

## Shaka the Great\*

Jeff Peires\*\*

Among several welcome signs that the gloom and doom which has for too long enveloped South African historiography is finally beginning to lift,<sup>1</sup> one ominous portent continues to threaten. As Christopher Saunders recently put it, “much of the new work is narrow and specialized and of limited general significance”.<sup>2</sup> History cannot flourish in the absence of debate, and the louder the debate, the more people are likely to join in. The South African historiographical landscape, however, still resembles that encountered by the British popular historian, Philip Ziegler, when he embarked on his study of the medieval Black Death, “rival historians, each established in his fortress of specialized knowledge, waiting to destroy the unwary trespasser”.<sup>3</sup> So long as we continue to huddle in our strongholds, we will never engage. There are too many foxes in the South African historiographical world, and not enough hedgehogs.<sup>4</sup> Today therefore, I put on my hedgehog suit and venture out to KwaZulu Natal, about which I truthfully know very little. If I die in battle, I can always scurry back to my Eastern Cape fortress and resume life as a fox. Besides which, if others follow my example, my sacrifice will not have been in vain.

### The decline of Shaka

The conventional image of Shaka as a great African leader, a kind of black Napoleon, was adopted wholesale and unreflectively by the liberal historians of the Oxford History School, who sought to counter the racist assumptions of the colonial and apartheid eras by portraying African history as dynamic, constructive and independent of European influence. Shaka was portrayed neither as a “superhuman hero”, nor as a “satanic monster”,<sup>5</sup> but as an innovative, albeit despotic state builder. John Omer-Cooper, whose experiences teaching History at the University of Ibadan aligned him with the historiographical mood of newly independent black Africa, described Shaka thus in 1966:

Shaka constructed a new type of state ... The concentration of power in the army and its extreme dependence on the king, raised Shaka’s authority far above that of the traditional chief. The sub-chiefs had lost the power to act as effective checks on the central authority. Shaka did not need to consult the traditional tribal council. He ruled as an absolute despot, deciding cases while taking his morning bath, and ordering men to death with a nod of his head.<sup>6</sup>

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\* C Burns, “A Useable Past”, in H E Stolten, *History Making and Present Day Politics* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2007)

\*\* Jeff Peires is of the University of Fort Hare-Alice

1 Burns, “A Useable Past”

2 C C Saunders, “Four Decades of South African academic historical writing; a personal perspective”, in Stolten, *History Making*, p 288

3 P Ziegler, *The Black Death* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970), p 9

4 “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing” This fragment from the Greek poet Archilochus was popularised by Isaiah Berlin in his celebrated essay on Tolstoy’s view of History, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953) According to Berlin: “There exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision” and “on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory”

5 D Wylie, *Myth of Iron* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2006), p 518

6 J Omer-Cooper, *The Zulu Aftermath* (Longman, London, 1966), pp 33, 36

It soon became clear that this picture of Shaka, however positive, was inadequate. Not only was the liberal view based on a small number of largely flawed printed sources, but its concerns were entirely political and military. Further research rapidly demonstrated the social and economic significance of the regimental system, which naturally raised the question of how and why age-sets were transformed into regiments in northern (Zulu), but not southern (Xhosa) Nguniland.<sup>7</sup> The writings of the French Marxist anthropologists were more or less influential in defining a “materialist” paradigm:

Who is working with whom and for whom? Where does the product of the labourer go?  
Who controls the product? How does the economic system reproduce itself?<sup>8</sup>

With so many new questions and so many different societies to look at, not to mention an instinctive aversion to the “great man” style of history, Shaka was not so much downplayed as ignored. A collection of papers given at the Nguni Workshop in Grahamstown in 1979 was entitled *Before and After Shaka*, but, ironically enough, Shaka himself was nowhere mentioned.<sup>9</sup> As the search for deeper structures pushed the origins of the Zulu state further and further back in time, the significance of Shaka’s personal role was inevitably diminished.

Shaka’s historical reputation may have declined during the materialist hegemony of the early 1980s, but it was the Cobbing hypothesis that really put the boot in.<sup>10</sup> Cobbing was understandably too busy making his case for “the trans-continental crossfire of interrelated European plunder systems”<sup>11</sup> to spend much time on Shaka, but his hypothesis necessarily relegated Shaka to the status of, at best, a convenient fall guy. Europeans, not Africans, drove the upheavals they called the “mfecane”, and made poor Shaka a scapegoat for their nefarious slave-trading activities.<sup>12</sup> “Mendacious propaganda was insistently relayed back to the Colony that Natal had been totally depopulated by the Zulu and that Shaka was a bloody killer that the British could virtuously and profitably crusade against”.<sup>13</sup> It was at this point that the Cobbing hypothesis fortuitously intersected with the burgeoning postmodern interest in problems of representation. The works of Nathaniel Isaacs and Henry Francis Fynn were weighed and, unsurprisingly, found wanting. Attention switched from the history of Shaka, to the history of the image of Shaka, and even as

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- 7 Linguists have long described the languages of South Africa’s coastal strip (isiZulu, isiXhosa) as Nguni, and historians, fearful of anachronism, initially described the protoZulu as “northern Nguni”, but ever since John Wright convincingly pointed out that the term Nguni meant different things to different people at different times, historians have been reluctant to employ the term and have resorted to circumlocutions like “the Phongolo-Mzimkhulu region” to describe the territory presently known as KwaZulu-Natal. See: J Wright, “Politics, Ideology and the Invention of the “Nguni”, in T Lodge (ed), *Resistance and Ideology in Settler Societies* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986)
- 8 C Meillassoux, quoted in: J B Peires, “Paradigm Deleted: the Materialist Interpretation of the Mfecane”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 1993, p 301
- 9 J B Peires (ed), *Before and After Shaka: Papers in Nguni History* (ISER, Grahamstown, 1981)
- 10 J Cobbing, “The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo”, *Journal of African History*, 29, 1988
- 11 Cobbing, “The Mfecane as Alibi”, p 509
- 12 C Hamilton, “The Character and Objects of Chaka’: A Reconsideration of the Making of Shaka as a Mfecane Motor”, in C Hamilton, *The Mfecane Aftermath* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1995), especially pp 183-186
- 13 Cobbing, “The Mfecane as Alibi”, pp 509-510

well-informed and balanced a historian as Carolyn Hamilton felt constrained to render her account of Shaka's career concise to the point of guardedness.<sup>14</sup>

We had to wait until 2006 to get the first full-scale biography of Shaka, *Myth of Iron* by Dan Wylie of the English Department at Rhodes University. Wylie is an unabashed adherent of the Cobbing school ("We can also be sure that the rise of the Zulu polity can at no stage be accurately read independently of the global influences of trade, slavery and white settler ambition")<sup>15</sup> and his assessment of Shaka was therefore entirely predictable: "a leader utilizing customary practices – including death sentences – to achieve a consolidation of power and control, rather than a tyrant pathologically addicted to cruelty for its own sake".<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of the book, Wylie expatiated on this theme:

He was remarkably successful as a leader, but he was neither the genius nor the tyrant that he has been made out to be. He made mistakes; he lost battles. He killed what today we would regard as a large number of people, but almost always for political or disciplinary reasons. He may have exhibited occasional cruelty, but he was far from genocidal. He inevitably made some enemies within the Zulu "nation", but he was far from unifying all the diverse peoples of the region seamlessly. He had made his mark on a considerable stretch of territory, but more through client chiefs than through direct colonization. Negotiation, patronage, marriages, ritual, language and propaganda were as important to his vision as coercive violence. The degree of his control was liable to be exaggerated.<sup>17</sup>

Shaka, in other words, was "remarkably successful", but only in traditional terms. He himself was not at all remarkable, he did nothing new or noteworthy.

Let me be clear. This article is neither about Wylie's book, nor Cobbing's hypothesis. Its aim is simply to rescue Shaka's reputation which, as I have shown, has long been on the slide and has finally reached its nadir with Wylie's assessment. By contrast with Wylie's view, which I will call Shaka Minimus, I choose, quite deliberately and in the grandest possible hedgehog style, to label this article *Shaka the Great*.

**"Some achieve greatness ..."**<sup>18</sup>

"Great" does not necessarily imply "good". Questions of ethics, as E.H. Carr demonstrated long ago in his discussion of "Bad King John", have no place in historical writing.<sup>19</sup> Historians are rightfully concerned with causes and effects, with the historical contexts which give rise to historical events, and with the historical significance of those events as measured by their impact on subsequent events. They are also concerned to elucidate the deeper structures of society which evolve or are transformed by internal tensions and long-time dynamics in which individuals or events play a minimal role except as "bearers" of the structures in question. It is

14 C Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1998), pp 48-50

15 Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, pp 482-484

16 Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, p 431

17 Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, pp 481-482

18 The full quotation reads: "Be not afraid of greatness; some men are born great, some achieve greatness, others have greatness thrust upon them" From: W Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act II, Scene 5

19 E H Carr, *What is History?* (Penguin Books, London, 1964), pp 45, 98

certain that the domestication of cattle, the adoption of maize and the desiccation of the Sahara – imperceptible processes unfolding over centuries – affected far more Africans far more profoundly, than did the actions of any one single African individual. Yet we cannot entirely avoid the problem characterised by Carr as “Cleopatra’s Nose”, the role of accident in history, including the role of the individual personality. Let us immediately acknowledge what has long been recognised, namely that the deeper historical processes which gave rise to the Zulu state can be traced back to long before the birth of Shaka. Let us further agree, for the sake of argument, that these processes, which manifested themselves in the rise of competing confederations (Mthethwa and Ndwandwe) in different parts of northern Nguniland would inevitably have led to internecine conflict followed by the establishment of a single large kingdom. The mere fact that Shaka emerged victorious from this conflict, does not necessarily make him “great”. And, if the kingdom which emerged, differed in nothing more than scale from the political entities which preceded it, that too would force us to concur in a historical assessment of Shaka *Minimus*. For us to award him the posthumous accolade of “Shaka the Great”, we would have to prove two things:

- That the Zulu state was fundamentally different to anything which had gone before;
- That these differences can be attributed directly to the personal interventions of Shaka.

Given the fact that the eyewitness accounts of Isaacs and Fynn have been so severely criticized, I will proceed without any reference to them, or to any European source whatsoever, including A.T. Bryant.<sup>20</sup> My arguments will be based entirely on the oral traditions recorded in the James Stuart Archive, and they will revolve around two critical questions:

- Was Shaka circumcised?
- Did Shaka kill his mother?

Simply to ask these questions is to recognise that no proper understanding of the Shakan state is possible, unless they are resolved, and that from their answers, much else must flow. For reasons that will become apparent, we will have to deal

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20 Wylie maintains that Nathaniel Isaacs was “semi-literate”, and that his *Travels and Adventures* must therefore have been “ghost-written by a Londoner, or another jaundiced colonial” Quite apart from the fact that Isaacs was Jewish, and therefore almost by definition educated middle class, I am amazed that it has escaped Wylie’s attention that he spent three years as a clerk in the business of his uncle Saul Solomon, the Merchant Prince of St Helena I see no reason to doubt the authenticity of Isaacs’s private letter to Henry Fynn, enthusiastically endorsed by Wylie in other contexts, which confirms that his book is based on “memo’s that I used to keep in Natal” I fully accept that Isaacs’s manuscript was smartened up for publication, as Wylie has shown, but all of us suffer from time to time at the hands of our editors As for the “infamous pact” between Fynn and Isaacs to brutalise the name of Shaka, almost all the insinuations about Fynn’s “horrendous lies” collapse once it is realised that Fynn made no attempt to get his work published I hold no brief for Isaacs or Fynn; Isaacs, particularly, is damned by his own letter, but it seems sad that we should deprive ourselves of such valuable sources on such flimsy grounds What we need, are good critical editions of Fynn and Isaacs, not blanket rejections See: D Wylie, *Savage Delight* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2000), pp 94, 97, 105-120; Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, pp 367, 515; N Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* (Struik, Cape Town, 1970), p xxviii; P R Kirby, “Unpublished Documents relating to the career of Nathaniel Isaacs, the Natal Pioneer”, *Africana Notes and News*, 18, 2, 1968, p 67

with the second question first, but before that, we need to clarify the nature of the oral traditions on which my argument will depend.

**Actually, we don't spend our years as a tale that is told**

Dan Wylie, like myself, relies heavily on the James Stuart Archive and characterises the oral narratives there recorded as follows:<sup>21</sup>

These testimonies are as flawed, shallow, distorted, patchy, and contradictory as the few written white eyewitness accounts. They tend to recall violent but minority movements and heroic actions, not the static peacefulness of the majority. Their many charming but scattered personal anecdotes are often riven with improbable mythology, subsequent politicization, and misremembrance. Yet they are detailed, pithy, suggestive and fascinating in themselves.

It will come as no surprise to the reader of the above quotation that Wylie has completely ignored the literally thousands of books and articles published on the nature and interpretation of oral tradition over the past fifty years.<sup>22</sup> He explicitly compares Stuart's Zulu testimonies to "written white eyewitness accounts", and assumes that the same method of analysis is equally applicable to both genres. One must therefore begin by saying something about the nature of oral tradition, and by explaining the principles on which one proposes to interpret it.

Any consideration of oral tradition in South Africa must take as its starting point Isabel Hofmeyr's justly celebrated *We Spend our Years as a Tale that is Told*. Let me hasten to agree with Hofmeyr's findings that South African "oral historical narratives" are ramshackle and loosely structured, and that they have no visible performance life.<sup>23</sup> I would further agree with many other points made by Hofmeyr, and by Carolyn Hamilton as well, with regard to the manner in which oral narratives vary according to time, place and performance. Having said that, I must assert that Hofmeyr's theoretical orientation is unhelpful to the kind of exercise which I am about to undertake. First, because its understanding of historical narratives derives from the theoretical framework developed by Harold Scheub in *The Xhosa Ntsomi*.<sup>24</sup> For those who have not read the book, a *ntsomi* is a fairytale, and Scheub's exposition of a common stock of "core elements" which the performer may vary at will, is entirely inappropriate to oral traditions, the structures of which remain stable and consistent, no matter how many times the story is told. Secondly, because scholars who are not historians seem to feel there is something reprehensibly arrogant about historians' attempts to apply historical analysis to oral traditions. If this sounds exaggerated, please consider the thoughts of Elizabeth Tonkin, an anthropologist whom Hofmeyr cites with approval:

Africanist historians have retained that title for themselves – they are the historians, the professional, academic, literate analysts who use oral materials to write history, their aim and hope to extract useful facts from oral evidence. The commonsense or

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21 Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, p 4

22 The only relevant reference in Wylie's footnotes and bibliography is to Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition as History* (1985). Daphna Golan's work is entirely absent, while Carolyn Hamilton's *Terrific Majesty* (1998) is mentioned, but otherwise ignored.

23 I Hofmeyr, *We spend our years as a tale that is told* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1993), pp 3, 5

24 H. Scheub, *The Xhosa Ntsomi* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975). For their reliance on Scheub, see: Hofmeyr, *We spend our years*, p 5; Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, p 51

empiricist assumptions that core facts can be transmitted through traditions – and then disinterred by a real historian – is easier to sustain if the transmitters are denied agency or “historical abilities” themselves<sup>25</sup>

It is as if any historian who dares to analyse any historical narrative, except on its own terms, is automatically violating the integrity of the narrative and denigrating the capacity of the oral historian. Surely no oral tradition is necessarily more sacrosanct than the Bible, which historians have been analysing for centuries? I also have never met an African historian who did not regard authentic oral informants with a respect verging on awe. The other part of the quotation – the bit about “empiricist assumptions” – potentially leads us to the postmodern debate, which I cannot get into here. Suffice it to say that Tonkin’s argument is based on a false dichotomy between “fact” and “interpretation”, to which we co-called “constructionists of the empirical-analytical school” do not in fact subscribe.<sup>26</sup>

Please do not let me be misunderstood. One is not denying that the representation of the past is shaped by the present, or that distortions occur when the oral is transcribed by the literate, or that the personality of the narrator and the circumstances of the performance affect the content of the narrative. Nor is one denying the importance of comparing different variants of the same narrative with a view to identifying the biases of the informants and the historically contested elements of their narratives, as well as tracing the evolution of such narratives over time. I have every respect for Isabel Hofmeyr and fully accept the validity of what she has done, but I am trying to do something else.

What I am asserting, is that where many different variants of the same narrative, collected across a wide geographical area over a long period of time and exhibiting major contradictions on points of detail, nevertheless all universally share a common structure, this universal common structure can be said to represent the relevant entity’s collective understanding of its own past. Tonkin thinks that “it seems rather obvious that recall must be purposeful, dependent on the interest of the teller”,<sup>27</sup> but I strongly disagree. The past is real, something happened, many of the consequences of the past influence what happens today. All people therefore have some kind of awareness, some kind of shared understanding of their own past, whether they articulate it or not. However whereas each individual oral historian has only his own story to tell, the outside historian enjoys a privileged viewpoint which enables him or her to identify such universal common structures.

The history of much of Africa is discernable only from oral tradition, and historians less obsessed by the minutiae of representation have developed methodologies to interpret it. Among many possibilities, I offer the following quotation from my PhD supervisor who, incidentally, taught me at Wisconsin along with Professors Scheub and Vansina:

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25 E Tonkin, “Investigating Oral Tradition”, *Journal of African History*, 27, 2, 1986, p 210 For Hofmeyr on Tonkin, see: Hofmeyr, *We spend our years*, p 275 For Hamilton on Hofmeyr, see: Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, pp 53-54

26 J Peires, “‘At the entrance to science as at the entrance to hell’; Historical Priorities for South Africa in an Age of Deconstruction”, *African Historical Review*, 40, 1, 2008, p 64

27 Tonkin, “Investigating Oral Tradition”, p 209 On the reality of the past, see Peires, “‘At the entrance to science as at the entrance to hell’”, pp 62-63

Lévi-Strauss has shown that in any telling of a myth there are some elements which are contingent and others which are structural. The contingent elements – the embellishments of a skilled teller, or his particularly apt choice of language – vary from one telling to another. The structural elements are those relationships which remain constant no matter how many times the myth is told ... The attempt to find the underlying structure which persists no matter how many times the myth is told has a number of advantages in actual practice. It encourages one to examine a great number of variants and to separate those elements which persist from those which are transient.<sup>28</sup>

The essential components of the oral tradition do not, therefore, lie around in promiscuous disarray like “a core of images”, or “a repertoire of core elements”, or sweets in a lucky packet waiting to be chewed on by the performer of the day.<sup>29</sup> An oral tradition is not a fairytale, and I cannot agree with Hofmeyr that oral historical narratives are necessarily linked to other forms of oral storytelling.<sup>30</sup> We do not, after all, spend our years as a tale that is told. We spend our years. Then the tale is told. Then the historian comes along and tries to figure out the difference.

Historians do this not only out of arrogance, but also because historians are forced to grapple with another problem which the literati do not often consider. This is the problem which arises because many of the episodes related in oral traditions are manifestly not literally true. These episodes may be palpably impossible (Sundiata, who has never walked, on a certain day picks up a gigantic iron bar and uproots a baobab tree with his bare hands); or wildly exaggerated (the king who is so cruel that he levers himself off the throne with daggers plunged into the backs of his kneeling slaves); or borrowed from the Bible (the Jacob/Esau motif plays a pivotal role in the traditions of the Transvaal Ndebele); or so widespread as to be obviously clichéd (the return of the prodigal son, which also features in the story of Shaka).<sup>31</sup> This is why oral historical narratives are frequently called “myths”, a word which has unfortunately acquired in colloquial speech the overtone of untruth. I would argue, however, that oral traditions – I prefer to avoid the word “myth” – inevitably conflate what is literally true with what is symbolically and ethically, but not necessarily literally true.

We need not here venture into deeper waters, concerning the origin and nature of myth. We do however need to move away from catchall expressions like “oral historical narratives” and from the indiscriminate conflation of significantly different

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- 28 S. Feierman, *The Shambaa Kingdom* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1974), pp 40-41. Jan Vansina, who is hostile to structuralism, adopts a nominally different methodology which amounts to more or less the same thing. See: J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (James Currey, London, 1985), pp 68-83, 162-165. Beginners trying to get a grip on early African history, often make the mistake of reading worthy but uninspiring general texts like Vansina or D. Henige, *Oral Historiography* (Longman, London, 1982). Far better to observe the methodology of a single good study. The best representative collection I know, J. C. Miller's *The African Past Speaks* (Dawson, Folkstone, 1980) is unfortunately very hard to find. In addition to Feierman, I can confidently recommend T. Q. Reefe's *The Rainbow and the Kings* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981) or J. C. Miller's *Kings and Kinsmen* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976).
- 29 D. Golan, *Inventing Shaka: Using History in the Construction of Zulu Nationalism* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 1994), p 118, recognises the importance of identifying the “invariant core – those aspects of the narrative that all versions share”. Unfortunately, she then proceeds to dismiss this core as a “fiction” and a “set of clichés from pre-Shakan days”, without acknowledging the many specific elements which are not borrowed from elsewhere.
- 30 Hofmeyr, *We spend our years*, p 5; Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, p 51.
- 31 D. T. Niane, *Sundiata* (Longman, London, 1965), pp 18-23; Miller, *Kings and Kinsmen*, p 139; Evidence before the Nhlapo Commission, KwaMhlanga, 12-15 June 2005; J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition* (Aldine, Chicago, 1965), p 74.

forms of narrative into a single undifferentiated category called “oral tradition”. Following Vansina and Henige, we can usefully divide “oral history” into eyewitness reports (I was there ...); rumour (I was not there, but I was reliably informed ...); opinion (I agree/do not agree with the report that says ...); and oral tradition proper (I heard it from my grandfather, who heard it from his grandfather ...).

Oral tradition is thus transmitted from generation to generation and therefore, by definition, can only emerge when the original informants are no longer alive. Whereas eyewitness reports, for instance, can be checked against the evidence of other eyewitnesses or against a written record, oral tradition cannot be assessed by the same criteria because, in the course of transmission, oral tradition amalgamates the eyewitness element with other elements, some of which arise out of rumour, others out of public opinion, yet others out of mnemonic imperatives (for example, dramatic features which render the story more memorable). Questionable as such oral traditions may be in terms of literal truthfulness, they possess the great virtue of transcending individual differences of perception and performance, being nothing less than the cultural community’s shared understanding of its own past:

In order for anything to be regarded as a tradition, it should be widely practised or understood in a society and it must have been handed down for at least a few generations. Oral traditions are those recollections of the past that are commonly or universally known in a given culture. Versions that are not widely known should rightfully be considered as “testimony”.<sup>32</sup>

The distinction between oral tradition and other forms of oral historical narratives is not one of semantic or theoretical importance only. One central argument of this article is that scholars as diverse as Hamilton and Wylie have erred by regarding Stuart’s informants as eyewitnesses, whereas we need to interpret the Stuart Archive holistically, according to the criteria applicable to oral tradition.

Oral tradition eventually stabilises into what Vansina has called a “corpus” of common historical knowledge, though one which is never totally sealed shut and which remains open to new inputs and influences.<sup>33</sup> It is precisely this “open” nature of oral tradition that enables Hamilton to analyse the extent to which the historical image of Shaka among the Zulu themselves was “produced” according to changing political circumstances from Dingane to Mangosuthu Buthelezi. It has even led respected anthropologists like Jack Goody to argue for “homeostasis”, which implies that the forces which impel oral traditions to conform with the existing social order are so powerful, that oral traditions must be seen as conforming to present rather than past reality.<sup>34</sup> This argument comes close to replicating postmodernist conclusions via an alternative route and, if sustained, would imply that any history outside contemporary history is simply impossible. Research has however shown that, notwithstanding strong pressures towards homeostasis, “traces” of inconvenient and counter-productive historical data refuse to be obliterated and stubbornly continue to cling to life, even within an oral environment. As Vansina has put it relative to his own research area:<sup>35</sup>

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32 Henige, *Oral Historiography*, p 2

33 Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Chapters 1 and 6

34 Summarised in: Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, pp 120-123

35 Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, p 122

Social change often leads to additions, not to suppression, leaving older variants intact. Items that tend to be suppressed leave traces. Kuba dynastic tradition tends to suppress irregular successions or succession struggles. So many traces of these remain, however, that one concludes that irregular succession was the norm.

Which brings us back to my earlier argument, contra Tonkin, that the past-in-itself lives on in the present, that things which happened may continue to be remembered, even when it is in no one's interest to remember them. Such traces often hide out in clichés, familiar tales which obscure, but cannot hide past events which present generations would prefer to forget. So when we discover that certain stories out of Zulu history are also found throughout the Great Lakes Region of East Central Africa,<sup>36</sup> we need to go on cliché alert.

More immediately, however, we need to remind the reader what all this has to do with Shaka the Great. Let me recapitulate in point form:

- We can learn much about Shaka from oral tradition, thereby entirely circumventing the problem of biased white sources;
- Oral tradition incorporates structural elements which remain consistent throughout, no matter who is telling the story;
- Unlike eyewitness testimonies which are specific to individual informants, oral traditions reflect the entire cultural community's shared understanding of its own history.

### KwaThulwana

As this article relies exclusively on the historical evidence in the James Stuart Archive,<sup>37</sup> it is relevant to establish whether or not this archive is reliable and, even more importantly, whether its evidence concerning Shaka should be classified as eyewitness testimonies or oral tradition. The first of these tasks has been ably accomplished by Carolyn Hamilton, whose detailed account of Stuart's motives and methods conclusively refute the predictable accusation that Stuart's records were doctored to support colonial objectives. Hamilton shows, *inter alia*, how careful Stuart was to identify his informants and to avoid mixing up his different sources of information. His work methods thus enable us to distinguish clearly between his oral records and the synthesized versions which he composed on his own account.<sup>38</sup> Stuart could not, of course, entirely escape the biases of his class and time, but for the purposes of this article, it is important to note that these biases were favourable rather than otherwise to the image of Shaka. As Hamilton explains: "Stuart sought in African tradition a vision of sovereignty on which to base native policy. The image on which he drew ... was that of Shaka".<sup>39</sup>

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36 Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, p 74

37 C. Webb and J. Wright (eds), *The James Stuart Archive I-V* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1976–2001) [hereafter *JSA*]. Volumes are arranged in alphabetical order, according to informant. The last published volume only takes us as far as Sivivi. Two other projected volumes have not appeared yet. It needs to be noted that Hamilton and Wylie have made use of the entire archive, including the unpublished interviews, whereas I have had sight of the published interviews only. However, for reasons given in the concluding paragraph, this shortcoming should not affect the validity of my argument.

38 Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, pp 53-54 and Chapter 4

39 Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, p 166

How do we take the evidence of Stuart's informants? Do we take them as eyewitness testimonies, or do we take them as oral tradition? Stuart began his Zulu interviews in 1900 – 62 years after the death of Shaka in 1828, and he concentrated on the life of Shaka between 1902 and 1903. Since he sought out old men, it is not surprising that some of his informants were born during Shaka's lifetime, but most of them would still have been children at the time when Shaka was killed. John Khumalo, one of Stuart's informants, summed up the age-cohort of his fellows most admirably when he referred to Stuart's hotel room as "Kwa Thulwana". The Thulwana regiment was inducted in about 1854, with most of its soldiers born in 1834 or even later.<sup>40</sup> The implication is that none of Stuart's informants had ever seen Shaka, though their fathers and grandfathers may well have done so. Indeed, Stuart went out of his way to locate informants whose parents were personally acquainted with Shaka.<sup>41</sup>

Clearly such evidence is not oral tradition in the sense defined by Henige, who insists that "at least a few generations" must pass before an oral testimony can acquire the status of a tradition. On the other hand, it is clearly not eyewitness testimony either. We need perhaps to adopt Vansina's comments on the evolution of oral tradition, where he points out that the shorter the time span of a tradition, the closer it comes to the original "message", but that the tradition begins to stabilise after a single generation, as eyewitness accounts conflate with rumour.<sup>42</sup> We also need to note that not all Stuart's informants got their information at one remove from Shaka's generation, and that even those informants one generation removed from Shaka, were two generations removed from Senzangakhona and the critical years around Shaka's birth and early manhood.

It is obviously possible to proceed with an informant-by-informant analysis as Carolyn Hamilton has already done.<sup>43</sup> One might then be able to explain why one informant says one thing and another informant says something else. One might even be able to hazard a guess as to which informant is more likely to be correct, but for our purposes, what is important is not the differences within the oral tradition, but the similarities. Vansina has pointed out that historical accounts are not literary works, like tales or epics, and that we may therefore expect to find substantial commonalities and relatively little variation. He even goes so far as to assert that, when it comes to the historical content of a stabilized tradition, "one performance is as good as the other".<sup>44</sup> We do not need to go so far. It should be enough to say that oral informants who differ on many other things, nevertheless agree on the essential elements of the structure. We need to weed out the contingencies and concentrate on that structure. We also need to close the door on these theoretical issues and to focus, at long last, on Shaka the Great.

### **The death of Nandi**

Before we commence with the structural analysis of the oral tradition concerning the death of Nandi, we should perhaps establish the methodology with a dry run on a

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40 Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, p 134; *JSA* I, p 270

41 Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, p 147

42 Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, pp 53-54

43 Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty*, pp 59-69

44 Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, p 53

familiar, but less contested topic, just to demonstrate the ease with which contingent elements can be distinguished from structural ones. This is not, in fact, as difficult as it sounds. Ironically enough, the very contradictions within an oral tradition actually help to point up the structural commonalities. For our example, I will make use of an oral tradition well-known not only to myself, but also to most of my readers: the story of Nongqawuse.

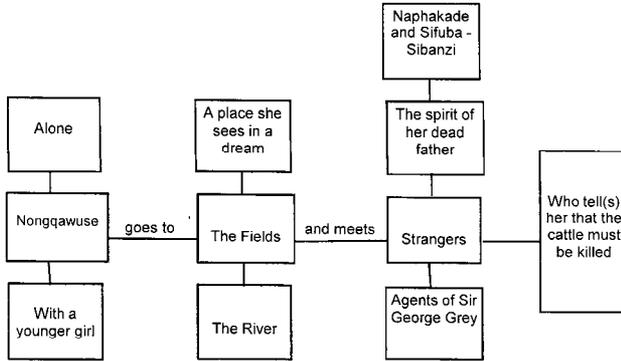
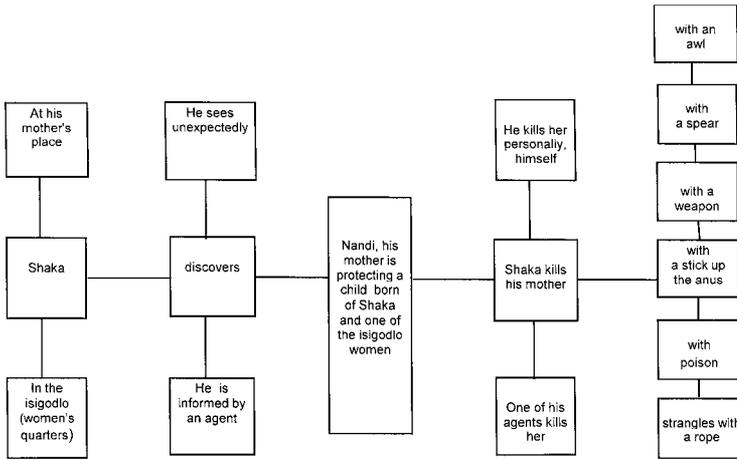


Figure 1: The Story of Nongqawuse

Note the crystal clarity of the structural elements, so unmistakable by comparison with the fuzzy areas where narrators and performers vary and improvise without however affecting the central thrust of the narrative. Stripped of its contingent elements, the Nongqawuse oral tradition invariably proceeds as follows [italics indicate the spaces where variation is permitted]: Nongqawuse went to *a lonely place* where she met *people she had never seen before* who told her that the cattle must all be killed.

Let us now apply the selfsame method to the story of the death of Nandi, as related in the five published volumes of the James Stuart Archive. It is related or mentioned by seventeen informants altogether, of whom five deny that Nandi was killed by Shaka. Excluding the denialists, who will be dealt with separately, and using the same methodology we employed on the story of Nongqawuse, we arrive at the following schema:



**Figure 2: The death of Nandi**

Wylie, ever a proponent of the Shaka Minimus interpretation, makes hay with the variant versions of Nandi's death wound and airily concludes that "the whole thing was a fabrication".<sup>45</sup> However, these are not eyewitness accounts and, once they are judged by criteria more appropriate to oral tradition, it is the common thrust of the story, rather than the variation in the details, which compels our attention. Even those James Stuart Archive informants who acquit Shaka of the murder, paradoxically confirm the existence of the tradition at the same time that they disagree with it. The most striking example is that of Ngidi, who twice insisted that Nandi died a natural death, but nevertheless managed to give an extremely graphic account of her murder:

His mother then brought out the child and placed it before Tshaka. Then Tshaka asked, "Mother, where does it come from?" Nandi answered, "You ask me where it comes from? Don't you have a penis, then?" Tshaka then left the hut. It is alleged he himself went for an assegai, returned, and forthwith stabbed his mother to death.<sup>46</sup>

The vigour of Ngidi's narrative contrasts starkly with the fact that he himself rejects it as untruthful, but we need not be too disconcerted, provided that we avoid the mistake of conflating oral testimony with oral tradition. Oral tradition derives from the shared corpus of the community's collective memory, and is recognised as such by the oral historian, however much he may personally disagree with it. This is not a contradiction or an anomaly. The individual oral historian is entirely entitled to his personal opinion, and he has just as much right to question the veracity of the narrative he relates, as a literate historian has to question the veracity of the documents which he has found in the archives.

45 Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, p 15

46 Ngidi, *JSA V*, pp 35, 44, 72

We who are literate historians may feel we are confronted by a dilemma. Faced with an oral tradition which incorporates elements of improbability and which is rejected even by some of the informants who relate it, do we attempt to tease the literal truth out of it, or do we attempt to assess it on its own terms as an oral tradition? In fact, we are free to do both. The evidence, with its stress on hidden weapons – whether poison, an awl or stick up the anus – can certainly bear the interpretation that Shaka instigated his mother's death in such a way that she could apparently die of natural causes while he was away on a hunting trip. There is certainly scope for other opinions, and no interpretation, however well-argued, can ever be taken as conclusive.

Far better, in my opinion, to stick with the oral tradition which can, at least, furnish us with sufficient certainty to carry us forward. The bottom line of the story of the death of Nandi is that, whether or not Shaka actually killed his mother, the consensus view among Zulu people was that he had indeed done so. This is shown by the number of variants relating that Shaka ordered the massacres following the death of Nandi in order to cover up his own guilt in the matter. The star evidence in this regard must be that of the Hlubi Mabonsa who, in the course of narrating the history of the Hlubi, accidentally embeds the critical detail that the Hlubi abandoned Shaka because “they could not approve his killing his mother”.<sup>47</sup>

For the sake of argument, let us look at this from an opposite angle. Let us assume that Shaka did not kill his mother after all, that she died of natural causes. The insistence of some variants that she was secretly killed, far from being the truth, could merely be an attempt to explain away the inconvenient fact that no mark of violence was found anywhere on her body. Accusations of poison, like accusations of witchcraft, are inherently unverifiable. The credibility of such accusations depend entirely on the popular perception of the person being accused. Nor need we, if we subscribe to this line of argument, necessarily accept that the child whose discovery provoked Shaka's anger, ever existed. The story as related condemns Shaka twice over. In the first place, that he killed his own mother. In the second, that he did so on account of his unnatural hostility to parenthood and family life.

The oral tradition, therefore, places Shaka in a double bind. Either he killed his own mother, which is bad enough. Alternatively, despite his actual innocence, his people hated him so much that they believed him capable of such a heinous crime. Either way, he was seen as a man entirely void of normal human affection and loyalty, a man who butchers his children and murders his mother. The same picture of unprecedented cruelty occurs time and again in other, shorter oral traditions, like the one about Shaka killing people to feed the vultures. Or the one about killing people to fill a donga. Or the one about killing a woman to see how her unborn child lay in the womb. We need not crack our heads over whether or not these things actually and literally happened. Indeed, it might be more illuminating to view all these stories as variants of the same oral tradition. The common thread of all the stories is that feeding vultures, filling dongas, and checking pregnant women is not a good enough reason to kill people, and the common message is that “Shaka killed people for no good reason”. Can we regard such an individual as a normal human being? Are we not compelled to agree with Baleka kaMpitikazi, that Shaka was a “wild beast, a creature who does not live with its own young”?<sup>48</sup>

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47 Mabonsa, *JSA* II, p 14

48 Baleka, *JSA* I, p 8

**“My father, being a man of Senzangakhona’s time, was circumcised”<sup>49</sup>**

It is common cause that circumcision was universally practised as a rite of passage to manhood throughout present KwaZulu-Natal before the time of Shaka. Senzangakhona, Shaka’s father, was circumcised, as were all the other amaZulu, together with the Mthethwa, the Bhele, the Qwabe, the Cele, the Luthuli, the Hlubi and other chiefdoms mentioned by Stuart’s informants.<sup>50</sup> Jantshi, a Zulu, while agreeing that “all were circumcised in the old days,” speculated that Dingiswayo of the Mthethwa “might have stopped it on his own accord, in his own tribe”, but this is contradicted by Mmemi’s evidence that the Mthethwa and the Qwabe practised circumcision until Shaka abolished it.<sup>51</sup>

One finds it difficult to understand how Wylie arrives at the conclusion that the evidence on the abolition of circumcision “isn’t uniform”, when all the examples which he himself cites shows that the generation of Senzangakhona, Shaka’s father, circumcised, but that the generation of Shaka did not.<sup>52</sup> Nor is it easy to comprehend why Wylie thinks that circumcision was dying out of its own accord, when six of Stuart’s informants specify that Shaka personally “put an end to circumcision among us Zulu, saying that it deprived the men of virility and fierceness”.<sup>53</sup>

The evidence of the James Stuart Archive informants that Shaka put a stop to circumcision is conclusive but, to be consistent, we have to note that it is evidence to be assessed by the criteria applicable to “news”, not by the criteria applicable to oral tradition. The informants are passing on reports they heard from their fathers, but these reports do not form part of any structured narrative. None of the informants reports as fact or opinion whether Shaka himself was circumcised or not, nor do they agree on Shaka’s reasons for so drastic an action as the abolition of circumcision. Madikane, already quoted, thought that Shaka was concerned to preserve the “virility and fierceness” of his army; Mmemi thought that the physiological impact of the operation on the army’s battle preparedness was the determining factor; while Mnkankani, for the Swazi, focused on the social implications of the ceremony, namely that it prepared the circumcision graduates for a domestic, rather than a military life.<sup>54</sup> Wylie endorses Mmemi, whereas I myself prefer Mnkankani, but the fact remains that none of us – including Madikane, Mmemi and Mnkankani – really know the answer. Speculations are not oral traditions, they are not even eyewitness

49 Mini, *JSA* III, p 128 For other evidence to the same effect, see Jantshi, *JSA* I, p 189; Madikane, *JSA* II, p 54; Mangati, *JSA* II, p 204; Melapi, *JSA* III, p 76; Mkando, *JSA* III, p 151; Mmemi, *JSA* III, p 248; Ndhlovu, *JSA* IV, p 217; Ndukwana, *JSA* IV, p 293

50 In addition to the other sources cited below, see Mangati, *JSA* II, p 204

51 Jantshi, *JSA* I, p 195; Mmemi, *JSA* III, p 248

52 Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, p 94 It is strange that, in attempting to sustain this argument, Wylie refers to one Ndlela as “another of Shaka’s warriors”, whereas he was, in fact, the older brother of Senzangakhona’s wife Mangati, *JSA* II, p 204

53 Evidence of Madikane, *JSA* II, p 54 Madikane is the informant whom Wylie praises to the skies on pp 90-91 of *Myth of Iron*. See also: Jantshi, *JSA* I, p 195; Magidigidi, *JSA* II, p 94, Mkando, *JSA* III, p 161; Mmemi, *JSA* III, p 248; Ngidi, *JSA* V, p 68 To be fair to Wylie, he is simply following in the footsteps of A T Bryant, *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal* (Longman, London, 1929), pp 99, 641-642 Bryant strongly asserts that circumcision “fell into disuse” towards the end of the eighteenth century, but his references to the amaZulu chiefdom are contradicted by almost all of Stuart’s amaZulu informants J B Wright, “Pre-Shakan age-group formation among the northern Nguni”, *Natalia*, 8, 1978, pp 22-30, explicitly relies on Bryant

54 *JSA* III, p 284 For the other references, see the note above

testimonies, they are opinion only. Unless we can find a way to appeal to higher authority, it seems as if we are stuck.

I have already pointed out that oral tradition is silent on the question of Shaka's circumcision, but it is extremely vocal on the story of Shaka's rise to power, indeed that constitutes the key oral document on the establishment of the mature Zulu kingdom. The same method which we employed with regard to the death of Nandi, is equally applicable here. The Shaka story is composed of several autonomous episodes, and you may want to begin on your own account by trying your hand at the first episode, "Senzangakhona, Nandi and the conception of Shaka". For reasons of space, we will also skip the second episode, "Shaka, chased from home, finds refuge with Dingiswayo". The critical episode shedding light on the question of Shaka's circumcision, is the third, which I entitle "Shaka becomes chief of the amaZulu" (where, by amaZulu, one means the relatively small chiefdom of Senzangakhona, rather than the mighty kingdom ruled over by his son). The structure of the episode looks something like this:

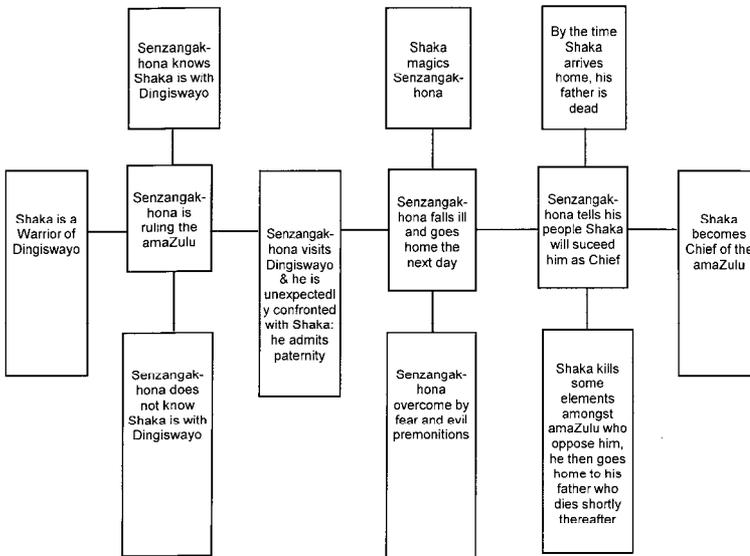


Figure 3: Shaka becomes Chief of the amaZulu

The message of the episode is concise and clear: Shaka surprises Senzangakhona at Dingiswayo's place. Overcome by fear, Senzangakhona designates Shaka in place of the legitimate heir and then dies. The areas of variation (whether or not Senzangakhona knew that Shaka had taken refuge with Dingiswayo; whether Senzangakhona became sick out of hostile magic or simple apprehension; whether Shaka seized power with or without resistance) do not in any way affect the main thrust of the oral tradition. The structure unequivocally shows that Shaka never

reconciled with his father, Senzangakhona, and that he was imposed on the amaZulu chiefdom by his patron Dingiswayo. The crisis of the story occurs at the moment when Dingiswayo discloses Shaka's true identity to Senzangakhona. There is no joyful reunion, only fear and loathing. Far from sticking around to get better acquainted, Senzangakhona hastens home and tells his people to set aside his legitimate heir, Sigujana, in favour of Dingiswayo's nominee. The consensus of the oral tradition is that Senzangakhona was already dead when Shaka returned home but, even allowing for the possibility that he might have been alive, there is no suggestion that Senzangakhona long survived the slaughter of Mdhuli and the other Zulu loyals. Certainly, the oral tradition allows neither the time nor the circumstances for Shaka's circumcision to take place.

The facetious remarks of Wylie with regard to circumcision are not only distasteful, but misleading.<sup>55</sup> The surgical operation is only one aspect, and not the most important aspect of the circumcision ceremony as a whole. The circumcision ceremony is not only an event of major importance in the life of the individual being circumcised, it is also a major public event and social statement whereby that particular individual is accepted as a full adult member of society and endowed with all the resources, rights and obligations which go with it. In this respect, it would seem significant that the isiZulu expression for circumcision used by the James Stuart Archive informants – *ukusoka* – is the same as the isiXhosa word for the graduation and gift-giving phase of the ceremony, rather than the isiXhosa word (*ukwaluka*) for the "bush" phase and the ceremony as a whole.<sup>56</sup>

In the apparent absence of direct evidence, it is difficult to be sure of the circumstances under which chiefs' sons were circumcised in the pre-Shakan era, but it is unlikely that they differed much from the circumstances among the culturally similar Xhosa further south.<sup>57</sup>

The youths who were circumcised together with one of the sons of the chief, belong to his future horde, and are intended, when he marries and quits the paternal home, to constitute the main body of the tribe

Among many other things, the initiate could look forward to the following benefits on emerging from the circumcision lodge:

- Education in social norms and ethics;
- The loyalty and friendship of his peer group;
- Sufficient share of his father's wealth;
- Welcome and integration into community and society; and
- An own home and the promise of future happiness.

One does not have to buy into all the romantic nonsense of traditional Shakaphilia to accept that the young Shaka never enjoyed a stable and happy home

55 Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, pp 51, 95

56 J L Döhne, *A Zulu-Kafir Dictionary* (Juta, Cape Town, 1857), p 329

57 L Alberti, *Account of the Xhosa in 1807* (Balkema, Cape Town, 1968), p 84 See also pp 40-41 for an account of the *ukusoka* ritual which closes the Xhosa circumcision ceremony

life. He was born out of wedlock. His mother had a succession of “husbands”.<sup>58</sup> He grew up as a child soldier. His father never recognised him. Denied circumcision, he further lacked wise guardians to teach him, loyal friends to stand by him, kind relatives to buy him new clothes, and any place outside the regiment to call his home. The circumcision ceremony which gave others their start in life, acted as a double barrier to Shaka’s advancement. His father was uncircumcised when he was conceived, a circumstance which marked him out for life as illegitimate. He was born the son of a chief but, in a society where circumcision was taken as the marker of adulthood, how could he, an uncircumcised boy, ever command the respect of his subjects? Long after the Shakan regime had been established, even after Shaka himself was dead, many of the circumcised still held the uncircumcised in contempt.<sup>59</sup>

Unquestionably, there must have been good grounds for the abolition of circumcision – the Zulu example was followed by Mswati and Faku among others – but one cannot accept that a ceremony so central to the individual and society simply died away of its own accord, and one cannot believe that Shaka’s personal circumstances played no part in his adoption of a policy so closely attuned to his personal interests.

### Implications

Before proceeding to the implications of these analyses, it is necessary to briefly recapitulate the broader historical context within which Shaka reigned, lest our focus on Shaka be misconstrued as a surrender to the “great man” theory of history. Going back to the historiographical consensus which was slowly emerging before it was derailed by the fruitless confusion induced by the Cobbing hypothesis, it was generally agreed that the origins of the Zulu kingdom must be traced back to major shifts in social and economic structures occurring at least fifty years before the birth of Shaka. Most important was the transformation of circumcision age-sets into regiments, a transformation linked to the expansion of elephant hunting to meet the growing demand generated by the international market for ivory.<sup>60</sup> The generation of Shaka’s patron, Dingiswayo, that is the generation before Shaka, saw the emergence of confederations – chiefdoms that had swallowed smaller chiefdoms – such as the Mthethwa, the Ndwandwe and the Qwabe, each concentrated in its own specific geographical zone. These confederations competed – whether for trade or whether to optimize their environmental resources – and the relations between them became increasingly militarized and aggressive until, some time around 1816, Chief Zwide of

58 Space precludes detailed discussion of these matters. Many of the *JS4* informants stoutly asserted that Senzangakhona did eventually marry Nandi, and that Shaka was therefore legitimate. That is surely a matter of opinion. Given all we know about Zulu marriage customs, it is clear that the “marriage” was highly irregular. Shaka had a sister, Nomcoba, whose paternity is not at all clear. There are hints in *JS4* that Shaka’s rage against Makhedama of the Langeni was due to fury about his relationship with Nandi. See Ngidi, *JS4 V*, p 43. Nandi later married a man named Gedeyama, and had children by him.

59 Mabonsa, *JS4 II*, pp 19-20. Makata, the great induna of the Iziyendane regiment, insulted Dingane by calling him “a good-for-nothing that has not been circumcised”. He was killed for that.

60 In addition to Wright, “Pre-Shakan age-group formation”; and Peires, “Paradigm Deleted”, see: P. Bonner, *Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), Chapter 2; J. Wright and C. Hamilton, “Traditions and Transformations: the Phongolo-Mzimkhulu region in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries”, in A. Duminy and B. Guest (eds), *Natal and Zululand from Earliest Times to 1910* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1989).

the Ndwandwe attacked Chief Sobhuza of the Ngwane (later Swazi), thereby triggering a series of bloody internecine wars from which only one victor could emerge, and which were therefore bound to result in the creation of a single kingdom under a single king. By a final battle in 1826, in which he defeated the sons of Zwide, Shaka emerged as that victor and the Zulu kingdom as that kingdom, and if it had ended there, one would have had no quarrel with Wylie's view that Shaka was nothing more than "a leader utilising customary practices ... to achieve a consolidation of power and control".<sup>61</sup> However, it did not end there.

Shaka was by no means the only begetter of the Zulu kingdom, but, I would argue, nor was his reign simply the culmination of historical processes going back more than fifty years. Let us not forget that Shaka failed in whatever it was that he was trying to achieve. He was murdered by his brother Dingane, who reversed several of his most unpopular innovations and praised himself as Malamulela, the one who intervened to save the people from Shaka. It is the modified Shakan state of Dingane, rather than the unfinished work-in-progress of Shaka himself, which better represents the logical outcome of the longer-term processes.

The two episodes in Shaka's life discussed in detail in this article, namely the death of Nandi and Shaka's first assumption of chieftainship, were chosen precisely because they highlight the more innovative and aberrant aspects of his rule, aspects which cannot be aligned to the historical logic of long-term trends, but which must be taken as originating from Shaka himself. Let me briefly restate the purpose of this article and then proceed to the conclusions which I would like to draw.

- The term "Shaka the Great" is admittedly a provocation, intended as a counterweight to the Shaka Minimus interpretation presented by Dan Wylie, Shaka's latest biographer and, implicitly, by the Cobbing school of thought. Far from being nothing more than a "leader utilising customary practices", Shaka was a distinctive figure who intervened decisively in the history of the Zulu kingdom and in a manner which can only be explained in terms of his individual personality and his personal objectives;
- The Shaka Minimus image has also been facilitated, albeit inadvertently, by an excessive concern with issues of representation in line with the postmodern trend in historiography. This has led scholars like Carolyn Hamilton to say as little as possible about the historical Shaka, rather than as much as they can;
- Oral tradition can break the impasse by providing a reliable frame of reference, a still point in a constantly turning world, provided however that oral tradition is properly understood and utilised. Not every oral account is an oral tradition. Oral informants may also provide eyewitness reports, they may also express their personal opinions. Their evidence can be analysed by conventional historical methods appropriate to the evaluation of individual testimonies. Oral traditions, on the other hand, should not be taken as literal representations of what actually happened. They constitute a given culture's collective understanding of its own past and are based on common structures, the validity of which transcends the contingent

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61 Wylie, *Myth of Iron*, p 431

elements which vary according to the narrator or the performance. Oral traditions therefore require to be decoded; however, they can never be discarded or ignored;

- The “Death of Nandi” oral tradition demonstrates the extent to which allegations of Shaka’s extraordinary violence and cruelty need to be taken seriously. Oral tradition condemns Shaka as the murderer of his mother, a historical assessment which, even if unjust, clearly shows the extent of popular revulsion against the king and his methods. Numerous other oral traditions – killing people to feed vultures, filling dongas with dead bodies, ripping open pregnant women – while not, perhaps, literally true, all tend to the same effect. There is an urgent need for researchers to revisit E.V. Walter’s under-researched, but nevertheless suggestive *Terror and Resistance*, to see how far its arguments could be amended or refined,<sup>62</sup>
- The “Shaka becomes Chief of the amaZulu” oral tradition was analysed with a view to shedding light on whether or not Shaka was circumcised. It became clear in the course of the analysis not only that Shaka could not have been circumcised, but that his relationship with his father and his home chiefdom were negative or non-existent, that he was never socialised into the norms and ethics of the society into which he was born, indeed that he necessarily required to shatter those norms and ethics to achieve his personal and political goals;
- Both oral traditions support what I take to be the central thrust of Shaka’s personal project: the destruction of the family and its replacement by a new social organism based on the state. Consider, for example, the evidence of Melapi, taken almost at random from the James Stuart Archive:<sup>63</sup> “All children were spoken of as *ingese*, *izingese*, not *umntwana*, *abantwana*, for Tshaka was *the* one and only *umntwana* ... When Nandi died Tshaka gave orders that no children were to be borne throughout the country. After a time, seeing that the strength of his army would be seriously affected by such an order, he rescinded it”. It is clear from the first part of this quotation, that Shaka’s refusal to bear children was not merely fear of assassination twenty years down the line. Golan is quite correct to draw attention to Shaka’s “mighty war against the only female capacity – reproduction through pregnancy – that he could not appropriate from women”.<sup>64</sup> The entire dynamic of Zulu expansion is explicable in terms of Shaka’s desire to recruit his army by conscription, rather than by birth. We, who live in the same era as the Lords Resistance Army, the RUF of Sierra Leone and the early Renamo, should not find such an objective far-fetched. Closer to home and before the time of Shaka, we find the *kilombo* of the Imbangala, better known as the Jaga, who gained “overwhelming military superiority” in Angola “by suppressing descent as an element of social structure”.<sup>65</sup> If indeed this was Shaka’s objective, it was a bridge too far for the Zulu people and one from which Dingane very wisely retreated.

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62 E V Walter, *Terror and Resistance* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1969)

63 Melapi, *JSA* III, p 86

64 Golan, *Inventing Shaka*, p 126 Golan also cites additional examples of Shaka’s unusual gender attitudes, which cannot be considered here, but which strongly support the argument of this paragraph

65 On the *kilombo*, see: Miller, *Kings and Kingsmen*, pp 225-227

Before closing, it is only fair to remind the reader that all of the above is deliberately based on nothing more than the five published volumes of the James Stuart Archive. Is it legitimate to draw such far-reaching hypotheses from so little research? Must not one consider all the evidence before jumping to conclusions? My response would be that further research will certainly turn up further variants, but that the version of oral tradition here presented cannot be shaken by the evidence of any single informant, and can only be disconfirmed by the discovery of an alternative counter-tradition. My purpose, in any case, is simply to get debate going. Any takers?

### **Abstract**

Recognising the unavoidable bias of colonial sources, the article reassesses the personality and career of Shaka by means of oral tradition alone. In doing so, it explicitly rejects the opinion, currently prevalent in South African studies, that oral historical narratives are nothing more than a variant of oral narratives generally in favour of the view that oral historical narratives possess underlying invariant structural elements. The body of the article consists of a structural analysis of the oral historical narratives concerning Shaka's accession to power and his role in the death of his mother Nandi. Shaka emerges from this analysis as a distinctive figure who intervened decisively in the history of the Zulu kingdom. The extraordinary violence of his reign and the abrupt break with social norms inherent in his abolition of circumcision must be explained in terms of his ultimate objective of destroying the family and replacing it with an entirely new social organism based on the state. Dingane, by assassinating Shaka, prevented him from realising his ambitions, and it is Dingane, not Shaka, who must be seen as the true founder of the mature Zulu state.

### **Opsomming**

#### **Shaka die Grote**

Hierdie artikel erken dat koloniale bronne onvermydelik bevooroordeel is, en gaan dan voort om die persoonlikheid en loopbaan van Shaka te herevalueer, gebaseer op slegs mondelinge oorlewering. Deur dit te doen, verwerp die artikel op duidelike wyse die opinie wat tans so algemeen in Suid-Afrikaanse studies voorkom, naamlik dat mondelinge historiese oorleweringe niks meer is as 'n variasie van mondelinge oorleweringe nie. Dit betoog ten gunste van die mening dat mondelinge historiese oorleweringe onderliggende onveranderlike strukturele elemente besit. Die hoofdeel van die artikel bestaan uit 'n strukturele analise van die mondelinge historiese oorleweringe rakende Shaka se magsoorname en die rol wat hy in sy moeder, Nandi, se dood gespeel het. Shaka tree uit hierdie analise na vore as 'n uitsonderlike figuur wat op beslissende wyse in die geskiedenis van die Zoeloeryk ingegryp het. Die buitengewoon gewelddadige aard van sy heerskappy en die plotselinge breuk met sosiale norme inherent aan sy afskaffing van besnydenis, moet verduidelik word in terme van sy uiteindelijke doelwit om die familiestruktuur te vernietig en met 'n volkome nuwe sosiale organisme, gebaseer op die staat, te vervang. Deur die sluipmoord op Shaka, het Dingane voorkom dat Shaka in sy voorneme geslaag het en dus is dit Dingane, en nie Shaka nie, wat as die ware stigter van die volwaardige Zoeloestaat beskou moet word.

**Keywords**

Carolyn Hamilton; child soldiers; circumcision; Dan Wylie; Dingane; historiography; Isabel Hofmeyr; James Stuart Archive; legitimacy; mfecane debate; Nandi; oral historical narratives; oral narrative; oral tradition; regimes of terror; representation; Senzangakhona; Shaka; South African historiography; state formation; structural analysis; Zulu.

**Slutelwoorde**

Carolyn Hamilton; kindersoldate; besnydenis; Dan Wylie; Dingane; historiografie; Isabel Hofmeyr; James Stuart-argief; wettigheid; mfecane debat; Nandi; mondelinge historiese oorlewering; mondelinge oorlewering; mondelinge tradisie; terreur-regimes; voorstelling; Senzangakhona; Shaka; Suid-Afrikaanse historiografie; staatvorming; strukturele analise; Zoeloe.