love which is made possible by her knowledge of ancestral lore and respect for the word. When the children learn to love their ancestors, they too gain access to the lore of the name, the self, of flight and freedom. The "certain wisdom" preached by the ancestral figure's actions is the way to the new self of today, the person who will readily meet the demands of tomorrow through the strength of his/her commitment to others and to the wisdom of the past generations.

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POSTAĆ PRZODKA WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ PROZIE KOBIET MURZYŃSKICH

Jedną z najbardziej znamienitych postaci współczesnej murzyńskiej prozy kobiecej jest postać przodka, kobiety, która skupia w sobie najcenniejsze wartości duchowe ludu murzyńskiego. W powieściach Glorii Naylor, Toni Morrison i Toni Cade Bambara owa kobieta jest matką chrzestną społeczności i opiekunką młodych, poszukujących własnej tożsamości. Jest także skarbnicą odwiecznej mądrości ludowej, przejawiającej się w uszanowaniu mocy imienia jako źródła ludzkiej osobowości oraz słowa - źródła magicznej władzy nad rzeczywistością. Postawa przodka, który spaja magię z miłością, wyznacza drogę dalszego rozwoju nowym pokoleniom narodu murzyńskiego.