

**Myth and Post-Apartheid Socio-Economic Challenges in Zakes Mda's  
*The Heart of Redness***

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**Abstract**

This paper has identified the conflict between modern life and urban civilization and a valued history by revealing the challenges of post-colonial identity which includes the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity. This paper will examine how Mda in *The Heart of Redness* delves into the mythical past and its divide to deftly portray the current socio-economic challenges posed to South African society. This paper shall adopt postcolonial theory.

**Introduction**

In the mid – 19<sup>th</sup> century, a teenage prophetess named Nongqawuse preached salvation to the Xhosa people. If the people would slaughter all of their cattle and burn all of their crops, the spirits of their ancestors would rise and drove their oppressors into the sea. The ancestors would also resurrect the cattle and restore the crops. A large percentage of the Xhosa who believed in the prophecy, destroyed their livelihood, which initiated many years of disease and starvation. The Xhosa nation might well have been wiped out, but for the fact that some of the people who disbelieved rejected these prophecies and did not destroy their crops and cattle. These historical events serve as the cornerstone of *The Heart of Redness*, (2000), which presents two intertwined fictional narratives: one that occurs in the time of Nongqawuse and a second narrative that takes place in Qolorha, a Xhosa village in present day South Africa.

In the novel, the conflict between believers and unbelievers in the myth has persisted through the Middle Generations and continues to the present. Believers claim that the prophecies

of Nongqawuse would have come true, if only all of the Xhosa people destroyed their farms and cattle. The ancestors failed to return because of the unbelief of a portion of the people. Unbelievers argue that the folly of the original Believers led to decades of suffering and a strengthening of the English colonizers. This traditional problem is reflected today in their attitude toward economic development. Developers want to build a large casino and resort complex on the village land. Unbelievers support the proposal because to them it will bring jobs and money to the region. Believers are dead set against the proposal because they insist it will destroy their way of life.

Mda's *The Heart of Redness* does not only address flaws in South Africa's current political and economic transformation, but is also concerned with environmental issues. Indeed, the equivalent of the cattle-killing of 1856-1857 is the current environmental destruction of lands of the Xhosa people. The way the Believers blindly followed the prophecy of Nongqawuse to restore the power and wealth of the Xhosa, makes the people of Qolorha to be on the verge of repeating a similarly tragic move by embracing the supposed progress and modernization promised by the casino. This paper will bring to knowledge how the dichotomy between believers and unbelievers has greatly affected the growth and development of the Xhosa people both economically, socially and otherwise.

### **Aim and Objectives**

This paper shall examine how Mda in *The Heart of Redness* delves into the mythical past and its divide to deftly portray the current socio-economic challenges posed to South African society. It will also bring to knowledge how the dichotomy between believers and unbelievers has greatly affected the growth and development of the Xhosa people both economically,

socially and otherwise as this forms a complex narrative strand of a historical antecedent and post-apartheid South Africa. The paper adopts post colonial theory.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Postcolonialism is a reaction against colonial discourse which, being a weapon of colonization, had established itself as the authoritative version of history. (Adegbija, 1999, p. 216). Hawthorn, (2000, p. 69), makes the substantive point that postcolonialism is “probably the most fashionable, varied and rapidly growing of critical or theoretical groupings”. A precise definition of postcolonialism is tricky. Sardar and Van Loon (1997, p. 115) offer this multifaceted definition of postcolonial discourse and postcolonialism:

Postcolonial discourse analyses how the historical fact of European colonialism continues to shape the relationship between the west and the non-West after former colonies have won their independence. Postcolonialism describes the continuing process of resistance and reconstruction by the non-West. Post-colonial theory explores the difference, displacement and migration in relation to the master Western discourses of History, Philosophy, science and Linguistics.

Postcolonialism is thus a complex series of political communication – a communication, not defined exclusively in terms of the human but experienced at the more biological and elemental level at which life shares the same consciousness. For this reason, when we speak of postcolonialism, we look for indicators and artifacts of a substantial shift or transformation that takes place against the historical background of a nation experiencing the decline or overthrow of colonial domination. Postcolonialism is thus a complex series of political and socio-historical

happenings and it involves a realignment of culture and cultural preconceptions in the nation that has undergone a post colonial transformation.

One of the primary issues that postcolonialism addresses is how individuals go about constructing identity in the face of massive change. For postcolonial literature, identity is an external construct. Western nation has colonized indigenous people for so long that identity is seen through the lens of external group. With the removal of colonial powers, postcolonialism strives to examine how identity changed as a result of and sometimes remain dependent on the form of other. Postcolonial literature also seeks to address how individuals see themselves and their world, how individuals can live a sort of double life in terms of their own notion of self.

Postcolonialism equally strives to address individuals navigate their present and future in a world where so much has changed. Envisioning one's life under Colonial rule causes a significant alteration in reality. One of the issues that postcolonialism addresses is the change in this reality. How individuals and societies navigate it in their present and in the construction of the future is a significant issue in postcolonialism. Also, it helps to define much of postcolonial thought because it recognizes that the past casts an influence on both present and future. Exploring this dynamic is an issue that is integral to understanding postcolonialism.

### **Literature Review**

In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda presents the hybrid identity of contemporary South Africa through the continuous intermingling of traditional myths with daily life, and in this way, applies a mixture of social and magic realism in his novel (Cornwell et al. 2009, p. 33). Upon reading the title, one might be reminded of Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* – a novel that contains numerous prejudices and portrays the people of South Africa as backward. Mda stresses, however, that he did not intend this allusion. The original title of his novel was

*Ululants*, but the publishing agency disapproved, so Mda had to think of something new. An acquaintance in a bar suggested ‘The Heart of Redness’ to Mda, which found the publisher’s approval as the novel’s new title (Pesenhofer-Yarton, 2007, p. 129).

Using two interconnected narratives, the novel combines two different timeframes, emphasizing that the past continues to influence the present (Cornwell et al. 2009, p. 137). One plot is set around 1850, describing the Great Cattle-Killing in Xhosaland as well as the prophecies of a young prophetess called Nongqawuse. Alongside these 19<sup>th</sup> century events, the second storyline is set in 1998, in the same rural seaside village of Qolorha-by-Sea, presenting a contemporary environmental point of view on the everlasting conflict between tradition and modernity. *The Heart of Redness* is not only built around two different timeframes, but also portrays two divergent tendencies. On the one hand, the Believers represent traditionalism and “redness” – referring to the red ochre tribal women who paint red coloring all over their bodies – and on the other hand, the Unbelievers, who display a strong faith in modernity.

In his book *Rewriting Modernity* (2005), Attwell revisits the novel and analyses it in terms of the way the text engages with the idea of an African modernity. For Attwell, instead of focusing on racial conflict, or apartheid and its counter-histories, *The Heart of Redness* “foregrounds the encounter with modernity, not as a completed event, but as unfinished business over which the Xhosa and through figures such as Dalton and Camagu and South Africans in general must take charge” (2005, p. 196).

According to Attwell, *The Heart of Redness* “is concerned with two historical moments, both encapsulating the Xhosa’s engagement with ongoing modernity” (2005, p. 196). In the first instance, around 1857, concerns the prophetic movement started by Nongqawuse and sustained

by her uncle, Mhlakaza, which provides the point of reference. In the second moment, it is the emergence of democracy in 1994, and more especially the period immediately after the elections when political freedom needs to be put into practice. Attwell claims that these historical moments are times of transition, where Xhosa people are confronted with modernity and have to make critical choices.

Attwell argues that *The Heart of Redness* is a novel of ideas in its attempts to reconcile the contradictory tensions of post-apartheid modern Africanness. This new identity, which brings together African traditional values and a modern outlook, embraces the hybridity of the novel. In this regard, Attwell also notes that Mda hybridises language through his combination of his native language and English. He puts this as follows: “in *The Heart of Redness*, Mda went beyond the literary to the anthropological through his use of diaglossia (unitalicised terms from isiXhosa used extensively alongside English)” (2005, p. 196).

Stynen, in his review “Zakes Mda, *The Heart of Redness*”, in *World Literature Today*, focuses on Mda’s criticism of the new South Africa and its leadership. His argument focuses on Mda’s critique of the current political system in South Africa, even though his narrative hides this under much history and depicts contemporary village life. Writing about Camagu, Stynen sees him as Mda’s voice in articulating a critique of the African National Congress (ANC). Camagu is against the:

‘Aristocrats of the Revolution’ and the ‘Black empowerment’ boom that is merely enriching the chosen few. Against the self-enrichment of trade union leaders and politicians who misuse their struggle

credentials, Camagu and Mda are trying to oppose the fact that people are denied the right to shape their own destiny. (2003, p. 2).

Titlestad and Kissack in their article “The foot does not sniff: imagining the post anti-apartheid intellectual” (2003), examine the role of literature in post-apartheid South Africa. Mda’s novel contributes towards this examination of what has to be innovated socially, politically and economically for a better future. In their analysis of *The Heart of Redness*, the critics are primarily concerned with the history of South African identity, which is one aspect that the novel deals with.

Focussing on Camagu, the central character of the novel, Titlestad and Kissack see in him the current dilemma of “post-anti-apartheid intellectual” (2003, p. 4). Taking into account Mda’s presentation of this intellectual character in *The Heart of Redness*, Titlestad and Kissack state that “the post-colonial intellectual clarifies and expands his understanding of colonialism and its ongoing expansion in the present” (2003, p. 5). This means that post-colonial intellectuals such as Camagu in *The Heart of Redness* help us to understand the neo-colonialism prevailing in the post-colonial governance.

Pieterse and Meintjies (2005) outline the seemingly overwhelming problems facing post-apartheid South Africa to include “unemployment, HIV/AIDS, endemic violence intertwined with patriarchy, poverty, segregation and racism”. With the addition of “the juggernaut of American-led globalization”, the likelihood of a successful transition is “arguably a veritable abyss” (p. 2). Mda’s third novel, *The Heart of Redness*, focuses on this last aspect, again ducking any direct address of the dominant political and social national concerns. Instead, Mda draws on the immediate and very real dangers that confront South African towns with the outset of

globalization. The novel highlights the risks posed to local residents' economic and social empowerment.

As in *Ways of Dying*, Mda juxtaposes past and present lives. He draws parallels with the community of the Xhosa coastal village of Qolorha in the nineteenth century and their descendents in modern-day South Africa. The “redness” of the novel’s title refers to the red ochre of the traditional Xhosa costume. Those who smear their bodies and clothes in the red ochre are the traditionalist, conservative Xhosa who stand by the pagan rituals and beliefs of their people and resist the enticement of Western cultural influences (Mayer, 174). As such, “redness” is putatively an ideal entrenched in past ethics, in the rural over the urban, in the periphery over the centre, and in stability and continuity over progress (Barnard, 2007, p. 161).

Woodward (2000), sees Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* as an epistemological challenge to dualistic thinking – primarily through its employment of satire and humour. She describes *The Heart of Redness* as “a postcolonial novel of epic proportions” in which “humour constitutes the central narrative strategy” (p. 73). Furthermore, she maintains that the “use of humour makes *The Heart of Redness* more effectively transformatory” (p. 22). Traditional dualities are deconstructed through humour and satire: racial identities as fixed categories are derided; the preference of urban over the rural is reversed with the ‘city slicker’ going to the country to establish himself rather than the ‘country bumpkin’ going to the city; and the dividing line between present and past becomes blurred or blurry (p. 173). Moreover, and with regard to the choice of setting, Woodward sees the book as a highly successful staging of the national crisis on a local platform:

So much of the comedy is connected to the region itself, to the historically sedimented Qolorha and to the identities which are



constituted by the place and its history. The region, replete with postcolonial issues [...] becomes a microcosm for the nation. (Woodward, 2000, pp. 21-37).

In Woodward's understanding, the novel satisfies the primary criterion of ecopoetic discourses in what she reads as its deconstruction of binary oppositions.

According to Ndibe, *The Heart of Redness* is set in a South Africa newly emerged from white minority rule. Talking about black empowerment that the novel highlights, he says that its rhetoric masks a cynical hypocrisy and betrayal. For him, the "Aristocrats of the revolution" (2003, p.36) and their minions are the sole profiteers from the so-called harvests of empowerment. As Ndibe puts it, "one outstanding aspect of Mda's narrative is the relentless depiction of how the prophecies sundered the Xhosa, creating rifts that forced spouse to betray spouse, children to usurp their fathers' thrones, and brothers to set upon one another" (2003, p. 3).

Complimenting Mda, Ndibe says that "he knows how to draw events and characters from lived history, deepening his narrative, amplifying characters and their motives and imbuing events with serious significance" (2003, p. 3). In addition, he points out that "Mda amazes the reader through his control and fluency. For him, Mda explores the past and the present, examining differing narratives within narratives, exploring white and black in deadly confrontation" (2003, p. 3). This achievement is very remarkable and clever because as Ndibe says, "Mda wishes us to see that the past is never a category of antiquity but vitally potent in the present" (2003, p. 3). The novel combines both nineteenth century and contemporary post-apartheid events. Another point that Ndibe makes us aware of is that in his novel, "Mda seeks to

show how particular ancient traumas dog contemporary lives, how they disfigure, dismember, and embitter the present” (2003, p. 4). His story, says Ndibe:

flows in two streams flows in two streams, alternating between ancestral anguish and contemporary agony, with the former always echoing the latter. Mda uses flashbacks not as a conceit for delineating the past from the present, but to illuminate the dramatic tensions of the here and there. (2003, p. 4).

Analysing Mda’s characters, Ndibe shows that the narrator gives ancestral names to several characters, among them John Dalton, Qukezwa, Xikixa, and Heitsi in order to “reinforce both the continuities and discontinuities of individual and communal lives” (2003: 4). Talking about Xoliswa, a principal in a local secondary school, Ndibe elaborates that she is:

beautiful, fiercely proud, but dour beautiful, fiercely proud, but dour and emotionally arid. She rues the continuing appeal of indigenous culture to many in her community. When a consortium of developers proposes to transform the village into a tourist paradise, Xoliswa fervently embraces their vision. Though poorly educated, Qukezwa and her father galvanise an effective opposition to this distorted notion of development. (2003, p. 5).

Ndibe continues that what is more humiliating is the way Qukezwa snatches Camagu, a young man about whom Xoliswa is building improbable dreams of marriage. Talking about Camagu, Ndibe says that:

he is the object of desire in the love duel between Qukezwa and Xoliswa. Camagu is a character after his creator's heart. Through all the conflicts, through the ordeal of acceptance and rejection, through the pangs of displacement and alienation, he establishes a poise, reasonableness, and public mindedness that are in short supply in the emergent South Africa. (2003, p. 6).

For Ndibe, Camagu functions as Mda's incarnation of rebirth. He is the novel's new man, a new voice as well as a new conscience for the village that has become his adoptive home. Referring to many deaths in contemporary South Africa, Ndibe says that "most of them are senseless, random and blind expressions of gang rage or political violence" (2003, p. 6). Ndibe ends his analysis saying that:

the past cannot be consigned to oblivion or locked in a closet where it must not disturb the present. The novel is set as the nation is on the cusp of opening up its life to all citizens, regardless of their skin colour. (2003, p. 6).

According to Robinson (1998), he observes that the building of casinos in poor communities has become popular in urban development across South Africa. She goes on to highlight the problematic nature of private investment in a politically unstable nation:

If there is a truism we can take from the field of Urban Studies, it is that urban processes are complicated, conflict-ridden, and difficult to coordinate [...] South African authorities have had to manage the city

in the face of powerful private interests, to negotiate complex political landscapes, and face up to the fact that locational choices for developments seldom please all interest groups [...] The urban terrain is always conflicted, and the specialities of development only compound this. (p. 274).

In this way, it is clear to see that in Qolorha, where the community is already deeply conflicted, the problems dividing the community are aggravated by institutions keen to modernize areas without consulting residents.

Huggan (2001), discusses the concept of “postcoloniality”, as a condition that is closely tied to the global market, which manifests itself through the capitalization of popular ideas about the cultural “other” with the aim of turning “culturally ‘othered’ artefacts and goods” into commodities to achieve commercial profit in the West” (p. 28). In the context of the society of the spectacle, “postcolonial products function, at least in part, as cultural commodities that move back and forth within an economy regulated by largely Western metropolitan demand” (pp. 29-30). We are reminded that as readers of the novel, we are also implicated in a kind of voyeurism, and the knowledge of the “other” that the Western reader may gain from the novel is always, inevitably, one of subjectivity.

However, through *The Heart of Redness*, Mda presents the merit of gaining insight and knowledge into the “other”, for as Woods observes, “Mda is concerned with the power of myth and the dangers of believing in it without reflection” (2007, p. 228). Mda deconstructs the myths of the amaXhosa perpetuated by apartheid history books, in which the Nongqawuse episode is written down as the “National Suicide of the amaXhosa”. This terminology, as Woodward indicates, is “obviously derisory” (2005, p. 290). Following Camagu through the eternal debate

between Believers and Unbelievers brings us to an understanding of the deep values and complex logic that sets the two groups apart, and that has held their faith across the generations.

Spivak, in her 1988 essay “Can the subaltern speak?” proposes that in colonized societies, the lower ranks of communities are virtually silenced, and are politically unable to represent for themselves. “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (p. 28). Through Camagu’s cooperative business, specifically for the women of Qolorha, Mda directly addresses this problem of the silencing of female citizens. In doing so, he seems to suggest that the problem of expressing agency has continued into the postcolonial – and post-apartheid – era. Camagu’s (and so Mda’s) ideal is that of giving residents a voice through communities running their own businesses. This helps to avoid the corruption of the ruling party and of private investors whose interests do not lie in the benefit of those living in the towns they seek to develop.

### **Xhosa Myth on Cattle-Killing**

Abram (1998) opines that as you walk through the land, the places you see and the sites you encounter are continually sparking the memory of the particular stories associated with those places and sites. The land is the primary mnemonic for remembering the oral stories. So while ancestral knowledge is held, as it were, in the stories, the stories are held in the land. The land is alive with the stories! It can be deduced that land is of fundamental importance to the Xhosa people in particular and to the Africans in general. Of course, the soil is fertile and life giving, so that the people depend on it for their social and economic survival. But the significance of the land also has a spiritual dimension to the Xhosa, for the land was given to them by God.

Besides, the association of mortal with the perennial land and mutational customs exist until the survival of the last soul. The fabricated life of human with the country, plants and beasts are not less considerable with that of the customs and the beliefs. The human has well-knitted his relationship with the land and the ethos from the ancient days. People that have affiliated themselves to the attained culture steadfastly stand in the same or at times switch to some other. It is moderately easy to watch the human bounded with the country and customs. Mda has concentrated on the life of the tribe, how they make their difference among each other based on the demands, their contribution to the maintenance of chosen habitat and their variation in culture, customs, rites and rituals. His novel, *The Heart of Redness* clearly portrays the people's attachment to their land and their belief in Xhosa Myth which in turn becomes their identity.

According to McClintock, through the Land Acts of 1913 and 1936, "a scant 13 percent of the most arid and broken land was allocated to Black South Africans, though they comprise 75 percent of the people" (p. 13). In a similar way, Mda's revisionist reading of this tragic event presents both sides of the story so that neither the Believers nor the Unbelievers are essentialized. In *The Heart of Redness*, this double-voiced perspective is provided by the character of Camagu, the hybrid, mimic man who has obtained a doctorate in communications in the United States and is neither a Believer nor an Unbeliever but represents a visitor to the rural village, Qolorha-by-Sea. He is to mediate between two women: Xoliswa who is oriented towards a Western lifestyle and believes in the necessity of development, and Qukezwa, who, on the other hand, is described as being bound to the traditional ways of the amaXhosa.

The narrative is moreover pervaded by the conflicts between the Believers and Unbelievers, two groups who also propagate traditionalism and development, respectively, and whose quarrels inform the village. Their conflicts over social and environmental policy affect the

ways of local government, belief, and cultural practice in general. The triadic relationship between Camagu, Xoliswa and Qukezwa and the social conflicts between Believers and Unbelievers are connected to a third narrative strand concerned with the amaXhosa's colonial past, and with the historical event known as the Xhosa Cattle-Killing of 1857 (see Peires, 1989). This event, during which the amaXhosa sacrificed almost all of their cattle, is represented as a struggle between the British colonial and missionary influences on the one hand and traditional Xhosa belief systems on the other hand. It precipitates the contemporary socio-economic challenges.

In the light of the above, Mda uses both tradition and modernity to explore the nature of a contemporary Xhosa identity by establishing 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 homogenous national paradigm but emanates from the complexity of the local history of "Xhosaland", the country of Nongqawuse. For example, in making 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 amaXhosa. 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.

## **Xhosa Myth on Culture and Heritage**

Culture is the process by which a person becomes all that they were created capable of being. (Thomas Carlyle).

A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots. (Marcus Garvey).s

These two epigraphs point towards the idea that culture and the knowledge of cultural roots are essential in order to understand human nature as well as oneself. It is apparent in both quotes that the concept of culture carries a wide range of meaning. In the course of time, influenced by increasing scientific research, the concept of culture acquired different meanings and definitions. Matthew Arnold, a humanist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, defined culture “as a study of perfection, an inward condition of the mind and the spirit”. He understands culture as “the best that has been thought and said” Segers, (2004, p. 176). In this value-laden point of view, the concept of culture applies only to a chosen few, “educated” people.

Studies of anthropology widened the understanding of culture, applying it to all people. It was argued that “there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture” (p. 177). Thus, culture may be compared to concepts of values, rituals, traditions and sets of norms (cf Seger p. 177ff). Psychologist Edward H. Schein argues that in contrast to these concepts, culture is characterized by two essential features. The first, structural stability implies that cultural elements are joined together into a consistent whole that is not visible and not changing. The



second essential characteristic of culture in Schein's point of view is the fact that shared learning forms the basis of the concept of culture. Schein concludes that "[f]or shared learning to occur, there must be a history of shared experience, which in turn implies some stability of members in a group" (p. 177)

Hofstede (1994), differentiates between two meanings of the concept of culture. One refers to civilization and may be found in art, education and literature. The other defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group [...] from another" (p. 178). This perspective implies that culture is not innate, but requires the process of learning. Additionally, Hofstede stresses that culture compounds different levels – such as an ethic level, gender level, a generational level, a national level, etc. – which are interrelated, change according to situation and "show an onion layering of symbols, heroes, rituals and, as the deepest layer, values" (Viljoen 2004, p. 6). This perspective of culture as an "ever-changing entity" (Segers, 2004, p. 179) implies that it is not possible to speak about "the" cultural identity of a person, but rather that one's identities change according to circumstance (p. 179).

Hofstede's intercultural research led him to distinguish five dimensions which may serve as a basis to classify individual cultures. These five dimensions may be briefly summarized as:

1. Social inequality, including the relationship with authority;
2. The relationship between the individual and the group;
3. Concepts of masculinity and femininity; the social implications of having been born as a boy or a girl;
4. Ways of dealing with uncertainty, relating to the control of aggression and the expression of emotions;

5. A long-term orientation in life versus a short-term orientation. (Segers 2004, p. 179).

Applying these dimensions to cultures represented in Mda's *The Heart of Redness* shows that indigenous culture of amaXhosa has certain cultural features that differentiate it from other cultures, especially from the industrialized Western kind.

Hofstede claimed that the concept of culture consists of different, interrelated levels, but Viljoen as well as Van der Merwe added a fifth layer to Hofstede's dimensions, consisting of stories and myths, in which the first layers are embedded and through which "individuals seek to achieve coherence and psychological wholeness" (Viljoen 2004, p. 6). Dirksen argues that myths and rituals, as a means to comprehend life, possess an intrinsic social function, for they combine and unite societies and thus help in the construction of personal as well as collective cultural identities (p. 14). While cultural identities concern one's social life within a particular group, individual identities deal with our innate struggle for personal truth (p. 89).

The relationship between myth and identity is equally represented in *The Heart of Redness* through the characters of Zim and Bhonco. Due to the split of their ancestors on account of Nongqawuse's prophecies, each of them leads in strong accordance to cultural heritage carried over for centuries in the form of myths and rituals. Bhonco, a convinced Unbeliever, firmly holds on to constant struggles on the subject of belief since he believes that "they shaped his present and the present of the nation and his role in life is to teach people not to believe" (Mda, 2000, p. 6). In contrast, Zim, a staunch Believer, even shaves off his eyebrows and dresses in accordance to old traditions (p. 165) in order to show that he believes in the prophecies of Nongqawuse and the involving lifestyle. Both counterparts know their identity, their place in the world and in society. It seems that each has found his inner truth.

Dirksen (2004), emphasizes the importance of myths for the identity of groups and classify four reasons for the growing importance of myths and the rituals that are associated with them in modern society.

Rituals, and myths, address (1) our urge to comprehend our existence in a meaningful way, (2) our search for a marked pathway as we move from one stage of our lives to the next, (3) our need to establish secure and fulfilling relationships within a human community, and (4) our longing to know our part in the vast wonder of the cosmos. (p. 89).

Such a change in the belief system seems to apply to almost all major young characters in the novels at hand. In *The Heart of Redness*, it is represented through the character of Xoliswa who regards the belief in tradition and myths, as well as the performance of rituals as backward, representing savageness and barbarism (p. 150). She is drawn to everything that is American and dreams of living in a big city, of being a part of the Western lifestyle. She is surprised that such highly educated men like Camagu whom she regards as a kindred spirit because “both of them have lived in the land of the free and the brave” (p. 67), is fascinated “by such rubbish as the memory ritual of the Unbelievers” (p. 87). She regards traditional amaXhosa customs as “shameful” (p. 150) and refers to myth evolving around Nongqawuse and her prophecies as a “shame and a disgrace” (p. 96).

She knows that she will never get Camagu back. He has decided to forsake all forms of civilized life and to follow heathen ways. He is a lost cause. “[...] She stands for civilization and progress, while he is

bent on reinforcing shameful practices and uncultured modes of dress.

They deserve each other, he and Qukezwa. They will wallow in redness together. She [...] will soon turn her back in this village. [...]

The sooner she leaves this heart of redness the better (p. 261).

Contrary to Xoliswa, Camagu only finds his true self the moment he comes to Qolorha-by-Sea, as he is then able to rediscover long forgotten traditional customs and rituals. Having spent most of his life in America, he has forgotten his cultural roots. Returning to his country, he experiences a lack of belonging which is partly represented by his promiscuous lifestyle, “his unquenchable desire for flesh” (p. 28). It is through Qukezwa that he learns more about tradition, customs and their meanings. Through his captivation with indigenous practices such as the memory ritual of the Believers, he gradually rediscovers his cultural roots and in this manner, he earns respect.

‘I am not from America. I am an African from the amaMpondomise clan. My totem is the brown mole snake, Majola. I believe in him, not for you, not for your fellow villagers, but for myself. And by the way, I have noticed that I have gained more respect from these people you call peasants since they saw that I respect my customs’. (p. 150).

The fact that Camagu becomes a well-respected man within the amaXhosa society proves Dirksen’s argument that performance of “myths and cultural rituals promote cooperation and a stronger sense of community” (Dirksen, 2004, p. 95).

The importance of heritage within the construction of identity is again considered in *The Heart of Redness*, as characters are identified and characterized through referring to them either with their clan name or relating to their ancestors. The story finds its beginning through

the introduction of Bhonco as the “son of Ximiya” (p. 3) which as a theme is repeated several times throughout the novel. The same applies to Dalton – “this child of Dalton” (p. 146). Only Camagu (p. 150) refers to himself as an “African”, but he too adds of the Mpondomise clan, cultural roots. In addition to myths, nationalism, and ethnicity, other commonly accepted identity markers such as naming, ways of dress, language, hair, and skin colour are displayed in the novel.

### **Xhosa Myth on Cattle-Killing and its Effects on Social Interaction and Economy of Believers and Unbelievers**

The cattle-killing movement ‘killed the nation of the amaXhosa’. (Mda, 2000, p. 66) and caused hatred and animosity among the Xhosa people. The cattle-killing coupled with British colonialism induced suffering and starvation to the amaXhosa nation and completely destroyed their traditional beliefs, cultural values and norms. As a result of the cattle-killing episode, thousands of the Xhosa people had died. According to Dhloomo, (1985.), it was estimated ‘that 20,000 men, women and children perished while 150, 000 cattle met their death’ (p. 4). For many years, the veld was strewn with bones and bleaching in the sun.

The cattle-killing is the core of the novel as it attempts to link the historical event with contemporary history and current conditions of the country. Nongqawuse was against the colonial system and British (white) rule, hence her perpetration of the cattle-killing saga in order to drive the whites into the sea – from where they came and where they belong. She did not wish her people to be deprived of their land and to ‘wallow in redness together’ (Mda, 2000, p. 301). The scars of history and suffering of her ancestors under British rule overwhelmed her and ‘all of a sudden her ancestor’s flagellation has become her flagellation. She rebels against these heathen scars’ (2000, p. 301).

The cattle-killing event is the springboard of Mda's *The Heart of Redness* as it juxtaposes the gruesome suffering endured by African people in the hands of British settlers since the mid-nineteenth century and the gruesome suffering endured by African people since the mid-twentieth century in the hands of the Afrikaners and the policy of racial segregation – Apartheid (1948). The ripple effects and consequences of the event of cattle-killing unequivocally manifest themselves today in the new order (new political dispensation) in spite of people's confident that 'a black race across the sea, newly resurrected from the dead, is surely coming to save us from the white man. Even the armies of The Man Who Named Ten Rivers cannot stand against it! You saw what happened in Cathcart' (Mda, 2000, p. 95).

*The Heart of Redness* tells two stories: the nineteenth-century account of Nongqawuse's prophecy with its resulting devastation to the Xhosa people and the late twentieth-century of the Eastern Cape Xhosa community struggling to make sense of its past and embrace its future. Interweaving the two, Mda narrates the major choices facing both communities as they must determine the best way to ensure success. The main protagonists of the nineteenth-century story Twin and are Twin-Twin, the brothers whose symbiotic connection is severed by their opposite responses to the cattle-killing prophecy.

The twentieth-century story – a comment on post-apartheid politics and economic empowerment – focuses on Zim and Bhonco, descendents of Twin and Twin-Twin respectively, steadfastly maintains the division between Believers and Unbelievers. Two primary debates rage in the community: first, should they accept a proposal to have a casino and resort built in their village, Qolorha-by-Sea? and second, should they maintain or abandon many of their traditional customs and costumes (marked by the use of red or ochre dye, hence the title)? Mda presents Camagu as disillusioned having returned to the "new South Africa" only to find it

governed by nepotism and political cronyism who initially prepares to leave his homeland once again. His plans are interrupted by his attraction to a stranger singing at a funeral, his infamous lust leading him to the Eastern Cape village where he settles into community life, far more quickly and intensely than he ever expected.

However, the extreme behaviours of Bhonco and Zim are obvious and many find them more entertaining than inspiring. They “await with bated breath the next skullduggery [the two men] will do against the other” (p. 5). The Unbelievers, led by Bhonco, are anxious to leave the “uncivilized” ways of their ancestors behind. The casino represents progress to them – a chance “for Qolorha to be like some of the holiday resorts in America. To have big stars like Eddie Murphy and Dolly Parton come here for a holiday”, (Mda, 2000, p. 67). Bhonco’s daughter argues that the new tourist attraction would create jobs, introduce electricity to the entire community, and mark their emergence onto the world stage; the Unbelievers campaign forcefully for their idea of development (p. 92). They seem to be assured of victory, for the government has already approved the project and its representatives are fully prepared to protect their own interests (as several of these officials also happen to be high-ranking members of the development company’ p. 20).

Zim and the Believers have another vision of progress and it does not include casinos and water parks. In one of the several public debates about the project, Zim voices their concerns: “[Bhonco] talks of progress, yet he wants to destroy the bush that has been here since the days of our forefathers. What kind of progress is that?” (p. 92). Soon it is clear that for the Believers “progress” would mean the restoration of the traditional ways, including a respect for the local ecology. Protesting “that a project of this magnitude cannot be built without cutting down the forest of indigenous trees, without disturbing the bird life, and without polluting the

rivers, the sea, and its great lagoon”, the Believers see the development as a further evidence of European intrusion at their expense (p. 119).

From the foregoing, Mda attempts to highlight the plight of the disadvantaged and the oppressed people in South Africa as a result of colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid, and their plight in the new political dispensation. The use the cattle-killing event is prompted by the plight and suffering of (African) black people he noticed after the Mandela’s regime (1994). For instance, on a visit to one of his ancestral homes in the Eastern Cape after his return from exile, he discovered an impoverished community with many of the men retrenched from the mines or neighboring farms. People were still living in appalling conditions with no development whatsoever. According to a study conducted by University of Transkei, the city in a former apartheid homeland, is the cradle of spreading lung disease among former workers in the gold, coal, diamond and asbestos mining sectors (Morris, 2002, p. 1).

In conclusion, we can deduce that the nineteenth-century colonization has extended into the horrific Middle Generations of apartheid; this intrusion seeks to re-invent itself as capitalistic opportunity. For the Believers, such opportunity is nothing more than exploitation. The development of the tourist complex will lead to minimal job creation at the great expense of the natural environment along with the villagers’ enjoyment of that environment and any independent livelihoods they earn because of it. As these competing arguments make clear, then, more is at stake than a family feud; indeed, the very ecological and economic future of this community depends upon the persuasive abilities of Unbelievers and the Believers.



## Conclusion

In Mda's novel, Nongqawuse and the dramatic events of the nineteenth century Cattle-Killing episode are interwoven with the picture of a contemporary South Africa's challenges of becoming a fully democratic nation, thus juxtaposing the enormous uncertainties that characterized the past and extends to recent times. It might be argued that *The Heart of Redness* deftly portrays the challenges posed to past and present South African black and focuses on the need for development and understanding. Mda's *The Heart of Redness* and others are increasingly preoccupied with certain emerging issues that can be identified with each social and economic problems facing the new South Africa.

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