Kunene's Shaka and the Idea of the Poet as Teacher

JOHN HAYNES

I

IN AN ESSAY PUBLISHED a year after the English version of *Emperor Shaka the Great*, Mazisi Kunene writes that "Classical African literature takes it as its primary strategy to broaden the base of the characters through mythification and symbolism" ("Relevance" 200). As he says in the poem itself, "Indeed, artists embellish their past to inspire their children" (166). What I want to look at is the trend of this mythification and embellishment. In doing this I shall not make any claims about the capacity of a poem to change people's attitudes or actions, nor will I deal with the ways in which a poem, as opposed to some other genre, might achieve such a goal. These are very vexed questions, neither of which has been tackled by African critics, even those who emphasize the traditional African artist's role of teacher. All I can claim is that if literature can have any bearing on political or social circumstance it is likely to be at times of crisis, such as we see now in Kunene's country, when people can be expected to reflect on the meaning of what they are doing and suffering. Yet we have to remember that what readers (or hearers) take from a work of art is affected by the attitudes they bring to it, and the social structures within which it is experienced — the school, the political party, exile, and so on. I will attempt, at the end of this account, to *relate* the implied "teaching" of Kunene's poem to present events, but I cannot pretend to *comment,* since I do not have anything like sufficient knowledge, nor indeed sufficient experience. Nonetheless I have not been able to hide a bias towards the more radically socialist wing of the ANC.

In what ways, then, if any, might *Emperor Shaka the Great* "inspire" its "children," many of whom — literally "children" — are already practically enmeshed in political praxis, hence in political education? Kunene himself believes that poetry should not concern itself with immediate protest, but with "long-term national and social goals" ("Relevance" 191). It should, in other words, set the immediate in a wider perspective, in relation to traditional Zulu, and African, values, and in relation to the ancestors. One of these ancestors is, of course, Shaka himself.

In looking at Kunene's interpretation of, mythification of, Shaka, I will divide my account into two parts, an artificial division because the two parts overlap a good deal. First I want to look at Shaka as an embodiment of a model Zulu or African leader, the public and political Shaka; then I want to say something about Kunene's study of Shaka's mind, Shaka the rejected child, the vulnerable mystic.

II

Following the practice, as he sees it, of "classical African literature," Kunene presents a systematically slanted view of his protagonist. It is an "Africanist" interpretation, as Slater has forcefully noted in his attack on the historiographical outlook of the poem. Kunene highlights Shaka's individual genius, and wherever he can, he denies accusations of brutality and bloodthirstiness made by earlier commentators, or he deflects them to make Shaka's role less blameworthy than has usually been assumed. Thus he denies that Shaka was illegitimate, that he had any hand in the capture and killing of his mentor, Dingiswayo, that he put unproductive old men to death, that he was responsible for the death of his half-brother, or for the massacres that followed the death of his mother.

I will give two examples of this exculpatory trend. The first is over the alleged killing of his half-brother, Sigujana, whom Shaka's father, Senzangakhona, had installed as his successor, at least in Omer-Cooper's and other versions. Omer-Cooper writes:

> Dingiswayo, anxious to confirm his authority over the Zulu by establishing his nominee as their chief, lent Shaka a regiment and

> with this assistance he was able to overcome his half-brother, Sigujana, and put him to death. (30)

The commoner form of the story, which Omer-Cooper is following, has it that Senzangakhona, Shaka's natural father, was particularly anxious to keep him off the Zulu throne, and so had made Sigujana his heir. Kunene alters this. He presents Sigujana as a usurper who has not been able to consolidate his position against other claimants; civil war is raging and Shaka comes to save a degenerating situation on behalf of the Zulu people. Shaka's advancing army simply comes upon the corpse of Sigujana, "stabbed in between the shoulder blades" (78). Shaka is absolved and his half-brother further condemned by the implication that, having been stabbed in the back, he was a coward and so doubly unworthy to rule. A similar recasting of the events of earlier versions occurs over the mass killings that follow his mother Nandi's death. Others than Shaka are blamed.

> Those who bore ancient grudges against each other
> Now seized the moment to vent their revenge,
> Claiming to act in the king's name. (337)

Although there are exceptions to this exculpatory trend, for example the frank treatment of the incident in which Shaka has a woman's child removed from the womb, Kunene certainly does tend to present an "entirely favourable image of Shaka himself," as Slater puts it (10). Slater's criticisms concentrate on Kunene's ideological viewpoint and serve to highlight the "Africanist historiography" Kunene embraces. Slater points out that Shaka's "genius" and innovations should not be taken as the source of everything that happened in the Mfecane; and he points to the importance of population pressure in increasing the warlikeness of Southern African peoples at this time. Kunene mentions this theory in his introduction (xii-xiv), but he does not bring it into the poem, presumably because his aims are not primarily to give a realistic account. We have to understand him as drawing a portrait of an ideal African ruler. And this will obviously foreground personal qualities. It also draws on traditional Zulu concepts of kingship.

Thus, within the court circle, Shaka is shown as sensitive to criticism, and democratic, exemplifying the proverb that "A ruler only rules through the people" (163). The actual Shaka seems to have achieved such dominance through his control of the new standing army, however, that probably he ruled much more autocratically than the proverb allows. Kunene makes him personify the values described by Gluckman, though Gluckman was careful to note that these were internalized norms, not necessarily actual practice. For Kunene they are exemplary and reveal how traditional values are also "progressive" in the modern context. The democratic Shaka, for example, is revealed in the passage where Zihlandlo remonstrates with him very frankly indeed: "through haste you violated the authority of the Assembly" (375). Shaka accepts the plain speaking as "profound thoughts" (376) and although he does not finally accept the advice being offered about battle tactics, he is shown as overruling Zihlandlo on the basis of greater wisdom and after consideration of alternatives. This is an intellectual Shaka whose decisions are presented as justified by circumstances and reflection. Kunene moves us a good way from the impatient tyrant of traders' accounts.

Another "progressive" aspect of Shaka's rule is his openness to new ideas and his dynamic conception of tradition. To Senzangakhona Kunene attributes the erroneous static view of tradition by which "It is only the ancestors who know how to guide us" (34). No, Shaka says, we must control our own fates and make our own values: "in human affairs there are no eternal laws; Each generation makes a consensus of its own laws" (55). The present is always sovereign, to be grasped; tradition is not the same as custom.

Despite this, and despite Kunene's apparently ignoring the striking movement towards militaristic values in Zulu society at the time, he assumes a basic Zulu ethic, contrasting Zulu values through Shaka's words with those of the "White Strangers": "to them wealth far surpasses the bonds of kinship. / From this all their obsessions originate" (296). This and the reference to rival rulers in Southern Africa as "bandits" betray some Zulu chauvinism. But not racism. Shaka is also made to say of King, "I often forget he is a foreigner or a white man" (407).

Another quite marked mythification is the idea that Shaka is a very popular leader, even though also much feared. With his death, "The whole Zulu army filled the region with their mourning songs" (427), although most other accounts claim that there was no very strong reaction to Shaka's murder, in particular not from the army which, returning from a failed mission, could expect the most severe punishment (Omer-Cooper 42; Becker 72; Thompson 351), though the logic of this is implicitly questioned in Plaatje's *Mhudi* (129). This popularity, and Shaka's democracy within the court circle, are to an extent contradicted by other passages, such as "He knew he had few friends who would speak without fear" (276) and "For those eager to be loved never make great rulers" (251), passages which, of course, reflect what must be a genuine conflict for all populist rulers.

The ruling class perspective from which Kunene writes is shown most clearly in what he chooses to describe naturalistically and what he does not. For example, before Shaka's inauguration we are given a picturesque image of the preparations:

> Beautiful women of the land sat in the shade, braiding their hair.
> They reaped and crushed the fragrance of young scented flowers.
> They gossiped about their future in the king's household.
> Great processions gathered from all directions.
> Red feathers quivered as the heroes hurried to the royal city.
> (78)

The scene is complete and idyllic. There is no close focus on the labour required to gather all these flowers nor on the real prospects of these young women as members of Shaka's seraglio — each to become one of hundreds of closely watched "sisters" with no prospect of normal family or sexual life, nor of (surviving) children. "Their future in the king's household" leaves all this in vagueness. The incoming soldiers, too, are treated at this commentary-box distance.

By contrast, Kunene expresses very subtly and economically the tensions and readjustments of position involved in Shaka's new regime, as it affects those close to him, with Nandi now taking the place of his aunt, Mkhabayi, as first lady. The tensions need not be spelt out because they are there in the situation, in the family, and known to Kunene's likely audience.

Princess Mkhabayi silently entered the arena,
Walking high like a cloud over the mountains.
As she came before the king she peered deep into his eyes.
The IziCwe regiments watched intently from their semi-circle
positions.
Princess Mkhabayi bowed low and shouted the royal salute . . .
She opened her lips as if to speak
But she only gestured to Nomchobo, directing her eyes to Nandi.
(78-79)

Here, at the level of court politics, we have the close focus of eyes meeting eyes, the unspoken readjustments in power relations, which primarily concern Kunene. But there is no view from "below," no faint grins from the tough IziCwe soldiers at Mkhabayi's regal discomfiture, no commoners nudging each other, alert to the slightest betrayal of Mkhabayi's real feelings, a half stumble, the quickening of the eyelashes.

Connected to this bias in focus is Kunene's treatment of battle scenes. For a martial epic *Emperor Shaka the Great* is remarkably distant in its treatment of battle violence, Kunene never gets down to the horrors as Mofolo does, with Homeric impact:

> he smashed the skull of one of them and his little brain fell out, and he died belching like someone who had drunk too much beer. That stick, as it came up, split someone's chin apart so that his jaws were separated and his tongue dangled in space.
> (Mofolo 32)

Mofolo presents Shaka as ruthless and barbaric, and had Kunene emphasized the violence in this way, he might have risked falling in with this interpretation. But his commentary box view of battles is, in a sense, evasive. He never attempts to portray the *tension* between Shaka's creativity and his destructiveness.

III

Kunene's Africanist perspective may be looked at, from one point of view, as an attempt to present his subject as Shaka himself may have perceived it. We are asked to enter imaginatively into his moral and political world as, to Shaka, it actually seemed to be. In this sense Kunene is naturalistic, at the level of the consciousness of Shaka and his peers. It is not surprising, therefore,

that Kunene shows a particular interest in, and sympathy for, Shaka the individual. We can look at his psychology from two points of view. First there is the process of his socialization, then there is Kunene's presentation of his deeper thoughts in his maturity, the vulnerable and affective sides of his nature which have not been presented before in such detail, nor so compellingly. We have seen how Kunene tends to clear Shaka of allegations of cruelty and the perpetration of atrocities. Sometimes he retells the story, and at others he takes an "understanding" view, seeing a particular event in psychological rather than moral terms. This is particularly clear in his treatment of the incident in which Shaka has a foetus cut from the mother's womb. Shaka presents this as a punishment for the woman's infidelity, which traditionally carried the death penalty. Shaka argues that sexual infidelity threatens the stability of the nation. He dismisses the protestation of the prosecutor that "the nation may be repulsed at such an outrageous act" (194) on the grounds that squeamishness is a form of weakness and superstition: "It is through such fears people fail to execute justice." When the mutilation is done Kunene turns our attention at once *from* both the actual details (not described) and the moral question *to* the moment of mystical insight it affords Shaka:

> Many looked in horror at the spectacle before them
> But none dared show their feelings of terror . . .
> Only Shaka followed with his eyes every detail.
> Finally he said: "At last I have seen
> How an infant lies in its mother's womb."
> He turned away and fell into deep thought.
> He wandered off, as if obsessed by some mysterious memory.
> (194-95)

Shaka, then, goes "beyond good and evil" in a kind of ruthless quest not really for justice but for an insight into the fundamentals of human existence and origins. The passage reveals an intellectual kind of ruthlessness, but also a vulnerability. Omer-Cooper makes the insightful suggestion that Shaka's alleged killing of his own child (which had been hidden from him by Nandi) might have a psychological basis, beyond the obvious practical consideration of eliminating future rivals: "Shaka also

may have regarded a child of his as a reminder of his own mortality" (35). The "mysterious memory" almost certainly refers to some such awareness. Kunene sees Shaka's psychology in relation to the poles of birth and death and connects the deepest of Shaka's emotions to his early traumatic childhood. Shaka says, "You shall never know how deep are the fears of a growing boy" (76).

In its main outline Kunene's biography follows the received narrative and explanation, showing Shaka as a man compensating for early insecurity and lack of identity. Vilakazi, in many ways Kunene's poetic forebear, pinpoints the central obsession of Shaka — his relation to his mother. He puts this in what now seem quite Freudian terms:

> For was your mother not a marvel
> Whose beauty of mind and body were unrivalled? —
> Her hair alone cast on men a spell:
> Thus many concubines had hair like hers. (36)

And Shaka's development does conform in a number of ways to Oedipus's. Like Oedipus he survives his father's attempt to dispose of him as a child, and is brought up as a relative commoner in exile. He symbolically murders his father when he usurps the throne Senzangakhona had done his best to keep from him; he comes to Zululand as an outsider bringing stability, as Oedipus had to Thebes, and he instals his mother as "mother of the nation," a position not unlike Jocasta's; the symbolically incestuous relation — hinted at in Vilakazi's lines — is suggested by Shaka's unwillingness to take a wife and his fear of having children. But, though some of this is implicit in Kunene's poem, he is by no means a Freudian. Yet he does stress Shaka's closeness to his mother, and to his sister. We may see, perhaps, his condemnation of sexual irregularity, together with his severe curtailment of the sexual life of men of fighting age, as a reaction to the circumstances of his own conception. In condemning the woman whose child is to be cut out of her, he says, "Whoever succumbs to the body's simple invitations / Violates the human laws and becomes no more than a beast" (194). But we cannot but remember — a further aspect of Shaka's own "mysterious memory" — the very passionate and irregular union which

led to his own existence. Of Senzangakhona and Nandi's love-making, Kunene writes, "They fell together behind the growth of bushes. / They loved as though to celebrate their final day on earth" (7). The description is a good deal more animated here than in the passage in which the child is removed, but again Kunene links conception and death. And this succumbing to "the body's simple invitations" certainly does threaten social stability: it produces Shaka.

The degree to which Shaka depends on his mother is revealed in the structure of the narrative. While she is alive he devotes himself to action, to living out her aspirations for him; but with her death the military and political pace of the narrative slows down, and the poem becomes much more contemplative. It is now that we see the vulnerable side of Shaka and, related to it, his capacity for deep friendship and mystical awareness — which in the form of communication with his ancestors is also a form of historical awareness. While Thompson summarily declares that "success gradually went to his head and eventually undermined his sense of reality" (350), Kunene shows him as concerned with a different dimension of reality, the reality, to him, of his dead relatives and the ancestors. The massacres that follow the death of Nandi *are* explained in terms of a kind of loss of contact with reality, but this is seen as distraction by grief, not madness. Shaka temporarily loses his grip on political affairs and indiscipline in the state follows. Kunene again takes the "understanding" line:

> If the death of Nandi has turned his mind
> Then it is a weakness that still attests to his greatness.
> For, truly, there is no lover who is without fault. (342)

Note, in passing, the ambiguous "lover." It is only now, in its mystical form, that death unsettles Shaka:

> I am obsessed with the voices of the dead.
> They who were once close to me come back.
> I tremble as though death had not been with me all my life.
> (379)

As in the passage where he has the child excised, here too, Shaka is brought face to face with the idea of his own mortality. Kunene now pays a good deal of attention to his dreams:

He dreamt he saw Mbiya and his mother, Nandi.
They were absorbed in deep conversation.
Constantly they whispered to each other,
But when he came closer, they were suddenly silent.
They turned to him, staring him in the eye. (422)

The writing here is very effective, and where Kunene is verbally striking it is often over face-to-face encounters, or expressions of the face. For example, Shaka's unease at getting a message purportedly from the ancestors is expressed as follows: "Shaka did not comment. He only stared at the ground. / His eyes were like those of a drunken man following an ant" (257). Here, naturalistically, he focuses on Shaka as leader and man, and on his relation to the supernatural, cosmological, forces which Kunene believes the poet should concentrate on. It is this area that interests him most immediately, here that his language is often at its most vital and resonantly particular.

IV

I have tried to indicate that the trend of Kunene's embellishment of Shaka is towards the exculpation of the public figure, and towards the "understanding" of the individual. The poet writes from the perspective of the ruling family, stressing Zulu — and by extension, African — values and continuities, and, as ruling families are apt to do, emphasizes nationalism. The pedagogical implication of the poem, looked at in Kunene's terms, is that it may broaden and deepen the understanding of the "children" it is addressed to. It does not aim at philosophically simplistic comprehensibility such as Chinweizu advocates, nor proletarian immediacy such as we find in Ngugi's recent work. Yet events in South Africa as I write do *render* the themes of *Emperor Shaka the Great* relevant to the immediate experience of its readers, especially the actual children who are stoning the police and being shot in the townships. The poem is in Zulu (originally) and deals with a Zulu hero, but Shaka can no longer be seen as only Zulu since to a large extent he is now an African figure who transcends ethnic boundaries, and Zulu is a language many non-Zulus speak. The poem has an obvious relation to the modern quest for black unity in South Africa, for organization and

martial courage at a time when the conflict is becoming more violent, when anti-apartheid parties are still not united, and when a significant number of blacks man the armed forces and the police.

Kunene himself has been an active worker in the ANC and also, paradoxically as it now begins to seem, an admirer of Gatsha Buthelezi, the Zulu leader who has so often attacked the ANC for its Leninist type of underground operations and consequent lack of rapport with everyday black life (Dhlomo 52). The poem is dedicated to Buthelezi; and indeed Buthelezi resembles Shaka in being a popular royal leader with great charisma. Kunene's Shaka does not, of course, advocate nonviolence as Buthelezi has done, though it may be argued that Buthelezi's position here is tactically pragmatic. Whatever the contradictions we might discern in Kunene's adherence to both the ANC and to Buthelezi, it does seem that the ideological trend of *Emperor Shaka the Great* is towards bringing the immediate struggles against apartheid under the wider sway of the Zulu ruling family, or, by extension, some form of "top-down" populism under a charismatic great leader, a further "embellishment" and "mythification," no doubt. And this would be a "long-term national and social goal."

I must admit to my misgivings about this scenario, which surely is not unfamiliar to Africans. But I will leave those with a more secure knowledge of South African politics to draw their own better informed conclusions. Let me say, however, that the very fact that it has been possible to find so much of such interest in this poem counts against Kunene's view — at least in the form in which he expresses it — that the African poet in some way acts as a political pedagogue. We learn from this poem to see Shaka from a particular point of view, one possibly very close to his own view of himself; but we do not passively "swallow" this, as Kunene the propagandist would perhaps wish. Kunene the *poet* goes deeper and is more compelling. He does affect his readers, but how this relates to their everyday political and personal lives remains very obscure. The ancient question (which we find also in Shakespeare, whose ideology is not so far from Kunene's) about the difference between poetic and other kinds

of communication comes back to us again. As I have mentioned, although African poets, and other literary artists, and critics, have emphasized the pedagogical role of the writer they have not yet sorted out what this role consists in, what kinds of communication are possible, what literary discourses are like and how they mesh with educational systems, political movements, and so on. There is always a difference between what you may wish to teach me and what I may wish to learn from your trying to do that.

WORKS CITED

Becker, Peter. *The Rule of Fear.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.

Dhlomo, Oscar. "The Strategy of Inkatha and Its Critics." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 18.1-2 (1983): 49-59.

Gluckman, M. "The Kingdom of the Zulu of South Africa." *African Political Systems.* Ed. M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard. London: Oxford UP, 1940. 23-55.

Kunene, Mazisi. *Emperor Shaka the Great.* London: Heinemann, 1979.

———. "The Relevance of African Cosmological Systems to African Literature Today." *African Literature Today, No. 11: Myth and History.* Ed. Eldred D. Jones. London: Heinemann, 1980. 190-205.

Mofolo, Thomas. *Chaka.* London: Heinemann, 1981.

Omer-Cooper, J. D. *Zulu Aftermath.* London: Longman, 1966.

Plaatje, Sol. *Mhudi.* Johannesburg: Quagga P, 1975.

Slater, Henry. "Shaka Zulu, Apartheid, and the Politics of the Liberation of Historiography of South Africa." Fifth SAUSSC Conference, 1982.

Thompson, Leonard. "Co-operation and Conflict: The Zulu Kingdom and Natal." *The Oxford History of South Africa.* Ed. Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon, 1969. 334-90. 2 vols. 1969-71.

Vilakazi, B. W. *Zulu Horizons.* Johannesburg: Witwatersrand UP, 1973.