

One of the minor but enduring controversies surrounding the events at iSandlwana concerns the meaning - and even the spelling - of the name itself. The word *iSandlwana* has historically presented problems of pronunciation for those not used to the isiZulu language, particularly the fluid sound represented by the middle 'dl'. As a result, the word was initially rendered phonetically in British reports in various ways from the garbled *Isandlalana* to the simplified *Isandula*, which remained popular with the British press throughout the war.

Lord Chelmsford himself wrote of his intention on 16 January 1879 to advance 'to the Isanblana hill', but on the 21<sup>st</sup> he dated his despatches with marginally more accuracy from 'Insalwana Hill'. His reports of the 23<sup>rd</sup>, breaking the terrible news of the battle's outcome, referred to 'Isandlana Hill', and by May he had added a 'w', rendering the name 'Insandhlwana'; he retained this version, with occasional lapses, as late as his memorandum of May 1880 defending his conduct during the campaign.

Most reports, official or unofficial, from British sources reflect a similar lack of consistency although the Colonial press, with rather more awareness of local language, generally preferred the form *Isandhlwana*. This became the most popular version used in histories of the battle until the 1970s, although in fact linguistic studies of isiZulu as early as the 1940s declared that the combination *dhl* was unsound. The early revisionist studies of the battle, about the time of the centenary, therefore adopted the version *Isandlwana*. More recently, in respect to the technicalities of isiZulu (the first 'l' is in fact a locative prefix), it has become common to render the name *iSandlwana*.

The meaning of the word has also been the subject of some confusion. When the novelist Rider Haggard visited the site in 1914 he grumbled that that two of the great colonial experts on Zulu history could not agree on the meaning of the name - 'Mr Gibson (1) declares that this name means 'Like a little house'; Stuart (2) on the contrary says that the true interpretation thereof is 'the second stomach of an ox'. When such learned doctors disagree, as they did with vigour, I may be pardoned if I cling to the old rendering of 'the place of the little hand.'(3)

Ironically, while both Gibson and Stuart may be said to be right, Haggard was not. It is true that the word *isandla* means hand, but the diminutive form ('little hand') is more correctly given as *Isandlana* not *iSandlwana*. In fact, iSandlwana literally means 'like a little hut' (*indlu*, hut) but in this form it has a very specific reference. It refers to a 'little hut', raised upon stilts to keep it clear of damp and away from rats, used as a grain store in an ordinary family homestead, but the comparison is not to the hut itself but rather reflects the Zulu habit of identifying features in relation to their cattle. The 'little grain hut' is in fact a term used as an analogy to the second honeycombed stomach of a cow. The hill iSandlwana is therefore believed to resemble 'the second stomach of a cow'.

A number of expert isiZulu linguists, both contemporary and modern, concur with this translation. Henry Francis Fynn Jnr - son of the 1824 pioneer and friend of King Shaka, Henry Francis Fynn - who was magistrate at Msinga at the time of the war and was present with Lord Chelmsford's troops at Mangeni on 22 January, attempted to further explain the analogy;

Sandhlwana is the honey-combed smaller paunch. Sandhlwana is an abrupt conical hill, precipitous rock on the eastern, southern and western sides, and much honeycombed. On the northern side its continuous ridge extends northwards and forms a spur or thumb, as it were, of the Nqutu range, Zululand, thus representing the Sandlwana store to its relative hut.(4)

The traveller, Bartram Mitford, noted rather testily in 1883 that the word meant 'neither 'little hand' nor 'little house', nor any other of the hundred and one interpretations which were devised at the time of the disaster, but refers to a portion of bovine intestinal anatomy.'(5)

Col. H.C. Lugg - whose father Harry Lugg had fought at Rorke's Drift with the Natal Mounted Police, and who was himself a Zulu linguist and a Native Commissioner - added further linguistic details;

Sandhlwana is the Native form for the second or honeycomb stomach of a cow, and the hill was named, some say by Sihayo, *because of its resemblance to this organ*. The word itself is the diminutive form of *isandhlu*, the upper portion of a corn crib, or even a native watch-hut (*ixiba*), and as the second stomach of a beast serves as a storehouse, and is similar in appearance to a

corn crib, or *isandhlwana*. A small corn crib is often referred to as an *isandhlwana*. (6)

He added, rather optimistically, that 'this explanation should dispose of the controversy which has arisen over this word'.

Finally, here are indeed a number of traditions that the hill was named by *inkosi* Sihayo kaXongo whose amaQungebeni people lived locally. While this may be apocryphal - a case of a significant name attaching itself to the memory of an important man who was involved in the events concerned - it is not inconceivable. Sihayo's family had originally lived close to the White Mfolozi River but were appointed guardians of the Mzinyathi border region by King Mpande in the 1850s; as newcomers it is possible they therefore applied names to geographical features which caught their attention.

## References.

1. James Young Gibson (1857-1935) was a magistrate in Zululand and author of *The Story of the Zulus* (1903). Gibson,
2. James Stuart (1868-1942) was a Natal civil servant and an avid collector of Zulu oral tradition (some of his voluminous notes have been published by the University of Natal under the title *The James Stuart Archive*) and author the semi-official *History of The Natal Rebellion*.
3. *Diary of an African Journey (1914)* by H. Rider Haggard, edited by Stephen Coan, London, 2001.
4. *My Recollections of a Famous Campaign and a Great Disaster* by Henry F. Fynn, *Natal Witness* 22 January 1913.
5. Bertram Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country; Its Battlefields and Its People*, London 1883.
6. *Historic Natal and Zululand* by H.C. Lugg, Pietermaritzburg 1949. The late 'SB' Bourquin, a fluent Zulu linguist and former head of the Bantu Affairs Department in Durban in the 1970s, was also of this opinion (conversations with the author).

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