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“THE BIG CANVASS”: AN INTERVIEW WITH MAZISI KUNENE

Chukwuma Azuonye*

Introduction

One of the most outstanding poets of South Africa, Mazisi Kunene (1930-2006), wrote almost entirely in his native Zulu. But he also rendered his works into English for a wider African and international audience. Born in Durban (present day KwaZulu-Natal Province, on May 12, 1930, into one the major Zulu royal families whose members trace their ancestry to the great Zulu warrior-king of the 19th century, Shaka, he was educated at the University of Natal at Westville, Durban, where he obtained a B.A. degree in Zulu and History in 1956, and an M.A. in Zulu literature with a thesis entitled, “An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry Both Traditional and Modern” in 1959. Before proceeding to Britain in 1959 to continue his studies at the at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Kunene was actively involved in the black nationalist resistance against apartheid. He was forced to remain in London as the director of the London office of the African National Congress and as its UK and European representative, owing to the increasing racial tension in South Africa. Thus began his thirty-four year exile which lasted until 1994. While in London, he became involved with the South African United Front, serving as its director of education for a while. Returning to the ANC as its director of finance in 1972, Kunene kept faith with the organization throughout the remainder of his exile abroad.



From Britain, he relocated to the United States, serving as Director of African Studies at the University of Iowa and subsequently as a professor of African literature and languages at Stanford University and the University of California, Los Angeles. In 1994—four years after the emergence of black majority rule in 1990—he returned to South Africa where he worked as a Professor of Zulu in his *alma mater*, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, until his death in August 2006.

Kunene’s literary career began when he won a Bantu Literary Composition Award in 1956. Although he has always composed his poetry in Zulu, the poems in his first collection of verse,

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Zulu Poems (New York, 1970), were written in English. They however reflect the spirit and nuances of Zulu and, are to that extent, what the title proclaims them to be.



Kunene, published several articles on traditional African cosmology, and was internationally acclaimed for his epic recreations of Zulu historical and mythic legends. Of these, by far the best known is *Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic* (1979), in which he offers an image of the great Zulu king which is radical different from those available in missionary and colonialist sources. In Kunene’s recreation, Shaka emerges as a revolutionary and patriotic leader, a wise and innovative military genius, and a visionary nation-building, assassinated by visionless and corrupt kinsmen, in an act of betrayal which helped to turn the country over to the colonialist and apartheid stranglehold of the British and the Afrikaners, through which the formerly great Zulu nation and other black South African people have been robbed of their patrimony and dehumanized. *Emperor Shaka the Great* was followed by *Anthem of the Decades: A Zulu Epic Dedicated to the Women of Africa* (London, 1981) which is written in much the same vein as a pastiche of praises of the order of *izibongo*, but in this case mobilized towards the wider pan-African vision proclaimed in the sub-title. In his third major poetic work, *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain: Poems* (London, 1982), Kunene offers dramatic lyrics on diverse subjects, but with strong political undertones and invariably alluding to the malaise of racial tension and state terrorism in his native South Africa and the pains of exile, themes and tonalities which anticipate his most recent offerings.

In the present interview, recorded in his office, in July, 1996, during an NEH Summer-long Seminar on the Literature and Culture of the New South Africa in which I participated, Kunene reflects on the challenges of the New South Africa and offers some illuminating insights into the impetus behind his choice of the epic as a mode of communication, his interest in the African world view and cosmology, the variety of his writing and interests beyond the epics for which he was best known, and his vision of the commonalty of all African cultures. In this, as in his creative writings, Kunene emerges as a forceful and perspicacious communicator, a committed pan-African nationalist imbued with the highest ideals of the African consciousness movement as well as of Afrocentric ideology and historiography. But throughout the interview, he maintained a consistent level of humor in spite of the high and excellent seriousness of his message and occasional drift into pejorative language in response to opinions and views which he found intolerable. Appended to the interview is a surviving excerpt of his reflections on the relativism of colonialist historiographies from a longer statement which was recorded earlier, during a meeting in his office, with the entire NEH Summer Seminar Group.

Kunene passed on unexpectedly in Durban, on August 11, 2006.

The Interview

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: You were away in exile for nearly thirty years?

MAZISI KUNENE: Yes, thirty-four years.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: When did you come back?

MAZISI KUNENE: I don’t know the exact year. But I think it was two years ago.[†]

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: What’s your feeling about the New South Africa? Is it coming on as one had hoped? Are there any indications that real change will take place?

MAZISI KUNENE: You know, it is difficult to make a summary of the New South Africa. There are certain dramatic changes that have happened in relation to the past as we know it. The relationships, for instance, among different peoples of South Africa have changed. There are in the process of rectifying themselves. There’s not anymore the idea of master-servant relationship or mentality, because the Africans have lifted themselves out of the kind of loophole. There’s also a more relaxed relationship between Africans and whites, because they [the whites] have liberated themselves. Many of them—I’m sure—did not want to be trapped in the kind of the harsh regime of just being robbers in their relation to other people. It’s a very strange kind of life when someone just goes that way. Even for us, it is difficult. But we should be grateful for the concrete things that they did. But it is difficult to do that. Because it means that your life is pretty defined by some system, by somebody. Because you’re not yourself. Normally, human beings are not like that, especially African people. We’re in Africa, and it’s not our tradition to hate somebody because he is kind of silly, or because he’s of a different color, or because he is kind of childish, yes.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: So you’re somewhat optimistic?

MAZISI KUNENE: Well, I wouldn’t say optimistic, because I’m not in a position now to do so. I’m only optimistic as far as the process that we *are* engaged in. We are now in a position to shape our destiny, which is what we needed. We are now writing books. I can publish my own books now, although it’s not the same because it’s not financed. Publishing companies are still limited, Africans and so on. But we are now in a position to take initiatives in those directions. So, I wouldn’t say I’m optimistic. I am challenged. I feel challenged in the present. The battle’s now begun. It’s a different kind of battle. And to me, it’s a greater battle. But the physical battle is, of course, brutal but it is physical; it is limited. It’s not an intellectual battle. The intellectual battle is most profound, most serious, most challenging. I would say that we’re now in that intellectual battle.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: I’ve heard complaints that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a farce and that it tends to exclude whites—the audience tends to be black. In fact the one we attended in Pietermaritzburg seems to be so. And the discussions there—in Pietermaritzburg—tended to focus on the Inkatha atrocities....

MAZISI KUNENE: Let me put it this way...

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: So what’s the “Truth” of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

MAZISI KUNENE: Let me put it this way. Some people like to be sensational. They like slogans. They like to summarize things, because they cannot reason on a large scale, on a comprehensive scale, on a futuristic scope. So, as they do that, they make slogans like “It’s a farce. It’s a farce.” How can you say that it’s a farce when the framework—the machinery—is created to turn inside out the rotten bowels of a society—the brutalities that were meted out to the people here. That itself makes all claims of any kind of superiority, let alone moral superiority, null and void. Anybody who’s not moved—whether he’s white or green or blue—not moved or outraged by these scenes that are exposed in these forums—well, he is an idiot, he is a fool. What does he want? What does society do? “It’s Africans; mainly Africans.” Of course, the Africans are in the majority. Africans are the biggest victims here. Not the Europeans. It’s the Africans. The whole machinery was geared towards the persecution of the African population. The outrage in the denigration of the population—the physical bludgeoning of the African population, so I don’t know what they mean by that it is mainly about Africans. Of course we are in Africa and of course it is Africans that have been victimized, of course all the policies of apartheid were geared

[†] This puts the year of his return at 1994, since the interview was recorded in July 1996.

towards attacking and destroying the African physically and otherwise. I don't know what they're talking about. Those people—they must be a kind of pseudo-intellectuals who like to talk a lot of English and say, “This is mainly the conservatives...” They're not thinking. They think they're saying something clever, but they're not thinking. If they were thinking, they'd say, “It's not enough. It's not enough.” But they be out there and saying, “This should never have happened.”

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Do you think that the exposure of these atrocities that took place under apartheid, through these processes, is enough; or should there be punishment?

MAZISI KUNENE: Enough? How can I say whether it is enough or not? I mean, at this point I'm just really outraged. I'm horrified about these things that took place—Apartheid—the degree to which these people could become beasts, could become animals. Anybody who's got any sense would just be outraged about these things. Now, is it enough? Is it enough? We don't know. We don't know. We think—I think—that probably the next generation will decide on that, not this generation. This generation is just stating: This is what happened. Now, may be the next generation will say, No, it is not enough. Or it may just say, Never again. And if a society can say that with absolute conviction that it should not happen again, not just playing games, well then that society has to be respected. It has attained for itself the respect of its own self and defined its own goal. Is it enough? Where is such a person standing who says, Is it enough? Now, is he standing inside or outside? Who is he? Is he a judge? Or is he a creator of history? Is he a judge in the context of history in the future? As they say, “Is it enough?” “Was it enough?” That is the question they should be asking.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Let's get back to your writing. There is a lot of political implications even though on the surface people can read them as historical texts. But the refiguration of Shaka for example in *Emperor Shaka the Great* revalues representations that we find in other sources. Why did you choose the form of the epic for that? Is it a form that helps to articulate this fusion of history and political commentary?

MAZISI KUNENE: Well, first of all, it was not just that I was making a choice. The whole material lent itself to an epic statement, because it has combined all kinds of the sentiments, feelings, and the ideas that some people are very intelligent, some people are very foolish, some people are very physical, some people are very spiritual, some people are other things. In that whole canvass, you can see all these kinds of people. And you cannot just put that on a minuscule representation. You have to say....You have to develop character, you have to elaborate on events, you have to elaborate on stories, you have to create a narration, you have to create characters and so on. You have to make explanations. You have to explain also the contexts in which these things happen and that requires a big canvass. That requires elaboration. So now, I don't know what you mean by reevaluating the events.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Well, I mean, obviously the missionary representations of Shaka were different.

MAZISI KUNENE: Well, there're irrelevant to us. Because here we are in a position to reevaluate our own history in our own terms, in our own language, whether it is Kumalo writing an orchestral piece on Shaka or somebody else or the people in the past, but we were censored. The material was censored. The people who are talking about—who are writing about or creating, or said they were creating history are actually talking about themselves. Their own attitude. But that's the whole point. Talking about evaluations and so on, it has to be done by themselves. The English write their own history by themselves; the Germans write about it in the same way; the Chinese...All people write their own history. Missionaries who are they? Who are they? What are they talking about? Where do they come from? Are they Africans? Do they know anything about African ideologies and African philosophies, thoughts, ideas? Were they qualified even in their own countries? Were they historians? Were they trained as historians? Or were they just trained in their own attitudes? The same with me if I go to England. Well, I look and say, “O Gosh, these people are all kinds of things. I pick on all sensational aspects of them and that's for lack of a vision or understanding of how the society wanted to shape itself. So, all these elements.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: What were your influences. Obviously I see the elements of izibongo and all the other traditional elements. The traditional materials are very clear in your work; but the form of the epic itself, did you see your work as continuing a tradition that was there, or...?

MAZISI KUNENE: Of course there are many epics in Africa!

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Of course, I know. Like Sunjata, like Ozidi and so on and so forth. But did you see your work as similar to that of Lonrrhot in creating a national epic for the Zulu?

MAZISI KUNENE: No, I am not interested in creating a national epic for the Zulu. I am merely stating epic events in a form which is a big canvass. And it is not for the Zulu. It is for the African people so that they can see themselves in a canvass of their own heroism, their own capacity not to be afraid of death, because when a people are occupied, one of their greatest weaknesses is to be afraid of death. They don't want to fight because they are frightened of dying. But, you see, the challenge is for the people to say, I'm not afraid of death; I've got an idea; and I'm part of a big movement.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: I ask this question because two days ago we got a lecture from someone who teaches Zulu and one of the comments he made was that you write in a tradition that is not Zulu?

MAZISI KUNENE: A tradition?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: That is not Zulu,

MAZISI KUNENE: What is the meaning of that?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Well, I don't know.

MAZISI KUNENE: I write in a tradition that is not Zulu?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: For the younger generation. Maybe—he said—that you are in touch with an older tradition, but that your work is not recognized as belonging to a Zulu tradition?

MAZISI KUNENE: What is the meaning of this?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: The claim was made at our seminar [at Pietermaritzburg]

MAZISI KUNENE: What is the meaning of Zulu tradition? Some people want to create themselves—make themselves something, then they find Kunene—they hang on to Kunene. But Kunene is writing in Zulu. In what else is he writing? Kunene is writing in Zulu, Kunene is using the old form, of the story form, not the form that's supposed to be short story or just story form. Some stories are short, some are long. Kunene doesn't care. Now, if you are writing something down, already you're using a different kind of format. It can't be the same as when you are performing outside. We're not performing outside. And this is a different kind of context. I like those performing outside. It's a good idea. Let them perform outside. But we have in Africa, people of different methods of representing things. You can use that one, you can use writing, you can use painting and so on. So what's the idiot—that one saying—that here is not Zulu..What is Zulu? What kind of thing is that?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Well, I mean, I wondered at that. I just wanted to put it to you, because I thought that we you writing in Zulu and with traditional oral poetry reflected

MAZISI KUNENE: There is a different kind of style which you have to adopt in an oral performance. If I make an oral poem—unfortunately we don't have the time—but I can make an oral poem about the situation. I can an oral poem about the situation. But if I turn that context into writing, then it is a different format. I'm using a different format. The same with if I were to paint something, I wouldn't now say I am painting Zulu. Lots of idiots; you are meeting a lot of fools. That's the trouble.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: You're also very interested in the study of African worldviews—indigenous world views?

MAZISI KUNENE: Yes, yes. Yes, I am. Yes, of course, I am.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Can you tell us something briefly about this work.

MAZISI KUNENE: Briefly, I have to catch a plane. Briefly about what?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: The Zulu world view as you understand it

MAZISI KUNENE: There’s no such thing as Zulu world view. There is African world view.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Do you think there are enough commonalties in African views of the world that enable you to talk categorically of *the* African world view?

MAZISI KUNENE: Yeeees! Of course?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Not world views?

MAZISI KUNENE: Not world views. There are world views that are deviations from *the* world view. You believe in the ancestors?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Yes.

MAZISI KUNENE: You’re coming from where? From Nigeria?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Yes.

KUNENE: How far is Nigeria from here?

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Well, probably a couple of thousands of miles?

KUNENE: Thousands of miles! And yet we have the same traditions. Do you believe that life is not terminal. It continues forever and ever.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Reincarnation into the world

KUNENE: All these kinds of things we have

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Are you still writing poetry now?

KUNENE: I’m writing everything—poetry, stories, everything, aphorisms, everything.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Well, I think we’d probably continue this sometime. I’m sorry I couldn’t make it yesterday

KUNENE: Now, I have to catch a plane.

AZUONYE: I will write to you sometime.

Addendum: Kunene’s Reflections on the Relativism of Colonialist Historiography

KUNENE: Standards of civilization are not those defined by those who conquer others as higher. Yes, we also conquered other people and we said, yes, that our system is higher, is better; but it’s only a kind of joke. It doesn’t mean that those who conquer others have a higher system than those they conquer. It means that temporarily they are stronger physically. And sometimes the barbarians are much more effective in conquering others than the settled communities that have developed systems. A good example between us are the southerners who were not at that time as sophisticated as the their northern neighbors—the Shonas, for instance, who, in their systems had gone much more ahead at that time, although we had, before that time, a much more sophisticated system. So, there are cycles of periods, and in these transitional periods, it is sometimes fortunate that the images or the dramas of the people who are the preservers of the order—the meanings of the previous order and those people—we say that it is not an accident but that it is the desire of the gods to preserve their message. As you know, this happened among the Mayas, for example, the Pupul-Vu, who deliberately said, “Let’s come together and preserve the Pupul-Vu and so on. And, as they did so, they were able to preserve a lot of interpretations. We can go there—to many different societies—and see this kind of phenomenon taking place. In which the past is preserved through either the epics or through the sculptures or through the cult objects of priests and so on, of the particular period who then give the idea to the next generation and the generations that come after, and so on. Take, for instance, the idea of models for short stories. They say that you start up from the beginning and go to the middle and then the end. Well, it’s fun, because the stories that they make not even as powerful as the stories told by people who just make the story interesting. I’ve got stories that I’ve written myself. Some are short, some are long, some are just parables. But it’s not based on any model. It all depends on how you organize how your own ideas, how you make the materials in line with themselves, the amount effort you put into the story....

Notes