

A REPLY TO DR O. DHLOMO

I am sorry that Dr. Dhlomo has found immense difficulty in grasping the point of my article, "The 'Year of Cetshwayo' revisited" (*Reality*, March 1984), and has, besides, found considerable cause for objection. In this brief reply I shall attempt to answer some of the more important of his criticisms and in the process hopefully clarify my original purpose.

Some of our differences are more apparent than real. Like Dr. Dhlomo, I certainly do not think that finality can be reached in historical research, and I very much doubt whether any historian would make claims to the contrary, except perhaps those working in totalitarian societies. Nor do I think that Jeff Guy has said the last word on the destruction of the Zulu Kingdom, and indeed in my article I suggested that some of his conclusions regarding the restoration of Cetshwayo and the ensuing civil upheavals were less than totally satisfying. Nonetheless, no one would deny that Jeff Guy's act is a difficult one to follow, precisely because in Dr. Dhlomo's words, his work marks "a clear point of departure". Jeff Guy's *magnum opus* is, and will no doubt long remain, the most authoritative book on the subject.

But there are other areas in which Dr. Dhlomo and I will have greater difficulty in reaching consensus. The gravamen of his case against me lies, it seems, in the last few paragraphs of his article. Here Dr. Dhlomo suggests that I, like some other well-meaning white South Africans, am guilty of cultural oppression or cultural imperialism. He bases his claims on what he sees as my attempts to dictate to Black peoples on a number of important issues. I am not sure that 'dictate' (or 'prescribe') best describes my intentions. But leaving that aside for the moment, one of Dr. Dhlomo's charges is, to quote him, that I wish to 'dictate', 'which aspect of their history (blacks) should be allowed to study'. This should be seen in conjunction with his earlier assertion that I consider, 'pre-colonial history is irrelevant to the needs of Black South Africans.' I am sorry to have created this impression but am somewhat perplexed that I appear to have done so, for it seems to me that much of my article reflects not only my personal interest in pre-colonial history, but an appreciation of its importance to all South Africans in an understanding of our society (to quote myself) 'as it was and has become'. In fact, like several of my colleagues at South African universities, I rather regret the fact that pre-colonial history is something of a Cinderella subject. Post-graduate students are, understandably perhaps, but

nonetheless unfortunately, more apt to select research topics from the less distant past. On this score then, Dr. Dhlomo and I may be less far apart than he seems to believe.

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But Dr. Dhlomo further asserts that I want to prescribe who blacks should honour, how they should honour them, what political pitfalls they should avoid in so doing, who their authentic leaders are and which black political movements should be regarded as credible. On the first score, what Dr. Dhlomo seems to be implying is that I would not recommend Cetshwayo for commemoration. On the contrary, I argued in my article that for several reasons he was entitled to historical prominence. What disturbs me is his elevation to the galaxy of 'historical and cultural heroes' — the words are Dr. Dhlomo's, not mine — which is where Dr. Dhlomo would have him. In this sense he is right; I do have reservations about how Cetshwayo should be 'honoured' (if that is the right word), and I do feel that there are political pitfalls to be avoided in such an exercise. Given the role that other 'historical and cultural heroes' in South Africa have played in political and ethnic mobilisation, in fostering a sense of racial exclusivity and in further dividing the peoples of this land, can we really afford to be complacent about adding his name to the list? Surely Cetshwayo deserves better? Particularly because Cetshwayo runs the real risk of assuming a specifically Zulu and partisan significance. How can it be otherwise when his commemoration as an 'historical and cultural hero' was initiated by a political organisation closely associated with the ethnically based Kwa-Zulu government, and when both these organs are led by a person who is proud of his descent from Cetshwayo? Cetshwayo might well come to divide blacks and will be shorn of even the dubious merit of having been a successful 'historical and cultural hero'. Under those circumstances the non-ethnic charter of Inkatha, to which Dr. Dhlomo refers, will have availed little.

One last point needs to be made. To equate my fairly restrained questioning of the wisdom and motives of the 'Year of Cetshwayo' exercise with, among other things, an attempt by me to dictate to blacks about which leaders and organisations they should support, is cause for concern. If this is to be the trend, I despair for the future of the liberal tradition Dr. Dhlomo claims to value and admire. □