

# Visionary Commitment in Mazisi Kunene's *Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*

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I  
MAZISI Kunene is a visionary poet. His visionary commitment entails the utilisation of resources from the Zulu cultural matrix and Zulu oral tradition as a basis for his work. His poetry draws its deepest meanings from Zulu cultural references and allusions while at the same time concerning itself with contemporary issues. This article sets out to examine Kunene's visionary commitment as manifested in his book: *Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*. It situates Kunene's visionary outlook within the arguments raised by Soyinka in his article: *Cross Currents: The New African after Cultural Encounters* and examines to what extent these arguments are relevant to Kunene's work.

Kunene has written many short poems. His first published volume was *Zulu Poems* (1970). This volume was banned in South Africa for many years. He has published two epic poems: *Emperor Shaka the Great* (1979) and *Anthem of the Decades* (1981). He has also published *Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain* (1982), which is the subject of this article.

Kunene draws on Zulu culture and oral tradition which inform his writing. The main influences are the praise poem, the dirge and the war song. He uses images and symbols from Zulu myth and culture to convey his message. This assertion is corroborated by various critics. Sesay (1988:61), for instance, observes that Kunene,

... writes poetry that is embedded in Zulu tradition and derives many of its forms and references from Zulu oral tradition.

Goodwin (1982:173) makes a similar observation about Kunene's poetry.

The world of discourse of his poems is a Zulu one, with the philosophy, imagery and the rhetoric relying on the oral tradition of Zulu poetry.

Ogundele (1992:34) echoes the assertions made by both Sesay and Goodwin above:

Mazisi Kunene draws upon African oral traditions in general and Zulu oral tradition in particular and its thought and imaginative systems.

Dathorne (1975:216) argues that Zulu philosophy and cosmology feature prominently in Kunene's work in general and in *Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain* in particular.

Here he is concerned with depicting Zulu concepts of the significance of life and the universe. Through the personification of ideas, Kunene the traditional poet attempts to dramatise the Zulu concept of the force at work in the universe.

The various critics quoted above corroborate the central assumption of this article, that although the poetry in this volume is written poetry, the overarching modes of thought and imagination that shaped it are oral.

## II

Some of the arguments I am advancing about Kunene's poetry are raised by Wole Soyinka in an article entitled 'Cross Currents: The New African after Cultural Encounters'. In this article, Soyinka stresses the importance of oral tradition as a viable resource for the contemporary African artist to draw from. He also stresses the need for the contemporary writer to,

imaginatively transform those elements that render a society unique in its own being, with potential for its progressive social transformation (Soyinka 1982:52).

Originally written in Zulu and later translated into English by Ndaba, the translator felt unable to capture the full resonance of the oral poetic techniques—in alliteration and assonance in particular—apart from the challenge to find conceptual equivalencies in English. This is a particular problem when one attempts to translate poetry. Schopenhauer (in Schulte & Biguenet 1992:4,33) for example said:

Poems cannot be translated, they can only be rewritten, which is always an ambiguous undertaking .... [and] Poems cannot be translated; they can only be transposed, and that is always awkward.

Visionary commitment in Kunene's poetry in *Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain* centres around the utilisation of Zulu culture and oral tradition for self-retrieval. His concerns draw their deepest meanings from Zulu oral tradition and culture. In the introduction to this volume, Kunene (1982:xvi) posits that art,

... must draw its deepest meanings from the high ethical ideals that have guided past generations (the ancestors). Yet it should take into account the goals and directions of present society.

In his poetry, Kunene uses Zulu oral tradition to address present-day problems and to point the way towards transformation of contemporary society. An instance of this can be found in the poem, 'Encounter with the Ancestors'.

Before considering the concerns of this poem, it is essential to understand the significance and symbolism of ancestors in Zulu tradition. Ancestors represent the past. Since, by virtue of their actions the ancestors have approximated the social ideals, they are regarded in Zulu tradition as individuals who are deserving of a higher order of being. This is seen in their association with the mountain, symbolising their heightened social status. Their actions and contributions, in a collective sense, constitute human initiative and social progress. They have established standards of moral excellence which succeeding generations should emulate.

In 'Encounter with the Ancestors', Kunene suggests that the ancestors are embodiments of traditional culture and are a potential source of direction for contemporary society. As leader of thought in society, the poet should utilise the resources of traditional culture as embodied in the ancestors, for social transformation.

We must follow the direction of their little finger  
Where begins the story, the beginning of seeing ...  
(Kunene 1982:37).

These lines suggest that the ancestors are the origin of community, its very foundation—'where begins the story'. Ancestors are, therefore, a source of direction and self-retrieval. The self which is to be retrieved is that self which forms part of this multi-form cultural story of which one is part. Through the ancestors, the community becomes aware of its roots, its direction and its goals—'the beginning of seeing'.

The motivation for this coming-to-see and of retrieving the self, in the process of how the poet utilises the resources of traditional African culture, is for social transformation and social reform. This is explicitly suggested in the following lines:

Our guide through the desert must sing then  
making our minds break the web of light  
To create a new path of wisdom ...  
(Kunene 1982:37).

As leader of thought in society or 'our guide through the desert', the poet must be the catalyst for social enlightenment and cultural consciousness. The poet

must 'break the web of light' through his/ her creative imagination and facilitate social transformation. In this way, the poet fulfils his/ her purpose: 'to create a new path of wisdom'. This poem's concerns include the creation or formulation of a new cultural personality who is to be the product of this visionary outlook which combines the ancestral with the path to be found in the midst of contemporary challenges. This is a personality who is integrated and rooted in his/ her culture—an unalienated personality, a culture-secured personality.

The child who is born from this vision  
shall be the envy of her age  
she must plant the first season of a million years  
(Kunene 1982:37).

This extract emphasises the significance of oral tradition in bringing about social progress for contemporary and future generations. The creation of the 'new African' will lead to the emergence of other such personalities. This poem, therefore, puts forward a case for African culture as a potential catalyst for social transformation.

'Encounter with the Ancestors' is a metaphor for cultural self-retrieval and the birth of a new, enlightened personality. This metaphor is used by Kunene to carry across his message of the integration of the 'new African' personality into his/ her own culture. Soyinka (1982:57) voices a similar concern.

... not only to create a 'new African' but to root him (sic) in his (sic) own culture.

### III

Kunene's vision reveals a unique rootedness in traditional Zulu mythology. He utilises resources from the Zulu cultural matrix for his imaginative creativity. While drawing on the myths as sources for his imagination, Kunene simultaneously renews the myths of the Zulu oral tradition in the service of cultural regeneration and cultural awareness. This is evident in the poem, 'A Vision of Nomkhulbulwane'. In this poem we see the visionary utilisation of the oral traditional mythic symbolism of Nomkhulbulwane as a potential force for the rechannelling of the society's psychic energies towards cultural regeneration and social transformation. Kunene (1981:xxvi) explains the symbolic significance of Nomkhulbulwane. Nomkhulbulwane is the daughter of God and a manifestation of God's creative purpose. She is also regarded as the goddess of balance between the spiritual and the physical. She manifests herself in a variety of ways, one of which is through the rainbow. The rainbow symbolises the restoration of order after destructive tropical storms.

'A Vision of Nomkhubulwane' is an evocation of the traditional celebratory performance of the festival of Nomkhubulwane. The celebration of this festival leads to people's cultural awareness and this brings the dream of cultural regeneration to fruition.

Voices rise in the horizon, people are shouting  
They bring the beautiful dream to our earth  
(Kunene 1982:18).

Another example of the evocation of the oral traditional mythic symbolism of the goddess Nomkhubulwane in a visionary setting is in the poem, 'A Meeting with Vilakazi, the great Zulu Poet'. In this poem, Vilakazi is portrayed in a dramatic manner, reviving traditional culture, thus leading society towards cultural awareness. Nomkhubulwane is used in this poem in a symbolic redirection of society towards cultural renewal and self-retrieval. Vilakazi, the poet, is portrayed in the poem as a catalyst bringing about this process of cultural consciousness and cultural regeneration. This leads to ecstatic memories of traditional life before the encounter with other cultures. There are intimations of self-discovery and expressions of joy and pride in African culture. As a result of his visionary meeting with Vilakazi, Kunene seems to have been transformed, in a metaphorical sense, into a new personality rooted into a culturally secure society. The symbolic redemption envisioned in this poem, to borrow Soyinka's (1982:59) words, seems

to spring from a cultural matrix of forces which alone can confront the machinery of oppression.

The concerns of this poem, discussed above, are suggested in the following lines:

I heard the drum beat behind your footsteps  
And the children of the south began to sing  
They walked on the ancient path of the goddess Nomkhubulwane  
And the old dance arena was filled with festival crowds  
Your great songs echoed to the accompaniment of the festival horn  
(Kunene 1982:56)

Here, Vilakazi is portrayed as reviving the ancient mythic symbol, Nomkhubulwane. This is suggested in his metaphorical and ritualistic walk 'on the ancient path of the goddess Nomkhubulwane'.

Another example where Kunene uses oral traditional symbols to convey his message is in the poem, 'Phakeni's Farewell'. This poem, written in epic style, is a

tribute to 'one of South Africa's greatest political leaders', Robert Resha. Kunene employs the ritualistic celebratory mode to recreate the heroic deeds of Phakeni (Robert Resha) in a communal ceremony. In the following extract, the crowd is portrayed in a ritualistic posture of reverence.

The round calabash overflows with beer  
Crowds assemble before their circular place

...

She kneels and tells others to follow her gesture  
She takes out a barbed spear and points it to the sun  
Others who know her meanings raise their hands.

...

Suddenly, she puts a round grain basket before them  
With lips opened in awe and wonderment, they see:  
It's a pumpkin from the garden of Phakeni.  
(Kunene 1982:8f).

The pointing of a barbed spear to the sun is a gesture symbolising Phakeni's strength, courage and creative energy—the sun being a symbol of life and creativity). The 'pumpkin from the garden of Phakeni' symbolises the significant deeds of Phakeni which sustain and nourish the society. Phakeni has demonstrated his intense concern for humanity through his actions. He is also acting as the custodian of the myth.

These are they who sheltered the sacred truths  
Whose kindness made truth round and desirable  
Who laughed for all things in the universe  
(Kunene 1982:9).

Through his actions, Phakeni inspired people to undertake similar actions without fear:

The children of the earth were paralysed with fear  
Yet not Phakeni  
He strode to and fro  
He spoke as if to fire the crowds with courage

...

They made the fierce posture of battle  
(Kunene 1982:9)

Phakeni's deeds brought about hope of a new life:

Your young season was to come with green leaves  
(Kunene 1982:10).

People are filled with expectations of a new order. The 'rainbow' is a promise of new order after destructive forces. It is at the same time a creative force in the sense that it heralds another cycle of creation after destruction. The allusion to the African creation myth in the last line of the extract below accentuates the expectations of the rebirth of the human race.

We were to clear the pathway for the new season  
We were to wait for the sign of the rainbow  
You were the promise, you were to lead the festival  
You were to come with ceremonial spears  
To celebrate at the top of the hill,  
To celebrate the birth of the sacred twins  
(Kunene 1982:10).

The 'sacred twins' is an allusion to the twins who originated from the reed and started the human family according to a variation in the Zulu creation myth. Phakeni is, therefore, seen as a catalyst in the rebirth of the human race. The poem ends in a positive, apocalyptic tone giving hope of an end to fragmentation and the beginning of reunion, reintegration and self-retrieval in and of society.

The rediscovery of our clansman  
The long embrace, the tears of joy across the desert  
(Kunene 1982:11).

This poem, therefore, celebrates and promotes a heroic ideology amidst suffering. In Mazisi Kunene we hear the voice of the poet as a sage and a seer creating a vision of a future renewal of society out of the historically significant and heroic deeds of Phakeni (Robert Resha). He focuses, in epic style, on a hero of stature who is held up during the course of his heroic deeds as an inspiring example to the present generation.

#### IV

Kunene sees the role of literature as protesting against the infringement of the social ethos and advocating a preservation and perpetuation of specific social values from oral tradition which he believes, have a potential to transform society. This notion is reiterated by Barnett (1982:105):

Since he sees the role of literature as 'not merely to entertain but to teach social values and serious philosophical concepts', there is no question in Kunene's mind about the right of the poet to make his protest ... or write African resistance poems. Like the oral poet in pre-colonial times. Kunene sees it as his duty to uphold an unchanging set of values and attack those who would destroy it.

Kunene, therefore, taps Zulu oral tradition as a vehicle for expressing contemporary ideas and struggles. He uses elements from the Zulu oral tradition as resource for his visionary outlook. He has borrowed symbols and imagery from Zulu myth and culture to convey his message. It is absolutely necessary for the critic to understand Zulu oral tradition in order to understand how Kunene uses it to carry his message across. More importantly, however, is that Kunene shows that no rebirth can take place without a rootedness in tradition, myth and culture.

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