

From Neglected History to Tourist
Attraction: Reordering the Past in
Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*
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Abstract: *The Heart of Redness* comprises two narrative strands: one which is set only four years after the first democratic elections in South Africa and one that explores the 1856-57 “Cattle Killing Movement” and discloses the early encounters between the Xhosa and the British colonizers. Retrieving the past episode originated in the visions of prophetess Nongqawuse and aligning it with the contemporary discussion surrounding issues of economic and social development raised by the proposal of a tourism project for the village of Qolorha, Mda successfully articulates the complex elements that have marked past and present South African culture and society. In Mda’s novel, the village of Qolorha and the character of Nongqawuse are released from their negative association with one of the most dramatic episodes in the history of the Xhosa and transformed into a tourist attraction that has the potential to contribute to the sustainable development of the local population. Mda’s rescue of Qolorha from the threat of massified tourism, and his recovery of Nongqawuse as a meaningful character for the history of the Xhosa, emphasize the importance of alternative development models and the relevance of revising biased historical narratives that often served manipulative objectives.

Keywords: South African literature, South African history, post-apartheid society, tradition and globalization, sustainable tourism

Among contemporary South African black novelists, Zakes Mda is one of the most renowned, both inside and outside South Africa, especially

for his ability to articulate an aesthetic sensibility in which subtlety, humor, and sharp critical commentaries are central. Forced into exile by the apartheid regime, Mda has established his academic career in the United States, returning nevertheless several times a year to his home country. Instead of constituting a difficulty, it seems as if this physical distance has actually contributed to the exploration of innovative stylistic approaches and controversial subjects in his novels.

In *The Heart of Redness*, a novel published in 2000, Mda deftly portrays the challenges posed to past and present South African society through a complex alignment between two distinct narrative strands: one which is set in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa and one that explores the 1856-57 “Cattle Killing Movement” and discloses the early encounters between the Xhosa people and the British colonizers. The manner in which past and present, history and fiction become intertwined in Mda’s novel to present a portrayal of the challenges faced by post-apartheid South Africa is underlined by Mike Kissack and Michael Titlestad:

Mda establishes an engaging dialectic between retrospective evaluation and prospective visions as he reconstructs the momentous event of the Xhosa cattle killing of 1856-57, tracing the legacy of this event for the Xhosa inhabitants of Qolorha-by-Sea and portraying the constraints and limitations that this historical memory, with its attendant values and expectations, imposes upon the present. In Mda’s imaginative synthesis of historical reality and fictional construction, he presents us with a scenario of post-apartheid transformation, which is deeply cognisant of the constraining presence of the past on people’s anticipations of a better future. (152-53)

No moment in South Africa’s recent history has been more pregnant with these anticipations than the country’s first democratic elections in 1994, and it is for this event that Camagu, the protagonist of the contemporary narrative in *The Heart of Redness*, decides to return to South Africa and find a position that will allow him to contribute to the development of the country, after almost thirty years spent in exile in

the United States, where he obtained the highest academic and professional qualifications. The various parallels that can be drawn between the character's and the writer's backgrounds—the Xhosa origin, the decades spent in exile in the United States, the qualifications in the area of development communication, and the return after the demise of apartheid in order to participate in the country's development—are not coincidental but intentional, as Meg Samuelson points out: “Like Mda, Camagu returns to South Africa after the democratic elections following an extended period of exile. Camagu is quickly disabused of any idealised notions of the South African ‘miracle’ and becomes the spokesman for Mda’s strongly worded critique of the ‘new’ South Africa” (237). Four years after arriving in Johannesburg full of expectations, and yet still unable to find a job consistent with his qualifications, Camagu thus joins the group of disenchanted intellectuals who have become increasingly disappointed with the directions the New South Africa appears to be following, which do not include them:

He was at Giggles, a toneless nightclub on the ground floor, when he decided to take a walk. He is a regular at Giggles because he lives on the fourth floor of this building. He does not need to walk the deadly streets of Hillbrow for a tipple. Most of Giggles’ patrons are disaffected exiles and sundry learned rejects of this new society. He is one of them too, and constantly marvels at the irony of being called an exile in his own country. (26)

According to Erik Peeters, who analyzes the role of Camagu in “The Accidental Activist: Reading Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* as a Parody of the Disappointed African Intellectual,” the initial reaction of disillusionment towards the social and political situation of post-apartheid South Africa displayed by Mda’s protagonist seems to fit the figure of the disenchanted radical intellectual, which has become a common trope in African literature.¹ This character, who can be found in the works of such influential African writers as Chinua Achebe (*A Man of the People*), Ngugi wa Th’iongo (*Petals of Blood*), and Wole Soyinka (*The Interpreters*), arises in the context of a certain historical perspective that

regards the political, social, and economic trajectory of African states from colonial occupation to national independence and beyond as one of decline. Like the majority of these pessimistic intellectuals, Camagu fails to realize that the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 mark only the beginning of a complex process of transformation in the country, regarding them instead as a realized achievement of that process. As will be seen later, when Camagu gets involved in the debate over the tourist project designed for a small Eastern Cape seaside village, and as he becomes aware through his conversations with the villagers of the various perspectives regarding the issue of development, he recognizes that discussing the most suitable type of political and economic development to follow at a local level might prove more useful and much more satisfying than his initial project of joining a governmental department or a private company, where the discussion of local interests would probably not take place. Importantly too, Camagu realizes that by conceiving alternative developmentalist approaches it is possible to empower local populations, and through this overcome or circumvent the threat of political and economic decline. Analyzing Camagu's role in the novel as a post-colonial intellectual, Kissack and Titlestad argue: "He is unsettled and he unsettles others . . . he is one who rigorously and courageously evaluates and modifies the inherited categories of understanding and who translates his understanding into actions that affect and transform his environment" (166). Attempting to mediate between the traditional and the modern, Camagu not only establishes his own points of view regarding those subjects but also proposes a course of action that may benefit the population of Qolorha.

Mda bases several elements of the historical narrative in *The Heart of Redness*, such as historical events and characters, on J.B. Peires's book *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-57*, as Mda acknowledges in the novel's dedication. However, as *The Heart of Redness* is a work of fiction and not a history book, Mda has dramatized the intricate historical episode by creating and exploring the lives of several fictional characters, confronting them in the process with authentic events and historical figures.² In a complicated time for the Xhosa, who were facing the advances of the

British into their territory as well as the terrible effects of the lung disease imported from Europe, which was decimating their cattle, a young girl called Nongqawuse prophesied that the ancestors of the Xhosa would rise from the sea to destroy the invading British settlers if the Xhosa killed all their cattle and destroyed their crops. This prophecy occasioned massive killings of cattle in Xhosa territories in 1857 and originated a division among the Xhosa population between those who believed it, the Believers, and those who did not, the Unbelievers. While the Believers killed their cattle because they trusted their traditional belief system to overcome the British invaders, the Unbelievers preferred to look for alternative means of overcoming their plight. Beyond the mere question of believing the prophecies or not, as it is presented in Mda's novel, the rift among the Xhosa people can be seen as a symbol of the manner in which they regard their culture when faced with an unsettling, foreign element—in this case, British colonial power. The Believers' confidence in traditional structures of knowledge and belief to help them repel the British settlers who were invading their lands and destroying their culture can be seen as an attempt to define and preserve their historical and cultural identities, usually implicit but rendered active by the need to reject the categories of the outsiders. On the other side of the conflict, the Unbelievers struggled to survive by seeking alternative forms of resistance to the British occupation, but their desperate situation eventually forced them to establish alliances with the British and their supporters. In more extreme cases, some Unbelievers even abandoned Xhosa traditions to adopt British culture and education, which they regarded as superior.

In the contemporary narrative, the disagreements over the issue of development between the followers of the Believers and the Unbelievers similarly result from their assessment of aspects related to their culture when challenged by an external factor that will almost certainly bring substantial changes to their lives. The two oppositional interpretations of Nongqawuse's prophecies are restored in the twentieth century by the leaders of the two conflicting factions, who adopt opposite viewpoints regarding issues of economic and social development raised by the proposal of a luxury tourist resort (a gambling complex that would include

a casino, hotel, and watersports) for the village of Qolorha. It might be argued that the division of the Xhosa into Believers and Unbelievers over historical and cultural phenomena parallels the distinction between cultural revivalists and cultural antirevivalists that Kwame Gyekye signals, and which is based upon their contrasting awareness of and attitudes towards their cultural past:

Now, the consciousness of a people of their cultural past, that is, of the cultural values, practices, institutions, and achievements of their forebears, evokes diverse, even opposing, sentiments among them. For, while some of them, with nostalgic sentiments, would, as we have seen, argue for and urge the revival of the indigenous cultural past, others may evince totally negative attitudes—attitudes almost disdainful and condemnatory of most, if not all, of the inherited ancestral cultural values and practices. (233)

Although in the past, the consequences of the conservative position assumed by the Believers drove the Xhosa people into despair, by stressing the importance of preserving their culture (in a comprehensive sense that includes not only its cultural manifestations but the conservation of natural resources as well), their attitude towards development in the twentieth century is now a radical one. On the other hand, the historical Unbelievers become Believers in modernization. In the contemporary narrative, Mda ironically inverts the positions of “belief” and “unbelief,” as Kissack and Titlestad indicate: “The historical Believers in the prophecies of Nongqawuse express themselves as Unbelievers in the promise of progress and change, while the historical Unbelievers become the Believers in modernization” (159). When faced with a new external challenge (global capitalism, represented in the novel by the tourist resort), the two factions maintain their allegiances but change their designations when it comes to the issue of “belief” and “unbelief.”

Contrasting with 1960s novels of decolonization (and in the South African context, with anti-apartheid novels) that focused predominantly on the nation and on the analysis of the effects of acculturation, considering subjects’ reactions to outside influences in polarised

terms, the contemporary postcolonial novel instead addresses postcolonial realities as part of a transcultural phenomenon and considers how postcolonial subjects deal with endogenously- and exogenously-induced identity conflicts. Unlike some early postcolonial novels, which focused frequently on frictions that arose between the white colonizer and the black colonized, the main conflict depicted in *The Heart of Redness*, although stirred by external elements, takes place among the Xhosa themselves, who, as we have seen, divide into Believers and Unbelievers over Nongqawuse's prophecies. In the historical as well as in the contemporary narrative, Mda offers perspectives from both sides of the feud without attempting to find a culprit for the dramatic situation the Xhosa find themselves in and without privileging one perspective over the other. However, the novel's emphasis on the perils associated with internal dissension seems to set *The Heart of Redness* apart from many postcolonial novels, because, as Jana Gohrlich explains: "Mda does not only write back to the white colonial masters and producers of grand narratives to teach them a lesson about precolonial past and colonial history. Rather, he aims at his black contemporaries, to whom he wants to point out the contradictions and future potential of their own local history and culture" (240).³

The acceptance or refusal of the tourist project by the inhabitants of Qolorha in the contemporary narrative has to do with the kind of political and economic development they envisage as the best for their village. The Unbelievers, led by Bhonco, look at the project as a classic introducer of modernization in the village, which has the potential to generate great economic possibilities: "'The Unbelievers stand for progress,' asserts Bhonco, to the assenting murmurs of his followers. . . . 'We want to get rid of this bush which is a sign of our uncivilized state. We want developers to come and build the gambling city that will bring money to this community. That will bring modernity to our lives, and will rid us of our redness'" (92). The expression "redness" used by Bhonco to refer to backwardness and lack of civilization relates to the red ochre used by Xhosa women on their bodies and also to stain the traditional isiXhosa garments (the isikhakha skirts), a distinctive element of Xhosa culture. Mda uses the word in the novel's title, itself a clear allusion to Joseph

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. According to Harry Sewlall, who analyzes both Conrad and Mda's texts from a postcolonial perspective:

Metonymically, the title *Heart of Darkness* functions as a substitute for Africa, the Dark Continent as it was scripted in the European imagination. It represents, or acts as, a substitute for the African wilderness and a place which still awaits the civilizing mission of the West. *The Heart of Redness* also assumes metonymic dimensions as it is the equivalent of backwardness and the absence of enlightenment. (8)

On the other side of the quarrel, the Believers, led by Zim, are suspicious of the promises of richness, fearing that the luxury resort will drive them into further poverty by excluding the majority of the local population from actually benefiting from the project while overexploiting their natural resources. Stubbornly holding on to the differences between their ancestors, Bhonco and Zim adopt extreme views on the subject of development. While Bhonco considers progress as wholly beneficial to Qolorha, Zim regards any change that may be brought by modernization as negative. Even though as the descendant of Twin-Twin, founder of the cult of the Unbelievers in the nineteenth century, Bhonco has always stood for progress and civilization, in the discussion of the tourist project he is influenced in his positions by his educated daughter, Xoliswa Ximiya, to the point that he even rejects certain Xhosa customs and traditions as being uncivilized, or "red": "The Unbelievers stand for civilization. To prove this point Bhonco has now turned away from beads and has decided to take out the suits that his daughter bought him many years ago from his trunk under the bed. From now on he will be seen only in suits" (71). Zim, on the other hand, wishes to preserve Xhosa customs and traditions at all costs and fears everything modern and foreign to the Xhosa culture as a potential threat. For Zim, the future happiness of the village depends on the return to the "pure" Xhosa traditions that existed before the arrival of the European settlers: "This son of Ximiya talks of progress. Yet he wants to destroy the bush that has been here since the days of our forefathers. What kind of progress is that?" (92). Tradition, however, is hardly a natural concept, occurring in

relation to values and perspectives that, as can be seen, construct it very differently. However, the most common attempts to define the concept of tradition regard the transmission of the customs, beliefs, and practices that apparently constitute tradition as automatic. These definitions of tradition tend to omit the dynamic importance of the various generations involved in the process of transmitting tradition(s). They fail to realize that the previous generations do not simply transmit their cultural creations but place them at the disposal of subsequent generations who have to actively process what is made available to them. The definitions also seem to forget that subsequent generations have an active role in the making and keeping of tradition, as they accept, refine, or abandon the traditions placed at their disposal by previous generations. Most contemporary postcolonial literary works, however, avoid presenting tradition and modernity as simplistic polar opposites. Instead, they frequently focus on the depiction and analysis of both positive and negative aspects associated with both notions. In the two narratives of *The Heart of Redness*, Mda reveals how the Xhosa people have had to juggle the wish to perpetuate ancient traditions and the challenges to those traditions brought by present circumstances, whether in the shape of early British colonialism in the past or globalization in the present. Throughout the novel, Mda contrasts and relativizes the arguments that divide the rational Unbelievers from the traditionalist Believers in both narratives by avoiding essentialist or oppositional perspectives, stressing instead the transcultural characteristics of Xhosa culture.

Even though at first sight the reasons that divide Believers and Unbelievers in the contemporary narrative are apparently of a different order from those that have split the Xhosa nation in the nineteenth century, they relate in both narratives to the question of preserving or abandoning tradition. In the historical narrative as well as in the contemporary narrative, the extreme positions result in an inner division that weakens the resistance of the Xhosa people to the foreign forces.

As is evidenced in both narratives, neither outright preservation nor the utter abandonment of tradition provides the best path for the Xhosa. The conflict between the leaders of the Believers and the Unbelievers, rekindled by the construction of the tourist resort, thus diverts the at-

tention of the villagers from the real issues that need to be discussed and constitutes a threat to the village's ability to resist further marginalization. Newly arrived in Qolorha, Camagu initially avoids becoming directly involved in the conflict that opposes Believers and Unbelievers. However, after he decides to stay in the seaside village, captivated by its many beauties, he tries to act as a mediator in the conflict (a difficult task, given Bhonco and Zim's polarized views on the dispute). Prompted by the need to find a means of supporting himself financially in the village he has chosen to live in, Camagu also becomes an important catalyst for change by combining his own perspectives on progress with those he comes across in the village.

The development project Camagu envisages for Qolorha is based on his interpretation of the village's history and culture, which he formulates from the various perspectives he encounters among the villagers of Qolorha. During his stay in Qolorha, Camagu learns about the complex history of the village, especially through the conversations he has with some of Qolorha's inhabitants. Through his dialogues with Bhonco and Zim he becomes aware of the two principal versions of the history of Nongqawuse, but the most significant contributions to Camagu's position on the issue of development arise in his discussions with Bhonco's daughter, Xoliswa, on the general issues of civilization and primitiveness, and through the exchanges with Qukezwa, Zim's daughter, on tradition and nature. The frequent arguments he has with John Dalton, a descendant of British colonizers, over the best developmental alternatives for Qolorha are also fundamental in the shaping of his own proposal for a sustainable development project. These different viewpoints, which Mda cleverly presents through characters who are more than mere mouthpieces of ideological positions, have an important function in the narrative itself, but they are also directed at the readers, who are implicitly interpellated in the assessment of the questions the novel explores.

Initially, Camagu appears closer to the modernization ideals supported by the Unbelievers, especially thanks to the close relationship he establishes with Bhonco's daughter, Xoliswa Ximiya. In remote Qolorha, the intelligent, educated, and beautiful Xoliswa unsurprisingly becomes

agreeable company for Camagu. During Camagu and Xoliswa's frequent conversations, however, most of which are on the questions of tradition and civilization, Camagu becomes increasingly aware that their positions are irreconcilable. Whereas Xoliswa, whose upbringing in a family of Unbelievers and formal education has inculcated her with the values of the colonizing power, regards all tradition as detrimental and everything Western as potentially beneficial and superior, Camagu is not indifferent to Xhosa traditions, some of which he even observes, in spite of having spent most of his life outside of South Africa. Her passionate defense of civilization, which makes Xoliswa reject anything vaguely related to Xhosa traditions, provides a further context for her strong feeling of shame in relation to the Nongqawuse episode:

Xoliswa Ximiya is not happy that her people are made to act like buffoons for these white tourists. She is miffed that the trails glorify primitive practices. Her people are like monkeys in a zoo, observed with amusement by white foreigners with John Dalton's assistance. But, worst of all, she will never forgive Dalton for taking them to Nongqawuse's Pool, where they drop coins for good luck. She hates Nongqawuse. The mere mention of her name makes her cringe in embarrassment. That episode of the story of her people is a shame and a disgrace. (96)

In one of the several passages marked by magical realism in the novel, Xoliswa, a fierce Unbeliever of anything related to traditional customs and beliefs, finds out she has inherited her father's scars of history. This episode is all the more ironic as it takes place at a time Bhonco's daughter has decided to leave the "redness" of Qolorha to join the Aristocrats of the Revolution in Pretoria: "She wakes up one day and finds that the scars of history have erupted on her body. All of a sudden her ancestor's flagellation has become her flagellation. She rebels against these heathen scars" (261). Even though the Unbelievers want to forget their history, which they regard as debilitating, particularly the Nongqawuse episode, it seems they are condemned to carry the scars of that history on their very bodies.

Camagu becomes emotionally involved with another female character who appears to be the very antithesis of Xoliswa. Qukezwa lacks the charm, beauty, and high level of formal education Xoliswa possesses, but her knowledge and appreciation of the Xhosa and Khoikhoi cultures captivate Camagu. He discloses his admiration for Qukezwa when, talking with Xoliswa, he compares the two: "That child, as you call her, is not dismissive of beautiful things. Where you see darkness, witchcraft, heathens, and barbarians, she sees song and dance and laughter and beauty" (189). Beyond her disconcerting attitude, he is able to recognize in Qukezwa his counterpart in the struggle for the preservation of the history, culture, and landscape of Qolorha against the greedy and unscrupulous development project. His exchanges with Qukezwa, in which she instructs him on Xhosa and Khoikhoi culture and beliefs as well as on indigenous plants and animals, increase his appreciation of traditional values and the local natural environment and become an important motivation towards devising an alternative cooperative development project. It is also in great part thanks to Qukezwa that Camagu changes his view on the Nongqawuse episode. For Camagu, Nongqawuse represented a faint recollection from history books, which described her as "a young girl who deceived the amaXhosa nation into mass suicide" (35). In one of their meetings, Qukezwa shows him the Valley of Nongqawuse and describes the historical episode as if she had witnessed it:

"We stood here with the multitudes," she says, her voice full of nostalgia. "Visions appeared in the water. Nongqawuse herself stood here. Across the river the valley was full of ikhamanga. There were reeds too. They are no longer there. Only ikhamanga remains. And a few aloes. Aloes used to cover the whole area. Mist often covers this whole ridge right up to the lagoon where we come from. It was like that too in the days of Nongqawuse. We stood here and saw the wonders. The whole ridge was covered with people who came to see the wonders. Many things have changed. The reeds are gone. What remains now is that bush over there where Nongqawuse and Nombanda first met the Strangers. The bush. Ityholo-lika-Nongqawuse." (105)

This spiritual moment makes a great impression on Camagu, who had never considered the historical episode from the Believers' perspective. Qukezwa's description induces him to question the common versions of history that portrayed Nongqawuse and her prophecies as delirious and tragic, a portrayal that led to a feeling of shame among the Xhosa in relation to the event. Even though he tries rationally to resist Qukezwa, for apparently he has very little in common with her, Camagu cannot help but feel fascinated with the young woman's ability to connect with the history and culture of her people. In the article "Situating Ecology in Recent African Fiction," Anthony Vital interprets Qukezwa's closeness to nature as a way of perpetuating damaging ideas about women's roles. He argues that behind Qukezwa's appeal "lies the old story of the vulnerable woman and her protector" (311). In fact, the male characters, Camagu and Dalton, ultimately save Qolorha, while Qukezwa is relegated to the background, as she is seen performing the conventional female role of nurturing mother. Mda's representation of the two most significant female characters in *The Heart of Redness*, i.e., Qukezwa and Nongqawuse, has been described by feminist critics such as Meg Samuelson as androcentric and essentialist:

Cast out is an image of Nongqawuse as a woman who entered the public sphere with her own gendered agenda. While the Nongqawuse of nationalist fantasies transmits the male-authored message through her mouth, Qukezwa, her representative figure in Mda's present-day narrative, transmits it through her body. Qukezwa, then, is proposed as a domesticated, culturally 'pure' Nongqawuse, her obedient womb replacing Nongqawuse's unruly, slippery voice. (248)

For Samuelson, this suppression of female agency in Mda's novel is made even clearer in the dismissal of Xoliswa Ximiya, "the only highly literate woman in the story" (243), not just from Camagu's company, as he chooses Qukezwa over her, but from the novel as well. However, Camagu clearly adopts Qukezwa's ecological sensibility in his ecotourism project, which draws heavily on her strong connection to the history and culture of Qolorha, a type of literacy and evidence of a determined

personality. We might say that even though she does not seem to be given the same social and political appreciation as Camagu and Dalton, Qukezwa is nevertheless presented as a female savior figure in Mda's novel, albeit associated with the role of wife and mother. The unsettling Qukezwa becomes one of the main influences in the process of self-discovery and transformation Camagu goes through in Qolorha, from disillusioned urban intellectual and man whose "unquenchable thirst for the flesh is well known" (28) into successful and fulfilled local business and family man.⁴ While these may be positive outcomes, Samuelson's critique remains difficult to rebut, particularly in the light of gender roles as being central to the realignment of tradition and modernity in contemporary South Africa.

Camagu's subject position (which informs his viewpoint on the issue of development) is influenced by the different discourses he comes across during his stay at Qolorha. Like the identity of Qolorha, to which he becomes intimately connected, Camagu's identity is shaped equally by the local and the global, tradition and modernity, the past and the present; he neither completely rejects nor overtly accepts the characteristics of these apparently polarized notions.

Camagu creates his syncretic project of a cooperative-based ecological tourist development for the community (initially a backpackers' hostel, which develops into a holiday camp) through dialogue with both Believers and Unbelievers, and especially with Dalton. The type of development Camagu proposes for the community is also related to Mda's concepts of theater for development and of development communication. In "Current Trends in Theatre for Development in South Africa," Mda describes the evolution of South African contemporary theater from Protest Theatre to Theatre for Resistance in the 1970s, a change that followed those that took place in the liberation struggle, which moved from protest to challenge with the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement. Mda's main focus, however, is on Theatre for Development, which only began to gain a higher profile after the end of apartheid and is now a popular form of theater among South Africans. Mda argues that because it encourages the involvement of the spectators in its production, resorting to their own traditional performance modes,

Theatre for Development is particularly suited to a recently democratic country like South Africa:

Theatre for Development has the potential to be the most relevant theatre in a democratic South Africa, since it can be rooted with the people in the marginalized rural areas and urban slums. It utilizes modes of communication and of entertainment that already exist in these areas. It is the theatre of the illiterate since, in its most progressive form, it has no dramatic text that acts as a referent for the performance text. Workers and peasants together form the vast majority of the population of South Africa. Of necessity a truly South African theatre will not be that which is the sole privilege of the dominant classes, but that in which peasants and workers are active participants in its production and enjoyment. (264)

Besides constituting a truly democratic type of theater by allowing the active participation of the people in its production, the most progressive performances of Theatre for Development, Mda stresses, can become an important vehicle for critical analysis, resulting in critical awareness, or conscientization: “The process of conscientization involves the active participation of the people in transforming themselves by engaging in a dialogue through which they identify their problems, reflect on why the problems exist, and take action to solve the problems” (260).⁵ Participating in the development projects outlined by Camagu as members of a cooperative makes the villagers more aware of their specific circumstances while increasing their own potential for initiative. Getting himself involved in the community issues, Camagu helps the villagers of Qolorha devise the means to resist the threat of a renewed colonization, now in the shape of political and economic exploitation, by resorting to their own initiative and their local resources. Behind Camagu’s project there is also a strong criticism of the neo-liberal policies adopted by the post-apartheid administration, particularly the institution of black economic empowerment:⁶

Black economic empowerment is a buzzword at places like Giggles in Johannesburg, where the habitués are always on the

lookout for crumbs that fall from the tables of the Aristocrats of the Revolution. But the black empowerment boom is merely enriching the chosen few—the elite clique of black businessmen who have become overnight millionaires. Or trade union leaders who use the workers as stepping-stones to untold riches for themselves. And politicians who effectively use their struggle credentials for self-enrichment. They have their snouts buried deep in the trough, lapping noisily in the name of the poor, trying to outdo one another in piggishness. Disillusioned with the corruption and nepotism of the city, Camagu had come to Qolorha in search of a dream. And here people are now doing things for themselves, without any handouts from the government. (171-72)

Camagu transcends the duality between the Believers, whose position on development focuses on the preservation of local interests, and the Unbelievers, whose unconditional defense of progress opens the door to global economic influences, by combining positive aspects of both perspectives and adding his own academic and work experience as well as his particular vision on the relevance of involving the local population in the development projects. Camagu's ecotourist project relies on and aims to protect the potential generated at a local level by the historical, cultural, and natural identities and resources found in Qolorha, but it depends on the forces of economic globalization that make it possible for tourists from inside and outside South Africa to be aware and take full advantage of this type of project. As Hilary Dannenberg states, Camagu's ecotourism project for Qolorha entails a compromise between moderate global trends and local development:

The Heart of Redness therefore depicts the preservation of regional cultural identities as a necessity if local cultures are to protect themselves from larger globalising cultural forces and suggests that a clear sense of local cultural allegiance should override the kind of amorphous hybridity that is represented by the expanding and economically monopolising forces of Western culture. (189)

In spite of the efforts displayed by scattered resistance movements at local levels, the risk of being allured and overcome by major economic interests is always present, as Mda suggests at the end of the novel. Even though Camagu feels proud of the type of sustainable development the community has devised for Qolorha, he is well aware the village is not completely safe from the threat posed by greed:

He feels fortunate that he lives in Qolorha. Those who want to preserve indigenous plants and birds have won the day here. At least for now. But for how long? The whole country is ruled by greed. Sooner or later the powers that be may decide, in the name of the people, that it is good for the people to have a gambling complex at Qolorha-by-Sea. And the gambling complex shall come into being. (277)

In contemporary South Africa, the preservation of Qolorha's natural resources as defended by the Believers, especially by Qukezwa, depends on the possibilities opened up by globalization. The *raison d'être* of Camagu's ecotourist project is intrinsically tied to the economic and psychological well-being of both the local community and its potential tourists. Having acquired valuable knowledge about economic development in the United States, Camagu is well aware that in contemporary South Africa, even in a remote village like Qolorha, the return to a kind of pre-colonial past (in its cultural, social, political, economic, and even natural dimensions) as idealized by the Believers is no longer viable. However, he also rejects the kind of neo-liberal development supported by the Unbelievers. Through his small-scale ecotourist project he transcends the binaries of tradition and modernity, of local and global interests, as he takes advantage of globalized processes already under way in order to benefit the local community.⁷ Kissack and Titlestad claim that Camagu's ecotourist project also has the potential of helping the inhabitants of Qolorha redefine their identities in the challenging context of post-apartheid:

For Camagu, and the project of ecological tourism, the past is to be remembered, not ossified and revered, while the present

must be redefined and reinvented to provide people with the dignity of self-determination, forged within the confines and prospects of their present situation. The vision of ecological tourism can provide this, as it offers the people of Qolorha-by-Sea respectful and conservatory control over their own environment, enables them and others to reflect on the passage of history, with all of its turmoil, conflict and tragedy, through which the region and its inhabitants have passed, and permits them some independence in the construction of a new identity in a time of social transformation. (163)

Mda's portrayal of Camagu's ecotourist project entails a contemporary understanding of ecology, one that mediates a traditional sense of connection with the land as an aspect of the modern that aims to preserve what it senses as being threatened by modernity (see Vital 307). In *The Heart of Redness* the ecotourist project thus becomes associated with both the global and the local, given that it depends on global forces to allow local positions to defend their interests against the pressures of globalization.⁸

The declaration of Qolorha as a national heritage site seemingly relates to the role the village assumes in the novel as a source of multiple natural and cultural meanings. In the context of contemporary South Africa, heritage has become not only a much-debated subject, due to its emphasis on historical and cultural memory, but also a flourishing activity, given its economic potential as part of the heritage tourism industry. Both the cultural and the economic potential associated with heritage are stressed by Sabine Marschall:

Heritage not only can lead to the manufacture of a suitable past, it also can become a veritable industry. . . . As official statements and press reports insist, virtually all new monuments and heritage sites are bound to attract hordes of 'cultural tourists', thereby becoming catalysts for infrastructure development, employment creation, and poverty alleviation to the benefit of previously disadvantaged communities. Hence, one might suspect that the design of any new commemorative

object is at least as much guided by perceptions of what is visually appealing to tourists as by what is meaningful to the local communities. (255)

Like ecotourism, heritage tourism may also bring cultural benefits to the local populations along with the obvious economic advantages. However, as with ecotourism, heritage tourism carries with it the risk of transforming African culture and history into a type of commodity that can re-enact the conception of an unspoiled geographical and cultural territory, not just among Western tourists but among local African populations as well.

Even though Camagu and John Dalton have different perspectives on the best developmental alternative for Qolorha, it is thanks to Dalton that the village is rescued from the tourist project. It might be argued that by securing governmental protection of Qolorha as a national heritage site (as suggested but never put in practice by Camagu), Dalton is trying to find atonement for the crimes committed in the past by his white ancestors.

In the two narrative strands he uses in *The Heart of Redness*, Mda not only unveils but problematizes complex historical and contemporary questions in what seems to be an attempt also to reach a balance between exposure and understanding, revealing past and present circumstances of suffering and exploitation, yet avoiding simplistic binaries. Retrieving the past episode of Nongqawuse and its intricate historical context and aligning it with the contemporary discussion surrounding issues of development, Mda successfully articulates the multiple and contradictory elements that constitute contemporary South African culture and society. From a character responsible for one of the most dramatic episodes in the history of the Xhosa people and consequently a cause of great embarrassment for them, Nongqawuse is transformed in Mda's novel into a tourist attraction that contributes to the sustainable development of Qolorha: "Nongqawuse really sells the holiday camp,' Camagu tells John Dalton, who is lying in a hospital bed. 'When we advertise in all the important travel magazines we use her name. Qolorha is the place of miracles'" (276). Similarly, in Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*,

Mandisa's recollection and reinterpretation of her grandfather's history lesson on Nongqawuse and the Cattle-Killing events attempt to reclaim the legitimacy of the young prophetess' voice: "Tatomkhulu was a fund of facts that, although seemingly different, made a whole lot of sense of some of the things we learned at school. He explained what had seemed stupid decisions, and acts that had seemed indefensible became not only understandable but highly honourable" (Magona 183). Though not entirely devoid of historical inaccuracies, which possibly result from the old man's imagination (see Schatteman 278), the grandfather's version does not omit the dramatic results of the prophecies. Importantly, his re-telling of the story, carefully stressing the context of great anxiety experienced by the Xhosa towards an unknown, threatening culture, makes the prophetess' behavior more understandable and even honorable. The recovery of Nongqawuse as a meaningful character for the history of the Xhosa, enacted by Mda and Magona in their novels, emphasizes the importance of revising biased historical narratives that often serve suspect and manipulative objectives, or as Adam Ashforth puts it:

The context in which South African writing takes place is far from neutral. Since the 1950s, through the system of Bantu Education, a pernicious brew has been served to young black South Africans in the guise of history. The representations of the past embodied in Bantu Education, to say nothing of other official and semiofficial histories, were designed to buttress white domination and undoubtedly served to entrench ignorance. . . . The production of stories about the past, then, that can empower people in changing the structure of domination in their present is of the utmost importance in the struggle against apartheid. (590)

If during the years of apartheid the production of narratives about the past was regarded as a powerful means to resist oppression, in the post-apartheid period the recovery of past (hi)stories relates mostly to the responsibilities brought by the new political situation of the country.

In Mda's novel, Nongqawuse and the dramatic events of the nineteenth-century Cattle-Killing episode are interwoven with the picture

of a contemporary South Africa experiencing the difficulties of becoming a fully democratic nation, thus emphasizing the environment of enormous uncertainty that marked and marks the two historical periods. In the novel, Mda assumes the need to examine contemporary South African identities by resorting to the reclamation of their historical memories. Through fiction, Mda combines history's concern with concrete facts and memory's attachment to disclosure, opening important spaces to debate some of the most complex questions posed to South African postcolonial identities. In *The Heart of Redness* Mda deftly portrays the challenges posed to past and present South African society through a complex alignment between the two distinct narrative strands, and above all, by moving away from accusations and guilt, focusing instead on the need for development and understanding.

Notes

1. Peeters supports his study of Mda's main character on the descriptions of the disempowered radical intellectual provided by Lazarus in *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (1990).
2. A recent article by Offenburger entitled "Duplicity and Plagiarism in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*," published in *Research in African Literatures*, has given rise to a certain amount of controversy with respect to the fine line between intertextuality and plagiarism. Offenburger has accused Mda of plagiarizing Peires's book, claiming that the historical narrative in *The Heart of Redness* has been almost entirely borrowed from *The Dead Will Arise*. His exhaustive analysis of the similarities between the two books includes several examples of paraphrasing and even a graph to demonstrate the "Trend in the Pattern of Borrowed Text" (14) but only a faint reference to the theory of intertextuality and almost no mention of the novel's other narrative, as important as the historical narrative, set in contemporary South Africa. In the same volume of the journal, Mda responds to the accusations by stressing the fictional nature of his work and revealing how he resorted to intertextual cross-fertilization:

The Heart of Redness is a work of fiction and not a history textbook. Historical record is only utilized in the novel to serve my fiction—to give it context, for instance. In the historical segments the fiction centers on the patriarch Xikixa, his sons Twin and Twin-Twin, and his daughter-in-law Qukezwa. All these are fictional characters created from my imagination. But the world they inhabit comes directly from historical record (Jeff Peires's *The Dead Will Arise*) and from the oral tradition. . . . [W]hen

my fictional characters interact with historical characters such as Mlanjeni, Mhlakaza and Nongqawuse the events surrounding these characters come directly from Peires's book. That is why I have credited Peires in all editions and translations of *The Heart of Redness* as the sole source for all my material that comes from historical record. (1)

3. Though Mda has admitted that he writes his novels primarily for South African readers (Wark), he is nevertheless aware of his international readership. In *The Heart of Redness*, for instance, he uses several devices to make certain aspects of the novel more accessible to a potential readership outside South Africa. These devices include a graphic representation of the characters' genealogy at the beginning of the book and several periphrastic explanations throughout the novel regarding cultural terms and practices, historical events and figures. Given the complexity of the historical events and cultural issues explored in the novel, most of which are intrinsically connected with the Xhosa culture, these devices are possibly directed at South African readers as well, as they also may have only a superficial knowledge of Xhosa culture, being ignorant of many or most of the details related to those events and issues narrated in the book.
4. Camagu's attraction to Qukezwa will result, in another of the novel's magical realist touches, in an immaculate conception. In *Ways of Dying*, Mda had already resorted to the magical realist device of the immaculate conception in the character of Noria, who miraculously conceives and gives birth, after fifteen months, to the same child she had lost a few years before. Given the strong emphasis on transculturation in *The Heart of Redness*, perhaps it is possible to interpret Qukezwa's virgin pregnancy as a combination of magical realism with the allusion to one of the most important symbols of Christianity, that of the magically conceiving Virgin Mary. We should also stress here that the nineteenth-century Nongqawuse prophecies already revealed a syncretism of Xhosa and Christian religious beliefs by combining elements of Xhosa cosmology with the Christian notions of apocalypse and resurrection. In a feminist interpretation of this episode, Samuelson argues that the immaculate conception of the contemporary Qukezwa functions as a contrast with the prostituting activities the Qukezwa of the nineteenth-century narrative became involved in during the War of Mlanjeni in order to help her people (see *The Heart of Redness* 21). Thus, as in *Ways of Dying* (Noria also has to resort to prostitution at a certain stage in her life in order to survive), Mda replaces the figure of the prostitute, which signals (national) degradation under colonial conquest, with the figure of Mother Africa, which is regarded as a symbol of national recovery:

Qukezwa the second is cleansed and reclaimed as a Mother Africa figure, her body uncontaminated and whole. The shift from prostitute to virgin-mother that we find in *The Heart of Redness* is one from the nation penetrated by foreign incursion to the nation redeemed through its

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recovery of an authentic cultural tradition. This trajectory is followed also in Mda's previous novel, *Ways of Dying*, where redemption is signaled by the movement of the central female character, Noria, from prostitute to ascetic. The story told through these women's bodies follows a linear structure, untangling narrative temporality and rearranging it into a teleological formation that stretches from colonial loss to post-colonial recovery. (Samuelson 241)

5. Mda has further developed the connection between community participation and conscientization in *When People Play People: Development Communication through Theatre* (1993).
6. Similar criticism of black economic empowerment can be found in a newspaper article entitled "We don't deify our leaders or kowtow to the ruling party" (2004), in which Mda examines the first decade of democracy in South Africa.
7. Graham, however, argues in *Land and Nationalism in Fictions from Southern Africa* that Mda's proposals for development presented in the novel do not fully succeed in overcoming these binaries, perpetuating dependency from the outside:

Mda clearly wants to model recognisably viable alternatives to the government's top-down development scheme. His problem is that, in the bid for a tricky narrative able to transcend the polarised narratives of the 'middle generations', to satirise Red ('traditional') and School ('modern') identities on what remains a deadly serious issue, the novel becomes mired in its own ironies. . . . [T]he fiction reproduces the ongoing dependency of the peoples of the Eastern Cape to 'outsider' intervention while simultaneously trying to construct a path out of that dependency. (166-67)

8. Despite the uncontested potential of ecotourism projects for the economic development of former colonized nations, Gilbert calls attention to the risk of replicating colonial representations, especially in contemporary descriptions of those areas as pristine and unexplored, thus open to external exploitation:

That remote wilderness sites in 'exotic' non-Western regions have rapidly emerged as preferred destinations for Western ecotourists suggests that 'third-world' countries may offer particular historical as well as geo-social contexts in and through which the tensions between pre- and post-industrial travel modalities can be mediated. European imperialism, despite its diverse and sometimes conflicting projects, played an important role in this process of mediation in so far as it produced as truth ideologically-loaded views of specific (colonizable) regions of the earth as underdeveloped, pre-modern, and even pristine spaces that potentially offered bourgeois travelers a corrective to the stresses wrought by imperial modernity. Most ecotourism marketing materials, as well as a large

number of policy documents, maintain this discursive construction of many former colonies (and their inhabitants) as always already marked by a sense of belatedness. (263)

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