

**‘A ZULU OF THE OLD SCHOOL’;
The Life and Death of Mehlokazulu kaSihayo**

By Ian Knight

A middle-aged Zulu man looks out squarely from an old photograph; from the context of others on the same album page appears to have been taken around 1900, during the Anglo-Boer War. He stands full-length, wearing a European suit that was probably quite natty in its day, but which now struggles to contain his comfortable girth. On his feet are an impressive pair of riding boots, and he holds a cap in his hand by his side, a gesture which was probably no more than a nod to the photographer's desire to see his face clearly, but which has somehow revealed rather more of character of the man himself. On his head he wears the traditional *isicoco*, the polished ring of fibre and resin, bound into the hair, which marks him out as a married man, the master of his own homestead and a man worthy of respect - a symbol which, by 1900, was beginning to fall out of fashion among younger men as age-old customs began to crumble in the face of a brash new world dominated by the realities of colonial rule. Yet for all a slight fading in the photograph has leached away a little crispness from his features, there is no mistaking that this man is old-school, a man who carries not only his personal standing but a pride in his culture and origins in his bearing, and in the confident gaze with which he looks out at the world.

As well he might, since he was a man whose personal story is inextricably bound up with the dramatic fall of the old Zulu kingdom, a man who had been photographed many years before, at a pivotal moment in his own life and those of his countrymen, and who was photographed now – in an image which has only recently come to light – on the eve of his last stand. His name is Mehlokazulu kaSihayo.

Mehlokazulu had been born in 1853 or 1854 into a world which, despite the apparent power and independence of the Zulu kings, was already feeling the pressure from the expanding settler societies on its borders. Indeed, Mehlokazulu's family owed its prominent role within the kingdom precisely to that pressure. The country was only then beginning to recover from the disastrous war with the Boer Voortrekkers in 1838-40 which had not only denuded the kingdom of a significant slice of its economic power in the form of thousands of head of cattle but had also drastically affected the balance of power between the king and his great regional chiefs. King Mpande had been slowly and patiently rebuilding the mechanisms of royal authority but his achievements were already under threat from a new internal crisis, the looming struggle between his sons to secure the concession. At the same time Mpande was besieged by white hunters and traders operating out of both the British colony of Natal and the Boer republic of the Transvaal, and who wanted concessions to operate freely in Zulu territory – a factor which, since they were keen to form local alliances which often benefited regional chiefs rather than the king himself, further served to undermine the apparatus of state control. In an attempt to counter this, the king had attempted to limit white penetration to certain areas. The most established trading route, first pioneered by Lt. Farewell and his early band of settlers at Port Natal in the 1820s and regarded, since the extension of British authority to Natal in the 1840s, as the principle 'traders' road', extended directly up the coast from the white enclave at Port Natal. Mpande's inclination was to limit European access to this route but by 1850 this was becoming difficult to achieve. Not only had the spread of white settlement along the Natal/Zulu border opened the possibility of a number of other – as yet unmonitored – entry points but the gradual build-up of Boer settlement along the ill-defined Zulu/Transvaal borders further north posed a threat from that direction, too.

The king's response had been to shore up the back door to the kingdom by establishing a loyal client group to represent his interests along the upper Mzinyathi border. These people, the amaQungebeni under their *inkosi* Mfokozana kaXongo, were moved westwards from their original lands along the White Mfolozi in about 1850, and took up residence instead in the Batshe valley opposite the boundary with Natal. Here they straddled an emergent trading route which had been pioneered by the white trader James Rorke from his farm which commanded the principle crossing on the Mzinyathi, and which white the settlers had already come to call Rorke's Drift. From their new

position the amaQungebeni were able to monitor all the traffic entering Zululand by way of Rorke's Drift, and send detailed reports to the king on the passage one way of ox-wagons laden with blankets, beads and copper wire, and of their return, accompanied by the large herds of cattle which constituted the traders' profits. The amaQungebeni were, said Mpande, his *isiquthu* – his 'eyes in the back of his head'.

For the amaQungebeni it was a role which brought a steady increase in power and influence. At once the king's border guards, a crucial source at court of intelligence on the doings of the white world, they were also first port of call to traders keen to maintain their good will. Mfokozana had not enjoyed his position for long and had died about 1853, and since he had no heir Mpande had confirmed his brother, Sihayo, in his position. Over the next twenty years Sihayo had grown wealthy as a result of his position – his homestead at kwaSogekle, 'The Cock's Comb', which nestled securely in a horse-shoe sculpted out among the cliff-faces of the hills overlooking the eastern bank of the Batshe, boasted a particularly large cattle-kraal, and Sihayo himself accumulated horses and wagons, and entertained visiting whites in European clothes. Even so, when Sihayo's principle wife, MaMtshali, bore a son shortly after Sihayo's accession he was named, in accordance of the usual Zulu practise of associating a child with an important theme of the times, Mehlokazulu – 'With Eyes of the Zulu' (1).

There was never any doubt towards whom those eyes were directed.

As a young man Mehlokazulu would have grown up like every other boy in nineteenth-century Zululand, milking his father's cows when he was old enough, and then later herding them across the pleasant hills bordering the Batshe. When his father walked the long journeys to attend the royal council Mehlokazulu would have accompanied him, carrying his father's rolled sleeping mat and wooden *isiquki* head-rest in a bundle on his head. Only in two respects was Mehlokazulu's life different from any other boy growing up in Zululand. The unique position of the amaQungebeni gave him not only a perspective on the world beyond the kingdom's borders – and both the threats and advantages it afforded – but also an ear to the inner circle of royal power and politics. As a youth Mehlokazulu would have had no voice in the royal councils, merely sitting, with his eyes respectfully averted, behind his father's right hand, ready to serve him snuff or bring him water if he desired it. He would, nonetheless, have heard much of their discussions and been unusually aware, for a lad, of the issues which surrounded the passing of old King Mpande in 1872, the accession of his son Cetshwayo a year later, and the tensions which faced the country as a result. The advent of a new king saw subtle shifts of power in the royal council as Cetshwayo began to distance himself from his father's elderly courtiers, and to appoint his own men to positions of authority and influence. Sihayo had always been a friend and supporter to Cetshwayo during the long years of uncertainty about the succession and the new order saw the amaQungebeni's position as guardians of the western marches not only ratified but expanded. Mehlokazulu became one of the king's body-servants, tasked with other sons of influential chiefs with the duty of fetching pure water from a spring to bathe the king in the ritual ablutions which formed part of the great national ceremonies, and he became, too, part of the king's internal network of intelligence gatherers which reported regularly on the state of the public mood in areas away from the centres of power.

In addition, Mehlokazulu grew up largely at ease with the white world. He was familiar with firearms and knew how to shoot, and he knew, too, how to ride the horses that his father had acquired through his trading contacts. Yet Mehlokazulu lacked the awe with which King Shaka had first encouraged ordinary Zulus to regard Europeans and which still prevailed among his father's generation, and he was part of a new order which saw nothing innately superior in the white way of life beyond the material comforts it afforded. Even as a young man he was regarded with some suspicion by the white traders who passed through the border districts who considered him rather to astute in his bargains. In 1872 Mehlokazulu, like the vast majority of his age-mates, had been enrolled in a new *ibutho* (age-grade regiment), the iNgobamakhosi. Mehlokazulu himself had already emerged as a charismatic and forceful personality among the younger members of the amaQungebeni, and soon began to exert an influence upon the iNgobamakhosi, too, to the extent that he was picked out from the ranks to be awarded a command, probably of several *amaviyo* (companies). The traveller Bertram Mitford met him in 1882 and found him

... a fine, well-made man ...with an intelligent face and a brisk, lively manner. A sub-chief among the Ngobamakosi regiment he is a good shot, and is much looked up to by his younger compatriots as a spirited and daring warrior. (2).

A daring warrior indeed. Today his family remember him as an *iqawe ga'khulu*, a 'great hero' who, in later life, carried a brooding air of his past deeds in his manner. He was a man who saw life's difficulties in challenges to be faced head on and who believed that problems could be solved simply enough – by fighting.

And problems were gathering steadily on the borders of the Zulu kingdom in the 1870s. King Mpande had allowed Boers from the Transvaal republic the right to graze their cattle on what the king considered to be Zulu territory. Over the years the Boers had edged further and further forward, building farms on land which was formally under the authority of the amaQungebeni, who therefore found themselves in the front line of the wrangles surrounding the emergence of the so-called 'disputed territory'. The annexation of the Transvaal by the British in 1877 dramatically altered the political situation beyond the Zulu borders, bringing together two neighbours whom, the Zulus had clearly understood, had previously pursued very different ambitions and agendas. Now, the Zulu kingdom was surrounded on two sides by European settler states acting to a common purpose; a purpose which, moreover, following the arrival that year of a new British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, seemed increasingly hostile to Zulu interests.

With tension over the disputed border rising on both sides, King Cetshwayo agreed to a suggestion from the government of the Colony of Natal that a boundary commission be appointed to look into the overlapping claims of both parties. The commission met at Jim Rorke's old farm in March 1878 and began conducting interviews and taking evidence. For the best part of a month Rorke's farm, as remote an outpost of empire as any in southern Africa, was at the epicentre of international affairs, and when the Commissioners packed up and trekked back to prepare their reports an air of expectation hung over the border region.

But nothing happened. In fact the Commission had found largely in favour of the Zulu case but Frere, increasingly convinced of the need to extend British influence into Zululand itself in support of a wider shoring up of British authority across southern Africa, refused to confirm its findings whilst he pondered how best to exploit it as a political tool. An air of frustration settled over the communities on both sides of the divide along the upper Mzinyathi valley.

It was against this background that two of *inkosi* Sihayo's wives made a fatal blunder. Not long after the Commission departed MaMtshali – Mehlokazulu's own mother – and MaMthethwa took advantage of their husband's absence attending the royal court to abandon him and flee across the Mzinyathi. Both women had apparently been having affairs with men on the Natal bank, and they seem to have calculated that Rorke's Drift's sudden role in the spotlight of regional affairs would afford them a degree of security. A ripple of anger passed through the amaQungebeni and Mehlokazulu was furious at the slight to his father's honour. When a Zulu, returning from visiting friends in the colony, happened to recognise MaMtshali and to scold her with tales of her son's wrath she responded with deliberate disdain. She 'jeered and said "he was to tell Mehlokazulu to come and kill her" (3). She counted, of course, on the fact that, with the fate of the disputed border still hanging in the balance Mehlokazulu would not dare.

She was wrong. On the morning of 28 July 1878 an African policeman named Mswagele, in the employ of the Natal authorities and living just downstream from Rorke's Drift, emerged from his hut to find as many as 200 Zulus quietly positioned around his homestead on all sides. At their head were a number of men on horseback, and Mswagele recognised them as Sihayo's brother, Zuluhlenga, and three of Sihayo's sons, Tshekwane, Mkhumbikazulu – and Mehlokazulu. Mehlokazulu had discovered that MaMtshali was living in the homestead, and he demanded Mswagele surrender her. For a moment it looked as if Mswagele, backed up by a handful of neighbours who had been attracted by the commotion, might refuse but in fact they were absurdly outnumbered. Zuluhlenga dismounted and pushed his way into the huts and emerged with a struggling MaMtshali. A Zulu struck her in the face, knocking out some teeth, and she was quickly bound at the wrists and waist, and dragged away. Somehow she was bundled down to the Mzinyathi – the international border – and across the river, and as the Zulus began to head off towards kwaSogekle they struck up a war song. They hadn't gone far when they halted on the banks of the Cumbeza stream. As the wife of an *inkosi* MaMtshali was

entitled to die without her blood being shed and instead leather reins were wound around her neck and the ends pulled taut – then someone struck the reins with a stick, and MaMshali's neck snapped. As she fell to the ground the Zulus fired a ragged volley over her body in celebration. A few days later, before the Natal authorities had time to digest the incident, Mehlokazulu again crossed the border and seized and killed MaMthethwa in much the same way.

In Zululand the general view of what today we might call these 'honour killings' was that the two women had brought shame on Sihayo's house, and as such their lives were deservedly forfeit. Mehlokazulu had been careful not to implicate his father directly, nor had he offered any slight to any Natal citizens. Nonetheless, as a young man he had far exceeded his authority, and the news of his actions greatly disturbed the royal council. As well it might, for it provided Sir Bartle Frere with the excuse he had been looking for, an opportunity to suggest to a reluctant Government in London that peaceful relations with the Zulu kingdom had broken down. Frere called a meeting with Zulu representatives to be held at the Lower Drift on the Thukela River on 11 December 1878, ostensibly to present the long-delayed award of the Boundary Commission; in fact, whilst the findings of the award were largely in the Zulus' favour, Frere attached a series of demands which amounted to an ultimatum. Citing Mehlokazulu's violations of the border among others, he demanded that King Cetshwayo dismantle the *amabutho* military system and accept a British Resident at his court. If Cetshwayo had accepted these demands he would have effectively handed over control of the Zulu kingdom to the British without a shot being fired; Frere did not expect that he would. When no response was received by the date allotted for compliance, 11 January 1879, British troops invaded Zululand.

Once it was clear that the British were in earnest Mehlokazulu and several of his brothers had left the border and taken refuge with the exiled Swazi prince Mbilini waMswati in the north. It was not just the wrath of the British he feared – several influential councillors blamed the amaQungebeni for the British reaction and in heated meetings at the royal capital Sihayo was harangued and abused. Nevertheless, the king stuck by him – Sihayo was not only a long-standing friend but Cetshwayo could only abandon him at the price of some of his own prestige. Instead, as the British ultimatum ticked away, the Zulu army was assembled and underwent the great ceremonies necessary to prepare it for war. Whilst the king and his advisers pondered their military response, the British Centre Column crossed into Zululand at Rorke's Drift at dawn on 11 January. The following day, in accordance with the premise laid out in Frere's manifesto, they attacked Sihayo's homesteads in the Batshe valley. Neither Mehlokazulu nor Sihayo were at home but following a stiff skirmish one of Sihayo's other sons, Mkhumbikazulu, and some sixty of his followers were killed. The British then set fire to kwaSogekle.

News of the attack – which seemed to suggest the British were deliberately targeting royal favourites – decided the Zulu strategic response. On 17 January the Zulu army set out towards the border at Rorke's Drift. As it did so Mehlokazulu hurried down from his refuge in the north and met it along the way, re-joining his regiment, the iNgobamakhosi. By 20 January the army had reached the Siphezi Mountain and learned that the British, meanwhile, had pushed forward to iSandlwana to the west. Scarcely twenty miles separated the two armies, and on the 21st the Zulus moved again, shifting their line of advance slightly to their right, and entering Sihayo's territory. Mehlokazulu – who of course knew the country well – hurried out to join the Zulu scouting parties which kept back the British scouts and monitored their movements. The great army spent the night of the 21/22 January bivouacking in the shelter valley of the Ngwebeni stream, just five miles from iSandlwana. At dawn on the 22nd Mehlokazulu and other scouts again pushed forward to observe the British movements but once the mist had cleared in the valley the British camp seemed oddly quiet; during the night, misreading reports of the Zulu approach, the British commander, Lord Chelmsford, had marched out with half his force towards the Mangeni valley. Mehlokazulu returned from his scouting to report to the senior Zulu commander, Ntshingwayo, in person. Ntshingwayo was inclined to delay an attack – the coming night was the night of the new moon, a time of ill-omen, and there were political implications too, for the king had instructed his commanders to let the British fire the first shots – and Ntshingwayo merely remarked that 'we will see what they are going to do'. Yet *amabutho* were restless with the proximity to the enemy, and several of them pushed forward from the valley, only to be ordered back again by their *izinduna*. Their movements were spotted from the British camp, and at about noon mounted detachments from iSandlwana stumbled across the *impi* – and the battle began.

Mehlokazulu had only just returned to the iNgobamakhosi bivouac when the battle began. In a long account given after the war ended he described how the regiment rushed forward and found itself supporting the young uVe regiment, which formed the left horn. Their advance was held up for a while by Col. Durnford's determined stand on the banks of the iNyogane stream – Mehlokazulu described how the Zulus advanced in short rushes, throwing themselves down in the long grass to avoid the British volleys. Even so, he recalled that whole groups of men were swept away on either side of him by the fire. Yet the British position was too extended, and Durnford could not hold the iNyogane indefinitely – as he retreated towards the camp the Zulu centre rushed in and the fighting became hand to hand. Mehlokazulu recalled seeing Durnford at the centre of a stand made behind the British tents but was drawn away by the fighting. He saw mounted British auxiliaries under Hlubi Molife retreating across country, and gave chase, but was unable to catch them – by the time he returned to the camp the fighting was largely over, and Durnford lay dead among the carnage. When interviewed by the traveller Bertram Mitford in 1882 Mehlokazulu shrugged off suggestions that he had killed many among the British troops but Mitford was not convinced –

Now this answer was evasive, for I subsequently heard that he had rather distinguished himself in the battle in question. As a rule, however, no Zulu will own to having actually killed anyone with his own hand, thinking such admission would be offensive; and so far from being ready to brag about their success, I invariably found the reverse tendency to prevail; in fact, tough, wiry looking warriors, just the most likely fellows to have played the deuce among our ranks, are the very ones who will most readily disclaim having killed anyone in battle. (5)

The Zulu success at iSandlwana completely changed the strategic situation early in the war. Lord Chelmsford returned to Rorke's Drift – where a detachment of troops guarding a stockpile of supplies had successfully fought off a Zulu attack – and regrouped. The great Zulu army dispersed to allow the men to recover, and the British dead lay unattended for five months. Most of the amaQungebeni had abandoned their homes in the area following the attack on kwaSogekle and were living instead in the hills but as the weeks passed many took the opportunity to visit the battlefield in search of loot. Several wagons were dragged away for Sihayo's use, and as late as 1992 Mehlokazulu's surviving son, uMnandi Ngobese, told the author that he remembered as a child seeing items of European manufacture at his father's homestead.

The war broke into life again with a vengeance towards the middle of March. With Lord Chelmsford preparing to mount an expedition to relieve the besieged outpost at Eshowe, on the coast, the British mounted diversionary attacks at various points along the border, prompting King Cetshwayo to reassemble his army and direct them, this time, against the British Right Flank Column. On 28 March they drove off a British foray against the Hlobane Mountain, and on the 29th they attacked the British camp at Khambula. By this time the British had learned the lessons of iSandlwana, however, and they were met by men securely posted in fortified positions. Mehlokazulu was present when the iNgobamakhosi attacked across a swathe of open ground only to be driven off by concentrated British fire. The battle proved to be a costly defeat for the Zulus, bringing an end to the ascendancy they had enjoyed since iSandlwana. Mehlokazulu himself had been slightly wounded – 'my hair was cut through by a bullet' (6) - but his friends had helped him get safely away, and he narrowly avoided the worst of the ruthless British pursuit. He had recovered by the time that the last great battle of the war was fought at Ulundi on 4 July, and again took part with his regiment, although he admitted ruefully that 'we did not fight with the same spirit' (7).

Mehlokazulu himself had been among those who had surrendered at Sir Garnet Wolseley's camp at Ulundi in August. He had used a false name but some of the auxiliaries had recognised him, and he had been arrested. It was at this point that he was first photographed, surrounded by auxiliary and Irregular troops. In one picture he sits between three African guards, looking out confidently despite handcuffs hanging loosely from his wrist – in the other he stands looking rather more wary, and the full might of his escort is more obvious. These are historic photographs, images of one of the major figures from the 1879 war, photographed in his fighting prime, just seven months after he took part at iSandlwana.

Mehlokazulu was sent down to Pietermaritzburg where, on 4 September, he was charged with 'assault with intent to murder' for the deaths of MaMtshali and MaMthethwa. This charge was

subsequently reduced to one of 'creating a tumult', and after two hearings even this was dismissed and on 26 September Mehlokazulu was released. Since neither Mehlokazulu nor his victims were Natal subjects, and the crimes had not taken place on Zulu soil, the legality of the charges was questionable; as Bertram Mitford observed, Mehlokazulu 'was allowed to return home, as anyone who gave the matter a moment's thought might have foreseen would be the case.' (8)

The defeat of the army and the capture of the king towards the end of August had a devastating impact upon the fortunes of the amaQungebeni. Lord Chelmsford's successor, Sir Garnet Wolseley, was determined to undermine support for the Zulu Royal House and divided the kingdom up among thirteen pro-British chiefs. Because of the prominence Sihayo had enjoyed in the run up to the war the British were keen to punish him personally, and there was moreover a desire to place the Mzinyathi border in the hands of a British client chief who would therefore provide a buffer between Colonial interests in Natal and the Zulu proper beyond – much the same role, ironically, that Sihayo had performed in reverse before the war. Accordingly Sihayo was deposed and Chief Hlubi – a Tlokoa chief from Natal who had fought with the British at iSandlwana – set up in his place. Hlubi arrived in the Batshe valley in October 1879 to take up his post, and, with appropriate symbolism, built his homestead on the ruins of KwaSogekle. Not long afterwards Sihayo himself returned to his old territory but Hlubi was clearly uncomfortable with his presence and – since Sihayo had been both impoverished by the war and had lost the support of many influential Zulu loyalists who blamed him for the British invasion – Sihayo had little choice but to comply when Hlubi banished him to the eastern fringes of his territory.

It was here that Mitford found them in 1882;

To my inquiries as to how he was getting on since the war, Mehlo-ka-zulu replied that it hadn't made much difference to him individually; his father had been a powerful chief but now he was nobody, and had been driven out of his former country. Still they managed to live.

'Did he regret having fought?'

'No, he couldn't exactly say that; he was a young man and wanted to prove himself as a warrior. He had been in all the principle engagements; Isandhlwana, Kambula, and Ulundi, and now he wanted to 'sit still'.

'Always?'

'Well, that he couldn't say either; he liked a fight now and then; there was no mistake about it ...'(9).

There was little hope in 1882, in any case, that those loyal to the king would have the opportunity to sit still. Mitford himself noted that, just three years after the post-war settlement, the country was already polarising between those who adhered fiercely to the old order and those who owed their position to the new. Mitford saw armed men hurrying to a muster, and noted that many leading men of the old kingdom were lobbying for Cetshwayo's return. That finally occurred in February 1883, following the king's visit to London to secure support; his return was always a compromise, however, since the British were wary of handing back power completely to a former enemy, and the king was prohibited from reviving the *amabutho* system, and large parts of the country were set aside for those who had been opposed to his return. Even so, he had scarcely been back on Zulu soil when the brewing tensions erupted into violence. In March his supporters – probably without the king's consent – attempted to attack the anti-royalist faction of Zibhebhu kaMaphitha, but were heavily defeated at the battle of Msebe, and both sides began to gather their supporters.

Among those who rallied to the king's rebuilt oNdini homestead in May 1883 were Sihayo and - probably - his son Mehlokazulu. Despite the British prohibition on the *amabutho*, most royalists still recognised their allegiance to the structures which pre-existed the disasters of 1879, and once at oNdini the young men who gathered there naturally assembled in their regiments, the iNgobamakhosi among them. When, on 21 July 1883, Zibhebhu launched a surprise attack on oNdini the royalists were caught unprepared, however, and the *amabutho* hurried out to meet them in disarray, and were quickly defeated. Mehlokazulu's part in the battle is not known, but in the rout which followed the young, fit men in the *amabutho* – including the iNgobamakhosi – were able to escape Zibhebhu's ruthless pursuit in a way in which the older royal councillors could not. Of 500 royalists killed no less than 59 were men of great importance under the old kingdom, and the defeat marked the real end of

the old pre-colonial order. King Cetshwayo himself was wounded in the action, and only just managed to escape; he sought refuge with the British agent in Eshowe, where he died on 8 February 1884.

The catastrophic defeats at Msebe and oNdini and the death of the king marked a dismal low in royalist fortunes, but it did allow a new – and arguably more politically ruthless – generation a greater influence on royalist affairs. Cetshwayo's heir was his son Dinuzulu, who was only 15 years old but already determined and ambitious. As he sought a way to restore royalist fortunes Dinuzulu took advice as much from younger men like Mehlokazulu as from his father's surviving councillors. Since Sihayo's death Mehlokazulu was regarded by the amaQungebeni as their *inkosi*, although the British refused to acknowledge his standing. Nevertheless it is no coincidence that when royalist messengers offered a tentative allegiance to Transvaal Boers in April 1884 Mehlokazulu was one of the leading negotiators. Offering farms in return for military support Dinuzulu was able to secure enough Boer firepower to defeat Zibhebhu at the battle of Tshaneni on 5 June. Yet his victory did little in the short term to improve his position, for the resulting Boer land claims were so severe that the British were prompted to intervene, effectively marginalising Dinuzulu still further and recognising a de facto partition of Zululand between the British and the Boers. In frustration Dinuzulu orchestrated a new rebellion against the British in 1888. Mehlokazulu again rallied to his support and, indeed, attempted to use the new crisis to settle old scores. Whilst the Tlokoa chief Hlubi – who had replaced the amaQungebeni as the resident power along the Zulu side of the Rorke's Drift border – led his men to support British troops, Mehlokazulu gathered his own supporters to attack Hlubi's unprotected homesteads. In the event, however, Dinuzulu's rebellion quickly collapsed, and Mehlokazulu's planned raid was called off.

The leaders of the rebellion – Dinuzulu and several of his uncles – surrendered to the authorities and were sent into exile, and in its aftermath the British finally assumed direct control over Zululand and addressed some of the issues which had led to so many deep-seated conflicts. There was a reluctant realisation that many of these were due to the deliberate British policies of divide and rule which had prevailed for almost a decade, and to restore an equilibrium of sorts both the persecution of leaders of the old order and the unqualified support for pro-British appointees was officially eased. Whilst Chief Hlubi found that his authority dwindled to that over his own followers in the Batshe valley – a poor reward for his years of service to British interests – Mehlokazulu was finally recognised as *inkosi* of the amaQungebeni in 1893, and allowed to return to his old territory.

This rapprochement proved to be timely. In 1899 years of tension between the British colonies in southern Africa and the Boer Republics broke into open conflict. Although both sides tried to maintain the myth that the Anglo-Boer War was a 'white man's war' both sides employed large numbers of Africans as scouts, wagon-drivers, grooms, servants and labourers, and indeed the movement of large armies across the area inevitably impacted on settled African communities. Initially, the Boer invasion of Natal at the end of 1899 avoided Zululand. Both sides were wary of the military reputation of the Zulus and were at first reluctant to risk drawing them into the conflict. At the same time, however, long-standing territorial wrangles between the Transvaal and the Zulu border communities meant that there was both a legacy of resentment and a willingness to profit from each other's misfortunes. At the very beginning of the war, in October 1899, Boer forces raided the British magistracy in the Ingwavuma district in northern Zululand prompting local Zulu groups to appeal for British protection. Towards the end of 1899 there were widespread rumours that the Boers intended raiding the Nquthu district, not far from the old battlefield at iSandlwana. There was a British magistrate at Nquthu but there were no troops available to defend him and instead, as it lay in the heart of amaQungebeni territory, Mehlokazulu assembled 250 armed followers in the middle of December who camped overnight in the Nquthu hills ready to come to the magistrate's aid if they were needed. In January 1900 there were indeed small Boer raids on the stores at Vant's and Rorke's Drift, and at the end of the month 600 men under Cmmdt. Ferreira struck at Nquthu. After a brief defence the magistracy was captured and for several months the Boers remained in control of the district. Mehlokazulu – who had again attempted to assemble his men but had been pre-empted by the strength and speed of the Boer invasion – thought it wise to leave the area. A British counter-attack drove the Boers out in May, and Mehlokazulu returned home and both the British and Zulu leadership began to see the advantages of closer co-operation. Dinuzulu – who had been exiled after the 1888 Rebellion – had only returned to Zululand a few years before the war and the British had steadfastly

refused to acknowledge his standing within the country as a whole, reducing him to the status of a local chief. Now, however, they were prepared to tacitly recognise his authority in return for his co-operation supplying scouts and patrols to watch future Boer movements. Later, in early 1901, as the war progressed and the British began to operate extensively in the south-eastern Transvaal, a small detachment of troops under Col. H. Bottomley were instructed to seal the Transvaal/Zululand border. Bottomley was directed to seize any cattle which the Boers might move into the district hoping to hide them in Zululand and as part of his operations he was given permission to raise Zulu support. Both Dinuzulu and his old rival Zibhebhu were given permission to arm their men, and so were a number of *amakhosi* including Mehlokazulu. At the end of May Bottomley allowed the Zulus to cross into Transvaal territory and raid for cattle there.

It is likely that the photograph of Mehlokazulu in European dress dates to this time (a picture on the same album page shows a patrol of British troops in Anglo-Boer War period uniforms). Interestingly another photo in the series shows a young Zulu, also in European dress, standing in front of the same iron shack as Mehlokazulu, holding a horse; it is likely that this is either one of Mehlokazulu's sons or his *inceku* (personal servant), and that the horse is one of several owned at that time by Mehlokazulu.

Bottomley's operations aroused considerable disquiet at the time and he was ordered to discontinue further raiding for fear that it would provoke a much greater Boer-Zulu conflict. Both Dinuzulu and Zibhebhu were allowed to retain men in the field, however, and indeed in 1901 there were a number of significant raids through Zululand, culminating in Louis Botha's unsuccessful attack on British forts at Ithala and Fort Prospect in September 1901. Perhaps those who feared the legacy from employing Zulus against the Boers were proved right when, in May 1902 – at the very end of the war – a serious clash took place near Vryheid. In the last stages of the bitter guerrilla war the local Vryheid commando had resorted to raiding the abaQulusi Zulus nearby for cattle and grain and, after unsuccessfully appealing for British troops to protect them, the abaQulusi had retaliated, over-running a Boer bivouac at the foot of Holkrans mountain and killing 56 men.

The action at Holkrans was the bloodiest clash between Africans and white combatants during the whole course of the war, and took place as tentative negotiations between the British and the Boers were already taking place; less than three weeks later a formal armistice was agreed, and the Anglo-Boer War ended.

The war had had a devastating effect on the economies of both the Boer republics and the British colonies, and had left a legacy of bitterness which affected not just the white participants but many African groups as well. Although Mehlokazulu, who was now about fifty years old, had perhaps emerged better than most. His standing among both the British and the Zulus higher than it had been at any point since the calamity of 1879, there were in reality few rewards for being an ally of the winning side, and indeed the economic consequences of the war would fall heavily on the African population. Thousands of head of cattle had been taken by the warring parties, and the widespread movement of cattle during the war brought with it a number of cattle diseases which swept across the region afterwards, destroying thousands more. Many Africans found themselves pushed into the developing white industrial economies as migrant workers where they became increasingly alienated from traditional forms of leadership, from their customs, and from family life. In Natal and Zululand the burden was exacerbated by the colonial government's decision to impose a new Poll Tax in an attempt to rectify post-war budget deficits. For many impoverished and marginalised groups this was the last straw and a number of *amakhosi* refused to pay; in April 1906 a Natal *inkosi*, Bhambatha kaMancinza, attacked a Police patrol and fled to Zululand in the hope of persuading the Zulu chiefs to join him in rebellion.

In fact support there was marginal. Memories of the losses of 1879 and 1888 were still fresh, as were the experiences of the vast resources of men and material the combatants had mobilised during the Anglo-Boer War. King Dinuzulu refused to openly support Bhambatha, and so did most of the Zululand *amakhosi*.

One who did, however, was Mehlokazulu kaSihayo.

It seems that in this last great test of his life Mehlokazulu was trapped by his widespread reputation on both sides of the colonial divide as an *iqawe*, a warrior of renown. Popular resentment against the tax was running high among the young men of the amaQungebeni, and they looked to Mehlokazulu to take a stand on their behalf. The colonial authorities, on the other hand, regarded him

as a trouble-maker with a long history of defiance which dated back to his border raids in 1878; as the pressure mounted from both sides Mehlokazulu realised uncomfortably he was damned if he didn't pay the tax – and damned if he did. Some suggestion of the strain that he was under at this point is revealed by a missionary, the Rev. A.W. Lee, who made a routine visit to a neighbouring *inkosi*, Makafula, but;

I entered [Makafula's] own hut to find myself confronted by the big chief of the Nquthu area, Mehlokazulu ka Sihayo of the Maqungebeni people. We were both taken aback, I because I had not expected to find myself thrust into such distinguished company, and he, because the last thing he wished to see there was a person with a white face. Mehlokazulu was a Zulu of the old school, a fighting man with a distinguished record ...He glared at me out of his prominent, rather blood-injected eyes, and, turning to Makafula, he asked 'Who is this white boy? Why does he come here? What does he want? ...It was an uncomfortable moment. I felt I had blundered into a secret meeting between the two chiefs in which they had been discussing the situation. (10).

In fact Mehlokazulu was probably hoping to avoid any direct clash with colonial troops but by early May they were already sweeping close to his area. Bhambatha had escaped to the Nkandla forest, downstream from amaQungebeni territory, beyond the confluence of the Mzinyathi and Thukela rivers, but the authorities were trying to hem him in on all sides. A colonial column passed through the iSandlwana area - instructed to intimidate waverers, they were deliberately harsh on the African communities they passed through, burning homesteads, including Mehlokazulu's own, and carrying away cattle. As a precaution Mehlokazulu had assembled the amaQungebeni fighting men and concealed them in the Mangeni valley, the same area where Lord Chelmsford had skirmished all those years before on the day of iSandlwana. He made no move to join the fighting, but some of his young men slipped away from him, passing round Qudeni Mountain to join the rebels at Nkandla. This provoked a colonial column to move down from Helpmekeer, across Rorke's Drift and on to iSandlwana in an attempt to intercept them. When the troops spotted groups of men watching them from the slopes of Malakatha mountain they fired on them; unknown to them, Mehlokazulu was among them, and the concussion from a shell-burst knocked him off his horse.

He was unhurt but it was a decisive moment that seems to have convinced Mehlokazulu that he was being deliberately targeted by the authorities, and that any attempt to avoid confrontation was hopeless. Instead, he reacted as he so often did to a challenge – he decided to fight. Yet the evidence is he had no great hopes of the rebellion's chances of victory; one of his wives, Kamangeza, was pregnant, and before he left Mehlokazulu sent instructions regarding the child's name. He told her to name him Mhlawosuku – 'The Day That I Die'. Then, riding his white horse Gedemduna, and wearing European clothes – including riding boots, probably the same pair he is wearing in his Anglo-Boer War photograph – he set off to join Bhambatha.

Mehlokazulu's party affected a junction with Bhambatha's men in early June. Bhambatha was hiding out in the rugged bush-choked hills and valleys near King Cetshwayo's grave, but already Colonial troops were surrounding the area, trying to pin him down. Mehlokazulu's arrival was a huge boost to the rebel cause but there are hints that the new allies did not entirely agree on how to wage the campaign. Bhambatha was a younger man whose reputation did not match Mehlokazulu's, and who had already learned the hard way that the only hope the rebels had of countering the overwhelming Colonial fire-power was to wage a guerrilla war from the thickets. Mehlokazulu, however, brought with him all the fighting traditions of the old Zulu kingdom but his approach was more conservative and he was no longer, moreover, the fit young warrior of 1879. Between them Bhambatha and Mehlokazulu decided to make the steep and narrow Mome gorge – which could easily shelter their *impi* – their base of operations and they reached it after a difficult march on the evening of 9 June 1906. Bhambatha apparently urged them to enter the gorge that same night but Mehlokazulu was tired, and insisted instead that they bivouac at the entrance. One embittered survivor attributed the calamity which followed to the fact that Mehlokazulu had refused to go any further 'because he was very stout, and wore boots, and was tired' (11). That night, in the inky darkness, a herd-boy claimed to hear wagon-wheels on the hill-sides beyond but Mehlokazulu dismissed the report, commenting tartly that the whites were incapable of making such an approach at night.

He was wrong. The Colonial troops had received information of the *impi*'s movements and had immediately set out to intercept them, making an extraordinary march to take up positions on the ridge-tops surrounding the gorge. Just after dawn on 10 June, as the rebels began to stir in their bivouac, they opened a storm of machine-gun and artillery fire. The rebels attempted to form up but were completely exposed and instead broke, fleeing back over a narrow neck towards the safety of the gorge. Once inside, however, they found themselves trapped by the troops above them who mercilessly raked the bush on the lower slopes or shot any rebel who emerged into the open. By the end of the day Colonial losses numbered just one officer killed – probably shot by his own side when he pushed too far ahead in the confusion – another officer and one man mortally wounded, and eight whites and a number of auxiliaries wounded; rebel losses numbered over 600 men.

There are some last glimpses of Mehlokazulu among the chaos. According to the semi-official history of the rebellion,

...the notorious ringleader, Mehlokazulu, one of the men who started the Zulu War, was shot. He was wearing a new pair of riding trousers, shirt, socks and overcoat, whilst a new pair of tanned boots was being carried for him by one of his servants. (12).

A few years later, however, the novelist Sir Henry Rider Haggard added a rather more poignant detail. According to him, Mehlokazulu had been cornered as the troops had driven through the bush, and with no chance of escape, had tried to surrender;

...all quarter seems to have been refused even to those who threw down their arms and pleaded for mercy, as did the old chief Mehlokazulu, who held up his hands and said 'please' before they shot him.' (13).

According to some reports once Mehlokazulu's body had been recognised the soldiers cut off his head-ring as a souvenir. Perhaps he was lucky – after Bhambatha's body was identified his head was cut off to serve as official proof of his death. In 1985, when the author first visited the Mome site, local herd-boys pointed out to us the site of Mehlokazulu's grave, marked in the bush by a large banana-palm. Pushing closer and clearing the undergrowth in the hope of getting a better picture, we saw that human bones were still exposed there on the surface.

The action at Mome effectively crushed the Rebellion in Zululand, and brought a final end to the life of a man who, in many ways, embodied not only *ubuqawe*, the fierce warrior spirit of the old Zulu kingdom, but also the contradictions and fatal flaws of that tradition in a changing world which saw the power of the Zulu kings replaced by an unsympathetic Colonial government unafraid to deploy Maxim guns and quick-firing artillery against traditional spears and shields.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Mnandi Ngobese, Andreas Ngobese and Lindizwe Ngobese for the privilege of discussing with them family impressions of their ancestor Mehlokazulu.

FOOTNOTES;

- 1). For a more detailed explanation of the role of the amaQungebeni see my *Zulu Rising* (2010).
- 2). Bertram Mitford, *Through The Zulu Country*, 1883.
- 3). Information from uMnukwa, a household official in King Cetshwayo's court, included in Bishop Colenso's notes in Conelius Vijn, *Cetshwayo's Dutchman* (1880).
- 4). Mehlokazulu's account. Mehlokazulu was interviewed during his time in Pietermaritzburg – several versions of this interview, with minor differences in editing, were published, notably in the *Royal Engineers' Journal* (2 February 1880), as a supplement to the *Natal Mercury* (1880), and in Charles Norris-Newman's *Through Zululand with the British* (1880).
- 5). Mitford, *Zulu Country*.
- 6). Mehlokazulu account.
- 7). *Ibid.*
- 8). Mitford, *Zulu Country*.
- 9). *Ibid.*

- 10). Bishop A.W. Lee, *Once Dark Country* (1949).
- 11). Evidence of Mangathi kaGodide, 28.1.07, given in Colonial Office papers 179/242/2162.
- 12). James Stuart, *History of the Zulu Rebellion*, 1906 (1913).
- 13). Haggard's diary of his 1914 journey through Zululand is published in Stephen Coan, *Diary of an African Journey*, (2000).

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1). The newly-discovered photograph of Mehlokazulu c.1900 – wearing the boots that might perhaps have cost him his life six years later.
- 2). From the same album – probably one of Mehlokazulu's sons or a personal attendant with Mehlokazulu's horse.
- 3 The first historic photograph of Mehlokazulu, taken after his surrender in August 1879 and surrounded by heavily-armed guards.
- 4). Prelude to disaster; Mehlokazulu's homestead in flames in 1906.
- 5). The author with Mehlokazulu's surviving son, Mnandi Ngobese, in 1992. Mr Ngobese was born in 1900, six years before his father was killed at Mome.



