Mazisi Kunene (1930 - 2006) was an epic poet who lived in KwaZulu-Natal. He studied at the University of Natal, and won the Bantu Literary Competition Award in 1956. He left South Africa in 1959, taught in Lesotho, and years later gained the distinction of becoming Professor of African Literature and Language at the University of California in Los Angeles. More recently, he was based at the University of Natal, Durban. For Zulu Poems (1970) Kunene collected and translated into English his early poetry. Evolving from traditional Zulu literature, the poems reflect the importance of this social and cultural inheritance. With the publication of Emperor Shaka the Great (1979), an epic poem inspired by the rise of the Zulu empire - Shaka’s royal kraal was located at KwaDukuza - followed by Anthem of the Decades (1981), a Zulu epic dedicated to the women of Africa, Kunene earned critical as well as popular recognition. His reputation was further enhanced by the elegiacal poems collected in The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain (1982). Acknowledged for his commitment to the language and history of his Zulu heritage, Kunene will undoubtedly continue to be a major voice in African literature. His more recent works include Isibusiso sikamhawu (1994), Impepho (1994), Indida yamancasakazi (1995), Umzwilili wama-Afrika (1996) and Iziyalo zomtanami (2007).

In 2015, Kunene was the recipient of a South African Traditional Music Achievement (SATMA) Award which took place at the University of Zululand.

Selected Work

Was I wrong when I thought
All shall be avenged?
Was I wrong when I thought
The rope of iron holding the neck of young bulls
Shall be avenged?
Was I wrong
When I thought the orphans of sulphur
Shall rise from the ocean?
Was I depraved when I thought there need not be love,
There need not be forgiveness, there need not be progress,
There need not be goodness on the earth,
There need not be towns of skeletons,
Sending messages of elephants to the moon?
Was I wrong to laugh asphyxiated ecstasy
When the sea rose like quicklime
When the ashes on ashes were blown by the wind
When the infant sword was left alone on the hill top?
Was I wrong to erect monuments of blood?
Was I wrong to avenge the pillage of Caesar?
Was I wrong? Was I wrong?
Was I wrong to ignite the earth
And dance above the stars
Watching Europe burn with its civilisation of fire,
Watching America disintegrate with its gods of steel,
Watching the persecutors of mankind turn into dust
Was I wrong? Was I wrong?

Bibliography


Author Map (Durban)