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ESSAY REVIEW

THOMAS MOFOLO'S *CHAKA* AND
AFRICAN THEOLOGY

IN 1959 a promising young Swedish author, Per Wästberg, spent a rewarding year as an occasional student at what was then the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. During that academic year he had experiences which influenced his development as a human rights activist and as a Scandinavian expert on African literature.¹

In 1961 Wästberg edited the first Scandinavian collection of African literary texts.² His impressionistic and elegant general introduction influenced the cultural aspect of the emerging Scandinavian interest in the new Africa.³

Rightly so, this collection of African literary texts starts with the significant final chapter on King Shaka's death in Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*, published in 1925.⁴ However, Wästberg's introductory comments on the novel are not quite accurate. The Swedish student suggests that Mofolo was a priest who wrote at a mission station secluded from the real issues in a socially segregated Southern Africa. He sees Mofolo's *Chaka* as being recognized as a classic by French-speaking enthusiasts in the *négritude* movement,⁵ but says that the first African novel in a modern sense does not have any relevance in contemporary South Africa.⁶

In the early 1960s European experts on African literature felt free to advance such analyses.⁷ This was before David Kunene had initiated what could be called the 'Mofolo renaissance' in African studies.⁸ New translations of Mofolo's *Chaka* have since been produced.⁹ Both African and Western scholars have provided more informed insights into the literary achievements of Thomas Mofolo and the social and political preconditions of his creative writings.¹⁰

Mofolo's *Chaka* occupies a significant position in the history of the modern African narrative. It has, in the first place, provoked the interest of literary

¹ See P. Wästberg, *Assignments in Africa* (London, Olive Press, 1986), vi-viii, 1-14.

² P. Wästberg (ed.), *Afrika berättar* (Malmö-Lund, Cavefors, 1961).

³ *Ibid.*, 11-42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45-9.

⁵ On the impact of the French translation of Mofolo's *Chaka* on French-speaking African authors, see M. Z. Malaba, 'The legacy of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*', *English in Africa* (1986), XIII, 61-71.

⁶ Wästberg, *Afrika berättar*, 22-3, 45.

⁷ A survey of the reception of Mofolo's *Chaka* since its publication in 1925 can be found in A. Gérard, *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Anharic* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press, 1971), 118-27, 397-9.

⁸ D. Kunene, *The Works of Thomas Mofolo: Summaries and Critiques* (Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press, 1967).

⁹ The latest so far is T. Mofolo, *Chaka*, trans. D. Kunene (London, Heinemann, 1981).

¹⁰ In addition to works by Gérard and D. Kunene, see D. Burness, *Shaka, King of the Zulus in African Literature* (Washington, Three Continents Press, 1976), and M. Z. Malaba, 'Shaka as a Literary Theme' (York, Univ. of York, Ph.D. thesis, 1986), forthcoming in published form by Skotaville, Johannesburg.

analysts and critics. My perspective is somewhat different. As a Professor in Religious Studies I will explore the mythological dimension of the novel.¹¹ In fact, I will argue that with his *Chaka* Thomas Mofolo proves himself to be a most interesting early African lay theologian.

BASES FOR THE SHAKA LEGEND

My objective is specific and I do not intend in this study to assess the historical significance of Shaka, the Zulu military genius and empire-builder, who, from around 1816 until his death in 1828, profoundly affected the course of the history of Southern and Central Africa.¹² In order to get a proper perspective on Mofolo's *Chaka*, however, it may be worthwhile to comment briefly on the documentary base of the historical study of King Shaka as well as to see how the Shaka legend continues to develop.

The oral sources have preference, and these are of different kinds. On the one hand there is the established royal chronicle — or narrative — which expands on the basis of a genealogical skeleton. This was recorded and transcribed by Magema Fuze in his *Abantu Abamnyama Lapa Bovela Ngakama* or *The Black People and Whence They Came*, which was published in the Zulu original in 1922 and in English translation in 1979.¹³ Such material was also fully utilized by Bryant, when he wrote the articles which were later collected and published in his *History of the Zulu People*,¹⁴ and in his comprehensive and sometimes confusing *Oldentimes in Zululand and Natal*, published in 1929.¹⁵

In addition to oral history in this more directly narrative form, Zulu historiography is qualified by the distinct tradition of royal praise-poetry, the *izibongo*. This is a deliberate form of recitation dwelling particularly on the military achievements of the king, and which is frequently directly sponsored by that king. *Izibongo*, thus, contain the gist of ethnic history seen from the point of view of the royal house.¹⁶

At the same time, *izibongo* is a surprisingly rich poetical genre which allows for variations which reflect the perspectives and conditions of the individual praise poet, the *imbongi*. As Malaba illustrates in his thesis, this feature is not least true for the continuing *izibongo* tradition, which has Shaka as its predominant centre.¹⁷

There is also an oral tradition of a more private, less official character.

¹¹ From June 1985 to December 1987 I served as Professor in Religious Studies at the University of Zimbabwe. This article is based on my public farewell lecture, 8 October 1987.

¹² A useful summary of historical developments is J. D. Omer-Cooper, *The Zulu Aftermath: A Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Bantu Africa* (Harlow, Longman, 1966).

¹³ M. M. Fuze, *Abantu Abamnyama Bovela Ngakama* (Pietermaritzburg, City Printing Works, 1922), and *The Black People and Whence They Came: A Zulu View*, trans. H. Lugg, ed. A. T. Cape (Pietermaritzburg, Univ. of Natal Press, 1979).

¹⁴ A. T. Bryant, *A History of the Zulu People and Neighbouring Tribes* (Cape Town, Struik, 1964).

¹⁵ A. T. Bryant, *Oldentimes in Zululand and Natal* (London, Longman, 1929), with references to Nomaklwa, daughter of Senzangakona, at viii, and generous recognition of the transmissions from Fuze, at 498.

¹⁶ See further, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems*, coll. James Stuart, trans. D. Malcolm, ed. T. Cope (Oxford, Clarendon, 1968).

¹⁷ Malaba, 'Shaka as a Literary Theme', 1-127.

These are transmitted individual eye-witness accounts and local attempts from within the Zulu people to interpret the character and achievements of King Shaka. There are also accounts and interpretations of Shaka's military and political achievements by spokesmen for peoples who were directly affected by the *Mfecane*. James Stuart's wealth of recordings, which are published in the *James Stuart Archive*, provide the basis for a more systematic analysis of such traditions.¹⁸ Most unfortunately, however, the editors have refrained from publishing the *izibongo* material which is part of these individual transmissions, and, therefore, they do not manage to convey the interesting interaction of the more directly narrative and poetical elements in both the public and the more private oral tradition.¹⁹

There are also written primary sources which can be used in the study of Shaka and subsequent developments, although their value has to be qualified. In the first place, there is *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, which in its final published form is not a diary at all. Instead, it is an attempt to trace and systematize Zulu history on the basis of recollections from actively involved observers from 1824 to the late 1830s.²⁰

Secondly, there is Isaacs's *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* in two volumes,²¹ in which Fynn's younger colleague both conveys eye-witness accounts from their interactions with Shaka and Dingane, and also ventures a more interpretative and comparative presentation of the two Zulu kings.

Compared to Fynn's *Diary*, Isaacs's *Travels and Adventures* are even more emotionally involved.²² As Kirby illustrates in his biography of the enterprising British medical doctor and colonialist Andrew Smith, Isaacs finished his manuscript in defence of certain criticisms of the early English explorers in Natal and Zululand, which were expressed by Smith during and after his official journey to King Dingane in 1832.²³

Although these printed sources are evidently very biased they do convey eye-witness impressions of King Shaka. As such documents often contain comparative references to conditions during the reign of Shaka attention should also be given to written eye-witness accounts from the time of Shaka's successor, King Dingane. There are three direct missionary reports, namely Gardiner's

¹⁸ *The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples*, ed. and trans. C. de B. Webb and J. B. Wright (Pietermaritzburg, Univ. of Natal Press, Killie Campbell Africana Library Series, Manuscript Series 1-3, 3 vols., 1976-82).

¹⁹ In W. Worger, 'Clothing the dry bones: The myth of Shaka', *Journal of African Studies* (1976), VI, 144-58, where an effective plea is made for the use of the *James Stuart Archive* in continued Zulu historiography. However, Worger does not comment on the regrettable omission of the *izibongo* material in this edition.

²⁰ J. Stuart and D. McK. Malcolm (eds.), *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter, 1950). On the preconditions of the manuscript, see ix-xvi, and Worger, 'Clothing the dry bones', 145.

²¹ N. Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*, ed. L. Heerman (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, Publications XVI-XVII, 2 vols., 1936-7).

²² Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures*, 262-86, gives a detailed portrait of Shaka. This is included as a separate chapter, 'History of Shaka', in J. Bird (ed.), *Annals of Natal, 1: 1495-1845* (Pietermaritzburg, P. Davis and Sons, 2 vols, 1888), 166-83.

²³ P. R. Kirby, *Sir Andrew Smith, M.D., K.C.B.: His Life, Letters and Works* (Cape Town, Balkema, 1963).

*Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa Undertaken in 1835*²⁴ and the diaries of Owen and Champion.²⁵ These can be compared with the report of the first official British mission to the Zulu kingdom under the determined leadership of Dr A. Smith in 1832 — four years after the death of Shaka.²⁶

There is, thus, both a comparatively solid and a surprisingly varied base for a historical study of Shaka and the Shaka legend. It is, therefore, not too remarkable that views on Shaka differ considerably and often contradict each other in different historiographic traditions. Thomas Mofolo was well aware of this when, after the Bambata Rebellion in 1906, he embarked on his project to write on Shaka from his Sotho view point.

THOMAS MOFOLO AT MORIJA

At that time Thomas Mofolo had established himself as an able assistant to the Revd A. Cassalis at the printing press on the French Morija Mission in central Basutoland (Lesotho).²⁷ He had already proved to be a creative writer. Since its inception in 1907 he was also an active member of *Lesotho la Tsoela pele*, or the Council of Progress — better known as the Basutoland Progressive Association. He was taught by the distinguished Sotho historians A. Sekese and L. Segoele.²⁸

As a matter of fact, some of Revd Cassalis's French missionary colleagues found Mofolo too daring as a pronounced Sotho author. His manuscript *The Fallen Angel* was not allowed to proceed to the printing press.²⁹ Financial difficulties for Mofolo and his family as well as for the Morija mission and its publishing house delayed the publication of *Chaka* when the manuscript was nearly ready in early 1910.³⁰

Mofolo and historiography in Southern Africa

In his brilliant classification of the historiographical traditions of Southern Africa Chanaiwa sees Mofolo as belonging to the second generation of what he calls 'the African tradition' as distinct from the imperial, colonialist, and missionary traditions on the one hand and the liberal and radical alternatives on the other.³¹

The African tradition in Southern African historiography is represented by

²⁴ A. F. Gardiner, *Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa Undertaken in 1835* (Cape Town, Struik, 1966 [first published London, William Crofts, 1836]).

²⁵ G. E. Cory (ed.), *The Diary of the Rev. F. Owen, M.A., Missionary with Dingaan in 1837-1883* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, Publication VII, 1926), and A. R. Booth (ed.), *Journal of the Rev. George Champion: American Missionary in Zululand 1835-9* (Cape Town, Struik, 1967).

²⁶ Documents relating to Andrew Smith's explorations in Natal and Zululand are published in P. R. Kirby (ed.), *Andrew Smith and Natal: Documents Relating to the Early History of that Province* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, Publication XXXVI, 1955).

²⁷ Gérard, *Four African Literatures*, 116. On the Bambata Rebellion, see S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-8 Disturbances in Natal* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1970).

²⁸ Gérard, *Four African Literatures*, 104-8, 133-7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁰ D. Kunene, 'Introduction', in Mofolo, *Chaka*, xii-xiii.

³¹ D. Chanaiwa, 'Historiographical traditions of Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Affairs* (1978), III, 175-93.

African intellectuals who were trained by missionaries and who addressed themselves to the local African Christian élites, to missionaries and to Whites who were ready to listen and learn. While the first generation of this African tradition gave certain priority to translations of Christian and Western classics — Tiyo Soga translated *The Pilgrim's Progress* into Xhosa as early as the 1860s — the second generation explored historical subjects or contemporary social and political issues, which were treated from a gradualist and not explicitly revolutionary perspective, although many of the writers were pioneers in the emerging African National Congress.³²

Chanaiwa is certainly right when he places Thomas Mofolo along with distinguished African Christian intellectuals such as Sol Plaatje, John Henderson Soga, D. T. Jabavu, J. L. Dube — and Revd D. T. Samkange from Zimbabwe could also be included. But he does not give the full answer concerning the character and significance of Mofolo's *Chaka*, as he sees the novel primarily as a biography on a par with Dube's presentation of Isaiah Shembe.³³

Thomas Mofolo's literary objective

As D. Kunene makes evident in the introduction to his translation of Mofolo's *Chaka* published in 1981, Mofolo's primary objective is not historical or biographical in the strict sense. The Sotho writer is himself explicit on this point. He starts his twenty-third chapter, 'The Unquenchable Thirst', which is essential for a relevant understanding of the meaning of the novel, with the following affirmation:

The events in Chaka's life were overwhelming because they were so numerous and of such tremendous import; they were like great mysteries which were beyond the people's understanding. But since it is not our purpose to recount all the affairs of his life, we have chosen only one part which suits our present purpose. And now, as we draw our narrative to a close, we shall first remind the reader of some things which have already been told.³⁴

Specifying Mofolo's literary objective Kunene does not deny that *Chaka* is fiction based on history. He emphasizes, however, that Mofolo's selection of topics and the deliberate structure of his presentation transcend historical dimensions and serve definite dramatic purposes.³⁵

Gérard carries that proposal further. He characterizes Mofolo's *Chaka* as 'a narrative tragedy in prose'.³⁶ This implies, I suggest, that *Chaka* does not just convey a very dramatic — and in the end a profoundly tragic — life story of the controversial Zulu king. It also illustrates a general and very basic human question. It is the problem of evil which transcends psychological and sociological terms of reference which Mofolo's novel explores.

In his *Four African Literatures*, published in 1971, Gérard concludes his

³² *Ibid.*, 30–3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 32. Reference is made here to J. L. Dube, *UShembe* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter, 1936 [first published Mariannhill, Mariannhill Mission Press, 1930]).

³⁴ Mofolo, *Chaka*, 153.

³⁵ D. Kunene, 'Shaka in the literature of Southern Africa', in Burness (ed.), *Shaka, King of the Zulus*, 174–5.

³⁶ Gérard, *Four African Literatures*, 117.

analysis of *Chaka* with some tentative hints as to what constitutes great literature. He also raises the question as to whether Mofolo's novel falls within this category.

However extensively the certainties of science and logic have grown the fundamental questions — the whence, the why, and the whither — of human existence and behaviour still remain unanswered. It is with these that myth deals and the level of myth can only be reached through nonrealistic, nonrational channels. The mystery in *Moby Dick*, the madness in *Don Quixote* and *Hamlet*, the magic in *Macbeth* and *Faust*, these are the elements that raise such works to the higher levels of Myth.³⁷

Gérard goes on to admit: 'Whether Mofolo's *Chaka* can be claimed to rank with them is a matter for Sotho readers and critics to decide. The mere fact that the question can be raised is in itself significant.'³⁸

A PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF *CHAKA*

In his own analysis of Mofolo's *Chaka*, however, Gérard tends to contradict this implied recognition of the greatness of Mofolo's novel. He aligns himself with the editor of the first English translation of *Chaka*, Sir Henry Newbolt. Gérard, thus, subscribes to a predominantly psychological interpretation of Mofolo's *magnum opus*. Isanusi, the royal diviner who plays such a central role in Mofolo's description of the ultimate tragedy of Shaka, is reduced to the visible symbol of Shaka's own hardening ambitions. This means that King Shaka is himself the ultimate cause of his own tragic end.³⁹

Gérard is not alone in holding that view. Mphahlele likewise suggests 'that the witchdoctor is a symbol of Shaka's other self'.⁴⁰ Even D. Kunene can subscribe to such an interpretation, although he is well aware of Mofolo's deliberate use of symbolism and mythology in traditional Sotho and Zulu cosmology and historiography.⁴¹

This psychological understanding of Isanusi — and of Mofolo's *Chaka* — encourages a particular interest in the way in which the Sotho author portrays the young Shaka. His unfortunate childhood as the unrecognized son of King Senzangakona, and his tense youth as an outcast in Nguni society, transform Shaka from a reluctant victim to an unscrupulous avenger. Isanusi becomes the moral guarantor for Shaka's advanced political ambitions and his increasingly anti-social behaviour. In fact Gérard suggests that it is Shaka himself who provokes Isanusi to prescribe ever more cynical objectives and brutal means in order to achieve his own political ends.⁴²

From psychological myth to African mythology

This is an interesting way of reading Mofolo's *Chaka* and Gérard pursues it when he re-reads the novel and accounts for his findings in the special 'Mofolo issue'

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-1.

⁴⁰ E. Mphahlele, *African Image* (London, Faber, 1962), 172.

⁴¹ D. Kunene, *The Works of Thomas Mofolo*, 26, and Mofolo, *Chaka*, xvii-xix.

⁴² Gérard, *Four African Literatures*, 116, 126.

of *English in Africa*.⁴³ The snag, however, is that it does not correspond exactly with the way in which Mofolo has structured his own presentation.

As an independent and imaginative African writer Mofolo operates within a more mythological framework than Gérard is ready to admit. The profound question which the life-story of King Shaka raises, deals, according to Mofolo with the basic issue of the use of power for better or for worse, and this problem has to be treated in mythological language.

Well acquainted with Sotho historiography and literary conventions Mofolo uses symbolically-loaded heroic poetry from his own culture when he pursues the riddle of Shaka. At the same time he has deliberately acquainted himself with Zulu society and Zulu culture. Sometime between 1907 and 1910 Mofolo actually visited Natal and made himself familiar with the ongoing *izibongo* tradition.⁴⁴ He found Chakijana, son of Mesenkeli, as his guide and quotes one of Chakijana's Shaka *izibongo* in his novel.⁴⁵

When passing through Pietermaritzburg it is most unlikely that Mofolo did not make use of the opportunity to be introduced to Magema Fuze and be informed by this authority on Zulu oral history. In 1907 Fuze had completed his own manuscript and was trying to secure the means to cover the costs of the publication of his Zulu history.⁴⁶ There are actually interesting convergencies on a number of issues in Fuze's and Mofolo's views on Shaka.

In Natal Mofolo may very well have also been able to supplement his own information on the royal diviner, Isanusi, by reading Fynn's substantial comments on the subject in his evidence before the Natal Native Commissioner in 1852 which are published in Volume I of *Annals of Natal*.⁴⁷

So, well equipped, Mofolo was ready to explore the implications of King Shaka's extraordinary resources and far-reaching political measures. He spells out straightaway — in Chapter 1 — the framework of his book which is both historically specific and generally human:

There is no place in the entire world where wars are unknown. There comes a time when nations hunger for each other and continually fight each other, sometimes over many years. But in the end peace returns once more and the land is warm again. Sometimes while the nations are living in a state of peace, none bothering the other, a male child rises among one of them, even though but one individual creates so much unrest that peace is vanished from the earth and much blood is spilt. But the sufferings which were occasioned by *difaqane* were unknown in olden days when the people were still settled upon the land.⁴⁸

King Shaka emerges as such an extraordinary male child. *Mfecane* — the social

⁴³ Gérard, 'Re-reading Chaka', *English in Africa* (1986), XIII, 9-11.

⁴⁴ Gérard, *Four African Literatures*, 116, 126.

⁴⁵ Mofolo, *Chaka*, 117-20.

⁴⁶ Lugg, 'Introduction', in Fuze, *The Black People*.

⁴⁷ 'Evidence of Henry Francis Fynn before the Native Commission, 1852', in Bird (ed.), *Annals of Natal*, I, 106-11. It should be noted that in the final version of Fynn's *Diary* references to Isanusi have been deleted. See Stuart and Malcolm (eds.), *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, 274-83.

⁴⁸ Mofolo, *Chaka*, 3-4.

and political upheaval of neighbouring peoples in Southern and Central Africa — is the remarkable effect of his ambitious policies.

The extraordinary Shaka

With this as his primary term of reference Mofolo, in the first part of his novel, illustrates how Shaka proves himself to be both extraordinary and remarkable. He kills a lion single-handedly and is praised in the form of a Sotho *lithoko* as 'the only young man of worth' when all others are cowards.⁴⁹ He defeats the mythological 'King of the Pool' and is hailed as the one who shall rule over nations and their kings.⁵⁰ He kills the nasty hyena and the devious Makatazana and is explicitly contrasted to his father Senzangakona in the praise-poem.⁵¹

It is at this point — before he has joined Dingiswayo's forces — that Shaka meets Isanusi, the royal diviner. Isanusi presents himself as a civilized but somewhat mysterious doctor.⁵² His objective is two-fold: to promise Shaka the royal power and fame that he deserves, and to give him secret medicine and not least a new weapon, which will revolutionize warfare in Nguniland.⁵³

The prerequisite for Shaka's success, however, is that he commits himself wholeheartedly to Isanusi and his cause. The overwhelmed Shaka does commit himself. He affirms: 'I bind myself to abide by your commandments in every way in which you will command me'.⁵⁴ For his support Isanusi also gives Shaka his two assistants, the bright Malunga and the cunning Ntlebe.⁵⁵

Initiated to Isanusi

In reflections on Shaka's extraordinary resources and achievements in the Zulu oral tradition there is a characteristic motif which is best interpreted in terms of initiation. When Shaka wants to develop a new weapon which will become his major political tool, Shaka negotiates with the most renowned blacksmith in the country. In the process Shaka is challenged by 'The Nameless One', who blesses the weapon and promises that Shaka will become the 'chief of chiefs'.⁵⁶

In Mazisi Kunene's overwhelming *Emperor Shaka the Great*⁵⁷ this motif is formulated as follows:

The old man . . . said:
'I give you my blessing, child of Nguniland.
Let it be your fate to conquer.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19. On parallels in Sotho, see D. Kunene, *Heroic Poetry of the Basutho* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1971), 8–9, 131–2.

⁵⁰ Mofolo, *Chaka*, 27. See also, D. Kunene, *Heroic Poetry*, 104–6, which discusses the role of the deep-pool monster in Sotho symbolism but does not explicitly relate the argument to the relevant passage in Mofolo's *Chaka*.

⁵¹ Mofolo, *Chaka*, 33. On the hyena in Sotho symbolism, see D. Kunene, *Heroic Poetry*, 132.

⁵² On the Sotho background, see *ibid.*, 123–4, but Kunene does not explicitly refer to Mofolo's *Chaka*.

⁵³ Mofolo, *Chaka*, 42–7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 55–60.

⁵⁶ This motif has been given a very dramatic expression in E. A. Ritter, *Shaka Zulu* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2nd edn., 1965), 38–46. It is reflected also in J. Langa, *Shaka* (Salisbury, Longman Zimbabwe, 1982), 9–14. Langa's is the first Zimbabwean Shaka novel.

⁵⁷ M. Kunene, *Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic* (London, Heinemann, 1979).

But never target those who prophesied your greatness.⁵⁷
 Shaka departed, his mind in turmoil,
 Sensing a generous blessing of the Forefathers.
 He ran his hand over his weapon,
 Caressing the shaft and its blade with his long fingers,
 Often he laughed as though seized by some madness.⁵⁸

It is this motif which Mofolo expands on when he illustrates the encounter between Isanusi and the young enterprising Shaka. Mofolo is able to qualify his presentation by means of insights into traditional Zulu views of divination. His more elaborate account of the interaction between Shaka and Isanusi, however, has the same quality of initiation as the original motif in the Zulu narrative. But who or what is Isanusi?

Who is Isanusi?

As royal diviner Isanusi is the servant of the shades — to use Dr Axel-Ivar Berglund's suggested terminology⁵⁹ — Isanusi communicates with the ancestors — more specifically with the ancestors along the royal line. He possesses extraordinary powers for better or worse. Basically, however, his function is for the better, as he is the guardian of life and fertility.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Isanusi is able to smell out evil and the *umthakathi*, or the sorcerer.⁶¹ Shaka's interaction with Isanusi, thus, is a traditional way of describing and explaining the extraordinary circumstances and purpose of Shaka's ever-extending powers.

Mofolo's ambitious Chaka

It has often been argued by D. Kunene and others, that Mofolo's image of Shaka is, in fact, ambiguous and even contradictory.⁶² As a Sotho nationalist Mofolo is well aware of the fact that King Moshoeshoe at some point appealed to Shaka for protection and got it. He is able to give a well-informed and well-balanced account of Shaka's achievements as an empire-builder. This is the case particularly in Chapter 17, where Mofolo also makes use of Chakijana's *izibongo*.⁶³ Even so, Mofolo's portrait of Shaka gets darker and darker. This is evident from Chapter 18 onwards. Here Mofolo describes how Isanusi forces Shaka to kill Dingiswayo's daughter Noliwa.⁶⁴ This ambiguity in Mofolo's novel is deliberate. It has directly to do with how Mofolo further develops his portrait of Isanusi.

I have already referred to the traditional Zulu understanding of the royal diviner. Mofolo's description of Isanusi, however, does not fully concur with the original. As Ben Obumusele has noted in an imaginative research paper on 'Mofolo's *Chaka* and the Folk Tradition', Isanusi in Mofolo's account

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 52-3.

⁵⁹ A.-I. Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (London, Hurst, Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia XXII, 1976), 136-96.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 185-6. See evidence of Henry Francis Fynn in Bird (ed.), *Annals of Natal*, I, 108-9.

⁶¹ Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns*, 185.

⁶² See D. Kunene in Burness (ed.), *Shaka, King of the Zulus*, 174-5.

⁶³ Mofolo, *Chaka*, 109-20.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 121-7.

increasingly plays the role of *umthakathi*, the sorcerer.⁶⁵ Also, this feature is deliberate in Mofolo's narrative. Increasingly, Mofolo's Isanusi directs the extraordinary powers which Shaka has been given towards death and destruction.

There is, in fact, a very definite contrast between life, peace, warmth, and fertility on the one hand, and brutal warfare, death and destruction on the other in the mythological general view which Mofolo develops. Isanusi and what he stands for represent one extreme; Dingiswayo, whom Isanusi did not want to meet because they hated each other,⁶⁶ and Dingiswayo's daughter, Noliwa, represent the other. Noliwa does, in fact, incarnate love and warmth, fertility and reconciliation. She is the gift of Nkulunkulu, the Great-great One, as an example to teach his children the beauty and profound love of their Creator.⁶⁷

Mofolo's Shaka is placed between these two poles. Isanusi makes his agreement with Shaka before the future Zulu king joins forces with Dingiswayo. The royal diviner sends Ntlebe to warn Shaka from getting too involved with Noliwa.⁶⁸ Ultimately, Isanusi forces Shaka to choose between himself and Noliwa. True to his original agreement with the royal diviner Shaka kills Dingiswayo's and Nkulunkulu's daughter.⁶⁹ From then on Shaka's military strategy becomes more and more ruthless. His killings become more and more brutal.

THOMAS MOFOLO AS AFRICAN THEOLOGIAN

In this way Mofolo qualifies his view of the character and function of the traditional royal diviner. Isanusi turns out to be the *umthakathi par excellence*. As Malaba has suggested, the colours of Satan in the dualistic Christian mythology are given to Isanusi.⁷⁰ In short: Isanusi is evil incarnated.

This is one illustration of how Thomas Mofolo operates as an African theologian. He conveys Christian convictions by means of traditional African symbolism and mythology.⁷¹ In the process he qualifies or radicalizes the references of the traditional religious language which he uses.

This holds true also for the way in which Mofolo highlights Shaka's freedom of choice and his responsibility for the effects of his decisions in the description of Shaka's first encounter and continued relationship with Isanusi. Although Isanusi is impressive and his presence is compelling, Shaka is at every stage of the interaction left to decide on his own and to take the consequences of his choice. Mofolo does not describe a spirit-possession like that which Mutswairo conveys in his dramatic account of the interaction of Mapondera with Nehanda in his *Mapondera: Soldier of Zimbabwe*.⁷² Mofolo is, if you will, more of a Christian existentialist in his description of Shaka.

⁶⁵ B. Obumusele, 'Mofolo's *Chaka* and the folk tradition', in C. Heywood (ed.), *Papers on African Literature* (Sheffield, Sheffield Univ., Seminar Series, 1976), 17-18.

⁶⁶ Mofolo, *Chaka*, 47.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 71

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 124-7.

⁷⁰ M. Z. Malaba, 'Patterns of Power: A Study of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*' (Roma, Lesotho, Paper read at the tenth Southern African Universities Social Sciences Conference, July 1987).

⁷¹ On Mofolo's Christian background, see Gérard, *Four African Literatures*, 108-9, and D. Kunene, 'Ntoanatsatsi/Eden: Superimposed Images in Thomas Mofolo's *Mwiti ou Bochabela*', *English in Africa* (1986), XIII, 13-40.

⁷² S. Mutswairo, *Mapondera: Soldier of Zimbabwe* (Harare, Longman Zimbabwe, 1983), 8-12.

This means that Mofolo gives due account for the issue of guilt in his description of Shaka's final calculation of the gains and losses in his own life. According to Zulu oral tradition, Shaka, after the death of his adoptive father, the Mthethwa chief Mbiya, was increasingly caught in agony.⁷¹ He had to endure evil dreams where Mbiya tested how far Shaka had lived up to his responsibilities.

Concluding his novel, Mofolo elaborates on this theme. He illustrates the final encounter of Isanusi and Shaka. Mofolo reinforces Shaka's responsibility and adds the dramatic question of guilt. Isanusi, thus, returns in order to claim what he is due. In fact, in the end he condemns Shaka,

the murderer of your own brothers, the blood of your own father, Murderer of your own wife, companion of your heart. Murderer of your own children, your very own blood. Murderer of your own mother, she who gave you birth.⁷²

Shaka's appetite for absolute royal fame and power has made him sacrifice all basic human relationships. There is no grace left in the scene of Shaka's death. The end is inevitable. Shaka is stabbed to death by his own brothers.⁷³

Mofolo and the problem of evil

The problem of evil in human experience and in society is certainly one of the fundamental human questions, which, according to Gérard, cannot be given a definite answer except by means of myth or mythological language. Thomas Mofolo treats that question by probing into the real riddle in the life of Shaka. He formulates his answer as an African lay theologian who allows his Christian convictions to be expressed by means of traditional African symbolism and mythology. This, I suggest, is the real literary achievement of his *Chaka*.

When I speak of African theology here, I am referring to conscious articulations of Christian convictions from the African people. In a more specific sense African theology refers to deliberate attempts to formulate Christian concerns by means of relevant experiences and expressions in the rich and varied African cultural and religious heritage.⁷⁴ As already implied, it is African theology in this second and more specific sense that Mofolo pursues in his *Chaka*. My interaction with this novel makes me inclined to suggest that we have a lot to learn here. Greater attention should be given to this and other early ventures in theological articulations in Africa, when today we try to formulate a relevant African theology.

THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF MOFOLO'S MYTHOLOGY

In this article I have frequently referred to myth and mythological language. In conclusion I should, perhaps, make explicit that I see mythology as a distinct form of religious language which makes use of personalistic terms of reference

⁷¹ Stuart and Malcolm (eds.), *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, 308-9.

⁷² Mofolo, *Chaka*, 167.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ C. F. Hallencreutz and J. Pobee, *Variations in African Theology* (Nairobi, Uzima Press, 1986), viii-ix.

when exploring basic human and cosmological issues. It is by means of such mythology that Thomas Mofolo explores the problem of evil as that which expressed itself as blind pursuit of political power without any consideration of basic human loyalties. In contemporary society we are more inclined to speak of evil in structural and economic terms rather than in mythological language. This, however, need not exclude us from the sense of urgency and depth in Mofolo's argument.

Indeed, Mofolo's critical analysis of Shaka's blind pursuit of absolute political power seems to be remarkably relevant in contemporary Southern Africa. With a necessary generalization I suggest that we can today distinguish three ways in which the legacy of Shaka is pursued by committed African nationalists. The first is the more exclusive Zulu nationalism of Inkatha and Chief Buthelezi, who see themselves as the true heirs of the legacy of King Shaka.⁷⁷ The second is the inclusive African nationalism of Albert Luthuli and Mazisi Kunene. Here the Shaka tradition is recognized as one source of inspiration among others in the African struggle.⁷⁸ And the third is the more radical or militant African nationalism of Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo. They deliberately appeal to the compelling African past but they do not make any specific reference to the absolutistic claims of Shaka.⁷⁹

With this perspective on Shaka and the Shaka legend Thomas Mofolo may be placed somewhere between Albert Luthuli and Mazisi Kunene on the one hand and Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo on the other. That is not too bad an option for an early African lay theologian from Lesotho.

However, when we assess the relevance of Mofolo's critique to the blind pursuit of political power in today's Southern Africa there is not just the question of the legacy of Shaka that matters. There is, indeed, another, more complex and more acute concentration of power that comes to the forefront in its blind pursuit of isolated political perseverance. That is the contemporary, expansionist apartheid system.

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⁷⁷ An interesting comparison, where explicit references are made to Chief M. G. Buthelezi, is J. K. Ngubane, 'Shaka's social, political and military ideas', in Burness (ed.), *Shaka, King of the Zulus*, 161-2.

⁷⁸ M. Kunene, *Emperor Shaka the Great*, and the eloquent assessment of Shaka in A. Luthuli, *Let My People Go* (London, Fontana, 1963), 17.

⁷⁹ For example, Mandela's address to Court before sentence, Nov. 1965, where, *inter alia*, Mandela states: 'Then the land was ours, in our own name and right. We occupied the land, the forests, the rivers, we extracted the mineral wealth beneath the soil and all the riches of this beautiful country. We set up and operated our own Government, we controlled our own armies and we organized our own trade and commerce. The elders would tell tales of the wars fought by our ancestors in defence of the fatherland, as well as the acts of valour performed by generals and soldiers during those epic days. The names of Dingane and Bambata, among the Zulus, of Hintza, Makana, Ndlambe of the AmaXhosa, of Sekhukhuni and others in the north, were mentioned as the pride and glory of the entire African nation.' N. Mandela, *No Easy Walk to Freedom* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1983), 147.