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## World Literature and Decolonization

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○ Stefan HELGESSON

Stockholm University

**Abstract:** With remarkable force, “decolonization” re-entered the academic agenda some ten years ago. Having been an ambivalent historical experience undergirding postcolonial studies in its emergence in the 1980s, “decolonization” today is wielded as a concept and a rallying call. One of its rhetorical purposes is to set up an opposition between morally objectionable and morally progressive ways of constructing and sharing knowledge, yet the content of the term is often vague. In this context, world literature has much to contribute, both methodologically and critically. If, on the one hand, there is a decolonizing potential in the very ambition to make the world’s literary cultures visible, the critical dimension of world literature scholarship makes us aware of its colonial genealogy. Taking Mazisi Kunene’s epic poem from South Africa, *Emperor Shaka the Great*, as its key example, this article discusses how the dual potential of world literature might contribute to a “decolonized” mode of literary reading.

**Keywords:** decolonization, ecologies, epic, world literature, Mazisi Kunene, *Emperor Shaka the Great*

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With remarkable force, “decolonization” re-entered the academic agenda some ten years ago. Having been an ambivalent historical experience undergirding postcolonial studies in its emergence in the 1980s, “decolonization” today is wielded as a concept and a rallying call for transformed ways of producing knowledge. Although the term was first rebooted by South Africa’s #RhodesMustFall movement in 2015, it really took off after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the global impact of Black Lives Matter. Calls for decolonizing all manner of disciplines and practices now abound, especially—but not only—in the humanities and social sciences.

A recent literary example is Shuh-mei Shih’s presidential address at the 2022 ACLA conference, published under the title “Decolonizing US Comparative Literature.” Retracing the history of comparative literature through its most famous figures, including Erich Auerbach,

Leo Spitzer, Paul De Man, and Gayatri Spivak, Shih argues that the intellectual history of the discipline in the United States has ignored the constitutive world-shaping character of colonialism and its implications for the study of literature. Indeed, the very disciplinary content of comparative literature, with its explicit or implicit cultural hierarchies, has in her view been expressive of a colonizing mindset. Hence, a radical reckoning with the discipline's past and present is called for:

[W]hile we may critique comparative literature's Eurocentrism and positivism, that critique must also be recontextualized in its settler-colonial, imperialist, and racialized conditions in the United States. To critique Eurocent[r]ism is therefore not just to provincialize Europe and to add either minor European or non-European literatures to our purview of study but, more urgently and more radically, to critique how Eurocentric and even non-Eurocentric comparative literature is a form of settler-colonial knowledge. Simply adding the study of the non-European to try to equalize the playing field, as the case of anthropology has shown, does not equal decolonization. Understanding how the epistemological assumptions underlying Eurocentrism operates specifically in the settler academy in the United States is therefore necessary. (243)

Two points can be derived from this statement. Most importantly, it demonstrates how a debate on decolonization can be waged effectively only in relation to a defined context. There is no such thing as a "general" decolonization, although the currency and wide distribution of the term might give such an impression. Secondly, the discourse on decolonization as an epistemological project often relies on setting up an opposition between morally objectionable and morally progressive ways of constructing and sharing knowledge. In Shih's article, this rhetorical patterning is visible in the binary of settlers vs. the indigenous population, which means that "all exogenous people who enter the United States or live in the United States are complicit with settler colonialism, albeit with significant differentiations in race and class" (248). Indigeneity is here the one and only pole of moral unassailability, notwithstanding those other "differentiations" that could be understood, for example, in terms of migrant knowledge, Asian-American knowledge, or Black knowledge, as well as "settler-colonial knowledge." By privileging the settler-indigenous binary, Shih is in other words giving priority to just one of many legitimate ways of organizing a politics of knowledge.

For these two reasons, I am skeptical of the assumption that an appeal to "decolonization" automatically secures a morally desirable position. Given its contextual nature, decolonization is always a matter of decolonizing *from* a given power structure, but not automatically *to* a defensible new dispensation. As a case in point, the white revolutionaries in America in 1776 were certainly involved in a process of decolonization that made sense to them, even as they continued to own slaves and repress Native Americans. Similarly, as Mahmood Mamdani has pointed out, the white Afrikaners in South Africa undertook a highly successful project of decolonization in the early 20th century that entailed, among other things, the consolidation of Afrikaans (in resistance to English) as a language of literature, learning, and statecraft. This variety of decolonization then

fed, quite disastrously, into the creation of the apartheid state in the 1950s and 1960s. Similar risks can be registered today when, for example, Hindu right-wing nationalists in India adopt the vocabulary of decolonization to further their cause in such a way that it ostracizes the Muslim minority (Deepak; for a critique see Gopal). Nor does the appeal to indigeneity resolve the problem on its own, given that this can confront us with other dynamics of power and violence, such as that of the “Comanche empire” studied by Pekka Hämäläinen, or indeed the right-wing appeal to indigeneity (in opposition to migration) that can be heard in some circles in Europe today (see for example Zemmour; also Harrison). This should not lead to the twisted conclusion that there is anything inherently wrong in the ambition to decolonize; it just means that the term needs to be employed reflexively to do any ethically and politically meaningful work. It is in this spirit that I later in this article will be looking at the South African poet Mazisi Kunene’s epic *Emperor Shaka the Great*, which illustrates some of the above-mentioned paradoxes of decolonization.

But how does world literature fit into the picture? Shih’s attack on the legacy of US comparative literature is one in a long line of discipline-specific challenges that have been issued in recent years. There have been, in various tones and registers, comparable calls to decolonize anthropology, sociology, musicology, pedagogy, English studies, and so on (Ewell; Gupta and Stoolman; Meghji; Quayson and Mukherjee). The fuzziness of decolonization’s contemporary field of reference means that it lends itself to a variety of purposes, ranging from narrow interventions to more general calls for nothing less than a complete refusal of and resistance to modernity (Escobar; Mignolo). A main driving force in all these debates, however, seems to be the contemporary political crisis in those parts of the world that in the post-1945 period subscribed to the principles of liberal democracy. If anything, these high-minded principles, formulated through a vocabulary of citizenship and rights, have been exposed as hollow—or at the very least ineffectual—in view of the mass deaths of migrants attempting to reach Europe, racial violence in the USA, and illiberal authoritarianism popping up in various parts of the world.

World literature could be seen as a casualty of this political turn. Its latest upsurge, beginning in the 1990s, was buoyed by a genre of post-1989 optimism. Globalization was the order of the day, and it made sense to study—albeit also in a critical spirit—the ways in which literature was implicated in the meshing together of the world. Today, in an age of increasing geopolitical fractures, the idealistic strain of world literature struggles to claim legitimacy. Even so, it must be recognized that what was begun by (in particular) David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Pascale Casanova a quarter of a century ago has taken on a disciplinary life of its own with a rich methodological range. Developments that can be registered in, for example, the *Journal of World Literature* or the book series Cambridge Studies in World Literature (edited by Debjani Ganguly and Francesca Orsini), present us with a field of study whose empirical depth, linguistic diversity and methodological complexity far exceed those early contributions.

One thing we in the field have learnt over the years is just how relevant the imperial or colonial question continues to be for how we conceive of world literature. Advanced critiques such as Aamir Mufti’s *Forget English!*, Siraj Ahmed’s *Archaeology of Babel*, and Baidik Bhattacharya’s

*Colonialism, World Literature, and the Making of the Modern Culture of Letters* all make the point that, genealogically, world literature as an idea emerged in the crucible of European colonialism and the philological revolution of the late 18th century. “In order to comprehend the structure of literary relations that is now a planetary reality,” Mufti writes, “we need to grasp the role that philological Orientalism played in producing and establishing a method and a system for classifying and evaluating diverse forms of textuality, now all processed and codified uniformly as *literature*” (80). On a theoretical level, the argument is derived from Michel Foucault and Edward Said, insofar as it claims that world literature is expressive of a particular order of knowledge, or episteme, that structures the verbal cultures of the world according to a European epistemology. While this has considerable traction as a historical analysis of a body of European thought shortly before and after 1800, the assumption of such a fully unified, global codification of literature is empirically questionable, and the argument as a whole is not always relevant as a critique of world literature *today*. This is for the rather trivial reason that actually existing studies of world literature are too varied and also internally contradictory to be summed up in one formula.

In a recent chapter called “Decolonizing World Literature,” Debjani Ganguly observes, for example, that there is a striking difference between

influential theories of world literature that perpetuate a universalist narrative of European expansion and diffusion and the diversity of global comparatist work that illuminates cartographies of literary world-making across various scales and linguistic zones, and within temporal frames irreducible to European literary history or the capitalist world system. (421)

It is clearly the “global comparatist work” that stirs Ganguly’s sympathies, and it is here that much of the decolonizing potential of world literature lies. I would even add: this has *always* been a latent potential in world literature. Contrary to a single emphasis on its imperial origins, it makes more sense to consider its conceptual history as split and unstable. If we grant German thinkers of around 1800 precedence—and this is, after all, where we can begin to talk about world literature as a conceptual construct—we need to recognize the contradictory nature of their historical position. On the one hand, as Europeans, they were beneficiaries in a global context of the racial and economic privilege produced by European colonialism and capitalism; on the other, they were Germans who in their European context lacked a nation-state of their own and were still battling to emerge from under the shadow of the dominant power of France and French culture. They were in other words involved in a decolonizing project of their own, and Goethe’s pronouncements on world literature in 1827 came when that project was maturing. The first recorded usage of the word *Weltliteratur* dates from 1773 (D’haen 5), and prior to Goethe, the influential work of Johann Gottfried Herder shaped a distinct world literary ethos (in praise of poetry, *Dichtung*, and oral authenticity as opposed to the artificiality of “literature”) that was anti-imperialist in spirit, as John Noyes has demonstrated at length.

This does not mean that Herder and Goethe should have the last word. The point is instead

that world literature as a field of study is not historically doomed to reproduce just one imperial episteme, but rather that it emerges out of an uneasy dialectic between imperial and decolonial tendencies. For the world literature scholar desirous of pursuing a decolonizing trajectory, there is in other words much to build on, even as that dialectic also serves as a reminder of the inherent tensions in decolonization itself: one group's decolonization might transform into another group's subjugation under colonialism. This is a point we see illustrated in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's valorization of the vernacular literary revolutions in Renaissance Europe as an inspiration for African literatures, despite the fact—as he acknowledges—that that era also marked the beginning of European expansionism (*Something* 82–88).

In Ganguly's reasoning, we can see a similar equivocation. As a program of study, she proposes a decolonizing approach to world literature along the axes of history, geography, and language:

The historical axis illuminates the imperial backstory of current iterations of world literature in the rise of comparative philology and orientalist scholarship in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It also pluralizes the temporal framing of world literature by reaching back to medieval and early modern instances of literary worlding in Arabic, Chinese, Latin, Persian, and Sanskrit and situates the current valence of English in a literary *longue durée*. The cartographic axis highlights literary world-making athwart transregional zones such as the oceanic, the hemispheric, the archipelagic, and multilocal. [...] Finally, along the linguistic axis [...] the contemporary resonance of world literature and its counterpart, global anglophone, cannot be grasped unless we disaggregate English from imperial models of the past. (421)

Hence, decolonial complexity reigns in opposition to imperialist simplifications. And yet, one may mischievously ask, doesn't such a massively ambitious methodological extension of world literature itself exhibit tendencies towards imperial mastery? This is not the reading of Ganguly's program I wish to promote, but I mention it to show that decolonization is not a clear-cut issue of right or wrong ways of producing knowledge. Bhattacharya's useful identification of three phases in the intellectual project of decolonization may help to clarify this point. If the first, anticolonial phase was about recuperating a lost autonomy, and the second was marked by the postcolonial realization that no such pure autonomy was to be restored (registered in the rise of "postcolonial theory"), the current and third phase is in his view more interested "in unraveling the global and connected histories of some of the central categories of thought with which we operate" (239). Albeit not the most common conception of epistemic decolonization today, it is one that I can concur with and that foregrounds the field of world literature. Hence, the strongest decolonial potential of world literature studies may lie precisely in the exploration of what Bhattacharya describes as "the multicultural, multilingual, and often intermedial genealogies of thought categories that shape modernity and its intellectual culture" (239).

Mazisi Kunene's Zulu epic *Emperor Shaka the Great*, shaped as it was in a contradictory

confluence of languages, media, and spatial orientations, provides us with an ideal testing ground for what a decolonizing mode of world literary study in Ganguly and Bhattacharya's spirit might look like. A singular figure in modern South African literature, Mazisi Kunene built an enormous body of work in the isiZulu language, much of which still remains unpublished (Masilela and Okoro 130). He did so mostly in exile, having left South Africa to study at SOAS in London in 1959, and later taking up a position as Professor of African Literature at UCLA. It would not be until the advent of democracy in the 1990s that he returned to South Africa. In the years of exile, he worked closely with the ANC and was staunchly committed to the struggle against apartheid. At the same time, precisely because of his exile, he became detached from cultural developments in a rapidly changing South Africa.

Born the same year as the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, Kunene partook in the early international formation of African literature as a field of criticism in the 1960s. In aesthetic and linguistic terms, his position was strongly Africanist. He gave no quarter whatsoever to those (like Achebe) who argued that a colonial language such as English could be appropriated and reshaped to further the agendas of African writers and dismissed the debate on whether African literature should be written in African languages as "inane" ("Problems" 44). His conception of language and its relation to literature was in other words normative and, in a manner of speaking, circular: literature is expressive of culture; culture determines language; language determines culture. In the African context, this strong advocacy of indigenous languages is mostly associated with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, but Kunene preceded him.

Kunene's conception of language emerged out of his early training in the forms and traditions of Zulu oral poetry. By his own account, in resistance to white supremacy, his parents forbade him to speak anything other than isiZulu at home (27). His talents became evident at a young age and his dedication to composing poetry in isiZulu would remain constant throughout his career. However—and here we see the major contradiction that underwrote his position—his poetry would mainly become known in English translation, that then served as a springboard for further translation. When *Emperor Shaka the Great* was translated into Japanese, this was done from English (Kambayashi). Indeed, Kunene's English translation was long the only "original" in circulation. It was not until a decade after Kunene's death, in 2017, that his Shaka epic finally appeared in print form in isiZulu (Kunene, *uNodumehlezi kaMenzi*).

His international *and* national standing during his lifetime was thereby directly reliant on the English language and the print medium, despite his ideological resistance to both. It was also his personal mobility in exile as an ANC-activist belonging to an "international" of Third World writers during the Cold War—notably the Afro-Asian Writers Bureau—that facilitated the limited transnational dissemination of his work. His two visits to Japan, as Kambayashi has shown, were instrumental both to the sharpening of Japan's policies on apartheid and to the translation of his own work into Japanese.

Considering the world literature/decolonization nexus, we can see how ambivalent Kunene's position was. He entered a world literary circuit because of his anti-colonial and anti-apartheid



commitments. Added force was then lent to these commitments by his stature as a poet and his belonging in the Third World network of anti-colonial writers—which resulted, among other things, in his famous foreword to the English translation of Aimé Césaire’s négritude poem *Cahiers d’un retour au pays natal* (Kunene, Introduction). At the same time, the circulation of his work was premised on what might be called the coloniality of English: the formerly imperial language now transforming itself into a global language. In these respects, the critiques of world literature referenced above apply. Kunene *as* and *in* world literature becomes exemplary of world literature’s colonial structures, and “decolonization” primarily amounts to a continuing critique of those structures.

Beyond such an analysis, however, it is important not only to distinguish between different types of circulation, but also to be attentive to their mutual interaction. Alexander Beecroft’s typology of different literary “ecologies” might help to clarify the matter. Ranging from the minimal form of circulation (typically oral), that he calls “epichoric,” to the maximal global form, these typologies can present a differentiated conception of world literature. It then becomes evident that Kunene’s work inserts itself into a number of different ecologies and becomes directed at a disparate constellation of implied readers (and listeners). For ideological reasons, despite his *de facto* reliance also on written scholarship and literature, he always insisted that the Zulu oral tradition was the only true source of his own poetry. In its primary form, prior to recording technologies, this oral tradition belonged to a local, epichoric ecology, reliant on performance and with limited circulation beyond a regionally delimited speech community. Kambayashi also makes the important point that Kunene establishes a strong indexical relationship between the English translation and the isiZulu version, such that the translation draws the reader’s attention to idioms and forms derived from isiZulu. In addition, however, by eliding the difference between “Zulu” and “African,” Kunene claimed to represent a continent-wide mode of literary composition and performance (Brown). This accorded with a strong tendency in the 1960s, when orality was seen by many African writers and Africanist critics as the key source of authenticity for African literature (Irele 23–38). By extension, as Eileen Julien argued in an important critique of this position, orality became seen—problematically—as *essentially* African, and not simply as a medium among other media the African writers might use.

It is not immediately evident how Beecroft’s typology fits this Africanist case, but I would suggest that it resembles his “panchoric” ecology, which builds on the example of how a pool of shared myths circulated (mainly through the epics) during antiquity among separate Greek city states in the Mediterranean, cultivating in this way a sense of cultural union. Interestingly, Beecroft makes the point that panchoric culture

may present itself as the artless compilation of epichoric materials, but in practice it creates entirely new cultural artifacts that frequently all but obliterate the traces of what went before. What gets understood as “local” in the presence of panchoric culture is often a fiction of the local, a generic element in a set rather than a genuinely autonomous tradition. (65)

From such an angle, the local embeddedness of an epic such as *Emperor Shaka the Great* cannot quite be dismissed as a fiction, yet it does become inscribed as a generic element in a broad tapestry of narratives that are brought together by the project of Africanism, which appeals to internally differentiated communities across Africa and the diaspora. The Shaka epic is written in such a way as to strengthen such a projected community, defined in racial, anticolonial terms. In Book 11, “The White Strangers,” Kunene provides a compelling and disparaging account of the early encounters between white settlers and the Zulus. Here, the Zulus are fully confident of their superiority and mostly bemused by the peculiar habits of the strangers “red in colour” (*Shaka* 208). This “panchoric,” Africanist world literary ecology works however ironically in tandem with another of Beecroft’s ecologies: the imperial ecology. It is of course the history of the English language, Kunene’s choice to translate the epic into English, and his own presence in imperial centers such as London and, later, USA, that motivates such a designation. Counter-intuitive and even provocative though it may seem, it is thanks to that imperial ecology (which has since become global) that my own position as reader of Kunene is enabled.

The fourth ecology in which *Emperor Shaka the Great* could be placed is the national one—which in this instance means South African literature. Perhaps surprisingly, this is where the position and reception of the epic becomes most uncertain. In the 1980s, it was banned by the apartheid government’s board of censors, and hence reduced to an extremely limited, clandestine circulation. Later, more than a decade into the democratic era when Kunene himself had returned to the country, Brown noted how the epic was revered in South Africa but not really read, and that its emphasis on Zulu national pride was not without its contradictions in the South African case. Without going too deeply into that complexity, it should be noted that democratic South Africa is a country with twelve official languages (including sign language) and that there are, linguistically speaking, four major African population groups and several smaller ones. In that context, the story of Shaka could easily be read as the story of one particular group’s domination over others. Thomas Mofolo’s novel *Chaka*, the early and major South African classic that was completed in seSotho in 1909, conveys much more of this ambiguity than Kunene’s panegyric.

Notwithstanding, it needs to be stated that Kunene’s *Emperor Shaka the Great* is a remarkable work of literature that deserves much more critical attention than it has received. Divided into 17 “books” (which would have been “songs” in Homeric epics), it sustains, over several hundred pages, an epic high style that is rare in any period and extremely unusual in the modern era. We see this, for example, in the early court scene where the future destiny of Shaka is foreshadowed:

The diviner spoke at Jama’s Royal House and said:  
“Look! the fierce contest of the hurrying rivers;  
One river swallows the other near the ocean,  
Turning itself into a gigantic river  
To enter the ocean triumphantly  
Provoking a towering mountain of waves.



Turn your eyes to the turbulence of the winds.  
Watch them as they skirt the central region like a hunting lion;  
Watch them as they leap like the angered heads of the whirlwinds.  
Trees are torn by their roots—  
They are flung into the hills  
To give eternal fertility to the red earth.  
On the ground shall grow the young plant of fire. (Kunene, *Emperor* 2)

The excerpt shows how Kunene crafted the translation as a work of poetry in its own right. In his prefatory note, he says that he has tried to give “a faithful but free translation of the original” (xxvii), adapting the length and style to the requirements of English. In the quotation, one may note how the rhythm is driven by numerous poetic techniques such as assonance (“towering mountains”), alliteration (“[...] waves [...] winds”; “Turn [...] turbulence”; “Trees [...] torn”) and anaphora (“Watch them [...] Watch them”). The scale of the vision in the excerpt can be described as sublime, which is the rule throughout the epic, although it also skillfully shifts between intimate moments—as in the dialogues between Shaka and his mother Nandi—and mass scenes, specifically of warfare.

Kunene claims to be historically accurate, and has also incorporated praise poems (or what he calls “poems of excellence”) that belong to the poetic legacy of the Zulus. This makes each book dense with allusion, yet the heroic narrative arc, leading from adversity to triumph and eventually betrayal by his brothers, never vanishes from sight. Shaka is in Kunene’s view unambiguously a hero and a genius, and his epic is intended to “cut through the thick forest of propaganda and misrepresentation that have been submitted by colonial reports and historians” (xiii). The portrayal of the Zulu king is thus thoroughly positive, but nonetheless multidimensional. Shaka’s choice not to raise a child of his own, contrary to custom and against the will of his mother, is one such detail that demonstrates the complex nature of his character.

In these respects, *Emperor Shaka the Great* can be described as an exemplary document of literary decolonization. It builds on indigenous forms of poetry; it resists colonial representations; it is composed (originally) in an African language; it presents a complicated yet supremely impressive Black protagonist; it champions the cause of liberation through African unity. Paradoxically, however, its decolonial stature becomes clearer the further away from the South African context one moves. As Brown notes, Kunene’s formative influences in the 1960s and 70s were *négritude* and Black radicalism in the USA, and his epic responds—in a more cogent and literary manner than just about any comparable work at the time—to the panchoric call of those movements. In relation to the South African scene, however, Kunene was out of touch with the urban sensibilities of Black Consciousness (BC), which had become a force to reckon with in the 1970s and shaped an entire generation of writers. BC can be described, retrospectively, as a movement of cultural and psychological decolonization (Helgesson), yet its approach was different to Kunene’s, not least because of the apartheid government’s co-optation of African languages as

an instrument of rule by splitting up the African population into neatly separated ethnicities. What this meant, in practice, was that schoolchildren were taught in their assumed home language in primary school. In the infamous system known as Bantu education, this meant that black children were subjected to second-rate teaching with propagandistic school books in African languages produced by the department of education (Hyslop). In sum, then, Kunene's project

may have accorded with the Africanist agendas of the United States—the hagiography of the institutions of African tradition and history—but the poem seemed contradictory, anachronistic and distant because of its lofty diction, the curious timelessness and placelessness of its Western epic evocations, its promotion of “tribal” influences and forms and its use of Zulu in the original. (Brown 93)

Two decades have passed since this assessment, and it seems that the current context of reception in South Africa is far more favorable to Kunene's epic. The biggest television event in South Africa in 2023 was the screening of the lavishly produced series *Shaka Ilembe* (“Shaka the axe”), with all of its dialogue in isiZulu. The screenplay built on a wide range of sources, including *Emperor Shaka the Great*, and the series as a whole was well-received in South Africa. Just as importantly, the past decade's debate on decolonization has had a tremendous impact on South Africa (Jansen) and puts the epic in a different position vis-à-vis its potential local readership. Rather than seem out of touch, it now responds to a contemporary need for Africa-centered narratives and myths in South Africa and beyond.

In scholarly circles, Lupenga Mphande, Ntongela Masilela, and Uhuru Phalafala have contributed significantly to placing Kunene firmly in a black South African intellectual history, effectively “repatriating” him to his origins, but also—in Phalafala's case—positioning him in relation to diasporic histories of South African writers. From this contemporary scholarly perspective, Kunene's exile was an important but passing deviation from his South African belonging. Mphande postulates a passing of the torch from the preceding generation to Kunene himself, who was “particularly fascinated by R. R. R. Dhlomo's and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi's deployment of Africa's cultural past as a launching desk into the vision of a glorious future and their appropriation of the Zulu kings' legacies” (114). Masilela, who knew Kunene closely, also sees him as a towering figure whose “unsurpassable poetic act was a desperate and dramatic attempt to resurrect African cosmology in the modern African world [...] he may appear to posterity as the last great diviner of African cosmology” (Masilela and Okoro 123). Yet, Masilela also speaks of a sharp disagreement between him and Kunene over the expression of gratitude in *Emperor Shaka the Great* towards Gatsha Buthelezi (*Shaka* xi), the then leader of a Zulu nationalist party called Inkatha that became a serious enemy of the African National Congress (Masilela and Okoro 133). Much earlier, as we soon shall see, Mbongeni Malaba had taken Kunene to task for fudging the less appealing aspects of Shaka's rule.

While this stronger symbolic positioning of Kunene and *Emperor Shaka the Great* seems

evident today, at the textual level it remains open to divergent interpretations (as strong literary texts tend to do). On the one hand, it is not far-fetched to claim that it glorifies war and conquest on behalf of the Zulu nation. Repeatedly, the speakers in the epic vilify their “enemies” and justify their acts of violence, such as here:

The defeated re-emerge, again and again. They launch new wars.  
[...]  
Yet victory must be final.  
The enemy must be chased and trapped in his own home.  
Then he shall not raise his head again. (51)

Or here, where a large gathering eulogizes Shaka:

The whole crowd sang in one proud voice of triumph:  
“You conquered all nations—  
Where now shall you send the fighting men?  
O! Where else can we find the stubborn rulers?  
You who conquered all nations, tell us.” (Kunene, *Emperor* 239)

On the other hand, such sentiments are tempered by passages that warn rulers not to abuse their power and that their legitimacy relies on the consent of the people. Shaka, once again, is seen as an example of the wise and strong ruler—yet it is undeniably that case that the vision of an ideal African sovereign order in the epic is premised on a “pax zuluana,” as we can see in this passage in Shaka’s voice:

I shall send messengers to all neighbouring nations  
To tell them: the Palm Race [meaning Africans] must eat from the same bowl.  
[...]  
We, the nations of the Palm Race,  
Shall outwit and stop the vermin of over-the-seas nations.  
Their fanatical love for the land threatens the very life of humankind. (373)

Of this Malaba said that “[t]he ‘glass’ through which the rise of the first Zulu king is filtered selects only those rays that, in the writer’s view, best illuminate Shaka. Other perspectives are rigorously excluded” (478). Indeed, Malaba questioned the image of a benign power presented by Kunene: “What motivates those who relinquish their sovereignty in the face of the powerful Zulu army: fear? prudence? or a genuine desire for integration? These questions are not even asked, let alone answered, in Kunene’s epic” (478). Hence, in terms of its decolonial impetus, Kunene’s epic prompts us once again to ask more precisely what it is being decolonized from, on whose behalf—

and if, in so doing, other dimensions of decolonization are being obscured.

To conclude, then, my initial remarks in this article concerned the conceptualization of world literature in relation to decolonization, and from there to systemic aspects of Kunene's circulation. The closer we engage with the particulars of the text, however, the more reticulated our understanding of the epic becomes. My own reading position is, inevitably, that of an outsider: at best, I can decode (some) isiZulu sentences with the help of a dictionary, and my understanding of the Zulu cosmology that is of such importance to Kunene is limited. Hence, my own account is dependent on Kunene's English translation. This readerly predicament speaks directly to the world literary question as I have discussed it in this article. Understood in terms of *reading experiences*, and not only as a system of circulation and consecration, world literature serves to name a practice of reading at different degrees of remove, be it linguistic, cultural, or historical—or all three at once. World literary reading in that sense is not fundamentally different from reading “in general” (to the extent that this always involves some encounter with alterity), but instantiates a wider range of possible readerly positions, as Beecroft's heuristic notion of literary ecologies helps to clarify. *Emperor Shaka the Great* is one such work that presents itself very differently in relation to divergent contexts of reception. Most importantly, it shows how decolonization—once we move beyond its superficial polemical usage—presents a fundamental scholarly challenge to world literature studies. A proper account of Kunene's epic would require profound knowledge of isiZulu and Zulu history, but also of the transnational and translational entanglements I have sketched out above. In brief, decolonized reading requires patience and attentiveness, and a constant awareness of the provisionality of one's own knowledge claims.

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