

Shaka and the Modern Zulu State

Dan Wylie

Noble savage? An illustration of Shaka from Nathaniel Isaac's 1836 *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* which set the agenda for the images of Zulu expansion and their king.



■ Two months before the historic election scheduled to bring majority rule to South Africa, the king of the Zulu people, Goodwill Zwelithini, began issuing tough demands for a constitutionally recognised sovereign Zulu state.

The demand was not wholly unexpected: the Zulu have well-entrenched history of distinctive national pride. Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Zulu Chief Minister and head of the Inkatha Freedom Party, has long made political capital of this consciousness. King Zwelithini's demands, however, signalled a clear desire to distance Inkatha, and ironically highlighted fissures in the Zulu polity which both leaders would rather have ignored.

Some pre-election polls indicated that Inkatha would corner not much more than 6 per cent of the national vote despite the numerical weight of 8.5 million Zulu-speakers – some 22 per cent of the whole. No one would deny that powerful sense of Zulu nationhood exists, but these recent political wranglings do raise renewed questions about how this nationhood has been constructed.

One aspect of Zwelithini's call for sovereignty was the question of boundaries – ironically the shibboleth of white apartheid rule which the elections were designed to abolish. Zwelithini demarcated the Zulu 'state' as including the whole of current 'Kwazulu' (the fragmented apartheid 'homeland') and 'white' Natal, in all an area stretching from the Mzimvubu river in the south to Mocimboa do Limpopo in the north, from the coast to the Drakensberg mountains. This, according to Zwelithini, was the 'pre-colonial' situation.

The claim effectively originates with two crucial eyewitness accounts of the Zulu chief Shaka's reign (1816-28). Nathaniel Isaacs and Francis Fynn were displaced frontier ruffians seeking quick and not necessarily legal lucre (Isaacs ended up slaving in Sierra Leone). Both had much to omit from their publicised accounts: running guns, acting as mercenaries, 'going native' and abandoning half-breed children, carrying out executions, possibly even slaving.

Instead, they colluded to project Shaka, the conqueror of most of south-eastern Africa, as utterly monstrous – notwithstanding that Shaka had treated them with royal operation. In an almost hysterical description (the more unbelievable since Isaacs was semi-literate, so could hardly have written his 1836 account at all), Isaacs condemned Shaka to 150 years of European vilification:

Chaka seems to have inherited no redeeming quality; in war he was an insatiable and exterminating savage, in peace an unrelenting and a ferocious despot, who kept his subjects in awe by his monstrous executions... nothing could restrain his ferocity; his eyes evinced his pleasure, his iron heart exulted in his whole frame seemed as if it felt a joyous impulse at seeing the blood of innocent creatures flowing at his feet...

This surely owes more to the penny-dreadful preconceptions of a travelogue-hungry English readership than to historical fidelity. Nevertheless, this passage was still being quoted unreservedly into the 1980s – in James Michener's bestselling epic of South Africa, *The Covenant* for instance.

Fynn, for his part, set the scene for another crucial exaggeration: Shaka had 'ravaged and depopulated' an area stretching '300 miles to the westward, 200 miles to the northward, and 500 miles to the southward'. This was patently absurd, even by Fynn's own account. Moreover Fynn claimed, on no evidence whatsoever, that Shaka had

slaughtered 'a million people'.

The exaggerations suited colonial superiorist notions of black self-destructive violence; the idea that the region had been depopulated by Shaka gelled sweetly with settlers' desire for uncontested land. The captivating image of a landscape 'littered with human bones', launched by Isaacs, persists as a melodramatic icon of Shaka's reign even into the most respected of modern histories, such as Leonard Thompson's *A History of South Africa* (1990). Similarly, the influential historian George Theal arbitrarily upped the number of dead to two million.

The exaggerations spawned the concept of the *mfecane* (usually translated as 'the crushing'): the notion that Shaka had been solely responsible for an explosion of aggression which sent neighbouring tribes scattering and marauding over most of the sub-continent. The *mfecane* became the historiographical sibling of the Great Trek: where the tribes displaced by Shaka had 'ended up' provided the basis for apartheid's 'Bantustans' (areas allocated to the Bantu people). In 1994, 'tribes' on both sides still cling to this ossified structure: Afrikaner trekker descendants holding out for a 'Volkstaat'; Bophuthatswana boycotting national unitary negotiations; King Zwelithini calling for sovereignty.

The myth of a depopulated land has long been exploded (see Shula Marks in *History Today*, January 1980). Even ethnographer-priest A.T. Bryant, whose massive early twentieth-century works on the Zulu consolidated many of the most persistent and dubious legends of Shaka, recognised that 'people had been there all along'. But the *mfecane* itself has only recently come under scrutiny.

The word 'mfecane' came into vogue only in 1928, via E.A. Walker's *A History of Southern Africa*. Interestingly, this coincided with the first explicit expression of Zulu 'nationhood' in Zulu praise-poetry – when the first Inkatha, predecessor to Buthelezi's party, was founded. The mfecane as a conceptual lens through which to interpret the nineteenth century in southern Africa, was elevated to full historiographical respectability with John Omer-Cooper's *The Zulu Aftermath* (1966). In the last ten years, Julian Cobbing has

produced a series of papers attacking the mfecane, inciting vigorous ripostes in the journals. Many of the leading voices in the debate (including Omer-Cooper) are due to be published this year in the proceedings of a 1991 Johannesburg conference, aptly entitled "The "Mfecane" Aftermath".

Cobbing's argument, crudely, is that the Zulu were *not* the 'motor of violence' in the early 1800s. Explanations previously advanced invoking drought, trade competition, or colonial pressures from the south, are as empirically unsound as that of a demonic Shaka. An upsurge in aggression there undoubtedly was, and undoubtedly the Zulu were involved. But the primary culprit, according to Cobbing, was an escalation in slaving activity, by Portuguese at Delagoa Bay (Maputo) to the east, and, further north, mounted Griquas from the west.

Cobbing's case is circumstantially compelling, though as yet short on data. Enormous research remains necessary (in the absence of which much of the furore has centred on the red herring of whether or not Cobbing is reverting to

an unfashionable 'Eurocentrism'). In any event, Cobbing's most important impact is probably his explosion of an 'apartheid' mode of history: a paradigm of more or less absolute, pre-1820s separation of the British Cape Colony, Zululand, and Portuguese Mocambique. (In South Africa's colonial literature, this is fundamentally underpinned by a stereotyped division between, respectively, the morally regenerating, the unregenerate, and the degenerate.) Cobbing has conclusively demonstrated that these spheres were intricately interlinked, and that an infinitely more fruitful paradigm will deal with all three holistically. It is in this sense that the mfecane loses conceptual validity.

Other scholars, notably John Wright in Pietermaritzburg and Carolyn Hamilton of Wits University, partially support, partially contest Cobbing's provocative suggestions. Their detailed work on rich but difficult, mostly twentieth-century oral traditional data, highlights three crucial points. Firstly, the Zulu 'state' was considerably smaller than Fynn – and a century-and-a-half of unquestioning commentators – alleged. In Shaka's time, it may have extended between the Tugela and the Pongolo rivers, between the coast and the middle Buffalo: that is, about half of what King Zwelithini has claimed. Stories of Zulu raids beyond Delagoa Bay, the Cape Colony border (a thousand kilometres to the south), and the Vaal are certainly fictitious.

Secondly, the 'state' Shaka cobbled together, in haste and often in the face of insuperable resistance, was far from the national monolith of the common picture. The chronologies need to be reinvestigated, but if Shaka reigned for

roughly a decade, as most accounts say, it would be practically impossible for him to have achieved the military social and linguistic cohesion these same accounts aver. Indeed, Wright and Hamilton indicate, Shaka's polity, though innovatively organised, was a rather more fragile palimpsest of some outright conquests, numerous marriage alliances, and variously undependable tributaries. Moreover, something of a class system developed as 'original' Zulu tried to consolidate power by linguistically and politically emphasising a putative genetic superiority over incorporated outsiders. After Shaka's death, again after the 1879 Anglo-Zulu war, and indeed to this day, sometimes violently opposed elements manifested a tension within the ostensible unity of 'the Zulu'.

Thirdly, then, the military invincibility and genius which has always been the cynosure of Shaka's reign, whether portrayed in monstrous or heroic form, falls deeply into question. It is undeniable that by 1879, when Zulu regiments confronted, and momentarily defeated, the British redcoats, they were quite highly organised, and

tremendously brave. But John Laband's recent work indicates that the cohesion demonstrated in the face of a common enemy often masked societal fissures: the Zulu response was militarily and politically much messier than the popular image of the seamless charging *impi* (propagated into the present day by the hugely successful, but horrendously inaccurate and stereotyped, 1986 television series *Shaka Zulu*).

As for Shaka, we have not a shred of evidence that he ever personally led his forces into large-scale battles, or used his famous 'chest-and-horns' formation. The oral traditions sometimes record *impis* of *four men*. The eyewitness accounts of skirmishes, though themselves dubious, describe only unedifying stabbing matches. We have only the kind of anecdotes that naturally attach themselves to a prominent leader in an oral society: Shaka killed a mad giant as a youth, invented the stabbing-spear, trained his soldiers by dancing them on thorns, executed cowards, and so on.

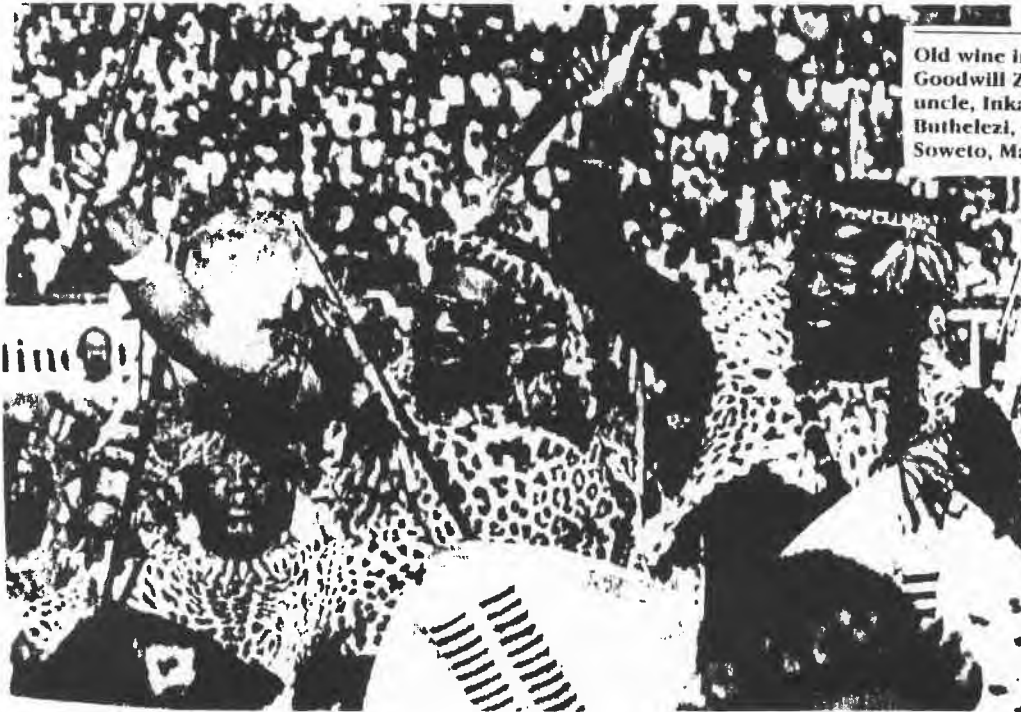
One example will suffice to demonstrate the extent to which fictions have contributed to a cumulative image of Shaka. A marked shift from monster to hero in the portrayal of Shaka occurs with E.A. Ritter's *Shaka Zulu* (1955). Ritter's manuscript was extensively revised by one Edward Hyam in England; what began as clearly a novel finished sounding more like a history. In this impossibly detailed rendition, a cunningly tactical Shaka defeats the rival Ndwandwe tribe at the decisive battle of 'Qokli Hill'. This battle appears unquestioned in virtually every subsequent history. No one checked Ritter's sources. But there is no such battle in any prior account; Ritter invented it. A primary piece of 'evidence' for Shaka's military acumen vanishes.

Clearly, Zwelithini's appeal to an established 'pre-colonial' situation is at best highly problematic. Scholarship has a long way to go before reaching even a probable outline of the period, which has been deeply overshadowed by the military glorification of the 1879 war. Pre-Shakan times remain particularly hazy; scholarly biographies of Shaka, Dingane and Mpande are still to be written. Until very recently, the historiography of Shaka has comprised the uncritical repetition, even invention of apocrypha to match culturally preconceived ideas of what an African 'kingdom' *should* look like; for a century, a nest of organised but bloodthirsty and lascivious vice; in the 'Africanist' upsurge from the 1950s, an epitome of *'sui generis'* African innovation and pride.

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Fictions have inflected the histories precisely because they are socially and psychologically most effective. For both settler and Zulu, a textually constructed Shaka has grown to constitute an essential icon of their distinctive identities. Understanding this process is, in an important sense, more crucial than verifying the history. Nevertheless, the myth is unlikely to be entirely baseless. One suspects that ongoing research will reveal a tough, locally powerful leader – one among several in the region – but one whose fame has resided primarily in the persuasiveness of a kind of self-nourishing literary machine. In their blindness to the 'textuality' of the Shaka material, writers have committed surely the most serious dereliction of scholarly duty in South African historiography.

Dan Wylie is currently completing a Ph.D. on the European image and mythology of Shaka at the English Department of Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa.



Old wine in new bottles? King Goodwill Zwelithini and his uncle, Inkatha president Chief Buthelezi, at a Zulu rally in Soweto, May 1991.

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LETTERS

Sources for Shaka

Sir,
Dan Wylie's analysis of the Zulu warrior myth (May, Cross Current) was a timely summary of recent revisionist theory, undoubtedly necessary in the light of the current debate about the role of the Zulu kingdom within the new South Africa.

Yet I was surprised at the statement that E.A. Ritter 'made up' the story of the battle of 'Qokli Hill' for his biography *Shaka Zulu*. That he did not; mention of it is made in A.T. Bryant's *Olden Times In Zululand and Natal*, published in 1939, almost twenty years before Ritter. Bryant's account of the battle is significantly different from Ritter's, and is based on recorded evidence; although Bryant himself is a problematic source – historians have long recognised that his methodology was flawed and highly eccentric – but he was working from oral tradition, and much of his raw material remains valuable. There are the odd references to this battle in other collections of oral history, too; not many, which suggests that as a battle it probably was quite a small affair, but simply because Ritter gave his subject matter the Rider Haggard treatment does not mean that it was entirely his own invention.

There are problems too, with de-mythologising Shaka as a military commander. His innovations have certainly been over-stressed, but there can be no doubt that a highly effective Zulu military machine existed a decade after his death – during the first well-documented clashes with the forces of Afrikaaner and British expansionism. That Shaka was a talented and dynamic military commander does at least offer a plausible explanation for the emergence of the Zulu kingdom – rather than one of the neighbouring groups, who were also struggling to extend their influence – and is affirmed by an overwhelming mass of *both* hostile *and* sympathetic evidence. Nor should one underestimate the resistance of the kingdom to British colonialism in 1879; it is true that the kingdom did crack at the seams under British pressure, but only after a series of military body blows. Certainly

the British were surprised by the Zulu military capacity; after all, the Zulu inflicted more *dead* on the British at the battle of Isandlwana than in any single battle of the later, and far greater conflicts, of the Anglo-Boer War.

It should come as no great surprise, either, that the accounts of the first British adventurers to Port Natal (now Durban) were unreliable, since this was recognised by contemporary readers; a review in June 18th, 1836, issue of *The Athenaeum* of Nathaniel Isaacs' *Travels and Adventurers in Eastern Africa* comments that 'Respecting the character of that extraordinary man, Chaka, there is but little trustworthy to be derived from the author's pages. Unfortunately for that chief's fame, the task of writing his history has devolved on the adventurers at Port Natal, who seek to free themselves from the imputation of abusing their influence over him, by representing him as a monster of iniquity'.

The image of King Shaka may indeed have been re-cast according to the various needs of a disparate group of commentators across the years, beginning in his own lifetime. That process is clearly still in full flow, yet as one about to pitch his own hat into the ring, one can only hope that it will ultimately lead to a synthesis which will tell us more about Shaka than about ourselves.

Yours faithfully,
Ian Knight,
Canterbury,
Kent.

Dan Wylie replies:

Ian Knight and I actually seem largely to be in agreement. I would concur that the Zulus did indeed become a formidable fighting force, though less machine-like than the popular image; and that Shaka's military acumen may be part of a plausible explanation of the rise of Zulu power, though not in the single-handed tyrannical (or heroic) manner of popular legend. The unreliability of the eye-witnesses Isaacs and Fynn (and of Bryant and Ritter) should not, indeed, be a surprise; however, for all but a handful of scholars, their accounts continue to be disseminated uncritically, particu-

larly through educational textbooks. The *Athenaeum* review is startling less in its perspicacity than for being ignored for more than a century.

What remains at issue is the extent and nature of Shaka's military capability, for which I find little *substantive* evidence. The notion of a set-piece Battle of Qokli Hill dies particularly hard! Bryant does indeed mention a clash between the Zulu and Ndwandwe *near* a Qokli Hill, where Shaka drew up his forces in a great circle for a pre-battle harangue. Ritter seems to have transformed this circle into a whole strategy of concentric circles of Zulu warriors on the hill itself. This tactic is said to demonstrate Shaka's genius; it is precisely this tactic for which there is no corroborating evidence.

Only oral traditions can provide that evidence. Almost all those we have, however, are like Bryant's nearly a century old and demonstrably corrupt and contradictory, to be treated with extreme caution. The most extensive collection, published as *The James Stuart Archive*, briefly mentions only a Kwa Qkori hill, near which *the Ndwandwe beat the Zulu – twice*. Several detailed accounts of the decisive Zulu-Ndwandwe clash roughly agree that a Zulu force feigned retreat down the Geongee ridge before making a successful stand on the banks of the Mhlatuze River (*contra* Ritter's White Mfolozi). Shaka apparently was neither originator of the feint or personally present. Finally, if there are other mentions of Qokli Hill of which I am unaware, indicating a *small* clash, as Ian Knight speculates, this can hardly imply the 9,000 casualties asserted by Ritter. Unquestionably Ritter wrote a *novel*, reliant almost entirely on Bryant and his own imagination, possessing negligible independent historical validity.