
The Zulu Identity: Surviving Colonialism, Apartheid, and King Shaka

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There is no clear evidence of when anybody first came to think of themselves as ‘Zulu.’ Even when people do eventually record themselves as ‘Zulu’, it remains slippery, changeable, one of several possible simultaneous identities.

—Dan Wylie, *Myth of Iron: Shaka in History*

The Zulu kingdom is now KwaZulu, one of nine South African provinces. It is situated on South Africa’s eastern coast along the Indian Ocean and encompasses only 7.7 percent of the country’s total area.¹ Although KwaZulu now has eleven official languages, including English and Xhosa, Zulu dominates as the primary spoken language of 80.9 percent of KwaZulu’s population.² In the 1990s, approximately eight million people living in cities of suburban South Africa (outside the coastal borders of KwaZulu) considered themselves Zulu or members of interrelated ethnic groups.³ This identity persists in spite of apartheid efforts that lasted until the late twentieth century to eliminate ethnic and linguistic distinctions by grouping all blacks together and attempts to oust them from South Africa en masse.⁴ This *Zulu identity* originated from the heroification of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona (r. 1816 – 1828). It can be examined in two parts: the popular acknowledgment paid to Shaka’s sweeping social, political, and military reforms, including the socio-militaristic regimentalization of all aspects of Zulu life; and the more recent role of dehumanization as employed by European colonialists and later apartheidists, together with the African cultural response.

Shaka’s Early History

Written history of the Zulu Kingdom typically begins with a non-Zulu: Chief Dingiswayo (r. 1808 – 1818) of the Mthethwa, a Nguni-speaking group of the Bantu population in South Africa. Dingiswayo distinguished himself among the myriad of chiefs and war-makers in South African history as a political and military reformer whose conquests were driven mainly by “his desire to end the internecine fighting between different communities and to bring them under a single government.”⁵ Dingiswayo’s legacy lies not in his own accomplishments,

however, but in those of his protégé, an unwanted bastard child named Shaka. During Dingiswayo's time, the neighboring Zulu comprised a small lineage of approximately two thousand people. The indulgence of their chief Senzangakhona kaJama in a scandalous liaison with a Qwabe princess, although eventually legitimized through marriage, was at best taboo⁶ and at worst considered incestuous.⁷ The result of their liaison, Shaka (a name which actually refers to a gastrological malady), grew up unwanted and ridiculed, the perfect underdog for any story. As a teenager, he took refuge among the Mthethwa, joined their army, and rose through the ranks to military prominence.⁸

Dingiswayo became this young warrior savant's mentor. In many ways, Dingiswayo's social appeal was appropriate for a young Zulu, whose people have been described by South African academic Dan Wylie as having "wanted to belong, to be rooted, to feel naturalized . . . at least some of the Zulu were extraordinarily sensitive about the question of their origins."⁹ The scandalous tragedy of Shaka's origin plays naturally into that attitude and provides a colorful basis for South African identity. African politicians would later draw upon the name and house of Shaka to define and legitimize future sociopolitical and economic struggles.¹⁰

Military and Social Reform

When the Zulu chief died, Shaka returned to the tribe of his birth and seized power over the Zulu community, adapting many of Dingiswayo's policies and approaches, though not necessarily his sociopolitical aspirations. Dingiswayo's chief contribution to Shaka's legacy was the reorganization of his military from fighting units based on lineage into integrated, age-based regiments, thereby weakening the influence of territorially-based familial associations.¹¹ Shaka would run with this motif by dividing his own army into four regiments primarily based on age and marital status.¹² This regimentalization separated young men from the middle-aged and the elderly, which in turn unified ranks previously ruled by generational tensions. In their article on "Zulu Masculinities, Warrior Culture and Stick Fighting: Reassessing Male Violence and Virtue in South Africa" for the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Dr. Benedict Carton and Dr. Robert Morrell emphasized the Zulu attribute of respect (*inhlonipho*) as a necessary balancing agent in masculine interactions by requiring "youths [honor their] elders through uncompromising practices of social avoidance, making vigilant restraint a vital part of their advance to adulthood."¹³ In other words, *inhlonipho* constrained the social behavior and upward mobility of assertive young men—no doubt as Shaka

also experienced during his youth. Age-based regiments effectively neutralized such restraints.

Most historical accounts hail Shaka as a military genius. Besides the regimental system, he also modified the Zulu's primary warfighting technique by adapting their fighting spear, *assegai*, into the *iklwa*, now a heavy broad-bladed weapon with a shortened haft, as well as converting the shield into an offensive weapon.¹⁴ However, Wylie alleges that Shaka's cousin was actually the true creator of the short-hafted stabbing spear,¹⁵ and that the only truly original military tactic that Shaka introduced into Zulu warfare was the *kisi*, essentially a simple challenge-and-password system.¹⁶ There is some merit to that critique; the bulk of Shaka's major innovations were actually modifications of preexisting tactics and policies. However, it would be overly simplistic to use pure innovation as the only yardstick for measuring military genius. Dingiswayo also changed the political structure by centralizing power across his territory, and leaving intact chiefdoms which willingly submitted to his power and offered tribute rather than continued resistance.¹⁷ This, too, was a post-conquest policy that Shaka adapted and maintained, though with far less benevolence than his mentor. Foreign affairs columnist and former CIA officer Donald R. Morris summarized Shaka's bloodthirsty adaptation as such:

Where Dingiswayo saw combat as an unfortunate but inevitable necessity when palaver had failed, Shaka saw it as the one safe and sure method of political growth. Dingiswayo would at once accept submission and chain the dogs of war, but Shaka saw that an undefeated clan, temporarily left in peace, was always free to turn on a paramount chieftain in a more propitious season. [Shaka's regiment] had more than once been sent to deal with a clan they had already vanquished, and Shaka preferred to smash such a clan the first time, incorporating the fragments into an organization of his own making. . . . He despised a show of force designed merely to convince an enemy that resistance was useless.¹⁸

Terror and Total Control

Under Shaka's rule, the Zulu kingdom evolved into a terroristic regime, which maintained order not only through aggregative, expansionist warfare, but through the integrative mechanism of internal coercion.¹⁹ He implemented an absolute form of centralized government, replacing hereditary chiefs of newly

conquered lands with royal officials.²⁰ Shaka regimented everything, not just his armies. Besides military duties, he segregated men and women from one another and disallowed marriage.²¹

Shaka instituted one social reform that was a genuine innovation on his part, which dealt with female sexuality. Arranged marriages, a social establishment that survives in modern Zulu culture, determined ascendancy through Shaka's centralized power structure.²² However, as stated earlier, marriage was widely disallowed among all but the elite. Women, like men, enjoyed some sexual leniency in that they were able to take lovers so long as the actual act of intercourse did not transpire.²³ There is little hard evidence to suggest a lasting impact on Zulu birth-rates, whether legitimate or otherwise, given an already low population density²⁴ and the spectre of continued, aggregate warfare. However, Zulu men and women enjoyed markedly more delineated sexual relations compared to previous eras.

Sexual regulation hearkened back to the very act that despoiled Shaka's mother and resulted in his childhood ostracization. From one perspective, Shaka allowed men and women the freedom to take lovers outside of wedlock without reprisal—as long as they avoided the sins of his own parents. Some stories theorize Shaka was impotent given his animosity toward procreation,²⁵ as well as childhood allegations that he was physically unendowed;²⁶ others allege that Shaka was a serial rapist.²⁷ Regardless of what sexual malfunction Shaka may or may not have been afflicted by, his restrictions over sexual intercourse and procreation were probably more just another byproduct of his near-sociopathic propensity for micromanagement. The punishment for adultery (defined by actual intercourse rather than mutual masturbation and evidenced usually by unapproved pregnancies) could be as simple as cattle fines²⁸ and as drastic as death.²⁹

Much like how modern military “boot camps” strive to break down a new recruit and refashion him or her into a proper soldier, so did Shaka's disseverment of hereditary lines and social constructs gradually wipe the slate of his subjects clean. Under stress, even the most artificial of commonalities will bring people together through relatable experiences. Over time, “the clans began to identify themselves with the Zulus, even to refer to themselves as Zulus, and the clan basis of activity began to fade.”³⁰ This forcible unification marked the beginning of consolidated power behind the Zulu monarchy, and later guided the efforts of South African nationalist leaders in the 1960s in their pursuit of state recognition.³¹

Mfecane Uprisings

Over his eight-year rule, Dingiswayo established a Mthethwa hegemony over fifty major clans and dozens of minor ones.³² Shaka accomplished the same over a decade, but with hundreds of clans. He became a key figure in nineteenth century European literature concerning the *mfecane* upheavals. *Mfecane*, which means “the crushing,” describes a series of intense wars between 1816 and 1840, which originated in the southeastern Lowveld among the northern Nguni kingdoms of the Mthethwa, Ndwandwe, and Ngwane.³³

Since the 1980s, however, Afrocentric historiography criticizes the *mfecane* as no more than a “propaganda myth,” concocted to justify European incursion in southern Africa and drum up support from racist sympathizers back home.³⁴ Caricatures of African tribesmen flooded Victorian broadsheets after the massacre of British forces at Isandlwana in 1879.³⁵ Following the Zulu kingdom’s downfall at the end of the Anglo-Zulu War, the stereotype of the partially domesticated, natural-born killer flourished in European imaginations.³⁶

Certainly, the dramatic upsurge in violence occurred, but the phenomenon originated well before Shaka’s era and continued long afterwards, blending easily into the patterns of violence, which accompanied increasingly militarized foreign colonization.³⁷ Preexisting ecological crises, including severe drought, greatly empowered Shaka’s assimilation of weaker tribes into his burgeoning Zulu nation.³⁸ Europeans found an easy target to blame in Shaka for the *mfecane* upheavals, and his successors perpetuated his rule-through-force methodology, even though the Zulu empire quickly fragmented following Shaka’s death in 1828.³⁹ Shaka’s regimented style of military and political leadership only worked so long as he had wars to fight, and after he removed all obvious threats, “he waged war for the sake of war. . . . If he felt any goad, it was one all tyrants have discovered to their sorrow—the fact that a large standing army cannot be maintained in idleness.”⁴⁰ Unfortunately for Shaka, purposeless violence begets political enemies, and his own half-brother assassinated him in 1828.⁴¹

Disinformation and Dehumanization

Racial bias and misinformation were not entirely one-sided. In fact, Shaka had allowed minor incursions by Europeans into Zulu territory and observed European technology, but maintained his perception of the Zulu culture’s superiority throughout his reign. He even entertained European “ambassadors” (and hostages), though displayed a lack of conceptual awareness of global geography.⁴² “It was perfectly obvious to all . . . that Shaka had no very clear idea who King George was or where he resided, or, in fact, what the British

structure of government was . . . he thought of the white world as a large, somewhat superior, but essentially Bantu clan.”⁴³ Shaka’s half-brother (and assassin) Dingane made similar mistakes after he succeeded Shaka: attempting first to accommodate white newcomers, then rule them, and at times annihilate them, all efforts ending in varying degrees of failure.⁴⁴

Cultural misconceptions persisted after Shaka’s death, exacerbated by European antagonism. Afrikaner emigrants known as the Voortrekkers used the ongoing tension between Dingane and his rivals to establish themselves and eventually drive Dingane out.⁴⁵ They took advantage of the power vacuum left behind in the war-torn region, allocating huge tracts of land to farming and condemning thousands of South African war refugees to the south rivers.⁴⁶ The British later annexed Natal, the southern part of Zululand, in 1843. Gross mishandling of the refugee issue and territorial disputes by British colonial authorities contributed to growing anti-white sentiment among Africans.

In 1880, a Dutch trader named Cornelius Vjin published his personal memoirs of moving through the Zulu kingdom during the Anglo-Zulu wars where he periodically related friendly interactions with Zulu civilians. Yet he also noted that the Zulus feared that the British had come to export all of their males overseas for slave labor, as well as steal their cattle, and force their women into sexual slavery. “Hence,” Vjin observed soberly, “when it came to fighting, [the Zulus] fought not only for [their] King only, but for themselves, since they would rather die than live under the whites.”⁴⁷

So while the Europeans stereotyped Africans as bloodthirsty savages without dignity, the Europeans were likewise stereotyped as selfish slave-traffickers who would steal their dignity. This sort of divisive dehumanization is a common tactic during periods of prolonged conflict, regardless of the historical era, but the fractious and changing sociopolitical landscape of South Africa meant these cultural biases became embedded in the region’s popular history. Even now, over a century later, on average more black South Africans express disillusionment regarding interracial interactions than any other of South Africa’s racial demographics—which is even more concerning given that blacks comprise close to 80 percent of South Africa’s population.⁴⁸

Us against them was a perfect unifying tactic to preserve—or, arguably, create—the African identity from European desecration. The introduction of such concepts as a cash economy and migrant work following the discoveries of diamonds and gold in southern Africa transformed economic systems and shifted population densities across the continent as surely as tribal warfare did.⁴⁹ Chiefdoms pushed back against these changes, which prompted European military

responses (like the Anglo-Zulu War), and the downward spiral of economic dependency and political instability continued.⁵⁰ Another of Shaka's successors, King Cetshwayo (r. 1872 – 1879), who understood the nuanced consequences of dehumanization, complained to the same Dutch trader from before:

Ask [the English] how I can make peace when the Queen's Army is daily capturing my cattle, burning my kraals, and killing my people? I believe that, if they go out of my country, I shall make peace with them. But, if they go on doing what they are doing, it will not be my fault if a calamity comes; and they will say, if White-men lose their lives, 'It is all Cetshwayo's doing!' whereas it is they who are doing it.⁵¹

Cetshwayo had the unfortunate luck to rule during a period of incredible economic change for South Africa. The discovery of gold and other precious minerals forced the region into industrialization and the capitalist market system.⁵² The British viewed the Zulu kingdom, due to its economic and military independence, as an obstacle against peace and progress that they had to overcome—hence the outbreak of the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879, near the end of Cetshwayo's short reign.⁵³

Heroic History and Nostalgia

Despite their bloody victory at Isandlwana, the Zulus lost the Anglo-Zulu War and their independence as a result. Racial segregationist issues which existed since the eighteenth century evolved into apartheid, “a well-articulated ideology, grounded in politics and sanctioned by religion, that asserted the superiority of one group and the inferiority of others”⁵⁴ in the twentieth century. The history of Shaka's wartime victories potentially inspired much-needed nostalgia for a simpler time when Zulu regional and cultural superiority was more easily quantified. Tales of Shaka's exploits were a fantastic source of inspiration, preserved by oral tradition, which created a “heroic history,” through which the king's actions in the social system and myth become history.⁵⁵ Praise poetry for King Shaka continues to be popular, and maintains relevance as commentary upon the growing complexities of black/white political engagements and the processes of modernization.⁵⁶

King Shaka International Airport opened in May 2010 and became the brief focus of controversy following the short-lived placement of a statue

depicting King Shaka as a herd-boy in front of the airport.⁵⁷ KwaZulu-Natal celebrates Shaka Day every year. All efforts to demonize Shaka and his military gains by nineteenth century European media served the opposite effect in South Africa. The modern Zulu people have since appropriated and romanticized the same aspects of Shaka's personality which once inspired trepidation, derision, and a sense of racist superiority among colonists and their contemporaries in Europe. The mythos surrounding Shaka and the Zulu identity shaped African politics, specifically the approaches of political groups such as the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress, and armed struggle against apartheid.

Recently, the Zulu identity, and Shaka's role within it, appears as nebulous as it does enduring. Dr. S. Nombuso Dlamini, Research Leadership Chair at the University of Windsor, based much of her conclusions on youth and identity politics in South Africa on her observations of willing participants in the youth community. She observed, for instance, that students associated the use of the Zulu language with illiteracy or ignorance, especially in academic settings where speaking English was encouraged.⁵⁸ This dichotomy would be indicative of a greater identity conflict, in which being more (or less) Zulu becomes a point of contest, drawing the group together, but also creating an artificial isolation. Using individual cases to illustrate, Dlamini noted the impact of the Shaka mythos on the rationalization of personal identity and history:

For Vukani, who is still actively involved in the MK [*Umkhonto we Sizwe*, an armed wing of the African National Congress], it became important for him not to denounce the Shakan wars of conquest because it was through the wars that his military practices could be legitimized. To Ndabezitha and Lunga, the myth of Shaka and the consolidation of the Zulu kingdom were important because, as descendants of those who fought these consolidation wars, they were positioned as more Zulu than others (*Zulu Zu*), which implied they were direct products of these acts of bravery.⁵⁹

Shaka's military exploits and sociopolitical reconstruction of the Zulu Kingdom during a critical, foundational point in South African history were crucial elements in creating the Zulu identity. However, without excusing the practices, the persistence of the Zulu identity must also pay credit to the dehumanizing components of European colonialism, racial segregation, and apartheid. Dehumanization not only engendered an *us versus them* environment which forced people together under a tenuously shared banner of tribal identity, but inadvertently

romanticized the stories of King Shaka and ensured his character a permanent fixture in South African popular history.

Notes

1. "A Warm Welcome to KwaZulu-Natal – Tourism KwaZulu-Natal," Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, 2014, accessed July 11, 2015, <http://www.zulu.org.za/about/key-facts/welcome>.

2. Ibid.

3. Ana Maria Monteiro-Ferreira, "Reevaluating Zulu Religion: An Afrocentric Analysis," *Journal of Black Studies* 35, No. 3 (January 2005): 348, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40034764>.

4. James L. Gibson, "Apartheid's Long Shadow: How Racial Divides Distort South Africa's Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 94, No. 2 (March/April 2015): 42.

5. Mathieu Deflem, "Warfare, political leadership, and state formation: The case of the Zulu Kingdom, 1808-1879," *Ethnology* 38, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 5, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/205102576?accountid=8289>.

6. E. A. Ritter, *Shaka Zulu* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 26.

7. Donald R. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears: A History of the Rise of the Zulu Nation under Shaka and Its Fall in the Zulu War of 1879* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1965), 44.

8. Deflem, 5.

9. Dan Wylie, *Myth of Iron: Shaka in History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 19.

10. Sibusisiwe Nombuso Dlamini, *Youth and Identity Politics in South Africa, 1990-1994* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 7, accessed October 24, 2015, available through Google Books.

11. Ibid.

12. Morris, 51; Deflem, 7.

13. Benedict Carton and Robert Morell, "Zulu Masculinities, Warrior Culture and Stick Fighting," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, No. 1 (March 2012): 33, accessed June 28, 2015, available through APUS library resources.

14. Morris, 47.

15. Wylie, 125.

16. Ibid, 186-187.

17. Deflem, 5.

18. Morris, 47.

19. Deflem, 8.

20. Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2012), 265.

21. Ibid, 266; Morris, 66.

22. Wylie, 329.
23. Ibid, 328-329.
24. Deflem, 8.
25. Morris, 91.
26. Ibid, 45.
27. Wylie, 138-139.
28. Morris, 66.
29. Wylie, 322.
30. Morris, 64.
31. Dlamini, 7-8.
32. Ibid, 42.
33. Shillington, 263.
34. Ibid; Carton et al, 36.
35. Carton et al, 34-35.
36. Ibid.
37. Wylie, 439.
38. Dlamini, 32.
39. Monteiro-Ferreira, 351; Deflem, 10.
40. Morris, 64-65.
41. Shillington, 267.
42. Morris, 97; Wylie, 321.
43. Morris, 97.
44. Dlamini, 33.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Cornelius Vijn, *Cetshwayo's Dutchman*, trans. John W. Colenso (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1880), 15, accessed July 11, 2015, <https://archive.org/details/cetshwayosdutchm00cornrich>.
48. Gibson, 42-46.
49. Shillington, 329.
50. Ibid, 332.

51. Vijn, 47.

52. Dlamini, 34.

53. Ibid.

54. Gibson, 44.

55. Deflem, 9.

56. Michael Chapman, "From Shaka's Court to the Trade Union Rally: Praises in a Usable Past," *Research in African Literatures* 30, No. 1 (Spring 1999): 4-6, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/207644878?accountid=8289>.

57. "Thank Shaka for Zulu Identity," *Independent Online*, September 25, 2010, accessed July 12, 2015, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/thank-shaka-for-zulu-identity-1.681694#.VaLMWPiViko>.

58. Dlamini, 128.

59. Ibid, 191.

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