

# Re/visions of History in the Submission and De/colonisation of Southern Africa

Michael Meyer

In his impressive history of *Southern African Literatures*, Michael Chapman juxtaposes African visions of cyclical history and European visions of linear history: The Southern African oral tradition knows “a long past accumulating its experience for the present [...] with almost no future” (1996, 52).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the colonisers’ Christian model of history is characterised by linear progress towards a secular and spiritual future (52). If we take a closer look at some written versions of history between the 1860s and the 1960s, we realise that this dichotomy is hardly substantiated. Christian colonisers often understand their lives as a (cyclical) *repetition* of the Israelites’ history. Their arrival in the promised land marks the definite *end of progress* that asserts their irreversible domination of Southern Africa. The African combination of cyclical models of history with Christian linear ones is more complex and more progressive than colonial versions of history. Since Europeans have frequently legitimised the colonisation and subjection of Southern Africa with a Christian emplotment of their history, Christian African authors often revised that pattern for the purpose of decolonisation.

Colonial writers tend to construct a history which begins with the European victory over Africans as the origin of progress and civilisation in Africa (Morris: 1965, 11-12). Europeans justify colonisation by their cultural superiority due to Christianity and to evolution. They generally place European progress in opposition to the arrested development of Africans, who in their eyes represent an earlier stage of humanity (White: 1978, 178). Colonials try to arrest history at the time of their domination in order to escape unsettling changes due to the rise of Africans or the decline of Europeans.<sup>2</sup> It is my intention to present three versions of colonial history which legitimise the British subjection of Africans before I turn to several revisions of history by African writers who combine oral traditions with Christian ideas in order to promote decolonisation.

David Livingstone begins his famous book *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (1858) with an account of his ancestors’ history, which provides the pattern for his role in Africa within the framework of a “kind, overruling Providence” (11). According to Livingstone, his Christian Scottish ancestors lived among the heathen Highlanders, who allegedly were cattle thieves, as the contemporary Cape-

1 As Duncan Brown points out in his analysis of oral praise poems, oral historiography continually recreates and revises history in a present perspective (1997, 28-30). Oral historiography with its implicit acknowledgement of the present construction of the past is at least in this respect more modern than nineteenth-century assumptions of objective historiography which seems to transpire in imperialist or colonialist versions of history.

2 Peter O. Stummer points out that late Victorian imperialism displaces socialism and feminism from the social and political agenda (1983, 227). The colonial enterprise allows British men to neglect demands for emancipation because the colonials can retain traditional male values and feudal attitudes abroad which are contested by women and the lower classes at home (1983,241).

Caffers (2).<sup>3</sup> The Highlanders were civilised by their submission to *bénéficient* Protestantism and to the authority of the law (2, 7). Livingstone wants to further Christian civilisation by transferring the Scots' progress to the Africans. He maintains that the conversion to Christianity goes hand in hand with social and economic development. However, Livingstone runs into difficulties with his model of parallel progress of Christian civilisation and prosperity because he notes that the Boers cynically justify subjecting Africans to unpaid slave labour by their Christian self-image of being God's chosen people, who are "the rod of divine vengeance on the heathen" (37). In a self-defeating argument that betrays his own racism, Livingstone complains that the trekkers "become as degraded as the blacks, whom the stupid prejudice against color leads them to detest" (36). His arguments about the Boers efface the moral difference between heathen and Christian, black and white, savage and civilised, backward and advanced. However, Livingstone argues that British commerce is not only morally superior to Boer slavery but also more profitable.

The missionary is fascinated by the potential progress of British capitalism to the detriment of local Boer peasants, as he stresses the mutual material benefit that would ensue if the Africans cultivated cotton for the *British market* and bought *British weapons* in return - to fight the Boers (Livingstone, 720). Because of the massive evidence of degradation among Africans and European settlers alike, Livingstone proclaims that it is the British mission to further progress by subjecting Africans and settlers to British law, to Protestant churches and to capitalist commerce. Implicitly, Livingstone himself is the ideal herald of progress in Africa because the Scottish missionary and doctor is a representation of a people who rose from being heathen to Christian and enlightened British subjects.

The cynical arch coloniser Cecil Rhodes secularises religious ideas in his Darwinian vision of the manifest destiny of the British race in history. He proposes to found a quasi-religious "Church for the extension of the British Empire" (Rotberg: 1988,100). He even conceives of himself as someone like the Saviour of the world who fulfils the quasi-divine imperial mission to promote British civilisation in the world (Stead: 1902, 98). He claims that the "British Empire stands for the protection of all [sic!] the inhabitants of a country in life, liberty, property, fair play and happiness" (Rotberg, 103). Rhodes's behaviour contradicts every single word of this noble claim which masks his crude desire for power. Whereas Livingstone shrewdly combines sincere moral and economic arguments in order to justify colonisation, Rhodes merely pays lip-service to human rights. Rhodes' Big Brother vision of the total control of the colonials' and the Africans' minds via education and the mass media (Rotberg, 416) in the future betrays his implicit anxiety that British power and superiority is not as unassailable as it seems.

Even if John Buchan in his novel *Prester John* (1910) shares Livingstone's and Rhodes' imperial zeal, he seems to have been more aware of the subversive potential of African history. Buchan imagines how Africans appropriate the medieval Christian legend of the exotic, powerful priest and king Prester John for African imperialism in a

3 Livingstone supports this vision of temporal stasis in Africa with Egyptian pictures of weavers and bakers, which illustrate contemporary southern African craftsmen (215,434).

circular model of history. An African visionary with the derogatory name of Laputa wears the mask of Christianity and uses Prester John's royal insignia in order to proclaim himself as a new African King. He will lead an insurrection in order to end British rule in South Africa and to establish an African empire that reminds the English of the warrior King Chaka's rule of terror. Laputa embodies the colonisers' fears of the Christian Africans' emancipation and of a repetition of anti-imperialist rebellions, such as the ones in Haiti or in India (Buchan: 1994, 52-54, 102).<sup>4</sup> Buchan destroys Laputa's self-image as an African saviour by likening Laputa to Lucifer, whose antagonist Crawford is given the epithet of the saviour of the country after having assisted in Laputa's fall.

It is particularly revealing that Arcoll, an intelligence officer and a reliable authority, denounces the African perversion of the historical memory of Prester John to a religious cult (Buchan, 72), whereas the British upgrade their own imperial history with religious metaphors. The novel contrasts "savage" African imperial aspirations with the British civilising mission. Arcoll criticises the fact that Africans forget the Christian aspect of the tradition and are merely interested in bloodshed and destruction (Buchan, 71-72). The British not only defeat Laputa but pretend that the dead African leader supported their mission to maintain law and order in Africa. Providence turns self-less and responsible white (British) men into potential kings who cultivate savage Africans and the African wilderness (Buchan, 196-198, 202-203). Laputa's vision of "an apocalyptic cleansing and re-creation" (Smith: 1995, 194) rivals British imperialism, but his alleged savagery justifies the repression of his insurgency. Whereas Laputa intended to use warfare as a means to establish an African empire, the British characters transform the country into a quasi-utopian idyll by negotiation, education, and hygiene. Buchan prefers to ignore that the British used violence in order to defeat and to conquer South Africa.

Buchan's novel is both retrospective and prospective. The setting is rather vague because the action takes place in the north-east of the Transvaal sometime after the diamond rush in Kimberley in 1870 and before the Boer War (Smith, 181-82). Smith astutely remarks that Buchan presents a nostalgic historical fiction because he imagines a pastoral South Africa dominated by British individuals in contrast to the contemporary emergence of the South African Union ruled by Boers in 1906-09 (175). The foundation of the Union of South Africa restricted not only British imperial influence but also African emancipation (Thompson: 1995, 148-52). The novel disrupts the closure of an historical circle which would allow Africans to resurrect ancient positions of power. This "virtual handbook for the budding colonial" (Smith, 177) plays into the hands of segregationists because it warns colonials not to let African Christians and intellectuals become dangerous subversive leaders in the fixture. But that is the role some early African writers take on in a positive sense.

The first generations of southern African writers were educated by missionaries who tried to erase their students' heathen past. The African appropriation of Christian values and plots for the reconstruction of the past is problematic because the

<sup>4</sup> The novel refers to the so-called Ethiopians, who based their emancipatory demands upon the Christian self-image of the chosen people.

acknowledgement of the Bible as a master text rivals the authority of oral traditions. The subversion of traditional African values and histories is obvious if narrators criticise the use of magic and the belief in ancestors, but oblique if Christian emplotments of the past displace oral traditions. However, as Achebe suggested, what matters is not the instrument you use but the tune you play (Achebe: 1974, 61). I will present three different strategies of using Christian teachings in the reconstruction of history: Thomas Mofolo in his novel *Chaka* (1925) uses implied parallels in order to liken the degradation of a heathen imperialist to that of the contemporary Christian rulers. Sol T. Plaatje, in *Mhudi* (1930) and *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), upgrades African histories as a repetition of the story of the chosen people, thereby questioning European supremacy and domination in Southern Africa. Stanlake Samkange juxtaposes African and European versions of the same past, and judges dubious colonisers' strategies by Christian values, in his accounts of South African history.

At first glance, Mofolo's *Chaka* and Buchan's *Laputa* have much in common. Mofolo seems to be the turncoat who merely echoes the European and Christian perspective in his narrator's judgements on Chaka in his novel (Ayivor: 1997, 68-69). Both African protagonists are powerful and evil savages with imperial aspirations, which fail in the end to the advantage of European colonisers. However, Mofolo combines Christian and African elements in a very complex hybrid novel that transcends Buchan's limited Eurocentric denigration of African leaders. Ayivor stresses Mofolo's inversion of African epic folktales in combination with Christian mythology (71). Mofolo's Christian faith accounts for the pattern that attributes the loss of paradise to forbidden premarital sex, a sin that is afflicted upon the child Chaka, who is ostracised by his community (Sulzer: 1988, 322). Christian and African traditions merge in the figure of Isanusu, who tempts Chaka to obtain his magical assistance in order to come to power, and in return demands Chaka's soul in the end. Chaka's Faustian moral drama may be a warning to contemporary political leaders not to abuse their power, a fact that may prove to be self-destructive (Ayivor, 76).

The description of Chaka's rise and fall is framed by the retrospective on early settlements in southern Africa and Chaka's prophecy that the white man will rule the country after his death. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes a South Africa that is densely populated by numerous African "nations" (Mofolo: 1981, 1) *in the present tense*. The narrator adds that African nations lived in peace and prosperity on their "own original territory" (Mofolo, 4) in ancient South Africa. The ahistorical present of that scenario can be interpreted as a nostalgic longing for a lost past or as a vision of an idyllic future. Either alternative excludes the European presence and thus contrasts with the European domination of South Africa in Mofolo's lifetime. The fictional history presents the dislocation of African tribes from their country by Chaka as an implicit model of the contemporary dispossession of Africans following the Native Land Act in 1913. The ambiguous novel dismantles African glorifications of Chaka but also rejects European versions of Chaka, which turn him into a formidable leader whose rule leads to a catastrophe. This, in turn, justifies the "civilising" mission of imperial rule (Wylie: 1995, 37). In Mofolo's novel, Chaka's reign of terror is ended by resistance from within his nation and not by European forces. The European

imperialists then subdue Chaka's assassins, so that they are associated rather with Chaka's than his adversaries' position. Mofolo inverts Buchan's analogy between the savage Chaka and the African fighter for liberation by his implied analogy between the rise and fall of the heathen Chaka and the Christian colonisers who dispossess Africans of the rightful ownership of their territories.<sup>5</sup>

Sol T. Plaatje uses the biblical story of the chosen people in order to emplot the histories of the Matabele, the Barolong and the Boers in his novel *Mhudi* (Couzens: 1987, 52). The emplotment of African history by the Christian sequence of peace, oppression, exodus, wandering in the wilderness, and the arrival in the promised land is provocative because it compares Africans to the chosen people in contrast to their negative Christian images as the sons of Ham, who are condemned forever to be servants.<sup>6</sup> Plaatje insinuates more than just equality between the African and European peoples settling in Southern Africa because the oppressed Matabele and Boers in turn become the oppressors of the civilised Barolong, i.e. the Egyptians according to the Christian emplotment of the history of the elect. Plaatje undermines the colonial use of teleological myth not only by the role changes from the oppressed elect into the oppressors and vice versa, but also by turning the linear history into a repetitive circle, which transcends the end of history as it is envisioned by the white colonists who supposedly found their promised land in South Africa.

History will repeat itself with a difference and will disrupt what could be read as a rather positive ending of the novel. Ironically, the violent Matabele and Boers find their promised lands, whereas in spite of the title of the final chapter, "[a] contented homecoming," the Barolong are still wandering in the wilderness.<sup>7</sup> What is more, according to a prophecy the Barolong will be oppressed and dispossessed by their allies, the racist Boers, which is an analogy to contemporary politics (Mzamane: 1983, 193-94; Green: 1997, 50). Readers are also aware of the fact that the Matabele will not be happy in their promised land because the British will occupy their territory. However, the "re-cycling" of teleological history suggests the possibility that the Boers and the British might be displaced in turn, and that the Africans, who are forced to wander in the wilderness by the Native Land Act, might be able to settle in their land in the future. Chennells proposes that the ending of the novel can be interpreted in two ways, as a satire that leaves Africans dispossessed in their own country, or as a comedy which demands the appropriation of Western technology and the building of a national order that overcomes "racial, ethnic and regional divisions so that white hegemony

5 Mofolo wrote and rewrote his historical fiction *Chaka* between 1908 and its publication in 1925 (Kunene: 1981, xi-xiii), a period that saw the growing dispossession and dislocation of Africans. Mofolo saw Chaka as a malevolent imperialist possibly due to censorship imposed by missionaries who were his publishers, but certainly due to his being a Sotho, a member of a people who had suffered under Chaka.

6 Plaatje was fascinated by analogies between Africans and the Israelites because he regarded the parallels as a source of national pride (Willan: 1984, 366-67). This attitude is supposed to upgrade Africans but implies that the Bible is retained as a superior master text which provides the paramount model for histories. However, *Mhudi* is a hybrid novel which also draws on African oral traditions which the Biblical pattern is interlaced with.

7 In an excellent article, Chennells explains that the complexity of the emplotment and the narrative voices provides for a comic ending of the plot concerning the Ndebele but a satiric one for the Barolong (1997,45-47).

would be presented with a united front" (1997, 49). Plaatje seems to envision life in South Africa after liberation on a small scale. He presents some open-minded individuals whose friendship and love transgresses national and racial boundaries. The hope for a peaceful solution to conflicts over the possession of land due to cross-cultural individual friendships seems to be utopian because their own groups regard those individuals with suspicion. A viable historical future, we may conclude, may be brought about by another turn of the wheel that would relieve the Africans from European colonisation first, and then replace mutual displacements by mutual attempts at understanding between all the peoples in southern Africa, including the Boers and the British. The possible future, however, is strikingly at odds with Plaatje's contemporary history, which denies the protagonists an idyllic romance and a national community (Green, 61-62).

In pursuit of the same goal of mutual understanding Stanlake Samkange chooses a different path. Samkange stresses the differences between the individual historical opponents Lobengula and Cecil Rhodes, who could never arrive at a mutual understanding. As the author presents the protagonists' justification of their strategies to their own people, he provides the reader with a superior insight into their reasonings and limitations. As a historian, Samkange pays attention to the making and the use of history rather than the fiction of a realistic representation of the past. In *African Saga: A Brief Introduction to African History*, the historian revises the form and the content of European versions of African history because he uses oral traditions to a large extent as sources, and reconstructs Africa as the origin of cultures and civilisations (33). Samkange questions claims to historical truth and objectivity, and foregrounds the use of history for national identity. The novelist from Zimbabwe wrote the historical fiction *On Trial for My Country* parallel to his history *The Origins of Rhodesia* in the 1960s. His novel focuses on the last Matabele King's defense of his territory against Cecil Rhodes's imperial strategies in the late nineteenth century. His historiography also depicts the long African history in southern central Africa before Rhodes' annexation, especially the building of the Matabele nation under Mzilikazi, in order to stress the African claim to the territory. The contemporary first-person narrator in the frame of the novel learns about the dispossession of the Matabele from an old man, whose dislocation reminds us of the Matabeles' past dispossession and their present oppression under the white regime in Southern Rhodesia in the 1960s (Brancaccio: 1978, 125). Instead of presenting a deceptively realistic representation of the past in his fiction, Samkange is concerned with retrospective constructions and assessments of history. Cecil Rhodes' father, a minister, charges his son with the treacherous appropriation of Matabele territory. Rhodes jr. justifies his deceptive fictions, for example unjust treaties dispossessing the illiterate Matabele, with the duty to promote the wealth and power of the British Nation, but he has to concede that he deceived the British as well as the Africans about his intentions to annex the country. Lobengula has to defend himself against his ancestors' charges that he dishonourably yielded the country to the British without the brave resistance that would have been expected from a warrior king. Samkange not only provides insight into the Matabele version of the past, but also presents a version of English colonial history which anticipates European

revisionary historiography. Rev. Rhodes sr. unmasks Cecil Rhodes' moral justification of his immoral acts. Samkange's historical fiction mirrors and inverts the colonial use of "fictions" in order to create facts in the past, such as the English expropriation of the Matabele under the guise of protection. Samkange's honest "faction," mixing history and fiction, is a political act that indirectly criticises Ian Smith's illegitimate rule in Southern Rhodesia. If we interpret the novel as a reflection of its historical point of construction, we can see Ian Smith not only as Cecil Rhodes' political heir, but also as the inheritor of Rhodes' racism that is subject to international moral criticism and sanctions in the 1960s. The juxtaposition of two mutually exclusive perspectives in the book suggests that Smith is as unlikely to change his attitude as Rhodes, but that, in contrast to the past, the international community puts Smith on trial and shares the African point of view.

The Africans Mofolo, Platje, and Samkange assume the authority to write historical fictions and historiography in order to deconstruct colonial versions of history that deny Africans a past and a future. They judge colonisers by their own Christian moral standards and appropriate the story of the chosen people for the emplotment of their past and their future. African writers often transform the teleological version of history by subordinating it to a cyclical version that transgresses the limits of the colonial imagination and provides for the possibility to reverse white domination in southern Africa. Finally, these African authors revise the biased perspectives of colonial versions of history, masked by the claim to objective truth, in favour of more comprehensive versions of the past that integrate their oral traditions. The examples discussed present an idyllic pre-colonial era in contrast with a catastrophic colonial past, which forms a blueprint for contemporary repression. These African writers are aware of the fact that the idyllic past without the presence of Europeans cannot serve as a viable model of the future, but their vision of ancient southern Africa stresses the Africans' right to liberty and to property.

## Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua (1974). "Colonialist Criticism," *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft. Rpt. 1995. London: Routledge. 57-61.
- Ayivor, Kwame (1997). "Thomas Mopoku Mofolo's 'Inverted Epic Hero': A Reading of Mofolo's *Chaka* as an African Epic Folktale," *Research in African Literatures* 28.1: 49-77.
- Brancaccio, Patrick (1978). "The Origins of Rhodesia: Myth as History and Fiction in the Work of Stanlake Samkange," *Ba-Shiru: A Journal of African Languages and Literature* 9.1/2: 124-33.
- Brown, Duncan (1997). "Poetry, History, Nation: The Praises of Chaka kaSenzangakhona," *English in Africa* 24.1: 7-36.
- Buchan, John (1910). *Prester John*. Ed. David Danieli. Rpt. 1994. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Chapman, Michael (1996). *Southern African Literatures*. London, New York: Longman.

- Chennells, Anthony (1997). "Plotting South African History: Narrative in Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*." *English in Africa* 24.1: 36-58.
- Couzens, Tim (1987). "Sol T. Plaatje and the First South African Epic," *English in Africa* 14.1:41-65.
- Green, Michael (1997). *Novel Histories: Past, Present, and Future in South African Fiction*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand UP.
- Kunene, Daniel P. (1981). "Introduction," Thomas Mofolo. *Chaka*. Trans. Daniel P. Kunene. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Livingstone, David (1858). *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa; Including a Sketch of Sixteen Years Residence in the Interior of Africa, and a Journey from the Cape of Good Hope to Loanda on the West Coast; Thence Across the Continent, Down the River Zambesi, to the Eastern Ocean*. Rpt. 1971. London, New York: Johnson.
- Mofolo, Thomas (1925). *Chaka*. Rpt. 1981. Trans. Daniel P. Kunene. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Morris, Donald R. (1965). *The Washing of the Spears*. New York: Konecky.
- Mzamane, Mbulelo Vizikhungo (1983). "Colonial and Imperial Themes in South African Literature, 1820-1930," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 13: 181-95.
- Plaatje, Sol T. (1930). *Mhudi*. Rpt. 1978. London: Heinemann.
- Plaatje, Sol T. (1916). *Native Life in South Africa*. Rpt. 1987. Harlow: Longman.
- Rotberg, Robert I. (1988). *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power*. New York, Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Samkange, Stanlake (1997). *On Trial for My County*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Samkange, Stanlake (1971). *African Saga: A Brief Introduction to African History*. Nashville, New York: Abingdon.
- Samkange, Stanlake (1973). *Origins of Rhodesia*. London: Heinemann.
- Smith, Craig (1995). "Every Man Must Kill the Thing He Loves: Empire, Homoerotics, and Nationalism in John Buchan's *Prester John*" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 28.2: 173-200.
- Stead, W.T., ed. (1902). *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes to Which Are Added Some Chapters Describing the Political and Religious Ideas of the Testator*. London: "Review of the Reviews" Office.
- Stummer, Peter O. (1983). "Kapitulation der Radikalität: Sozialismus, Feminismus, Imperialismus - Spätviktorianischer politischer Diskurs und literarische Kommunikation," *Die Nineties*. Ed. Manfred Pfister und Bernd Schulte-Middelich. München: Francke. 227-247.
- Sulzer, P. (1988). "Nachwort," *Chaka Zulu*. Trans. Peter Sulzer. Zürich: Manesse.
- Thompson, Leonard (1995). *A History of South Africa*. Rev. ed. New Haven, London: Yale UP.
- White, Hayden (1978). "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins UP. 150-82.
- Willan, B. (1984). *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876-1932*. London: Heinemann.
- Wylie, D. (1995). "Chaka and the Myths of Paradise," *English in Africa* 22.1: 19-47.