

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LIVING HISTORY AND VIEWS ABOUT HISTORY

It is a great pity that Peter Colenbrander seems not to have grasped the importance of what Dr Dhlomo was saying in response to his article "The 'Year of Cetshwayo' Revisited." (Reality, July 1984). It would appear to me that an important issue is at stake in the discussion between Dr Dhlomo and Peter Colenbrander, and I believe that this issue should be teased out and that debate about it should continue either until consensus is reached, or until Peter Colenbrander and ourselves have nothing more to say to each other because each has adopted a position unassailable by logic.

For me the issue at stake is what history is and is not. Peter Colenbrander seems to be saying the following. Inkatha is an ethnically based political organisation and KwaZulu is ethnically based and if Inkatha and KwaZulu take initiatives to commemorate King Cetshwayo, his historical significance will change. He says: "... Cetshwayo runs the real risk of assuming a specifically Zulu and partisan significance." And he asks: "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 KwaZulu Government, and when these organs are led by a person who is proud of his descent from Cetshwayo?"

Peter Colenbrander is making the assumption that what Inkatha do or do not do could alter the historical significance of King Cetshwayo. History is not made by historians, and King Cetshwayo's role in South Africa has historical significance precisely because his life and rule, and the circumstances through which he rose to the true heights of an historical hero, are recognised by ordinary people and have influenced the behaviour of millions of Black South Africans ever since. King Cetshwayo continues to influence current events. Because the influence he exerts does not conform to Peter Colenbrander's view of what the South African realities should be, he makes the assumption that King Cetshwayo needs a White liberal guardian. He does want to tell the millions who are influenced by this historical figure how they should be influenced and what they should be doing about King Cetshwayo. He tells six million Zulus not to venerate their past King in the way they choose to do so.

In our honouring of King Cetshwayo we have reflected a living historical sense for the current political circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is we who are being influenced by King Cetshwayo and the historical significance of King Cetshwayo is in part established by the fact that this is the case. King Cetshwayo to us lives in a vibrant and vital living tradition. He continues to exert his influence in a positive way, and our commemoration of him is in part a deeply felt realisation of how relevant he remains to the whole of South Africa.

True South African

I see King Cetshwayo as one of the first true South Africans. He was never the narrow ethnic Zulu King of Peter Colenbrander's perception. During his lifetime he related to other ethnic groups in a vision about South Africa which makes us proud to be Zulus. King Cetshwayo had diplomatic exchanges with King Moshoeshoe and with King Sekhukhuni. He shared thoughts with them about the common fate of Black South Africans, and he actually sent King Sekhukhuni golden sovereigns to help him buy guns to enable his people to defend themselves against attacks from the Boers. King Cetshwayo was the reigning King when the Zulu State was dismembered, and when KwaZulu was incorporated into South Africa willy nilly by history itself, as a people we accepted the new and broader identity which was imposed upon us by the superior military might wielded by Whites.

No Zulu today talks about the re-establishment of a Zulu Kingdom. We are South Africans with a Zulu contribution to make. It is an historical absurdity to assert that only those who have shed their cultural identity can shape history in the right direction.

I have no intention of apologising to Peter Colenbrander or any other White liberal for being of Zulu extraction and being proud of it. I and other Zulus will enact the responsibility which history has placed on our shoulders, and we will do so as South Africans. For us there is no contradiction in this statement.

Zulus as Zulus contributed towards the founding of the African National Congress and its subsequent growth. It is those who feel the need to carry out a vendetta against anybody being Zulu who are a problem, not those who are inspired by being Zulu. Dr Pixley ka Isaka Seme was a Zulu. He founded the ANC and Chief Lutuli was a Zulu. He was the last President-General of the ANC. My pride in being Zulu in no way detracts from my contribution to the struggle for liberation as a South African. In fact my contribution is enhanced by my awareness of being a Zulu.

I sincerely hope that Peter Colenbrander will now find it possible to grasp some of the things we are saying, and in conclusion I feel constrained to add that it would only be polite of Peter Colenbrander to desist in future from calling King Cetshwayo simply Cetshwayo. He must feel free to follow norms in academic circles, but he must also be aware of how insensitive some of these norms are in some circumstances. □

(We regret that for reasons of space, this discussion, must now be closed. Editorial Board)