

Shaka

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IN the African world the family is an all-inclusive social phenomenon involving a large number of individuals who may be linked by a common ancestry. The ideals that are celebrated within such a large family unit are those that emphasize continuity, participatory activities and fulfilment through wider circles of relations. The implication of these factors on the nature of the literary idiom and form cannot be over-emphasized. They mean that literature, as a social product, must be celebratory and public, and above all focus on group participation and performance. Literature, if it is to be meaningful in such a society, must utilize the oral language and group action (drama, song, mime, dance) to heighten its meaning.

Looking at Zulu literature in particular, it is important also to emphasize that the heroic poem or epic is integrally linked to events as they happen in society. Its focus is on the extent to which such events exemplify the social ethic. The very process of electing what to celebrate is a serious one which engages the poet's integrity and intellectual perception. The poet in this sense is viewed as a thinker, as the highest whose status is inviolable.

His poetic statement must incorporate the highest social truths. He not only reports events, but, after careful selection, sees them to affirm the ideals of the society. There is nothing deeply personal in his praise for the hero. His statements of approval or disapproval celebrate the permanence of the social order. He is a performer whose utterances must always be directed at a public audience, a philosopher who must link the particular with the universal, and a historian whose knowledge of detail must be attested by a highly tentative and critical audience.

What political factors led to the major heroic period that brought about the flowering of the Zulu heroic epic?

From about the middle of the seventeenth century, the African peoples in southern Africa went through a period of intensive land crisis. This was due to population growth which led to crowding in that part of the continent, to the mounting pressure arising from colonial wars and slave raids by the Portuguese and the Dutch, and to the fact that the economic life of the African people centred on animal husbandry and agriculture. The impact

The legendary exploits of Shaka (1786-1828), founder of the Zulu empire, gave rise to a number of epic poems which rank among the finest in the literature of southern Africa and are still a source of inspiration to many African writers. In his dramatic poem Shaka, which he dedicated to "the Bantu martyrs of South Africa", the philosopher-poet and former President of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, put these words into the mouth of the famed warrior-chief:

"It is not hate to love one's people,
I say there is no peace under arms,
no peace under oppression,
No brotherhood without equality. I
wanted all men to be brothers."

Above, Shaka portrayed by the Senegalese artist Alpha Diallo.

of these factors was to destabilize the whole region. It was a period during which many national States emerged, each boasting an heroic leadership by a particular individual or family. One of these was the Zulu State.

At first it was a small State, often forced to pay tribute to more powerful States such as the Ndwandwe. At other times it was part of a loose confederacy. Its decisive period came with the emergence of Shaka as its political leader. Through outstanding military genius and astute political leadership, he subdued and integrated many once-powerful States within just over a decade, from 1815 to 1828.

Shaka not only initiated unique styles and methods of warfare, he also evolved a type of leadership that sought to reinstate the social law, which had been violated by selfish leadership. This social law was, according to Zulu thought, embodied in the Sacred Codes of the Ancestors.

Shaka's leadership was patterned on the idea of service in which the leader himself took equal risks with the rest of the population. One of the greatest doctrines that characterized the Zulu State became that of selflessness in rendering service to the community. This was coupled with the notion of merit as a criterion for leadership at all levels.

the Great

An analysis of the impact and the influence of the Shakan epic is inevitably an analysis of the transformation of Zulu society and its affirmation of the Law of Selflessness. While in other societies this may be viewed in moral terms, in Zulu society, influenced by Shaka's ideas, it became a law. Punishment for disobedience of this law ranged from ostracism by the community to, in extreme cases, death.

It is natural that the Shakan heroic epic should have celebrated these virtues. The celebration was woven around a specific series of events; it ceased to be a didactic and moralistic statement. The poetic style underwent a dramatic change to convey a sense of urgency. A new technique evolved that was deeply concerned with projecting the social message. The very selection of metaphors and symbols is testimony of a society concerned with high achievements and high goals. Courage and initiative were relevant not only to wartime situations but to all social occasions.

Thus the first part of the Shakan heroic epic is a cosmic address to all forces, real and imaginary. The hero is depicted as breaking through all obstacles. He is possessed with the spirit of his forefathers, symbolized in Ndaba. He is the will of the Ancestral powers. He is ferocious in battle; he has subdued nation after nation. He has attained his fame, the poet says, through his wisdom and his skill on the battlefield.

Wild one! Restless power, son of Ndaba
You who were the whirlwind of the Mbelebe
lebele brigade
Who raged among the vast villages of men
Until morning they tumbled down one
after another.
You whose fame spread effortlessly, great
son of Menzi!
Shaka the Invincible, who is not subdued
like water
Great battleaxe that flashed over others
by its sharpness
Shaka! I fear to call you by name
Because you were the ruler
Who counted multiple feats of battle
Whistler who responded like a lion
You prepared for battle in the thick of
the forest
You were the madman who was the spectacle
in the eyes of men!



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Descendants of the Nguni people, the Zulus were given their name by their warrior-king Shaka. In a famous book on Shaka, the well-known author Thomas Mofolo (1877-1948), of Lesotho, who wrote in the Sotho language (belonging to the Bantu linguistic group), recounts that a soothsayer suggested to Shaka that he should rename his clan. Looking up to the stormy sky above him, Shaka cried out "Zulu! Amazulu!" (The sky! The clan of the sky!). Then he spoke to his men, saying: "Today you have vanquished all your enemies and this is why I have chosen for you a worthy name." Left, a kraal, or village, similar to those in which Shaka and his contemporaries would have lived. A kraal usually houses a family group and consists of a number of huts arranged in a circle around an enclosure for cattle.

► In the elaborate poetic restatement and dramatization of Shaka's life the numerous episodes are carefully selected for their national and public significance. They serve not only as points of historical reference but also as affirmations of commitment to public service. The leader has acquired the right to leadership, not by virtue of his birth, but through communally approved social actions.

Throughout the epic there is no reference to Shaka's personal appearance. Instead, events assume a primary symbolic significance; their meaning, scope and variety are built up in a series of dramatic statements. Whereas pre-Shakan poetry had concentrated on the person of the leader, the poetry of the Shakan period ignores the leader and concentrates on the event. Persons are only mentioned in order to stress socially significant events.

It is unfortunate in a sense that evaluation of this great heroic epic is today based purely on recorded material. The heroic epic of the Shakan era was never meant to be read but to be verbalized, acted, dramatized and heightened in meaning through public performance. The highly skilled use of ideophonic sounds, for instance, is lost on the silent page. What we read therefore is only a skeletal part of the epic. Besides, the epic must be performed before an active and appreciative audience; its "private" form cannot fully convey its public meanings.

It should not be assumed that the Shakan heroic epic is a piece of archaic literature. Ever since its inception it has exercised enormous influence on Zulu literature. Virtually every African child in South Africa is taught to recite one or more excerpts from it, and by virtue of its highly sophisticated style, it has influenced the compactness of the Zulu poetic idiom and guaranteed that performance of the heroic poem shall not die. Many public gatherings in modern South Africa feature performances by poets who model their public mes-

sages on the heroic epic of the Shakan period.

Since the advent of Christianity, some communities have taken to public dramatizations of the achievements of Jesus Christ, which are invariably modelled on

A military genius of the highest order, Shaka created the powerful fighting machine that would later offer stern resistance to colonial occupation. He divided the army into regiments based on age groups and distinguished by special markings on their shields and various combinations of headdress and ornamentation. His soldiers went barefoot, "because sandals prevented them from marching fast" (Mofolo); they were equipped with large shields and armed with short stabbing assegais which meant that they had to fight at close quarters.



the Shakan epic. This is not to say that before the Shakan epic there was no powerful Zulu heroic poetry; there was. But never had there been a heroic epic as elaborate, as powerful, as idiomatically complex or as intrinsically geared to the public event. The Shakan epic has permeated all subsequent poetry to the present day. Its impact has even been felt in poetry composed for children. All Zulu literature since that time has specifically focussed on the event rather than the individual.

Many Zulu poets whose works today are in written form have taken the great heroic verses of the Shakan period as their model. The influence of these verses on the work of Vilakazi, the outstanding modern Zulu poet, is particularly evident in his successful volume *Amal'ezulu*. My own epic, *Emperor Shaka the Great*, was deeply influenced by the idiom and style of the Shakan epic. Indeed, I consider Magolwane and Mshongweni, the great Zulu poets of the Shakan era, as my true masters. The combination of the Shakan heroic idiom with the discipline of converting oral literature into written form has created a new and original challenge to a type of poetry that had become precise and technically correct, but dead.

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