The intertext of the ethnological discourse in Thomas Mofolo's Chaka

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Abstract

If literary creation is often opposed to scientific discourse, the first accounts and reports on Africa were largely conducted by anthropologists, ethnologists, missionaries, explorators and other colonial administrators. This foreign discourse conveyed simplistic images that postcolonial writers have undertaken to critically identify and deconstruct when they were in a position to have their say. As a discourse in response to this colonial ethnological discourse which was at the same a work of art and ethnological knowledge, modern African literature has had recourse to the notion of intertextuality which many theoreticians regard as a key principle of literary creation.

Keywords: Ethnology – intertextuality – motif – pedagogy – narrator.

L'intertexte du discours ethnologique dans « Chaka » de Thomas Mofolo

Résumé

Si l'on oppose souvent le discours de la création littéraire et celui des sciences, il reste que les premiers écrits sur l'Afrique ont généralement été le fait d'anthropologues, d'ethnologues, d'explorateurs, de missionnaires et autres administrateurs coloniaux. Ce discours sur l'Afrique par des étrangers a colporté des images réductrices que les écrivains postcoloniaux ont entrepris d'identifier et de déconstruire à l'avènement de leur prise de parole. Parce que discours de réaction et de correction d'un premier discours qui se voulait à la fois œuvre d'art et de savoir ethnologique, la littérature africaine postcoloniale empruntera à ce premier discours son cheminement en faisant appel à la notion d'intertextualité que des théoriciens mettent au cœur du processus de création littéraire.

Mots-clés : Ethnologie – intertextualité – motif – pédagogie – narrateur.

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Introduction

If scientific interest for other human societies can be traced back to ancient Greece and Roman eras, the modern equivalent of such an interest into the Other was synthesized through the notion of ethnology or anthropology. The term ethnology was first used in Europe in a context where Europeans came into contact with human communities that were different from theirs. There was a need to know these societies and a discipline developed that aimed at studying these unknown societies, their mores and identifying characteristics which were described in monographs. Through ethnography, the descriptive part of ethnology or anthropology, it became widely accepted as a scientific discipline. (Levy-Strauss 1958: 386)

Literature on the other hand is generally defined as writings that are valued as works of art and traditionally contrasted with scientific, technical books and journalism. (Horny ed. 2009: 728) It is the product of individual subjects' imaginations through fiction, drama, poetry, etc.

From these definitions, we can oppose literature to ethnology in the sense that one is a science with its own methodological tools while the other is inspired by imagination and idiosyncratic creation in which affective filter of facts is almost the norm.

Is there a possible link between the two notions that appear at a first sight to be opposed against the subject of this paper which seems to imply a link? If yes, should there be any link in the first place between the two notions or is the term ethnological literature acceptable or paradoxical? How is this relation implemented or represented in African literature? Is this relation specific to literature by writers from former colonized countries or does it have any antecedents?

The novel Chaka first published in 1925 by the Sotho born writer Thomas Mofolo inspired by the traditional narrative of the life of the Zulu national hero Chaka will serve as a corpus to analyze the relations in this rather uneasy couple.

This study will be based on a series of theoretical assumptions borrowed from ethnologists like Malinowski, Jan Vansina, Claude Levy-Strauss, etc and literary theorists like Gerard Genette, Milman Parry, T. Todorov, Isidore Okpewho, etc. The insightful analyses of the notions of intertextuality and orality of these theoreticians will enhance a better hermeneutics of that seminal work of modern African literature.

To answer the questions raised above will require studying the history of the relation between ethnology and literature through the notion of intertextuality. Then we will have to identify in the corpus the presence of the ethnological discourse. The approach will therefore be based on a brief account of modern African literature, the different influences generations of writers of diverse origins had one on the other, then on the presence of the ethnological discourse as it is inserted into Chaka by an African writer.

The intertextuality of the ethnological discourse

Modern African literature did not grow out of any void. There is no spontaneity as such in literary creation. Writers do compose in reaction or by influence of other writings or writers. They write to contest an earlier standpoint or uphold it.

The Russian theoretician Chklovski argued that "the work of art is perceived in relation with other artistic works and with the assistance of associations that are made with them"[1] (in Todorov 1965:50) In his Palimpsestes, Gerard Genette provides insightful information about that cooperative principle through his definition of the important notion of intertextuality:

> "[Intertextuality] is the relationship of co-presence between two or more texts, that is, the effective presence of one text into another one. In its most explicit and literal sense, it is the traditional practice of quotation (with quotation marks, with or without any precise reference); in a less explicit and canonical forms, that of plagiarism …, which is a non declared borrowing which is still literal though; in an even lesser explicit and literal form, that of allusion which is a statement whose full comprehension supposes the perception of a rapport between this statement and another referring to such or such of its inflexions otherwise non receivable."(Genette 1982: 8)[2]

For Michel Rifaterre, this presence of one text in another is the principle of "literariness"[3] (1979:1) The French theoretician was thus at variance with Milman Parry over the domains in which this cooperative practice is effected. The American philologist argued that borrowing artistic material is exclusively a practice in oral traditional communities. In such communities, the artist draws from the inexhaustible reservoir of the common lore already established. (Parry 1971:22) For Harold Bloom, every artist is visited by this "anxiety of influence"[4] (Bloom 1973) for he always writes in support of or against other texts that existed prior to his. This pattern of repetition and revision, of speaking to and responding to, is not practiced only with ideas but also at the level of the artist's technical and stylistic devices. Gerard Genette also establishes the practice of borrowing from already established literary material as a universal criterion of literary creation. What he coins as 'hypertextuality' as an aspect of that general practice is "a universal aspect (to the degree) of literarity: there is no literary text which to some extent and according to one's readings, does not refer to another one; in that sense, all works are hypertextual".

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[1] « L'œuvre d'art est perçue en relation avec les autres œuvres artistiques et à l'aide d'associations qu'on fait avec elles. » translation is mine.

[2] " [l'intertextualité est] une relation de co-présence entre deux ou plusieurs textes, c'est-à-dire par la présence effective d'un texte dans un autre. Sous sa forme la plus explicite et la plus littérale, c'est la pratique traditionnelle de la citation (avec guillemets, avec ou sans référence précise) ; sous une forme moins explicite et moins canonique, celle du plagiat …, qui est un emprunt non déclaré, mais encore littéral; sous forme encore moins explicite et moins littérale, celle de l'allusion, c'est-à-dire d'un énoncé dont la pleine intelligence suppose la perception d'un rapport entre lui et un autre auquel renvoie nécessairement telle ou telle de ses inflexions, autrement non recevable … » (8)

[3] « la trace de l'intertexte » in La pensée octobre 1980. « la syllepse intertextuelle » in Poétique 40, novembre 1979 ;

[4] In reference to the title of his book The Anxiety of Influence, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973.

(Genette 1982:18) Mikhail Bakhtine's key notion of "polyphony" (Todorov 1994 & Bakhtine 1978) is an aspect of that co-presence of style and ideas of various origins and allegiances into one single author and narrator.

Thomas Mofolo's Chaka was written in a general mood of ideas that surfaces in the novel. If Mofolo was not the first African to write modern literature, he can however be ranked among the pioneer generation of writers whose voices began narrating stories according to the point of view of the insiders, of the colonized.

One of the most informed critic about the Sotho born writer's literary career shows clearly in the introduction to the 1981 Heinemann edition that "there seems to be no doubt whatsoever that the 'Chaka ' manuscript was completed by around late 1909 certainly before March 1910. (Daniel Kunene 1981: xi) The text itself clearly provides clues about the historic-ideological context of the novel. Phrases like "in those days", "those were days of …" (Mofolo: 20) are indicative of the time in which he wrote his story. These linguistic indicators show that Chaka's time was not the writer or the narrator's. By the time Mofolo was writing his story, the Zulus were no more the powerful people they had once been:

> "Even to this very day the Zulus, when they think how they were once a strong nation in the days of Chaka, and how other nations dreaded them so much that they could hardly swallow their food, and when they remember their kingdom which has fallen, tears well up in their eyes, and they say: 'They ferment, they curdle! Even great pools dry away!" (Mofolo: 168)

If in Chaka's time, "there were still no horses", at the time of the narrative, the white men were already in full possession of the region and ruled it. The narrative is therefore of the white man's era. "Horses" he narrator says "were first seen again in the most recent times, when the white people came." (Mofolo: 84) About to die, Chaka, granted a vision, foretells his murderers of the future of their country: "You are killing me in the hope that you will be kings when I am dead, whereas you are wrong, that is not the way it will be because umlungu, the white man is coming, and it is he who will rule you, and you will be his servants." (Mofolo: 167) The narrator always reminds his narratee that the events of his story can be traced back to "those days of our fathers, not these modern times" (Mofolo: 19) He recurrently uses expressions like "in those days" (5, 20, 27) "those were days of might" (Mofolo: 20) to show the discrepancy between the narrative's time and the events' time.

An overview of the historical and ideological context of the time of the narrative outside the literary text will provide insights into the content of the narrative. The novel was written in a context of a prevailing colonial discourse. This colonial discourse was manifested in the Christian conversing mission and a colonial literature that set first to pave the way for the future colonial administration and even justify its status quo once the colonial enterprise was in progress.

The origin of modern African literature can be traced back to the literatures of discovery, of explorers, travelers and missionaries. They were the first in number and

influence in modern times to write about Africa. This literature was generally the product of imaginary tales. Its actors substituted for the lack of information about Africa their own phantasms and inventions. When for instance, Francis Finn informed his friend Nathaniel Isaacs about his project of writing about Chaka, Isaacs advised the following ideas:

> "When do you intend to publish it [your novel on the Zulu]? The sooner the better and do try to bring to light the politics that the Zulus use to rule their tribes. I mean, do show their chiefs, Chaka as well as Dingarne, their treachery and intrigues … Do make them appear as bloodthirsty as you can and try to give an estimate of the number of people murdered during their reigns; describe also the lightness of the offences committed which caused the killings of these people. Slip in the narrative as many anecdotes as you can, all these will but lengthen this work and render it interesting."[5] (Robinson &Smith 1979: 5)

This literature has therefore never been concerned about giving a faithful picture of the African setting. Expressions like "the sooner the better" and "make them appear bloodthirsty", "slip in as much", "conflate this work", "render it interesting" are rather doubtful about the honesty of their author. They reveal the real motivation of these writers whose aim has rarely been about recounting a faithful picture of the black continent which they promised they were doing. Finn finally came up with the book about Chaka and has so far been regarded as one of the best historian of the Zulu nation and its hero. Ironically enough, it is from his notes on Chaka that films have been shot and a whole historiography on this historical figure has been built. Historians regard his accounts as historical sources. Nathaniel Isaacs had earlier contributed to ingrain into his readers' minds pictures or images about Africa that reveal this continent as inhabited by savage and unhistorical peoples:

> "My adventures took place in a country where civilization has not yet occured, where no man endowed with reason has yet set foot in so as to shed the lights of the truth among these ignorant people, to convey knowledge of religion."[6] (Isaacs in Sévry 1999: 48)

In this context where information about the Other was needed, the writer was expected to provide knowledge about Africa and its inhabitants, their customs, values, cultures and even mentalities. This information would later be used by missionaries and colonial administrators. In Through the Dark Continent, explorer and writer Henry Morton Stanley's account of his African tour is truly scientific and of much help to future colonial administrators. Its 800 pages describe with scientific precision the

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[5] Translation is mine « Quand donc as-tu l'intention de le publier? Le plus tôt sera le mieux, et tâche donc de bien mettre en lumière la politique que les Zoulous utilisent pour gouverner leurs tribus. Je veux dire, montre donc leurs chefs, Chaka comme Dingarne, leur traîtrise et leurs intrigues … Fais-les donc paraître aussi sanguinaires que tu le pourras et tâche de donner une estimation du nombre de gens qu'ils ont assassiné durant leur règne, et décris aussi la légèreté des offenses commises qui entraînaient la mort de ces gens. Glisse autant d'anecdotes que tu le pourras, tout cela ne pourra que gonfler cet ouvrage et le rendre intéressant. » (Robinson & Smith: 5 in Sévry: 46)

[6] Mes aventures se sont déroulées dans un pays où la civilisation ne s'est point encore avancée, qu'aucun homme doué de raison n'a encore foulé de ses pieds afin d'y répandre les lumières de la vérité parmi des ignorants, pour leur communiquer une connaissance de la religion. (Isaacs, Preface : XXIII in Sévry: 48)

geography of the places he visited. They also provide insights into the cultural norms and psyches of the communities they visited. Though he shows paternalism towards his primitive "children", he truly provides important information about them.

All things considered, the accounts on Africans of these literatures of travel were far from being fair towards the natives. This literature had its "*clichés"* that successive writers were passing on from one generation of colonial writers to another.

In facts, Africa was a mere pretext for reflecting on their psychological evolutions. Indeed, African characters in this literature also stood in the background and performed peripheral functions such as servants, errand boys and go betweens. Africa became an allegorical setting within which these western writers explored issues about western civilization and European characters' mindsets. Africa was only a sort of backdrop for non African concerns.

It is this historical and ideological context that led many Africans to literature. Though we have little biographical elements about Mofolo's motivation to write, writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have clearly stated that it is this literature on Africa by western writers which induced them to "write back"(in reference to the title of the seminal book of postcolonial theories Aschcroft and al 1989) in defense of their peoples' values:

> "I know around '51, '52, I was quite certain that I was going to try my hand at writing, and one of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary's novel set in Nigeria, Mister Johnson, which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture of not only of the country, but even of the Nigerian character and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside." (Duerden & Pieterse: 3-4

Mofolo did not explicitly confess of having embarked on a literary career as a way of writing back to the prejudices spread by foreign writers. An analysis of the content of his novel suggests though that he wished to present a different picture from that presented at his time by the literature missionaries encouraged and which most western writers indulge in. His conception of the role of the narrator is far from that of these colonial writers. His picture, even though it is still spreading some of the prejudiced images on African peoples, is yet a new and fairer picture on the African society.

The traditional storyteller is not singly a composer of imaginary stories. He is a sort a historian, an anthropological scientist of his people's values, who often resorts to ethnological digressions. He explains the origins of social practices and therefore expands on etiological mythology as it can be seen in this performance by Banna Kanute's Sunjata. The griot links most traditions in the mandingue land to the life of his hero:

> He [Sumanguru] went into retreat;
> After forty days he came out.
> That is why,

Among us black people,
A white cock is prescribed as charity,
For every boy.
Afterwards, when you grow up and build your own compound,
A white ram is prescribed as charity for you.
As to the origin of this custom,
This is how it came about.
He too went into retreat;
After forty days he came out. (in Okpewho 1979: 195)

The same motif is present in Chaka where the narrator seems to link everything to Chaka's life. The Zulu hero was the initiator of almost anything of much worth in his community. The etiological motifs of Chaka have a double origin. They are a survival of the traditional art of storytelling but are also supported by the rumors and other negative images spread by the colonial writers. Chaka's narrator behaves like the Europeans who were prompt to accuse African tribes of cannibalism without any evidence or any effort to understand and explain several ritual and cultural practices. He traces cannibalism in Africa to Chaka's reign, an allegation that needs little reflection to be contradicted. Chaka becomes the "originator-of-all-things evil." (Mofolo: 137) The narrator is not different from Conrad's narrator who accused his Africans of being cannibals to keep distances with: "Fine fellow – cannibals – in their place." (Conrad 1969: 157)

These narrators of the traditional milieu always pretend to speak the truth. Thus the griot Mamadou Kouyate is explicit about the historic nature of his Sunjata: "My word is pure and free of all untruth; it is the word of my father. I will give you my father's words just as I received them." (Okpehwo 1979: 66-67) As culturally fathers do not tell lies to descendants, his statement is to be taken for granted. He adds as another token of the authenticity of his recounting that "royals griots do not know what lying is …" (ibid: 67) Elsewhere, the griot seals the veracity of his report by his fidelity to the original version he collected from his forebears:

> "I, Djely Mamadou Kouyate, am the result of long tradition. For generations we have passed on the history of kings from father to son. The narrative was passed on to me without alteration and I deliver it without alteration, for I received it free from all untruth." (Niane 1965: 40-41)

These vows may well be at variance with rigorous historical recordings though the narrator will not be accused of being an arrant liar. Truth indeed is a notion that is culture specific as ethnologists like Bronislaw Malinowski (1968), Levy-Strauss (1958), Vansina show clearly. "In many cultures truth is what is being faithfully repeated as content and has been certified as true by the ancestors. But sometimes truth does not include the notion that x and y really happened. […] [The] tradition [may be] true, but not factual. (in Vansina 1985: 129) The narrator of Chaka is also endowed with qualities that may seem unliterary to a foreign analyst or reader but remain the skills required from any art performer in this 'unlettered' society.

The social function of the narrative: the narrator as a pedagogue

The artist is a pedagogue of the communal values. He is the guiding sensibility and an imaginative leader for his society. All these attributes of the traditional artist are recaptured in Mofolo's Chaka. The hero does not question norms as such. He asserts them and call for their keeping. What he reproaches Chaka with is the deviation from what any sensible African would consider as good. From this we deduce that there are values that reach agreement among the narrator and his narratee.

Chapter one serves this pedagogical purpose. It introduces the geographical setting for his story. The details he provides very early will serve for a later use: *" South Africa is a large headland situated between two oceans, one to the east and one to the west. The nations that inhabit it are numerous and greatly varied in custom and language. ..."* (Mofolo: 1)

After this contextualization for his story, he comes to the point of making a precise historical and geographical presentation of the particular community from which the story was borrowed and the historical events developed.

> "Our purpose here has to do with the eastern nations, the Bakone, and it is fitting that, before we plunge into our story, we should describe how the nations were settled in the beginning, so that the reader may understand what will be narrated in the coming chapters. […] the greater portion of the land of Bakone, which lies between the Maloti and the sea, is covered by forest. Besides, the crops there are never bitten by frost, for there are only light frosts because of the nearness of the sea. It is a land of lush greenness, and of extremely rich pasturage. …" (Mofolo: 1-2)

After this geographical presentation, he set out to present some of the cultural values and belief systems of the people among whom Chaka lived. Once this prior presentation is made, the events can unfold and some of these belief systems will provide clues for deciphering some of the attitudes in the story as is the case with the importance of reptiles in this community:

> "Water serpents are highly regarded in Bokone, and so indeed, are such crawlers as the cobra and the puff-adder. A person who has seen a snake is considered to have seen something portentous which presages either good fortune or extreme bad luck accompanied by plagues that are coming to him from his ancestral gods. A snake is not to be killed in Bokone, and anyone who kills it is considered to have done a deed that surpasses all others in ugliness. Such a one will carry for the rest of his life the shame of having killed that snake. He who kills a snake is regarded as insulting the gods and showing them disrespect by killing their messenger who conveys the wishes of the dead to their living descendants. […] Snakes are abundant therefore, since they are not killed. It is understandable, then, that the snake should be an ingredient in all the medecines of Bokone, because there is no way in which such an important thing could be left out." (Mofolo: 2-3)

The story follows a linear development from the meeting of Chaka's parents, their marriage, the hero's birth, his early extraordinary childhood, exile, apprenticeship and victorious return home then his death.

No talented and experienced storyteller in the traditional context of live performance would jump into any subject without preparing his audience to the mental adjustment needed to fully enjoy the performance. It is only when the appropriate mental set has been created that the narrator can embark on the narration. We can therefore sum up the approach of the narrator. He first presents the geographical and historical context, then the people and their cultural values. After that he presents the village, the family and the hero himself. Then the main actions ensue. The end of the story is marked by the progressive fall from glory to an ignominious death by the hero's own brothers. The story is therefore composed in a fixed structure. The book is divided into chapters whose headings are summaries of the content of that chapter. The chapter ends in summarizing paragraphs that also announce the coming chapters as is illustrated in the last paragraph of chapter five:

> "In this chapter we find that it is indeed true that the fruit of sin is amazingly bitter, because we do not see any transgression on Chaka's part in these matters, yet, in spite of all that, his father commands that he should be killed. The real issue, the cause of it all, was that Nandi and Senzangakhona suffered from guilt, and Senzangakhona, fearing that his crime would be exposed, went to the length of plotting to kill his own son. Yet, if Senzangakhona had not committed this shameful deed in his youth, Chaka would have been at his home at Nobamba, a precious child, a child dearly loved by his father." (Mofolo: 34)

It is not enough to collect ethnological and anthropological data and present them to readers. As Lévy-Strauss and his disciples showed, after ethnographic recording of data, the last step of the ethnological approach must be the beginning of the explanatory synthesis. (1958: 387) One must explain and even justify these data. Chaka's narrator therefore justifies individual and social attitudes. Some rites are explained and their rationale shown. He uses many stock phrases to make sure his readers do not interpret behaviors wrongly. Some of these stock expressions are: "the reader must understand that …" (Mofolo: 3), *"the reader should read these words bearing in mind that …" (Mofolo:19), "the reader should know remember that …" (21), "the reader can imagine for himself how great …* (Mofolo:39), "*let the reader imagine these things… (Mofolo: 54), "the reader must remember …* (Mofolo: 114). After stating that women of Ncube were not attracted by men's handsomeness but rather by their courage and fierceness in battles, he proceeds to explain their rather singular values:

> "… In those days the women were not attracted by a man however handsome he might be if he was a coward. A woman's aim was to find someone who was a man indeed in battle, a true brave when spears were being wielded, or when occasions of precisely this nature arose. Such a one, however ugly he might be, was loved, and songs were composed to praise him and deride the others. In a way we cannot blame them for being like that, because those were days of might. Women who wanted to be well protected had to find herself a man of that caliber, who was feared by others, a truly tough fellow." (Mofolo: 20)

When Chaka undresses before his mother for his ritual bath in the Mfolozi – Mhlophe River, the narrator promptly provides ethnological justifications to the prudish educated readers prone to be shocked by this attitude:

"When they arrived at the river, …, [Chaka's] mother hid near where her son was going to bathe. The reader should remember that it is not shameful in Bokone for a mother to see her son naked and bathing, because people hardly wear anything in Bokone."(Mofolo: 21)

The same narrator shares with Isanusi the witch doctor who helps Chaka achieve his life dreams with witchcraft some of the rules of the former's divining art. The narrator who undertakes to educate his reader into the rules of occult sciences informs the latter why it is necessary for Chaka to take time to think well before making his mind. For once he has made his decision, he binds himself to observe the commandments of the diviner or healer:

"It is the law of the profession that in matters of this nature, or of curing someone of sterility, or of surrounding a property with protective medicines, a doctor should lay down his conditions which the people have to abide by or refuse right at the beginning if those conditions are too difficult because, if they do not refuse at the very start, the doctor will still claim his reward even if, through their negligence, his labours have not attained any results." (Mofolo: 40-41)

The same way he makes a point of honor to initiate his readers into the psyche of the Zulu. Not only does he teach readers the Zulus' traditions but he also claims to be initiated into deciphering the mind of the whole black race in whose name he speaks and gets his authority. To show the sacrifices Chaka imposes upon his subjects, the narrator reminds his readers of the importance of marriage which his soldiers can no more indulge in. This important rite of traditional life has become a rare privilege, a reward for the most gallant fighters of his army:

> "The reader must remember that among all the things that are held in high regard by the black peoples, there is none held dearer than marriage; very often when other things are being evaluated, marriage is kept apart from them, for marriage is life itself." (Mofolo: 114)

To stress the point even further, the narrator draws the conclusion for his readers. "[T]hat" he reminds them "will make us understand more clearly the extent to which Chaka's warriors exerted themselves in their eagerness to qualify for it [marriage] (Mofolo: 114)

Earlier in the first paragraph, he had already shown his pretention to be an expert of the black peoples' minds and customs. If Chaka's mother's age mates did not denounce the King after his sinful sexual intercourse with Nandi in break of the traditionally sanctioned moral code, it is because they were caught between contradictory interpretations of these codes. They have to denounce anybody committing such a break of traditions. At the same time though, they have to abide by the principle that in no way should they disobey a king for " … among the black people, [the king] is above the law." (Mofolo: 5) There is no point in trying to prove that such arguments require little effort to be contradicted. This is something anybody a bit familiar with African communities can see for himself in their everyday lives.

Pointedly, the councilors of Tubondo the king in Mwindo are at variance with this sacrosanct principle said to be common to all black peoples. “If the king cannot be disagreed with, then it is too great foolishness” these people say. (Okpewho 1979: 78) If this respect for rulers in this society is a well-established social rule, it therefore needs no sweeping generalization. The Basotho often argue that “a chief is a chief through his people.” (Ibid)

Chaka’s narrative is often interrupted and the development of the main actions delayed by long ethnological explanations and authorial intrusions. These ethnological and sociological intrusions are sometimes explicitly announced as is done in chapter seventeen which is no more than a mere listing of the reforms and changes brought by Chaka to his kingdom. It is by way of consequence the longest chapter of the novel which postpones the growth of the plot to subsequent chapters. The narrator opens this chapter with this generosity and pedagogical qualities that he has displayed since the beginning of the novel: *“Before we proceed further with the story of Chaka’s rule, we ought to describe briefly the state of the Bathethwa nation when Dingiswayo came and took over the kingship, and where it stood at the time of his death.”* (Mofolo: 105)

The narrator is therefore an expert in the geography, history and the social sciences of the Zulu people. Indeed in the traditional context from which the narrative borrows this social identity of the storyteller, the bard or griot is sometimes endowed with extraordinary powers and can be an important member of the ruling body. He knows the official history of the clan, its main cultural and social practices. Banna Kanute, for instance, claims social and artistic distinction. He reminds his visibly unimpressed listener here with a feeling of irritation the excellence of his artistic status:

> Don’t you know
> That an ordinary narrator and an expert singer are not the same? (in Okpewho 1992: 46)

Some rather punctilious critics of literature might reproach Mofolo with having written an ethnological novel, a term which would imply that it is canonically a bad form of literature. All these ethnological information in a piece of fiction might be dismissed as unliterary. The author can oppose to this canon the traditional conception of art of his traditional community and even the western writers who initiated him into that art. All things considered, these details are never gratuitous digressions as Kwame Ayivor has demonstrated about one example. The Ghanaian scholar has for example this to say about the ethnological note of page 2 cited earlier about the importance of reptiles in the Zulu cosmology:

So far there is nothing mischievous the aim being to objectively present facts and even enlighten the readers. Some twenty pages later, the encounter between the King of the Deep Pool can be understood only in this symbolism. This ritual can only be understood within the ethos of this traditional African belief. The ethnographic introductory paragraph therefore provides the symbolic equipments for deciphering this ritual. (69-70)

Conclusion

Mofolo's Chaka was written in a context of prevailing ideas that need to be known to be able to enjoy the story and decipher some of its ideas and symbols. The Sotho born writer wrote back to this literature. Some critics reproached the writer with having contributed to spread the colonial prejudices, with having not openly sided with the Zulu people against the white man and thus reject the negative image some colonial writers drew of the Zulu hero. It would be 'chronocentrism'[7] (Griffin 2005: 15) to dismiss the novel according to one's time values and prevailing ideas. Chaka was written in support of some of these ideas and against some of them. Writing in traditional African communities has seldom been an activity of mind, an emotional exercise centred around the idiosyncratic mind of its creator. Generally used in the precolonial context to assert the traditional institutions, it has been used during and after the painful experiences of the slave trade and the colonial enterprise as a commodity the artists from the colonized societies traded for their humanity. Through their literature, African writers have tried to deconstruct the established assumptions that almost denied any humanity to the black race. Artists became teachers and ambassadors of their peoples' cultural heritage.

Ethnology has for long been regarded as the study of societies considered primitive and savage as opposed to those that are advanced and have 'civilizations'. Now that it has been expurgated of its negative connotations, it can be reconciled with its nobler purposes of helping mutual comprehension between human communities. When writers of the then 'savage', 'primitive' and 'uncivilized' societies use this science to present their communities from an insider's point of view, ethnology is reconciled with literature as both celebrate differences, specifities among human communities for the first discipline and human beings as individuals for the second.

After a century of ethnological literature that used literature as a pretext to counter attack the falsities spread about the black peoples all over the world, a new type of literature is developing based on the critical mind of individual writers in a context where the general agreement on one's values is shattered. The postcolonial situation has given an impetus to new forms of literature that foretell new directions and new experimental techniques in which the presence of ethnology will be less visible. Focus will be inwardly turned towards the individual writer or his characters' minds. Besides, if according to most ethnologists, their discipline is a science for the foreign communities, a science for the observed (in Lombard: 14), is it still ethnology when it is appropriated by African writers who cast a scientific look at their own societies?

[7] Analogy to ethnocentrism. Chronocentrism is a term used by some ethnologists to speak about the attitude that consists in judging according to one's time things that happened in another time.

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