

# Shaka and the Changing of Perspectives— Teaching South African Literature and History at a German College<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 Introduction

In 1996 a colleague of the history department and I developed and taught an interdisciplinary course 'South Africa and Shaka—Literature and History' at the Oberstufenkolleg Bielefeld as an experiment in interdisciplinary team-teaching in our section 'cultures and histories'<sup>2</sup>. Various reasons motivated us to choose such an apparently 'far away' topic: the exciting political situation in South Africa, the question of nationbuilding and the role of tradition in this context. We had looked for

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the Centre for the Study of Southern African Literature and Languages (CSSALL) at the University of Durban-Westville in August 1999.

<sup>2</sup> The Oberstufenkolleg at the University of Bielefeld is the only college of its kind in Germany. It was founded in the 1970s in the context of educational reform as an experimental college and research institution that links the three years of upper secondary school including Abitur (matric) with undergraduate university studies (2 or 4 semesters) in an integrated four-year course. Different from the traditional sequence of general knowledge at school and specialisation at university it combines specialisation in two majors and general studies based on interdisciplinary courses and project learning and has the aim to further self-directed learning. It is meant as an ongoing workshop for (action) research and development of curricula and the production of teaching material that should allow transfer to universities and schools in particular. The great diversity of the students with regard to their educational, social, cultural and national background and age is one of the fundamental characteristics which is linked to the aim of creating greater equality of opportunity (e.g. about 20% of the students have a culturally or nationally different background from German, most of them coming from migrant families). Another characteristic aspect of the Oberstufenkolleg is its democratic self-administration.

a topic that allowed and required both literary and historical studies and was a good case for the reflection of eurocentric perspectives. Having taught at a Zimbabwean school in the 1980s I remembered well how I had been impressed by the new Zimbabwean history books after independence and their Africanist approach e.g. to the figure of Shaka—Shaka the Great and not Shaka the Brutal—to the Mfecane and the question of historical change and I realised that there are new challenges now and a lively debate in South Africa in this respect. We were interested in the general and theoretical questions involved in the topic with regard to the question of construction or invention of tradition and its political function. And finally we had already come across Zulu praise poetry and the German translation of Thomas Mofolo's novel *Chaka Zulu* as interesting texts for such a course.

We decided for Shaka and posed the following questions in the leaflet announcing the course: There are many and contradictory representations of Shaka—why and what is 'true'? How and why do traditions and ethnic identities emerge? What is Shaka's importance for nationbuilding or ethnic identity in South Africa? We outlined that we wanted to look for answers by analysing literary texts and historical sources; by studying theoretical concepts; that we wanted to deal with the current political situation in South Africa using newspapers and films; and that we wished to also reflect upon our own points of view and perspectives.

Our approach involves various perspectives and their change:

- \* changing the perspective of the discipline in an interdisciplinary approach, i.e. in this case of historical and literary studies;
- \* changing the perspective of the 'self' and the 'other', the European and African, or German and South African perspectives and underlying experiences;
- \* changing the teachers' and students' perspectives on the topic.

The first and third refer to the curricular and didactic approach, the second is an essential element in an approach to intercultural learning.

Following these ways of changing perspectives, I shall first outline some theoretical and didactic aspects of our approach with reference to the concrete course. Then the course structure and programme, the teaching material and teaching methods will be presented, to conclude with a short reflection of our experiences.

## **2 Underlying Theoretical and Pedagogical Concepts**

### **2.1 General Studies and the Interdisciplinary Pedagogical Approach**

The area of general education comprising the interdisciplinary courses and projects is an important curricular element at the Oberstufenkolleg as it is conceived to be

complementary and in contrast to the area of specialised education. The central ideas are that learning in this field should be holistic, problem oriented and reflective and relate one's own experience or questions to the respective topic or problem. It should involve learning by going beyond the boundaries of one discipline, changing the perspective of the discipline and reflecting this process and the different approaches involved. The students in these courses are a mixed group also as for their majors and this should further their experience that complex problems can only be tackled by the co-operation of different disciplines and people. These courses also teach basic skills and abilities—like reading strategies, text interpretation, analysis of sources, studying skills, differentiation and critical thinking etc. They should prepare for studying at the university but also for life in society.

According to this concept of general studies we started off from the complex phenomenon, i.e. the fact that Shaka is being referred to and plays a certain role in present day politics in South Africa and the question what this means—in South Africa and for us. We did this by showing a film of a German TV-series 'African Kings' of 1996 with the characteristic title 'The Lion of the Zulu' that dealt with the revival of Zulu culture today, with Shaka, King Zwelithini, South African politics etc. It raised many questions on the basis of which we developed the need to look behind the clichés—e.g. of Zulu warriors—and to approach the topic from different angles and disciplines: politics, literature and culture, and history. We changed the perspective of the discipline, i.e. contrasted the different concepts, methods and insights of literary and historical studies when we dealt with literary text and historical sources and made students aware of differences, but also of similarities, and reflected what we did and learnt. For example we carried out literary interpretation and looked at the aesthetic qualities of Thomas Mofolo's novel 'Chaka Zulu' (e.g. characterisation, narrative strategies, imagery, language, form etc.) and of Zulu praise poems and on the other hand analysed sources like the diary of H.F. Fynn about his meeting with Shaka, dealt with Zulu praise poems as source of oral history, or looked at history books. Texts like Ritter's biography of Shaka illustrated that there is often no clear distinction between history and fiction.

On this basis we could show the relevance of theoretical concepts. The discourse on the construction of nations, the creation and formation of ethnicity and ethnic identity (Elwert 1989) and on the invention of tradition (Ranger 1983) was both background and explicit topic in our course, also in reference to the colonial and apartheid history of South Africa (Kößler 1991). We found it very exciting to include aspects of the ongoing research and the academic and political debate in South Africa which we try to follow as far as our possibilities allow (e.g. Hamilton 1995; 1998). However, as knowledge of English is limited for a number of our students, we cannot include too many and too difficult texts in English.

The learner orientation of the general studies concept meant that we started off the Shaka-course by stimulating the students to communicate and reflect their associations and questions with regard to South Africa—most of them had not heard of Shaka before<sup>3</sup>. We did this by letting them choose a postcard or photo as a stimulus. This was also a way for the group (of 24 students) of getting to know each other which is an important basis for this type of course. The approach also means that to a certain extent there should be possibility and space for students to include their interests and participate in making the programme of the course, thus changing from the teachers' to the students' perspective and planning. For example it was some students' wish to include more of present day South African politics and we followed that suggestion by including more press clippings, films and current affairs topics. One requirement for passing the course is an oral and written contribution regarding a topic arising from the content of the course. Here some students also put forward their particular ideas and interest, e.g. one politically interested student wanted to read the autobiography of Nelson Mandela and make a presentation for the group. We discussed it with her and identified an aspect that fit the course topic; she finally gave a biographical survey and focused on the role of tradition and Xhosa identity in Nelson Mandela's youth.

## 2.2 Intercultural Learning

The approach of intercultural learning is another element that determined our course. I think it should always apply when dealing with 'other' cultures or societies. This may be the case when reading South African literature as German readers, but also when dealing with the topic of the identity of German-Turkish youth in German society. It involves that not only aspects of the 'other' culture and society are dealt with, but also the respective aspects of one's own or familiar culture. Thus, it means a change of perspective and the challenge to treat the topic as it represents oneself and 'the other'. Furthermore, when dealing with another culture and society, the basis of one's reception is to be reflected, i.e. one's own historical, political, social, personal and gender position and linked to all this, one's language, values, judgements and ideas, that which is 'normal'. This cultural self-reflection in our context is a way of becoming aware of eurocentric perspectives, of dealing with the colonial gaze or neo-colonial attitudes, shaking prejudices and stereotypes or essentialised ideas of culture.

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<sup>3</sup> In South African context, I would begin by asking for everybody's associations regarding Shaka. In fact, I did this when presenting this paper at UDW and it revealed an interesting variety of views and perspectives which one has to take into account and can refer to during the course.

The approach meant that we dealt with the problem of European or German terms applied to African history, e.g. the terms 'Stamm'/'tribe', 'king' and 'state', their eurocentrism, and the colonial and racist connotations they may carry (Harding 1994). We reflected the colonial and racist images carried by the German word 'Häuptling' and decided for the English term 'chief'; we wondered if the term 'nkosi' for Shaka would not be better than 'king'; and looked for an alternative to the term 'Stamm' that carried both the idea of essentialism and the connotation of primitivity when applied to Africa.

It also meant reflecting upon stereotypes and one's own reactions and evaluations when watching the film about Zulu culture, Zulu warriors, the strong reference to tradition and Shaka, or when reading about violence in KwaZulu/Natal. At a later point—also on the basis of more knowledge about the historical and political context—we could relate such phenomena to the concept of invention of tradition and culture, to the political use of cultural symbols and traditions and show that these are general phenomena and 'modern' processes. We looked for an example from the German context to show similar (although also very different) processes and chose the figure of the Germanic warrior Arminius whose statue can be seen in the Teutoburg Forest near the city of Bielefeld where we live. In history we learn that Arminius beat the Romans under their commander Varus in the year 9 A.D.—i.e. according to Tacitus—and that this liberated the Germans from Roman colonialism. In the nineteenth century when there was a national movement for a unified German national state, the figure of Arminius became an important symbol of German nationalism and strength and after a long time (more than 40 years) of preparation and mobilisation, the huge Arminius statue was erected in 1875 in the presence of the Emperor Wilhelm I—after the German national state had been founded in 1871 (Böhning 1985). What is interesting is that the Arminius of the nineteenth century has his sword lifted and directed to the south west against the then 'hereditary enemy', Napoleon and the French. Arminius, as symbol of nineteenth century nationalism, has been depicted in art and in literature, e.g. in a nationalist drama of Kleist, in poetry and popular songs. Heinrich Heine wrote a very ironic and anti-nationalist poem in 1844. It is not surprising that during national socialism in Germany, the fascists used the Arminius symbol for their own nationalist, racist and warfare purposes. After 1945 it no longer had this point of reference or importance, except for neo-nazi groups who still take the statue as their place of assembly and for chauvinist reference. In general, these days—to tell the end or, better, the present state of the story—the Arminius statue fortunately is only a tourist attraction and recently Arminius got dressed in a huge football shirt in order to celebrate the promotion of the local football team called Arminia Bielefeld into the first league and to boost local tourism and a local brewery.

In our course we referred to Arminius, to the way he was constructed and made use of as a mythical construction and symbol for German nationalism in different times. We did not do this in detail, however. It will be worthwhile next time and perhaps as a digression, we shall make a trip to the statue, to intensify the experience how 'the other' (Shaka) can help to open or sharpen one's eye for one's own history and political processes. Despite all this, it is obvious that the case of Shaka as a political and cultural metaphor, the great variety of representations even during his lifetime and after, is certainly much more complex and of different relevance for the South African history and society than the Arminius case. Of course, such a change of perspective to our own history implying some comparison has to be careful and conscious of the trap of eurocentrism and it needs the basis of certain theoretical concepts—as mentioned above.

### 2.3 Pedagogical Approach

As a third point I want to underline elements of our pedagogical approach that are closely linked to the two concepts of general or interdisciplinary studies and intercultural learning. Central aspects like learner and problem orientation, inclusion of students' interests and perspectives, reflection of one's own cultural background, values and images, and reactions to the 'other' have already been mentioned. The concept of 'theme-centred interaction' developed by Ruth Cohn (1975) implies further changes of perspective and proved to be a very fruitful pedagogical basis for our purposes. It is based on the so-called 'triangle' of 'I', 'We' (the group) and 'It' (the subject matter resp. a certain question) that is surrounded by 'the globe'—the context of society etc. Contrary to traditional approaches that are centred on the subject matter only (as it is often the case at university) or more recent pedagogical approaches that are student oriented, it emphasises that all three dimensions are important and need to be balanced in the pedagogical situation. This means that one has to focus on the interaction of the individual and the subject matter, i.e. the topic, theme or text, and also on the interaction of the group as a group, and how the group articulates with the subject matter.

We did this by applying various methods, e.g. once when we needed some feedback regarding the course and wanted to stimulate reflection on everybody's participation and attitude, we had everybody position him- or herself in relation, i.e. in respective distance, to the course reader that was lying on the floor in the centre. This showed quite a variety of involvement and was revealing for the group. In addition we also had a 'round' in which everybody briefly commented on the question: 'How is my participation in this course? What are the reasons?' Or, before focusing on the reception and interpretation of literature (also in contrast to historical texts) we had the students discuss in small groups for a short while the question 'Do I

read literature/fiction? Why or why not?' and had a discussion in the plenary about reasons for reading literature, its effects etc. which prepared the ground for literary studies.

Altogether we tried to apply and experiment with a variety of methods that can organise and facilitate the learning process, students' activity, personal participation and creativity, reflection and discussion, e.g. by group work, role play, creative tasks. Team teaching is not necessary for all that, but of course, an advantage not only for ideas and variation, but also for observation, reflection and evaluation of processes and lessons.

### **3 The Course: Programme, Teaching Material and Methods**

Roughly five different phases resp. topics can be distinguished: the current political situation in South Africa, literary representations of Shaka, historical constructions of Shaka, Zulu praise poetry as literary text and historical source and finally theoretical concepts of invention of tradition and creation of identities<sup>4</sup>. Although we had fixed this course programme and prepared the course reader with central texts, we were flexible in the process of teaching and learning, added or left out certain aspects and material.

#### **3.1 Introduction and Current Political Situation in South Africa**

After introducing our course concept to the students and dealing with the students' associations as mentioned above, we showed and discussed the TV-film 'The Lion of the Zulu' as a first introduction to Shaka, his representations and his relevance for the past and present of South Africa, e.g. for Inkatha. We tried to build up the background by means of basic information on South Africa ('From apartheid to democracy') and various newspaper articles that gave an impression of the political situation in September 1996 (violence in KwaZulu/Natal, constitution). As it became obvious that most students had very little knowledge about South Africa further information and illustration regarding apartheid and current affairs were necessary in the course of the programme (e.g. the film 'Cry for Freedom', up-to-date newspaper clippings).

#### **3.2 Literary Representations of Shaka**

To convey a first impression of a traditional African literary text and create one different from the academic or school atmosphere, we listened to some music of Ladysmith Black Mambaza and created a kind of story telling situation: I read the first three chapters of Thomas Mofolo's novel *Chaka Zulu* (1988) to the group. When

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<sup>4</sup> See the end of the article for the outline.

reflecting what was unfamiliar or striking for them, students mentioned e.g. the exotic names, the language, the way of telling, which was a good starting point.

In the following lesson we dealt with the different pieces of information on the author and his work as given in entries of encyclopaedias and on blurbs. It struck us, for example, and led to discussions on eurocentric evaluations that three of the four short texts emphasised Mofolo's 'simple language'. The next step was a practical introduction to literary interpretation and its application to chapter four of the novel: narrative perspective and strategies, plot, characterisation, language, elements of oral tradition, cultural context, effects on the reader. The epilogue of the translator dealing with Mofolo's language, characteristic elements of African oral tradition and the difficulties of translation from Sesotho to German (in particular the imagery, proverbs, sentence structure, repetition, onomatopoeia) was very productive for intercultural reflection. In the following lessons small groups of students read and interpreted different chapters of the novel applying what they had learnt and presented their results to the plenary.

At the beginning of the literature section we had suggested topics for the students' individual contributions, so that the following topics were dealt with on the basis of student input: historical context and biography of Thomas Mofolo and the history of his novel *Chaka Zulu*, which is interesting, as the author had to alter it and that it took 18 years to get published by the missionary publishing house—there one wonders how different comments and opinions were censured or not. There is the German edition of *Chaka Zulu* of 1953, which was a translation of the shortened and 'smoothened' English version for European readers of 1949, and the new German edition of 1988 translated directly from Sesotho. Thus, one topic was the comparison of the passage on Shaka's murder of his love, Noliwe, in the shortened and distorted version of 1953 and in the 1988 edition<sup>5</sup>. Other topics were a comparison of the passage on Shaka's mother Nandi's death as told in Mofolo and Ritter's *Shaka* biography (in the former, Shaka kills and in the latter he does not kill his mother), the author Rider Haggard and Shaka's death in his romance *Nada the Lily*, the representation of Shaka and the beautiful black Noliwe in Leopold Senghor's dramatic poem *Tschaka* of 1956 written in the tradition of *négritude*<sup>6</sup>. We compared

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<sup>5</sup> The 1953 edition is not only considerably shorter; there is also a change of style, e.g. images are left out, like 'he swallowed the stone' (when Shaka decided to follow Isanusi's advice to kill Noliwe).

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful for the critical questions which were raised when I presented my paper at UDW—e.g. why we had not included anything from Masisi Kunene's, *Emperor Shaka the Great*. I agree that it is important to include this perspective and its literary representation, and, having got hold of the text in the meantime, we shall use it too in our next course.



different interpretations and evaluations of Mofolo's novel and this raised questions like: Does the novel represent or subvert the colonial/missionary discourse? Does it uphold Christian moral values or the importance of African culture? It was the ambiguity of Mofolo's novel in these respects that was particularly interesting and stimulating.

Interwoven with these contributions we continued reading and interpreting passages of the novel, discussed different approaches to literary studies and the question of reception. The variety of literary representations and constructions of Shaka ranging from Mofolo's ambiguous Shaka figure that develops from good to evil, from a young man who was wronged to a ruthless, immoral ruler, up to Senghor's Shaka as fighter against oppression and symbol of African liberation, led us to the importance of the historical, political and personal context of the author and the functions of literary construction.

### 3.3 Historical Constructions of Shaka

A text 'Rewriting of history in South Africa' (*Le Monde Diplomatique* October 1996) that discusses the problem of different perspectives on history and in textbooks in the new South Africa introduced our historical part.

We took care to use besides European or German authors (e.g. Fisch 1990) as many texts written by authors from Southern Africa as possible. Thus we introduced a southern African perspective on 'Mfecane and Shaka' by texts from the Zimbabwean history textbook 'African Heritage' (Sibanda et al. 1982). In groups, students read and translated some passages, e.g. historical change, Shaka the great military leader. We had luckily (and by chance) got hold of some South African teaching material 'Teaching the Mfecane' (History Methodology group at Witwatersrand University 1995). We included some of it in our reader, as it presents the concept and concrete material regarding the different constructions of Shaka in a stimulating way: E.g. it asks 'What did Shaka look like?' and answers it by different sources giving contradictory information, e.g. Shaka was not tall or rather tall, dark or light in complexion etc. With regard to the topic 'market forces and state formation' we successfully took up the suggestion to make a role play of barter trade involving three groups that had either cattle, ivory or weapons and thus different chances in trade. In a next step we dealt with 'causes of change in Nguni society and Mfecane', starting with the different theories presented in a recent Zimbabwean textbook (Barnes et al. 1993)—the theory of white influence, great-men-theory, influence of trade, population growth, which made us conclude that there is a complexity and interplay of causes. We taught about the current debate in South Africa initiated by Cobbing—the influence of slave trade vs. internally induced change—on the basis of short excerpts of three positions (Cobbing 1988; Eldridge 1992; Hamilton 1992) and various maps. This made the students see and experience

historical research as an ongoing process that is determined by different theories and ideologies and construction of historical figures.

A role play should consolidate and apply what had been learnt: we imagined an academic conference; some students acted as researchers who put forward their position on the Mfecane after having prepared for it in group, so that an argument and lively debate developed.

Next we looked more closely at the analysis and the problem of interpretation of primary and secondary historical sources referring to concrete examples that dealt with Shaka, as e.g. Ritter, Bryant, and in particular H.F. Fynn's diary of which we read an extract<sup>7</sup>. It was revealing to learn that the white traders' representation of Shaka changed and depended on their interest, e.g. when they wanted Britain to get involved in Natal they portrayed Shaka as an aggressive brutal ruler, whereas before he was said to be a wise diplomat.

As a kind of footnote I want to mention an interesting text in this respect<sup>8</sup>. In 1929 the German missionary Wilhelm von Fintel of the Hermannsburg mission in Empangweni wrote a booklet on Shaka with the title 'Tschaka der große Zulukoenig' for the Germans at home to make them continue their support of the missionary efforts. To briefly summarise his conclusion: The Zulu lived an idle life full of vice and without moral, then Shaka came and changed his people, establishing moral and discipline, as if he was called by God to act as a reformer to prepare his people for times to come when they would receive the evangelium. For this to happen, however, God had to destroy the Zulu kingdom so that Christ's throne could be erected. Fintel concludes that the missionaries' work to change Shaka's kingdom into Christ's kingdom is still going on. At first this seemed to me an absurd interpretation or a wild adaptation of the mission's ideology to the circumstances. On second thought, however, I wonder if it is not a theological parallel to Shepstone's modelling of the colonial government in Zululand—in a distorted way—on structures of Shaka's rule (see Hamilton 1998:72ff.) In any case, this can serve as illustrative material for a certain kind of historical construction and ideological perspective in our next Shaka-course.

All along in the history section, there were students contributions or inputs dealing with: history and politics of the ANC and Inkatha, Nelson Mandela's biography, South Africa at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Mfecane and the Great Trek, traditional Zulu culture, the question of land in the history of South

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<sup>7</sup> This is a good example illustrating the problems related to source material: the diary had been reconstructed and not only rewritten by Fynn himself, but has been used as a source and point of reference by many historians.

<sup>8</sup> I discovered this text at the Killie Campbell library in Durban a few days before presenting this paper.

Africa. We concluded the history part by reflecting and contrasting the different emphases and methods of literary and historical studies.

At this point of the course the students had to write an assignment of 90 minutes to apply what they had learnt about literary interpretation and historical analysis<sup>9</sup>.

### 3.4 Zulu Praise Poetry—Literary Text and Historical Source

Our aim was to show the quality of a text that requires the interaction of different disciplines for its interpretation, i.e. history, social anthropology and literary studies, and that only by relating the aesthetic, cultural, social and historical aspects to each other, fuller understanding can be achieved.

As most students knew little about interpreting poetry and its effects, we first taught or revised some basics (e.g. rhythm, metre, alliteration, anapher, imagery, parallelism etc.) using a German example, a poem of Heinrich Heine. Then we chose one passage of Shaka's praise poem (collected by James Stuart, translated by Cope 1968) and demonstrated to the students some aspects of a literary interpretation and a historical analysis and how they complement each other—as far as we could we used the English version and for some formal elements also the Zulu original. A practical exercise intensified the poetic and intercultural 'encounter': In small groups the students translated some more extracts from Shaka's and Senzangakhona's praise poems from English into German, struggling to understand the message, the praises and allusions or criticism, and to find poetic German equivalents for images, for the rhythm, the alliterations etc.<sup>10</sup>. They also realised that despite the annotations, a lot remained incomprehensible, vague and strange to us and that much historical, linguistic, and aesthetic knowledge is needed to understand more, but also that our intercultural understanding has its limits.

A contribution of two students dealt with oral tradition, the context and function of Zulu praise poems, *izibongo*, and looked at the praise poems in Mofolo's novel (in German translation). At the end, they asked everybody in the group

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<sup>9</sup> It had two parts: a literary interpretation of a passage from Thomas Mofolo's novel and an analysis of a passage on Shaka taken from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Passing this assignment, an oral and written presentation of one topic in the course and regular attendance were the requirements for students to pass the course. (The Oberstufenkolleg has a pass/fail system of evaluation; marks are only given in the final examination and some preceding examination assignments.)

<sup>10</sup> E.g. the powerful repetition that conveys the numerous battles: 'Bird that eats others, As it was still eating others it destroyed some more, Still eating it destroyed others..'; criticism like 'the kicking of this beast puzzles me'.

(including us teachers) to show what we have learnt by writing a short praise poem on somebody or something. This creative task proved to be very productive, not only because of the fun we had and the interesting results presented to the plenary, but also because the active production and use of aesthetic elements intensified the understanding of the genre and its effect and the involvement with 'the other'.

### 3.5 Theoretical Concepts: Invention of Tradition and Creation of Ethnic and National Identity

We dealt with theoretical concepts—only briefly, however—that explain the formation of ethnic and national groups and identities and that criticise essentialist positions. This helped to explain and understand the concrete material, i.e. the different constructions and representations of Shaka and their respective political and ideological functions in society. Leading back to questions regarding present day South Africa that were raised at the beginning of the course, we read and discussed a theory-based article (in German) that analysed the processes of inventing tradition with reference to the question of national identity of the 'Zulu' and 'Xhosa' (Kößler 1991) during colonial and apartheid times. Students found the text and the complex subject matter quite difficult to understand. As this was at the end of the course, we unfortunately had too little time left to deal with these theoretical, historical and political aspects more thoroughly and also the present situation in South Africa as for nation building and ethnic identity. This would require a follow-up course. I think and hope, however, that if there are—for both students and teachers—some puzzling and open questions triggered by the 'Shaka-topic' this will also have a productive result.

## 4 Conclusion

'Shaka' is a difficult and complex topic for a course that is not a graduate or research seminar, but for most students an introduction to South Africa, South African literature and history. That is why we had a broad approach with a great variety of material and often could not treat subject materials in depth. Because the Shaka-topic is very 'far away' for the students and it is difficult to find a subjective or personal anchor, we used many different methods to activate the students and motivate them for their learning process. Especially the creative tasks, role plays and translation tasks proved to be successful.

Our central text for the start, Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka Zulu*, is also not easy, as it leads into a strange, unfamiliar and old world—somehow more difficult for the students than South African fiction of the present—, but most students liked reading it and quite a number of them got fascinated by the novel: by Shaka's development,

by Isanusi, by the language. Just because the Shaka-topic is 'far away', our experience showed that literature is a good way to lead into it, to create a subjective and emotional link and we concluded that in any case, the literary approach should come before the historical. Showing some of the film 'Shaka Zulu' by Bill Faure—which was not available to us then—would not only be interesting for the question of cultural constructions and intercultural reflection but also play a motivating and personally activating role in creating controversial discussions. For creating personal connection and motivation, it was also important that we repeatedly related the topic to eurocentric and colonial images as well as to current political relevance. The intercultural change of perspective—e.g. when reflecting stereotypes, eurocentric terms, German national symbols—also meant coming closer to the topic, revealing its complexities and furthering the process of understanding.

Students evaluated as positive that their ideas and suggestions were taken up and discussions and activities were stimulated, i.e. they appreciated the changes of perspective to the 'I' and to the group that I mentioned above. A good indicator is also that all students remained in the course up to the end.

Dealing with literature before the historical approach meant still another advantage: moving from literary constructions of Shaka to the historical Shakas made the students discover that there is construction in history, too. The change of perspective of the discipline was thus revealing for them and facilitated understanding. Using methods of both literary and historical studies when we dealt with the praise poems, provided the experience that, going beyond one discipline or specialisation, the process and quality of understanding is furthered and enhanced. For us teachers the interdisciplinary change of perspective was very stimulating and enriching. Team teaching also enabled us to have different perspectives in the lesson, because each time one of us was mainly responsible and acting, the other more observing and reflecting, which was a good basis for evaluating the teaching process. Team teaching also made us more daring in experimenting with teaching methods. But of course, it is also possible—and the normal case—to teach such a course on one's own.

Often the students had the active part which made the lesson lively and reduced our double dominance. However, a great number of oral contributions by students can also be a difficulty—if the contributions are poor. Therefore, especially with the younger students, a lot of help was required to prepare.

We were tempted to add more and more material and aspects to do justice to the complexity of the topic. This cannot be the solution, however. On the contrary, we have to be very careful not to overdo it—especially because we find more and more interesting material. Rather to confuse by abundance, one would need to select carefully and keep the balance—between all the concrete and interesting facets, the exemplary and the theoretical.

It is difficult to draw conclusions that look beyond the assignments, the course discussions and the feedback and know what the students actually learnt and understood and how far they got involved with South African topics. Sometimes we can see some effects, e.g. when students write exam papers on Zulu praise poetry or choose literary representations of Shaka as a topic for their final exam at the end of their four years at the Oberstufenkolleg<sup>11</sup>.

To conclude: The three different kinds of changing the perspective—interdisciplinary, intercultural and pedagogical—and a variety of teaching methods helped to open up the far away and complex Shaka-topic and to gain insight that could not have been gained otherwise. Perhaps some of this may also be of interest for teaching at the university and for training future teachers.

Oberstufenkolleg Bielefeld  
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## Course Outline

### **WS 1996 Course in General Education/Cultures and Histories**

**Gisela Feurle/Uwe Horst**

#### **South Africa and Shaka Zulu—Literature and History**

##### **Course structure**

#### **1. Introduction and current political situation in South Africa**

- personal reflection
- film 'The Lion of the Zulu'
- basic information on South Africa; slides
- newspaper articles: politics in South Africa

(continuous students' contributions/inputs integrated in the course topics)

#### **2. Literary representations of Shaka**

- Thomas Mofolo: *Chaka Zulu*
- literary interpretation
- E.A. Ritter, *Shaka*; Rider Haggard, *Nada the Lily*; Leopold Senghor, *Tschaka*;
- different interpretations of Mofolo
- literature and literary studies

(feedback to the course and reflection)

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<sup>11</sup> Four students of this course took part in our study trip to South Africa (to Kwa Zulu-Natal and in particular Pietermaritzburg) in 1998.

### 3. Historical Constructions of Shaka

- current affairs/political history and situation
- South Africa in the 19th century
- Shaka and the Mfecane (Zimbabwe)
- teaching the Mfecane (South Africa)
- 'Cobbing debate' on the Mfecane
- historical sources (example H.F. Fynn)
- Eurocentrism of terminology

(assignment—90 min.: analysis of a literary and a historical text)

### 4. Zulu Praise Poetry—Literary Text and Historical Source

- oral tradition and Zulu praise poetry
- Shaka praise poem: literary and historical interpretation

### 5. Theoretical Concepts: Invention of Tradition and Creation of National and Ethnic Identities

- theoretical concepts
- Arminius statue: symbol for German nationalism
- South Africa: example Zulu

(feedback and evaluation of course)

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