



Michael Chapman (1945 -) is a prominent academic, literary critic and commentator on southern African literature.

Born in Durban, he went to school in Kimberley and, as a qualified schoolteacher, he taught in Durban schools before continuing his studies in London. With degrees from the universities of London, Natal, and Unisa, Dr Chapman lectured at Unisa in Pretoria before, in 1984, returning to the city of his birth as Professor of English at the then University of Natal. Having retired in 2010, he continues as an emeritus professor and fellow to contribute to research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He is also a research fellow of the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study.

A-rated as a world leader on South African literature, Michael Chapman has published numerous articles, anthologies and literary studies for which he has won several awards including the prestigious Bill Venter/Altron prize for his history, *Southern African Literatures*. This is first study to consider all the language-specific literatures of the southern African subcontinent as part of a single, though multi-perspectival, 'story'.

Chapman's literary output has considerable links to KwaZulu-Natal. He wrote the first study of the Durban-based poet, Douglas Livingstone; he is one of the editors of the 4-volume, collected works of Roy Campbell; and he is co-editor of a facsimile edition of the short-lived but – in its time in the mid-1920s – controversial journal, *Voorslag* (published by Campbell, William Plomer and Laurens van der Post). In 2012 he delivered the English Academy of Southern Africa Commemorative Lecture on the Durban-born author/journalist, Lewis Nkosi.

The following extract is taken from Chapman's collection of essays, *Art Talk, Politics Talk*:

The Praises of King Shaka, Then and Now

A re-interpretation of Shaka hero and Shaka villain, as Shaka human being, strikes at the core of traditional white views of the *mfecane* [the scattering of the 'tribes' in the 1820s]: that Shaka's conquests were those of a savage force in defiance of rationality or analysis. Instead, revisionism sees a Zulu Kingdom not entirely secure in its military might, but having to respond to a conflictual state of affairs. Accordingly Shaka, undoubtedly an exceptional being, may also be understood as vulnerable in relation to surrounding shifts of authority, influence and territorial occupation consequent upon the beginnings of the colonial advance into older Zulu social organisations. Shaka may be regarded, therefore, as both belligerent and insecure; his wars both aggressive and defensive, expansive and conservative; and in re-locating his praises in the living past, we might want to consider whether the hyperbole and relentless catalogue of victories ('he slaughtered Sikhunyana born to Zwide') feature simply as the documentation of a bloody age, or whether the boasting style hints at a more complicated, even devious, rhetorical act: an act concerning the obligation of the *imbongi* (the court poet) to bolster the image of the Kingdom at the same time as he fictionalises its immunity from intrusions on its borders. If we are prepared to grant the praiser his own humanity in a psychology of poetry and social duty, in which he has to tell lies truer than the truth, we may become attuned to the resonance of several lines and phrases that persist in James Stuart's variations of Shaka's praises. When the praiser announces that Shaka's name is fear – 'Shaka! I fear to speak the name Shaka!' – the thrall of admiration might have been mingled, almost imperceptibly, with the thrall of terror as the court poet, in resorting to the grand, ceremonial statement, attempted to conceal the dangerous political situation from his powerful, but explicably human, King.

After Shaka's assassination in 1828, the colonial intrusion took root in Zululand, and in Dingana's reign the praiser Magolwana, in lines attributed by Stuart's respondents to his invention, eulogised the living-dead as he sounded the death knell of a heroic age of action:

Though people may die, their praises remain,

These will remain and bring grief to them,

Remain and lament for them in the empty houses.

(tr. isiZulu, D. McK. Malcolm)

The words echo eerily in KwaZulu-Natal: a province that continues to experience tensions, even killings, in rivalries between the Zulu past and the Zulu present, between the rural powerbase of the IFP and the urban strongholds of the ANC. In a society in which the remnants of Zulu monarchical tradition vie with a Western-derived Constitution of individual rights, Magolwana's words issue a warning not to underestimate the complexities of people in history.

Ancient royal praises are as much about processes of modernisation as about glorious chiefdoms. At least, that is how they should be understood to *live* in their reception.

('From Shaka's Court to the Trade Union Rally', *Art Talk, Politics Talk*, 35 - 36)

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(For a complete bibliography, go to: www.michaelchapman.co.za)