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## Embedded in History: Camagu's amaXhosa identity in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*

In his third novel, *The Heart of Redness*, Zakes Mda, the award-winning South African playwright and novelist, turns his attention to the Eastern Cape, in particular the site of the Nongqawuse legend and the cattle killings of the 1850s. It is a place of historical resonance in the violent history of South Africa being the home of the amaXhosa who bore the brunt of British colonial expansion in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is also the area which saw the first hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996 following the end of apartheid, and it is a region marked by severe rural poverty. In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda weaves together both an historical narrative and a contemporary one based on this part of "Xhosaland". The former explores the nature and ramifications of the Nongqawuse legend of the mid-1850s while the latter is based on the struggle of the inhabitants of the sleepy village of Qolorha-by-Sea to come to terms with developments in the new South Africa. Both the title of Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) and the name of the protagonist of the contemporary narrative, Camagu,<sup>1</sup> suggest a complex interaction in the novel of past, present and inter-text; the title with its allusion to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and the name, Camagu, with its associations with traditional belief and the history of the amaXhosa.

My purpose here is to examine how Mda uses both tradition and modernity to explore the nature of a contemporary Xhosa identity. With this in mind I will establish Camagu as subject not only in terms of his interaction with the people of Qolorha-by-Sea, the setting of the contemporary narrative in the novel, but also in the manner in which he is embedded in the various discourses which constitute a complex and significant inter-textuality. In this respect Camagu's sense of identity is not constructed in terms of a narrow homogeneous national paradigm but emanates from the complexity of the local conditions and history of "Xhosaland", the country of Nongqawuse.

I suggest, following Peter Hallward, that, as a subject, Camagu moves from a specified mode of individuation in which the demarcation of an individual follows from its accordance with recognised classifications, to a specific mode which "works through the active negotiation of relations and the deliberate taking of sides, choices and risks under constraints that are external to these

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<sup>1</sup> Camagu is a relatively common name among the amaXhosa, but my interpretation of its use in this novel is taken from Peires' historical account of the Nongqawuse legend, *The Dead Will Arise* (1989) and also Mda's own reference to the name in a personal conversation (16<sup>th</sup> July 2004).

undertakings" (*Absolutely* xii).<sup>2</sup> In making his choices Camagu strips off the white mask of a Westernized African and regains an African/amaXhosa identity (Cf. Fanon *Black Skin* 1967). Camagu's transformation from specified to specific subject is defined in relation to the inter-textual discourses that permeate the novel and which rewrite history to re-constitute the sense of belonging of the amaXhosa.

A significant aspect of Mda's narrative is the refocusing of the historical to give a new credence to past narratives that have been suppressed or denigrated. One such narrative is the discourse of colonialism, which has Othered colonised peoples. In this respect, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is, by its very title, clearly alluded to by Mda's *The Heart of Redness*. But it is not only the title of Mda's novel that begs comparison with its predecessor. The primary trope of Conrad's novella is a journey by white Europeans, principally Marlow and Kurtz, into an "unknown" part of Africa, described by Marlow as the "blank spaces on the earth" (33). Marlow's gaze describes his journey through a countryside perceived as hostile in which he sees himself perpetually surrounded by "lurking death, hidden evil [and the] darkness of its heart" (65) and a land which he describes as being peopled by "wild men" (31) "unhappy savages" (43), "cannibals" (67) with "black death-mask menacing expression" (82) and not least "a savage superb, wide-eyed and magnificent woman" (101) dressed in "barbarous ornaments" (100). It is a language which relegates the indigenous population to a sub-species while simultaneously constructing a threatening, sexual Other. In the end, Marlow is glad to turn his boat around and leave this place, as the "current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness" (109).

In *The Heart of Redness*, Camagu's journey from Johannesburg to Qolorha-by-Sea forms a marked contrast to that undertaken by Marlow. Having spent four years after the first democratic elections of 1994 discovering the impossibility of getting a job in the new South Africa, Camagu is prepared to abandon Johannesburg to return to the USA. A chance encounter with a beautiful woman at a wake that entices him to abort his intended return to the USA initiates his search for a young woman with "a hauntingly fresh voice" (27) from the sleepy village of Qolorha-by-Sea. This village, in Nongqawuse country, constitutes the heart of redness of the title and ultimately Camagu finds himself on a journey of discovery and enlightenment that counters the darkness of Conrad's canonical work.

The description of Camagu's approach to Qolorha-by-Sea constitutes a counter discourse to Marlow's gaze. Camagu's environment is not dark and impenetrable, but is painted by a "generous artist . . . using splashes of lush colour. It is a canvas where blue and green dominate"(61). This view is perpetuated throughout the narrative as, with the help of a local girl, Camagu explores the area. In his gaze the rocks on the sea shore are turned into "works of abstract art" by the yellows, browns greens and reds he encounters and the historic Valley of Nongqawuse is home to partridges and guinea fowls, cerise bellflowers,

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<sup>2</sup> Underlying my approach to this topic is a mode of post-colonial individuation, the specific subject, as formulated by Peter Hallward in his *Absolutely Postcolonial* (2001).

orchids cyads and usundu palms (118, 119). Camagu's landscape is one that comes alive and his enthusiasm for what he considers the "most beautiful place on earth" (69) is sustained by a feeling of nostalgia for the vague memories of youth and long-forgotten images of a good place.

Camagu's link to the past of history and myth is construed in the novel in terms of the significance attached to the meaning of his name, his confrontation with the legend of Nongqawuse and the parallel historical narrative.

In both of J. B. Peires' historical accounts of the amaXhosa, on which Mda relies heavily, the word "Camagu" is defined as a means of address to ancestors or diviners, meaning "Forgive and be pacified", in *The House of Phalo* (footnote 25, 218) or "Amen and Be satisfied, O Great Ones!" in *The Dead Will Arise* (105).<sup>3</sup> In Mda's novel, "Camagu" can be related to the questions of tradition and belief that these historical accounts engage with, as the name implies not simply a form of address. In one respect, it associates him with Nxele, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century diviner, whose syncretic religion consisting of Christian, traditional and personal elements resulted in a strong religious dichotomy between a Black (Mdalidiphu) god and a White (Thixo) one and ultimately led to a disastrous war with the colonists in 1819.<sup>4</sup> In another respect it draws attention to the ritual killing of the cattle and the need to follow these rituals. Without them the dead would not arise to drive the Europeans into the sea and neither would the dead be able to provide healthy cattle and grain.<sup>5</sup> Through these interactions with Peires' accounts of the amaXhosa, Mda links Camagu historically to a past of crisis. This associates him with a traditional belief in ancestors that is further modified by elements of a syncretic religion and it also makes him complicit with the opposition to colonialism.

Camagu's journey of enlightenment and insight into modern-day South Africa sees his transition from a disillusioned returnee in Johannesburg to a fulfilled parent and small-businessman in Qolorha-by-Sea. In this process, Camagu abandons a sense of self that is specified by an imperialist discourse, and, by extension, a neo-colonial one, to embrace a subject position in relation to a counter discourse grounded in the history, traditions and ecology of the land of the Nongqawuse story.

The process of negotiating Camagu's transition as subject from a Western discourse of modernity to a counter discourse founded on tradition and empower-

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<sup>3</sup> "Take that rope off his neck and say *Camagu*" is the way J. B. Peires describes the rescue/redemption of the amaXhosa prophet-to-be Nxele around 1812 (*The House of Phalo* 69). In *The Dead Will Arise* (1989), Peires describes the word "Camagu" as the cry made by the crowd at a sacrifice when they heard the great bellow of the slaughtered beast as its windpipe was severed (105).

<sup>4</sup> Thixo was of Khoi origin and was later imposed on the Xhosa by the missionaries. Contemporary amaXhosa churches (Ethiopian Church) argue as recently as the late 1990s for a rejection of Thixa and a return to Mdalidiphu.

<sup>5</sup> As the supporters of Nongqawuse became adjusted to the first disappointment in her prophecies she demanded that the (*umefumlo*) breath/soul, of the cattle should be preserved as this offered the one way of communicating with the ancestors who would arise to destroy the invaders and replace the sick cattle. (*Dead* 104-5).

ment is constituted in a series of dialogues with members of the village.<sup>6</sup> With Xoliswa Ximiya it is a dialogue on the nature and relevance of civilization, progress and primitiveness; with Qukezwa on the nature of traditional beliefs and indigenous plants and animals; and with Dalton, the village storekeeper, on the issue of empowerment.

Camagu's initial attraction to and infatuation with Xoliswa Ximiya's cold beauty is in contrast to the critical attitude he adopts to the values she represents. Throughout their relationship, Camagu finds himself defining his own values in relation to her commitment to a perceived idea of western values that she believes define civilization. Having himself lived in the United States for thirty years, Camagu has difficulty in embracing Xoliswa Ximiya's image of civilization that elevates Dolly Parton and Eddie Murphy to cultural icons (71).

In a series of exchanges involving the rituals of the unbelievers, topless girls, traditional costume, snake totems and the development plans for the village it becomes apparent that Xoliswa has inculcated the mores and values of the colonising power; she is the personification of the kind of cultural imperialism evident in the historical narrative in the novel and the kind of cultural invasion examined in Paulo Freire's critique of anti-dialogical societies (*Oppressed* 112). As her name suggests, Xoliswa has become pacified, not in the sense of her personality, but as someone who has embraced western/European concepts and values—or as her father puts it “is prepared to die for civilisation”<sup>7</sup> (*Redness* 259). She represents the kind of pacification envisaged in Sir George Grey's civilising mission against the amaXhosa in the 1850s, as divulged in the historical narrative (312). This passage in the novel is linked to the pacification referred to in the final lines of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (148), itself a response to the European colonial mentality explored in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (86). Significantly, Xoliswa Ximiya finally abandons her home village in order to take a government job in Pretoria (*Redness* 302), thereby joining the elites of the new South Africa, the “Aristocrats of the Revolution” (36).

Camagu defines himself against Xoliswa Ximiya's vision of modernity in which all tradition is considered detrimental. He sees the ritual trance dance of the unbelievers not as primitive, but as an expression of graceful pain and beauty (99), girls playing topless as an integral part of a culture that is not ashamed of

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<sup>6</sup> This transition is illustrated by his attitudes to sexuality and in his relations with women. In Johannesburg, which is the starting point of his journey, Camagu has had a reputation of being a man-about-town who sees women as objects and as legitimate satisfaction for his sexual appetite. In an equation with the imperial past, he even compares his sexual drive to that of a slave master who rapes his female slaves (*Redness* 30). It is his lust after NomaRussia, whose beautiful singing at a rooftop wake in Hillbrow, Johannesburg had attracted his attention, that takes him to Qolorha-by-Sea; and here he gazes in desire at the thighs of Qukezwa, a young girl who has teasingly propositioned him on his arrival in the village, (27, 34). Even the relationship he establishes with Xoliswa Ximiya, the principal of the village school, is couched in terms of possession. Yet, by the end of the novel he has given up smoking and drinking, rejected his lusts and married Qukezwa. He has become a dutiful father and husband, a settled member of the community and a successful initiator of small-business cooperatives. This is a major transition that comments strongly on the nature of contemporary, post-apartheid South African society.

<sup>7</sup> Xoliswa means pacified in Xhosa

bare breasts (172) and traditional costume not as representative of backwardness, but as a “beautiful artistic cultural heritage” (184). However, the crucial distinction comes in Camagu’s reaction to the appearance of a snake in his hotel room (112). Camagu recognises the snake as Majola, the totem of his clan, the Mpondomise, and refuses to allow the domestic staff to kill it. Instead, he is overjoyed, as this is a blessing that will bring good luck. His action earns him the respect of the local population, but in the eyes of Xoliswa Ximiya it condemns him as a man who is reinforcing barbarism (172).

The full significance of this event can only be appreciated with reference to the literary context in which it appears. It has clear antecedents in and reflects on a major Xhosa novel, A.C. Jordan’s *Wrath of the Ancestors*.<sup>8</sup> Firstly, there is a very similar incident concerning a snake (*inkwkhwa*), which is the ‘Animal of the House of Majola the royal house of the Mpondomise’ (182-189). Here, the Chief’s wife Nobantu (Thembeke) kills the snake when she discovers the Majola lying beside her young child. Thembeke is a mission-educated outsider who, despite her royal status, has shown no respect for the customs of the Mpondomise (167-172). This brings into the open the conflict between followers of tradition and the advocates of modernity and precipitates a deadly crisis in the clan.

Secondly this novel also sees the conflict between modernity and tradition as a key issue. The traditionalists are referred to as the “Mpondomise of the soil” or the “ochre men”—people of redness—and the modernists are led by the young mission-educated chief, Zwelinzima, who wishes to move his people rapidly from what he considers a primitive state to a fully modern one. *The Wrath of the Ancestors* like *The Heart of Redness* raises the issue of the value and relevance of traditional African values in relation to modern western knowledge, and it is apparent that by interacting strongly with a Xhosa literary tradition Mda provides a context in which Camagu will define himself as subject in post-apartheid South Africa.

Camagu rejects the automatic assumptions that the ideas of modernity and progress, as represented by the building of a casino and hotel complex envisaged by the ruling party, will bring prosperity and civilisation to Qolorha-by-Sea. Instead he sees a neo-colonial, corrupt exploitation of the countryside, which is yet a further example of the kind of nepotism and suspicion of qualifications and experience that he had met in Johannesburg. Camagu’s choice becomes clear in the manner in which he compares the two women in his life where, like Marlow, “Xoliswa Ximiya, sees darkness, witchcraft, heathens and barbarians, Qukezwa sees song, dance, laughter and beauty” (219).

In deciding to follow Qukezwa, Camagu chooses to define himself in relation to her views and beliefs, which means that he re-enacts the journey taken by Twin, Qukezwa’s ancestor, in the historical narrative of *The Heart of Redness*.<sup>9</sup> Twin had decided to marry a woman of KhoiKhoi origin, the original Qukezwa,

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<sup>8</sup> Originally written in Xhosa as *Ingqumbo yeMinyanya* in 1940 and published in an English translation in 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Twin is also Qukezwa’s brother whose wake Camagu had attended in Johannesburg.

against his brother's wishes (25). Like Twin before him, Camagu is also initiated into traditional beliefs and myths both amaXhosa and KhoiSan.<sup>10</sup> This also leads him to a re-assess the negative interpretation of the Nongqawuse legend.

Initially, Camagu accepts the designation given in his school textbooks with their description of Nongqawuse as the girl who “deceived the nation into mass suicide” and this perception of her role is reinforced by his early contact with people in the village of Qolorha-by-Sea: the unbelievers such as Xoliswa, Bhonco and also the schoolteachers (39, 75). However, as Qukezwa gives Camagu a guided tour of the Valley of Nongqawuse she talks of the prophetess, her visions, her followers and the cattle killings as if she has gone back in time, as if past and present have been brought together in the now (120). This almost spiritual revelation causes Camagu to reflect on the way in which the village has rejected and denied the Nongqawuse legend—a question of shame—and brings about his own transformation in attitude (173). Camagu's change of heart is such that when Dalton dismisses these beliefs as superstition, Camagu feels obliged to contradict him, arguing strongly for the “sincerity of belief” and defending “prophecies that arose out of the spiritual and material anguish of the amaXhosa nation” (282-283).

Qukezwa also initiates Camagu into an understanding of other aspects of traditional belief. In a re-enactment of the historical narrative, she shows him the cairns on which her ancestors placed stones in honour of the KhoiKhoi god Tsiqwa and his son Heitsi, and in a replay of the past in the present Camagu does likewise (24,121). Camagu also discovers that Qukezwa is the guardian of a dying tradition of split-tone singing (175) and has excellent knowledge of indigenous plants, birds and animals (102). Such is the extent of her influence on Camagu's thinking that by the end of the story he sees it as a privilege to live among people who retain knowledge of the past and respect for the environment (319). It is also from Qukezwa that Camagu first acquires the arguments he uses in opposing the proposed development to modernise the village (118).

Through his dialogue and dissent with Dalton, Camagu creates his syncretic perspective of a cooperative-based, ecological development for the community. Throughout this process Mda's novel implements many of the ideas he has already espoused in his work on theatre for development and treatise on development communication, *When People Play People* (1993), with its concepts of democracy derived from both Latin-America and Africa.<sup>11</sup> It is a sense of grass roots democracy that has as its slogan “with the people” rather than “for the people” (208), a slogan which echoes the radical voices in the ANC in the 1940s and 1950s.

In *The Heart of Redness*, Camagu brings the villagers to an awareness of their situation and a readiness to initiate change. Camagu's early initiatives are the product of a necessity to survive financially in Qolorha-by-Sea. His educational background makes him alert to the potential the village provides in the harvesting

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<sup>10</sup> Mda's development of this theme raises the issue of Black on Black conflicts and the way in which historically the Nguni treated the KhoiSan indigenous population.

<sup>11</sup> In particular writers such as Boal, and Freire.

of shellfish that can be sold to nearby hotels. By setting up a cooperative together with the women who normally harvest the sea he provides employment for both himself and the women (159). An expansion into the production of traditional costumes for the “glitterate” of Johannesburg who wish to glory in the “African Renaissance spearheaded by the President” turns out to be highly profitable (185). The strength of this success, fortified by suspicions of the development plan for the village, mean that Camagu supports Dalton and the believers in their fight against the casino and luxury hotel project, arguing instead for ecological tourism based on cooperative enterprises, such as a backpackers’ hostel, the provision of a local cuisine and the designation of the area as a national heritage site in memory of Nongqawuse (274-275).

Empowerment of the people of the village, in particular the women, is a cornerstone of Camagu’s business philosophy and constitutes his contribution to his position as subject. It is also the aspect of his thinking that brings him into conflict with Dalton whose white skin/black mask (Cf. Fanon *Black Skin*) disguises a paternalistic mentality. Camagu is critical both of Dalton’s water supply scheme, because it is imposed from above, (208), and of his idea of a cultural village in which a reinvented, pre-colonial culture would be offered to gullible tourists (286). Camagu argues for a living Xhosa culture, but is not adverse to the idea of using Nongqawuse’s name and reputation as a means of selling the eco-tourist activities to potential customers. In a symbolic unification of past and present, the Nongqawuse name and legend become a highly successful marketing device (318).

Camagu’s personal development in the contemporary narrative of *The Heart of Redness* transforms him from being disillusioned with the corruption and nepotism of the city to finding a sense of fulfilment in the rural and historically renowned setting of Qolorha-by-Sea. In evolving his subject position as a modern South African, Camagu interacts principally with three main characters in the village, but it is also a subject position that arises out of the intertwining of the historical and contemporary narratives in the novel and the intersection with a number of significant discourses and textual references. In this respect, Camagu is narrated into being in relation to both past and present in the history of Africa, South Africa and, in particular, the amaXhosa.

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