



**Reararticulating Cultural Myths Across Time? A Semiotic Comparison of
Shaka Zulu (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) Television Series Posters and
Pilot Episodes**

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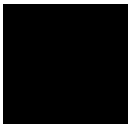
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Phangisile Ndlovu.

You have left me with the lifetime bread, which is education, without it I would not have survived so far.

I will teach the children that I will have in future the way that you taught me before you left.

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I give sincere thanks to God Almighty for the strength, clarity of mind, and perseverance that enabled me to complete this research. I am deeply grateful for the intellectual capacity and resilience that sustained me throughout this academic journey.

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My heartfelt thanks go to my grandmother, MaZondi Ndlovu, my pillar of support and source of strength. Since the passing of my mother, she has provided unwavering emotional, spiritual, and practical support. Her presence in my life has been fundamental to my ability to pursue and complete this qualification.

I honour the memory of my late mother, Phangisile Ndlovu, whose commitment to education laid the foundation for this achievement. From my early schooling years, she consistently monitored and encouraged my studies, even during periods of ill health. She instilled in me a love for reading, patience, determination, and the belief that education is a vital path to personal growth and purpose.

I am also grateful to my family, friends, and academic peers for their encouragement and understanding throughout this journey. I acknowledge the Centre for Communication, Media and Society and the broader University of KwaZulu-Natal for providing an academic environment that enabled this research to be undertaken.

It is my hope that this study may serve as a source of encouragement to others who aspire to pursue further studies, and that it contributes, in its own way, to the advancement of academic knowledge.

Abstract

This study investigates how the image of Shaka Zulu is visually and narratively constructed and re-articulated across time through a comparative semiotic analysis of promotional posters and pilot episodes from *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). Situated within a constructivist paradigm and employing a qualitative textual approach, it approaches media texts as culturally constructed through which meaning, ideology, and historical consciousness are relationally produced with their context, rather than merely reflected.

Theoretically drawing on representation theory and especially the processes of myth making, the study adopts a basic semiotic visual methodology to analyse television promotional imagery and the meanings they connote and symbolise. The findings reveal that the 1986 series constructs Shaka through a militarised and conquest-centred myth that fixes meaning around warrior masculinity and exceptionalism, reflecting apartheid-era representational logics. In contrast, the 2023 series re-articulates Shaka through Afrocentric visual and narrative codes that foreground lineage, land, ritual, and becoming, allowing greater polysemy and cultural depth in a post-apartheid context.

By placing posters and pilot episodes in direct dialogue, the study demonstrates how promotion and narrative function as an integrated system of signs that stabilise or reconfigure preferred readings. The research contributes to media and cultural studies by showing how myth-making adapts across historical moments and by bridging a gap between analyses of visual promotion and television narrative. Ultimately, the study underscores the role of visual media in negotiating African historical representation, identity, and cultural memory across generations.

Keywords:

Myth-making; representation; semiotic analysis; Shaka Zulu; South African television; visual culture.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction

Historical figures do not exist only in archives or textbooks; they continue to live through images, narratives, and media representations that shape how societies remember and interpret the past. In South Africa, few historical figures have been as repeatedly represented, contested, and re-imagined as Shaka Zulu. Across decades, Shaka has been constructed as warrior, tyrant, nation-builder, mythic hero, and cultural symbol, with each representation reflecting the ideological conditions of its time.

This study examines how the image of Shaka Zulu is visually and narratively constructed in two television productions that span almost forty years: *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). By analysing promotional posters and pilot episodes, the study explores how meaning is produced through representational signs, often relating to myth, and how these meanings may or may not shift across apartheid and post-apartheid contexts. Rather than treating media as a neutral reflection of history, the study approaches television as a powerful cultural site where historical memory, identity, and ideology are actively constructed.

Background to the Study

The 1986 television series *Shaka Zulu* emerged during apartheid, a period in which South African media production was deeply shaped by colonial narratives, censorship, and Western market demands. Cultural production at this time was largely mediated through Eurocentric frameworks that prioritised spectacle, exoticism, and simplified portrayals of African history in order to appeal to international audiences (Tomaselli, 1996; Tomaselli, 2003a). As Keyan Tomaselli (1996) argues, apartheid-era visual culture frequently represented African subjects through external gazes that emphasised primitiveness, violence, and hyper-masculinity, reinforcing colonial myths rather than historically grounded complexity.

Furthermore, Stuart Hall (1997) reminds us that representation is never neutral but is always produced within relations of power. Under apartheid, these power relations meant that African identities were often constructed in ways that aligned with dominant Western ideologies and commercial expectations. The international circulation of *Shaka Zulu* therefore positioned the series within a global media economy that favoured dramatic and militarised imagery, contributing to a representation of Shaka that privileged conquest and spectacle over communal, spiritual, or political nuance. In this way, the series reflects both the ideological conditions of apartheid South Africa and the broader colonial tradition of narrating African history through externally imposed visual codes.

Although the series brought unprecedented international visibility to Zulu history, previous scholarship has argued that it also operated within representational frameworks that tended to simplify African

leadership through militarised and exoticised imagery. Tomaselli (1996; 2003a) notes that apartheid-era and late-colonial visual culture frequently framed African historical figures through spectacle, violence, and hyper-masculinity in ways that were legible and marketable to Western audiences. Such representations often privileged dramatic conquest and bodily power over political complexity, spiritual authority, or communal leadership.

Similarly, Hall (1997) argues that representation is shaped by relations of power and that dominant visual codes tend to reproduce ideologies that appear “natural” or self-evident. In this context, the repeated emphasis on warfare, aggression, and heroic masculinity in historical narratives has been understood by scholars as part of a broader tradition of constructing African authority through narrow and reductive visual tropes. These tropes do not simply describe history, but organise how African leadership becomes imaginable within global media cultures.

However, rather than assuming that *Shaka Zulu* (1986) necessarily reproduces these patterns, this study approaches the question empirically. It examines if, and how, such meanings are communicated in the promotional posters through a semiotic analysis of visual signs, including posture, weaponry, composition, background, and symbolic framing. By doing so, the research does not pre-empt its findings but instead investigates how ideological meanings are constructed, stabilised, or potentially complicated within the visual language of the posters themselves.

In contrast, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) was produced in a post-apartheid South Africa marked by increased emphasis on African-centred storytelling, cultural reclamation, and indigenous authorship. The series positions itself as a re-telling of Shaka’s story from within Zulu epistemologies, foregrounding lineage, spirituality, land, and becoming rather than conquest alone. Previous scholarship suggests that many contemporary African historical dramas increasingly seek to re-centre indigenous epistemologies by narrating history from within African cultural worldviews rather than through externally imposed colonial frames. Scholars such as Mbembe (2001) and Mignolo (2011) argue that postcolonial cultural production is often driven by a desire to reclaim historical agency, restore indigenous knowledge systems, and challenge the dominance of Western historiography. Within this broader intellectual movement, African storytelling has been understood as placing emphasis on genealogy, spirituality, land, and relational identity as foundational ways of knowing and being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; 2018). These elements are not merely cultural symbols but operate as epistemological anchors through which history is interpreted and narrated.

Research on African visual and narrative traditions further indicates that lineage and ancestry are central to constructions of authority and identity. Mudimbe (1988) explains that African historical consciousness is deeply tied to genealogical continuity, where leadership is legitimised through descent, ancestral memory, and collective belonging rather than conquest alone. Similarly, Nyamnjoh (2012) argues that African subjectivity is relational and embedded in networks of kinship, land, and spirituality, which often become key narrative resources in postcolonial cultural production. These

studies suggest that when African histories are told from within indigenous frameworks, lineage is foregrounded as a source of legitimacy and historical grounding.

Spirituality and land have also been identified as crucial dimensions of African epistemologies. John Mbiti (1990) emphasises that African cosmologies do not separate the spiritual from the social or the political; instead, spiritual life, ancestry, and land form an integrated system of meaning. In visual and narrative representations, this integration frequently appears through attention to ritual practices, sacred spaces, and landscapes that are treated not as neutral settings but as active carriers of memory and identity (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007). Land, in particular, has been theorised as a site of historical belonging and cultural continuity, especially in postcolonial contexts where dispossession has been central to colonial violence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

At the same time, scholarship on contemporary African media cautions against assuming that all new productions successfully realise these epistemological shifts. Tomaselli (2003a) notes that even post-apartheid cultural texts operate within global media economies and may continue to negotiate between indigenous storytelling and international market expectations. For this reason, it cannot be assumed in advance that *Shaka iLembe* fully achieves an Afrocentric re-telling of Shaka's story. Rather, these themes of lineage, spirituality, land, and becoming are identified in the literature as key markers of indigenous-centred representation.

Accordingly, this study does not presume their presence or effectiveness in *Shaka iLembe* (2023). Instead, it investigates whether, and how, such epistemological orientations are visually communicated in the promotional posters through a semiotic analysis of posture, setting, symbolism, spatial composition, and visual codes. In this way, the research remains open-ended and empirical, examining how far the series participates in, revises, or complicates the representational tendencies identified in existing scholarship.

Background Production Information for Shaka Zulu (1986)

Shaka Zulu (1986) is a South African historical epic television miniseries produced for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). It was directed by William C. Faure and written by Joshua Sinclair, based on Sinclair's novel on the life of Shaka kaSenzangakhona (IMDb, 2026). The series consists of a single season of ten episodes and was filmed primarily in KwaZulu-Natal, using extensive outdoor locations to recreate nineteenth-century Zululand (TVSA, 2026). The production adopted a single-camera cinematic style typical of historical epics, with wide panoramic shots, large numbers of extras, and choreographed battle scenes, positioning the series within the tradition of international prestige historical drama.

The production context of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) was shaped by both local and international collaboration. The series featured a mixed cast of South African and internationally recognised actors, including Henry Cele in the lead role, alongside Edward Fox and Robert Powell, which contributed to

its global circulation and reception (Hamilton, 1998). Its scale and ambition were unusual for South African television at the time, reflecting an intention to produce a historical drama designed to circulate beyond national borders (Tomaselli, 1992).

Narratively, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) adopts a serialised structure that allows for extended character development and political complexity. The series focuses not only on Shaka but also on figures such as Queen Nandi, King Senzangakhona, Dingiswayo, and Zwide, situating Shaka within a dense network of familial, cultural, and political relationships. This multi-stranded narrative structure reflects what John Fiske describes as television's capacity to produce meaning through the accumulation and sequencing of signs across episodes, enabling deeper social and ideological articulation (Fiske, 1987; Fiske and Hartley, 2003). Themes of identity formation, loyalty, leadership, and historical becoming are explored alongside conflict and warfare, expanding the representational field beyond militarised spectacle. Stylistically, the series aligns with what Jason Mittell conceptualises as "narrative complexity" in contemporary television, characterised by slower pacing, character-centred storytelling, and layered political development (Mittell, 2015).

The series was produced during apartheid, a political system of institutionalised racial segregation that governed South Africa from 1948 to 1994. During this period, broadcasting was state-controlled and cultural production was shaped by censorship, ideological regulation, and colonial representational frameworks (Tomaselli, 1996; Tomaselli, 2003b). Scholars have argued that apartheid-era visual culture often relied on exoticised and militarised imagery to render African history legible and appealing to Western audiences (Tomaselli, 1996). As a result, although *Shaka Zulu* brought unprecedented international visibility to Zulu history, it also circulated within global visual conventions that privileged spectacle, conquest, and heroic masculinity (Shohat and Stam, 1994).

In terms of reception, the series achieved remarkable international reach. It was broadcast widely beyond South Africa, including in Europe and North America, contributing to its status as one of the most internationally visible African television productions of its time (Tomaselli, 1992; Hamilton, 1998). Critics praised its scale and production values, while also raising concerns about its ideological framing and reliance on colonial narrative conventions that privilege spectacle and militarised masculinity (Tomaselli, 1996; Shohat and Stam, 1994). Its long-term impact lies in its dual status as both a landmark in African television history and a contested site for debates about the representation of African leadership and historical memory.

Background Production Information for Shaka iLembe (2023)

Shaka iLembe (2023) is a contemporary South African historical epic drama series produced by Bomb Productions for Mzansi Magic, a channel under the MultiChoice Group, with distribution through Showmax and DStv platforms (TVSA, 2026; DStv Mzansi Magic, 2025). The series is primarily produced in isiZulu, marking a significant shift towards linguistic and cultural authenticity in mainstream South African television, particularly through its commitment to grounded storytelling

(Multichoice Group, 2023; Mzansi Magic, 2023). It premiered in June 2023 and has since been renewed for multiple seasons, indicating its status as a flagship local production.

The production has been described as one of the most expensive and ambitious television projects in South African history, involving large crews, extensive location shooting, and high-definition cinematography (Osimbo, 2023). Nomzamo Mbatha serves both as an executive producer and as an actor in the series, alongside other key industry figures, highlighting the strong involvement of South African creatives in shaping the project (Showmax, 2023; MultiChoice Group, 2023). Filming takes place in various parts of South Africa that can visually evoke early nineteenth-century Zululand, and the series employs contemporary production techniques such as digital colour grading, elaborate costume design, and large-scale battle choreography (Osimbo, 2023).

Narratively, *Shaka iLembe* adopts a serialised structure that allows for extended character development and political complexity. The series focuses not only on Shaka but also on figures such as Queen Nandi, King Senzangakhona, Dingiswayo, and Zwide, situating Shaka within a dense network of familial, cultural, and political relationships (Shaka iLembe, 2023; MultiChoice Group, 2023). Themes of identity formation, loyalty, leadership, and historical becoming are explored alongside conflict and warfare. Stylistically, the series aligns itself with contemporary “prestige television” through its cinematic visuals, slower narrative pacing, and attention to cultural detail (Osimbo, 2023).

The historical and cultural context of *Shaka iLembe* is post-apartheid South Africa, following the democratic transition of 1994. This era has been marked by increasing efforts to reclaim African history, promote indigenous languages, and restore cultural authority within national media (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Indigenous languages, cultural memory, and local knowledge systems have increasingly been foregrounded within contemporary African cultural production as part of broader decolonial efforts to reclaim African histories and epistemologies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) specifically argues for “epistemic freedom” through the deprovincialisation of Eurocentric knowledge and the re-centring of African ways of knowing. Similarly, Mbembe (2001) contends that postcolonial African societies continually negotiate the legacies of colonialism while simultaneously creating new forms of historical consciousness and political imagination. Read together, these perspectives suggest that contemporary African media increasingly engages with history from indigenous epistemological standpoints rather than relying solely on inherited colonial representational frameworks.

At the same time, Tomaselli (2003a) cautions that post-apartheid media still operates within global commercial economies, meaning that tensions between cultural authenticity and international market demands remain.

In terms of reception, *Shaka iLembe* achieved record-breaking viewership on its premiere and has been widely recognised for its production quality and cultural significance (MultiChoice Group, 2023;

SA Film and Television Awards, 2024). The series received multiple nominations and awards at the South African Film and Television Awards (SAFTAs), confirming its status as a landmark production in contemporary African television (SAFTA, 2024). Audience and critical responses have highlighted its ambition to foreground African history through African languages and perspectives (Showmax, 2023; MultiChoice Group, 2023).

Distribution has been central to the impact of *Shaka iLembe*. Beyond its broadcast on Mzansi Magic, the series is available across Africa through MultiChoice's network and internationally via Showmax (DStv Mzansi Magic, 2025; MultiChoice Group, 2023). It has also been licensed for broadcast in Francophone territories through Canal+, extending its global reach (Canal+ Group, 2023; MultiChoice Group, 2023). Marketing strategies include extensive digital campaigns, social media promotion, and online audience engagement, reflecting contemporary transmedia television practices (DStv Mzansi Magic, 2025).

Together, *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) represent two historically distinct moments in South African television: the former shaped by apartheid-era media structures and colonial narrative conventions, and the latter emerging from a post-apartheid environment that increasingly prioritises indigenous languages, cultural restoration, and African-centred storytelling.

Despite the temporal distance between these two productions, both contribute to the ongoing cultural myth of Shaka Zulu. Comparing them offers a valuable opportunity to examine how historical representation may be relational to changing political, cultural, and media environments. There is substantial scholarship on the 1986 Shaka series that argues the series predominantly constructed a militarised and exoticised Shaka Zulu. There is less scholarship on the newer *Shaka iLembe*, and this study is, therefore, interested in if and how the representational frameworks that dominated the earlier production have changed.

Problem Statement

While Shaka Zulu has been widely discussed as a historical and symbolic figure in South African and international television, there remains limited scholarly work that systematically examines how his image is constructed through visual media across different historical moments using a consistent analytical framework. Existing scholarship has largely focused on the political, historical, and ideological significance of the 1986 television series rather than on a sustained comparative analysis of its visual strategies. Tomaselli (1996; 2003) critically interrogates *Shaka Zulu* (1986) within the context of apartheid-era media production, arguing that the series must be understood in relation to the ideological conditions of state broadcasting, international market demands, and colonial representational traditions. His work highlights how television drama functions not simply as entertainment but as a site where power, identity, and history are visually constructed.

Similarly, Carolyn Hamilton (1998) situates Shaka Zulu within broader struggles over historical representation, demonstrating how his image has been repeatedly reworked in relation to shifting political concerns, including debates around power, identity, and the ownership of historical narratives in South Africa. She shows that the series did not merely depict history but actively participated in contemporary discourses about legitimacy, identity, and power. Themba Msimang (1990) further contributes to this discussion by analysing the cultural reception and historical significance of the series, noting how it shaped public understandings of Shaka and Zulu history while also raising concerns about historical simplification and narrative framing.

More focused discussions of Shaka Zulu as a visual and ideological text appear within broader scholarship on colonial discourse and representation. For example, Edward Said (1978) argues that Western representations of non-Western societies function as constructed systems of knowledge rather than transparent reflections of reality, shaping how histories and cultures are understood. This insight is reinforced by Hall (1997), who conceptualises representation as an active process through which meaning is produced and organised within relations of power. Applied to *Shaka Zulu* (1986), these perspectives suggest that the series operates not simply as a retelling of the past, but as a mediated construction shaped by visual codes, narrative framing, and ideological positioning. Such scholarship demonstrates that the series should be understood as a culturally and politically situated media text embedded within apartheid-era regimes of representation, where African history is organised through spectacle, hierarchy, and external interpretation.

Despite these important contributions, there is still limited research that compares how Shaka's image is visually constructed across different historical periods of South African television, particularly through promotional media such as posters, using a consistent semiotic methodology. Most existing scholarship addresses the 1986 series in isolation or focuses on its narrative and political implications rather than its visual semiotic strategies. This study therefore, addresses this gap by examining if and how representations of Shaka are constructed, stabilised, or rearticulated through visual media across two historical moments – apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa – through a comparative semiotic analysis of posters and pilot episodes. In doing so, it moves beyond historical commentary to interrogate the visual mechanisms through which cultural meaning is produced.

Broader Social Problem: Representation, Power, and the Politics of Historical Memory

Representations of historical figures are never neutral. They are shaped by the ideological, cultural, and political interests of those who produce them, often reflecting the perspectives of dominant groups or “victors” in society (Aldridge, 2006; Loewen, 2018). Visual and narrative representations of the past therefore become powerful sites where history is selected, framed, simplified, and stabilised in ways that serve contemporary power relations. As Zerubavel (2003) argues, collective memory is socially organised, meaning that what societies remember and how they remember it is structured by dominant narratives rather than by objective historical truth. Similarly, Wertsch and Roediger (2008)

note that mediated representations of history shape how communities come to understand identity, heroism, and belonging across generations.

In colonial and postcolonial contexts, this problem becomes particularly acute. African historical figures have often been represented through Eurocentric frameworks that emphasise violence, primitivism, or authoritarianism, while marginalising political complexity, spirituality, and indigenous epistemologies (Tomaselli, 1996; Mudimbe, 1988). Such portrayals function not only as entertainment but as ideological instruments that naturalise particular ways of understanding African leadership and power. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues that coloniality continues to structure knowledge production by privileging Western modes of narration and interpretation, even in postcolonial societies.

Shaka Zulu, as one of the most globally recognised African historical figures, is especially vulnerable to such ideological reworking. His image has circulated internationally through novels, films, television series, and promotional media, often detached from the complexities of Zulu political, spiritual, and social organisation (Hamilton, 1998; Wylie, 2006). These representations do not simply tell history; they participate in producing cultural myths that shape how African leadership, masculinity, and power are imagined. Thus, the broader social problem addressed in this study concerns how historical figures are visually constructed by those who control cultural production, and how such constructions may reproduce, stabilise, or contest dominant ideological frameworks across time.

In South Africa, this issue is intensified by the shift from apartheid to democracy. During apartheid (1948–1994), media production was shaped by colonial and racial ideologies that structured African history through external gazes (Tomaselli and Shepperson, 2002). In the post-apartheid era, cultural production increasingly seeks to reclaim African histories through narratives of decolonisation, African Renaissance, and epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Marschall, 2017). Yet, the extent to which these ideological shifts are actually realised at the level of visual representation remains an empirical question.

Precise Academic Issue: Scholarly Gaps in the Study of Shaka's Visual Representation

Existing scholarship has made significant contributions to understanding how Shaka Zulu has been narrated and interpreted historically, politically, and culturally. Studies by Tomaselli and Arnold (2002) and Merham (1990) examine the 1986 *Shaka Zulu* series in relation to apartheid-era ideology, media politics, and narrative framing. Hamilton (1989; 1998) and Dan Wylie (2006) analyse the construction of the Shaka myth within historical and literary traditions, while Gama (2019) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) situate contemporary representations of African leaders within broader projects of decolonisation and epistemic renewal.

However, much of this scholarship focuses on narrative content, historical accuracy, reception, or ideological critique. As shown earlier, studies addressing narrative and historiography explore how

Shaka's story is told and contested (Hamilton, 1989; Hamilton, 1998; Guy, 1994), while reception-oriented studies examine how audiences and critics responded to the series (Msimang, 1990; Tomaselli, 2002). Others focus on the politics of representation in apartheid media more broadly (Tomaselli, 1996; Tomaselli, 2003).

What remains limited is a systematic, semiotic examination of promotional visual media, particularly posters, and how these images construct Shaka's identity across historically distinct moments. Promotional posters are not merely supplementary materials; they are ideologically saturated texts that frame how audiences encounter a series before viewing it. They condense narrative, power relations, and myth into highly controlled visual forms (Barthes, 1972; Rose, 2016). Yet scholarship on *Shaka Zulu* (1986) has paid minimal attention to posters as semiotic texts, and virtually no academic work exists on the visual semiotics of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) due to its recent release.

This study, therefore, addresses a clear research gap by comparing how Shaka's image is constructed through posters and pilot episodes across a forty-year historical divide. It asks whether and how ideological meanings, cultural myths, and representations of power have been rearticulated in line with shifts from apartheid to post-apartheid cultural paradigms. By doing so, the study moves beyond narrative or historical critique to interrogate the visual mechanisms through which meaning is produced.

Methodological Gap

Anthony Miles (2017) identifies several types of research gaps in his taxonomy. This study primarily addresses two of them: a methodological gap occurs when a topic has been studied, but not through a particular method or analytical approach (Miles, 2017). In this case, although *Shaka Zulu* (1986) has been widely discussed in terms of history, ideology, and narrative, it has not been systematically analysed using a comparative semiotic framework focused on promotional posters and pilot episodes. This study introduces semiotic analysis grounded in Barthes (1972) and Hall (1997) to examine how visual signs, myths, and ideological codes operate across time.

Temporal Gap

A temporal gap arises when earlier studies have not accounted for changes over time or when newer phenomena remain under-researched (Miles, 2017). While the 1986 series has received scholarly attention, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) has not yet been studied in depth due to its recent emergence. This research addresses that gap by placing the two productions in dialogue, enabling an analysis of how representations shift across almost forty years of socio-political transformation.

Together, these gaps justify the study's focus and originality. The research does not simply revisit existing interpretations but extends scholarship by introducing a comparative, visual, and semiotic dimension to the study of Shaka's representation. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates about

how cultural memory, identity, and power are rearticulated through media texts in postcolonial societies.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to examine how the image of Shaka Zulu is visually and narratively constructed and re-articulated across time through a comparative semiotic analysis of promotional posters and pilot episodes from *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023).

The objectives of the study

1. To conduct a semiotic analysis of each poster using Roland Barthes' and Gillian Rose's frameworks to analyse the denotative, connotative and symbolic meanings encoded into the iconography of the posters presenting narrative constructions of Shaka Zulu.
2. To examine if and how the socio-political changes from apartheid to democratic South Africa are reflected in the visual codes and symbolic representations of Shaka Zulu.
3. To understand how shifts in socio-political dispensations may or may not contribute to the sustained articulation or rearticulation of cultural myth, with Shaka Zulu and broader narratives of African identity, as the example.

Research Questions

1. What signs and symbols (iconography) are used in the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) posters, and how do they construct narratives about Shaka Zulu?
2. Does the iconography encoded in the posters reflect changes in the representation of Shaka Zulu from apartheid to democratic South Africa, and if so, how?
3. How have cultural and ideological shifts, or lack thereof, reflected in the iconography of the posters, contributed to the sustained articulation or re-articulation of the cultural myth of Shaka Zulu within a post-apartheid context?

Study Significance, Scope and Delimitation

This study is significant for several reasons. Academically, it contributes to media and cultural studies by offering a comparative semiotic analysis that integrates visual promotion and televisual narrative. By treating posters and pilot episodes as interconnected texts, the research bridges a gap in scholarship where these media forms are often examined in isolation.

Culturally, the study contributes to debates on African historical representation by demonstrating how Shaka Zulu's image is not fixed but continually reconstructed in response to shifting ideological

contexts. The findings highlight the role of contemporary media in reclaiming and re-articulating African history, identity, and cultural memory.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative semiotic analysis for examining historical media texts, particularly within African television studies, where visual symbolism plays a central role in meaning-making.

This study focuses on six official promotional posters (three from *Shaka Zulu* [1986] and three from *Shaka iLembe* [2023]) and two pilot episodes, one from each series. These materials are selected because of their high visibility and their foundational role in establishing the narrative, ideological, and mythic frameworks through which audiences first encounter each production. Promotional posters function as condensed visual texts that communicate dominant meanings, cultural values, and ideological positions, while pilot episodes introduce the narrative tone, character construction, and symbolic universe of a series (Rose, 2016; Barthes, 1972).

The study is grounded in the understanding that visual media is a powerful site of public impression-making and collective memory, playing a crucial role in the construction of cultural identity (Tomaselli, 2021). By focusing on posters, this research deconstructs the cultural myths encoded in visual portrayals of Shaka across different historical moments. Comparing *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) enables the study to trace shifts in visual representation that may be shaped by changing socio-political contexts and ideological discourses. As Roland Barthes (1972) argues, cultural myths often operate by presenting historically produced meanings as natural and unquestionable. Examining how such myths evolve is therefore important for understanding how power, identity, and ideology are reproduced or challenged in visual culture.

The study further recognises that media texts are products of social, cultural, and discursive forces, and therefore reflect the power dynamics of the societies in which they are produced (Yearwood, 1987). Visual representations do not merely depict reality; they participate in shaping public conceptions of reality and collective knowledge (Bandura, 1997; Wasserman et al., 2018). In this sense, posters and television narratives are not neutral but function as ideological sites that influence how historical figures, leadership, and identity are understood. As Hall (1997) emphasises, representation is always bound up with power and meaning-making, making semiotic analysis an appropriate tool for interrogating these processes.

This study is particularly significant in the South African context, where cultural myths are often deeply entangled with a turbulent socio-political history. Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael (2000) note that myths in postcolonial societies frequently operate as unquestioned truths that stabilise particular identities and histories. By analysing how Shaka is visually represented across apartheid and post-apartheid contexts, this research contributes to understanding how cultural memory and identity are continually reconstructed. Christine Angier (2017) similarly highlights the importance of media

adaptations in shaping and reinterpreting visual narratives of the past, making them central to the production of historical meaning.

The scope of this study is also shaped by its attention to socio-political change. *Shaka Zulu* (1986) was produced under apartheid, a regime characterised by racial segregation, censorship, and a separatist ideology that privileged white ethnic identities while marginalising Black South Africans (Miller, 2016). During this period, media representations often reflected colonial and apartheid discourses that framed African leadership through violence, primitivism, and authoritarianism (Hamilton, 1998; Tomaselli and Shepperson, 2002). Hamilton (1998) argues that the portrayal of Shaka in the 1986 series was shaped by these ideologies, frequently reproducing stereotypes and forms of othering. Tomaselli and Shepperson (2002) further show that the series functioned not only as entertainment but also as a form of cultural diplomacy, helping to offset South Africa's growing international isolation by presenting an "exportable" version of African history.

In contrast, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) emerges from a democratic South Africa shaped by nation-building, decolonisation, and efforts to reclaim African history and cultural agency. This period is marked by renewed debates on heritage, land reform, and economic inequality (North, 2017), alongside broader projects of epistemic freedom and African Renaissance thinking (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Cultural production in this context increasingly seeks to challenge colonial narratives and restore African perspectives on history, leadership, and identity.

By placing these two productions in dialogue, the study examines how representations of Shaka Zulu evolve as South Africa continues to redefine its precolonial past in the aftermath of apartheid. This comparative approach allows for an investigation into how narratives of African leadership and state formation are reconstituted, how colonial caricatures are reappraised, and how African agency is reclaimed. As Msimang (1990) has shown, portrayals of Shaka have historically played a powerful role in shaping communal understandings of history and culture.

At the same time, this study is deliberately delimited. It does not aim to evaluate historical accuracy, assess audience reception, or analyse the complete narratives of both series. Nor does it attempt to provide a full historiographical account of Shaka Zulu. Instead, it prioritises semiotic interpretation within a clearly defined dataset, focusing on how meaning is produced visually through posters and supported by pilot episodes. This delimitation is methodologically consistent with the study's aim to examine denotation, connotation, myth, and ideological coding in visual texts (Barthes, 1972; Rose, 2016).

By narrowing its focus in this way, the research is able to offer a detailed and theoretically grounded analysis of how cultural myths are articulated and rearticulated through promotional media. It builds on earlier work by Tomaselli and Shepperson (2002), which demonstrated how media narratives adapt to shifting political frameworks, and extends this scholarship by incorporating *Shaka iLembe* (2023) into the discussion. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates about cultural

memory, identity construction, and the role of visual media in shaping historical consciousness in postcolonial societies.

Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework is comprehensively discussed in Chapter 3. However, the summary below serves to orient the reader to the study's overall theoretical approach. This study is informed by theories of representation and articulation to examine how visual media constructs and reconfigures cultural meanings around historical figures across different historical moments. Central to this framework is Hall's theory of representation, which understands meaning as culturally produced through symbolic systems rather than as a reflection of reality (Hall, 1997a; Hall, 2020). Hall's concept of articulation further emphasises that identities and ideologies are contingent and historically situated, formed through the linking and re-linking of social, political, and cultural elements (Hall, 1996; Hall, 2021). Jones' (2020) reworking of the circuit of culture underscores articulation as a dynamic process through which cultural identities are continually negotiated. In the South African context, these theories are particularly useful for analysing how cultural myths surrounding figures such as Shaka Zulu are rearticulated in response to shifting ideological conditions from apartheid to post-apartheid society (Nuttall and Michael, 2000). Representation thus functions as a performative process through which visual media actively shapes cultural memory, identity, and public consciousness.

Complementing Hall's work is Roland Barthes' semiotic theory of myth, which provides a critical lens for unpacking how historically specific meanings become naturalised within visual and media representations (Barthes, 1972; 1977; 2007). Barthes conceptualises myth as a second-order semiological system that strips signs of their historical and political context and refills them with dominant ideological meanings that appear self-evident and universal (Aiello, 2006; Artz, 2005). Myth operates as a form of discourse that conceals its constructed nature while reinforcing cultural norms and power relations through language, imagery, and popular media (Yearwood, 1987; Simões, 2021). Together, Hall's theories of representation and articulation and Barthes' concept of myth enable a comparative analysis of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023), possibly revealing ideological shifts from colonial narratives to postcolonial rearticulations and foregrounding representation foreground questions of agency and authorship, particularly given Shaka's mediation through largely non-Zulu and colonial perspectives (Wasserman, 2021)

Methodological Approach

This section provides an overview of the study's methodological orientation and process, that will be fully explained in Chapter 4. This study adopts a qualitative, comparative methodological approach to examine the visual representation of King Shaka Zulu in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). The research is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which understands meaning and

reality as socially and culturally constructed rather than objectively given (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Hall, 1997a; Barthes, 1972). Within this paradigm, visual media is treated as a site where shared meanings, ideologies, and historical narratives are produced and contested. Representation theory and semiotics align closely with this perspective, as both emphasise that images, symbols, and signs carry culturally agreed-upon meanings that are shaped by specific social and historical contexts (Hall, 2020). This approach is particularly suited to analysing how representations of Shaka Zulu shift across apartheid and post-apartheid eras, reflecting broader transformations in South African cultural identity.

Methodologically, the study employs semiotic analysis as its primary analytical tool, drawing on the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure and the expanded visual semiotics of Roland Barthes. Saussure's model of the sign—comprising the signifier and the signified—provides a basis for understanding how visual elements such as colour, costume, posture, and composition function as meaning-making systems (Saussure, 1916/1983; Chandler, 2022). Building on this, Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation, as well as his theory of myth as second-order signification, enables the analysis of how visual texts naturalise ideological meanings (Barthes, 1972; 1977; 2007). The study analyses promotional posters and pilot episodes by examining linguistic messages, non-coded iconic messages, and coded iconic messages, allowing for a layered interpretation of how Shaka's image is mythologised and rearticulated across different political and temporal contexts (Barthes, 1977; Rose, 2016).

The research design is comparative. Data consists of six purposively selected promotional posters (three from each series) and the pilot episode of each production, selected based on visibility and public accessibility via Google Images, following Gillian Rose's (2016) guidance on visual sampling and analysis. Reflexivity is also central to the methodological approach, with the researcher's positionality acknowledged as an interpretive resource rather than a limitation, in line with situated knowledge and reflexive qualitative research practices (Haraway, 1988; Dyll, 2018; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organised into seven chapters:

- *Chapter 1* introduces the study, outlining the background, problem statement, aim, research objectives and questions and significance. It also provides an overview of both the study's theoretical and methodological approach.
- *Chapter 2* reviews relevant literature on constructing and reconstructing Shaka, international ideological framing and mythic simplification, colonial and missionary myth-making, nationalist and apartheid-era appropriations, Afrocentric and decolonial re-interpretations, cultural myths, symbolism, and ideology

- *Chapter 3* presents the theoretical framework that is influenced by cultural studies, especially that of representation, articulation and myth-making. Supplementing this is an explanation of postcolonial and decolonial thinking.
- *Chapter 4* details the research paradigm, methodology, design, sampling, and analytical framework.
- *Chapter 5* presents the semiotic analysis of posters and pilot episodes.
- *Chapter 6* discusses the findings in relation to theory and existing scholarship.
- *Chapter 7* concludes the study and offers recommendations and directions for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review: Constructing and Reconstructing Shaka

Introduction

This chapter reviews the key scholarship that informs how King Shaka has been imagined and reimagined across historical periods and media forms. It traces the shifting interpretations of Shaka in oral traditions, colonial narratives, African historiography, and contemporary screen cultures to demonstrate how his image operates as both a historical figure and a symbolic construct. The review considers how myth-making, political interests, cultural identity, and visual signification have shaped portrayals of Shaka, while also examining themes such as gendered power, oral memory, metaphor, and heritage production. By synthesising these perspectives, the chapter establishes a critical foundation for analysing how *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) visually articulate and contest dominant narratives about Zulu history, leadership, and cultural meaning.

This chapter is structured thematically to reflect how Shaka's image has been constructed, disputed, and re-described over history. It reviews selected scholarly literature that firstly explores colonial and missionary myth-making, illustrating how early European authors manipulated the image of Shaka to serve the purposes of imperial control (Bryant, 1929; Fynn, 1950; Hamilton, 1998; Isaacs, 1836; Wylie, 2006). Later sections cover popular and visual culture, examining how Shaka's image works in apartheid and post-apartheid media. It then proceeds to discuss scholarship that focuses on nationalist and apartheid deployments, where visual media such as *Shaka Zulu* (1986) served to uphold ideological tales of power and racial segregation (Baines, 2010; Maingard, 2007; Marschall, 2017; Tomaselli and Shepperson, 2002; Wasserman, 2010). The review then turns to global ideological framing, examining how transnational discussions created ideologically filtered myths of South Africa. Following this, it moves on to Afrocentric and decolonial reimaginings, through which contemporary scholarship and recent screen productions such as *Shaka iLembe* (2023) seek to reclaim Shaka's story by grounding it in African epistemologies and historical agency (Asante, 2003; Mbembe, 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, 2021; Wright, 2010). Within each of these sections the review contextualises this study within existing scholarship that identifies and critiques cultural mythology, symbolism (metaphors, heroic ideals), and gendered readings associated with the representation of Shaka Zulu.

The aim of this literature review is to chart the intellectual and historical ground that underlies the comparative semiotic analysis of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). It explains how various time periods (and their associated ideologies) have reframed the visual and narrative codes by which Shaka has been interpreted, and how these have been previously studied.

International Ideological Framing and Mythic Simplification

International narratives about South Africa have often simplified complex local realities, and this section introduces that broader ideological framing before the review shifts to South African-specific scholarship. Matthew Graham and Christopher Fevre (2021) show how global actors, such as the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, used streamlined, celebratory stories—like presenting Mandela's release as the definitive end of apartheid—to mobilise support, even though deep inequalities and conflicts continued. Their work is useful here because it demonstrates how visual and textual symbols can produce powerful but reductive myths. This sets the foundation for the following sections, which move from this broad international framing to more focused literature on colonial and missionary constructions of Shaka, apartheid-era appropriations, Afrocentric and decolonial reinterpretations, and the cultural metaphors and oral traditions that shape contemporary visual portrayals of Shaka.

Graham and Fevre (2021) describe the British Anti-Apartheid Movement's (AAM) contribution to constructing narratives of South Africa's majority rule transition, 1990-1994. Graham and Fevre (2021) discover that global activists and witnesses tend to oversimplify the nature of South Africa's political transition. Nelson Mandela's release, for example, was framed as an international symbol of the end of apartheid, but such a narrative obscured continued structural segregation and conflict in post-apartheid society. Graham and Fevre's (2021) research illustrates how AAM discourse sketched towards closure and linear progression, representing South Africa as gaining freedom in an instant. This simplification was partly necessitated by the necessity to mobilise popular enthusiasm and fund-raising in Britain, typical of the disconnection between everyday experience on the ground in South Africa and image promoted from afar. The article is also indicative of how Western media and human rights campaigns selectively framed issues, emphasising celebratory milestones rather than long-term social problems.

Graham and Fevre (2021) also demonstrate these closures and victory narratives were ideological tools. In representing the release of Mandela as a definite point of arrival, Western narratives instated an impression of historical closure that was not fully consonant with the continuing reformation of South African society. They uncover how these representations harnessed visual and textual signs—headlines, images, and orations—to construct an account of tidy political change. They note that typically these symbols simply repeated cut-down myths of freedom and reconciliation that masked the facts of local political battles and social inequalities. The research raises the need to research not only the events themselves, but how stories and pictures are summoned to signal progress, closure, and moral authority in international imagination.

This work is helpful to the study because it provides a model of how ideological narratives are reduced and symbolically communicated by way of visual media (Graham and Fevre, 2021). The following sections will elaborate on this, in terms of research conducted specifically on Shaka Zulu and the Zulu nation, across three different periods.

Colonial and Missionary Myth-making

This section reviews key historical and historiographical debates surrounding the construction of King Shaka's image in early colonial, missionary, and cinematic texts. By examining how authors such as Nathaniel Isaacs (1836), Henry Francis Fynn (1950), Alfred Thomas Bryant (1929), and later scholars including Carolyn Hamilton (1992) and Anna-Marie Jansen van Vuuren (2022) shaped, critiqued, or reproduced dominant narratives about Shaka, the section clarifies the origins of the mythic Shaka and the visual regimes through which he has been represented. This background is essential for the current study because it reveals how selective storytelling, symbolic objects, political agendas, and inherited visual templates inform contemporary portrayals. Understanding these earlier constructions allows this research to critically analyse how the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) posters and pilot episodes draw upon, transform, or challenge long-standing representational patterns, and how their iconography participates in broader processes of cultural memory, myth-making, and identity formation.

Hamilton (1992) details how the early colonial and missionary accounts represented Shaka Zulu as a ruthless leader and uncivilised despot. He contends that authors like Isaacs and Fynn employed the image of Shaka Zulu to justify colonial expansion and racial hierarchies. Early colonial and missionary writers laid the foundations of the mythologised Shaka, producing depictions that served imperial interests. Henry Fynn, a British trader on the colonial frontier, portrayed Shaka as brutal and unpredictable, drawing on selective personal recollections that aligned with settler desires for protection and territorial advantage (Fynn, 1950). Isaacs likewise a British adventurer of the 1820s, sensationalised Shaka's violence in *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*, reinforcing European fantasies of African despotism (Isaacs, 1836). Later, Bryant, an American-born missionary writing in the early twentieth century, systematised these narratives in *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*, framing Shaka as a savage yet formidable military moderniser (Bryant, 1929). Together, these authors—shaped by their colonial social locations—constructed enduring images of Shaka as violent, primitive, and uncivilised. Hamilton (1992) critically reassesses these accounts, revealing how colonial writers selected events, ignored contradictions, and merged disparate histories into a dominant narrative that positioned Shaka as the prime mover of the Mfecane. Her work highlights the political uses of these narratives, their silences, and the role of objects—such as weapons and regalia—in shaping Shaka's character. These insights provide essential methodological grounding for this study's semiotic analysis, which examines how poster iconography encodes shifting meanings across political eras. Extending this historical foundation, Van Vuuren's (2022) review of Parsons's *Black and White Bioscope* demonstrates how early cinema also operated within imperial visual regimes. The review identifies how film distribution, exhibition, and representation were shaped by racial, commercial, and technological factors, while cautioning against neglecting African audience agency. This perspective informs the present study by emphasising that visual representations—including the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) posters—are embedded in long-standing visual traditions and must be read within their historical, ideological, and reception contexts. This source explains the origin of the mythic

(mis)shaping of Shaka Zulu, which is important to include in this review as it traces how subsequent visual and televisual texts inherited and replicated these colonial fancies.

Hamilton (1992) reappraises how Shaka had been presented as the prime mover of the Mfecane. The Mfecane (also known as the Difaqane in Sotho-speaking regions) refers to a period of widespread political upheaval, warfare, population displacement, and state formation in parts of Southern Africa during the early 19th century (1815–1840) (Hamilton and Thompson, 2001). Hamilton (2001) documents that the figure of Shaka Zulu was created by a certain group of colonial and missionary accounts and subsequent historiography centred on violence, newness and disturbance. She argues that the figure of Shaka Zulu, as depicted in colonial and missionary accounts, was constructed around themes of violence, disruption, and novelty. The “newness” attributed to Shaka specifically refers to the perceived disturbance of existing social, political, and cultural orders in southern Africa—such as the centralisation of political power, militarisation of Zulu society, forced incorporation of neighbouring communities, and the reshaping of kinship and land structures—which colonial historiography framed as unprecedented and destabilising.

Beyond the Mfecane, Shaka's reign (1816–1828) was characterised by a series of military campaigns and political consolidations that transformed the balance of power in south-eastern Africa (Laband, 1995; Hamilton, 1998; Wright, 1995). Following his accession as Zulu ruler in 1816, Shaka entered into an alliance with Dingiswayo of the Mthethwa, which culminated in the defeat of Zwide's Ndwandwe kingdom during the Ndwandwe–Zulu War (1818–1819) (Laband, 1995; Hamilton, 1998; Wright, 1995). The decisive Battle of the Mhlathuze River in 1819 marked a significant turning point, dispersing Ndwandwe political authority and enabling the incorporation of numerous neighbouring chiefdoms into the expanding Zulu kingdom (Laband, 1995; Hamilton, 1998). Between 1816 and 1828, successive campaigns of conquest, alliance, and incorporation consolidated a centralised Zulu polity that extended beyond military domination to encompass new administrative, political, and social structures (Wright, 1995; Laband, 1995). These processes demonstrate that the Zulu kingdom emerged through complex historical negotiations involving warfare, diplomacy, alliance formation, and incorporation rather than through conquest alone.

This historical consolidation also provides an important genealogy for understanding the later construction of the “Zulu nation.” As Hamilton (1998) argues, the nineteenth-century Zulu kingdom should not be conflated uncritically with later nationalist understandings of a unified Zulu nation. During the colonial period, British administrators further consolidated and reified “the Zulu” as a singular political and ethnic category, simplifying diverse chiefdoms and lineages into a more administratively manageable entity, particularly in relation to systems of indirect rule, territorial administration, and land governance (Guy, 1994; Hamilton, 1998; Mamdani, 1996). Consequently, both the historical figure of Shaka and the idea of the Zulu nation were continually reconstructed through changing political and ideological projects. This historical genealogy is significant for the present study because it demonstrates that the representations analysed in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) draw

upon identities and myths that were themselves historically articulated long before they were translated into television texts. This reinforces Hall's (1996) argument that meanings are never fixed but are continually re-articulated within new historical and political contexts.

Thabang Ntloedibe and Siyabonga Mtombeni (2025) further contend that these portrayals were largely a European invention, designed to distort African historical realities. They argue that by exaggerating Shaka's militarism and erasing his original identity as Shaka kaSenzangakhona, colonial narratives served to justify colonial expansion and perpetuate stereotypes of African societies as inherently violent and disorderly, obscuring the complexity of indigenous governance, culture, and resistance. Hamilton (1992) tracks how writers chose incidents, highlighted some of their characteristics, and connected disconnected incidents to form a single causal narrative. Hamilton (1992) employed a historiographical and textual analysis methodology, examining how Shaka Zulu was represented in 19th-century colonial records, missionary writings, and early historiographies. She focused on how authors selected specific incidents, emphasised certain traits, and connected otherwise disconnected events to construct a coherent, causal narrative of Shaka's rise and the upheavals of the Mfecane. This approach is directly relevant to the present study, as it parallels the semiotic analysis of visual media used to examine Shaka's portrayal in the posters and pilot episodes of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). In both cases, the research highlights how selective representation shapes historical and cultural narratives, influencing perceptions of Shaka's identity and the socio-political context of his time. Hamilton (1992) argues that this selective approach, transformed a disputed collection of local histories into a master narrative whereby Shaka's behaviour and character account for large-scale regional change. Hamilton (1992) also highlights the silences and contradictions in the sources, such as narrative gaps, alternative accounts and local challenges that were excluded from the dominant version. As such the narrative was political: it was used for colonial narratives of land acquisition and later fuelled nationalist and academic controversy (Hamilton, 1992). Her conclusion is cautious: we need not dump the sources but need to read them cautiously—being sensitive to how meaning was created, which voice was heard, and whose interests were advanced (Hamilton, 1992).

The second point of significance between Hamilton's research and this study is her explanation on how material culture and symbolic objects contributed to constructing Shaka's character. She argues that narratives about weapons, attire, cattle, and ritual practice were foregrounded to construct a vision of Zulu military modernity. Hamilton (1992:46) observes that the image of Shaka was "a complex mix of ingredients, negative and positive, in slightly different proportions according to various menus" reflecting the selective nature of historical representation. Early European traders, she notes, portrayed Shaka as a "benign patron", with stories emphasising violence and atrocity emerging only after his death (Hamilton, 1992:46). Material objects such as short stabbing spears, cow-hide shields, and ritual paraphernalia were central to these narratives, serving as symbolic signifiers of power and authority (1992:49). This focus on selective representation parallels the semiotic analysis of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) posters and pilot episodes, where costume, weaponry, posture, and composition are emphasised to construct narratives of heroism and historical significance,

demonstrating how mediated images shape cultural memory and myth-making. By emphasising weapons, regalia, cattle, and ritual practices, historical narratives made Shaka's authority and identity intelligible, portraying him as both a brilliant strategist and, in sensationalised accounts, a figure of violence (Hamilton, 1992; Ntloedibe and Mtombeni, 2025). This selective use of material and symbolic objects parallels media representations, where posters and pilot episodes of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) employ visual and semiotic codes to construct meaning, highlight heroism, and shape cultural memory (Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Rose, 2016). In both historical and contemporary texts, objects function as central signifiers through which audiences interpret Shaka's power, identity, and legacy. This study emphasises the role of these object-centred narratives as it aims to explore if and how the iconography (including objects) encoded in the posters reflect changes in the representation of Shaka Zulu from apartheid to democratic South Africa.

Hamilton's (1992) intervention is particularly applicable to a possible semiotic difference between the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) pilots and posters. Her main argument—that images and stories of Shaka were made for politics—is issuing a caution grounded in history regarding visual likeness as historical reality. For the sake of this research, she makes three different interventions. First, she advocates sustained interest in source production: in poster analysis we need to inquire who produced the image, for whom, and with what selective framing. Second, interest in objects aligns with this study's semiotic approach: weapons, regalia, landscape and costume are not mere inert props but coded signs bearing authority, threat, or dignity. Third, Hamilton's (1992) approach—reading contradictions and silences—urges the researchers to verify claims of production against reception and archival rather than simply taking overt claims in promotional contexts at face value. The idea of exclusion or structured absences is important to this study that will, in the semiotic analysis, be cognisance of what is 'left out' in each of the posters.

Hamilton's (1992) research will be used instrumentally and critically in this research. She discusses nineteenth-century textual production, and the manipulation of sources by historians; she provides no semiotic model for the analysis of modern visual media. Thus, although her historicist criticism is guiding the project's scepticism, it is not providing explicit solutions for poster semiotics. Specifically, Hamilton cautions us against confusing fact and myth; this research should thus not fall into that mistake in reverse form by denying preceding meanings to visual signs. For example, a poster showing Shaka with a spear before a herd of cattle may dramatise his martial prowess, yet it simultaneously conveys ideas of leadership, authority, and cultural wealth. Even when historically compressed, such visual signs carry preceding cultural, ideological, and historical meanings, shaping audience interpretation. Ignoring these meanings would risk overlooking the semiotic work that media performs, just as uncritically treating colonial narratives as fact misrepresents historical complexity. Hamilton (1992) reveals the manufactured nature of Shaka's myth and how in colonial writings, the distinction between history and propaganda was obliterated. This body of research places myth as a living, contested discourse, providing intellectual terrain for this research's semiotic investigation of visual myth-making across time.

Jansen van Vuuren's (2022) reviews Neil Parsons' *Black and White Bioscope: Making Movies in Africa 1899–1925* (2018). The book is introduced by the reviewer as an extensively researched history of early cinema in the African continent. Parsons's book follows the arrival, the production and exhibition of the moving pictures throughout colonial Africa. Jansen van Vuuren's (2022) review foregrounds the technological, commercial and racial relations that influenced early film practice. The book demonstrates how cinema travelled as popular culture and an instrument of empire, and the way filmmakers, exhibitors and colonial authorities negotiated work, expectation and race among the audience. Parsons uses archival records, trade press and cinema catalogues to trace film flows on chains of production and circuits of exhibition.

Jansen van Vuuren (2022) praises Parsons' narrative vividness and archival richness but suggests constraints. She comments on the inconsistent treatment of African listeners and local agency, in that Parsons occasionally favours producers' and colonial sources over fuller accounts of African reception and improvisation. The reviewer also implies gender and vernacular modes of engagement receive less scrutiny than they ought. Methodologically, van Vuuren also appreciates Parsons's combination of micro-historical case studies with general structural analysis but suggests more concerted focus on how intermediaries in Africa used to adapt early cinema practices. Overall, the review presents Parsons's book as a work that opens new grounds for future audience-centered and decolonial film history (van Vuuren, 2022).

The review's comment on gender and local adaptation cautions against over-determination of Shaka's iconography as a colonial visibility product. The comment highlights that while Shaka's image in media—posters, films, or historical accounts—is often framed through a colonial lens, we should be careful not to assume that all aspects of his representation are purely products of European or colonial imagination. The phrase “over-determination of Shaka's iconography as a colonial visibility product” means that scholars sometimes attribute too much of his visual portrayal—his costume, posture, weapons, or heroic/violent persona—solely to colonial influence, ignoring the ways local communities adapted, interpreted, or recontextualised these symbols.

This current research is different from Parsons's interest insofar as it uses a semiotic framework for analysis of modern material culture, specifically television. It thus serves to complement Parsons by examining how recurrent visual motifs are reworked, challenged, or reclaimed in democratic South Africa.

Jansen van Vuuren's reading of Parsons equips this study with both a historical grounding in inherited colonial visual regimes and a crucial reminder to attend to local interpretive practices, which resist treating Shaka's iconography as a monolithic colonial product. Local interpretive practices emphasise how African audiences, artists, and cultural communities actively reinterpret and re-signify visual symbols according to their own cultural logics, oral traditions, and contemporary identity politics. As scholars such as Barber (1997) and Ranger (1993) show that African cultural production is

characterised by creative adaptation and re-use, meaning that symbols like Shaka's spear, shield, beadwork, or ritual posture acquire new layers of meaning within locally grounded narratives of pride, heritage, or political critique. Likewise, Nuttall (2009) and Mbembe (2008) highlight the role of "re-memory" in South African cultural texts, where historical figures and motifs are continually reframed through present-day experiences and community knowledge. Nuttall (2009) argues that memory in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be understood as a transparent retrieval of past events, but rather as a set of overlapping and contested temporalities that shape contemporary cultural formations. Thus, while colonial imagery has undeniably shaped dominant visual templates of Shaka, contemporary representations—such as those in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023)—must also be read through these dynamic, locally embedded interpretive frameworks that continue to inform how Shaka is symbolically understood and visually constructed.

Jansen van Vuuren (2022) greets the depth of archives and narrative fidelity but finds unevenness in the treatment of African audiences and local agency as Parsons sometimes favours producers' and colonial voices over more multifaceted representations of African reception and improvisation. She also indicates that gender and vernacular modes of engagement are less well served than they might be (van Vuuren, 2022).

Jansen van Vuuren's critique — and by implication Parsons's book — are important to this project insofar as they both highlight the manner in which visual technologies and colonial institutions construct public representations of Africa. Parsons's map of early film circuits makes it certain that visual regimes are historically determined: images are created in webs of power, trade and ideology. It is that insight upon which this research's overall argumentation relies; that the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) poster and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) texts are not to be read as neutral; they bear visual grammars constructed across long histories of representation (van Vuuren, 2022).

This is a helpful clarification: in interpreting posters and pilot episodes one should not simply read critical reception or official production intention as sole sources of meaning. Rather, one should bring production contexts into relationship with promotional circulation, and local semiotic practices. Jansen van Vuuren's (2022) comment on gender and local adaptation is also a caution against over-determining Shaka's iconography as exclusively the consequence of colonial visibility. The current research differs from Parsons's study in that it uses semiotics to examine current television advertising/promotion and narratives. While adopting a different methodology to Parson's archival work it does arguably extend on it by exploring the ways in which well-established visual conventions are remade, countered, or reclaimed in a democratic South Africa.

Nationalist and Apartheid-era Appropriations

This section examines how Shaka's image was strategically mobilised during the apartheid era to serve political, ethnic, and ideological agendas, drawing on key scholarship that exposes the state's manipulation of history and cultural symbolism (Tomaselli, 2003; Cobbing, 1988; Parcells, 2022; Wylie,

1997). By outlining how apartheid institutions selectively emphasised militarism, ethnic authority, and territorial legitimacy, the discussion situates contemporary representations within a longer genealogy of political myth-making. Accounting for this era is essential for the present study because the visual languages used in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and the reimagined iconography of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) emerge from, respond to, or deliberately contest these earlier discursive formations. Understanding this historical context therefore allows the analysis to identify patterns of continuity, rupture, and rearticulation in the symbolic construction of Shaka across time.

Tomaselli (2003b) explores how television and other visual media have shaped the way people think about Shaka Zulu. He explains that television portrayals do not simply tell the story—they aid in creating the myths and images people remember. Tomaselli (1999) traces how visual images of Shaka developed from nineteenth-century colonial engravings and travel illustrations to early cinematic depictions and, eventually, to major screen productions that helped consolidate a global iconography of Zulu identity. In mapping this genealogy, he shows how films such as *Zulu* (1964) and the television miniseries *Shaka Zulu* (1986) drew heavily on inherited representational tropes—heroic militarism, hyper-masculinity, and ethnographic spectacle—rooted in colonial knowledge systems rather than strictly historical accounts (Tomaselli, 1999; Hamilton, 1998). These screen texts therefore did not emerge independently but layered contemporary narrative demands onto long-standing visual scripts authored in the colonial archive, demonstrating how Shaka’s image continues to be shaped by earlier discursive formations (van Vuuren, 2022). Tomaselli (2003b) explains how the choices made during production, like camera angles, costumes, music, and editing, all work together to present Shaka as either a heroic leader or a ruthless tyrant. These visual techniques are, therefore, not neutral. They simplify complex histories into easy-to-understand images that can serve political or commercial interests. Tomaselli (2003:88) makes clear that representations of Shaka are never neutral but are shaped by the ideological terrains in which they are produced, noting that “there is no innocent text: all representations are interventions shaped by particular ideological assumptions and political contexts”. In the case of *Shaka Zulu* (1986), Tomaselli (2003:92) argues that the series operated within “apartheid’s discourse of ethnicity, which made Zulu identity appear primordial, martial and separate from the modern nation”. This means that technical decisions—camera angles that exaggerate threat, costuming that emphasises ‘tribal’ timelessness, and music that codes scenes as exotic or violent—worked together to reinforce a vision of Shaka that aligned with the apartheid state’s ethnic-separatist ideology. Such choices condensed complex histories into simplified, emotionally legible images serving political and commercial ends. Tomaselli’s (2003:95) insight that “myth is mobilised to provide coherence where the historical record is fractured; this coherence serves contemporary political purposes, not historical accuracy” is particularly instructive for this study. It highlights how visual texts, including the posters and pilot episodes analysed here, similarly operate through selective emphasis and stylised symbolism, producing meaning through layered mythologies rather than straightforward historical narration.

Tomaselli (2003b) centres audience and institutional forces in the construction of Shaka. He considers how the producers, broadcasters, financiers and overseas markets shape the representation of Shaka. He maps contradictions between authenticity claims and drama's commercial demands. The work is attuned to how television simplifies, dramatises and markets historical complexity for popular audiences. He notes that contested responses—scholarly criticism, political discussion, community reaction— can betray the image of Shaka and are always negotiated. Tomaselli (2003b) shows that reactions to Shaka's portrayals reveal how his image is never fixed but continually contested, with each representation “betraying” its intended meaning as audiences reinterpret or resist it. Later representations can also subvert earlier ones, rewriting Shaka through new cultural and political lenses. This aligns with Hall's (1997) view of meaning as discursively negotiated, Hamilton's (1998) argument that Shaka's image is historically contested, and Ranger (2004) and Mbembe (2002), who note that African historical figures often become symbolic sites for competing interpretations.

Tomaselli (2003b) positions television as an interventionist site where history, myth, and ideology intersect, arguing that to know Shaka's image is to decode the visual grammar and the production circumstances under which it gains its power. In this view, meaning arises not from historical accuracy but from the ideological conditions shaping representation. Hamilton (1998) supports this by showing that Shaka's image has always been politically mediated, with writers and artists selecting and stylising elements—violence, ritual, authority—to serve contemporary agendas. Hall (1997) similarly argues that visual culture is a terrain of discursive struggle, where images acquire meaning through cultural codes rather than intrinsic truth. However, Ranger (2004) and Mbembe (2002) add a complication: while they agree that representations are ideologically charged, they emphasise that African audiences actively reinterpret and appropriate such images, sometimes subverting the very myths media seeks to stabilise. Placed in debate, these perspectives reveal that Shaka's visual legacy is neither a fixed historical portrait nor a passive ideological imprint, but a dynamic negotiation between production agendas, mythic traditions, and audience reinterpretation.

Tomaselli's (2003) work is directly relevant to this study because it aligns with the objective of the study: televised representations and their promotional imagery. His insistence that television builds visual myths helps justify a semiotic approach to the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) posters and pilot episodes. Tomaselli supplies two practical leads. First, treat production choices (casting, costume, framing, soundtrack) as intentional sign-making moves. Second, is the recommendation to place those signs in institutional and market frames of reference to prevent interpreting posters as discrete artworks.

However, Tomaselli's (2003b) analysis must be used critically and empirically. He provides rhetorical illustrations and theory background, but his essay is interpretive, not a systematic semiotic overview of a number of artefacts. Tomaselli (2003b) provides suggestive hypotheses, for example, that apartheid representation routinely exoticised or pathologised Shaka—though the hypotheses require testing, not postulating. The study will therefore adopt Tomaselli's contextual emphasis while avoiding two pitfalls

he sometimes leaves open. Firstly, not to assume a single “dominant” reading; posters can function polysemically for different audiences. Secondly, resisting to equating production intent with audience meaning. Although Tomaselli (2003b) cautions against assuming a single dominant reading or equating production intent with audience meaning, his analysis of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) in that article is ideological rather than semiotic; he does not provide detailed readings of specific visual signs. Instead, he focuses on how Shaka’s televised image circulates within apartheid-era discourses and is reinterpreted by different audiences, demonstrating the inherently polysemic nature of visual texts. However, Tomaselli (2003b) offers a fuller semiotic foundation elsewhere. In *Appropriating Images: The Semiotics of Visual Representation* (1996), Tomaselli provides extensive filmic examples to illustrate how meaning emerges from codes, framing, montage, and ideological context. As reviewers note, the book forcefully underlines the relevance of a semiotic approach and shows how visual media operate through layered sign systems. Taken together, these works justify this study’s approach: posters and pilot episodes must be read as multi-coded texts whose meanings remain open, negotiated, and never reducible to production intent alone. This study takes up this approach but now including *Shaka iLembe* which Tomaselli had not written about.

Tomaselli (2003b) delineates particular analytical procedures that can inform this study’s response to its key questions. With respect to the inquiry into iconography—specifically, the symbols and signs employed and their role in narrative formation—his framework indicates that one should identify motifs (such as colour, posture, regalia, and spears) and evaluate their semantic functions within the narrative structure. In addressing the question of continuity versus change—whether the iconography signifies transitions from apartheid to democracy—Tomaselli’s focus on production contexts encourages the researcher to examine not only the visual forms but also the identities of the image creators, the targeted markets, and the prevailing political economies. Ultimately, Tomaselli (2003b) substantiates the principal assertion of the study: that posters and pilots function as arenas for ideological negotiation.

John Wright (2006) considers the ways that Shaka Zulu’s myth was rewritten for contemporary audiences in the 1986 series while retaining ideology from colonial historiography. He traces these changes in representation through museums, texts, film and television. Wright finds that contemporary images both do simultaneously: they recover aspects of Zulu leadership and pride and commodify those aspects for popular consumption. The article highlights cases in which Shaka is presented as a founding father figure, tragic state-builder, or commercially successful entertainment. Wright (2006) concludes that these variations reflect changing political agendas—heritage tourism, nation-building, commercially successful entertainment—rather than some distinctive historical reality.

The second focus is on reconstitution mechanics. Wright (2006) breaks down visual codes (costume, pose, regalia), narrative framing (hero’s journey, moral dilemma), and institutional roles (producers, museums, broadcasters). She illustrates how producers decide which aspects of the Shaka Zulu narrative to highlight and which to leave aside. Wright also places emphasis on audience work: various

publics read Shaka in different ways with different meanings ensuing (2006). The article concludes with an appeal to scholars to approach modern Shaka representations as negotiated texts. They are historical, political and marketplace products that are to be critically read in context (Wright, 2006).

Wright (2006) is directly applicable to a semiotic comparison of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). His main argument—that Shaka's image is reconstituted to serve various political, cultural and commercial purposes—undergirds the study's thesis that posters and pilot shows are texts with political ideology. Wright (2006: 139) argues that Shaka “has been repeatedly remade to suit changing political and cultural circumstances”, highlighting how his image shifts across time to serve different ideological purposes. However, some scholars caution against viewing Shaka purely as a European or colonial invention. Hamilton (1998) emphasises the role of oral traditions and African memory, noting that negative narratives about Shaka's supposed atrocities emerged “only after his death” and often reflected local recollections as much as European interpretations (Hamilton 1998: 112). Similarly, Mtombeni (2023) highlights the structural and social innovations in early 19th-century Zulu state formation, arguing that while myth-making is evident, Shaka's historical role in consolidating power cannot be entirely dismissed (Mtombeni, 2023: 76). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that Shaka's legacy is best understood as a complex interplay between historical realities and symbolic constructions, with visual and textual representations serving as sites where memory, identity, and political agendas converge (Kelly, 2015; Wright, 2006). Wright points up the very semiotic resources on which the study will perform analysis: costume, pose, regalia, landscape framing and promo layout. With these observations as a guideline, the study can create directed coding categories. Wright proposes that more recent depictions signify dignity and cultural recuperation. This study will explore that by coding particular visual signs over 1986 and 2023 posters and verify whether those signs alter in denotation and connotation. Wright also places audience plurality centre stage; that serves as a warning not to presume a single reading.

Daphna Golan (1990) enhances the discourse by connecting the utilisation of animal and gendered metaphors in narratives concerning Shaka to patriarchal interpretations of leadership during apartheid, thereby reinforcing masculine authority and militarism. Collectively, these sources illuminate how the cultural production of apartheid capitalised on Shaka's image to justify ideological narratives centred on control and racial segregation.

Golan (1990) investigates how life-narratives about King Shaka were constructed and how these narratives mirror gender tensions within the Zulu state. He initiates his analysis by delineating the principal textual traditions pertaining to Shaka: oral testimonies, missionary accounts, and colonial chronicles. Golan (1990) demonstrates that each family of sources accentuates distinct characteristics. Oral *izibongo* (praise poetry) frequently commends Shaka's tactical prowess and political advancements, as will be elaborated on below. In contrast, missionary and colonial texts underscore themes of violence, instability, and masculine excess. Golan contends that these discrepancies are significant as they influence subsequent historiography and prevailing popular representations. He

emphasises that Shaka's life narrative is not an impartial account but rather a contested discourse shaped by the social standings and gender norms of the narrators.

An underlying claim of the article is that images of Shaka transmit gendered expectations for leadership and social ordering. Golan (1990) interprets examples of state constitution through a gender-oriented optic. He depicts how male dominance was enshrined through fighting prowess, ritual power, and control over home bases. In parallel fashion, Golan (1990) spots indices of hostility: claims over Shaka's brutality often mute anxieties over fluctuating male roles and disruptive social changes. Golan scrutinises ways that texts typified by savagery and discipline operated to justify later political domination and to yield coherence through social turbulence. His analytical approach combines textual analysis with attention to performative forms like praise poetry and testimony. He concludes that historians should consider Shaka stories as cultural texts revealing gender dynamics as well as recording historical events (Golan, 1990).

Golan's (1990) analysis of gendered narratives is especially relevant to a semiotic analysis of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). His study highlights ways narratives around Shaka inscribe expectations over masculine authority. This is relevant to poster analysis since visual features—such as posture, build, dress, and arms—operate as shorthand for gendered leadership. Golan's (1990) work invites questions over semiotic questions, such as which masculine script is enacted through each poster? Does 1986 imagery enlarge a warrior-based masculinity shaped through colonial as well as apartheid political anxieties? And/or does 2023 imagery complicate or reframe that narrative in terms of cultural dignity or complex leadership? The 2023 *Shaka iLembe* imagery appears to potentially reframe Shaka as a figure of “complex leadership” and cultural dignity, suggesting a multidimensional portrayal that contrasts with earlier media-based myth-making (*Shaka Zulu*). In this context, “complex” may denote a leadership that integrates military-political strategy, moral and ethical considerations, cultural stewardship, and community responsibility — thereby offering a more layered reinterpretation than depictions grounded solely in spectacle or violent conquest (for example, during the 1980s). This possible reframing aligns with arguments by Tomaselli, who critiques the mythic and sensationalised representation of Shaka in earlier television media as contributing to reductive and exoticised tropes (Tomaselli, 2003), and Wright (2006), who warns that popular—and especially tourist or heritage-oriented—appropriations of the “Shaka the Mighty” image often strip away historical complexity in favour of commodified symbolism. The inclusion of Golan's gender lens within this study's literature review brings visual images into line with wider discourses over power, social composition, and gender roles rather than taking them as mere cosmetic features (Golan, 1990).

Golan's article also contains limitations worthy of consideration in this study. His principal sources of evidence are textual traditions along with oral forms. He lacks a semiotic framework suitable for analysis of contemporary visual media. Furthermore, Golan's argument occasionally risks attaching too strong a causal influence to gender dynamics within its accounts of narrative developments. The 2023 *Shaka iLembe* imagery suggests a potential reframing of Shaka as a figure of “complex leadership” and

cultural dignity, contrasting with earlier media-based myth-making (Tomaselli, 2003; Wright, 2006). Here, “complex” denotes leadership that integrates strategy, ethics, cultural stewardship, and community responsibility, moving beyond portrayals focused solely on conquest or spectacle. While gender dynamics—such as the roles of royal wives or advisors—interact with Shaka’s narrative, they do not fully determine his leadership or plot developments. Recognising this interplay underscores the need to understand Shaka’s authority as emerging from multiple, intersecting factors, including strategic, moral, and culturally grounded considerations.

Golan's study aligns with this study's key questions. With respect to exploring iconography and narrative construction, his focus makes it easier to identify visual signs that are probable bearers of gendered meaning and shows how such meanings can shift within different political frames. In terms of addressing the key question that interrogates continuity with respect to change from the apartheid era through the post-apartheid era, Golan offers a historical point of reference: earlier narratives used gendered tropes to justify power. As such, the study is well-positioned to assess whether 2023 posters rearticulate such tropes (continuity), subvert them (rupture), or derive new meanings from pre-existing signs (re-articulation). In addition, Golan's focus on interpreting narratives as cultural objects is commensurate with this study's suggested semiotic approach; both demand thorough, evidence-based analysis.

The deployment of Shaka's image is used to authenticate Zulu identity within the framework of apartheid's policies of ethnic segregation, showing up the ideological manipulation within cultural mythology. Ashley Parcels (2022) discusses the deployment of the Shaka Zulu image during apartheid South Africa as a tool for strengthening politically constructed ethnic identities. The article suggests that political leaders selectively invoked Shaka's legacy to support certain ethnic groups while excluding others, thus creating historical narratives that supported state agendas. From 1959 to 1970, both the apartheid government and its related organisations used Shaka as a symbol of Zulu authority; this deployment continued hierarchical and territorial divisions in line with their ideology of separate development. Parcels (2022) highlights the ways in which historical narratives and accounts of Shaka were used to create a legitimised past as a means of accommodating existing political agendas at the expense of historical accuracy. Furthermore, she discusses the contest over these representations of Shaka's image, showing that these became part of a broader contest over authority, legitimacy, and common memory in South Africa. The article highlights that conflict lies along lines of historical reality and myth-making with images of historical figures being used for purposes of ideology. Parcels (2022) shows that representations of Shaka are deeply embedded in wider struggles over authority, legitimacy, and collective memory in South Africa. She illustrates this by noting that the apartheid state's construction of a Zulu homeland encompassed “territory and populations that never recognized the Zulu monarchy before colonialism” (Parcels 2022: 205), revealing how Shaka's image was mobilised to stabilise ideological projects rather than reflect historical reality. This underscores how myth-making and political interests frequently intersect in portrayals of Shaka, reinforcing the need for

careful attention to how contemporary images—such as those in *Shaka iLembe*—reframe cultural dignity and leadership within contested memory landscapes.

Like Tomaselli (2003b), Cobbing (1998) and Parcells (2022) also clarify that the appropriation of Shaka's image in the apartheid era was not neutral; it involved a careful selection of events, symbols, and narratives to produce certain meanings and claims to authority. As Julian Cobbing argues, some of these historical constructions rested on “selective use or actual invention of evidence” (Cobbing 1988, 493), while Wylie highlights how Shaka's image has been variously invoked and distorted—“regarded as both the cynosure of Zulu nationhood, and the epitome of African brutality” (Wylie, 1997: 1)—showing that representations have long been enlisted for political, ideological, and commemorative ends (Tomaselli, 2003b; Cobbing, 1988; Parcells, 2022). Tomaselli (2003b) evaluates government publications, speeches, and commemorative events to illustrate how Shaka was ethnicised and used to justify political hierarchies. These portrayals often oversimplified or misrepresented Shaka's achievements, presenting him as a harbinger of a narrowly defined Zulu nation that aligned with apartheid ideals. Although popular portrayals of Shaka have often circulated through media, education, and political discourse, scholars caution that many of these representations were shaped by the ideological climate of apartheid rather than by historical nuance. Parcells (2022), for example, demonstrates that Shaka's image became a site of political struggle within debates on ethnic sovereignty and Zulu “homeland” identity, revealing how selective memories of the past were mobilised to legitimise state-controlled forms of authority. What this suggests is not necessarily that apartheid narratives invented Shaka anew, but that they strategically emphasised particular elements of his legacy—such as militarised statecraft or ethnic unity—while downplaying the broader socio-political, regional, and cultural dynamics that shaped early nineteenth-century Zulu leadership. Such selective emphasis risks flattening historical complexity into a narrow ideological frame, especially when contrasted with scholarship that foregrounds competing narratives, regional variation, and the fluidity of identity formation in the period (Hamilton, 1998; Wright, 2010). In this sense, mediated representations of Shaka under apartheid may be better understood as participating in a broader struggle over memory and legitimacy, rather than as neutral historical accounts. Furthermore, Parcells (2022) points to the implications of these depictions on collective awareness, showing that they impacted both scholarly discourse and popular understanding of Shaka's historical role. In conclusion, the article highlights that historical figures' meanings are context-specific, shifting in tandem with political dictates and ideological compulsions.

Parcells's (2022) examination of portrayals from the apartheid era provides this study historical perspectives regarding the construction and manipulation of Shaka's image for specific political objectives. This viewpoint is consistent with one of the principal assertions of the study that visual depictions of Shaka transform in accordance with dominant sociopolitical discourses. The source underpins this study's inquiry into possible shifts in visual symbolism, myth-making, and cultural memory across temporal contexts. In particular, it establishes a basis for comprehending the influence

of political and cultural agendas on the portrayal of historical figures, which is crucial for examining both divergences and continuities in the representations found within the two television series.

Afrocentric and Decolonial Re-interpretations

The following section examines three key strands of contemporary scholarship that illuminate how Shaka's image is produced, circulated and reinterpreted across linguistic, political and cultural terrains. Together, these works provide a conceptual bridge for this study's comparative semiotic analysis of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). First, Xhakaza et al. (2024) foreground language as a central site of cultural reclamation, demonstrating how *Shaka iLembe* functions as a vehicle for revitalising isiZulu (the language that is spoken by the Zulu inhabitants) and asserting Black self-representation through dialogue, ritualised speech and linguistic visibility. Second, Macqueen (2022) shifts the focus to global circulation, revealing how *Shaka Zulu* (1986) travelled into Cold War Eastern Europe and was consumed through entrenched colonial fantasies rather than African historical realities. His work highlights the mobility of Shaka's myth and the ideological rearticulations that occur when media texts enter new political contexts. Third, van Vuuren (2023) traces the long lineage of Shaka's portrayal in local and international media, arguing that contemporary productions such as *Shaka iLembe* represent deliberate attempts to Africanise and decolonise earlier visual and narrative conventions. Taken together, these scholars illustrate that Shaka's representation is never static: it is shaped by linguistic choices, geopolitical circulation, production politics and shifting cultural imaginaries. Their insights directly inform this study's approach to posters and pilot episodes as semiotic artefacts, guiding the analysis of how language, iconography and visual myth-making reflect broader ideological shifts from apartheid-era spectacle to post-apartheid cultural reclamation.

Sibusiso Xhakaza, Bongephiwe Dlamini-Myeni, Nontobeko Ngqulunga and Lungile Mkhwanazi (2024) present *Shaka iLembe* (2023) as revival language and culture, presenting it as a postcolonial corrective to recover isiZulu language pride and self-representation. Xhakaza et al. (2024) also view *Shaka iLembe* as a linguistic and cultural reclamation vehicle that revitalises Zulu pride through dialogue, fashion, and authenticity in visual narrative. Such conversations resonate with this study's comparative semiotic interest in post-apartheid media re-imaginings of Shaka's mythology through Afrocentricity and gender inclusivity of imagery.

Xhakaza et al. (2024) examine how *Shaka iLembe* promotes and maintains isiZulu as a language. They explain how language is manifested across the series: dialogue, idioms, praise-poetry insertions, names, and culturally specific expressions. The authors suggest that the show is a space of linguistic visibility. It brings isiZulu into mainstream spaces in broadcasts and illustrates pronunciation, idiomatic use, and register for mass audiences. Xhakaza et al. (2024) record instances in which the script places Zulu cultural forms centre stage—*izibongo* (praise poetry, referring to a traditional oral art form that extols achievements, lineage and character of a person), greetings, songs—and demonstrates how these become incorporated into plotlines instead of being offered as exotic sideshows. They argue that

the effect is a televisual world where isiZulu functions both as ordinary speech and as a signal of cultural continuity.

Production decisions and audience effects are also addressed in the article. Xhakaza et al. (2024) note that the series uses code-switching and subtitling techniques to engage multilingual audiences without compromising on isiZulu being at the centre. They show that, through interviews, textual examples, and early audience responses, the series is widely perceived as both educational and as a source of cultural pride, particularly in relation to language and heritage. They show that, through interviews, textual examples, and early audience responses, the series is widely perceived as both educational and as a source of cultural pride, particularly in relation to language and heritage. The article is sensitive about boundaries: script changes are subject to business pressure, and some language usage is simplified for the sake of clarity. But Xhakaza et al. determine that *Shaka iLembe* is actively engaged in the maintenance of language by the demonstration of formal and informal discourse, by the recovery of more aged lexis, and by the flow of *izibongo* and ritual discourse into living media spaces. Xhakaza et al. (2024) argue that *Shaka iLembe* plays an active role in sustaining isiZulu by showcasing a rich spectrum of linguistic forms, “from formal and informal registers to the recovery of older vocabulary and the continued circulation of *izibongo* and ritual expressions within contemporary media spaces” (Xhakaza et al. 2024:6). This illustrates how the series functions as a linguistic reclamation project, positioning isiZulu not merely as dialogue but as heritage, artistry, and embodied cultural memory.

Xhakaza et al. (2024) research is pertinent to this study in as much as they outline how *Shaka iLembe* uses audiovisual format to normalise and esteem isiZulu. In a semiotic comparison between *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023), their study foregrounds a communicative level which posters and pilot shows encode: language as indexical sign. Posters, taglines and dialogue perform language politics as openly as costume and pose. The article helps to hone the semiotic coding frame: other than colour, stance and iconography, include linguistic signifiers (use of orthography in posters, use of isiZulu in slogans, subtitle tactics, use of *izibongo*).

Xhakaza et al. (2024) provide empirical evidence that contemporary television producers consciously elevate isiZulu as a form of cultural and pedagogic capital within *Shaka iLembe*, framing the language not merely as a communicative tool but as a valued resource that carries identity, heritage, and instructional weight. They explicitly argue that isiZulu language functions as both “heritage capital” and “pedagogic capital”, stating that the producers themselves “use the language as a form of heritage capital” and deliberately “position isiZulu language as pedagogic capital to teach, preserve and dignify the language” (Xhakaza et al. 2024: 7–8). Their findings demonstrate that producers intentionally embed formal registers, revived lexical items, and ritualised discourse patterns (such as *izibongo* and ceremonial speech) into the series in order to sustain linguistic pride and cultural continuity. In this sense, the show becomes a deliberate vehicle for language maintenance and cultural recovery, with

isiZulu framed as a legitimate asset capable of transmitting historical knowledge, reinforcing collective identity, and modelling respectful, elevated speech forms for contemporary audiences.

Khakaza et al.'s research on the linguistic and cultural choices in *Shaka iLembe* will inform the interpretation of this study's data seeking to examine if and how iconography has shifted from spectacle to cultural reclamation.

Although Xhakaza et al. (2024) are largely celebratory and production-oriented their data—summaries of texts, interviews, early reception notes—document positive language effects but do not quite explore the show's political and commercial boundaries. For example, subtitling decisions and cut dialogue for increased accessibility can arguably commodify foreign Zulu market language too. Subtitling and the selective editing of Zulu dialogue to improve accessibility for non-Zulu speakers can inadvertently commodify the language, presenting it as a marketable product rather than a living cultural medium (Martínez-Lorenzo, 2020; Kruger, Kruger and Verhoef, 2021). While such strategies enhance understanding, they may also simplify or omit linguistic and cultural nuances, influencing how audiences perceive Zulu and its socio-historical significance. This study thus must abandon the premise that only the use of isiZulu is decolonial practice. Instead, this study will use Xhakaza et al. to inform the analysis: 1) demarcate linguistic signs on posters and pilot episodes (lexical units, isiZulu presence/absence in headlines, izibongo quotations); (2) assess how visual signs co-occur with linguistic signs (e.g., isiZulu caption + dignified portrait = reclamation frame. This approach renders Xhakaza et al.'s (2024) findings into empirically testable actions.

Finally, the article informs this study's key questions. In response to the iconography question—what signs create stories—the study argues that language itself constitutes an iconographic source that interacts with visual codes to construct Shaka's persona. For the continuity/change issue—does iconography express transitions from apartheid to democracy—Xhakaza et al., (2024) ask the researcher to look for a linguistic shift: if *Shaka Zulu* (1986) excluded isiZulu in marketing copy or re-coded it as Other, but *Shaka iLembe* (2023) places it in the centre, that would be scientific and meaningful. When interpreting the data this study will remain aware of how Xhakaza et al., (2024) explanation of how language and visual iconography together reframe the cultural myth of Shaka over time.

Ian Macqueen (2022) places the myth within Cold War geopolitics, showing how global receptions of Shaka Zulu reflected cross-cultural ideological struggles. Macqueen (2022) situates the global appeal of Shaka Zulu within Cold War geopolitics, arguing that its reception circulated a specific colonial myth: the exoticised, romanticised image of Africa as a timeless and dramatic “Black Land,” embodied through a hyper-heroic Shaka figure. He explains that the miniseries' success in Poland rested on a “potent mix of exoticism and excitement that capitalised on Poland's limited exposure to Africa” (Macqueen, 2022: 2). This myth depended on familiar European colonial imaginaries that cast Africa as mysterious, warlike, and culturally distant, which Polish reviewers largely accepted at face value—

describing the series as offering “an exciting exotic, colourful spectacle” with “incredible witches and priests” and claiming it revealed “something of the truth about the fascinating Black Land” (Macqueen, 2022: 17–18). By showing how such representations resonated even in a communist society publicly opposed to apartheid, Macqueen (2022) demonstrates that the *Shaka Zulu* miniseries allowed Cold War audiences to consume a colonial fantasy that cut across ideological lines, sustaining older European myths about Africa while masking the political conditions of its apartheid-era production.

Macqueen (2022) traces the image and name of Shaka Zulu beyond southern Africa to the Polish People's Republic in the late Cold War period. The article documents cultural flows, television and film shows from South Africa and flows of Shaka-relevant texts to Poland. Building on the broader debates about the contested nature of Shaka's image, recent scholarship shows how his representation travels across borders and retains deep ideological weight. Macqueen's (2022) analysis of *Shaka Zulu*'s unexpected popularity in Cold War Poland illustrates how cultural texts participate in global “cultural flows,” circulating meanings far beyond their sites of production. As semiotic theorists emphasise, such texts carry embedded myths and representational codes that shape how audiences imagine distant cultures (Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Rose, 2016). In the Polish context, these flows intensified pre-existing colonial imaginaries, with reviewers praising the series as an “exciting exotic, colourful spectacle” that unveiled the “fascinating Black Land” and its “incredible witches and priests” (Macqueen 2022: 17–18). These responses underscore how *Shaka Zulu* functioned not merely as entertainment but as a mobile myth-making device, reproducing a familiar colonial fantasy of Africa even within a socialist state publicly opposed to apartheid.

This interpretation aligns with longer-standing critiques of Shaka's portrayal across Western media. Tomaselli (1996) traces a recurring semiotic pattern in which Shaka is read through Eurocentric codes that emphasise violence, exoticism, and hypermasculine authority—codes that become naturalised through repeated circulation. Afrocentric scholars extend this critique by arguing that even the widely used name “Shaka Zulu” reflects a European linguistic invention that distorts indigenous epistemologies and obscures Shaka kaSenzangakhona's authentic identity (Ntloedibe and Mtombeni, 2025). Together, these perspectives demonstrate how Shaka's representation has long been shaped by colonial historiography, mythic storytelling, and visual spectacle. This provides an essential conceptual bridge to the present study, which compares *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) to explore whether contemporary media continue to reproduce these inherited myths or rearticulate Shaka through newer, more culturally grounded interpretive paradigms.

Macqueen (2022) argues that Polish fascination with Shaka resulted from ideological congruence, academic curiosity, and state cultural diplomacy. The author illustrates how institutions in Poland approached South African material as ethnographic interest and as a way of situating Poland within international anti-colonial discourse. Employing archival sources, press coverage and diplomatic correspondence, Macqueen illustrates how Shaka's image was recontextualised in a new political

context. Although Macqueen (2022) analyses the 1980s *Shaka Zulu* miniseries, his work fits within Afrocentric and decolonial re-interpretations because his 2022 perspective critically exposes how the series circulated colonial ways of seeing Africa. Drawing on “archival sources, press coverage and diplomatic correspondence” (Macqueen, 2022: 1), he shows how Shaka’s image was “recontextualised” in Cold War Poland through meanings shaped by apartheid-era and colonial imaginaries. Polish reviewers described the series as an “exciting exotic, colourful spectacle” revealing the “fascinating Black Land” populated by “incredible witches and priests” (Macqueen, 2022: 17–18), illustrating how Eurocentric myths travelled unchallenged into new political contexts. This is where Macqueen’s study becomes decolonial: while the media text is from the 1980s, his analysis foregrounds the ideological distortions embedded in its global circulation and implicitly calls for African-centred reinterpretations that challenge these inherited colonial frames (Macqueen, 2022).

The article also explores how transnational circulation generates new meanings. Macqueen (2022) notes that Polish readers and audiences recontextualised Shaka within socialist narratives of nationhood, modernisation and leadership, producing meanings that differed significantly from South African readings. This resulted in South African meanings that differed from readings. This process reflects what Hall describes as articulation and rearticulation: the idea that cultural texts acquire new ideological meanings as they enter different contexts and are linked to new political projects. In this case, Shaka’s image was “rearticulated” through Polish socialist concerns rather than apartheid-era South African ones—an interpretive shift that demonstrates how meanings are never fixed but continually re-made (Hall, 1980). This concept will be discussed more fully in the following chapter, but it serves here as a useful theoretical bridge showing how transnational audiences reshape the ideological work of media texts. The article recognises translation choices, exhibition settings and scholarly commentary as genres that shaped Polish information outside. Macqueen (2022) contends that examining such cross-border receptions reveals the malleability of historical myths—how easily they can be detached from their original political contexts and reworked to serve new ideological purposes. As he notes, “a cultural product from apartheid South Africa could be detached from its local political context and made to serve different ideological purposes in a socialist country” (Macqueen, 2022: 17), demonstrating how “global media circuits remap local images” to meet foreign audiences’ expectations (Macqueen, 2022: 18). The Polish reception of *Shaka Zulu* thus shows how Shaka’s image could be reinterpreted through socialist narratives of nationhood, modernisation and leadership, illustrating the adaptable nature of such myths as they circulate across borders.

Macqueen’s (2022) study is useful to this research because it highlights the global movement of Shaka’s image and reception contexts re-signifying visual and narrative codes. The article substantiates the project’s notion that iconography is not fixed: symbols such as spears, regalia or heroic poses take on new meanings when they cross media ecologies and political regimes. In the proposed semiotic difference between *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023), Macqueen’s research prompts the scholars to study not only national production contexts (apartheid South Africa and democratic South Africa) but also global flows, reception and rearticulation that is arguably

decolonial. This is important since promotional posters and pilot episodes find transnational distribution and enter media discourse; international audiences, funders or distributors can interpret their visual grammar differently. Practically, Macqueen recommends considering distribution, translation, and exhibition data in interpreting poster iconography and narrative framing. This adds depth to the study's key question as to if and how iconography captures ideological transformation: meaning in a sign may alter partially because of external publics and market reasonings as well as domestic politics (Macqueen, 2022).

Macqueen's (2022) focus is on reception and diplomatic documents rather than systematic semiotic encoding of visual artefacts. Macqueen's (2022) focus is on how European travellers, officials, and diplomats documented and interpreted Shaka, not on how contemporary audiences decode visual texts. In other words, her "reception" material refers to archival accounts produced by colonial observers, not focus groups or modern audience studies. Her analysis works with written diplomatic correspondence, travellers' journals, and official reports, so the "reception" she examines reflects colonial-era meaning-making, not systematic semiotic analysis of images or artefacts. Macqueen's (2022: 1) analysis reconstructs reception historically through "archival sources, press coverage and diplomatic correspondence", drawing on the interpretive work of Polish critics, cultural bureaucrats and state officials to show how *Shaka Zulu* was reframed as it travelled through socialist media networks. This study will therefore fill a gap in asking similar questions but via visual iconographic interpretation. Macqueen's research informs the analytical steps of this research. Firstly, by framing the question "What signs and symbols are used?" ask a follow-up question regarding where the signs originally were supposed to go and how translation might somehow alter them. Secondly, by framing the question "Do posters reflect shifts from apartheid to democracy?". These works collectively demonstrate the intellectual shift from extrinsic myths to reimagining from an African context, directly impacting this research's examination of temporal and ideological rearticulation across *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023).

Jansen van Vuuren (2023) provides a cultural critique on behalf of the prevalent fascination with Shaka Zulu, suggesting that repeated revisions to the Zulu nation represent continued conversations about national identity, heritage, and spectacle. She outlines the enduring appeal of Shaka Zulu and the Zulu nation across film, television, and wider popular culture. She notes that initial South African cinema regularly used the descriptor "Zulu" within its titles, with many such films produced largely for international markets. Scholars cited within the article suggest these initial representations frequently exoticised and reduced Black life to fit colonial and coloniser nation-building plan (Jansen van Vuuren, 2023). The article relates this initial pattern to a later international popularity with Shaka Zulu through works of fiction such as novels, international films, as well as continued popularity within popular culture with regards to the Battle of Isandlwana as critical dates that sustain "Zulu" as part of world history as well as media narratives. Jansen van Vuuren (2023) highlights scholarly viewpoints that assert that Shaka Zulu mythology has itself been redefined and redirected over time to serve varied cultural and political ends. This perspective aligns with Wright (2006), who contends that Shaka's image has been

“reconstituted to serve political, cultural and commercial purposes”, functioning less as a historical figure and more as a symbolic construct whose meanings shift according to context (Wright, 2006: 45).

Hamilton (1998) similarly emphasises that some narratives portraying Shaka as a tyrant emerged “only after his death,” reflecting a complex interplay of African oral traditions and European accounts (Hamilton, 1998: 112). As Kelly (2015) observes, such portrayals operate as sites of memory and power, shaping both heritage discourses and popular understandings of history. Taken together, these scholars suggest that Shaka’s legacy is best understood as a dynamic intersection of myth, history, and visual representation, where mediated images both reflect and construct cultural and political meanings (van Vuuren, 2023; Wright, 2006).

Jansen van Vuuren (2023) then contrasts conventional, often Eurocentric portrayals with newer efforts at recovering the narrative from a South African point of view. She highlights *Shaka iLembe* (2023) as a new, home-made attempt to “Africanise and decolonise” Shaka’s narrative (van Vuuren, 2023). Others mentioned in the article believe that new productions can help correct earlier biases in framing as well as visual presentation. van Vuuren (2023) notes that contemporary productions have the potential to correct earlier biases in the framing and visual presentation of Shaka Zulu. Scholars such as Tomaselli emphasise that early films often reinforced colonial or settler-nationalist myths, serving as instruments of “nation-building” that projected exclusionary visions of identity (Tomaselli, as cited in van Vuuren, 2023). Similarly, van Vuuren (2023) argues that cinema historically inscribed national identities through visual language and narrative, suggesting that newer media can reconfigure these representations to centre African perspectives. Van Vuuren, (2023) further underscores this potential, noting that productions like *Shaka iLembe* contribute to Africanising and decolonising the historical narratives of the past on screen. Collectively, these perspectives support the view that modern television and film can act as corrective interventions, challenging historical misrepresentations while shaping contemporary understandings of Shaka and Zulu heritage — a central concern of this study. The article also highlights the Zulu nation’s demographic and cultural importance as factors that shape its appearance on screen. Finally, the piece describes Shaka’s portrayal as complex: framing him as a warfare thinker, as a figure of resistance, as a source that filmmakers and writers draw on differentially in terms of audience as well as ideology (van Vuuren, 2023). The overall tone is reflective rather than confrontational, taking history as well as more recent shifts in portrayal into account.

The present article is significant to the proposed research as it delineates a media lineage regarding representations of Shaka. Van Vuuren (2023) offers empirical indicators—such as early film titles, notable novels, and significant events like Isandlwana—that illustrate the circulation of the Shaka sign across various temporal and spatial contexts. In conducting a semiotic analysis comparing *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023), these indicators serve as tangible points to examine both continuity and transformation in aspects of iconography and narrative emphasis. The author’s focus on the foreign perspective prevalent in the early film industry elucidates the potential presence of Eurocentric visual codes in the 1986 miniseries. In contrast, the article’s exploration of contemporary local

production bolsters the argument that *Shaka iLembe* may intentionally revise these codes to prioritise Afrocentric perspectives. “The new television and streaming series *Shaka iLembe* is a chance for Black South African film Makers to tell the story from their authentic perspective, one that has not been imposed upon them” (van Vuuren, 2023:43). Integrating this discussion into the current research proposal, this study heeds the call to investigate how *Shaka iLembe* has provided a change for South African film makers to tell their own story.

Cultural Myths, Symbolism, and Ideology

While the previous section focused on how Shaka’s image has been historically constructed and mythologised through colonial writings, political agendas, and later visual media, this new section shifts attention toward indigenous Zulu knowledge systems—the metaphors, oral traditions, praise poetry, gender structures, and cultural symbols that shape how Shaka is remembered from within Zulu culture itself. This section is important because it highlights forms of meaning-making that are not always visible to outsiders, yet are deeply embedded in Zulu ways of interpreting leadership, morality, kinship, and heroic identity. By examining animal metaphors, *izibongo*, and gendered cultural roles, the section foregrounds what might be called “local semiotic frameworks”: interpretive resources that Zulu audiences bring to representations of Shaka. These cultural codes help explain why certain visual motifs, characterisations, or narrative emphases in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) resonate differently for Zulu versus non-Zulu viewers. This section is therefore separated from the earlier debates because it does not analyse the external politics of representation; instead, it draws on internal cultural logics that contextualise how Shaka’s imagery is constructed, understood, and continually reinterpreted within Zulu society. It provides the cultural grounding necessary to read the posters and pilot episodes not only as media products but as texts that engage with longstanding Zulu symbolic traditions and interpretive practices.

This section discusses components of the Zulu knowledge system that are likely included in representations of Shaka. They hold cultural significance that is clearer to a reader/audience member from within the Zulu culture. These metaphors, motifs and even forms of expression (like praise poetry) are aspects of a production with which people from the Zulu culture can relate.

Animal Metaphors and Heroic Ideals

Biyela (2014) examines the lion, bull, and elephant animal metaphors as semiotic codes signifying Shaka Zulu’s leadership, courage, and moral complexity. He describes how animal metaphors are used by the Zulu in the construction of King Shaka images. Biyela (2014) argues that in Zulu cultural discourse animal and bird metaphors play a key role in shaping images of Shaka, drawing on species considered powerful or royal — such as the lion, leopard, elephant and buffalo — thereby embedding moral values, social mores and political symbolism in popular memory. Supporting this, the study *The Conceptual Metaphor ‘People are Animals’ in Zulu* shows that in isiZulu metaphorical language “People are Animals” functions as a foundational conceptual framework, whereby human behaviour and status

are regularly expressed through animal metaphors, allowing “an extensive and systematic hierarchy of entailments ranging throughout the different phyla of the animal kingdom” (Hermanson and du Plessis 1997, 50). This underlines Biyela’s point that comparison to animals is not random but embedded in a shared metaphorical system that communicates power, status and moral character. In addition, an analysis of the novel, *Chaka* (1925) An analysis of Thomas Mofolo’s novel *Chaka* (1925/2017) reveals that animal metaphors drawn from praise-song traditions are used to both elevate and critique the protagonist’s power, with references to lions, elephants, leopards, wolves, mambas, and hyenas invoked to represent Shaka’s ferocity and destructive force (Loots, 2018). As the author notes, “the praised were often identified with lions, elephants, leopards, wolves ... and mambas” to reflect the “aggressive spirit of the age” (Hermanson, 2006:44). Together, these perspectives reinforce Biyela’s argument: animal metaphors in Zulu oral and literary traditions are not merely decorative, but function as a culturally meaningful semiotic system through which leadership, power, and moral values are communicated and contested. Biyela (2014) takes examples from praise poetry, oral and written witness to illustrate how such metaphors capture rich bundles of subtle character judgments in tightly compacted, evocative forms. He contends that this rhetorical gesture universalises Shaka’s appeal because imagery of animals appeals to common cultural experience.

Biyela (2014) also discovers metaphorical ambivalence. The same animal image can consecrate or demonise depending on circumstances. A “lion” metaphor of praise poetry ennobles bravery; the same metaphor of a denunciatory narrative stigmatises predation (Biyela, 2014). The author follows the clustering of metaphors with material signs—regalia, landscape, and weapons—and their migratory pattern from oral genres to written and visual forms. He postulates that metaphorical codes facilitate the persistence of the Shaka Zulu myth as they are repeatable, portable signifiers that survive change of medium. Biyela (2014) concludes that animal metaphors are dynamic cultural tools. He also states they do cognitive labour (simplifying judgment), social labour (spreading norms), and political labour (legitimizing power or condemning excess). Biyela then positions metaphor as a semiotic register mediating between oral tradition and subsequent representations of Shaka Zulu (2014).

Biyela’s analysis is immediately translatable to a semiotic comparison between *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). His classification of clusters of animal-metaphors provides the analysis with culturally specific sign-meanings to look for in dismantling visual texts. Posters and pilots employ brief, compact visual signals—pose, composition, costume, light—in similar forms to verbal metaphors. A low angle shot with expansive chest and advancing stride, for instance, may visually enact the “lion” trope by visually instantiating dominance and stalking. Biyela (2014) thus allows the project to proceed from generic icon lists (shields, spears) to more nuanced hypothesis: what compositions generate lion/elephant/bull readings, and whether they change valence from 1986 to 2023.

Critically, Biyela’s work derives from textual and oral analysis instead of systematic visual semiotics. He illustrates that metaphors “travel” across media but does not empirically investigate the representations

themselves. His hypotheses therefore need to be employed as heuristics—not as complete mappings—when one is examining visual evidence.

Praise Poetry (Izibongo) and Gendered Readings of the Shaka Narrative

This section examines King Shaka's portrayal in Zulu oral traditions, particularly through praise poetry (izibongo). These narratives blend admiration and critique, constructing a formidable, manly image of Shaka that is simultaneously heroic and enigmatic. By exploring these oral accounts, this section foregrounds how local memory and cultural storytelling contribute to the ongoing negotiation of Shaka's identity, offering a perspective that contrasts with, and sometimes informs, mediated representations in film, television, and other visual media.

When looking at King Shaka's portrayal in Zulu oral traditions, one finds that these stories, in the form of praise poetry (izibongo) blend a deep reverence and a critique, and ultimately build a manly image that is hard to get to know. Cele's (2001) analysis of Shaka Zulu's appearance in Zulu oral accounts and *izibongo* showcases the way in which these oral stories form his picture through the art of language and collective memory. Cele (2001) draws upon an assortment of spoken sources and poems that detail Shaka's character, management and ethical standing, and spots recurring motifs such as fearlessness, intellect, ruthlessness and creativity that present him as a multilayered cultural icon, rather than a straightforward historical figure.

Thamsanqa Cele (2001) observes that portrayals of King Shaka in Zulu oral tradition are complex and varied, blending admiration and critique, and reflecting shifts in social, political, and cultural contexts. B. Julian Peires (1999:23) supports this view, noting that “oral historical narratives possess underlying invariant structural elements” that allow researchers to reconstruct aspects of Shaka's life beyond colonial or written records. Gunner (2000:14) similarly emphasises that *izibongo* is a dynamic and context-sensitive form of cultural expression, with “political, religious and aesthetic aspects” that respond to changing social circumstances. These insights from oral traditions provide a critical lens for examining visual media representations, as the posters and television series of Shaka — such as *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) — often rearticulate these layered narratives, selectively highlighting heroism, leadership, or violence to construct a particular image for contemporary audiences. Together, these perspectives suggest that both oral and visual portrayals of Shaka function as sites where memory, identity, and cultural meaning are negotiated, producing a multi-dimensional and sometimes contradictory representation of the Zulu king.

Significantly, Cele (2001) highlights that these portrayals are not objective, they are soaked in the societal values and the collective ideas of what it means to be a nation, and how power is perceived. Well-known Zulu poets through their oral performances, have carefully chosen to emphasise some aspects of Shaka's reign to mirror the aspirations and worries of their time, and made his army tactics a demonstration of genius and order, but his brutality is portrayed as both necessary and heartbreaking, the embodiment of uncertainty in the Zulu moral mindset.

Cele (2001) explains that *izibongo* are like living records of a group's identity. They're not just art, but also history books and ways to talk about beliefs. These spoken stories show how the legends (myths) about Shaka Zulu grew even before movies and books talked about him. They link the old spoken stories to the newer TV shows and movies, which all paint Shaka as a hero, but also someone people argue about. Cele's (2001) point is that these spoken stories aren't just repeating facts, they're changing Shaka's story to fit what people want and believe at the time. He wraps up by saying that you can't talk about the Shaka stories without talking about how the Zulu community was changing as a whole. The stories show how they were rewriting their past to deal with the present (Cele, 2001).

Cele's (2001) contextualises this study in showing that television and film is not the only way culture is expressed; there are also spoken stories. The *izibongo* are almost like early ways of writing things down, using symbols and images that later get reused in shows like *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). This is great when looking at how the legend of Shaka has been visually retold over time, with different beliefs coming into play. Cele (2001) proves that the old stories already had different meanings for Shaka – like warrior, leader, and villain. So, it gives this study a starting point to look at how movies and posters used similar ideas. That is why his work aids in finding the source of these signs and symbols in Shaka's image – things like weapons and royal clothes (Cele 2001).

What's important is that while Cele focuses on spoken stories, he still shows how cultural legends change through how they're shown. This study is a bit different because it really digging into the visuals of it all, but Cele (2001) makes relevant sense by showing that something isn't just about spitting out facts; it's about creating meaning. Cele (2001) also stresses that the community has a big role in backing and keeping the Shaka legend alive through these performances. That is the idea of looking at how TV and advertising do the same thing. In addition, Cele sees *izibongo* as ways to push certain beliefs, which fits with this research into how cultural and ideological shifts change what we see. By looking at *Shaka Zulu* from the apartheid era and *Shaka iLembe* from the democratic era, it makes the academics wondering if we still see those same conflicting ideas in the visuals as we did in the spoken stories. Cele's idea of mixed feelings and selective memory is similar to how this study is looking at the rewriting of legends over time.

Cele's work gets right to the point of the question: How have cultural and ideological changes, or a lack of change, shown in the posters, made the Shaka Zulu legend stick around or get retold? Cele's (2001) research shows that the Shaka legend has always been able to change, moulded by the needs of different beliefs.

Historical scholarship has increasingly challenged male-centred narratives of the Zulu kingdom by demonstrating that women occupied critical positions within political authority, diplomacy, and state stability. Rather than being confined to domestic or reproductive roles, women were embedded within the structures that sustained governance and legitimacy. Sarah Hanretta (1998: 390–392) argues that as the Zulu state became more centralised in the early nineteenth century, “the potential for both

exploitation and the acquisition of power and prestige increased” for women. He shows that state formation created new spaces for women’s influence, meaning that gender hierarchy did not simply marginalise women but reorganised how power could be accessed and exercised. Women’s social positioning thus became “an important source of power” rather than a sign of political exclusion (Hanretta, 1998: 395).

Zakhele Shamase (2014: 16–18) similarly demonstrates that royal women such as Queen Nandi and Princess Mkabayi kaJama exercised substantial authority behind the scenes of the Zulu monarchy. He shows that these women were deeply involved in leadership processes, succession politics, and national stability, especially during periods of political transition and crisis. Shamase (2014: 19–20) argues that royal women contributed directly to “nation-building and wars of resistance,” shaping political outcomes through negotiation, counsel, and symbolic legitimacy. Their authority was therefore not merely ceremonial but structurally integrated into the political order of the kingdom.

Golan (1990: 101–104) further reveals that “gender relations were central to the construction of power in the Zulu state”. Through oral traditions and political symbolism, women’s bodies, fertility, and lineage affiliations were bound to state authority and succession legitimacy. Gender was thus “not peripheral to governance but constitutive of how authority itself was organised and understood” (Golan, 1990: 106). Hamilton (1998) cautions that colonial and apartheid historiography systematically wiped away this complexity by assembling Shaka’s power through a hyper-masculine and militarised lens. Hamilton, further, shows that such narratives marginalised women’s political agency and reduced African governance to male authority, reinforcing colonial assumptions about African patriarchy (Hamilton, 1998). In doing so, historiography transformed women into background figures rather than recognising them as central actors in political life.

Together, these scholars provide firm historical grounding for the argument that women in the Zulu kingdom did more than just being housewives and child bearers. They participated in diplomacy, succession politics, ritual authority, and political mediation. Their influence was material, institutional, and ideological rather than symbolic alone (Hanretta, 1998: 395; Shamase, 2014: 20; Golan, 1990: 106).

These insights are crucial for analysing how gender is represented in visual media. They establish a benchmark against which the portrayal of women in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) can be evaluated. In the 1986 series, female characters such as Nandi are often framed primarily through maternal or prophetic symbolism, reflecting colonial narrative traditions that reduce women’s political agency (Hamilton, 1998: 15; Golan, 1990: 103). By contrast, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) appears to re-position women more visibly as political actors and cultural bearers, resonating with historical evidence of their authority outlined by Shamase (2014: 18–20) and Hanretta (1998: 392–395).

Drawing on these historians, this study examines how gendered iconography—through posture, costume, spatial positioning, gaze, and narrative centrality—functions as a semiotic register of

ideological meaning. Women's visibility or marginalisation in the posters and pilot episodes becomes a way of tracing how cultural memory is either aligned with colonial patriarchal myths or re-articulated in line with historically grounded African gendered power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it emerges from the reviewed literature that Shaka Zulu's image is not fixed but constantly reconfigured by changing political, cultural, and ideological forces. Depictions of Shaka Zulu have long been a battleground in South African cultural studies, involving oral tradition, colonial history and contemporary visual media. The rich literature shows how his image has been repeatedly textualised across different semiotic systems: linguistic, performative, visual and ideological. In this chapter, these intellectual journeys have been mapped so as to situate the current work in an expansive genealogy of ideas and realise how it diverges by way of a comparative semiotic analysis of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). From colonial and missionary manipulations, apartheid-era propaganda, and post-apartheid reinterpretations, each period has recoded the symbolic meaning of Shaka. Scholars emphasise how myth, power, and visual representation intersect to create competing meanings of Shaka—as a feared conqueror, a national hero, or reclamation as a cultural icon. The review also illustrates that new Afrocentric and decolonial approaches attempt to redress historical imbalance by bringing indigenous knowledge systems and authentic self-representation to the fore. Together, these texts constitute the theoretical and contextual background to this research's semiotic analysis of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023), and the ways in which the visual media are still negotiating the meaning and legacy of Shaka in post-apartheid South Africa.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of the construction and re-construction of the myth of Shaka in the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) texts. The framework integrates strands of thought related to the concepts of representation, articulation and semiotics. These concepts form the basis of the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of how the televisual texts have been constructed, articulated, rearticulated and over two historical periods. The theories also form the basis of understanding the construction of the Shaka image as man and myth, from a colonial icon to the Afro-centric icon.

Representation theory (Hall, 1980/2020) and the concept of articulation (Hall, 2003/2021) underpin this study; complemented by Barthes' semiotic theory, especially his concept of myth (Barthes, 1977), which will be explicitly defined and applied to explore how cultural myths are encoded in visual texts. The concepts of representation (1997) and articulation (1996, 2021) developed by Stuart Hall form the foundation for the concepts used in this analysis. Roland Barthes's semiotic theory (1972, 1977), mainly his essay "The Black Soldier: The Making of a Mythological Celebrity", expands this framework by indicating how everyday cultural signs—such as the Black body in uniform—become mythological constructs that provide ideological purposes. Barthes' (1977) semiotic theory explains how signs in culture create meaning through different levels: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (associated cultural and emotional meaning), and myth (a deeper cultural system of belief that makes signs appear natural and timeless). Key concepts include signs, signifiers, and signifieds, building on Saussure's (1983) work, but Barthes expanded semiotics to analyse cultural and ideological messages in mass media, showing that what appears "natural" is often historically and culturally constructed. The central ideas of representation and myth will be augmented by additional insights from African and postcolonial theorists including Mbembe (2001, 2022), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2021), Mudimbe (1988), Bhabha (1994), and Tomaselli (1999, 2000, 2012).

As a supporting theoretical influence, this study is also informed by African and postcolonial scholars such as Mbembe (2001, 2022), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2021), Mudimbe (1988), Bhabha (1994), who theorise ideas and approaches to reclaim African subjectivity from misrepresentation under colonialism in more specifically Afrocentric and decolonial ways. Hall's representation theory provides a framework for understanding how power operates in postcolonial societies by showing that representations are not neutral but are socially constructed and used to create meaning, often through binary oppositions. This theory highlights how dominant powers construct images of marginalised groups, which can lead to stereotyping and a distorted self-image for the colonised. Postcolonial theory uses Hall's ideas to analyse how these representations become embedded in institutions and challenge existing power dynamics by reclaiming and reinterpreting these images.

Hall's theory of articulation is central to postcolonial theory because it explains how cultural, political, and social elements become connected and organised, resisting the idea of any single underlying cause or essential truth, which directly applies to analysing the complex and fragmented experiences of colonialism and its aftermath. For postcolonial studies, articulation provides a framework to understand how identities are formed and transformed through historical encounters.

The combination of these theoretical influences assists in the exploration of how posters and pilot episodes operate as cultural texts. These texts do not merely represent Shaka; they dynamically inscribe symbolic meaning that represents and constitutes political and cultural narratives. The integration of these theoretical ideas enables a rich interpretation of the way visual media reproduces and reworks myths of Shaka Zulu over the course of time. The next section therefore turns to a discussion of representation as a site of power, examining how visual and media representations function as arenas where historical meaning, ideology, and authority are negotiated.

Representation as an Unfixed Site of Meaning and Power

Hall (1997: 28–30) argues that representation is not a mirror of reality but a cultural practice through which meaning is produced "through language" and other signifying systems. A leading cultural theorist and one of the principal architects of Cultural Studies, Hall developed a framework that conceptualises media and cultural texts as sites where meaning, ideology, and power are constructed and contested (Hall, 1997). Within this perspective, representation is understood as an active process of signification rather than the simple reflection of reality. Meaning is produced through shared cultural codes that enable people to interpret signs and symbols, making representation central to the construction of identity, history, and social knowledge. Hall's approach is therefore fundamental to the present study because it provides the theoretical basis for examining how promotional posters and television narratives construct particular understandings of Shaka Zulu rather than merely depicting a historical figure.

These ideas travelled to Africa and South Africa, where scholars adapted them to analyse local media contexts and postcolonial identity formations. Tomaselli (2003b) describes *Shaka Zulu* (1986) as a "visual history" that racialised and mythologised Shaka to satisfy colonial discourses, highlighting the ways representation mediates historical memory. Rather than presenting a stable or unified image, Wright (2006) argues that Shaka Zulu's historical figure has been repeatedly reconstituted for different audiences and political moments, with colonial, nationalist, and heritage discourses producing competing and often contradictory representations. In this sense, Shaka's image circulates between contrasting interpretive frameworks that reflect shifting ideological investments in African sovereignty, power, and history. Nuttall and Michael (2000: 27) argue that post-apartheid media functions as a space of memory work, "attempting to recover silenced histories". Together, these perspectives situate Shaka not merely as a historical figure but as a symbolic terrain where representation becomes a site of ideological struggle, illustrating the ongoing negotiation of African identity, visual culture, and politics

of memory in South African media. Representation, as conceptualised by Cultural Studies scholars, is not a neutral reflection of reality but a process through which meaning is produced, circulated, and contested (Hall, 1997: 15).

Meaning is thus constructed, not found, through systems of signification that encode specific ideological worldviews. Chris Barker (2004) shows that representation starts to become the point at which meaning is created and contested and resisted. Hall (1997: 218) suggests that “there is no one true meaning. Meaning ‘floats’. It cannot be finally fixed”.

Barker (2004: 327-330) notes that in Hall’s conceptualisation representation is a “social process through which meanings are continuously organised and contested”. Language is central to this social process as “representation is the production of meaning through language...there is no simple relationship of reflection, imitation or one-to-one correspondence between language and the real world. Meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems which, for convenience, we call ‘languages’” (Hall 2013: 47). This study therefore focuses on the ‘language’ of the televisual image including iconography and symbols, which are all interpreted according to the viewers’ own frameworks of knowledge that can include cultural norms, beliefs, location etc. Therefore media representations, do not represent things as they are but is part of a process where cultural meanings become constructed, naturalised, and even contested. Representation is not one-way transmission of meaning but rather a process of interaction by which signs can be decoded in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional terms.

Hall (1997) emphasises that representation is not neutral; rather, it is embedded within power relations and organised through discursive practices in which meanings are produced, circulated, and contested within culture. The process of Othering is connected to power relations. Hall’s concept of the “spectacle of the Other” further frames the ways in which visual representations of culturally or racially defined “Others” are constructed to provoke fascination, fear, or ideological anxiety. In this study, this lens will guide the exploration of how the 1986 *Shaka Zulu* posters may encode colonial anxieties and exoticised portrayals of Shaka, while the 2023 *Shaka iLembe* posters may potentially rearticulate these visual codes to emphasise cultural pride, leadership, and ancestral knowledge. Barthes’ (1972) myth theory complements this perspective by showing how cultural signs are naturalised into myths that appear self-evident but are ideologically loaded, revealing the underlying power structures that shape representation. This study will thus examine how visual signs—such as costume, posture, weapons, and landscape—are encoded with ideological meanings that may be naturalised or contested.

Historical consciousness complements this perspective by providing a framework for understanding how representations of Shaka mediate the past, present, and future. Jorn Rüsen (2005) defines historical consciousness as “an operation of human intellection rendering present actuality intelligible while fashioning its future perspectives,” while Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) adds that it requires “a full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opinions.” Pierre Nora’s *lieux*

de mémoire captures the role of media as sites where memory crystallises: “sites where memory crystallises and secretes itself” Pierre Nora (1989: 12), and Alieda Assmann (2011) notes that cultural memory allows societies to sustain knowledge of the past across generations. In this way, historical consciousness situates Shaka not merely as a historical figure but as a symbolic terrain where competing narratives, ideological struggles, and memory work converge, reinforcing the centrality of representation in shaping postcolonial African identity.

Hall’s (2013) constructive approach to explaining how representation works is relevant to this study as it guides the discussion on how images are constructed according to multiple factors, with political ideology playing an important role. His contribution to representation theory is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a clear framework for understanding how images do not simply reflect reality but are actively constructed within specific cultural and ideological contexts. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall (2013) outlines three approaches to representation: the reflective approach, which assumes meaning lies in the object itself; the intentional approach, which locates meaning in the author’s or producer’s intention; and the constructivist approach, which he ultimately argues for. The constructivist approach understands meaning as produced through shared cultural codes, language, and signifying practices rather than residing naturally in things or being fixed by authorial intent (Hall, 2013). From this perspective, images are shaped by historically situated discourses, institutional contexts, and relations of power, making representation a site where meaning is negotiated rather than given.

Hall’s constructivist approach aligns closely with the concerns of cultural studies, particularly its emphasis on culture as a terrain of struggle over meaning. As Barker (2004) explains, cultural studies is concerned with how meanings are produced, circulated, and contested within everyday practices, especially through media and popular culture. Representation, within this tradition, is understood as a political process because it plays a central role in shaping how social groups, histories, and identities are understood. Images are therefore constructed through multiple intersecting factors—such as ideology, history, and power—rather than through neutral depiction. This makes the constructivist approach especially appropriate for analysing representations of historical figures like Shaka Zulu, whose image has been repeatedly shaped by shifting political and cultural agendas.

Importantly, Hall’s constructivist understanding of representation also provides a conceptual bridge to the analysis of myth. Because meanings are constructed rather than fixed, certain representations can become stabilised and naturalised over time, appearing as common sense or historical truth. This process resonates with Barthes’ argument that myth functions by transforming culturally produced meanings into taken-for-granted realities (Barthes, 1972). Following on from the idea of constructed representations, Roland Barthes’ (1972/1977) theory of myth and myth-making will be discussed below.

The Construction of Cultural Myth and Semiotics

Barthes' (1972, 1977) theory of semiotics provides the analytical tools for examining how signs and symbols construct cultural myth. A leading French semiotician and cultural theorist, Barthes extended Saussurean semiotics by demonstrating that systems of signification operate not only through language but also through everyday cultural forms such as photographs, advertisements, film, and popular media (Barthes, 1972). In *Mythologies* (1972), he argues that modern myths function by naturalising historically and politically constructed meanings, presenting them as self-evident or common-sense truths rather than as products of particular social and ideological conditions. Consequently, myth transforms history into nature, making ideological constructions appear inevitable and unquestionable (Barthes, 1972). This understanding is central to the present study because it provides a framework for analysing how the promotional posters and pilot episodes of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) construct, sustain, and re-articulate cultural myths surrounding Shaka Zulu.

In cultural and semiotic theory, myth refers to a system through which societies naturalise particular meanings, values, and ideologies, making them appear timeless and common-sense rather than historically produced. Barthes (1972: 109-110) defines myth as a second-order semiological system, arguing that “myth is a type of speech” and that it works by turning history into nature, so that “what the world supplies to myth is a historical reality, defined by the way in which men have produced or used it”. Myth, therefore, does not lie in objects themselves but in how meanings are attached to them. Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955: 443) explains myth as a structure that helps societies resolve contradictions, stating that “the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction”. From this view, myth organises social anxieties into narrative form. Within media and cultural studies, John Fiske (1987: 138) stresses myth's ideological function, noting that myths are “stories that a culture tells itself to explain, justify, or naturalise its values and beliefs”. In representation, myth thus stabilises dominant meanings while concealing their political and historical origins.

Semiotics serves as the basis for analysis to explain the process of signification and the construction of meaning, including myth. Saussure (1983) has described the sign as consisting of the signifier (form) and the signified (concept). This relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. For example: “it is the cultural convention, not nature that links word to thing” (Saussure, 1983). This view has been pushed further by Barthes (1972, 1977), when he declares signs at the connotational level become ‘myths’, as ideology naturalised. In *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes states: “myth is a type of speech chosen by history; it is a system of communication, a message”. Within this study, myth is understood as the process through which Shaka is transformed from a historically situated leader into a symbolic figure that appears natural, timeless, and ideologically coherent. Drawing on Barthes' notion of myth as a second-order semiological system, Shaka's image functions to “transform history into nature” (Barthes, 1972: 129), concealing the political and colonial conditions under which particular representations were produced. Across *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023), visual and narrative signs—costume, bodily scale, weaponry, lighting, and speech—rework Shaka as either tyrant,

heroic nation-builder, or cultural redeemer, illustrating Fiske's argument that myths are "stories that a culture tells itself to explain, justify or naturalise its values and beliefs" (Fiske 1987: 138). In this way, Shaka operates as a mythic sign through which competing ideologies of power, African identity, and historical memory are articulated, contested, and reconfigured over time.

Barthes' essay "The Black Soldier: The Making of a Mythological Celebrity" (1957/1972) is instructive in this study's analysis. In an analysis of the photograph of the black soldier saluting the French flag, Barthes demonstrates the construction of the myth of the "faithful colonial subjects"—the black man appears only for the purposes of the construction of the myth of the power of the coloniser. "The Black soldier salutes the tricolor; his salute is the salute of France herself" (Barthes, 1972). In a similar way, the body of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) represents the African body, possibly as the signifier of the power of the coloniser. On the other hand, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) may use the same body as the signifier of sovereignty and the continuity of the spirit.

Another dimension to this semiotic strategy comes from Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-1958). Peirce's triadic model of signification provides a useful conceptual tool for examining how meaning may be produced through visual representation. Peirce understands the sign as a relational process involving three interconnected components: the representamen, which refers to the material or perceptible form of the sign; the object, which is that to which the sign refers; and the interpretant, which denotes the meaning generated in the mind of the interpreter (Peirce 1931–1958). Meaning, within this framework, is not inherent in the sign itself but emerges through interpretation, shaped by cultural knowledge, historical context, and ideological positioning. Applied to this study, Peirce's model enables an exploration of how visual elements in the posters—such as imagery, symbols, and compositional choices—may function as representamina that refer to particular constructions of Shaka Zulu, while allowing for multiple interpretants to arise across different historical periods and audiences.

Peirce's triadic model of signification offers a productive semiotic framework for exploring how meaning may be constructed and contested in the visual representations of Shaka Zulu across different historical periods. Peirce conceptualises the sign as a relational process involving the representamen (the perceptible sign form), the object (that which the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning produced in the mind of the interpreter) (Peirce, 1931–1958: 2.228; 2.274). Importantly, meaning is not fixed within the sign itself but emerges through interpretation, shaped by cultural knowledge, historical context, and ideological positioning.

Guided by this model, the study asks the following analytical questions in relation to the posters of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023): What visual elements function as representamina—such as costume, weapons, posture, facial expression, colour, and landscape—and how are these elements organised within the image? What objects do these signs appear to refer to, for example, ideas of kingship, violence, spirituality, ancestry, or nationhood? Finally, what interpretants may be produced for

viewers situated within apartheid and post-apartheid South African contexts, and how might these interpretations differ across time?

By foregrounding the interpretant, Peirce's model allows the analysis to examine how similar visual signs may generate different meanings depending on the ideological and historical conditions under which they are encountered. This is particularly useful for exploring whether the iconography in the posters sustains dominant myths associated with colonial representations of African leadership or opens space for alternative interpretations aligned with post-apartheid cultural reclamation. In this way, Peirce's triadic approach supports a comparative investigation into how meaning-making processes surrounding Shaka Zulu may evolve, without presuming fixed or singular readings of the visual texts.

Bringing together Peirce's triadic model of signification, Hall's theory of representation and articulation (to be discussed below), and Barthes' concept of myth enables this study to examine how meanings associated with Shaka Zulu may be produced, stabilised, or contested across historical periods. Peirce's model foregrounds the interpretant as the site where meaning is generated, allowing the analysis to ask how particular visual signs in the posters—such as regalia, weaponry, bodily stance, or landscape—might give rise to different interpretations depending on viewers' cultural and historical positioning (Peirce, 1931–1958, 2.228; 2.274). Hall's theory extends this insight by situating interpretation within relations of power, emphasising that representational meanings are articulated within specific discursive and ideological contexts and are therefore subject to contestation over time (Hall, 2013). Barthes' theory of myth further enables the study to explore how certain interpretants may become naturalised, functioning as second-order sign systems that present historically contingent meanings—such as notions of savagery, heroism, or nationhood—as self-evident or timeless (Barthes, 1972). Taken together, these frameworks allow the research to investigate how the interpretive meanings generated by the posters of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) may reflect shifting ideological conditions, without assuming either continuity or rupture in advance. Instead, the study treats the posters as sites where meanings are articulated, disarticulated, and potentially rearticulated, revealing how cultural myths surrounding Shaka Zulu are negotiated within changing political and historical contexts.

In contrast to the binary model of signification proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), which conceptualises the sign as a fixed relationship between signifier and signified within a closed linguistic system (Saussure, 1983), Peirce's semiotic framework foregrounds interpretation as a dynamic process. For Peirce, meaning does not reside in the sign itself but emerges through semiosis, whereby a sign “creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign” (Peirce, 1931–1958, 2.228). Signification is therefore understood as ongoing and contingent, with meaning continually deferred through successive interpretants rather than stabilised within a fixed structure. This distinction is particularly useful for examining how visual signs may generate different meanings across historical contexts, allowing the study to explore shifts in interpretation without presuming stable or universal readings.

The distinction between Saussure's structural model of signification and Peirce's processual approach provides an important foundation for understanding how meanings may shift across historical contexts. Saussure conceptualises the sign as a relatively stable binary relation between signifier and signified within a synchronic linguistic system (Saussure, 1983), whereas Peirce reframes signification as an ongoing process of semiosis in which meaning emerges through interpretation (Peirce, 1931–1958: 2.228; 4.127). This emphasis on interpretation is particularly significant when extended through Hall's theory of representation, which situates meaning-making within relations of power and discourse. Hall (2013) argues that representational meanings are not fixed but articulated within specific historical and ideological contexts, making them subject to contestation and rearticulation over time. Roland Barthes' concept of myth further develops this path by demonstrating how particular interpretations can become naturalised as second-order sign systems, presenting historically produced meanings as universal or self-evident (Barthes, 1972). Taken together, these theoretical perspectives allow the study to examine how the visual signs used to represent Shaka Zulu in different periods may generate divergent interpretants, some of which may harden into dominant myths while others remain open to reinterpretation. Rather than assuming continuity or rupture in advance, the framework positions representation as a dynamic process through which meanings are structured, interpreted, and potentially transformed across apartheid and post-apartheid contexts. These theories' notions serve to highlight an approach to signification in understanding how the same object—the spear, the shield, or Shaka's body—can represent aggression in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and pride in *Shaka iLembe* (2023).

Gunter Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen's (2006) visual semiotics provides a “grammar of visual design” wherein the composition of images, gaze, colour, and spatial organisation are deemed cultural syntax. According to Giorgia Aiello (2006) and Elizabeth Refaie (2015), the mentioned aspects have strong ideological significance in form and function as the framework for viewers' interpretation of images even before the introduction of the narrative. It is clear to see that the art of images act as an agent in representing reality. Alfred Gell (1998) goes deeper as she contends the images are “social agents” in the generation of meaning whereby collective consciousness can be determined through repetition. In *Art and Agency* (1998), Gell argues that artworks function as “social agents” because they mediate social relations and produce effects in the world. For Gell, images do not just represent ideas; they act upon viewers, shaping belief, behaviour, and social meaning. “Art objects are not passive but are active in social relations; they are agents.” (Gell, 1998: 6) shows that his is very useful for poster analysis, because it frames posters as doing cultural work, not merely depicting history. Under the aforementioned aspects of visual semiotics, the recurring imagery of spears, shields, and regalia in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) could likely be identified as the ideological rearticulation of myth.

A significant portion of Barthes' analysis in *Mythologies* is drawn from mass-mediated and commercial texts, including advertisements, magazine images, and popular photography. He was particularly interested in how advertising images use visual rhetoric to persuade viewers while concealing their ideological work. This concern is further developed in his essay “*Rhetoric of the Image*” (1977), where

Barthes analyses a food advertisement to demonstrate how images communicate meaning through layers of denotation and connotation. He argues that images are never neutral; rather, they are structured by cultural codes that guide interpretation and anchor preferred meanings (Barthes, 1977).

This insight provides a productive link to the analysis of film and television posters, which function in many ways as film advertisements. Like commercial advertising, posters are designed to condense complex narratives, characters, and values into a single visual composition, mobilising symbolic imagery to attract audiences and shape expectations. From a Barthesian perspective, posters can therefore be examined as myth-making texts that do not merely promote media products but also circulate broader cultural narratives about history, identity, power, and belonging. Within this study, Barthes' theory enables an exploration of how the visual signs used to represent Shaka Zulu may participate in the construction, reinforcement, or reworking of cultural myths across apartheid and post-apartheid contexts, without presuming stable or singular meanings in advance.

Central to Barthes' approach is the distinction between denotation and connotation, which he uses to explain how signs operate at multiple levels of meaning. Denotation refers to the most immediate, literal, or descriptive level of meaning—the “what we see” of a sign. In visual terms, denotation involves identifying the observable elements of an image, such as a figure, an object, a gesture, or a setting, without attaching evaluative or cultural judgments. Barthes treats denotation not as a purely objective level of meaning but as a necessary starting point that appears neutral precisely because it is widely shared and culturally familiar (Barthes, 1977).

Connotation, by contrast, refers to the secondary meanings that accrue to a sign through cultural knowledge, social values, and ideological frameworks. At this level, signs begin to signify more than what is literally depicted. For Barthes (1977), connotation works through association: visual elements draw on shared cultural codes—such as ideas about race, gender, authority, violence, or spirituality—that guide interpretation. These meanings are not inherent in the image itself but are activated through culturally learned ways of seeing (Barthes, 1977). Importantly, connotation operates subtly; it often appears natural or intuitive because the cultural codes it draws upon are already familiar to the viewer.

Barthes' key intervention is to show how myth emerges from the naturalisation of connotation. Myth, in his formulation, is a second-order semiological system, meaning that a sign that already carries denotative and connotative meanings becomes the signifier for a broader ideological concept (Barthes, 1972). In this process, the historical and political origins of the connotation are stripped away, allowing the meaning to circulate as “common sense”. As Barthes explains, myth transforms culturally specific interpretations into seemingly universal truths, making ideology appear natural rather than constructed (Barthes, 1972).

Crucially, myth does not suppress meaning; rather, it reorganises it. The original sign is not erased but is emptied of its complexity and refilled with a simplified ideological message. This is why Barthes

insists that myth is most powerful when it appears innocent or obvious. The effectiveness of myth lies in its ability to conceal its own workings, presenting historically contingent meanings as timeless and unquestionable (Barthes, 1972).

Within this study, Barthes' semiotic theory provides a framework for examining how visual representations—such as television series posters—may operate across these layered levels of meaning. By distinguishing between denotation, connotation, and myth, the analysis can explore how images potentially move from description, to cultural association, to ideological naturalisation. This approach does not assume that meanings are fixed or uniformly received but instead treats visual texts as sites where cultural meanings are encoded, circulated, and potentially contested across different historical contexts.

Myth and the Spectacle of the Other

Returning, once more to the connection with Hall's "spectacle of the Other". Barthes' theory of myth and Hall's concept of the "spectacle of the Other" can be productively read together to explore how visual representations participate in the construction and contestation of meaning across time. While Barthes (1972) is concerned with how cultural signs are transformed into myths that naturalise dominant ideological meanings, Hall (2013) extends this insight by showing how such meanings are embedded within relations of power, particularly in representations of racial and cultural difference. For Hall, representations of the "Other" are rarely innocent; they are structured through repeated visual and narrative conventions that fix difference, render it spectacular, and position it as an object of fascination, fear, or control (Hall, 2013: 223–225).

From this perspective, myth can be understood as one of the mechanisms through which the spectacle of the Other operates. Barthes' argument that myth "empties" signs of their historical specificity and presents ideology as nature (Barthes 1972) helps explain how visual representations may obscure the political conditions under which they are produced. Hall similarly argues that stereotypes work to reduce and fix meaning, producing representations that appear timeless while serving contemporary power interests (Hall, 2013: 258). When applied together, these theories allow the study to ask how visual signs in media posters—such as bodily display, weaponry, costume, and landscape—may function both mythically and spectacularly, shaping how figures like Shaka Zulu are made legible to particular audiences.

Importantly, this combined framework does not assume that representations operate uniformly across historical periods. Instead, it enables an investigation into how myths may be sustained, challenged, or rearticulated as ideological conditions change. In the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, the framework allows the research to explore whether visual representations of Shaka Zulu reproduce inherited regimes of otherness or open space for alternative articulations grounded in cultural recovery, ancestry, and self-representation. By treating posters as sites where myth and

spectacle intersect, the study positions visual media as a key arena in which struggles over historical meaning, identity, and power are negotiated rather than resolved.

The discussion now moves to articulation and historical context, foregrounding how meanings are assembled, stabilised, and reworked within specific socio-political conditions.

Articulation as Connection and Historical Context

This chapter examines how representations are shaped by historical moments, allowing cultural myths to be articulated and rearticulated over time rather than understood as fixed or universal. Hall's (2013: 223-225) articulation theory further suggests that ideological meanings are not fixed, but are constructed through the linking of various social, historical, and visual elements. Meanings are, therefore, not fixed but emerge from the way signs are combined, enabling the production of new ideological configurations over time.

Hall explains the word "articulation" as "the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions" (Hall, 1996). According to John Clarke (2015), the connections mentioned above are contingent and political rather than fixed. Kevin DeLuca (1999) further explains the role of articulation as a "rhetoric-discursive practice" since it provides the ability to analyse the re-assembly or dis-assembly of ideology through cultural discourse that involves linking and re-linking social and ideological elements. DeLuca asserts that articulation functions as a "discursive grounding for rhetorical practice," providing a conceptual framework for examining how social and ideological elements may be assembled and reassembled within discourse, thereby enabling the analysis of how dominant meanings can be contested and re-configured over time (DeLuca, 1999: 334–348).

In the context of *Shaka Zulu* (1986), previous scholarship suggests that the series was produced within a historical moment shaped by apartheid anxieties and Cold War geopolitics, where African sovereignty was often framed through discourses of threat, instability, and disorder. Macqueen's (2022) notion of the "geopolitics of cinematic Africa" is useful here, as it highlights how African histories and leadership figures were frequently positioned within global narratives that associated Black power with danger and rebellion. From this perspective, the series can be approached as a cultural text that may have articulated Shaka's authority in ways that resonated with dominant fears surrounding Black masculinity, resistance, and political autonomy, rather than simply as a neutral retelling of history.

By contrast, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) emerges within a post-apartheid and increasingly decolonial intellectual climate. Scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) describe this moment as characterised by an "epistemic break," understood as a movement away from colonial systems of knowledge toward indigenous epistemologies and African-centred ways of understanding history. This conceptual framework provides a lens through which the newer series can be examined, particularly in relation to how it might foreground ancestry, spirituality, and communal values in its representation of leadership.

Rather than presuming that *Shaka iLembe* necessarily achieves a decolonial re-articulation, this study treats it as a site where such shifts in meaning are possible and open to empirical investigation.

In line with Hall's (1996) theory of articulation, representation is understood as a process through which meanings are temporarily "sutured together" under specific historical conditions and can later be "re-sutured" differently as those conditions change. This study therefore does not assume in advance that one series is ideologically closed and the other ideologically emancipatory. Instead, it examines how each production enunciates Shaka within its own cultural moment, and whether the systems of meaning that organise his image reflect continuity, rupture, or reconfiguration in relation to colonial, apartheid, and decolonial frameworks. Through this approach, the analysis remains open to discovering how Shaka's representation is shaped, contested, and possibly transformed across different historical and ideological contexts.

Hall's (1996, 2021) articulation theory builds on semiotics to illustrate how media texts aggregates discrete components—history, culture, and ideology—into particular configurations of meaning. Articulation is not permanent but, as temporary aggregation of ideas, subject to remaking in the face of altered, as it is a form of connection that brings together different elements—such as ideas, images, and discourses—into a temporary unity, while emphasising that these linkages are never necessary, natural, or permanent (Hall, 1986:54). Instead, articulation is contingent and historically specific, meaning that the same representational elements can be reorganised and re-signified under different social and ideological conditions. This understanding moves representation away from a model of fixed meaning and towards a view of representation as a site of ongoing ideological work. Representations are not simply collections of signs but are articulated within particular discourses that link images to meanings, values, and power relations. When contexts change—politically, culturally, or historically—these articulations can be loosened, disrupted, or reconfigured, allowing new meanings to emerge.

DeLuca (1999) extends Hall's argument by foregrounding articulation as a critical practice of representation, particularly within visual culture. He argues that images do not carry meaning autonomously but acquire force through the discursive chains in which they are articulated. From this perspective, visual representations function rhetorically: they connect symbols, narratives, and affects in ways that stabilise certain interpretations while marginalising others. However, because these articulations are contingent, they remain open to challenge and rearticulation when alternative discourses intervene (DeLuca, 1999). This insight is particularly useful for analysing visual media such as posters, which rely on condensed imagery to articulate complex ideological positions.

Clarke (2015) further develops the relevance of articulation for cultural analysis by emphasising its role in explaining how meanings persist or transform over time. He argues that articulation provides a way of understanding continuity and change without resorting to determinism. Rather than assuming that representations simply reflect social change, articulation allows researchers to examine how older meanings may be partially retained, selectively reworked, or strategically reconnected to new

ideological frameworks (Clarke, 2015). This approach is especially valuable for analysing historical figures whose meanings are repeatedly reassembled across different periods.

When linked to Barthes' theory of myth, articulation helps explain how myths endure while also being adaptable. Barthes (1972) argues that myth operates by naturalising historically specific meanings, presenting them as timeless and self-evident. Hall's articulation theory complements this by showing that myths are not static ideological impositions but are sustained through ongoing representational work. Myths persist not because they are fixed, but because they are continually rearticulated in ways that align with prevailing cultural discourses. When those discourses shift, myths may be destabilised, contested, or reformulated rather than simply replaced.

Within this study, articulation, therefore, functions as a conceptual bridge between representation and myth. It enables an exploration of how visual representations of Shaka Zulu may articulate particular meanings at specific historical moments, while remaining open to rearticulation as ideological conditions change between the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Rather than treating myth as a static narrative, the framework allows myth to be examined as a dynamic outcome of representational practices that are continuously made, unmade, and remade in response to shifting contexts.

The theory of articulation is thus crucial to understanding the process by which the same historical subject bears totally different ideological meanings at various points in time. Articulation theory emphasises the contingency of cultural myths and their location within socio-political contexts. Articulation theory, as developed within Stuart Hall's cultural studies tradition, foregrounds contingency as a defining condition of meaning-making, particularly in relation to representation and cultural myth. Rather than assuming that meanings, identities, or myths are fixed or essential, Hall conceptualises articulation as a temporary linkage between social practices, discourses, and representational forms that emerge under specific historical conditions (Hall, 1986). Lauren Dyll and Keyan Tomaselli (2024) draw directly on this formulation, emphasising that cultural studies is concerned with how meaning is negotiated within power-laden contexts rather than resolved into stable outcomes. They explicitly align their argument with Hall's understanding of contingency, which "requires us to think the contingent, non-necessary connections between and among different social practices and social groups" (Hall, 2016: 122, cited in Dyll and Tomaselli, 2024: 12). From this perspective, representation becomes a dynamic site where meanings are provisionally organised, rather than a mechanism that transparently reflects reality.

Importantly, contingency also challenges the expectation of closure in cultural analysis, in other words interpretive or ideological closure. There is no point at which one arrives at a final or settled meaning that provides the "solace of closure" (Hall and Grossberg, 2019) as "around us history is constantly breaking in unpredictable ways" (Hall, 1991: 43). When applied to representation and myth, this understanding suggests that cultural myths persist not because they are timeless, but because they are repeatedly rearticulated in relation to shifting socio-political contexts. Within this study, articulation

theory therefore provides a conceptual lens for exploring how representations of Shaka Zulu in television series and posters may participate in the contingent articulation and rearticulation of cultural myth across apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, without presuming either ideological continuity or rupture in advance.

This understanding of articulation and contingency is central to how the study approaches its research questions. Rather than treating the iconography of the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) posters as carriers of fixed meanings, the framework allows the analysis to explore how visual elements may be articulated differently across historical periods. Signs such as weaponry, bodily posture, costume, facial expression, landscape, and the use of language can be examined as representational elements whose meanings are contingent upon the socio-political conditions in which they are produced and circulated. By foregrounding contingency, this theoretical framework positions the posters as sites of ideological negotiation rather than definitive statements of meaning. It allows the study to trace how representations participate in the articulation and rearticulation of cultural myth over time, while remaining attentive to the historical unpredictability and political struggle that shape meaning-making in South African visual culture. By examining the iconography, colour schemes, composition, and other semiotic features in the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) posters, the study will investigate how these elements might reflect shifting ideological perspectives across the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. The framework allows for a comparative and exploratory approach, focusing on the contestation of meanings and the potential rearticulation of Shaka's cultural myth in response to evolving historical, political, and social contexts. This theoretical lens thus guides the analysis of how symbols function not only as representations of a historical figure but also as sites where competing cultural narratives and ideologies may be negotiated over time.

In relation to the first research question, articulation theory supports an exploration of how specific signs and symbols (iconography) are linked together within the posters to construct particular narratives about Shaka Zulu. Rather than treating meaning as fixed, this approach recognises that visual elements such as posture, costume, weapons, colour, and spatial composition are articulated into narrative structures that communicate power, authority, leadership, and identity, without assuming that these narratives are necessarily coherent, stable, or universally shared.

With regard to the second research question, the framework enables a comparative examination of whether and how similar iconographic elements are rearticulated across apartheid and post-apartheid contexts. This allows the study to investigate whether visual strategies used in the posters reflect shifts in ideological priorities, cultural values, and representational logics between *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023), and to identify points of continuity, rupture, or tension in the representation of Shaka Zulu over time.

Finally, in addressing the third research question, the concept of contingency provides a means of analysing how cultural myths surrounding Shaka Zulu are sustained, contested, or reformulated

through visual representation. Myth is approached not as a completed ideological product, but as an ongoing process that is continuously reworked in response to changing cultural and political conditions. This makes it possible to examine how cultural and ideological shifts, or their absence, contribute to the continued articulation or re-articulation of Shaka Zulu as a mythic figure within a post-apartheid context.

The discussion now turns to postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, which provide critical tools for interrogating how representation, myth, and articulation are shaped by histories of colonial power.

Postcolonial and Decolonial Perspectives

Read through a postcolonial semiotic lens, *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) illustrate how the same symbolic repertoire can be ideologically re-encoded across historical moments. *Shaka Zulu* emerged from an apartheid-era broadcasting system shaped by Cold War geopolitics, and its posters and pilot episode mobilise recurring signs—centralised spears and shields, monumental posture, and ritualised violence—that elevate Shaka while fixing him within a militarised and exceptionalised frame (Tomaselli, 2021: 91–107; Macqueen, 2022: 265–286). This visual strategy aligns with what Said famously describes as Orientalism, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1978: 3), in which African power is made legible through spectacle, excess, and despotism. At the level of television semiotics, these patterned signs perform what Fiske and Hartley identify in television’s mythic role as a “cultural bard” that naturalises ideology through repetition (Fiske and Hartley, 2003). By contrast, *Shaka iLembe* reworks many of the same signs—spear, shield, beadwork, and ritual posture—within a post-apartheid media context, shifting emphasis from spectacle to lineage, interiority, and collective belonging. This re-articulation exemplifies what Bhabha terms the “in-between” space of postcolonial hybridity, where inherited colonial forms are neither simply rejected nor reproduced but re-signified (Bhabha, 1994). Semiotic comparison of the posters and pilot episodes thus reveals not a rupture in visual symbolism, but a transformation in syntagmatic organisation: violence is contextualised, authority is grounded in kinship and ritual legitimacy, and Shaka’s body is framed as culturally embedded rather than mythically excessive, signalling a reclaiming of representational agency previously constrained by apartheid-era and Cold War ideological economies. The 2023 drama, *Shaka iLembe*, was produced in democratic South Africa, which is struggling to navigate the effects of colonialism and apartheid, while building a new South African identity.

While semiotic analysis and theories of representation offer powerful tools for examining how meaning is constructed through images and discourse, they also carry important epistemological limitations. Many foundational semiotic frameworks were developed within European intellectual traditions and are grounded in Western philosophical assumptions about language, subjectivity, and meaning-making (Saussure, 1983; Barthes, 1972). As a result, these theories may implicitly universalise Western modes of interpretation, treating them as culturally neutral or globally applicable. This risks overlooking how meaning is produced through alternative epistemologies, particularly in societies shaped by oral traditions, spirituality, relational worldviews, and collective memory. In postcolonial contexts, such

universalising tendencies can obscure the ways in which representation has historically functioned as a tool of colonial power, producing knowledge *about* colonised subjects rather than from within their cultural frameworks (Said, 1978).

Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship provides an important framework for understanding how representations for Africa have been shaped by enduring relations of power. Mbembe (2001) argues that colonial domination extended beyond political control to shape African historical consciousness, subjectivity, and ways in which Africa has been imagined within dominant systems of knowledge. Complementing this perspective, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) contends that coloniality persists beyond the formal end of colonialism through enduring structures of power, knowledge, and being that continue to privilege Eurocentric epistemologies. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate how Western representational systems have historically contributed to the production and maintenance of hierarchical understandings of Africa and its histories. Even critical applications of semiotics may risk reproducing epistemic hierarchies if Western theory is positioned as the primary lens through which African cultural texts are interpreted. This concern has led decolonial thinkers to call for approaches that foreground historical power relations, colonial violence, and the suppression of indigenous ways of knowing (Fanon, 1963; wa Thiong'o, 1986). Within this study, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives are therefore introduced not to discard semiotics or representation theory, but to critically situate them. These perspectives provide a necessary corrective that ensures the analysis remains attentive to the prejudicial conditions under which representations of figures such as Shaka Zulu were historically produced, and to the ongoing struggle for epistemic justice in post-apartheid South Africa.

Postcolonial and decolonial perspectives are particularly important for analysing representations of Shaka Zulu, given the extent to which African historical figures have been mediated through colonial systems of knowledge and representation. Said's (1978) foundational critique of Western knowledge production demonstrates that colonial discourse did not simply misrepresent the colonised world but actively produced it through regimes of representation. As Said argues, colonial knowledge functions by "making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (Said 1978: 3). Within such frameworks, African leaders were often rendered intelligible to Western audiences through reductive tropes of savagery, despotism, or exotic spectacle, displacing indigenous understandings of leadership, spirituality, and social organisation.

Decolonial scholars extend this critique by emphasising the persistence of coloniality beyond the formal end of colonial rule. Among the most influential is Ndlovu-Gatsheni, a leading decolonial theorist whose work on coloniality and epistemic decolonisation has significantly shaped contemporary African scholarship (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; 2018). *Through Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa* (2013) and *Epistemic Freedom in Africa* (2018), he argues for an epistemic break from Eurocentric knowledge systems and advocates the recovery, validation, and centring of African ways of knowing, being, and imagining the world. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013: 11) argues that "coloniality is different from colonialism because it outlives it," highlighting how colonial structures of power and knowledge continue to shape

postcolonial societies long after formal colonial rule has ended. Similarly, Mignolo (2007) conceptualises coloniality as the enduring logic of power, knowledge, and subjectivity that survives colonialism and continues to organise representation through Eurocentric hierarchies. From this perspective, representations of Shaka Zulu in popular media can be understood as sites where colonial epistemologies are reproduced, negotiated, or contested. This is especially relevant to visual media such as television series and promotional posters, which condense complex historical narratives into symbolic imagery that circulates widely and contributes to the construction of cultural memory and myth. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argues that coloniality functions through the continued privileging of Eurocentric systems of knowledge, which influence how African histories, identities, and cultural symbols are interpreted and represented. His analysis therefore shifts attention from colonialism as a historical event to the ongoing politics of knowledge production, providing an important framework for analysing how media texts may either reproduce or challenge inherited colonial ways of seeing Africa.

Mignolo (2007), an Argentinian semiotician and literary theorist, defines coloniality as the ongoing structures of power and knowledge that originate in colonialism but persist beyond its formal end, shaping representation, identity, and cultural meaning through racialised and Eurocentric hierarchies. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013: 11) opines that “coloniality is different from colonialism because it survives the end of direct colonial administration”. From this perspective, representations of Shaka Zulu in popular media can be understood as sites where colonial epistemologies may be reproduced, negotiated, or contested. This is especially relevant for visual media such as television series and posters, which condense complex historical narratives into symbolic imagery that circulates widely and contributes to the formation of cultural memory and myth.

Frantz Fanon’s (1963) work further illuminates how colonial representation fixes colonised subjects within rigid and dehumanising images. He observes that colonial discourse “turns the colonised into an object” and traps them within a narrow field of meaning defined by violence and primitiveness (Fanon, 1963: 170). Applied to representations of Shaka Zulu, this raises critical questions about whether visual portrayals position him primarily through inherited colonial imaginaries of fear and brutality, or whether they open space for alternative articulations grounded in African epistemologies, ancestry, and collective identity. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) similarly stresses that decolonisation must involve a re-centering of indigenous cultural systems, arguing that colonial domination works most effectively “through the control of a people’s culture” (wa Thiong’o, 1986: 16).

Within this study, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, therefore, function as critical lenses through which to interrogate how Shaka Zulu’s image has been constructed and rearticulated across different historical periods. Rather than assuming that post-apartheid representations are inherently decolonial, these frameworks allow for an examination of continuities, tensions, and contradictions within contemporary visual culture. When read alongside semiotic and representational theory, postcolonial and decolonial approaches enable the analysis to remain attentive to the historical conditions of

colonial power while exploring how visual representations participate in ongoing struggles over identity, memory, and epistemic authority in South Africa (Mbembe, 2001).

This study is therefore informed by African postcolonial and decolonial scholarship that foregrounds African perspectives in the analysis of history, representation, and power. Among the leading scholars in this tradition is Achille Mbembe, whose work has been central to postcolonial theory and African political thought (Mbembe, 2001; 2022). In *On the Postcolony* (2001) and *Out of the Dark Night* (2022), Mbembe critically examines how colonial power continues to shape African subjectivities, political life, and historical consciousness while arguing that postcolonial societies also possess the capacity to imagine alternative futures beyond colonial epistemologies. He contends that postcolonial societies remain deeply entangled with the memories and legacies of colonialism, yet these memories also provide opportunities for re-imagining identity, sovereignty, and freedom. From this perspective, cultural figures such as Shaka Zulu function as sites of memory through which historical narratives may be reproduced, contested, or reappropriated for emancipatory purposes. Mbembe's work therefore provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding how visual representations of Shaka Zulu operate as contested sites where colonial histories and contemporary African identities are continually negotiated.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013; 2021) pursues this line further in arguing that decolonisation needs an "epistemic break" with colonial epistemology. An epistemic break entails a deliberate rupture from colonial systems of knowledge by delinking from Eurocentric universality and re-centering marginalised epistemologies as legitimate foundations for meaning-making (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; 2021). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013; 2021) extends postcolonial critique by arguing that meaningful decolonisation requires an epistemic break with colonial modes of knowledge production, not merely political independence or representational inclusion. By epistemic break, he refers to a deliberate rupture from Eurocentric epistemologies that continue to structure meaning, representation, and authority in postcolonial societies.

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argues that colonality operates through the continued dominance of Eurocentric systems of knowledge that shape how African realities are understood and represented. He contends that "the epistemological domain remains one of the most important terrains of colonial domination" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 16), resulting in the marginalisation of African ways of knowing. He further argues that decolonial scholarship seeks to "decolonise knowledge and restore epistemic dignity" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 18). From this perspective, representations of historical figures such as Shaka Zulu are not ideologically neutral but are embedded within broader struggles over whose knowledge, histories, and cultural narratives are legitimised. An epistemic break therefore entails questioning the categories, assumptions, and representational frameworks through which African histories and identities have been narrated, rather than simply inserting African content into existing Western theoretical models. In his later work, Ndlovu-Gatsheni frames decolonisation as a struggle for epistemic freedom, asserting that it "demands a fundamental shift from Eurocentric modes of knowing

to a pluriversal epistemic order" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021: 74). Crucially, this does not imply the wholesale rejection of Western knowledge, but rather its decentring and provincialisation, as he cautions that "the challenge is not to discard all Western knowledge, but to remove its monopoly over defining reality" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 44). Within the context of representation, an epistemic break therefore invites critical scrutiny of how visual texts may reproduce or unsettle colonial ways of knowing, allowing this study to explore whether representations of Shaka Zulu remain articulated through inherited colonial epistemologies or gesture towards alternative, locally grounded modes of meaning-making, without presuming epistemic transformation in advance.

Sabelo-Ndlovu-Gatsheni's call for an epistemic break complements rather than contradicts Hall's theory of articulation, as both reject fixed or universal meanings and emphasise the historical contingency of knowledge and representation. While Hall (1986) conceptualises articulation as the temporary linking of meanings within specific socio-political contexts, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013; 2021) extends this insight by questioning the colonial epistemologies that have historically structured those linkages. His argument that decolonisation requires "a fundamental shift from Eurocentric modes of knowing" towards epistemic plurality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021: 74) invites scrutiny of how representational articulations themselves may remain shaped by coloniality. When applied to the analysis of television series posters, this combined framework allows the study to examine whether visual elements such as language choice, landscape, bodily presentation, and spiritual symbolism are articulated through inherited colonial logics or gesture towards alternative epistemic orientations, without presuming epistemic rupture in advance. In this way, articulation theory provides a means of tracing how meanings are assembled, while the notion of epistemic break sharpens critical attention to whose knowledge systems underpin those assemblages. Media, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues, is a strategic site for such struggle in the sense that it provides a site for the recovery of repressed histories (2013, 2021). *Shaka iLembe's* deployment of isiZulu terminology, ancestral cosmology, and affiliations with the Zulu royal family illustrate such a decolonial rearticulation of myth.

Mudimbe (1988) resists the "invention of Africa" in Western discourses, wherein African histories are re-fashioned in colonial terms. That critique is directly applicable to *Shaka Zulu* (1986), which constructs Shaka through discursive frameworks of exoticism and spectacle. Among the foundational scholars of African postcolonial thought is Mudimbe, whose work interrogates how Africa has been constituted as an object of knowledge within Western epistemological systems (Mudimbe, 1988). In *The Invention of Africa* (1988), he demonstrates how colonial anthropology, missionary writings, and philosophy produced Africa through Eurocentric categories, thereby shaping how African histories, cultures, and identities came to be understood. Mudimbe conceptualises this body of knowledge as the "colonial library," arguing that Africa has historically been interpreted through inherited Western discourses rather than through its own epistemological traditions. He contends that "Africa is a product of the West, of its discourses, its systems of knowledge, and its power" (Mudimbe, 1988: 1), and that African realities were subsequently "reorganised and translated within Western epistemological categories" (Mudimbe, 1988: 16). This process did not erase African histories but re-inscribed them

through binaries such as primitive/civilised and rational/irrational, shaping how Africa and its historical figures have been represented. Mudimbe's critique is therefore central to the present study because it demonstrates how visual and narrative representations of Shaka Zulu may continue to draw on inherited colonial epistemologies even when produced within postcolonial contexts.

Likewise, Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism takes note of how Africa was commonly portrayed as the "Other" in international media. Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity follows suit as it challenges binary understandings of culture that oppose coloniser and colonised as fixed and separate identities. Bhabha is an Indian-born literary theorist and cultural critic, widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in postcolonial theory. He is currently Professor of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University, where he also serves as Director of the Mahindra Humanities Center. Bhabha's scholarly objective has been to rethink colonial power and cultural identity beyond binary oppositions such as coloniser/colonised. In works such as *The Location of Culture* (1994), he theorises concepts like hybridity, mimicry, and the third space to show how colonial authority is continually unsettled through cultural translation, negotiation, and ambivalence. His work aims to reveal how meaning and identity are produced in in-between spaces, where dominant narratives are disrupted and new, negotiated forms of cultural expression emerge. Writing within postcolonial theory, Bhabha argues that colonial encounters produce a "third space" in which cultural meanings are negotiated, translated, and transformed rather than simply imposed or resisted. The "third space" is the in-between cultural space where meanings and identities are negotiated, translated, and re-signified, disrupting fixed binaries such as coloniser/colonised (Bhabha, 1994). Homi Bhabha explains that hybridity "displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination" (Bhabha, 1994: 112), undermining claims to cultural purity or originality. Rather than viewing culture as stable or homogeneous, Bhabha emphasises that meaning is produced through ambivalence, where colonial authority is both asserted and destabilised. As he states, the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 1994: 5). Within representational analysis, hybridity therefore provides a way of examining how cultural identities and historical narratives may be articulated through mixed, contested, or overlapping discourses, rather than through singular or essentialised frameworks.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is particularly useful for analysing visual symbolism because it foregrounds how meanings are produced in the "third space" of cultural negotiation rather than through fixed or pure identities. He argues that hybridity "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 1994: 5), allowing representations to be read as ambivalent sites where colonial authority may be both reiterated and unsettled. Applied to visual media such as posters, hybridity enables attention to how symbols, styles, and narratives may combine inherited colonial codes with local cultural elements, producing meanings that are neither wholly resistant nor entirely compliant. However, decolonial scholars caution that hybridity can risk underplaying material power relations if it is treated as politically neutral. Ndlovu-

Gatsheni, (2013: 14) warns that without an epistemic break, such hybrid representations may remain “trapped within colonial epistemological frames”), while privileging Western interpretive authority. Read together, these perspectives allow the study to examine whether hybrid visual forms function as sites of genuine epistemic negotiation or whether they reproduce colonial logics under the appearance of cultural mixture. Bhabha explains hybridisation as “the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha, 1994: 2). Bhabha contends that colonial contact results in hybrid identities that disrupt the foundational notions of culture. Shaka, who appears in both series, can be interpreted as a hybrid image—co-constituted from indigenous Zulu cultures and extraneous colonial imaginations.

Postcolonial and decolonial theories provide a critical framework for situating representation, myth, and articulation within histories of colonial power and knowledge production. While theories of representation, myth, and articulation explain how meaning is constructed and circulated in media texts, postcolonial perspectives interrogate whose meanings are authorised and under what historical conditions those meanings emerge. In this sense, postcolonial theory does not replace these theoretical guides but deepens them by foregrounding coloniality, epistemic power, and historical asymmetry.

In relation to representation, postcolonial theory challenges the assumption that representational practices are neutral or universal. Stuart Hall’s account of representation already emphasises that meaning is produced through discourse and power rather than reflection (Hall, 2013), but postcolonial scholars such as Said (1978), Mudimbe (1988), and Mbembe (2001) extend this argument by showing how representational systems were historically mobilised to construct Africa as an object of colonial knowledge. From this perspective, representation becomes a site where colonial epistemologies are either reproduced or unsettled. Postcolonial theory thus sharpens representational analysis by insisting that images of African historical figures must be read in relation to the colonial conditions that shaped the visual codes through which Africa was made legible.

Postcolonial theory also intersects productively with myth, particularly through Barthes’ understanding of myth as a second-order semiological system that naturalises ideology. Barthes’ (1972) theory of myth relates to postcolonial theory by providing a framework to deconstruct how dominant cultures use everyday symbols and narratives to naturalise ideologies of power, particularly those stemming from colonialism. Postcolonial theorists apply this concept to reveal how colonial powers used myths to create and reinforce a sense of cultural superiority, distort the reality of colonised peoples, and maintain control by presenting their worldview as universal and natural. Barthes’ focus on semiotics allows for an analysis of how these myths operate in popular culture, such as through images and objects, making them effective tools for ideological manipulation that must be critically examined. Postcolonial scholars have demonstrated that colonial representations frequently transformed historically contingent understandings of Africa into seemingly natural and universal truths. Said (1978) argues that colonial

discourse constructed non-Western societies through enduring stereotypes of otherness, while Mudimbe (1988) shows how the "colonial library" produced Africa through Eurocentric epistemological categories that framed African societies as primitive and irrational. Complementing these perspectives, Barthes (1972) explains that myth operates by transforming history into nature, making ideological constructions appear self-evident and timeless. Read together, these arguments suggest that colonial representations of Africa frequently functioned at the level of myth by presenting historically contingent images of savagery, primitivism, and despotism as natural characteristics rather than ideological constructions.

The concept of articulation provides the bridge that connects representation and myth within a postcolonial framework. Hall's theory of articulation emphasises that meanings are not fixed but are temporarily assembled through contingent linkages shaped by socio-political contexts (Hall, 1986). Postcolonial and decolonial theorists extend this insight by arguing that many of these linkages have been historically articulated within colonial epistemologies. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's call for an epistemic break highlights the need to interrogate not only what meanings are articulated, but the knowledge systems that make certain articulations possible and others unthinkable (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; 2021). From this perspective, cultural myths persist not because they are permanent, but because they are continually rearticulated in ways that resonate with dominant ideological formations—even as historical contexts change.

Taken together, postcolonial theory strengthens the analytical capacity of representation, myth, and articulation by embedding them within longer histories of colonial power. It allows the study to explore how visual representations of Shaka Zulu may operate as sites of ideological struggle, where inherited colonial myths are potentially sustained, contested, or reworked through shifting articulations. Rather than assuming either continuity or rupture between apartheid and post-apartheid representations, this integrated framework positions meaning as historically contingent, politically charged, and always open to renegotiation.

Conclusion

This chapter has brought together semiotics, representation theory, articulation, and postcolonial/decolonial thought to establish a coherent theoretical foundation for analysing the visual mythology of Shaka Zulu. Concepts related to semiotics, articulation, and decolonial thinking are synthesised to form the basis of analysis concerning the visual mythology of Shaka. The use of signs and representations as perpetuants of ideology has been described by Barthes (1972) and Hall (1997, 2020). Discussions related to the process involved in signification have been made available by Saussure (1983) and Peirce (1958), and how to apply the concept of signification in visual studies has been covered in the writings of Rose (2016), and Fiske and Hartley (2003), whose main area of concentration revolves around television studies. In postcolonial studies, Said (1978), Fanon (1967),

Bhabha (1994), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) apply the concept of signification to the discourse of power, racial discourse, and the topic of authorship.

Rather than treating images as neutral reflections of reality, the framework developed here understands media texts as sites where meaning, ideology, and power are actively produced. Drawing on Saussure (1983) and Peirce (1958), semiotics provides the basis for understanding how signs function and how meaning emerges through processes of signification. Barthes (1972) extends this by demonstrating how signs become naturalised as myth, transforming historically and politically situated meanings into seemingly common-sense truths. In this way, ideology is not imposed overtly, but is embedded within everyday images and visual narratives.

Hall's (1997, 2020) theory of representation and articulation is central to this synthesis. Representation is understood as a cultural process through which meaning is constructed, contested, and circulated, while articulation explains how meanings are temporarily "sutured" together under particular historical conditions and may later be "re-sutured" differently as contexts shift. This allows the study to approach *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) not as fixed fictionalised portrayals of a historical figure, but as historically contingent constructions shaped by distinct political, cultural, and ideological environments. Hall's model of encoding and decoding further emphasises that meaning is neither singular nor stable, but negotiated between producers, texts, and audiences.

The visual dimension of this process is strengthened through the work of Rose (2016), and Fiske and Hartley (2003), who provide methodological tools for analysing how signification operates specifically in visual and televisual media. Their approaches make it possible to examine how elements such as posture, costume, composition, colour, weapons, and spatial organisation function as systems of meaning within posters and television texts, and how these visual choices contribute to ideological framing and myth construction, as will be explained in the next chapter.

Postcolonial and decolonial theory adds a crucial political dimension to this framework. Thinkers such as Said (1978), Fanon (1967), and Bhabha (1994) reveal how representation is entangled with colonial power, racial discourse, and questions of authorship, while Mbembe (2001), Mudimbe (1988), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) foreground African epistemologies and expose the persistence of colonial structures in knowledge production. Their work enables the study to interrogate how Shaka's image has been shaped within colonial and apartheid imaginaries, and how contemporary representations may seek to reconfigure or challenge these inherited frameworks.

Together, these theories position *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) not merely as entertainment texts, but as cultural arenas in which collective memory, national identity, and historical consciousness are negotiated. Semiotics explains how meaning is produced through signs; representation theory explains how images construct versions of reality; articulation explains how those meanings are historically linked and relinked; and postcolonial/decolonial theory exposes the power relations that shape whose histories are told and how they are told.

By integrating these perspectives, the theoretical framework provides a strong basis for analysing how the myth of Shaka Zulu has been perpetuated, contested, and rearticulated over time. It allows this study to examine how iconography, narrative, and visual symbolism operate differently across apartheid and post-apartheid contexts, and how shifting ideological conditions shape the construction of African leadership, sovereignty, and cultural identity. In doing so, the chapter establishes that media representations of Shaka are not static historical images, but dynamic processes through which power, memory, and meaning are continually produced and transformed.

Finally, this framework is further strengthened by Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, which is particularly valuable for analysing visual symbolism because it emphasises that meaning is produced in a "third space" of cultural negotiation rather than through fixed, pure, or essential identities. In this sense, the posters are not read as simply colonial or decolonial, traditional or modern, but as hybrid visual sites where different histories, ideologies, and cultural logics intersect and are reworked. This perspective allows the study to approach the representations of Shaka Zulu as dynamic and negotiated constructions, shaped by overlapping influences rather than by singular narratives.

Taken together, semiotics explains how meaning is produced through signs, Hall's theory of representation and articulation explains how those meanings are historically sutured and re-sutured, Barthes' theory of myth explains how ideology becomes naturalised, and Bhabha's hybridity highlights the in-between spaces where cultural meanings are contested and transformed. Alongside postcolonial and decolonial thinkers such as Said (1978), Fanon (1976), Mbembe (2001), Mudimbe (1988), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2021), Wright (2006) and Tomaselli (2001), this integrated framework positions *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) as cultural arenas in which power, memory, and identity are negotiated. It reinforces the idea that these texts should not be understood as stable or complete representations of history, but as hybrid, historically situated processes through which the myth of Shaka Zulu is continually articulated and rearticulated across changing political and cultural contexts.

Chapter 4

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines and justifies the methodology used to analyse how the myth of Shaka is constructed and rearticulated across two major televised representations: *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). By examining three official posters and the pilot episode of each series, the study applies a qualitative, semiotic, and comparative research design to explore how signs, symbols, narrative structures, and ideological codes shift across apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

Grounded in a constructivist paradigm and guided by semiotics, representation theory, articulation theory, and postcolonial and decolonial perspective, this chapter explains the philosophical orientation, methodological design, sampling procedures, data collection, analytical strategy, researcher positionality, and ethical considerations. The methods used align directly with the study's aim: to analyse how Shaka's myth is visually and narratively produced, naturalised, contested, and possibly transformed across historical periods.

Theoretical and Methodological Alignment

The theoretical framework chapter established that semiotics, representation theory, articulation theory, and postcolonial and decolonial perspectives provide not only conceptual grounding but also methodological direction. Their methodological implications are summarised below.

Semiotics as Method

Saussure (1983) conceptualised the sign as a structure linking a *signifier* (form) and *signified* (concept). This dyadic model is essential for identifying how posters use visual form—colour, props, posture—to signify concepts such as power, war, or royalty. Peirce (1998) expanded semiotics by explaining that signs operate triadically as icons (visual resemblance), indices (causal or physical links), and symbols (socially learned meanings). This model is particularly important for analysing visual media: Shaka's spear is both an icon (looks like a spear), an index (sign of warfare), and a symbol (represents Zulu identity). Barthes (1972, 1977) extends semiotics into the ideological realm by explaining that signs, that function both denotatively and connotatively, accumulate into cultural myths. In "The Black Soldier: The Making of a Mythological Celebrity", he shows how media transform the Black male body into a mythic symbol of strength, "discipline," or colonial heroism. This research provides a methodological lens for analysing how Shaka's body itself becomes a site of myth-making—whether framed as barbaric or and noble. Together, these frameworks justify the qualitative, semiotic, visually grounded methodology adopted here.

Representation and Ideology

Hall (1997, 2020) emphasises that representation is not neutral but a discursive practice that produces meaning through power. His encoding/decoding model guides the methodological decision to examine how visual and narrative texts offer dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings influenced, by this constructivist perspective. Barker (2004) and Rose (2016) argue that representation must be analysed through both form and context. Visual methodology therefore requires looking beyond aesthetic features to understand ideological intent.

Supplementing the discussion on the relationship between representation, context and ideology the study draws on postcolonial and decolonial studies that will function as an interpretive lens that strengthens the analysis of posters and pilot episodes by foregrounding questions of authorship, cultural authority, and epistemic positioning. They guide attention to how visual elements such as beads, clan references, ancestral motifs, and bodily presentation operate within African systems of meaning, rather than being interpreted solely through Western semiotic conventions. At the same time, these perspectives justify the researcher's reflexive engagement as an insider, recognising cultural familiarity not as bias but as an interpretive resource that must be critically and ethically mobilised. In this way, postcolonial and decolonial thought does not replace semiotics or representation theory but extends them, ensuring that the analysis remains sensitive to African epistemologies while remaining methodologically consistent with the theoretical framework established earlier in the study. Influenced by these postcolonial perspectives, African Cultural Studies scholars (Tomaselli, 1999, 2000, 2012, Wright, 2020), Dyll and Tomaselli, 2024)) argue that visual analysis in African contexts must remain attentive to historical consciousness, cultural memory, and indigenous knowledge systems that have often been marginalised by colonial epistemologies. Their work supports an approach in which images are not read only as aesthetic or technical artefacts, but as culturally embedded texts whose meanings emerge from specific African histories and symbolic traditions.

Articulation Theory as Comparative Method

Articulation theory (Hall, 1996; Clarke, 2015; DeLuca, 1999), read alongside Hall's (1997, 2020) theory of representation, provides a critical framework for understanding how these television texts produce meaning as historically situated constructions rather than transparent reflections of the past. Representation is approached as a cultural process through which meaning is constructed, contested, and circulated, while articulation explains how elements—images, narratives, and ideologies—are temporarily “sutured” to specific historical conditions and may later be reconfigured as those conditions shift. Importantly, this framework recognises that *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) do not present history per se, but rather fictionalised narratives based on a historical figure, shaped by the ideological and cultural contexts of their production. This allows the study to interpret differences in representation not as objective historical corrections, but as re-articulations of

meaning—for instance, the construction of Shaka as a violent ruler in the 1986 series can be read as linked to apartheid-era anxieties, while the 2023 portrayal of Shaka as a unifying, culturally grounded leader reflects contemporary investments in African identity and revival. Hall's encoding/decoding model further reinforces this position by emphasising that meaning remains open, negotiated, and contingent upon the interaction between producers, texts, and audiences.

Research Paradigm

This study is situated within a constructivist research paradigm, grounded in the belief that meaning is socially produced rather than simply discovered. Constructivism argues that knowledge is shaped by “agreements made within cultures and societies about meaning” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), and thus it supports the idea that representations of Shaka Zulu in posters and pilot episodes are constructed artefacts, not neutral historical mirrors. In this paradigm, cultural images are understood as shared products of interpretation, perception and context — what people collectively “make real” through discourse, visual convention, and social memory. This outlook aligns closely with the aim of the study, which is to analyse the historical imagery of Shaka Zulu in order to understand “the socio-political periods in which they exist”.

Constructivism directly supports the theories already underpinning this work. Hall (2020) explains that “representation is always coded or constructed by signs,” which means images communicate through shared cultural codes rather than universal truth. Likewise, Barthes (1972; 1977) shows that signs become myth — they naturalise particular meanings so effectively that they appear “obvious” or “self-evident.” For this reason, constructivism provides an interpretive foundation for semiotic reading: it recognises that posters are not simply aesthetic choices, but socially signifying symbols that define African cultural values and parameters of identity, power and heritage.

Because constructivism assumes that knowledge is interpretive and contextual, it aligns naturally with the qualitative semiotic approach adopted here. Semiotics depends on reading signs, colours, spatial arrangements, wording and composition as vehicles of meaning, and this interpretation requires the researcher to take an active role in making sense of them. In this way, the research design assumes that meanings are not fixed, but “continually constructed,” allowing the study to explore how the image of Shaka Zulu is reinvented across time. Thus, the constructivist paradigm is not only theoretical — it informs how each poster and episode will be read, recognising that what appears on the surface (denotation) is inseparable from the cultural meanings constructed beneath (connotation and myth).

Finally, constructivism also acknowledges the role of the researcher in producing knowledge. Meaning is shaped in dialogue between the cultural text and the interpreter. My own cultural and spiritual positioning plays a critical role in shaping the lens through which I read these images. Constructivism therefore makes space for my positionality, recognising that interpretation is not detached, but situated.

Positionality and Reflexivity

My positionality forms an integral part of how I approach and interpret this research. I am a Zulu man who was born and raised within isiZulu language, history, customs and cultural symbolism. I am also strongly rooted in Zulu traditional religion, and I am an initiated traditional healer (*inyanga* and prayer) who works with herbs and ancestral knowledge. *Inyanga* means someone who heals using raw herbs that are dug from the mountains, hills, rivers and sea. This lived immersion provides me with cultural familiarity that is not learned but lived — shaping how I read signs related to ritual, attire, gesture, cosmology, and the spiritual role of a king within Zulu worldviews. This insider position allows me to interpret cultural references in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) in a way that is grounded in practice rather than abstraction. As such, it enriches my ability to identify meanings that may be misconstrued or overlooked by outsiders to the culture.

Alongside this cultural grounding, I bring an academic and creative background to the project: I am trained in film production and editing, and I have a strong personal interest in history, semiotics, and how media signs produce meaning. Because the representations in this study are visual and cinematic, my experience as a filmmaker positions me to engage actively with questions of composition, framing, sound, rhythm and visual storytelling — not as passive observer but as someone who understands how media is constructed.

Following Haraway's (1988) notion of "situated knowledges," I recognise that interpretation does not emerge from nowhere — it comes from a location. My cultural, creative and academic identities shape the lens through which I view Shaka Zulu as a symbolic figure. Dyll (2018) similarly argues that researchers must ask, "where do I fit in?" when they enter a field of study. In this research, I fit in as both a cultural insider and an analyst, situated between the emotional and rational. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 737) contend that autoethnography is a mode of research and writing that "displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural". This underscores that interpretive inquiry must engage both the intellectual analysis and the researcher's emotional and experiential insight, integrating subjective experience with cultural interpretation.

However, positionality is not only about acknowledging identity — it requires reflexive awareness. Haraway's (1988: 575-581) "situated knowledges" reminds us that every perspective has a partial nature. Thus, while my insight may add depth, there is also a risk of over-identifying with cultural elements or assuming shared knowledge where explanation is required. Reflexivity is therefore a continuous, dialogical process in which the researcher actively interrogates their own positionality, assumptions, and interpretive choices throughout the research process, rather than accepting them as neutral or fixed; as Denzin and Lincoln (2018: 37) explain, reflexivity in qualitative inquiry involves "ongoing awareness and active reflection on the researcher's role, influence, and position throughout the research process".

Dyll (2018) suggests that autoethnography allows lived experience to become a strength rather than a liability, and this is particularly within decolonial research where the self is not divorced from the community. I draw on this principle by allowing my cultural identity, healer calling, historical curiosity and filmmaking background to inform the research, while ensuring my academic training in media analysis maintains critical discipline. In this way, my identity is not positioned as a source of bias to be erased, but as a resource that generates deeper meaning — recognising, as Dyll (2018) notes, that where one “belongs” is not fixed but continually negotiated throughout the research process.

Ultimately, embracing reflexivity in this study is both an ethical and epistemological responsibility. I am not a neutral, distant spectator — I am an active meaning-maker, situated within the cultural world I am studying. This dual position strengthens this research, allowing it to remain methodologically sound, culturally situated, and attuned to the complexities of how media constructs Shaka Zulu across time. By naming and critically reflecting on my positionality, I strengthen the credibility of this research, because the interpretive process becomes transparent and accountable, demonstrating how meaning is produced rather than pretending it is neutrally “found”.

Research Approach: Qualitative

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is suited to exploring subjective meanings and socially constructed realities. As semiotic analysis requires reading and interpreting signs rather than measuring them, a qualitative approach allows for a deep, interpretive engagement with the posters and pilot episodes instead of reducing them to numbers or fixed outcomes. As noted earlier in the methodology, qualitative research positions the researcher as an active meaning-maker which means that I, as the interpreter, play a role in constructing what the posters communicate rather than merely observing them as neutral artefacts.

Within a qualitative paradigm, meaning is understood to emerge through analysis, through context, and through my interpretive lens — particularly when examining colour, composition, symbolic motifs, wording, and placement within the posters. This approach allows the study to decode how ideological narratives and cultural meanings are constructed, sustained or disrupted across the apartheid context of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and the post-apartheid context of *Shaka iLembe* (2023). This approach guarantees contextual findings due to the entwinement between the posters’ cultural aspects and the researcher’s interpretation. Hence, the qualitative approach does not treat representation as objective fact; instead, it recognises that meaning depends on how cultural texts are read, what codes are activated, and who is reading them.

Because qualitative work values interpretation, it complements the constructivist paradigm guiding this research — both assume that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered. It also supports the multimodal semiotic method used in this dissertation, as reading denotation and connotation requires slow, careful, layered interpretation, something only a qualitative approach can provide. This

makes qualitative semiotics especially fruitful for analysing the cultural and ideological characteristics of media messages, as is the focus of this study.

Given that this qualitative approach prioritises interpretation, it naturally leads into the comparative design that follows, which focuses on examining how Shaka Zulu is visually constructed across two historical moments and two sets of visual texts.

Research Design: Comparative Textual Analysis

This study employs a comparative textual analysis using semiotic methodology to interpret how Shaka Zulu is visually and narratively constructed across two historical moments. The promotional posters and pilot episodes are therefore treated as media texts that communicate meaning, rather than merely images or entertainment. In this study, “texts” refers to the symbolic language embedded in these media forms: colour, costume, composition, gesture, linguistic wording, spatial hierarchy, and narrative sequencing. Each element is read as a sign that participates in constructing cultural knowledge about Shaka Zulu.

A comparative design is used because this research aims to examine if and how changes might be included across time. The design enables the study to place *Shaka Zulu* (1986) within its apartheid socio-political environment, and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) within a post-apartheid cultural moment, revealing how media texts can rearticulate identity, power, and history across generations. What the study does not assume is that representation changes have occurred definitively. For now it tries to determine and analyse whether and how realistic such changes might be. A semiotic analysis will be employed to identify and compare poster elements, including colour, composition, symbols, and text, and decodes the socio political and cultural narratives found in the posters. A semiotic reading is, therefore, appropriate because posters and episodes are not taken at face value; instead, they are decoded to reveal how myth-making, identity, and ideology are embedded. Semiotics reveals the cultural and ideological codes that are incorporated into media texts, making it a suitable analytical method for this comparative work.

This design also aligns with the qualitative constructivist paradigm guiding the study. Because meanings are culturally constructed, examining two sets of texts side-by-side allows the research to observe how signs are repeated, altered, or replaced in each era to shape different understandings of Shaka. The comparative structure therefore supports the central aim of this study: to determine whether and how visual representation shifts, and what cultural scripts may be at work in shaping or re-shaping the image of Shaka Zulu.

Since this design depends on close reading of selected texts, the next step is to outline how the posters and pilot episodes were chosen and justified as suitable data for semiotic analysis.

Data Sample and Rationale

This study uses purposive sampling to select the visual material for analysis. Purposive sampling is appropriate because it ensures that the sample selected is relevant, visible, and reflective of the texts most likely to shape public perception (Rose, 2016). In this case, the sample consists of six promotional posters — three from *Shaka Zulu* (1986) (see figure 5.1. in Chapter 5) and three from *Shaka iLembe* (2023) (see figure 5.5 in Chapter 5) alongside two pilot episodes, one from each series.

A sample of equal size from both series supports the comparative purpose of the research — to determine if and how there have been changes between apartheid-era and post-apartheid representations. Analysing three posters and one pilot per era enables parallel reading, making it possible to trace continuities and ruptures in how Shaka is visually constructed, mythologised, or culturally reclaimed.

Promotional Poster Selection

The promotional posters act as the first point of audience contact and are therefore a key mechanism through which Shaka is offered to the public. Posters communicate fundamental cultural-political discourses especially those regarding African race, power and history. Selecting the most publicly visible posters ensures this research analyses the images that shape collective memory, not archived or obscure graphics.

Posters were selected using visibility-based criteria, specifically drawing from the first three unique posters that appear on Google Images. In line with Rose's (2016) directions for doing visual methods, this selection minimises the subjectivity of the researcher by basing the choice on visibility and availability of pictures; the images selected are those most publicly accessible and circulated to audiences. Only official posters were included to ensure the materials reflect authorised visual messaging from each production.

This study acknowledges that the most visible posters (those that appear at the top of Google Image results) are not necessarily the most accurate or culturally sensitive, but are often the most clickable or dramatised (Noble, 2018). This reflects what Anderson (2006) describes as the “head” of search distribution, where algorithmic amplification reinforces hegemonic visual tropes.

Pilot Episode Selection

Pilot episodes are included because they set the ideological template for each series, introducing the manner in which Shaka is framed — whether as mythical ruler, warrior, heritage figure, or political symbol. Analysing the pilots grounds the poster analysis in the broader narrative and ideological frameworks of each production. In semiotic terms, the posters show the coded iconic message, while the pilot episodes reveal complementary narrative sign-systems (Fiske and Hartley, 2003).

Data Collection Process

Since the design and sampling draw heavily on public circulation, this section explains how digital visibility shapes which images become culturally dominant and therefore relevant for semiotic reading.

Poster Data Processing

1. Initial online search and retrieval – Google Images was used to locate publicly visible posters of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). Visibility ranking was recorded by capturing screenshots of where posters appeared in search results.
2. Download and catalogue – each poster was downloaded in its highest-resolution version available. Files were renamed and stored by series, year, poster number and platform source (e.g. “Zulu_1986_Poster1_Google”).
3. Verification of originality – posters were cross-checked to ensure they were official promotional posters and not fan-edited or duplicated images.
4. Organisation into dataset – posters were placed into a folder system with a spreadsheet catalogue noting: title, URL source, date of retrieval, file resolution, and the first three posters for each television series were selected.

The selection can be summarised according to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria

- Official promotional posters only, in other words, posters must have been formally released by production teams.
- Clear correspondence to original launch period: Only posters linked to the 1986 or 2023 release campaigns were selected.
- All posters needed to contain clear visual detail in high resolution quality (colour, text, symbols, layout).
- Digital and hardcopy versions eligible: *Shaka iLembe* (2023) includes current digital posters, while *Shaka Zulu* (1986) relies on scanned digitised hardcopies.

Exclusion Criteria

- Fan-made, amateur, duplicated or low-quality posters were excluded.
- Posters with severe image degradation were excluded.
- Multiple variants with minimal design differences (e.g., same image but text moved) were removed to avoid redundancy.
- Any circulating images not recognisable as official advertising were excluded.

Pilot Episode Processing

The two pilot episodes were accessed legally through authorised streaming platforms. The pilot episode of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) was viewed via publicly available archival uploads on YouTube that was host licensed or broadcaster-distributed material, while the pilot episode of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) was accessed through Showmax, the official streaming platform on which the series is distributed. In both cases, the episodes were not downloaded; instead, detailed viewing notes and screenshots of selected frames were taken for analytical purposes in line with ethical and copyright considerations.

In preparation for the analysis of both the posters and the pilot episodes, all materials were either printed or screenshot-captured to allow for close visual inspection, annotation, and systematic coding. The posters were prepared using Barthes' semiotic framework in conjunction with Rose's (2016) visual methodology, which provides structured prompts for analysing composition, colour, symbolism, spatial organisation, and textual elements. This ensured that each poster could be examined at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, while also attending to its visual organisation and cultural context.

The pilot episodes, by contrast, were prepared and analysed using the semiotic framework developed by Fiske and Hartley (2003), which treats television as a system of signs rather than a transparent reflection of reality. Key scenes were identified, captured, and annotated to examine how meaning is produced through narrative sequencing (syntagm), symbolic substitution (paradigm), metaphor, metonymy, and myth. This distinction between analytical tools reflects the different semiotic properties of still images and moving audiovisual texts.

Together, these procedures ensured that the data were retrieved, preserved, and prepared in a manner consistent with qualitative semiotic analysis, while maintaining methodological coherence between the visual analysis of posters (Barthes; Rose, 2016) and the televisual analysis of pilot episodes (Fiske and Hartley, 2003). This systematic process ensures that the images and episodes are retrieved, preserved and prepared in a manner consistent with qualitative semiotic analysis.

Digital Visibility: Platform Influence on Sampling

As this study examines how cultural meaning is constructed in the public realm, it matters which images the public most often sees. Google search results are not neutral — they are shaped by visibility algorithms that prioritise posters according to popularity, user clicks and regional circulation. Therefore, selecting the first three unique posters that appear on Google aligns sampling with public reach, not researcher preference (Rose, 2016).

Posters serve as the public gateway to Shaka's imagery, while pilot episodes establish the narrative and ideological foundations of each series, collecting both forms of text provides a holistic dataset for semiotic interpretation.

Data Analysis

The analysis for this study followed a structured, step-by-step workflow to ensure that both posters and pilot episodes were examined systematically and consistently. This section explains the step-by-step process.

Step-by-Step Plan for Semiotic Analysis

Step 1. Selection of visual artefacts

The analysis begins with selecting the six promotional posters and two pilot episodes identified through purposive sampling. These artefacts form the dataset from which signs, codes and ideological messages will be interpreted.

Step 2. Deconstruction of signs – Saussure and Barthes

Posters and episode visuals were first read at the denotative level (what is literally shown) and then at the connotative level (the cultural meaning attached), following Barthes' (1972; 1977) orders of signification. Saussure's (1983) signifier/signified model underpins this stage of identifying how visual elements function as signs.

Step 3. Contextual analysis – Hall's representation and ideology

Once signs are identified, meanings will be located within their socio-political context, informed by Hall's (1997; 2020) theory that "representation is always coded" and that meaning emerges through cultural interpretation. Posters and pilot scenes will, therefore, be read through the lens of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, recognising that context shapes what Shaka is constructed to represent.

Step 4a. Application of Rose's visual methodology (posters)

Rose's (2016) visual analysis prompts — colour, spatial composition, symbolism, typography and intertextuality — will guide the close reading of posters. At this stage, annotated notes will be taken on how specific elements visually "organise" Shaka's body, identity and status.

Step 4b. Fiske and Hartley's semiotics of television (pilot episodes)

Pilot episodes will be analysed using Fiske and Hartley (2003), focusing on television's system of signs, myth construction, metaphor/metonymy, and syntagmatic–paradigmatic relations. Key scenes, music cues and character representations will be interpreted to uncover how the visual and narrative structure produce ideological meanings.

The practical steps of 4a. and 4b. are also informed by Barthes' ideas on denotation, connotation and myth; as well as (for the posters) the three distinct messages that he argues function in advertisements: the linguistic message, the non-coded iconic message, and the coded iconic message.

Following Barthes' "Rhetoric of the Image" (1977), this study analyses each promotional poster through three interrelated semiotic levels: the linguistic message, the non-coded iconic message, and the coded iconic message. These levels provide a systematic way of decoding how posters, like advertisements, construct meaning and ideology through the interaction of text and image. The linguistic message refers to all written elements in the poster, such as the series titles *Shaka Zulu* and *Shaka iLembe*, typography, and any accompanying text, which function to anchor interpretation and guide the viewer's reading of the image. The non-coded iconic message operates at the denotative level and involves describing what is literally visible, including figures, posture, weapons, clothing, facial expressions, setting, and spatial composition. This level establishes the basic, descriptive content of the image without cultural interpretation. The coded iconic message functions at the connotative level, where visual elements are read through shared cultural knowledge and ideological frameworks, allowing signs to signify broader concepts such as power, authority, masculinity, spirituality, ancestry, nationalism, or violence. Together, these three levels enable a layered and rigorous reading of the posters, showing how visual and textual elements work together to construct and naturalise particular myths about Shaka Zulu. Applying this framework to all six posters allows the study to trace how meaning is produced, stabilised, and rearticulated across different historical contexts, revealing how promotional imagery participates in the ideological and cultural myth-making surrounding Shaka's figure.

6. Comparative analysis across eras

Findings from each poster and each episode will then be compared side-by-side, identifying continuities, ruptures and shifts in representation across two eras, noting any similarities and differences that can be explained through theory of articulation (in the next step).

7. Synthesis of comparative findings and discussion – Hall's articulation theory and postcolonial perspectives

Finally, I will compare and synthesise poster-based readings and episode-based readings to show how myth-making and identity construction operate across *time* (1986 and 2023). The use of the posters and pilot episodes is not to compare the different *forms* of representation but to establish a solid data set upon which the analysis could be applied as posters alone may not display enough. Emerging themes will be summarised and linked back to the research questions, and will be interpreted using the study's theoretical framework, especially that of articulation and postcolonial perspectives.

This structured sequence reflects the constructivist and qualitative orientation of the study, where meaning is actively made through interpretation. Each step moves from basic description (denotation) toward deeper ideological reading (connotation, myth), and then toward broader interpretation across time. Posters and episodes will therefore be treated not simply as visuals, but as texts that construct and circulate cultural meaning, making this workflow appropriate for semiotic exploration.

Table 4.1: Semiotic Guidance for Posters from Rose (2016)

Category for analysis	Analytical action
Barthes three distinct messages	Identify the linguistic message, the non-coded iconic message, and the coded iconic message.
Site of the Image	Consider the poster's composition, symbolism, and graphic design in cultural context.
Colour Analysis	Analyse chromatic choices to interpret emotional tone, historical aesthetics, or symbolic resonance (e.g., gold for royalty, red for blood/power).
Spatial Composition	Assess character positioning, eye-lines, scale, and foreground/background dynamics for visual hierarchies.
Costume and Props	Evaluate signifiers like shields, spears, or headdresses for their semiotic and cultural weight.
Symbolic Elements	Decode symbols (e.g., Shaka's spear or shield) for their historical and ideological resonance.
Layout and Composition	Assess spatial arrangements and figure positioning to understand power dynamics or cultural emphasis.
Text and Typography	Consider the elements of font, style, size and placement in their effect on narrative tone and audience perception. As noted above, Barthes (1977) linguistic message will be included. The study attempts to identify deeper cultural and ideological processes taking place in this representation of Shaka Zulu through these posters, and insight the significant role played in historical and cultural narratives.
Intertextuality	Identify visual echoes of film, history, or political imagery that frame Shaka as mythic or political icon.

Table 4.2: Semiotic Guidance for the Pilot Episodes from Fiske and Hartley (2003)

Category for analysis	Analytical action
System of Signs	Decode each scene as a culturally encoded sign—not a reflection of reality.
Two Levels of Signification	Identify denotative (literal) and connotative (ideological) meanings of key visuals, speech, sounds.
Myth	Examine how pilot episodes construct mythic meaning (e.g. “hero,” “savage,” “liberator”).
Metaphor and Metonymy	Use metaphor to read analogical constructions (e.g., Shaka = storm), and metonymy to trace associative meaning (e.g., beads = cultural memory).
Syntagmatic vs. Paradigmatic Choices	Analyse narrative sequencing (syntagm) and symbolic substitutions (paradigm) (e.g., a television narrative, a sequence that moves from council meeting → preparation for battle → confrontation).
Polysemy and Cultural Codes	Recognise the multiplicity of possible readings, yet note how dominant codes anchor viewer interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

As this is a text-based study ethical exemption was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. HSSREC Ethics Approval Number: 00031438. The study analyses public materials and does not involve human participants. All visual materials are cited appropriately, and cultural symbols are interpreted respectfully, avoiding reductive or appropriative readings.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework that guides this study. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm and a qualitative textual analysis using a semiotic methodology, the chapter demonstrated that meaning within posters and pilot episodes is not fixed but socially produced and interpreted. The research approach positions me, as the researcher, as an active meaning-maker, and acknowledges that cultural and ideological narratives must be read rather than merely observed.

A comparative research design was justified to enable close reading of how Shaka Zulu is visually and narratively constructed across two eras — apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The data

sample, comprising six official promotional posters and two pilot episodes, was selected purposively according to visibility and study relevance. A systematic data-collection process was followed, accompanied by clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, and contextualised through a digital-visibility lens that recognises the influence of platform algorithms on which representations the public most frequently encounters.

A step-by-step analytical plan was presented, drawing on Barthes (1977), Saussure (1983), Hall (1997; 2020), Rose (2016), and Fiske and Hartley (2003) to structure the denotation–connotation reading of signs, contextual interpretation, visual analysis and television semiotics, and final comparative synthesis. Additionally, the chapter acknowledged my positionality as a Zulu man, traditional healer, filmmaker, and cultural insider, and reflected on how this shapes and enriches the interpretive process. By embracing reflexivity, the chapter ensures that methodological transparency and credibility are maintained.

Having established the methodological foundation and analytic process, the following chapter now presents the semiotic analysis of the six posters and two pilot episodes, thus presenting the study findings. Interpreting the finding through the study's theoretical framework it will discuss how meanings of Shaka Zulu are constructed and possibly re-articulated across time across historical contexts.

Chapter 5

Findings and Analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents the semiotic analysis of the six promotional posters and two pilot episodes from *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). Drawing directly from the methodological framework outlined in Chapter 4, this analysis treats both posters and episodes as texts – meaning-making artefacts that construct cultural identity, myth and historical narrative. In line with the constructivist paradigm, meaning is understood as socially produced, and therefore interpretation is central to how this analysis unfolds.

The chapter proceeds by applying the step-by-step textual-semiotic workflow established earlier – beginning with denotative reading (what is shown), followed by connotative interpretation (what cultural meanings are communicated), contextualisation within socio-historical settings, and comparative synthesis. The analysis draws on Barthes' (1972; 1977) orders of signification and Hall's (1997; 2020) theory of representation to understand how visual codes construct ideological messages. Rose's (2016) visual methodology provides the practical structure for examining colour, composition, symbols and spatial arrangement in posters, while Fiske and Hartley (2003) guide the reading of the pilot episodes as systems of culturally encoded signs.

Because this project compares productions from two eras – apartheid South Africa (1986) and post-apartheid South Africa (2023) – this chapter is structured to show not only *what* meanings exist, but also *how and why* changes or continuities may emerge. Each poster and episode is, therefore, analysed individually and then placed in comparative dialogue.

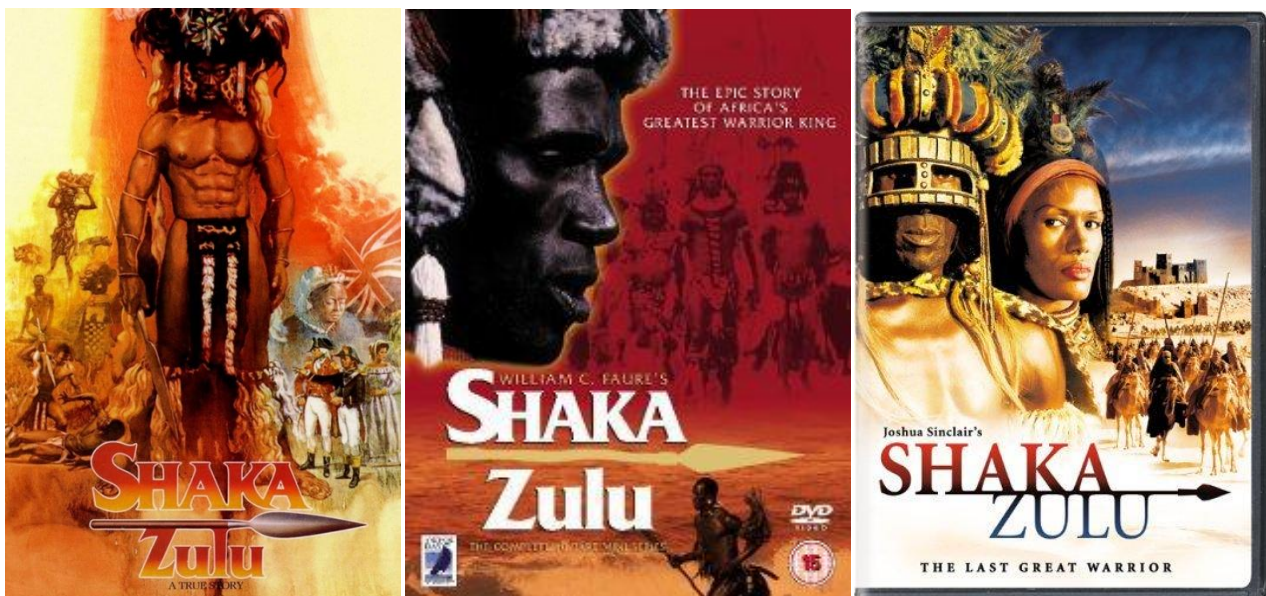
To maintain analytical clarity, this chapter is organised in four parts. Part 1 presents the visual data whereby each poster and episode is briefly described in its denotative form. This ensures a clear description of what is being analysed. Part 2 presents the semiotic deconstruction of the poster specifically using Barthes (1977) and Rose (2016), with a focus on colour, spatial composition, attire and symbols, text and typography and ideological framing. Part 3 presents the semiotic deconstruction of the pilot episodes, guided by Fiske and Hartley (1987, 2003), with a focus on visual and narrative codes, syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures, myth-making and representation, and lastly metaphor, metonymy and polysemy.

The key analytical principles that are consistently applied throughout this chapter, are summarised below in Table 5.1

Principle	Author
Linguistic message, denotation (associated with the non-coded iconic message) and connotation (associated with the coded iconic message)	Barthes (1972; 1977)
Icon (motivated, denotative, obvious relation between signifier and signified), Index (evidentiary, connotative, the signifier is directly related to the signified), Symbol (arbitrary, ideological – mythical, a culturally agreed meaning between signifier and signified) as System of 3 Categories of Sign	Pierce (1931-1958; 1955)
Signifier (associated with physical object – sound, word or image)/ Signified (associated with the mental concept)	Saussure (1916/1983)
Representation as Culturally Coded	Hall (1997; 2020)
Visual Reading of Posters	Rose (2016)
Myth and Ideological Television Codes	Fiske and Hartley (2003)

Table 5.1: Analytical principles applied

Semiotic Analysis of Posters: *Shaka Zulu* (1986)



Poster 1: Shaka standing

Posters 2: Shaka close up

Poster 3: Shaka and Nandi

Figure 5.1: Three Selected Posters of *Shaka Zulu* (1986)

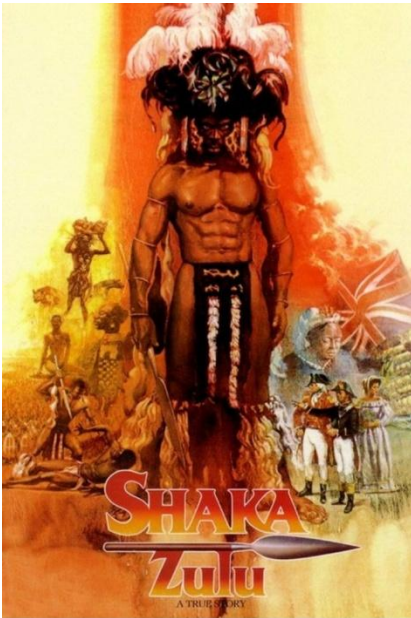


Figure 5.2: Poster 1 of Shaka Zulu (1986)

The above is a promotional poster. Produced by Harmony Gold and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Available at IDMb.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086798/mediaviewer/rm4117704961/>

Poster 1: Semiotic Analysis – Shaka Zulu (1986)

Denotative Description

Poster 1 presents a centrally positioned male figure identified by the title text as Shaka. As the non-coded iconic message (Barthes, 1977), the figure is shown full-bodied from the back, occupying the dominant visual space of the composition. His upper body is bare, revealing exaggerated muscular definition across the shoulders, back, and legs. He wears traditional adornments around the waist and ankles. A spear motif appears beneath the title “Shaka Zulu” that functions as the “linguistic message” (Barthes, 1977) at the bottom of the poster.

The background consists of layered scenes rendered in red, orange, and yellow tones. On the left, figures are depicted in low or collapsed positions, visually suggesting injury or death. On the right, a group of uniformed men stand in formation beneath a clearly visible British flag. All background figures are significantly smaller in scale than the central figure. Above Shaka’s head, a dark, plume-like form rises, visually merging with fire or smoke.

Connotative Analysis

At the connotative level, meaning is organised through scale, bodily emphasis, and spatial hierarchy. The exaggerated muscular body of the central figure functions as a signifier of strength and physical dominance. The scale disparity between Shaka and the smaller background figures operates indexically, providing visual evidence of hierarchical power relations and positioning Shaka as a dominant leader figure.

Shaka's back-facing orientation limits interpersonal engagement and reinforces distance and monumentality. His rigid posture and firmly planted stance further connote control and authority. Leadership is thus visually constructed through bodily presence rather than relational or symbolic attributes.

The background imagery contributes to this reading. Connotation works at the indexical level. The inclusion of people presented as smaller in the poster standing behind Shaka connotes that he is a leader and the people are 'evidence' of his followers. The presence of figures positioned on the ground on the left provides indexical evidence of violence, while the uniformed soldiers on the right introduce a competing political presence. The fiery colour palette intensifies associations with conflict and destruction, anchoring authority within a visual field of warfare.

These connotative meanings that function as the coded iconic messages (Barthes, 1977) draw on established cultural narratives identified by Cele (2001), who demonstrates that historical and oral accounts of Shaka circulated multiple meanings — including warrior, ruler, and aggressor — from which later visual representations selectively emphasised martial identity.

Symbolic / Ideological and Myth-related Analysis

At the symbolic and mythic level, Poster 1 participates in the transformation of historical representation into what Barthes (1972) terms myth. Through repeated visual associations between leadership, weaponry, muscularity, and scenes suggestive of killing, authority is presented as inseparable from violence. These associations appear naturalised through repetition and visual excess.

The inclusion of the British flag and uniformed soldiers symbolically reframes Shaka's historically mediated encounters with Europeans as direct confrontation. This aligns with Hamilton's (1998) argument that colonial and apartheid-era historiography produced a simplified "Shaka myth" by collapsing historical complexity into spectacle and opposition. Rather than presenting diplomacy or political negotiation, the poster encodes conflict as the defining historical relation.

Following Hall's theory of representation, the poster encodes a dominant representational code in which African leadership is constructed through physical excess and martial force. The contrast between the disciplined formation of European soldiers and the fiery, organic background surrounding Shaka fixes meaning through binary opposition, encouraging a preferred reading that limits interpretive openness. As Tomaselli (2003b) and Mudimbe (1988) argue, such visual strategies reproduce colonial discursive frameworks that frame African power as inherently violent and pre-modern.

The absence of symbols relating to governance, lineage, spirituality, or communal organisation further narrows meaning. This absence is ideological, reducing Shaka's authority to bodily dominance and warfare.

In response to research question one, which seeks to identify the signs and symbols used in the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) posters and how they construct narratives about Shaka Zulu, Poster 1 demonstrates how iconographic elements function evidentially and indexically to produce meaning. The exaggerated body, spear motif, hierarchical scaling of figures, scenes suggestive of killing, and fiery colour palette collectively construct a narrative of leadership grounded in domination and conflict. Through these signs, Shaka Zulu is represented as a monumental warrior-leader whose authority is made visible through control over others and association with violence. This narrows the range of possible interpretations and stabilises a mythic representation of African leadership consistent with colonial and apartheid-era visual conventions.

In response to research question two, which questions whether and how the iconography encoded in the posters reflects changes in the representation of Shaka Zulu from apartheid to democratic South Africa, Poster 1 of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) establishes a baseline against which such change can be assessed. The poster's reliance on exaggerated physicality, weapon-centred symbolism, hierarchical scaling, and imagery suggestive of violence reflects a representational logic in which African leadership is visualised primarily through militarisation and domination. This iconographic configuration is consistent with apartheid-era visual conventions that framed African power as threatening, excessive, and rooted in bodily force. By foregrounding these signs as normative indicators of authority, Poster 1 provides a stable point of comparison for later posters produced in a democratic context, allowing shifts—or continuities—in representational strategies to be identified through changes in posture, symbolism, relationality, and narrative emphasis.

In relation to research question three, which aims to examine how cultural and ideological shifts, or their absence, are reflected in the iconography of the posters and how these contribute to the sustained articulation or re-articulation of the cultural myth of Shaka Zulu within a post-apartheid context, Poster 1 of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) demonstrates an early and forceful articulation of a warrior-centred myth. Through repeated visual associations between leadership, violence, and bodily dominance, the poster contributes to the stabilisation of a myth in which Shaka's authority appears natural, inevitable, and inseparable from militarised masculinity. This mythic framing, rooted in colonial and apartheid-era ideologies, limits polysemy and marginalises alternative understandings of leadership such as diplomacy, spirituality, or communal governance. As such, Poster 1 functions as an ideological anchor, enabling the study to trace whether subsequent posters sustain this myth unchanged or re-articulate it in response to post-apartheid cultural and ideological reconfigurations.

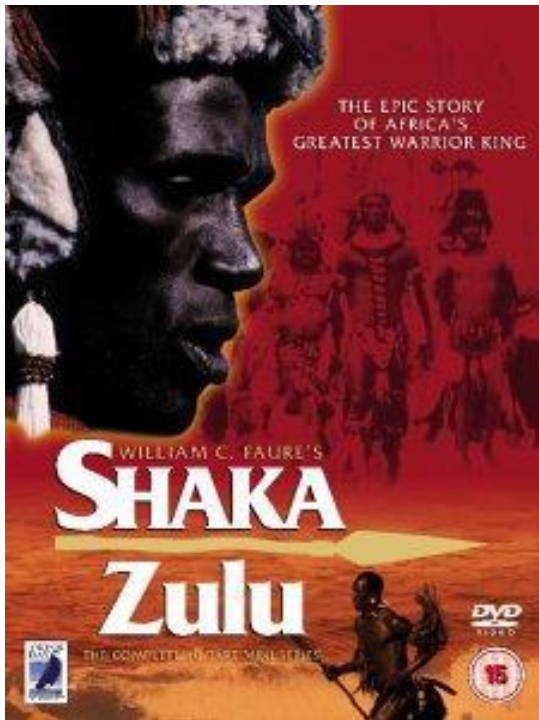


Figure 5.3: Poster 2 of Shaka Zulu (1986)

The above is a television series poster by South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) & Harmony Gold USA (1986) *ShakaZulu*

Available at <https://www.imdb.com/tt0086798/mediaviewer/>

Poster 2: Semiotic Analysis – Shaka Zulu (1986)

Denotative Description

Poster 2 presents a large, shadowed profile of a male face occupying the left side of the composition. The figure is identified by the centrally positioned title text as “Shaka Zulu”. His facial features are partially obscured by darkness, with strong contrast between light and shadow. At the non-coded iconic level (Barthes, 1977) the figure faces toward the right side of the image, looking over a group of smaller human figures positioned in the background.

In the lower half of the poster, a group of warriors carrying shields and spears advances forward. These figures are rendered at a much smaller scale than the face in the foreground. The background is dominated by fiery orange and yellow tones, suggesting heat, smoke, or fire. The title “Shaka Zulu” appears in bold, block lettering on the right side of the image, visually separating the dominant face from the background figures. Unlike Poster 1, this image includes additional linguistic messaging (Barthes, 1977) that reads, “The Epic of Africa’s Greatest Warrior King.” If and how this reinforces the connotative and symbolic meaning will be discussed below.

Connotative Analysis

At the connotative level, meaning is organised through scale, facial proximity, and visual dominance that all signify the coded iconic message (Barthes, 1997). The enlarged facial profile functions as an

indexical sign of authority, suggesting oversight, command, and surveillance. The disproportionate size of the face relative to the background figures provides visual evidence of hierarchical power relations, positioning Shaka as a commanding presence rather than an equal participant in collective action.

The obscured facial features contribute to a connotation of emotional restraint, hardness, and mystery. Rather than offering an expressive or relational gaze, the image withholds intimacy, reinforcing distance and authority. The background warriors, shown as smaller and partially indistinct, index followers or soldiers under command. Their forward movement visually supports a narrative of mobilisation and warfare.

The fiery colour palette further intensifies associations with conflict. Fire and smoke operate as culturally loaded signs that connote destruction, danger, and violence. Together, these elements construct leadership as something exercised from above and enacted through collective force.

The use of the term “epic” connotes grandeur, scale, and heroic narrative, positioning Shaka within a larger-than-life, almost mythic tradition associated with legendary figures and monumental histories. Similarly, the phrase “greatest warrior king” reinforces a hierarchy of exceptionalism, where “king” signifies authority, sovereignty, and political legitimacy, while “warrior” emphasises militarised power and conquest. Together, these descriptors elevate Shaka beyond a historical figure into a mythologised symbol of dominance and heroic masculinity, shaping how the viewer is positioned to interpret the image.

As Thamsanqa Cele (2001) notes, historical and oral traditions around Shaka carried multiple meanings, including ruler, military strategist, and feared figure. Poster 2 draws selectively on this archive, privileging the martial and authoritarian dimensions through visual emphasis and scale.

Symbolic / Ideological and Myth-related Analysis

At the symbolic and mythic level, Poster 2 contributes to the stabilisation of Shaka as a mythic figure rather than a historically situated subject. Following Barthes’ (1972) understanding of myth, the poster transforms culturally specific representations into meanings that appear natural and inevitable. Here, authority is symbolised through facial dominance, visual surveillance, and association with armed collectives.

Using Hall’s theory of representation, the image can be read as a coded construction rather than a neutral depiction. Shaka is encoded through a dominant representational code of the warrior-leader, in which power is expressed through distance, control, and violence. The absence of contextual markers such as community, governance structures, or spiritual symbolism narrows interpretation and fixes meaning around militarism.

The background warriors, rendered as a mass rather than as individuals, reinforce this ideological framing. They function symbolically as extensions of Shaka's will rather than autonomous actors. This aligns with apartheid-era visual conventions identified by Tomaselli (2003b), where African leadership was frequently represented as collective force directed by a singular, overwhelming authority.

The fire-filled background further mythologises Shaka's presence. Rather than situating him within a specific historical moment, the image collapses time into spectacle, reinforcing what Hamilton (1998) describes as the transformation of Shaka into a "historical invention" shaped by colonial and ideological anxieties.

In response to research question one, Poster 2 demonstrates how iconography operates through scale, facial dominance, and militarised imagery. The enlarged facial profile functions indexically as evidence of authority and command, while the smaller warriors positioned below and behind provide visual evidence of followership and collective mobilisation. The fiery colour palette and presence of weaponry further support a narrative linking leadership to warfare and coercive power. Through these combined signs and symbols, the poster constructs a narrative of Shaka Zulu as a distant, commanding, and militarised leader, reinforcing a mythic representation of authority grounded in dominance rather than relational or political complexity.

In response to research question 2, Poster 2 of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) exemplifies a late-apartheid representational mode that foregrounds continuity rather than transformation. The emphasis on enlarged facial dominance, militarised imagery, and hierarchical scaling reinforces a visual grammar in which leadership is articulated through distance, command, and coercive power. These iconographic choices align with broader apartheid-era conventions that framed African authority as authoritarian and martial, thereby establishing a representational baseline against which later democratic-era depictions can be assessed for evidence of ideological shift or rearticulation.

In relation to research question three, Poster 2 of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) contributes to the consolidation of a dominant warrior myth. Through the repetition of visual signs such as facial monumentality, weaponry, and subordinated collective figures, the poster stabilises a mythic construction of leadership grounded in domination and militarised authority. This narrowing of meaning limits alternative interpretations of Shaka as a relational, political, or strategic leader, thereby sustaining a colonial-inflected myth of African power that later post-apartheid representations may either reproduce or seek to reconfigure.

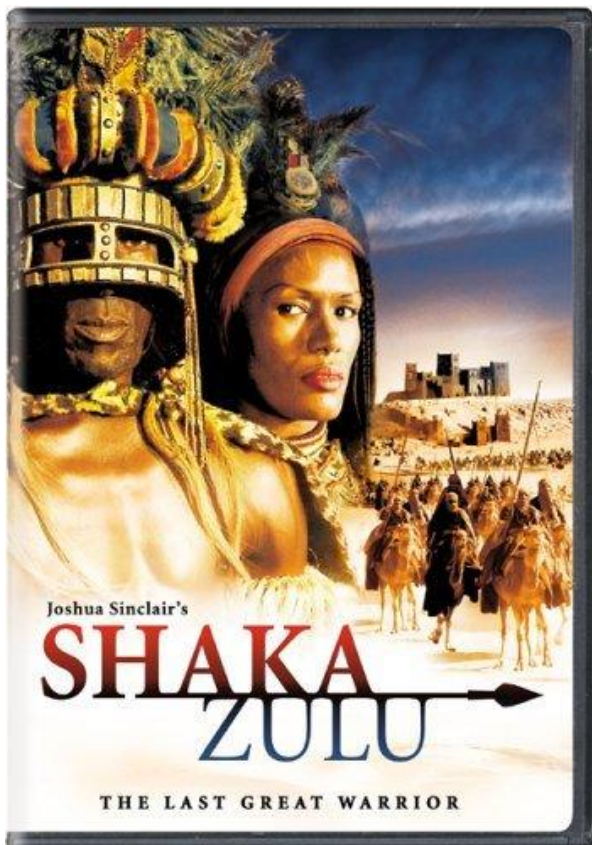


Figure 5.4: Poster 3 of Shaka Zulu (1986)

The above is a television series poster from the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) & Harmony Gold USA (1986) *Shaka Zulu: The Last Great Warrior*. Image Available at IMDb: <https://image.tmbd.org/t/p/original/roQyRTPqjZyK6PTpO1IWZcWZN.jpg>

Poster 3 Semiotic Analysis - Shaka Zulu (1986)

Denotative Description

Poster 3 presents two large human figures positioned in the foreground. Reading the image as a non-coded iconic message (Barthes, 1977), the male figure occupies the left side of the image and is shown wearing an elaborate traditional headdress and minimal upper-body attire. His body is muscular and prominently lit. In the background, a group of mounted figures moves across a sandy landscape toward a fortified settlement. These figures are significantly smaller in scale than the foreground subjects. The environment appears arid and expansive, rendered in warm, golden tones. In terms of the linguistic message (Barthes, 1977), the title “Shaka Zulu” is placed prominently in the lower centre of the poster, accompanied by the subtitle “The Last Great Warrior”. The meaning signified in the use of these exact words will be explained in the section that follows.

Connotative Analysis

At the connotative level, meaning is organised through spatial hierarchy, scale, and proximity. Therefore, this section will discuss aspects and connotations of the coded iconic message (Barthes,

1977). Shaka's placement in the extreme foreground and his exaggerated physical presence function indexically as evidence of authority and leadership. His muscular body and traditional regalia connote strength, dominance, and warriorhood. The fact that he is positioned ahead of all other figures visually establishes him as the primary locus of power.

Slightly behind and to the right of Shaka appears a female figure, identified through intertextual knowledge as Nandi, Shaka's mother. She is clothed, adorned with head covering and jewellery, and faces forward with a composed expression. Nandi's presence, while secondary in spatial positioning, is nevertheless significant. Although she stands behind Shaka, she is rendered at a similar scale and remains close to him. This proximity functions as an indexical sign of influence and relational importance. Her calm posture and direct gaze contrast with the militarised movement in the background, connoting guidance, lineage, and maternal authority rather than physical force.

The mounted figures in the background, rendered smaller and moving collectively, index followers or subjects under leadership. Their reduced scale provides visual evidence of hierarchy, reinforcing Shaka's elevated status. The desert landscape and expansive space further connote endurance, conquest, and historical journey.

As Cele (2001) demonstrates, Shaka's image in oral and historical narratives has long carried multiple meanings, including warrior, ruler, and morally ambivalent figure. Poster 3 selectively draws on these traditions, foregrounding warrior-leadership while gesturing toward lineage and legitimacy through Nandi's inclusion.

Symbolic / Ideological and myth-related analysis

At the symbolic and mythic level, Poster 3 extends the mythic construction of Shaka by combining martial power with lineage-based legitimacy. Following Barthes' (1972) conception of myth, the image transforms culturally specific signs into meanings that appear natural and self-evident. Leadership is symbolised not only through bodily strength but also through inheritance and destiny.

Using Hall's theory of representation, the poster can be read as a coded articulation of African authority. Shaka is encoded through the dominant code of the warrior-king, while Nandi's presence introduces a supporting code of ancestral continuity and maternal support. However, her positioning behind him ensures that authority remains visually centered on masculine power.

Returning to the deeper meaning of the linguistic message (Barthes, 1977), "The Last Great Warrior", it has already been established that the warrior image of Shaka dominated. The deliberate choice of the word "last" could also symbolise that with Shaka's death it was the end of an era. Thus, "The Last Great Warrior" functions ideologically to frame Shaka as an endpoint rather than part of an ongoing political tradition. This textual framing contributes to myth by isolating his leadership as exceptional and final, rather than historically situated within broader systems of governance. The background

procession, reduced to spectacle, reinforces a narrative of movement and conquest rather than administration or diplomacy.

As Hamilton (1998) argues, such representations participate in the historical invention of Shaka, shaped by colonial and apartheid-era frameworks that privilege spectacle and exceptionalism. Tomaselli (2003b) similarly notes that visual media often inherit these earlier discursive formations, reproducing simplified heroic archetypes.

In response to the study's first research question Poster 3 demonstrates how iconography operates through bodily prominence, spatial hierarchy, and relational positioning. Shaka's foregrounded body functions indexically as evidence of authority and warrior leadership, while the smaller mounted figures in the background provide visual evidence of followership and collective mobilisation. Nandi's close yet subordinate placement operates as an indexical sign of lineage and influence, supporting a narrative of inherited legitimacy without displacing masculine authority. The linguistic message "The Last Great Warrior" further anchors this narrative linguistically, guiding interpretation toward a mythic understanding of Shaka as a singular, martial figure, and perhaps that last of his kind. Together, these signs and symbols construct a narrative of leadership grounded in physical dominance, destiny, and hierarchical control.

Considering the second research question Poster 3 of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) establishes a late-apartheid representational position that foregrounds continuity rather than transformation. The poster continues to privilege bodily dominance, martial symbolism, and hierarchical spatial organisation as the primary visual markers of leadership. Although the inclusion of Nandi introduces relational and genealogical cues, these elements do not significantly disrupt the dominant warrior-centred framing. Instead, lineage is incorporated in a way that reinforces rather than reconfigures masculine authority. As such, Poster 3 consolidates the apartheid-era visual grammar of Shaka as a singular, militarised leader, providing a point of comparison against which later democratic-era posters can be examined for evidence of representational shift or rearticulation.

In relation to the third research question centered on articulation or re-articulation of the cultural myth of Shaka Zulu within a post-apartheid context, Poster 3 of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) contributes to the stabilisation of a warrior-based myth. Through the combined use of hierarchical scaling, mounted imagery, and the linguistic anchoring "The Last Great Warrior," the poster reinforces a mythic construction of Shaka as an exceptional, destiny-driven figure whose authority derives from conquest and command. While the visual presence of Nandi gestures toward lineage and continuity, this relational element is absorbed into an overarching myth that privileges militarised masculinity and singular leadership. In this way, the poster sustains an inherited ideological framing of African power, narrowing the range of possible interpretations and establishing a mythic baseline that subsequent post-apartheid representations may either reproduce or contest.

Semiotic Analysis of Posters: *Shaka iLembe* (2023)



Poster 1: Shaka close up shot

Poster 2: Nandi (Shaka's mother)

Poster 3: Shaka facing backwards

Figure 5.5: Three Posters of *Shaka iLembe* (2023)



Figure 5.6: Poster 1 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023)

The above is a television series poster) by Mzansi Magic & Bomb Productions

Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt18747550/mediaviewer/>

Denotative Description

Poster 1 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) presents a frontal, tightly framed portrait of Shaka, portrayed by Lemogang Tsipa (his name also being part of the linguistic message), positioned centrally within the composition. Shaka faces the viewer directly, with a serious and controlled facial expression and a steady, forward-facing gaze. He wears traditional Zulu adornments, including a woven headband, feathered headgear, and layered beaded necklaces. His upper body is bare, revealing a natural, unexaggerated physique.

Behind Shaka, a dense formation of Zulu warriors extends across the width of the frame. These figures are shown holding shields and spears and appear arranged in organised ranks. The warriors are rendered with less visual clarity and at a smaller scale than the central figure. The background is dominated by muted blue-grey tones, suggesting an overcast sky rather than a fiery or chaotic environment.

At the denotative level, the poster depicts Shaka as a central figure embedded within a collective military presence.

Connotative Analysis

At the connotative level, Poster 1 signals a marked departure from the visual strategies employed in the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) posters. Whereas the earlier imagery relied on exaggerated musculature, weapon prominence, and aggressive stances to signify power, the components of the coded iconic signs (Barthes, 1977) in this poster constructs authority through composure, grounded posture, and visual restraint.

Shaka's direct gaze and upright stance connote resolve, control, and responsibility rather than overt aggression. Following Barthes' (1977) distinction between denotation and connotation, stillness here can function as a signifier of legitimacy and emerging authority. Power is communicated through bodily presence and positioning rather than through spectacle or physical excess.

The warriors positioned behind Shaka function metonymically as signs of collective strength and social cohesion. Their reduced scale and partial blurring relative to the central figure operate indexically, evidencing hierarchy while avoiding the visual domination characteristic of the 1986 posters. Shaka does not tower over the collective; instead, he appears to emerge from within it. This compositional choice connotes leadership as relational and communal rather than singular and coercive.

The subdued colour palette reinforces this connotative shift. The absence of fiery reds and violent chromatic contrasts tempers the mythic register

Symbolic / Ideological and Myth-related Analysis

At the level of myth, Poster 1 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) articulates an ideological reorientation in the visual representation of African leadership, though this is more clearly expressed through themes of leadership and determination. Leadership is symbolised through Shaka's positioning at the forefront of the group, with warriors following behind him, visually establishing authority through guidance rather than isolation. Determination is conveyed through his facial expression, which suggests focus, resolve, and forward intent rather than aggression or excess. In contrast to the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) posters, where power is naturalised through spectacle and hyper-masculine dominance, this image constructs a more measured representation in which authority is associated with direction, purpose, and collective movement.

Drawing on Barthes' (1972) conception of myth as a system that naturalises historical meanings, the poster does not eliminate myth-making but redirects it. The land and sky operate symbolically as more than background elements; they situate Shaka within a broader cosmological and environmental context, signaling authority as relational and culturally grounded rather than derived solely from conquest.

From Hall's theory of representation, Poster 1 encodes a re-articulated representational code. Shaka remains masculine and authoritative, yet the meaning of that authority is transformed. Power is no longer fixed through domination or bodily excess but articulated through alignment with collective structures and cultural continuity.

The spatial organisation is central to this ideological shift. Myth is present but restrained, framing Shaka as a leader defined by responsibility and anticipation rather than destruction. Shaka's prominence anchors rather than erases the presence of others, disrupting the colonial visual trope evident in the 1986 posters where African leadership was isolated, monumentalised, and rendered exceptional. Here, leadership is embedded within the social body.

Meaning remains more open and polysemic. Shaka may be read simultaneously as warrior, leader, and emerging historical subject situated within community. This openness reflects a post-apartheid representational context in which African history is narrated through indigenous epistemologies rather than colonial spectacle, marking a significant semiotic and ideological shift from earlier visual constructions.

In response to research question one, which seeks to identify the signs and symbols (iconography) used in the *Shaka iLembe* (2023) posters and how they construct narratives about Shaka Zulu, Poster 1 demonstrates how iconography operates through grounded bodily presence, collective positioning, and cultural regalia. Shaka's centrally positioned body and direct frontal gaze function indexically as evidence of authority and emerging leadership, while the tightly grouped warriors positioned behind him provide visual evidence of collective mobilisation and social support. The ceremonial beadwork

and headband operate as indexical signs of cultural legitimacy and status rather than purely militarised power. The subdued colour palette and absence of explicit scenes of killing further shift the narrative away from spectacle and coercion. Through these combined signs and symbols, Poster 1 constructs a narrative of leadership grounded in legitimacy, collective alignment, and responsibility, expanding the representational field beyond the monumental warrior archetype characteristic of earlier depictions.

In response to research question two, that questions whether (and how) the iconography encoded in the posters reflects changes in the representation of Shaka Zulu from apartheid to democratic South Africa, Poster 1 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) demonstrates a clear reconfiguration of visual codes associated with leadership and authority. Unlike the apartheid-era posters, which foregrounded exaggerated physicality, weaponry, and scenes suggestive of violence, this poster replaces spectacle with composure and relational presence. Authority is articulated through Shaka's direct gaze, grounded posture, and integration within a collective formation rather than through bodily excess or domination. The warriors positioned behind him function not as subordinated figures overwhelmed by scale, but as organised supporters, signaling leadership as socially embedded rather than coercive. This shift in iconographic emphasis reflects broader ideological changes associated with democratic South Africa, where African leadership is increasingly represented through legitimacy, cultural continuity, and collective responsibility rather than militarised dominance.

In response to research question three, which centers on analysing cultural and ideological shifts, or lack thereof, reflected in the iconography of the posters contribute to the sustained articulation or re-articulation of the cultural myth of Shaka Zulu within a post-apartheid context, Poster 1 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) demonstrates a deliberate re-articulation rather than a simple repetition of inherited myth. While the poster retains recognisable symbols of authority—central placement, traditional regalia, and military association—it reworks their meaning through compositional restraint, collective framing, and an emphasis on legitimacy rather than domination. The absence of overt violence, exaggerated physicality, or scenes of killing signals a shift away from colonial and apartheid-era myths that equated African power with brutality. Instead, the iconography sustains the myth of Shaka as a powerful leader while re-articulating it through post-apartheid ideological values that privilege cultural rootedness, communal authority, and moral responsibility. In this way, the poster contributes to the ongoing circulation of the Shaka myth, but does so by reshaping its ideological foundations to align with contemporary Afrocentric and decolonial re-imaginings of leadership



Figure 5.7: Poster 2 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023)

The above is a promotional poster by Bomb Productions; Mzansi Magic.
Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt18747550/mediaviewer/rm2522612481/>

Poster 2: Semiotic Analysis – Shaka iLembe (2023)

Denotative Description

Poster 2 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) presents a female figure positioned prominently in the foreground. Her body is turned slightly away from the viewer, while her head turns back over her shoulder, directing her gaze toward the viewer. Her facial expression is calm, composed, and resolute. She wears traditional attire and elaborate adornments, including a beaded headdress with red detailing and a voluminous hair arrangement, indicating ceremonial or culturally significant dress rather than everyday wear.

The background depicts a wide natural landscape composed of rolling hills and distant mountains beneath a cloud-heavy sky. The colour palette is muted and earthy, dominated by browns, greens, and cool greys. Textual elements are prominently displayed, including the phrase “INDODANA YAMI IYEZA” (“My son is coming”) above the series title *Shaka iLembe*, followed by the release information “Coming 2023” (IMDb, 2023). The linguistic message thus identifies her as a maternal figure.

At the denotative level, the poster centers a maternal figure within a natural environment and explicitly links her presence to the anticipated arrival of Shaka.

Connotative Analysis

At the connotative level, Poster 2 reframes authority through maternal presence, anticipation, and foresight rather than through spectacle or violence. Drawing on historical knowledge the reader can

interpret that the maternal figure is Nandi, Shaka's mother. Her turned pose signifies watchfulness and awareness; she appears oriented simultaneously toward the present and toward an anticipated future. Her calm composure connotes strength grounded in patience, endurance, and certainty rather than aggression.

Following Barthes' (1977) framework, these visual signifiers elevate motherhood beyond a biological role and reposition it as a symbolic source of destiny and legitimacy. Nandi's authority is conveyed through stillness, posture, and gaze, rather than through bodily excess or martial readiness.

The landscape functions connotatively as well. The expansive terrain situates Nandi, and by extension Shaka, within land and ancestry, signaling belonging, continuity, and rootedness. The absence of weaponry or explicit battle imagery is notable. Meaning is constructed through anticipation rather than action, reinforcing a narrative of emergence rather than conquest.

The Zulu phrase "Indodana yami iyeza" performs a strong anchoring function, guiding interpretation toward a narrative of becoming an inheritance. Rather than naming Shaka directly, the text frames him through relational identity, positioning leadership as something announced and foreseen rather than immediately enacted.

In relation to Research Question 1, which asks what signs and symbols are used in the posters and how they construct narratives about Shaka Zulu, Poster 2 constructs meaning through a set of indexical signs that foreground lineage, maternal authority, and anticipatory leadership. Nandi's large scale relative to the surrounding landscape operates indexically as evidence of her narrative importance, visually signaling that Shaka's authority is framed as emerging through maternal lineage rather than appearing in isolation.

The textual phrase "Indodana yami iyeza" functions as a key linguistic sign that provides evidentiary support for reading the image as a moment of anticipation. At an indexical level, it directs the viewer toward futurity and inheritance rather than conflict or domination. Nandi's backward glance further operates as an indexical sign of vigilance and foresight, visually evidencing awareness and protective resolve.

Additional indexical signs are present in Nandi's adornments, including beadwork and hairstyle, which point to cultural identity and status. These elements provide visual evidence of her embeddedness within Zulu cultural structures. In the background, the distant landscape and faint suggestion of social presence provide restrained evidence of a broader historical and communal context, without depicting explicit violence or confrontation.

Collectively, these indexical signs construct a narrative in which Shaka's authority is relational, genealogical, and culturally grounded. Leadership is presented as imminent rather than enacted, rooted in maternal foresight and continuity.

Symbolic / Ideological and Myth-related Analysis

At the level of ideology and myth, Poster 2 encodes a significant reconfiguration of leadership and power. Drawing on Hall's perspective, the poster arguably articulates a representational logic that departs from masculinised and militarised constructions of authority. Power is not visualised through physical dominance but through female agency, lineage, and symbolic foresight.

Nandi is not marginal or positioned as supportive background figure; rather she occupies the central visual and narrative space of the image. This repositioning challenges colonial and apartheid-era presentational tropes that historically rendered African women peripheral to political authority and historical agency, where their roles were often confined to domestic or symbolic rather than recognised as site of power (Hassim, 2006; Gasa, 2007; Nnaemeka, 2004). Authority is, therefore, reconfigured as emerging from familial and cultural structure, rather than being defined solely through conquest or masculinised power.

Meaning remains open and polysemic. Nandi can be read simultaneously as mother, prophet, cultural custodian, and historical agent. Her authority is temporal and relational: she stands at a threshold moment, announcing the emergence of Shaka rather than enacting violence herself.

At the level of myth, Poster 2 constructs a foundational narrative in which Shaka's emergence is legitimised through maternal authority and prophecy; connection to land and ancestry; calm resolve rather than aggression; anticipation rather than spectacle. Myth is not abandoned but redirected, shifting emphasis from warrior to origin, continuity, and legitimacy.

By centering Nandi, the poster expands the representational field of leadership to include gendered, relational, and spiritual dimensions. This marks a clear ideological departure from the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) posters, where women were largely absent and power was anchored almost exclusively in militarised masculinity. Poster 2 thus contributes to a broader re-articulation of African kingship within *Shaka iLembe* (2023), grounding authority in lineage and social foundations rather than singular domination.

In response to research question one, Poster 2 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) demonstrates how iconography operates through lineage, maternal presence, spatial prominence, and linguistic anchorage. The central positioning and enlarged scale of Nandi function indexically as evidence of maternal authority and historical significance, signaling that Shaka's leadership is framed as emerging through lineage rather than appearing in isolation. Her composed posture and backward glance operate as indexical signs of foresight and guardianship, while traditional adornment provides visual evidence of cultural legitimacy and ceremonial status. The Zulu text "Indodana yami iyeza" ("My son is coming") anchors interpretation linguistically, directing the viewer toward a narrative of anticipation, inheritance, and emergence. Together, these signs and symbols construct a narrative in which Shaka's authority is grounded in maternal lineage, cultural continuity, and future-oriented legitimacy,

expanding the iconographic field beyond militarised masculinity to include relational and genealogical foundations of leadership.

In response to research question two, Poster 2 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) evidences a clear representational shift. Whereas apartheid-era posters foregrounded Shaka through militarised masculinity and bodily dominance, this poster reorients meaning toward lineage, maternal authority, and anticipatory legitimacy. The centering of Nandi as the primary visual subject marks a departure from earlier iconographies in which women were marginal or absent, signaling an expanded representational framework in the democratic era. The absence of explicit weaponry and combat imagery, combined with the emphasis on land, prophecy, and Zulu-language text, reflects a move away from representations of power grounded solely in violence toward narratives of emergence, inheritance, and cultural continuity. In response to research question two, Poster 2 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) evidences a clear representational shift. Whereas apartheid-era posters foregrounded Shaka through militarised masculinity and bodily dominance, this poster reorients meaning toward lineage, maternal authority, and anticipatory legitimacy. The centering of Nandi as the primary visual subject marks a departure from earlier iconographies in which women were marginal or absent, signalling an expanded representational framework in the democratic era. This shift is further reinforced through the treatment of landscape, particularly the presence of dark clouds that are indexical of impending rain. As a semiotic sign, rain functions not merely as atmospheric detail but as evidence of transformation and emergence. Within Zulu cultural contexts, rain carries deep symbolic significance, associated with divine blessing, purification, fertility, and the life-giving presence of both God and the ancestors. It signifies renewal, the fertility of the land, and the continued connection between the community and the spiritual realm (Govender et al., 2013). In this sense, the visual suggestion of rain—through the darkened sky—operates as a symbolic register of becoming, implying that both Shaka and the rain “are coming,” each marking the onset of change, growth, and ancestral approval. The absence of explicit weaponry and combat imagery, combined with this emphasis on land, prophecy, and environmental symbolism, reflects a move away from representations of power grounded solely in violence toward narratives of emergence, inheritance, and cultural continuity. Through these iconographic choices, the poster reflects a broader ideological shift in post-apartheid visual culture, where African leadership is increasingly articulated through relational, genealogical, and culturally embedded forms of authority rather than through spectacle and coercion.

Through these iconographic choices, the poster reflects a broader ideological shift in post-apartheid visual culture, where African leadership is increasingly articulated through relational, genealogical, and culturally embedded forms of authority rather than through spectacle and coercion.

In response to research question three, Poster 2 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) demonstrates a significant re-articulation of the Shaka myth. Rather than sustaining the apartheid-era myth of Shaka as a singular, violent warrior-king, the poster reworks myth through maternal lineage, prophecy, and anticipation. The prominence of Nandi functions as an ideological intervention that repositions the

origins of Shaka's authority within familial, cultural, and spiritual frameworks. This is further reinforced by the presence of rain, symbolised through the dark clouds, which connotes ancestral blessing, renewal, and emergence, thereby linking Nandi's centrality to a broader spiritual and ecological framework in which Shaka's authority is not only inherited but divinely sanctioned and in the process of becoming.

The Zulu linguistic message ("Indodana yami iyeza") further anchors this mythic reconfiguration by framing Shaka's emergence as inevitable yet relational, grounded in ancestry rather than conquest. While myth remains operative, it is no longer articulated through fear, spectacle, or domination; instead, it is re-signified as destiny and cultural continuity. In this way, the poster contributes to a post-apartheid re-imagining of the Shaka myth that both resists colonial mythologies and affirms Afrocentric modes of historical meaning-making.

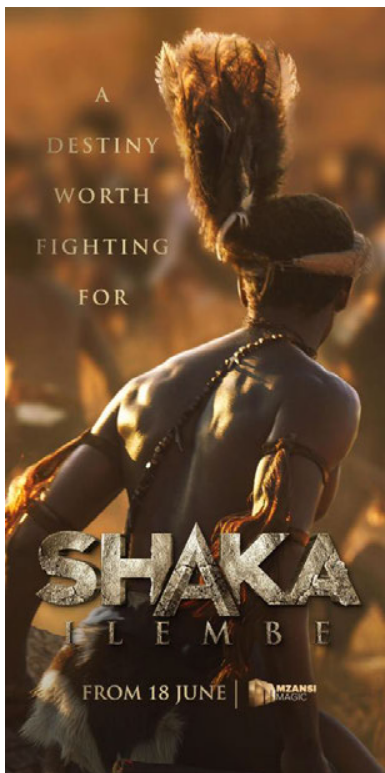


Figure 5.8: Poster 3 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023)

The above is a series television poster by Mzansi Magic & Bomb Productions]. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt18747550/mediaviewer/>

Poster 3: Semiotic Analysis – Shaka iLembe (2023)

Denotative Description

Poster 3 of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) presents a man from a rear, three-quarter angle, with his back and shoulders occupying the foreground of the image. His muscular form is visible but not exaggerated; visual emphasis falls on posture and movement rather than bodily excess. He wears traditional

adornments, including arm bands and a prominent feathered headdress. The figure appears to be in motion, turning toward a crowded battlefield rendered in soft focus behind him.

The background is composed of blurred figures holding weapons, suggesting a collective presence without isolating individual bodies. The colour palette is dominated by warm, golden-brown tones, evoking dust, earth, and late-afternoon light. The linguistic message (Barthes, 1977) reads “A DESTINY WORTH FIGHTING FOR,” positioned vertically along the left side of the image. At the bottom, the series title *Shaka iLembe* and broadcast information (“From 18 June | Mzansi Magic”) anchor the image within its promotional context (Mzansi Magic & Bomb Productions, 2023).

At the denotative level, the poster depicts a moment of imminent action, with Shaka positioned between individual resolve and collective mobilisation.

Connotative Analysis

At the connotative level, Poster 3 encodes a re-articulated representational logic in which agency replaces domination as the primary signifier of power. From Hall’s perspective, Shaka’s partially turned body signifies movement, choice, and becoming. He is not monumentalised above others; instead, he is visually integrated into a scene of collective action.

The absence of explicit enemies, bloodshed, or spectacle keeps meaning open and polysemic. Shaka may be read simultaneously as warrior, protector, leader-in-motion, or historical subject confronting destiny. This openness contrasts sharply with the closed, preferred readings of the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) posters, where Shaka’s identity was fixed through aggression, isolation, and bodily excess.

Poster 3 completes *Shaka iLembe*’s representational arc by articulating leadership as forward-facing and future-oriented; grounded in land and ancestry; justified through moral purpose rather than brute force; and embedded within collective struggle. Poster 3 completes *Shaka iLembe*’s representational arc by visually articulating leadership as forward-facing and future-oriented. His upright stance conveys authority and action, while the richness of his ceremonial attire situates his power within lineage and cultural continuity. The *umqhele* (fur headband) and *isicoco* (feathered headdress, often from the Blue Crane) signal royal status, pride, and bravery, while the *amashoba* (cow-tail tufts) and *imbatha* (leopard-skin chest cover) highlight strength tempered by disciplined authority. The armbands and implied lower-body regalia, including *isinene* (a cow skin piece that covers the front private part) and *ibheshu* (a cow skin piece that covers the buttocks), further reinforce his identity as a warrior-king whose power is morally guided rather than purely physical. Surrounding figures, rendered slightly smaller and positioned around him, visually embed leadership within collective struggle, emphasising that true authority is exercised for communal rather than individual gain. The body remains strong, but strength is subordinated to responsibility and ethical direction.

Leadership is, therefore, reconfigured away from displays of brute strength or excess and toward resolve and ethical accountability, and responsibility to the collective, reinforcing the series' broader Afrocentric re-imagining of power and leadership. Poster 3 thus consolidates *Shaka iLembe's* ideological departure from colonial and apartheid-era mythologies, presenting authority as relational, purposeful, and historically situated rather than inherently violent.

Symbolic / Ideological and Myth-related Analysis

At the symbolic and ideological level, Poster 3 encodes a re-articulated representational logic in which agency replaces domination as the primary signifier of power. From Hall's perspective, Shaka's partially turned body signifies movement, choice, and becoming. He is not monumentalised above others; instead, he is visually integrated into a scene of collective action.

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Semiotic Analysis of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) Pilot Episode

Pilot Episode Summary

The pilot episode introduces the origins of Shaka against a backdrop of political instability and social exclusion within early nineteenth-century Zulu society. While Shaka grows up marked by marginalisation due to his birth status, the inciting incident occurs when escalating inter-clan tensions and threats of violence force his mother, Nandi, to flee with him, disrupting any possibility of a stable childhood. As the episode unfolds, Shaka begins to confront the realities of power, loyalty, and survival through encounters with rival groups and emerging warrior cultures, establishing the central conflict between vulnerability and strength that will define his trajectory. The episode's major focus is on Shaka's exposure to combat practices, the testing of his physical endurance, and the recognition—by allies and adversaries alike—of his latent potential as a warrior-leader. By the episode's resolution, Shaka is positioned at the threshold of transformation: not yet a king, but no longer merely an outcast. The pilot closes by establishing the stakes that will drive the series forward, namely Shaka's struggle to convert personal adversity into political authority, while foregrounding the tensions between lineage, legitimacy, and power that underpin the broader narrative arc.

Denotative Description

At the denotative level, the pilot episode of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) presents a sequence of events that introduce Shaka's early life, social marginalisation, and gradual emergence as a figure of authority within a fractured Zulu polity. The episode unfolds across a series of identifiable iconic traditional cultural Zulu codes including Zulu homesteads, councils of elders, training grounds, and scenes of

regional conflict. These are intercut with the presence of European traders and settlers, whose activities and observations frame parts of the narrative.

The episode's syntagmatic structure follows a recognisable televisual sequence: an initial disruption of social order, scenes of preparation and training, and moments of confrontation that establish Shaka's exceptional discipline and military capacity. Visually, Shaka is repeatedly foregrounded through framing, camera positioning, and narrative focus, while other characters—warriors, elders, and enemies—appear in supporting or reactive roles. Costumes, weaponry, and bodily discipline are emphasised, with spears, shields, and regimented movement recurring throughout the episode. Music cues and rhythmic chanting accompany scenes of mobilisation, reinforcing the sense of collective action and imminent conflict.

At this descriptive level, the episode presents a narrative of emergence, discipline, and conflict, anchored in recognisable historical and cultural signifiers without yet interpreting their broader meaning.

Connotative Analysis

At the connotative level, meaning is produced through the organisation of these signs into patterned relationships, as outlined by Fiske and Hartley's (2003) understanding of television as a system of signs rather than a transparent reflection of reality. The syntagmatic sequencing of scenes—from council deliberations, to military preparation, to confrontation—constructs leadership as something forged through conflict and discipline. This sequence does not merely describe events but connotes a causal logic in which authority emerges from the capacity to organise violence effectively.

Metaphor operates strongly in the construction of Shaka's character. His movement through space, his controlled physicality, and the recurring alignment of his presence with moments of collective mobilisation allow Shaka to function metaphorically as a force of nature—frequently read as storm-like, unstoppable, and transformative. This metaphor is reinforced audiovisually through drum rhythms and escalating musical cues that accompany his rise, analogically linking Shaka's leadership to elemental power rather than negotiated governance.

Metonymy functions through repeated close associations between material objects and cultural meaning. Beads, weapons, and ritualised bodily markings operate as metonymic signs of cultural memory and identity, standing in for broader Zulu social structures without requiring verbal explanation. Similarly, regimented movement and uniform weaponry function metonymically to signify order, discipline, and collective unity, even when individual motivations are not explicitly articulated.

Although the episode allows for multiple possible readings (polysemy), dominant cultural codes work to anchor interpretation. The repeated association between leadership and militarised masculinity encourages a preferred reading in which authority is understood primarily through strength, discipline, and conquest rather than diplomacy, spirituality, or relational governance.

Symbolic, Ideological and Mythic Analysis

At the level of myth, the pilot episode contributes to the construction of what Fiske and Hartley (2003) describe as television's capacity to naturalise ideology through repetition and narrative closure. Shaka's rise is presented not as one possible historical trajectory among many, but as a seemingly inevitable outcome of his exceptional qualities. This inevitability is a key mythic operation: leadership appears destined rather than contingent.

Symbolically, the episode articulates African power through a narrow ideological frame. Conflict, warfare, and bodily discipline are elevated as the primary means through which historical change occurs. Alternative forms of authority—such as consensus-building, spiritual leadership, or maternal influence—are marginalised or deferred, even when present. This selective emphasis aligns with what Hall identifies as a preferred reading, where certain meanings are stabilised while others are backgrounded.

The presence of European observers further contributes to myth formation. Although not always dominant in screen time, their framing function positions African history as something to be watched, interpreted, and ultimately explained through an external gaze. This reinforces a colonial narrative logic in which African agency is spectacularised rather than internally theorised. It aligns with what Stuart Hall (1997: 225–226) describes as “the spectacle of the Other,” where difference is constructed and stabilised through unequal regimes of representation. Similarly, Said (1978) argues that such representational frameworks position non-Western subjects as objects of knowledge to be observed and interpreted, rather than as agents of self-definition”. Within this logic, African agency is not entirely erased but is mediated and reframed for an implied external audience, reinforcing a colonial narrative structure in which power operates through visibility and spectacle rather than through internally grounded epistemologies. This dynamic also resonates with critiques of the “colonial library” (Mudimbe, 1988: 4–10), where African histories are organised and rendered legible through externally imposed systems of knowledge.

Television's paradigmatic choices are crucial here. By selecting militarised masculinity over other possible signifiers of leadership, the episode reduces complexity to ideological legibility. Shaka becomes a symbolic condensation of strength, order, and fear—an image that resonates with colonial representational regimes in which African societies through what Hall (1997: 249) describes as “a set of representational practices” that reduce difference to fixed and simplified meanings, and through what Mudimbe (1988: 4) identifies as “colonial library” a system that produced Africa as an object of knowledge within categories of primitiveness and lack. Within this framework, African societies are not represented in their historical complexity but instead rendered legible through reductive tropes of violence, disorder, and timeliness.

As a result, the pilot episode does not simply introduce Shaka as a historical figure; it participates in the myth-making process that transforms him into a symbolic archetype. This myth is not fabricated

through fantasy alone but through the careful arrangement of televisual signs—narrative sequencing, metaphor, metonymy, and cultural codes—that render a particular version of African leadership natural, coherent, authoritative and warrior-like.

Semiotic Analysis *Shaka iLembe* (2023) Pilot Episode

Denotative Description

At the denotative level, the pilot episode of *Shaka iLembe* (2023) presents a narrative focused on origins, lineage, and social positioning within Zulu society prior to Shaka's rise as a recognised leader. The episode unfolds across domestic homesteads, ritual and communal spaces, and expansive natural landscapes, situating the narrative firmly within indigenous environments. Rather than foregrounding immediate confrontation, the episode introduces Shaka through family relations, maternal protection, and social tension linked to legitimacy, belonging, and inheritance.

The episode's syntagmatic structure differs notably from that of the 1986 series. Instead of moving rapidly from disruption to confrontation, the narrative progresses through scenes of anticipation, dialogue, and social negotiation. Moments of threat and conflict are present, but they are embedded within broader sequences of everyday life, kinship interaction, and political positioning. Shaka appears within a network of relationships rather than as an isolated focal point. Other characters—particularly maternal figures, elders, and peers—occupy substantial narrative space, shaping the conditions within which Shaka's emergence is framed.

Visually, Shaka is foregrounded through framing and positioning, but without exaggeration of physicality. Costume and adornment remain culturally specific, with beadwork, headbands, and ritual attire recurring throughout the episode. Weapons are visible but not dominant, and bodily movement is restrained rather than overtly militarised. Music cues are subdued and atmospheric, accompanying scenes of landscape, dialogue, and ritual rather than signalling imminent battle.

At this descriptive level, the episode presents a narrative of emergence grounded in ancestry, social tension, and anticipation, anchored in recognisable cultural and environmental signifiers without yet assigning fixed ideological meaning.

Connotative Analysis

At the connotative level, meaning is produced through the patterned organisation of these signs, consistent with Fiske and Hartley's (2003) understanding of television as a system of signs. The syntagmatic sequencing—from domestic and maternal scenes, to social negotiation, to moments of latent threat—constructs leadership as something that unfolds through relational processes rather than through immediate conflict. Authority is connoted as emergent and contingent, shaped by social positioning and legitimacy rather than by dominance alone.

Metaphor operates through spatial and environmental alignment rather than spectacle. Shaka's presence is repeatedly associated with land, horizon lines, and moments of stillness, allowing him to function metaphorically as a figure of potential and becoming rather than as an elemental force of disruption. Unlike the storm-like metaphors activated in the 1986 pilot, Shaka here is aligned with endurance, rootedness, and gradual formation. Musical restraint and measured pacing reinforce this metaphorical framing, analogically linking leadership to responsibility rather than eruption.

Metonymy functions through close association between cultural objects and broader social meaning, where "a part stands for the whole, or an attribute standards for the object" (Fiske, 1990: 95), allowing specific elements to "signify wider social structures and meanings" (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 47). Beadwork, hairstyles, ritual gestures, and domestic spaces operate metonymically as signs of cultural memory, lineage, and belonging. These elements stand in for wider Zulu social structures without requiring explicit exposition. Similarly, the repeated presence of maternal figures operates metonymically to signify protection, legitimacy, and continuity, embedding Shaka's emergence within familial and generational frameworks.

While the episode allows for polysemy, dominant cultural codes work to anchor interpretation toward a reading of leadership as relational and socially constituted. The recurring association between authority, ancestry, and communal recognition encourages a preferred reading (Hall, 1980) in which power is understood as something sanctioned by collective structures rather than imposed through force.

Symbolic / Ideological and Mythic Analysis

At the level of myth, the pilot episode participates in a process of re-articulation rather than simple reproduction, with re-articulation understood in Hall's (1985) sense as the reworking and repositioning of existing meanings within new cultural and historical contexts. In *Shaka iLembe* (2023), this re-articulation is evident not only through visual representation but also through the deliberate use of isiZulu as the primary language of narration, dialogue, and cultural expression. As Xhakaza, Dlamini-Myeni, Ngqulunga, and Mkhwanazi (2024) argue, the series' sustained use of isiZulu contributes to the promotion and preservation of language, culture, and indigenous knowledge systems within contemporary South African media. Their findings resonate with this study's semiotic analysis because language itself functions as a signifying system through which cultural meanings are encoded and legitimised. In the pilot episode, isiZulu dialogue, praise poetry, ritual speech, and kinship terms do not merely provide historical atmosphere; they anchor leadership, identity, and belonging within specifically African epistemological frameworks. This marks a significant departure from earlier televisual conventions in which African history was frequently mediated through English narration and external interpretive frameworks. The series therefore re-articulates Shaka's mythology not only visually, but linguistically and culturally, positioning African identity as internally narrated rather than externally explained. Following Fiske and Hartley (2003), myth here operates not by

naturalising inevitability through spectacle, but by framing destiny as contingent and negotiated. Shaka's emergence is not presented as a foregone conclusion; instead, it is symbolically positioned as uncertain, shaped by maternal intervention, social resistance, and historical circumstance.

Symbolically, the episode articulates African power through a broader ideological frame than that of the 1986 series. Leadership is associated with legitimacy, ancestry, and social responsibility, while overt militarisation is deferred. Conflict is present but not yet privileged as the primary engine of historical change. This symbolic emphasis allows alternative forms of authority—maternal influence, communal recognition, and ritual legitimacy—to occupy central narrative space.

Notably, the absence of European observers or explanatory framing alters the ideological logic of representation. African history is not positioned as an object to be interpreted through an external gaze; instead, meaning is produced internally through dialogue, ritual, and social interaction. This shift disrupts the colonial narrative logic identified in earlier televisual representations, in which African agency was often spectacularised for external consumption (Hall, 1997; Fiske, 1987).

Paradigmatic choices are central to this ideological reconfiguration. By selecting relationality, ancestry, and anticipation over immediate militarisation, the episode substitutes complexity for simplification. Shaka is not condensed into a singular symbolic archetype of fear or domination; rather, he is constructed as a figure-in-form whose authority remains open and contingent.

As a result, the pilot episode does not simply introduce Shaka as a historical protagonist; it actively reshapes the mythic framework through which his story is told. Myth here is not the naturalisation of violence or inevitability, but the ethical framing of leadership as something that must be grounded, sanctioned, and socially borne (Hall, 1997; Shohat and Stam, 1994; Xhakaza et al., 2024).

In extending the visual logic established in the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) posters, the pilot episode stabilises a representational framework in which African power is articulated through hierarchy, militarisation, and masculine discipline. Meaning emerges not from individual scenes, but from the structured organisation of televisual signs—sequencing, metaphor, metonymy, and myth. This analysis establishes a clear baseline against which the re-articulations evident in *Shaka iLembe* (2023) can be systematically examined.

In contrast to the *Shaka Zulu* (1986) pilot episode, which stabilised a mythology of African leadership through militarisation, spectacle, and external framing, the *Shaka iLembe* (2023) pilot establishes a televisual logic grounded in relational emergence and internal epistemology. Through Fiske and Hartley's (2003) framework, it becomes evident that meaning is produced not by individual scenes alone, but by the patterned organisation of narrative sequencing, metaphor, metonymy, and paradigmatic choice. This analysis demonstrates a clear representational shift and provides the televisual counterpart to the ideological reconfiguration already identified in the 2023 poster set, preparing the ground for comparative synthesis in the discussion chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the visual and televisual representations of Shaka Zulu in *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) function as complex semiotic constructions rather than neutral historical depictions. Through systematic denotative, connotative, and mythic analysis of posters and pilot episodes, the chapter has shown how meaning is produced through patterned arrangements of iconography, narrative sequencing, metaphor, metonymy, and representational codes within distinct historical contexts.

In addressing Research Question 1, the chapter established that both series rely on recognisable signs and symbols—such as bodily posture, scale, weaponry, regalia, spatial hierarchy, language, and collective presence—to construct narratives about Shaka’s authority. However, the function of these signs differs markedly across periods. In the 1986 materials, iconography consistently constructs leadership through exaggerated physicality, hierarchical dominance, and visual association with violence. In contrast, the 2023 materials deploy restraint, relational positioning, lineage, and cultural legitimacy to articulate authority as emergent, socially embedded, and ethically grounded.

In relation to Research Question 2, the analysis demonstrated a clear representational shift from apartheid-era to post-apartheid visual culture. The *Shaka Zulu* (1986) posters and pilot episode stabilise a narrow representational grammar aligned with colonial and apartheid historiographies, in which African leadership is rendered legible through militarisation, monumentality, and fear. By contrast, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) reflects democratic-era representational priorities by reconfiguring leadership through Afrocentric epistemologies that foreground ancestry, communal recognition, maternal authority, and moral responsibility. This shift is evident across both the posters and the pilot episodes, confirming that the transformation is ideological rather than merely stylistic or medium-specific.

With respect to Research Question 3, the chapter has shown that the myth of Shaka Zulu is neither abandoned nor reproduced unchanged, but continuously re-articulated in response to shifting cultural and political conditions. In the 1986 materials, myth operates predominantly as myth-as-fear, naturalising violence, domination, and inevitability as defining features of African power. In the 2023 materials, myth is reworked as myth-as-ethical-destiny, where leadership is framed as contingent, relational, and socially sanctioned. This re-articulation preserves the mythic status of Shaka while revising its ideological foundations, allowing for greater polysemy and historical complexity.

Importantly, this chapter has demonstrated that posters and pilot episodes operate together as a coherent visual data set through which broader representational logics can be traced across time. While posters condense ideology into iconic form, pilot episodes extend and stabilise these meanings through narrative sequencing and repetition. Analysed together, they reveal how media texts participate in the construction of collective memory and historical consciousness by selecting, fixing, or reconfiguring the meanings attached to iconic historical figures.

Overall, Chapter 5 has established that the representation of Shaka Zulu across apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa reflects a broader transformation in how African leadership, power, and history are imagined. The findings confirm that visual culture plays a central role in sustaining, contesting, and re-articulating cultural myths, making it a crucial site for examining postcolonial identity formation and ideological change.

While Chapter 5 focused on the systematic presentation and semiotic analysis of visual data, the following chapter further interprets these findings within broader theoretical and historical debates. Chapter 6 comparatively consolidates the identified representational shifts within postcolonial, decolonial, and articulation frameworks, examining how the reconfiguration of Shaka's myth reflects changing struggles over memory, identity, and power in post-apartheid South Africa. In doing so, the chapter considers not only what has changed in Shaka's representation, but why these changes matter for contemporary understandings of African kingship, media, and cultural myth-making.

Chapter 6

Articulating the Comparative Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter synthesises the comparative findings of Chapter 5 by placing the posters and pilot episodes of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) in direct analytical dialogue. Chapter 5 established that while similar cultural codes were included in the posters and pilots across both series, their relational signs and paradigmatic and syntagmatic constructions revealed differences in the resultant meanings that could be interpreted. Rather than treating these productions as stylistic variations, the discussion comparatively consolidates the examination on how representation, myth, and ideology are differently articulated across apartheid and post-apartheid contexts, as guided by Hall's articulation theory (Hall, 1996) in considering the research questions, the chapter focuses on three interrelated dimensions: (1) shared semiotic strategies across both series, (2) key ideological and representational divergences, and (3) the implications of these shifts for understanding the re-articulation of Shaka's cultural myth over time.

Semiotic Coherence Across Media: Posters and Pilot Episodes

Across both series, a striking continuity emerges in the relationship between promotional posters and pilot episodes. Rather than functioning as separate or loosely connected texts, these media operate as integrated semiotic systems in which meaning is constructed, reinforced, and stabilised across visual and narrative forms. Posters establish the initial mythic framing of Shaka, while pilot episodes extend and consolidate these meanings through narrative sequencing, performance, and audiovisual emphasis.

In both *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023), Shaka is consistently positioned as a figure of historical consequence. This is achieved through recurring semiotic strategies, including centralised composition, controlled bodily presentation, and the use of culturally recognisable signifiers of leadership, such as traditional Zulu regalia (including the *umqhele/isicoco*) headring and animal skin attire), the carrying of weapons like the *iklwa* (the spear) and *ihawu* (the shield), his spatial position at the forefront of the warriors, all of which index authority, status, and command within Zulu cultural and historical frameworks. Such patterns demonstrate that myth remains a key organising principle in the construction of African kingship across time.

Drawing on Barthes' concept of myth, these representations do not merely depict Shaka but structure meaning by elevating particular values into seemingly 'natural' narratives. At the same time, Hall's theory of articulation is evident in how each series links visual signs, narrative codes, and ideological frameworks into relatively stable configurations of meaning (Hall, 1996; Hall 1997). Importantly, this coherence confirms that representation operates systemically across media forms rather than emerging accidentally within isolated texts.

Divergence in Ideological Articulation: From Militarisation to Relationality

Despite this structural similarity, the ideological content of representation differs significantly between the two series. These divergences speak directly to the second and third research questions by demonstrating how meaning is shaped by historical context.

In *Shaka Zulu* (1986), leadership is articulated through a tightly controlled visual and narrative grammar centred on militarisation. Posters emphasise weaponry, exaggerated musculature, rigid posture, and dark, dramatic backgrounds, while the pilot episode reinforces these meanings through action-driven sequencing and narratives of discipline and confrontation. Together, these elements produce a closed representational system in which authority is equated with dominance and violence. Shaka emerges as a singular warrior-hero, largely detached from relational, spiritual, or communal dimensions.

By contrast, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) reconfigures these same semiotic resources within a different ideological framework. Visual representation shifts toward grounded posture, environmental embeddedness, and ceremonial symbolism, while narrative emphasis moves toward lineage, maternal authority, and ethical formation. Leadership is not presented as immediate domination but as a process of becoming, shaped by social relationships and cultural legitimacy.

This shift produces a more open field of meaning. Rather than fixing Shaka within a singular identity, the 2023 series allow for polysemic readings—simultaneously positioning him as son, historical subject, emerging leader, and moral agent. From the perspective of articulation theory, this represents a re-linking of signs: leadership is no longer sutured to violence alone but to ancestry, land, and collective responsibility.

A focused comparison of poster iconography illustrates ideological shifts. While both series employ myth and symbolism to visualise leadership, they encode different understandings of power and authority.

In the 1986 posters, leadership is consistently expressed through monumentality, bodily excess, and overt militarisation. Authority is made visible through domination, with Shaka positioned above or apart from others. This produces a stabilised meaning in which African power is equated with violence and hierarchy.

In contrast, the 2023 posters re-articulate leadership through relational and culturally embedded forms. Shaka is positioned within networks of lineage, land, and community, emerging from rather than dominating the collective. Visual elements such as environmental settings, restrained bodily representation, and symbolic references to ancestry contribute to a broader ideological shift toward legitimacy and ethical responsibility.

This contrast reflects a movement from what can be understood as myth-as-fear to myth-as-legitimacy, demonstrating how visual culture responds to changing socio-political conditions.

The pilot episodes reinforce and extend these differences at the level of narrative. In *Shaka Zulu* (1986), authority is constructed through a linear progression that links leadership to discipline, endurance, and strategic violence. Narrative causality suggests inevitability, with Shaka's rise framed as the natural outcome of his exceptional physical and tactical abilities.

In *Shaka iLembe* (2023), narrative structure foregrounds origins, relationships, and ethical tension. Leadership emerges gradually through social recognition and cultural alignment rather than immediate conquest. Semiotic elements such as dialogue, ritual, and landscape embed authority within a broader moral and cultural framework.

At the level of myth, these differences become even more pronounced. The 1986 series constructs a closed mythic system in which African leadership is equated with coercive power. The 2023 series, however, sustains myth while opening it to reinterpretation, framing destiny as a function of responsibility rather than inevitability.

Myth and Historical Re-articulation

At the level of myth, the comparison reveals both continuity and transformation. Myth persists as a structuring mechanism across both series, but its ideological direction changes significantly over time.

In *Shaka Zulu* (1986), myth operates primarily through logic of fear and spectacle, in which repetition and visual excess function to stabilise Shaka as a figure of violence, excess, and inevitability. This representational regime aligns with colonial and apartheid-era historiographic formations that construct African leadership as inherently threatening and irrational, rather than historically situated or politically legible (Shohat and Stam, 1994; Hall, 1997; Ntloedibe and Mtombeni, 2025). In this sense, leadership is not merely depicted but ideologically produced through dominant encoding practices that convert African authority into spectacle, thereby naturalising asymmetry between Western rationality and African excess.

In *Shaka iLembe* (2023), myth is not discarded but re-articulated. While the figure of the warrior-leader remains, it is reframed through an ethical and relational lens. Leadership is constructed as responsibility, inheritance, and cultural obligation rather than domination. Myth thus shifts from a mechanism that simplifies and fixes meaning to one that enables complexity, continuity, and Afrocentric reinterpretation.

This transformation illustrates that myth is not static but adaptive. As Barthes (1972) suggests, myth continues to organise meaning even as its content changes. The critical shift, therefore, lies not in the presence of myth, but in how it is articulated within specific historical conditions.

Conclusion

This comparative discussion has demonstrated that representations of Shaka Zulu are not static reflections of history, but dynamic semiotic constructions shaped by shifting ideological and cultural conditions. Across both posters and pilot episodes, meaning emerges through the articulation of signs into historically specific configurations that either stabilise or rework cultural myth. Having established how representation, ideology, and myth operate comparatively across apartheid and post-apartheid contexts, the following chapter consolidates these insights by directly synthesising the findings in relation to the study's research questions, drawing together the analytical threads into a focused statement of the study's overall contribution.

This chapter has demonstrated that *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023) are not simply different portrayals of the same historical figure, but distinct ideological projects articulated through specific semiotic configurations. Through the application of theories of representation, myth, and articulation, the analysis has shown how Shaka's image is constructed, stabilised, and reworked across time in relation to shifting socio-political contexts.

The transition from militarised fixity to relational and culturally embedded forms of authority reflects broader transformations in South Africa's historical consciousness and representational practices. Representation therefore emerges not as a neutral reflection of the past, but as an active site where meaning, identity, and power are continuously negotiated.

Building on this comparative analysis, the next chapter synthesises these findings more directly in relation to the research questions, consolidating the study's central argument regarding the re-articulation of Shaka's cultural myth across visual and narrative media.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Introduction

This study examined how the figure of Shaka Zulu is constructed through visual and narrative representation across time, using a comparative semiotic analysis of promotional posters and pilot episodes from *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023). Situated within a constructivist paradigm and informed by semiotics, representation theory, articulation, and postcolonial scholarship, the analysis approached these texts not as transparent reflections of history, but as culturally and historically situated constructions through which meaning is produced, stabilised, and contested.

Building directly on the comparative analysis presented in Chapter 6, this chapter synthesises the study's key findings by addressing the research questions in a focused and integrated manner. The analysis has shown that the figure of Shaka Zulu is not represented as a fixed historical subject, but as a culturally and ideologically constructed figure whose meaning is produced through the interaction of visual and narrative signs across different historical moments. This chapter consolidates these insights by drawing together the semiotic, ideological, and historical dimensions of the analysis into a coherent statement of the study's overall contribution.

Building on the synthesis presented in Chapter 6, the study finds that while both series draw on a shared repertoire of symbolic resources—such as regalia, bodily performance, and spatial hierarchy—they mobilise these signs within distinct ideological formations. As a result, each production constructs a different understanding of leadership, authority, and African identity.

Representation as Ideological Negotiation

Taken together, the comparative analysis demonstrates that representations of *Shaka Zulu* (1986) are not historically neutral but ideologically constructed. Across both apartheid and post-apartheid contexts, Shaka's image is continuously reworked to reflect shifting cultural, political, and epistemological conditions.

The findings show that representation operates as a site of negotiation where inherited colonial meanings are both sustained and contested. While *Shaka iLembe* (2023) challenges earlier visual regimes, it does not completely abandon them. Instead, it re-articulates existing signs within new ideological frameworks, confirming that cultural meaning is always provisional and subject to reconfiguration.

This negotiation is further reinforced through the presence of European observers within *Shaka Zulu* (1986), whose framing function positions African history as something to be watched, interpreted, and explained through an external gaze. Although not always dominant in screen time, this perspective contributes to myth formation by reinforcing a colonial narrative logic in which African agency is

spectacularised rather than internally theorised. Their inclusion underscores how representation is shaped not only by what is shown, but by the epistemological position from which it is made visible.

These patterns of continuity and divergence provide the analytical basis for answering the research questions, which are synthesised explicitly in this concluding chapter.

Reconfiguring Leadership Across Historical Contexts

The analysis demonstrates that *Shaka Zulu* (1986) constructs leadership through a militarised and individualised representational logic. Across both posters and the pilot episode, meaning is stabilised through recurring visual and narrative patterns: weaponry, disciplined male bodies, hierarchical composition, and action-driven sequencing. These elements work cumulatively to limit interpretive openness and fix Shaka as a singular warrior-hero whose authority is expressed through force, command, and physical dominance. This configuration aligns with a broader colonial visual grammar in which African power is rendered legible through violence and excess.

In contrast, *Shaka iLembe* (2023) re-articulates leadership through relational, cultural, and historical grounding. Rather than foregrounding immediate confrontation, the pilot episode introduces Shaka through family relations, maternal protection, and social tensions linked to legitimacy, belonging, and inheritance. The narrative unfolds through anticipation, dialogue, and social negotiation rather than rapid escalation into conflict. Shaka appears within a network of relationships shaped by maternal figures, elders, and peers, who actively contribute to the conditions of his emergence.

This shift is further reflected in the episode's syntagmatic structure, which differs significantly from the 1986 series. Instead of privileging confrontation as the primary narrative driver, meaning is produced through the gradual organisation of scenes that foreground kinship, cultural practice, and political positioning. Leadership is therefore reframed as contingent, negotiated, and socially embedded rather than fixed or inevitable.

Rather than representing a simple opposition, this shift reflects a process of re-articulation in which inherited sign systems are reconfigured to produce new ideological meanings. Leadership moves from a model of militarised fixity toward one of relational emergence, signalling a broader transformation in how authority is imagined within post-apartheid cultural discourse.

Myth as a Site of Ideological Reconfiguration

The study further demonstrates that myth operates as a structuring principle across both series, though its ideological function changes across contexts. In *Shaka Zulu* (1986), myth works to naturalise historically contingent meanings, presenting violence, isolation, and exceptionalism as inherent qualities of African leadership. Through repetition and visual consistency, these meanings become stabilised, reducing ambiguity and reinforcing a singular interpretive framework aligned with apartheid-era and colonial historiography.

In *Shaka iLembe* (2023), myth is not discarded but reoriented. Dominant signifiers shift toward spirituality, ancestry, genealogy, and land, producing a different moral economy of leadership grounded in continuity, responsibility, and cultural legitimacy. In this way, the posters sustain the cultural myth of Shaka while revising its ideological foundations, aligning leadership with communal obligation, historical agency, and Afrocentric legitimacy rather than colonial-era narratives of brute force.

This comparative shift confirms that myth is neither static nor neutral. Rather, it functions as a dynamic site of ideological work in which meanings are continually reconfigured in relation to changing socio-political conditions. Representation thus emerges as a process of negotiation, where dominant meanings are contested, reworked, and partially transformed rather than simply replaced.

Multimodal Articulation of Meaning

A key contribution of the study lies in demonstrating that meaning is produced across the interaction of promotional and narrative forms. Posters and pilot episodes operate as an integrated semiotic system in which visual condensation and narrative elaboration function in tandem. By examining posters and pilot episodes together, the study reveals how meaning is produced across interconnected texts rather than within isolated representations.

This finding is reinforced through John Fiske and John Hartley's (2003) framework, which demonstrates that meaning emerges not from individual scenes alone but from the patterned organisation of narrative sequencing, metaphor, metonymy, and paradigmatic choice. In *Shaka Zulu* (1986), these semiotic patterns converge to produce a closed, militarised interpretive frame. In *Shaka iLembe* (2023), they operate more diffusely, enabling a broader range of meanings grounded in relational and cultural contexts.

In *Shaka Zulu* (1986), posters establish a militarised mythic framework that is subsequently reinforced and stabilised through the pilot episode's narrative structure, performance, and sound. In *Shaka iLembe* (2023), posters introduce a restorative and anticipatory framework that is extended through narrative emphasis on relationality, cultural grounding, and historical becoming.

This alignment indicates that posters do not merely serve a promotional function; they actively shape interpretive expectations and frame the ideological terrain within which narrative meaning unfolds. Analysing these forms together therefore provides a more comprehensive account of how representation operates across media, reinforcing the methodological value of a multimodal semiotic approach.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes several contributions to scholarship in media and cultural studies. Empirically, it offers a sustained comparative analysis of two influential television productions, demonstrating how

representations of a foundational historical figure are reconfigured across time. Methodologically, it provides a rigorous process through which scholars can integrate visual and televisual analysis, showing how meaning is generated across interconnected media forms rather than within isolated texts.

Theoretically, the study extends the application of representation, articulation, and myth by demonstrating their practical utility in analysing visual culture within a South African context. It shows how these frameworks enable tracing the relationship between signification, ideology, and historical context. In doing so, it affirms the relevance of postcolonial and Afrocentric approaches in interrogating how African histories are mediated and reimagined.

More broadly, the study highlights the role of media representation as a key site in the negotiation of cultural memory and identity. The figure of Shaka Zulu emerges not as a stable historical reference, but as a contested symbolic resource through which broader questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and belonging are articulated.

Conclusion

This study has shown that representations of Shaka Zulu are produced through historically situated semiotic processes that reflect and respond to shifting ideological conditions. Across *Shaka Zulu* (1986) and *Shaka iLembe* (2023), meaning is not inherent in the figure itself but is constructed through the articulation of visual and narrative signs that organise how leadership and power are understood.

By bringing posters and pilot episodes into analytical dialogue, the study demonstrates that representation operates across interconnected media systems in which meaning is established, reinforced, and reconfigured. The transition from militarised spectacle to relational emergence reflects broader transformations in South Africa's cultural and intellectual landscape, particularly in relation to post-apartheid efforts to reclaim and reframe African historical narratives.

Ultimately, the study underscores that representation is an active and ongoing process through which the past is interpreted and mobilised in the present. In this sense, visual media does not simply depict history; it participates in shaping its meaning. The figure of Shaka Zulu thus remains a dynamic site of cultural production through which competing visions of leadership, identity, and historical agency continue to be negotiated.

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