

## **The South African National Poet Laureate Prize for Mazisi Kunene.**

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by

Ntongela Masilela

It is an incomparable honour for me to be congratulating Mazisi Kunene for receiving The South African National Poet Laureate Prize bestowed by our nation. I have been waiting for this moment for a long time. Mazisi Kunene is unquestionably one of our great national poets. In this lineage of poetic greatness, Mazisi Kunene belongs in the pantheon of S. E. K. Mqhayi, J. J. R. Jolobe, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, H. I. E. Dhlomo and David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi. Though belonging to this pantheon, Mazisi Kunene surpasses all of them because he is arguably the greatest poet produced by Africa in the twentieth century. His two great epics, **Emperor Shaka The Great** (1979) and **Anthem of the Decades** (1981) have no comparable counterparts anywhere in Africa . Mazisi Kunene is a great *Imbongi* for all seasons and for the whole African continent. In this sense, Mazisi Kunene is the first continental poet Africa has produced. His poetic vision encompassing a profound philosophy of life and a true African cosmology is what holds together the metaphysical unity of the continent. This poetic vision also postulates the unity of Africa and the African Diaspora. In this unification of the black world, Mazisi Kunene's achievement is similar to that realized by Aime Cesaire in **Return To My Native Land** (1939). It is perhaps because of the affinities between them that Ngugi wa Thiong'o considers Mazisi Kunene's "Introduction" to the 1969 edition of Cesaire's epic to be the finest essay ever written on the great poet from the Caribbean/Antilles.

Mazisi Kunene is also a remarkable scholar. His 1959 M. A. thesis ( University of Natal ), **An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry: Both Traditional and Modern** is one of the best South African literary histories. In this, it belongs to the distinguished company of Benedict Vilakazi's 1946 doctoral thesis (University of Witwatersrand), **The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni** , Sophonia Machabe Mofokeng 1954 doctoral dissertation (University of Witwatersrand), **The Development of Leading Figures in Animal Tales in Africa** and A. C. Jordan's 1956 doctoral dissertation (University of Cape Town) **A Phonological and Grammatical Study of Literary Xhosa** . These documents have established a high standard of scholastic excellence that should be emulated by all South Africans.

Let me mention in passing that Mazisi Kunene has a book which appeared only

in the German language and was published in the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany): **Die Grossfamilie: Eine Afrikan: Gesellschaftstheorie** [The Great Family: An African Theory of Society, 1971].

Given these extraordinary achievements of Mazisi Kunene, it is not extravagant to posit him as one of artistic giants Africa has been privileged to have. It may take several centuries before another poet of Mazisi Kunene's stature emerges again. This is no exaggeration. He is one of a kind.

Mazisi Kunene and Ezekiel Mphahlele are the last surviving colossi of the New African Movement, a great political and cultural movement that was launched in 1904 by the simultaneous appearance of three essays in that particular unusual year: Pixley ka Isaka Seme's "The Regeneration of Africa", Solomon T. Plaatje's "The Negro" and John Langalibalele Dube's "Are Negroes Better Off in Africa? Conditions and Opportunities of Negroes in America and Africa Compared". Last year, the tenth anniversary of the historic victory of 1994, was also the centennial year of the birth of the New African Movement.

Mazisi Kunene was a great political warrior in the exile period from 1957 to 1990. He was one of the founding members of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain .

On a personal note: when I was a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and Mazisi Kunene was a Professor of Linguistics and African Languages at this institution in the 1970s, I use to spend weekends at his home in West Hollywood here in Los Angeles. Mathabo's cooking is what got me there all the time besides the extraordinary power of our greatest mind. I was privileged to see Mazisi Kunene write his great epic **Emperor Shaka The Great** . He would sometimes write it while lying on his big stomach on the floor in the dining room. The great poet used to read portions of the manuscript in the Zulu original to me on UCLA campus despite the fact of being aware that I had practically no comprehension of this great language. I feel absolutely privileged that Mazisi Kunene considered me worthy as an audience of one person to his magnificent and monumental creative process.

I lack words to express my deep love for this great poet of ours. I'm saddened that he has entered his autumnal years. But his poetic voice will continue singing to Africa about the continent's greatness till eternity.

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