

Mazisi Kunene (1930-2006): An Appreciation

by

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The passing away of Mazisi Kunene on Thursday evening (August 10th) in this year of 2006 is truly extraordinary given that this is the centennial year of seminal occurrences and events in South African intellectual, political and cultural history: first and foremost the Bhambatha Rebellion, which was recently honored throughout the country; the birth of two major writers, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947) and A. C. Jordan (1906-1968), who were exponents of *African literature in the African languages*; the publication of Walter Benson Rubusana's (1858-1936) Xhosa anthology *Zemk' Inkomo Magwalandini* (usually translated as "The Cattle Are Departing, You Cowards", but Vilakazi's rendering as "Preserve Your Culture" is more apropos)---a landmark event that opened the cultural component of the New African Movement, whose political component had been launched in this particular year by Pixley ka Isaka Seme with his searing manifesto "The Regeneration of Africa". Mazisi Kunene's *decision* to permanently depart in this momentous year of celebrations and recognitions is in keeping with his monumental nature as a man of letters.

A mere glance at these names shows that the elemental quality that defined their connectedness to each other and to posterity was their essential belief in the fundamental construct that defined the Africanness of African people: African languages. The African languages are the spiritual music of African people. It would seem it is those New African intellectuals who committed themselves to creating literary expressive forms by means of the African languages during the duration of the cultural and political constellation of the New African Movement from 1904-6 to 1960 who are destined to be the most durable throughout this new unfolding twenty first century. The most eminent poetic tradition in South Africa throughout the twentieth century was realized through the African languages: *beginning* with S. E. K. Mqhayi (1875-1945) and Nontsizi Mgqwetho (?-?) through J. J. R. Jolobe (1902-1978) and Benedict Wallet *Bhambatha* Vilakazi *ending* possibly with David Livingstone Phakamile Yali Manisi (1926-1999) and Mazisi Raymond Lafayette kaMdabuli weKunene (1930-2006). This was the poetic tradition of Mqhayi of which Mazisi Kunene was its greatest exponent. The superiority of this tradition launched by Mqhayi, yes that terrible word of superiority given our recent history is necessary here, stems not only from the brilliance of its exponents, but also from its engagement with the dialectic of modernity and tradition which defined the most intractable political moments of our history in the receding century. Given the adjacency of poetic form to music, it may turn out that the last exponent of this poetic tradition was not so much Mazisi Kunene as the great music genius of Mfaz' Omnyama (his actual name was Mphatheni Khumalo), the incomparable exponent of maskandi music, who

died five years earlier. The day Mfaz' Omnyama is fully understood in our country, it will most probably bring about the revival and renewal of interest in the poetry of S. E. K. Mqhayi.

What Mqhayi demanded of those who would dare to follow in his footsteps was for them to emulate or practice the *classicism* of African languages. This issue of classicism was at the center of the symmetry between the poetic practice of Mqhayi and the scholarship of Clement Martyn Doke (1893-1980), arguably our foremost scholar ever. It does not seem it would be out of order, given that Mqhayi wrote a Xhosa poem about this great scholar (“U-Professor Doke”, *Umteteli wa Bantu*, March 19, 1932), to argue that he endorsed this postulation by Doke: “I would digress here to make a plea for the recognition of the Bantu language family as one which can hold up its head with any other language family on earth. Bantu languages are extremely rich in vocabulary, and in grammatical, phonetic and syntactic structure, and their study presents a theme as noble as that of Semitic, Romance or Teutonic. But they have a unique grammatical system---one which it is impossible to treat adequately except according to its own genius” (“A Call to Philological Study and Research in South Africa”, *The South African Quarterly*, July 1925/February 1926). There is no reason to doubt that Benedict Wallet Bhambatha Vilakazi too subscribed to this endorsement of the excellence of the African languages, for he wrote the following against H. I. E. Dhlomo (1903-1956): “I have an unshaken belief in the possibilities of Bantu languages and their literature, provided the Bantu writers themselves can learn to love their languages and use them as vehicles for thought, feeling and will. After all, the belief, the resulting literature, is a demonstration of [a] people's ‘self’ where the cry: ‘*Ergo sum quod sum*’ [I am what I am]. That is our pride in being black, and we cannot change creation” (“African Drama and Poetry,” *South African Outlook*, July 1, 1939). It was this unremitting commitment to African languages that undoubtedly made Mazisi Kunene align himself with Benedict Wallet Vilakazi against H. I. E. Dhlomo within the constellation of the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s.

The issue of the African languages was perhaps the central dividing line within the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s, which included the following, beside Vilakazi, Dhlomo and Kunene: Rueben Caluza (1895-1969), Albert Luthuli (1898-1967), R. R. R. Dhlomo (1901-1971), Selby D. B. Ngcobo (1909-1983), Walter M. B. Nhlapo (?-?), Anton Lembede (1914-1947), Jordan Ngubane (1917-1985), and C. L. S. Nyembezi (1919-2001). On the other hand, what united them was the appropriation of Shaka's militarism from a traditional society of the past in order to transpose its *unending originality* into the present realms of political and intellectual culture in modernity. This is the reason that Shaka has had such an imaginary fascination for many Zulu intellectuals across much of the twentieth century. Mazisi Kunene was the most unrelenting in this fascination or

engagement as exemplified by his epics. In his search for his own particular classicism demanded by Mqhayi of all those who wrote in the African languages, Mazisi Kunene was very much aware that he had to go through his master Benedict Wallet Vilakazi in order to learn from the classicism of two great Zulu poets of the nineteenth century: Magolwane and Mshongweni. Being a comparative study of Xhosa literature and Zulu literature, Vilakazi's dissertation *The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni* (1945), in whose preface an indebtedness to Mqhayi is expressed, did not consider these two poets in any great depth as Kunene's master's thesis on Zulu literary lineages *An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry* (1958) subsequently did. Expressing a deep hostility to European poetic forms, Mazisi Kunene's thesis makes clear that he appreciated Magolwane and Mshongweni not only for their classicism, but also as possible poetic foils against his possible unintended weakness for Romantic poetry. In his thesis, he indicted Vilakazi for now and then imitating Shelley and H. I. E. Dhloomo for being enthralled with Keats. In his young days Mazisi Kunene was unforgiving of his older contemporaries for what he considered to be their unpardonable sins. His appropriation of the classicism of Magolwane and Mshongweni was in direct opposition to any forms of European poetic classicisms infiltrating the African poetic imagination.

In the later decades of the 1960s and of the 1970s, as he was beginning in earnest to write his epics as well as in the midst of writing them, he was still very much preoccupied with the poetic significance of these two nineteenth century poets: Magolwane writing in Shaka's Royal Court and Mshongweni in a different era when modernity and tradition were just beginning their contestation of each other. Two examples will suffice here. In an essay of 1967, Mazisi Kunene wrote of Magolwane: "Magolwane is one of the greatest of African poets, indeed I would say one of the greatest world poets. He lived in the early 19th Century and was the national poet at the peak of Zulu power. His poetry can best be understood within an appreciation of the historical background which nurtured his immense genius. . . He revolutionised the whole poetic idiom. In his great epic on the conquests of the Zulu empire he introduced political and social analysis also delving deep into character. The change he brought about in discarding the usual practice of describing physical features elevated Zulu poetry to such dramatic heights as had never been achieved before. We find that the characters and individuals stand for specific social and political and historical meanings" ("Portrait of Magolwane---The Great Zulu Poet", *Cultural Events in Africa* [an Oxford University journal], July 1967). About a decade later, around 1977, Mazisi Kunene celebrated the other great poet Mshongweni in a poem: "After the festival, after the feast/ After the singing/ After the voices have faded into the night/ And the sounds of talking have ceased/ And the angry winds have shed their manes/ And people have stopped to dance/ You voice and your voice only/ Shall rise from the ruins" ("Tribute to Mshongweni: A Great Nineteenth-

Century African Poet”, in *The Ancestors & the Sacred Mountain* , 1982). It is clear with hindsight, having permanently departed only three days ago, that Mazisi Kunene's unending engagement with these two poets, as well as with Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, was a life-long process of schooling himself in effecting a Shakan revolution in South African literature, indeed in African literature, in the twentieth century. By achieving this, Mazisi Kunene established himself as Africa 's greatest poet in the twentieth century.

An even greater achievement is that he has made certain that African cultural history in the twenty first century will have to preoccupy itself with *African literature in the African languages* if it is to realize its historical mission. Mazisi Kunene mentioned to me many times over a thirty-year period that his singular mission in life was to destroy *African literature in the European languages* because he felt it was a “Literature of Occupation”, a deadly cultural poison left behind in Africa by colonialism and imperialism. This unfolding century, in a new millennium, will eventually have to testify whether Mazisi Kunene succeeded in this ambition or not. Without a doubt Mazisi Kunene has been *our literary Shaka* in complement to the *military Shaka* of the past. The still unpublished approximately ten Zulu epics and approximately five Zulu anthologies will one day give us the true monumental nature of this towering genius. With his passing, *our contemporary Shaka* has closed one historical period and possibly opened a new one.

Characterizing Mazisi Kunene as the literary Shaka of the twentieth century is justified by the prodigious productivity he displayed in his exile period in Los Angeles , teaching at the University of California in Los Angeles , from 1976 to 1993, when he returned to South Africa , a country he had left for voluntary exile in Britain in 1959. These are the works he wrote while living in West Hollywood with his family. Mazisi Kunene himself in a Curriculum Vitae written in 1995 tabulated his unpublished works in the following manner:

Poetry Volume I The Wild Dog of Mhawu (2210 poems).
 Poetry Volume II Mayhem in the Morning (360 poems).
 Poetry Volume III The Smoking Pipes of the God Ra/Re (276 poems).
 Poetry Volume IV The White Stone of the Mountain (312 poems).
 Poetry Volume V The Spirits of Our Forefathers (732 poems).
 Poetry Volume VI In Between the Nights (31 poems).
 Poetry Volume VII The Vision of the Diviners (908 poems).
 Poetry Volume VIII The Swirling Dust of the Ancestral Festival (360 poems).
 Poetry Volume IX The Last Words of Khmet (Egyptians) (224 poems).
 Poetry Volume X The Nameless Spirit (150 poems).
 Poetry Volume XI Isibusiso sika Mhawu (The Last Word of the Grandfathers).*
 Poetry Volume XII Indiba Yamancasakazi (The Circular Dance of of Young

Women).

Poetry Volume XIII Inqama Yas'Ekunene (Sacred Ram of the Kunene House).

Poetry Volume XIV Imyalezo yaba Chwezi (The Last Mortal Embrace Of the Egyptians).

Poetry Volume XV Amadlozi Obabamkhulu (Ancestors/Forefathers).**

Poetry Volume XVI Ingqungqulu Yamalanga Amabili (Two-Day Champion).**

Poetry Volume XVII Ubhedu Lika Matapa (The Heroics of Matapa).**

Poetry Volume XVIII Ubuhlalu Buka Nomandishi (The Multicolored Beads of Nomandishi).

Poetry Volume XIX Ingqimphothwe (Somersault).**

Poetry Volume XX Injongolo ka Mhawu (Mhawu's Resolve).**

Poetry Volume XXI Zwana Elimnandi Enchanting Words).**

*Mazisi Kunene in an astrick indicated that those volumes without the number of poems given, the number in them are an average of a thousand poems. In this same note he made clear there were other volumes which were written in his London exile period from 1959 to 1975.

**The Zulu translation of these volumes was provided by Mazisi Kunene's translator Vusi Mchunu, with whom this author and Mbukeni Herbert Mnguni spent a spectacular Summer of 1988 with the great poet in West Berlin on a Fellowship sponsored by the Goethe Institute. The three of us were living in exile in this great city then.

All of these aforementioned volumes have not as yet been published in the Zulu original or been translated to any of the great languages of the world.

This great legacy has still to be disseminated throughout Africa !

Claremont [Los Angeles], California , August 13, 2006.

An Afterthought on the Second Anniversary of the Departure of Mazisi Kunene.

Three months before (on August 10 th 2006) the departure of Mazisi Raymond Fakazi Mngoni Kunene to join the ancestors, as he always believed that he would, the Mazisi Kunene Foundation Trust was launched at the International Convention Centre in Durban on June 3, 2006. Among those present were His Majesty King Goodwill Zwelithi, the First Lady Mrs. Zanele Mbeki, Minister of Arts and Culture Z. Pallo Jordan, the Premier of KwaZulu/Natal Sibusiso

Ndebele, Mrs. Mathabo Kunene. The Foundation Trust established several tasks as its mission: To gather and catalogue all the writings of Mazisi Kunene; To translate and publish selected poems written by Mazisi Kunene; To develop and sustain research fellowships and scholarly sponsorship of African literary works; To establish a permanent home for the Foundation; To establish an endowment fund to support the work of the Foundation in perpetuity; To identify additional neglected historical and new African writers with the aim of collection, preservation and publication.

In pursuance of the first objective, the gathering and cataloguing of the works of the great poet, the Foundation Trust has had enormous success as evident in over a hundred Notebooks that it is in the process of collating them with the intent of publishing them in the Zulu original language and subsequently translating them into African as well as to other non-African languages. Although the collating process is still very much incomplete, as evident in the absence of titling of the various Notebooks enumerated below, Mrs. Kunene has taken this second anniversary to share with the world the prodigious genius of Africa 's greatest poet. I have taken the liberty of listing them below.

Notebook 1 (252 poems on 129 pages), Notebook 2 (768 poems on 351 pages); Notebook 3 (1143 poems on 274 pages); Notebook 4 (555 poems on 592 pages); Notebook 5 (1227 poems on 264 pages); Notebook 6 (642 poems on 152 pages); Notebook 7 (2499 poems on 197 poems); Notebook 8 (253 poems on 267 pages); Notebook 9 (164 poems on 191 pages); Notebook 10 (1049 poems on 208 pages); Notebook 11 (260 poems on 122 pages); Notebook 12 (141 poems on 66 pages); Notebook 13 (1 poem on 1 page); Notebook 14 (1324 poems on 173 pages); Notebook 15 (9 poems on 10 pages); Notebook 16 (271 poems on 127 pages); Notebook 17 (8 poems on 45 pages); Notebook 18 (123 poems on 67 pages); Notebook 19 (indeterminate); Notebook 20 (indeterminate); Notebook 21 (indeterminate); Notebook 22 (644 poems on 298 pages); Notebook 23 (344 poems on 226 pages); Notebook 24 (54 poems on 24 pages); Notebook 25 (123 poems on 52 pages); Notebook 26 (28 poems on 12 pages); Notebook 27 (71 poems on 35 pages); Notebook 28 (103 poems on 35 pages); Notebook 29 (208 poems on ? pages); Notebook 30 (470 poems on 273 pages); Notebook 31 (172 poems on 136 pages); Notebook 32 (278 poems on 163 pages); Notebook 33 (42 poems on 22 pages); Notebook 34 (166 poems on 41 pages); Notebook 35 (211 poems on 223 pages); Notebook 36 (60 poems on 8 pages); Notebook 37 (608 poems on 55 pages); Notebook 38 (861 poems on 226 pages); Notebook 39 (879 poems on ? pages);

Notebook 40 (171 poems on 163 pages); Notebook 41 (1011 poems on 406 pages); Notebook 42 (994 poems on 530 pages); Notebook 43 (164 poems on 144 pages); Notebook 44 (164 poems on 82 pages); Notebook 45 (152 poems on

148 pages); Notebook 46 (72 poems on 77 pages); Notebook 47 (516 poems on 617 pages); Notebook 48 (6 poems on 150 pages); Notebook 49 (251 poems on 72 pages); Notebook 50 (285 poems on 68 pages); Notebook 51 (248 poems on 72 pages); Notebook 52 (308 poems on 72 pages); Notebook 53 (283 poems on 70 pages) Notebook 54 (138 poems on 60 pages); Notebook 55 (122 poems on 46 pages); Notebook 56 (314 poems on 150 pages); Notebook 57 (69 poems on 70 pages); Notebook 58 (57 poems on 69 pages); Notebook 59 (573 poems on 148 pages); Notebook 60 (289 poems on 61 pages); Notebook 61 (62 poems on ? pages); Notebook 62 (74 poems on 64 pages); Notebook 63 (92 poems on 72 pages); Notebook 64 (263 poems on 48 pages); Notebook 65 (indeterminate); Notebook 66 (78 poems on 32 pages); Notebook 67 (8 poems on 8 pages); Notebook 68 (68 poems on 84 pages); Notebook 69 (173 poems on 174 pages); Notebook 70 (106 poems on 180 pages);

Notebook 71 (185 poems on 186 pages); Notebook 72 (289 poems on 56 pages); Notebook 73 (19 poems on 22 pages); Notebook 74 (112 poems on 58 pages); Notebook 75 (52 poems on 24 pages); Notebook 76 (183 poems on 186 pages); Notebook 77 (183 poems on 188 pages); * [inexplicably original listing jumps from 77 to 85 (MISSING VOLUMES!)]* Notebook 78 (160 poems on 89 pages); Notebook 79 (166 poems on 83 pages); Notebook 80 (20 poems on 21 pages); Notebook 81 (174 poems on 96 pages); Notebook 82 (58 poems on 10 pages); Notebook 83 (1 poem on 49 pages); Notebook 84 (44 poems on 82 pages); Notebook 85 (427 poems on 91 pages); Notebook 86 (254 poems 183 pages); Notebook 87 (99 poems on 62 pages); Notebook 88 (52 poems on 27 pages); Notebook 89 (253 poems on 72 pages); Notebook 90 (68 poems on 36 pages); Notebook 91 (306 poems on 71 pages); Notebook 92 (66 poems on 35 pages); Notebook 93 (400 poems on 168 pages); Notebook 94 (423 poems on 166 pages); Notebook 95 (417 poems on 101 pages); Notebook 96 (745 poems on 156 pages); Notebook 97 (727 poems on 156 pages); Notebook 98 (780 poems on 150 pages); Notebook 99 (6 poems on 1 page); Notebook 100 (169 poems on 154 pages); Notebook 101 (719 poems on 158 pages); Notebook 102 (745 poems on 160 pages); Notebook 103 (762 poems on 158 pages); Notebook 104 (16 poems on on 56 pages); Notebook 105 (140 poems on 579 pages); Notebook 106 (152 poems on 507 pages); Notebook 107 (76 poems on 334 pages); Notebook 108 (163 poems on 164 pages); Notebook 109 (173 poems on 175 pages); Notebook 110 (186 poems on 176 pages); Notebook 111 (192 poems on 295 pages); Notebook 112 (50 poems on 6 pages); Notebook 113 (192 poems on 98 pages); Notebook 114 (158 poems on 143 pages); Notebook 115 (24 poems on 7 pages); Notebook 116 (183 poems on 184 pages); Notebook 117 (284 poems on 36 pages); Notebook 118 (256 poems on 950 pages); Notebook 119 (178 poems on 169 pages); Notebook 120 (114 poems on 247 pages); Notebook 121 (indeterminate); Notebook 122 (187 poems on 150 pages); Notebook 123 (1 poem on 1 page); Notebook 124 (174 poems on 112 pages); Notebook 125 (5

poems on 22 poems); Notebook 126 (473 poems on 136 pages); Notebook 127 (131 poems on 65 pages); Notebook 128 (45 poems on 25 pages); Notebook 129 (74 poems on 138 pages); Notebook 130 (346 poems on 162 pages); Notebook 131 (450 poems on 182 pages); Notebook 132 (410 poems on 600 pages); Notebook 133 (500 poems on 247 pages).

In all probability the 21 epics and anthologies listed by Mazisi Kunene in his Curriculum Vitae of 1995 by their actual title are included in the 133 Notebooks noted above.

This is the monumental patrimony that Mazisi Kunene has bestowed to South Africa .

Will future generations be able to inherit this extraordinary legacy.

Earlier today in Durban , South Africa , Mrs. Kunene has unveiled the gravestone of the great poet.

Claremont [Los Angeles], California, August 10, 2008.