

LITERARY PORTRAITS OF CHAKA: THOMAS MOFOLO AND MAZISI KUNENE

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ABSTRACT It appears that most texts described as great works of art today are focused on the literary portraits of men whose actions were remarkable enough to canonize them in art. We may recall for this purpose, Sophocles' sustained aesthetic use of the Greek mythic figure, King Oedipus, in the play of that name. Shakespeare's most persuasive plays are those that explored the tragedy of certain historical personalities. Modern African literature records a fairly long history of an art type in which the activities of historical or legendary figures are immortalized. The texts on Chaka form the seminal works by the modern African writers to retain memories of Africans of significance. However, it often happens that the personality in question may be so controversial that he attracts both positive and negative interpretations as the subject of literature. Such is the contradiction among the images of Chaka. Thus, this paper examines two texts on Chaka, one by Thomas Mofolo and the other by Mazisi Kunene, and establishes the antipodal perceptions of Chaka's image, nothing in particular, the way in which genre choice (romance and epic) becomes part of the interpretation.

Key Words: Epic; Romance; Celibacy; Militarism.

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Mofolo enlisted himself as the first major contributor to what could be regarded today as the stock of Chakan literature when he wrote a novel on Chaka, the Zulu king, in 1908 in the Sotho language. In 1925, this historical novel was popularized through translation into several major European languages. Some of the more recent translators are Dutton, Chris Swanepoel and Mazisi Kunene. The original publication and the translations provided the inspiration for many enthusiastic African creative artists to increase the Chakan literary stock. Contributions from poets like Whole Soyinka, Mazisi Kunene, Sedar Senghor and a dramatist, Pieter Fourie, have registered the Chakan literature as a repertoire of multiple art forms exploring the image of a historical personality.

No doubt, Chaka⁽¹⁾ exists within an extended family of mythic and legendary personalities whose stories have shaped the course of African literature. However, the story of this Zulu king has generated more significant contributions to literature than the stories of other African legends like Mwindo, Ozidi, and Moremi.⁽²⁾ It is not that these other personalities suffer deliberate neglect by the African writers. Chaka is a more compelling personality. Moreover, the enigma that surrounds his life accommodates different shades of literary intentions and portraits. As expected, the variety in intention and artistic portrait leads to a wide

spectrum of reception and criticism. The earliest opinions expressed on Chaka occur in the introductions to the translations of Mofolo's *Chaka* by Dutton (1971) and Kunene (1981). While Dutton's introduction insists that Chaka was "a monstrous beast, consumed by all-destroying blood-lust" (Dutton, 1971: 13), Kunene's introduction warns the reader of the danger of assuming that Mofolo's *Chaka* is a faithful recount of history. The varied reception and interpretations of the Chakan texts are due to the conflicting versions of historiography on Zulu history in general and on Chaka in particular. The central purpose of this paper is to review available historiography on Chaka to lay the basis for the different portraits of this Zulu King in Mofolo's *Chaka*, and Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great*.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL EVIDENCE

As it seems, the typology of available historiography on Chaka falls into two broad categories. Some historians try to create the impression that Chaka was a ruthless tyrant whose amorality represented a satanic pursuit. Others explain Chaka's action in the context of the demands of his time and portray him as a gifted warrior with a revolutionary spirit. Some of those who commend Chaka's military might and nation-building drive also point to the bloodbath that characterized his reign. The major positive statements of those historians on Chaka's military genius should be restated. In an ambitious book on South African history, Muller (1971: 497) depicted Chaka as, "a warrior and tactician without equal." He also indicated that by 1820, Chaka, "controlled what is today known as Zulu land and had a highly disciplined, invincible and restless army" (Muller, 1971: 497). Commenting on the Zulu King's expansionist pursuit, Muller (1971: 497) said that Chaka: "... had already cleared his immediate neighborhood of all opposition and his eight years of conquest had started a chain reaction which was felt as far as the Limpopo in the north, Xhosaland in the south and Sotholand in the west."

Binns (1963) who explored the life of Cetshwayo in his *The Last Zulu King* commented on Chaka's turbulent boyhood, his flight from home and his return to claim his father's chieftainship. Like Muller, Binns (1963) commended Chaka as a military genius who was able to build the mightiest fighting force that Africa had ever known from a single regiment. He described Chaka as a great warrior and a king who built an empire over which he held undisputed sway until the day of his assassination at Dukuza. He however observed that Dingaan, Chaka's successor: "... wrecked that empire and Mpande, who followed him, cared nothing for warfare, but the great military system that Shaka had organized and built up, though sadly neglected for years, was still in existence and only needed a strong king to resuscitate it" (Binns, 1963: 4). Cetshwayo, the last Zulu king revived Chaka's military system and brought the Zulu armies to the zenith of their power. It was this revived military system that Cetshwayo, in the words of Binns, used to, "stand up against the might of Britain and inflict on her the most crushing defeat in the annals of her military history" (Binns, 1963: 4).

In *The Oxford History of South Africa* edited by Monica & Thomson (1969), there are details on Chaka's military organization. The book examines the various military innovations made by Chaka. His invention of the short stabbing spear, new military drills, the imposition of celibacy on his army, the use of young boys as baggage carriers and appointment of doctors to treat the wounded are some of the innovations highlighted in the book. Denoon (1972), another historian on South Africa, defended Chaka's position on marriage among his soldiers. He found Chaka's imposition of celibacy on the army and on himself as a remarkable decision which allowed him to, "create an effective military machine" (Denoon, 1972: 18). Again, Denoon (1972: 18) defended Chaka's militarist doctrine arguing that, "it was sensible to keep the regiments fully occupied lest they turn their attention to internal allies whatsoever." He also saw a positive result in Chaka's expansionist pursuit. At the end of Chaka's wars much of the South African ethnic groups came under a single political unit called Amazulu and: "... the Zulu dialect of Nguni became standard throughout the country; the traditions of the Zulu dynasty became the traditions of all the citizens; people thought of themselves as Ama-Zulu instead of the remnants of earlier political units" (Denoon, 1972: 17).

One of the typical negative views on Chaka is recorded by Roberts (1974). He argued that Chaka "had no set objectives and was uninfluenced by political and moral considerations" (Roberts, 1974: 156). To him, Chaka, "was guided by intuition; he learned from his own experience" (Roberts, 1974: 156). Guy's review of Roberts' book however contended that the text was premised on stereotypes on the African continent. He identified such statements as, "Zulu history was unrecorded" and, "Southeastern African coast where the Zulu lived ... was part of the Dark continent and had remained unexplored and uncharted until well into the 19th century" (Guy, 1977: 112) as examples of stereotypic views of Africa and its peoples. Guy (1977: 112) saw the text as, "one of the many biographies of 19th century African rulers in Southern Africa which perpetuate more myths than they question."

One of the areas in which negative portraits of Chaka was often drawn relates to the measures which he adopted for the mourning of his mother, Nnadi. Omer-Cooper (1975) highlighted Chaka's agony at the death of his mother. He said that the deeply shaken Chaka, "stood leaning against his shield while tears ran down his face" (Omer-Cooper, 1975: 39) at the news of his mother's death. In what seems to be a portrait of Chaka's excesses, Omer-Cooper (1975: 39) wrote that, "anyone found with dry eyes was instantly put to death." He quoted Fynn who estimated that not less than seven thousand were killed or died of exhaustion in the first paroxysm of mourning. Some of the formal measures taken by Chaka to enforce a collective mourning of the death of his mother recorded by Omer-Cooper (1975: 39-40) were: "Cultivation was not to take place and no milk was to be used for an entire year. Throughout this period men must abstain from intercourse with their wives and any woman found pregnant would be put to death together with the husband." Even Binns (1963) who had some words of praise for Chaka on account of his military genius took care to describe one of Chaka's cruel punishments. A condemned prisoner was often: "... seized and compelled to hold his left arm high above his head whilst the executioner, holding aloft his razor-sharp assegai

brought it down with a very slow movement, piercing the quivering flesh under the armpit and so deeper and deeper till it sank into his victim's heart" (Binns, 1963: 176). It must be stated that the positive and negative polarities reflected in this review of historiography on Chaka are also sustained in the Chakan literary texts.

THOMAS MOFOLO

It must be stressed that Kunene's effort in introducing Mofolo's *Chaka* to the world is consistent with the creative process in which world literature is extended through such literary practices as translation, adaptation and transposition. With his translation of Mofolo and the writing of existing oral epic on Chaka, Kunene enlists himself into the community of writers like Soyinka and P'Bitek whose retransmission of African literature in the local languages through translation made the African contribution to world literature.

Mofolo really felt that he had made a good contribution to South African history through the publication of his novel. This feeling was probably informed by his research on the subject prior to writing the novel. In the introduction to the English translation of *Chaka*, Dutton says that Mofolo "made more than one journey into Natal to ascertain dates and other details for his narrative" (Dutton, 1971: 13). Mofolo's research is also confirmed in a book jointly written by Kunene & Kirsh (1967: 44): "Around 1909, Mofolo had travelled through Natal on bicycle to gather historical background for a novel based on the life of the great Zulu Chief.... At Mgungunalovu Mofolo was welcomed and feted, an ox was slaughtered in his honour, and a hut for him was erected by order of the Chief. Here Mofolo visited the grave of Chaka, and observed the ceremonies of the Zulu people." In spite of this effort to inform himself of the facts of history, Mofolo's *Chaka* is still very fictive particularly at the level of characterization. It is therefore not reliable as a historical artifact. Kunene's translation of Mofolo's text therefore afforded him the opportunity to address the disturbing distortion of history in this seminal creative work on Chaka.

In a comprehensive introduction, which Kunene expects the reader to consider critically, certain facts concerning Chaka's birth and the motivation for his actions are established. For instance, he counters Mofolo's stamp of illegitimacy on Chaka's birth by proving that Nandi and Senzangakhona, Chaka's parents, were properly married. Kunene also proves that Isanusi, Ndlebe and Malunga, the Marlowe type devilish figures in Mofolo's novel did not exist in history but are fictive characters created by the author to portray Chaka as evil. He also cites several examples of negative reactions to Mofolo's truncation of history. For instance, he quotes Thoahlonge who wrote on the pages of *The Leselinyama* to accuse Mofolo of an intention to, "tell nothing but exaggerations produced by a facile pen" (Kunene, 1981: 15). He also cites the example of the Reverend S.M. Malabe who, after reading *Chaka*, "questioned the accuracy of certain historical facts concerning the establishment of the Changana nation" (Kunene, 1981: 15).

Mofolo's picture of Chaka is evidently unambiguous. The image is that of a man whose ruthlessness increases progressively. In Dutton's translation the intro-

duction prepares the reader's mind for Chaka whose career, "is the perfect and unanswerable example of the ruin of human life by the rule of force" (Dutton, 1971: 12). Dutton also submits that the tragedy of Chaka is "the apocalyptic vision of a monstrous beast, consumed by an all-destroying blood-lust" (Dutton, 1971: 13). However, the author does not simply stamp the savage image on his subject. He provides enough details to justify Chaka's progressive degeneration.

Chaka's initial ritual fortification by the woman doctor is the beginning of complex ritualistic processes. The bile of the respected yellow snake which Chaka must drink with other medicines and the liver of a lion, leopard and a renowned warrior which are part of the ingredients of more potent medicines are ritual symbols connoting savageness. Young Chaka is gradually initiated into the vicious world of the wild. The fortification later assumes a cosmic tonality. The woman doctor instructs Nandi: "Always when the noon is about to die you must bathe this child at the river very early in the morning, before the sun has risen, and then when he has finished bathing he must walk quickly back home and when the first rays of the sun shine upon the village, you must take some of his medicine with your fingers and anoint his head with it.... Bathe him in a large river, not a small one" (Mofolo, 1971: 8). The ritualistic processes culminate in a psychic transformation. Chaka begins to experience an: "... uncontrollable desire to fight.... He dreamt about it at night when he was sleeping; he dreamt about it during the day, with his eyes open; and whenever he saw a man carrying a stick or a spear his whole body would at once begin to itch, and he would wish to engage that man in a fight" (Mofolo, 1971: 14).

With a full awareness of the murderous intent of his enemies, particularly his own father, Chaka escapes into the forest. This flight becomes a symbolic descent into self, a kind of quest into the unconscious for the discovery of the mystery of existence. In the silence and solitude of the forest milieu, he attains a Jungian individuation: "And when he thought of the day when he came back from rounding up the calves, and found that there was already a plot against him, and the day the boys surprised him in the field, and about the lion and hyena, he realized that here on earth people live by might only, and not by right; he decided that here on earth the only person who is wise and strong and beautiful and righteous, is he who knows how to fight with his stick... from that day on... whether a person was guilty or not, he would simply kill him if he so wished, for that is the law of man" (Mofolo, 1971: 35). What provokes Chaka's ruthlessness is not so much the attractiveness of Isanusi's temptuous offers as the discovery that his society permits and respects brute force. This insight shapes his subsequent actions. Before he meets Isanusi, his mind is already set on reaching a state of absolute power by all means. Hence, he does not hesitate to tell Isanusi, "I bind myself to abide by your commandments in every way in which you will command me" (Mofolo, 1971: 41). Chaka later unleashes terror on his enemies and his own people. The murder of Noliwa and Nandi, the senseless carnage and the serious ecological implications of the numerous piles of putrifying corpses are the returns of Chaka's quest into the territory of evil. However, all these actions are consistent with the demands of Isanusi, a devilish figure created by Mofolo to personify Chaka's infernal thoughts. Having entered into Isanusi's scheme of offers, Chaka, like Marlowe's

Faustus must run the course of a moral and psychic fall. The appearance of Isanusi at the end of the novel is archetypal. In almost the same way as Mephistophelis appears to Faustus to bear him into hell, Isanusi comes to claim Chaka's soul just when his brothers drive their spears into his heart.

MAZISI KUNENE

Kunene's *Emperor Chaka the Great* was first published in 1979. The epic was intended to portray the positive aspects of Chaka's character. For instance in the introduction to the text, the author notes Chaka's varied gifts which, "demonstrated qualities of organisation and innovation" (Kunene, 1979: 13). Kunene states the intention to, "cut through the thick forest of propaganda and misrepresentation that have been submitted by colonial reports and historians" (Kunene, 1979: 13). He emphasizes that his epic is "an attempt to present an honest view of the achievements of Shaka" (Kunene, 1979: 13). He also hopes that through the awareness of Chaka's vision, "many may understand the dreams and realities that have shaped the destinies of the people of Africa" (Kunene, 1979: 26).

Kunene's choice of the epic form and the use of the epithet in the title signals a positive interpretation of Chaka's image. The portrait of Chaka's militarism appears even in the early pages of the epic. While in Dingiswayo's army, Chaka invents a new and more effective spear and pursues the idea of speed as a necessary military requirement. Like a typical strategist, Chaka posits that, "the essence of success in war is speed. / Speed is of the mind and all intricacies of wars... / speed is of the feet not encumbered by sandals" (Kunene, 1979: 54). Having secured the throne of Senzangakhona, his father, Chaka introduces further military ideas to make his army invulnerable. He enforces military drills which are intended to strengthen the warriors for battle. He addresses his commanders on the need for drills:

On the day when all regiments shall be assembled
They shall start from those distant mountains
And gallop like wide animals pursued by hunters
Even I shall be there, running with them (Kunene, 1979: 82).

The positive result of the new training scheme shows among the soldiers of the Fasimba regiment. They no longer "wobble like the praying mantis / Their bodies moved rigorously like those of young bull" (Kunene, 1979: 84). Chaka discovers that the long spear is cumbersome. He invents the short spear which is effective in close combat. He then instructs his soldiers to carry only one spear to the battle warning that:

Unlike the many coward who carry an assemblage of weapons,
Who, having thrown away their collection, take to their heels
Whoever shall lose his spear shall have lost their lives (Kunene, 1979: 82)

Chaka's image as an intelligent military strategist reaches a height in the battle against the vicious Zwide. First, he plans a tight spying scheme through Prince Mzilikasi who in turn works through as insider, Nolugu, to collect information on Zwide's battle strategy. He later uses a more sophisticated reconnaissance scheme against the recalcitrant Faku.

Other dimensions of Chaka's image are depicted by Kunene through elaborate references to his philosophical discourse and his flexible yet firm relationship with the whites. In a philosophical manner he argues in support of absolute war instead of the half-hearted battles under Dingiswayo. He reasons that, "the enemy must be chased and trapped in his own home" (Kunene, 1979: 51). Otherwise he will, "re-emerge, again and again... / like the menace of weeds in a fertile field..." (Kunene, 1979: 51). The truth of this militarist doctrine occurs to Dingiswayo but it is already too late. Waiting for death in Zwide's house, Dingiswayo laments the futility of the peaceful approach saying, "I believed once our land of Nguniland / should flourish with a great sense of brotherhood and peace / I did not see then the worms that infest its very heart" (Kunene, 1979: 121). Early in the epic, Chaka argues philosophically that, "what fights a war is not numbers, nor weapons, but the mind" (Kunene, 1979: 84). He extends this later through a similar aphorism, "wars are fought not only through members / or the cleverness of strategies but also through beliefs" (Kunene, 1979: 127). Such statements reveal the depth of philosophical thoughts in Chaka.

There are several textual indications of Chaka's flexibility and firmness. He is permissive and humanistic enough to accept the whites as brothers and even plans for their resettlement. In spite of this show of friendship, Chaka is wise enough to remain suspicious of the strangers. He decides to "study carefully their plans and customs" and then "surprise them when they least expect it" (Kunene, 1979: 211). He is also careful enough to note that the stranger's eyes "are truly those of a desperate people" because when "a man is a victim of hunger / His whole body is hard" (Kunene, 1979: 211). Chaka proves his firmness in a swift reaction to the rape of the woman from the Shezi clan. He calls out to Fynn, his white friend:

Must you desecrate the house of my father?
 We tolerate no barbarism and no crime against families
 I want you to die cleansing this repulsive crime
 Go now and fight against the stubborn Bhaje (Kunene, 1979: 289).

The epic also shows that Chaka is not all war. He is depicted as a dancer and as a sportsman whose fertile thoughts generate varieties of games in peacetime.

The title of the dirge ("Dirge of the Palm Race") which closes the epic is significant. The tall palm tree becomes the central symbol for Chaka's magnificent achievement and the collective pride and dignity of the Zulu people. Also as a way of sounding the cosmic and terrestrial disharmony which accompanies the death of a tragic hero, Kunene imbues the dirge with metaphors of universal destruction:

The great cloud opens: the mountain has fallen
 Silence hangs on the shoulders of the heavens.

The thunderbolts travel making the skies tremble.
 The flashes of lighting haunt our earth with destruction
 The mountain has fallen, the earth's Centre quivers (Kunene, 1979: 431).

There is something positively moving about the closing dirge. The Chakan legend becomes the source for which the Zulu people, Children of the Palm Race, will draw inspiration to create a united and strong nation. For this reason, Chaka is elevated in the epic as the symbol of the people's collective will and the regenerative strength for the Zulu children who, "shall scatter the dust of (the) enemies" and, "make (the) earth free for the Palm Race" (Kunene, 1979: 433). The structural significance of the dirge is evident in its capacity to create the lingering memory of Chaka as a worthy legacy of the rough but necessary path through which the Zulu people moved to attain nationhood.

Thus, the Chaka we discover in Kunene's epic is a revolutionary one, quite different from the savage personality which Mofolo depicted in *Chaka*. In Kunene's *Chaka*, the idea of the collective will finds expression. The transformation of the small Nguniland into a politically promising Zululand is achieved by Chaka at the end of the epic. To this extent, Chaka symbolizes the unity of a race, especially a unity strong enough to withstand external enemies. His assassination cuts short an impending battle with the white settlers whose social and political activities lead to a sad history of apartheid in South Africa today.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Like the varying historical portraits on Chaka, the Chakan literature reflect varieties of artistic portraits. Mofolo and Kunene stand at the extremes of the continuum of possibilities in the portraits of the inscrutable Chaka. Mofolo chose the medium of the tragic novel to present a fictionalized, Chaka with the devil's garment. His choice of the romance is consistent with the intention to portray Chaka as a ruthless personality. This is because the novelist, in the words of Frye (1957: 305), "does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes." Something nihilistic and untamable, Frye argues, often runs through the pages of the romance.

An establishment of the motive for Mofolo's choice of the romance and hence of the negative picture of Chaka may be necessary for a proper understanding of the nature of historical fiction. There are comments which suggest that Mofolo did not write *Chaka* with partisan detachment. Some critics say that Christian and ethnic factors influenced Mofolo's image of Chaka. For instance, Attwell (1987: 63) refers to a section of the *The Oxford History of South Africa* Vol. 1 which describes Mofolo as a man from a Sotho context, "where missionaries... enjoyed evangelical success...." Dutton unwittingly underscored the Christian decorum in *Chaka* when he described Mofolo as, "a soul by nature Christian and sees in every crises the clash of good and evil" (Dutton, 1971: 12). On another level, Kesby (1982: 319) observed that Mofolo's presentation of Chaka as, "a blood-crazed monster of evil" could be traced to ethnic partisanship. He argued that since the

Sotho people were among the victims of the Zulu expansion, Mofolo, himself a Sotho author, "had no cause to admire Zulu in general or Chaka in particular" (Kesby, 1982: 319).

Kunene's choice of the epic form however achieved the opposite effect of Mofolo's novel. The epic, because of its celebrative nature, is suitable for Kunene's elevation of Chaka as a hero. There are indications of Kunene's emotional involvement in the experience he presents in *Emperor Shaka the Great*. This is perhaps the reason for Mbongeni Malaba's objection to Kunene's presentation of the image of Chaka. Malaba (1988: 483) argued that the reader's suspension of disbelief became impossible when Kunene presented Chaka as a demi-god who, "wins all the debates, with the whites on philosophy, religion, and the penal code." Nevertheless, the issue in the study of the two Chakan texts is not really the justification of positions. The texts are best seen as portraits of the enigmatic Chaka as a dual personality, a legend with Soyinka's Ogunist polarities of creative and destructive essence.

NOTES

(1) The name is either spelled Chaka or Shaka. However, the spelling, Chaka is used here following the example of Thomas Mofolo.

(2) Mwindo and Ozidi are epic figures in Africa. Mwindo is the epic of the Nyanga of East Africa and the Ozidi epic is recorded among the Ijaw of Nigeria. The Moremi Legend exists among the Yoruba of Nigeria and is the source of Duro Ladipo's *Moremi* and Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*.

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