

# A Zulu King in Conversation with the World: Translational and Transcultural Strategies in *Chaka* (1981) by Thomas Mofolo

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## Abstract

This article discusses *Chaka* (1981) by Thomas Mofolo as a transcultural text written by a transcultural author. It has hybrid origins, was written with local and global audiences in mind and forges linkages between different ethnicities, nations, languages and literary traditions. In this way it disrupts the centre-periphery polarity associated with stark distinctions between “European” and “African” literatures. In shifting the attention to the transcultural entanglements without which *Chaka* would never have been written or read, I am being mindful of the view of Rebecca Walkowitz, outlined in her book *Born Translated* (2015), that some literary works begin collaboratively and comparatively, in multiple languages and geographical locations, and are targeted to readerships in various cultures and languages. Walkowitz examines the importance of these literary processes in contemporary Anglophone literature, but I will argue that Mofolo’s novel was in its own way “born translated” and displays many of the characteristics highlighted by Walkowitz in her discussions of writers such as J. M. Coetzee, Haruki Marukami and Jamaica Kincaid. The article outlines how translation shaped Mofolo’s novel and became a condition of its production, how its literary and political meanings are influenced by the fact that it exists in different editions in different languages and in different markets, and the multiple ways in which Mofolo’s novel can be understood as “born-translated” writing.

**Keywords:** transcultural; translation; Shaka; Mofolo; *Chaka*



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## Introduction

*Man Animal Thing* (2021), the most recent award-winning volume of poetry by the Dutch-Aruban poet Alfred Schaffer, takes the form of a narrative epic about the life and death of the legendary African king Shaka Zulu and was inspired by Thomas Mofolo's famous novel *Chaka*. In the poems themselves, and in academic discourse about them, Schaffer explicitly draws attention to the historical novel the epic poem is based on. Schaffer reworked each of the chapters in the source text into long narrative poems which, broadly speaking, adhere to the outlines of Mofolo's story but incorporate them in dramatically altered contexts. Schaffer's Shaka retains many of his original characteristics, but is also portrayed, anachronistically, as an immigrant and asylum seeker in the Netherlands of this day and age. About these transformations Schaffer (2016, 149) says: "*Man Animal Thing* owes everything to Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* and is at the same time a universe away from that text."

It would be possible and indeed plausible to use Schaffer's comment about two texts from different universes as a starting point for a comparison between Mofolo's text as one located in African-language traditions, and Schaffer's text as one located in European-language traditions. Such an approach would draw on a long tradition in literary studies to distinguish between European and African literatures, often with references to assumed oppositions between European texts—global, written and (post)modern—and African texts—local, oral and rooted in traditions from the past. Central to this methodology would be questions of authorship, informed by often-voiced criticisms of the appropriation of African literature. Achille Mbembe (2001), for instance, has written extensively about aesthetic discourses that will have Africa function as a pool of traditional genres, myths and legends which can be drawn from to reinvigorate European texts. In fact, Schaffer (2016, 155) quotes Mbembe as part of his discussion about the ethical pitfalls he wanted to avoid when writing *Man Animal Thing*.

Building on Schaffer's point that Mofolo's novel was already "an adaptation, an appropriation" of the Shaka legend and "is owned by no one" (Schaffer 2016, 150, 154), I want to break away from the troubled dichotomies which I've just outlined. I offer instead an interpretation of Mofolo's novel that questions the supposed opposition between African and European literature. I consider Schaffer's comment about the novel belonging to no one against the background of complicated boundary crossings between cultures, languages, belief systems and continents before and after its publication. I read *Chaka* as a novel written with both African and European audiences in mind and as a disruption of the center-periphery polarity associated with stark distinctions between African and European literatures.

In shifting the attention to the transcultural entanglements without which *Chaka* would never have been written or read, I am being mindful of the view of Rebecca Walkowitz, outlined in her book *Born Translated* (2015), that some literary works begin collaboratively and comparatively, in multiple languages and geographical locations, and are targeted to readerships in various cultures and languages. Such works are "born

translated,” through processes of composition and distribution, prior to their actual translation from one language to another by “outside” translators. Walkowitz examines the importance of these literary processes in contemporary Anglophone literature, but I will argue that Mofolo’s novel, originally published in Sesotho, was also “born translated” and displays several of the characteristics highlighted by Walkowitz in her discussions of writers like J. M. Coetzee, Haruki Marukami and Jamaica Kincaid.

Mofolo “wrote the first African world novel,” argues Jennifer Wenzel (2021, 336) in a recent article. She explains how Mofolo’s three extant novels were “shaped equally by the horrors of the precolonial displacement and decimation of the Basotho people in the early nineteenth century, by the optimism and confidence of a mission-educated intelligentsia at the turn of the twentieth century and by the looming threat of subjugation” (336–37). My reading of Mofolo’s *Chaka* explores different aspects related to her second point about the optimism of a mission-educated intelligentsia at a time when Mofolo “inhabited a vibrant literate culture that had come into its own” (348). My reading of Mofolo’s novel as “born translated” considers the literary experimentation and invention that inaugurated “the birth of the novel in Africa” (337) within the historical context of mission literacy and the literary activities that introduced Thomas Mofolo and his contemporaries to multiple, global audiences and markets alongside local ones. Like Wenzel, I consider *Chaka* to be “the first African world novel” (336), but I will push further and argue that the process of “becoming a world novel” (356) was wrapped up in its writing. *Chaka* did not “become” a world novel but was conceived as one.

### *Chaka* as “literature written for the world” (Walkowitz 2015, 83)

Mofolo’s *Chaka* is an early example of the sort of novel about which Walkowitz (2015, 2) writes that they enter various markets when they are “published in different editions in the same language ... and in different editions in different languages.” Mofolo’s novel was originally written in Sesotho and published in 1925 by a missionary press of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (Mofolo 1925). An English translation by F. H. Dutton was published in 1931, and in 1940 it was translated into French by Victor Ellenberger (Mofolo 1931; 1940). In the 1950s it was translated into German (Mofolo 1953) and Italian (Mofolo 1959). The novel was translated into Afrikaans in 1974, with a second, reworked Afrikaans translation appearing in 2017 (Mofolo 1974; 2017). A new English translation by Daniel P. Kunene appeared in the Heinemann African Writers Series in 1981 (Mofolo 1981).

Scholarly attention has not been limited to any single one of these translations or editions. Instead, published research about the novel reflects that *Chaka* has generated different meanings and legacies in different languages. Vassilatos (2011, 2016) studies the influence of the French translation on Francophone and pan-Africanist visions of Shaka as a symbol of African independence; Gray (1975) and Sulzer (1984) discuss how the German translation positioned Shaka as “a black führer” (Gray 1975, 67); Tomei (2020) focuses on the Italian translation; and Krog (2010), Malaba (1986) and

Viljoen (2018) consider the formative influence of Swanepoel's 1974 Afrikaans translation on Afrikaans literary representations of the Zulu king. Walkowitz explains that, because no single language can contain all the scattered meanings of a born-translated novel, its first edition, even if it is the one written in the author's mother tongue, is only part of the work's meaning. This is certainly true of Mofolo's *Chaka*. Even though the original Sesotho publication is considered by researchers as part of what Sandwith (2018, 1) calls its "history of mutation and change," most scholarly articles about Mofolo's novel are based on translated editions, as is indeed the case with this article also. Dunton and Krog (2016) describe how their "Translating Mofolo" conference in 2015 was attended by scholars from different traditions, countries and disciplines who had read *Chaka* mostly in translation. In addition to Lesotho, the country Mofolo hailed from, scholars from South Africa, France and the United States of America were also drawn into the mix. For Dunton and Krog (2016, 10), this underlined how "the translations of Mofolo's *Chaka* (into English, French, Afrikaans and German) had generated their own scholarly interest in those languages."

Even though the dissemination and circulation of Mofolo's novel in different markets and cultural territories happened less quickly or extensively than the processes described by Walkowitz with reference to contemporary Anglophone novels, the novel's publishing history bears out that its meaning, like those of all born-translated novels, does not reside in any one of its editions or translations. Instead, it requires a continuous comparative effort from its readers. Mofolo's *Chaka* exists as part of a group, as one of many versions, and it is unclear where, with what version, when, and how many times it was "born." Since it is a book with "multiple stagings" (Sandwith 2018, 1), it is not only studied across languages in different translated versions, but also as part of different literary lineages and networks. *Chaka* is often described as "a tale of an African hero written, for the first time, by an African" and as a book written for "an African audience" (Jeffrey 2010, 54). It has been chosen by a panel of African scholars as one of the top 12 African books of all time (Lilford 2012, 381), with Mofolo hailed by many as "the pre-eminent Black novelist of early 20th century Southern Africa" (Mbao 2015, 3). The novel is also studied as an example of "Lesotho literature in English" (Ricard 2016, 51; Shava and Kolobe 2016), "Black South African 'Mission' Writing" (Attwell 1999) and—since its Afrikaans translation inspired the Dutch poet Schaffer—as part of "the transcontinental ties that bind the Afrikaans and Dutch literary systems" (Loots 2018).

Clearly, its circulation in multiple languages complicates to what degree any single territory, literary tradition, interpretative framework, nation, linguistic or ethnic group can claim ownership of Mofolo's novel. Schaffer (2016, 154) has a point when he defends himself against accusations of appropriation with the reminder that *Chaka* "belongs to no one." *Chaka* has acquired mobility and fluidity in a transcultural, transnational and translingual space and forces readers to pay attention to "aspects of the work that exceed the single, monolingual version" (Walkowitz 2015, 49). For Sandwith (2018, 1), it is a novel that "changes form, and therefore meaning, in relation

to different historical and geographical contexts.” Sandwith makes this point with reference to the format of material books published in different languages, but her observation about “the various shapes it [Mofolo’s novel] has taken and meanings it has accrued on its journey through time and space” (2018, 1) can also be applied more broadly to its non-tangible afterlives in different reading communities. The novel has lent itself to many different interpretative focuses and conflicting perspectives, and the discussion and debate continues. The transculturality of Mofolo’s *Chaka* cannot be separated from what Ricard (2016, 48) calls “the story of Mofolo’s translations.” Vassilatos (2016, 161) is not wrong when she describes the processes of transculturation after publication as follows:

In the case of Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* (1925) transculturation takes place through its various rewritings and translations. The transference of culture does not follow a linear (colonies/metropolis) path but, rather, *Chaka* becomes transcultural through the variety of cultures it encounters.

It should be added that the quintessential transnationality and transculturality of Mofolo’s novel lie not only in its reception, but also in its conception. *Chaka* was addressed from the start to multiple audiences and shaped by Mofolo’s awareness that it would be read by people from different national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Long before the age of global mobility in the so-called globalised world discussed by Walkowitz in *Born Translated*, Mofolo established himself as a transcultural writer who could move between languages and cultures to create networks of transcultural entanglements.<sup>1</sup> The novel represents complicated boundary crossings between cultures, languages, belief systems and continents.

Mofolo grew up in a multilingual and multicultural world. The first school he attended was at Qomoqomong in the southern part of what is today Lesotho. It was an environment known for “ethnic diversity” (Gill 2016, 31), and it was here that he “learned isiXhosa and English to add to Sesotho and Dutch, the languages used by his family” (Gill 2016, 31). After finishing his lower standards at Qomoqomong, Thomas went to school at Masitise, where he finished his primary school education, probably in 1893 or 1894, studying under the French missionary Renee Ellenberger (Couzens 2003, 291). He then enrolled in Bible School at Morija, a well-known missionary station and cosmopolitan centre that attracted students from many parts of Lesotho, the Free State, the Transvaal, Mozambique and Barotseland, and the Eastern Cape. He was educated by and boarded with Reverend Alfred Casalis. After obtaining a diploma at the Teachers’ Training College, Mofolo started working for Casalis in the Morija Book Depot, run by the Paris Evangelic Mission Society, as a proofreader and general assistant to the French missionary Reverend Alfred Casalis (Couzens 2003, 291). Casalis valued Mofolo for having obtained a teaching diploma, for his written and spoken fluency in English, for his impeccable written and spoken Sesotho, and for being

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1. It is a great pity that Mofolo abandoned his writing career after committing adultery and fleeing Morija in March 1910 because he feared a scandal (Couzens 2003, 315–18).

widely read in both Sesotho and English. Casalis and his French-speaking missionary colleagues chose to educate their converts in English but were themselves conversant in Sesotho and involved in various projects linked to the emergence of written Sesotho. They transcribed and translated praise songs and proverbs from Sesotho into French, and translated hymns, portions of the Bible and religious material from French into Sesotho. Mofolo's writing career was thus influenced by intercultural ties with missionaries whose activities in Lesotho were not only evangelical but extended to matters linguistic and literary. It made him a writer attuned to multiple languages, cultures, and religious frameworks.

Dunton and Krog (2016, 13) see Mofolo as “an African who regarded himself as being in conversation not only with his fellow Basotho, but with other Africans.” I would like to suggest that Mofolo's novel was also an early example of what Walkowitz (2015, 83) calls “literature written for the world.” Morija was a renowned missionary centre, a cosmopolitan hub of education and literary activity, and Mofolo belonged to a group of well-read black writers who addressed themselves to local African elites, but also to missionaries and therefore to Europeans. Couzens (2003, 16) reveals that even before the publication of *Chaka*, Mofolo's third and most famous novel, Mofolo was described by one of the missionaries at Morija as “known even beyond the borders of this country, thanks to his books.” Among the first readers of Mofolo's three novels, all of them written in Sesotho, were French-speaking Protestant missionaries. Some of their reactions have been recorded. For instance, the minutes of a meeting of the publications committee in April 1927 indicate that one of the committee members, Renee Ellenberger, objected to the publication of *Chaka* on moral grounds, expressing strong reservations about the fact that *Chaka* was a secular novel, and could be read as an apology for “pagan superstitions” (Kunene 1989, 143–48). The novel, submitted for publication in 1909–1910, was only published after a delay of 15 years.<sup>2</sup> Only then did it become available to Sesotho readers, and the rest of the world. It had European readers long before it had African readers, as Mofolo knew it would. Unlike his previous two novels—*Moeti oa Bochabela* (Mofolo 1907) and *Pitseng* (Mofolo 1910)—*Chaka* was not serialised in the Sesotho newspaper *Leselinyanala Lesotho* before being published in book format (Kunene 2015, 9). It would not be read unless it was published by the missionaries. It was, indeed, with the direct assistance of Casalis that the manuscript was eventually published (Kunene 2015).

Walkowitz (2015, 4) reminds us that born-translated novels “are *written for translation*, in the hope of being translated, but they are also often *written as translations*, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed.” Mofolo wrote *Chaka* at a time and place that made it possible for him to foresee the possibility of his manuscript being published in the original and possibly in translation. By 1909, when he was still working on *Chaka*, the Reverend Gerard Duby

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2. The reason for this delay is the well-documented controversy about Mofolo's adultery that erupted after Mofolo had submitted the manuscript (Couzens 2003, 315–18).

was already busy translating Mofolo's debut novel, *Moeti oa Bochabela*, into English. He was planning to publish *The Pilgrim of the East* soon (according to a letter by Duby quoted in Couzens 2003, 316). The adultery scandal that would lead to Mofolo's unexpected departure from Morija still lay in the future (Couzens 2003, 315–18). *Chaka* was written *for* translation, but also *as* a translation: it is written in Sesotho, and not in the language of Shaka, the great Zulu warrior. Walkowitz explains how “novels that begin in translation present us with distant, paraphrased, or disabled voices” (2015, 124). When Zulu characters speak Sesotho in Mofolo's fictional rendering of Shaka's story, Mofolo is indeed “paraphrasing.” The novel enacts a complicated internal translation process that precedes the labours of its actual translators. It is translated writing even though Mofolo is writing in his mother tongue.

In the way of many born-translated novels, *Chaka* makes visible how translation is a condition of its production. For the most part, Zulu characters speak in Sesotho, but some snippets of conversation are reproduced in Zulu, reminding readers that Mofolo's writing cuts across linguistic and cultural divides. Mofolo is foregrounding his strategies of translation. Kunene (2015, 22) explains, in his “Introduction,” that he added translations in parenthesis when Mofolo provided none. An example is the scene where Chaka rescues a young girl from being eaten by a hyena and his words are given in Zulu: “Chaka ... woke those with whom he was sleeping, saying: ‘Vukani, Madoda, intombi yemuka nencuka!’ (Wake up, men, a girl has been taken by the hyena!)” (Mofolo 2015, 59). On the next page, Chaka is still speaking Zulu: “Chaka said one word only, ‘Nanso!’ (There!), and then he kept quiet” (60). By the end of the page, Chaka's words are once again being translated by Mofolo and Zulu has retreated into the background: “Chaka held her by the arm ... saying: ‘You are safe, stop crying and rejoice’” (60). When Mofolo's narrative switches between mediated and unmediated voices in this way, it becomes clear to the reader that the novel originated in multiple languages. In Chapter 17, Mofolo (2015, 168) reproduces a long praise poem in the original Zulu, drawing attention to the fact that it is being reproduced in its original language: “Here we reproduce the praises of King Chaka, in Zulu, which we were able to obtain.” This is typical of the born-translated novel's insistence on drawing attention to its multilingual sources.

There are several moments in the text when it becomes clear that Mofolo is aware of his role as a cultural go-between across ethnic and linguistic divides, with clear signs that he is comparing and juxtaposing the cultural worlds of the Basotho and the amaZulu. Born-translated writing is comparative (Walkowitz 2009), and Mofolo's “comparison writing” highlights not only differences, but also similarities. His description, early in the novel, of a game played at a feast organised by Chaka's father, Senzangakhona, demonstrates how he draws comparisons between the customs and cultures of different tribes. He writes how, during the festivities, young men asked young women to play a game called *kana*. He goes on to explain that this game, played by the story's Zulu characters, “is similar to the *sedia-dia* girls' dance among the Basotho” (Mofolo 2015, 28). It is telling that Kunene, a native speaker of Zulu, mentions how translating

Mofolo's novel was rewarding because it led him to "marvel at the close parallels in human thought in different cultures" (Kunene 2015, 22).

Mofolo is keen to avoid misunderstandings by modern Sesotho readers who are no longer entrenched in and familiar with the traditional customs and beliefs of their people. He frames the narrative for them: "We are talking about those days of our fathers, not these modern times" (Mofolo 2015, 47). Since Mofolo is not only addressing fellow Africans but also European readers, he also goes to great lengths to clarify aspects of the novel that are culture-specific and tied to its African roots. *Chaka* portrays the lives and customs of a rural people in a pre-modern, pre-industrialised Africa. It is set in the remote past and speaks of myth, magic and ritual as part of a traditional African belief system. The text is specifically African in that it could not be read or understood without considering the indigenous moral framework that shapes it. Thematically, it is rooted in Africa since it is concerned with questions of Zulu identity and nationhood. It recounts African history since it describes the causes and consequences of the Mfecane (a time of unrest in the Southern African region caused by the rise of the Zulu nation under Shaka). Against this background, Mofolo, in the guise of a transcultural writer addressing himself to multiple audiences in a born-translated novel, is hard at work throughout the novel to make it accessible and understandable to outsiders. Some explanations are woven into the narrative in an unobtrusive way. When Mofolo invents a magician character called Isanusi, he finds a way to explain to readers unfamiliar with the meaning of the word "isanusi" that it is not only a proper name but also a common noun describing a profession: "[Chaka] said to himself: might this not be the *isanusi* who, it had been said, would come to him!" (72). The point is made even clearer—and traditional, tribal distinctions between healers, witchdoctors, sorcerers and diviners touched upon—in the answers given by Isanusi when Chaka asks him for his name (Mofolo 2015, 79):

"Doctor, we have already been together several days now, ... but you have not yet told me your name. Who are you?"

"Neither did you tell me yours. I discovered it for myself with my own intelligence. When you call me, say 'Isanusi.'"

"But 'Isanusi' is not your name, it simply describes what you are, whereas what I am asking is your name."

"You speak the truth, but *I* am Isanusi both by name and deed."

Isanusi explains and demonstrates, by not having to ask for Chaka's name, that he is not a doctor or herbalist but a diviner and sorcerer with composite magical powers. He repeatedly tells Chaka: "You must not say 'doctor' when you speak to me, you must say 'Isanusi'" (Mofolo 2015, 80). Not all amplifications are woven into the narrative. Mofolo does not refrain from interrupting his narrative to explain, in the manner of an ethnographer, how it should be interpreted. He insists, at regular intervals, that it is



important for readers to understand what they are reading and phrases like “[t]he reader should read these words bearing in mind that ...” (47) and “[t]he reader should remember that ...” (49) recur. For instance, the novel opens with a detailed description of the different tribes of Southern Africa and their histories and with Mofolo (2015, 24) maintaining that these explanations are necessary “so that the reader may understand what will be narrated in the coming chapters.” The famous confrontation between Chaka and a water monster in the shape of a giant snake is preceded with an extraordinarily lengthy explanation, spanning several pages, about beliefs surrounding snakes and serpents:

Water serpents are highly regarded in Bokone, and so indeed, are such little 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 one is considered to have done a deed that surpasses all others in ugliness. (Mofolo 2015, 25)

The scene itself, which contains a description of Chaka bathing in the pool while his mother is watching, is interrupted with the following clarification: “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 2015, 48). When Mofolo quotes a song sung by women after Chaka has succeeded in killing a lion—a song in which they tease those men who were less brave than Chaka—he carefully explains the implications of their song: “The reader should read these words bearing in mind that there is nothing more humiliating for a man than to be sung about by the women in mockery and contempt, nor, on the other hand, is there anything as pleasing as when they sing about him in praise” (2015, 47).

The inclusion of praise songs such as the one mentioned above is one of the most striking translational and transcultural strategies employed by Mofolo, since it reveals that he is not only translating from one language (Zulu) to another (Sesotho), but also from one medium to another. This point has been contested by some commentators. “Mofolo was not a praise singer or a bard; he was a man of the book, of paper, of the printing shop,” writes Ricard (2016, 55). He suggests that Mofolo’s attention to Zulu praise songs may have been inspired by the interest in recording oral traditions amongst the missionaries at Morija, and their “radical break with the neglect of orality and the contempt for non-written material which characterised the attitudes of many who had preceded them” (2016, 55). Since these missionaries spent much time collecting and transcribing praise songs, Ricard (2016, 55) argues that the inclusion of praise songs in Chaka is “literary borrowing” instead of “a tribute to memory.” But there is much in the text to suggest very powerfully that Mofolo’s writing is located at the confluence of two alternative media, oral and written literature. Not only songs composed in honour of Chaka, but many other saturate the narrative. Songs—such as the song sung by the young men to bolster their spirits during the lion hunt, the song sung by women to praise Nandi for giving birth to Chaka, the song performed by a mysterious voice when the

snake appears to Chaka, the villagers' song about the feared brown hyena, and the song of grief sung by Nandi's friends when Chaka is in mortal danger (Mofolo 2015, 43, 46, 46–47, 52, 58–59, 64–65)—are often used to interrupt the flow of the narrative and, even in translation, it is clear that they are meant to be performed. Mofolo includes “stage directions” for the snake song, describing how the first part of the song was “boomed with a heavy, stentorious voice” and the second part spoken with a “very soft voice” (2015, 53). He notes that the first stanza, which appears only once in print, was repeated twice to Chaka; and he uses repetition, exclamation marks and onomatopoeia to capture something of the drama and musicality of the song in performance:

Mphu-mphu, hail!  
 Kalamajweng, Kalamajweng!  
 Mphu-mphu, hail!  
 Kalamajweng, Kalamajweng!  
 Mighty monster in the water-r-r  
 Kalamajweng, Kalamajweng!  
 It is seen only by the favoured ones  
 Kalamajweng, Kalamajweng!  
 It is seen by those who will rule over nations  
 Kalamajweng, Kalamajweng!  
 (Mofolo 2015, 52–53)

Other oral traditions are recreated by weaving lore, stories and myths into the narrative. Ayivor (1997, 49) discusses the noble ancestry of Chaka, the mysteriousness of his birth and early youth, his pre-eminence as hero and his heroic martial ferocity as some oral traditions assimilated by the novel. Mofolo's introduction of the sorcerer Isanusi and his two helpers, Ndlebe and Malunga, also stem from the novel's indebtedness to orality if one bears in mind Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka's view that oral traditions can be found “in the pharmacology of healers, in the utterance of the possessed medium, in the enigmas of the diviners” (quoted in Adu-Gyamfi 2002, 14). The ritual “prayers” and incantations performed by Isanusi in *Chaka* are a case in point, even when they form part of the narrative and are not offset in the form of verse or song:

He [Isanusi] ... rubbed in the medicine with his eyes shut, speaking as follows: “Permitter-of-those-who-are-gone, Permitter-of-those-who-are-taken-unduly, accept him, receive him, bring him all the blessings of those who are gone, that they may lie on him as the dew that lies upon the ground!” (Mofolo 2015, 76)

Chaka as a “world-shaped” and “world-themed” novel (Walkowitz 2015, 120)

Mofolo's use of oral sources, some explicitly acknowledged and some not, illustrates complex interactions between different literary traditions, cultural matrixes and languages. When Mofolo states explicitly, in the narrative, that the praise song at the end of Chapter 17 was “obtain[ed]” by him and is being “reproduce[d] in Zulu,” he foregrounds the transcultural and polyglot sources of his novel. It is a hallmark of the

born-translated novel that it “gather[s] materials drawn from disparate geographies” (Walkowitz 2015, 120). A born-translated novel starts with movement or circulation across geopolitical and geographical boundaries and will find ways to reflect that it is “world-shaped” and “world-themed” rather than “nation-shaped” and “nation-themed.” The expansion from nation to world results in novels that distribute narrative action across several continents, regions, or national territories.

Mofolo’s narrative does not cut across continents and is therefore not about “global circulation,” but it does span different sovereign states or territories, highlighting the differences between landscapes, peoples, and customs. This novel’s very first sentence gives a panoramic view of its multinational, multilingual setting: “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 2015, 23). Mofolo goes on to describe landscapes, villages, territories, nationalities and groups of nations in writing that incorporates long, exhaustive catalogues. It is necessary to quote one of these at some length to illustrate how Mofolo employs enumeration to suggest comprehensiveness:

Across the Mfolozi-Mnyama River were settled the Ndwandwe people who were ruled by Zwide. Between the Mfolozi-Mnyama and the Mfolozi-Mhlope, all the way to the sea, were the Bathethwa who were ruled by Jobe; or perhaps we may more fittingly mention the name of his son, Dingiswayo, who became more renowned than his father. Between those two ... was settled ... the Fenulwenja. ... Near to the Fenulwenja were the Mangwane led by Matiwane. ... There were also the Maqwabe, the Makhuze, the Mahlubi, the BakwaMachibisa, the Mathuli. (Mofolo 2015, 26)

The repeated use of epithets describing multiplicity (“numerous rivers,” “numerous villages”), scale (“large headlands,” “large groups,” “great deserts,” “massive mountain range,” “large villages”) and expansiveness (“far, far away,” “all the way to the sea,” “from the west to the east”) is striking, as is the listing of different landscapes (“oceans,” “deserts,” “forests,” “mountains,” “marshes”). Accumulation and enumeration suggest a world in its totality. It is writing that “creates the impression of comparative worlds” and is “located comparatively rather than uniquely” (Walkowitz 2015, 25, 127). Mofolo draws comparisons between these different geopolitical, ethnic and cultural territories when, for instance, he says of the Bokone that they were “more skilled in medicine than any other group in South Africa” (2015, 25). Even though he explains that the nations described in Chapter One lived “each one in its own original territory” and were separated by “boundaries” that were “visible and prominent” (2015, 24), his is the perspective of a traveller who has journeyed across those boundaries:

These nations are markedly distinct from each other, so much so that a person travelling from the west to the east is immediately conscious of having come to a different country and among strange people when he arrives among the Sotho nations in the centre, and likewise when he descends towards the Matebele nations over there beyond the Maloti mountains. (Mofolo 2015, 24)

Like all born-translated novels, *Chaka* is interested in the movement of people among several territories. The above travel account is soon followed by another: “When one travels downward between the sea and the Maloti, coming from the direction of Delagoa Bay, in the north, the first Bakone one comes upon are the Swazi nation” (Mofolo 2015, 25). The novel records the journeys of many other travelling characters. Special emissaries travel back and forth between villages with messages from one king to another. Healers and traditional doctors cover great distances in journeys that last several days. A doctor whose help is enlisted by Chaka’s mother, Nandi, reveals that it will take her at least 10 days to travel from Ncube’s village to Zwide’s village and back (40). Isanusi tells Chaka that he comes “from far away yonder” (72). Chaka himself is only an infant when his mother is banished from Nobamba and travels with him to Ncube’s village. When years later he runs away from Ncube’s village, Chaka embarks on a long and tiresome journey that necessitates crossing three rivers before arriving at Dingiswayo’s village (68). The novel’s interest in movement across geographical and geopolitical boundaries extends to the implied journeys of traders, since it features narratives about trade, one of the classical themes of transnationalism. The Mazulu are described as people “famous for their trade in tobacco, carved wooden basins, and other artefacts” and the novel contains a detailed description of how Dingiswayo inspired his people to trade in blankets, carved wood and horns and how he “opened up a trade route leading to Delagoa Bay, where trade flourished” (27, 153).

In *Chaka* the frequent appearance of travelling characters who speak different languages is tied to migration. The novel contains very many narratives of migration, which it associates with Chaka’s expansionist policies. These migrations operate across villages, regions and nations. Mofolo describes, for instance, how Chaka forces conquered nations to give up their native languages:

After changing the national name, Chaka brought together the young men from Zwide’s scattered nation, ... and he said to them: “... [I]f you give up your national name as well as your language, and join my regiments, and become Zulus, then you shall live.” (Mofolo 2015, 154)

The novel draws sharp distinctions between the historical period preceding Chaka’s reign, “when the people were still settled upon the land,” and the aftermath, during which many people “would wander in the wilderness with no fixed home” (Mofolo 2015, 27). It displays the born-translated novel’s typical “interest in encounters between cultures, and the consequences of those encounters” (Walkowitz 2015, 235). Mofolo (2015, 27) is clear from the start that his account of the hardships caused by the *difaqane* (forced migration) is the story of an entire world falling apart, if not the entire earth. He uses both these terms—“world” and “earth”—in the prelude to his story of war:

There is no place in the entire world where wars are unknown. There comes a time when the nations hunger for each other and continually fight each other, sometimes over many years. Sometimes while the nations are living in a state of peace, a male child arises ... and ... creates so much unrest that peace is banished from the earth. (Mofolo 2015, 27)

The world described by Mofolo in the opening scenes of the novel will be changed in its entirety by the arrival of Chaka. Even when Chaka is still a child, it is clear to some “what this child was going to become in the world” (Mofolo 2015, 30). Chaka is certainly determined to take possession of everything around him: “My kingdom will begin right here where I am, and spread along the breadth of the earth, till it reaches the very ends” (154). He builds a city “of immense size, unequalled among all nations past and present, in sheer bigness and the number of its inhabitants” (155). It seems that nothing exists outside of the territories he has conquered, since he “reigns over all the kings of the earth and all the nations under the sun and moon” (165). He has the power to wipe entire nations “off the face of the earth” (191). When Isanusi visits him in the months leading up to his death, Chaka is convinced that his kingdom encompasses the world: “Chaka told Isanusi how his kingdom had grown, and that there was now only one king in the world, and that was he, Chaka; and also that his warriors were now as numerous as stars” (212). As the narrative draws to a close, Mofolo’s world-shaped, world-themed novel comes full circle with descriptions of how a world that was filled with villages, great multitudes of people, crops, wild animals and cattle, has been hollowed out and emptied:

Ahead of Chaka’s armies the land was beautiful and was adorned with villages and ploughed fields and numerous herds of cattle; but upon their tracks were charred wastes without villages, without ploughed fields, without cattle, without anything whatsoever, except occasionally some wild animals. (Mofolo 2015, 19)

The novel ends like it began, with a panoramic view that cuts across geographical boundaries. It is a way to underline the “tremendous import” of the many wars waged by Chaka (Mofolo 2015, 212). What is more, Chaka’s dying words are a stark reminder of more conflict to come, in the form of imminent intrusions by colonial forces from an “elsewhere” that had never before been part of the world portrayed in the novel: “[U]mlungu, the white man, is coming, and it is he who will rule you, and you will be his servants” (232).

## Conclusion

Mofolo’s *Chaka* is a novel that combines Christian imagery with traditional African mythology, offers a Sesotho’s view of a Zulu king, and incorporates Sesotho translations of isiZulu poems and written transcriptions of oral lore. It anticipates being read across linguistic divides and knowingly addresses a foreign audience alongside a local one. It is clear from the publication history, borne out by an analysis of the text itself, that it resulted from and further stimulated an intercultural discourse that profoundly defies the contrast between global European and local African. In this way it represents mutual impact and comprehension between the local and the global, the here and there. It is poised between global connectivity and localised networks, between cosmopolitan dialogues and culturally defined concerns. It is an African novel, but also a novel written for the world, read by the world, and shaped by the world.

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