Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison
On the Death of Professor Emeritus Daniel P. Kunene

Daniel P Kunene, professor emeritus of African Languages and Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, passed away peacefully on May 27, 2016 in Madison. He was 93. A member of the UW-Madison faculty for 33 years until his retirement in 2003, Kunene was a preeminent teacher, an acclaimed linguist, literary scholar, transcriber of South African oral works, and translator of South African writers. He was also an award-winning author of poetry, short stories and translations, and a civil rights activist and spokesperson in the long struggle against apartheid in South Africa. He was widely admired by colleagues, and generations of students who continued to seek his sage counsel well after graduation.

Kunene was a pioneering institution builder in African literary-critical and literary-historical studies. His classic scholarly work, Heroic Poetry of the Basotho (1971), was the first to introduce the entire spectrum of Basotho poetry, old and new, to the academy. The historical fiction of Thomas Mofolo had made Basotho prose fiction well known, so Kunene’s work filled a much-lamented gap and was much praised. The book served as a model for similar studies elsewhere in Africa: scholarly studies of African literary, cultural and performance forms by professionally educated African scholars. And through his acclaimed English translation (1981) of Mofolo’s turn of the twentieth-century Chaka, published in the continent-wide Heinemann African Writers series, Kunene would become central to the popularization of Mofolo throughout the continent as one of the earliest pillars of modern African writing. Kunene too has been actively central to one of the key debates in the field: the place of African languages in African writing, whether creative literature or scholarship. Kunene dedicatedly promoted literature in African languages and their translation to other languages African and European. He was also one of few and most consistent African literary scholar to write scholarship in an African language. Kunene’s other notable monographs, in both English and Sesotho, include Dithoko, Dithothokiso le Dithohetletso tsa Sesotho (1996); The Zulu Novels of C.L.S. Nyembezi: A Critical Appraisal (2007); Thomas Mofolo and the Emergence of Written Sesotho Prose (1989); and The Ideophone in Southern Sotho (1978).

In addition to scholarship and translations, Kunene was also a notable author of poems and short stories, many widely anthologized, and many gathered in well-known collections such as From the Pit of Hell to the Spring of Life (1986); The Rock at the Corner of My Heart (2009); A Seed Must Seem to Die (1981); and Pirates Have Become our Kings (1978). Kunene is also the composer of a substantial body of songs and music that is archived at the UW-Madison Mills Music Library. His narrative poem, Soweto (1989), was set to music by Dutch composer Bernard van Buerden and was performed in the Netherlands and in Madison.

Born in Edenville, South Africa, on April 13, 1923, Kunene received a B.A. in 1949 from the University of South Africa and an M.A. in 1951 and a Ph.D. in 1961 from the University of Cape Town. He married Selina Kunene (b. Sekhuthe) in 1953. In 1963, he left South Africa with his family and found political asylum in the United States after a stay in London, England. He was in exile for thirty years and was only able to return to South Africa in the summer of 1993 with his beloved wife Selina for an emotional reunion with their families and a tour hosted by academic institutions in the country. Selina died on October 22, 1993. In 2003 Kunene married Marci Kunene (b. Mauricina Ellis). He is survived by his beloved wife Marci of thirteen years; and children Liziwe, Sipho, Luyanda, Wandile; and grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Before arriving at UW Madison, Kunene taught at the University of Cape Town, University of London, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. Professor Kunene received honorary doctorate degrees from the University of South Africa (1999) and the University of Cape Town (2013), as well as numerous other awards and honors, including the Sol T. Plaatje Translation Award by the English Academy of Southern Africa (2011), the Karel Čapek Award by the International Federation of Translators (FIT) (2011), Honorary Member of the Wisconsin

Daniel was a committed member of the Madison community, culturally and politically. He regularly hosted programs on WORT’s Radio Literature Collective, and was a chief of the Potluck Poets. His poems are personal and socially engaged; he read them at political rallies at the capital and published them in local publications such as The Wisconsin Academy Review, The Madison Times, The Capital Times, The Capital City Hues, and The Wisconsin Poets Calendar.

Kunene was a highly supportive colleague who cared deeply both about peers and juniors, dispensing sage counsel and invaluable mentoring, and was widely respected by all. Highly personable, those who had the good fortune of knowing him will forever miss him.

African Cultural Studies Memorial Resolution Committee