

‘Wet with Yesterday’s Blood’

The disembowelling controversy.

By Ian Knight

On 12 March 1879, Major Charles Tucker of the 80th Regiment was awakened in his tent in the camp at Luneberg, in northern Zululand by a distraught Lieutenant H. Harwood, who had just escaped the devastating attack on the stranded convoy at Ntombe River. Tucker immediately gathered together as many men who could ride as possible, and set out to the scene of the disaster. His description of what he found there provides a vivid description of the aftermath of a Zulu attack, which remains chilling even after the passage of 120 years;

As we approached the Intombe Drift a fearful and horrible sight presented itself, and the stillness of the spot was awful; there were our men lying all about the place, some naked and some only half clad. On the opposite side of the drift I need not attempt to describe to you what I saw; all the bodies were full of assegai wounds and nearly all of them were disembowelled...I saw but one body that I could call unmutilated... (1)

Tucker’s account mirrors the sense of shock that the survivors of Lord Chelmsford’s column similarly felt on their return to Isandlwana the night after the battle. “We saw the dead bodies of our men strewed about on every side, and horribly mutilated”,(2) wrote on, “the Zulus mutilated them and stuck with the assegai all over the body”,(3) observe a second, while a third noted that “Every white man that was killed or wounded was ripped up, and their bowels torn out”. (4) To suffer a sudden, unexpected and astonishing catastrophe such as Isandlwana was bad enough, but the treatment of the British dead understandably worked those who witnessed it into a fury; “It was enough to make your blood run cold”, commented one man, “to see the white men cut open, worst than ever was done in the Mutiny”. (5)

The sense of horror provoked by the sight of men killed by the Zulus still lingers today. Just last year, the *Letters to the Editor* pages of *The Daily Telegraph* were enlivened by correspondence over this very issue. For the best part of a month, the contributors ranged freely over the subject, offering increasingly bizarre explanations, which hinted darkly at improbable witchcraft practices, and even cannibalism.

In fact, there should be little mystery surrounding the reasons why the Zulu treated the dead in such a manner, as there is a good deal of contemporary evidence from Zulu sources, both with regard to the practices themselves, and with specific reference to the Anglo-Zulu War.

The Zulus repeatedly stabbed, disembowelled, and occasionally mutilated the bodies of men killed in action – black or white – in pursuit of three distinct post-combat rituals, all of which reflected the extent to which death in combat was regarded as an important part of their interaction with the spirit world.

That the dead often bore multiple stab wounds is a feature common to all descriptions. Of course, in the fierce tussle of action, it is likely that many enemy were stabbed more than once before they fell: despite the Zulu warrior’s famed expertise with their stabbing weapons, it could clearly have been impossible to despatch any enemy with a single clean thrust every time, especially if he was parrying with his own weapon, and fighting back. Given the large wounds made by the blades of the Zulu stabbing spears, the act of inflicting death itself was likely to be messy.

Nevertheless, bodies were deliberately stabbed again after death in a practice known as *ukuhlomula*. The practise of *homulaing* a fallen enemy had less to do with delivering the *coup de grace* than a desire on the part of warriors taking part in the fight to mark their role in the kill. The Zulus had a distinctly communal mind-set, which was encouraged by complex pre-battle rituals, and which was intended by bind the army together as a whole. In action, therefore, those men who had been involved in the fighting but had not actually killed an enemy were still entitled to some part of the glory that was attached to the victory. In particular, the practice of *hlomula* had evolved in the hunt; after cornering and despatching a particularly dangerous animal, the act of participation was recognised when the men each came up and stabbed the dead beast. While the man who had actually killed it was allowed his particular share of the glory, the other members of the hunt had shared the same risks, and had played their part in its success; *ukuhlomula* – stabbing the corpse after it was dead – reflected this.

The same rule applied in warfare, particularly when fighting a foe that had stood their ground bravely, and had therefore been a dangerous opponent. As Mpatshana kaSodondo, who fought with the uVe regiment as Isandlwana explained,

[our] numbers included those who had stabbed opponents who had already been stabbed by others (hlomula'd); then again those hlomula'ing became more numerous by reason of the fact that they had been fighting such formidable opponents, who were like lions... This custom was observed in regard to Isandlwana because it was recognised that fighting against such a foe and killing some of them was of the same high grade as lion-hunting. In regard to buffalo, too, anyone hlomula'ing, first, second, or third... was looked on as responsible in some way for its death. (6)

Interestingly enough, during the 120th anniversary re-enactment of Isandlwana in January 1999, the Zulu *amabutho* walked across the field at the end of the 'battle', repeatedly stabbing the ground next to the 'bodies' of the fallen British red-coats, in a symbolic representation of *ukuhlomula*. This was a spontaneous gesture, which had not been suggested by the advising historian, or, indeed, included in the re-enactment 'script'.

The second ritual, the custom of disembowelling a fallen enemy – *qaqa* – was directly related to the Zulu view of the universe, and its relationship with the world of the living. Prior to embarking of a campaign, the Zulu warriors were prepared for war in a complex set of rituals which set them aside from civilian life, and protected them against the harmful effects of *mnyama* – literally 'darkness' – the harmful spiritual consequences that flowed from shedding human blood. They could not return to ordinary society until they had undergone the counterpart cleansing ceremonies at the end of the campaign, for fear of contaminating their families with *mnyama*. (7) As part of the cleansing rituals, it was necessary that certain practices be observed with regard to the bodies of men who had killed in battle. Specifically, it was necessary for a warrior to remove part of the clothing of a man he had killed, and to wear it until he had undergone the necessary cleansing ceremonies. This practice was known as *zila* – to abstain from ordinary, every-day customs while in a dangerous state of spiritual pollution. Men who had killed in battle, but not yet been cleansed, were known as *izinxeleha*, and those who had particularly distinguished themselves by their tally in battle were said to be "wet with yesterday's blood".

As part of these observances, it was also necessary to slit open the stomach of the enemy. In the hot African sun, any corpse begins to putrefy quickly, and the gases given off by the early stages of decay cause the stomach to swell. In Zulu belief, this was the soul of the dead warrior, trying to escape the after-life. The man who killed him was obliged to open the stomach, to allow the spirit to escape. If he did not, he would be haunted by the ghost of his victim, who would inflict various horrors upon him, including causing his own stomach to swell, until eventually the killer went mad. To allow the spirit free passage, a cut was made vertically down the stomach, from sternum to groin. Furthermore L.B.Z. Buthelezi, the modern Zulu poet, has suggested that as part of the ritual it was necessary for the killer to run the blade of his spear along his tongue, touching the blood. (8) The purpose of this remains obscure, but probably has to do with the killer gaining supernatural ascendancy over his enemy by ritually 'eating' his spirit; it is perhaps no coincidence that the Zulu cry of exultation in battle is *Ngadla* – "I have eaten."

That both practices were followed at Isandlwana, Ntombe and elsewhere are testified not only by British observations on the corpses, but by Zulu accounts. According to Mpatshana,

It is the custom for one killing another to take off the deceased's things and put them on, even the penis cover. He zila's with them by so doing... If he has killed two or more he will take articles from each and put them on. He will not put on his own things until the doctor has treated him and given him medicines... We took the Europeans' things at Isandlwana; they were all stripped. This was done to zila with" (9)

Mehlokazulu kaSihayo, an attendant of the king who had been named in the British ultimatum for his part in the border raid of June 1878, was also present at Isandlwana with the iNgobamakhosi regiment. He made several references to the subject of stripping and disembowelling the dead in a long and comprehensive account of the war which was recorded when he was brought before a magistrate in Pietermaritzburg in September 1879;

As a rule we took off the upper garments, but left the trowsers, but if we saw blood upon the garments we did not bother... All the dead bodies were cut open, because if that had not been done the Zulus would have become swollen like the dead bodies... I heard that some bodies were otherwise mutilated. (10)

It is not clear whether the disembowelling was always carried out in the immediate aftermath of the victim's death, or later, once the full fury of the fighting had passed. Certainly, at least some bodies were disembowelled immediately. Trooper Richard Stevens of the Natal Mounted Police survived Isandlwana, and had clearly glimpsed terrible sights, even as he fled the camp;

I stopped in the camp as long as possible, and saw one of the most horrid sights I ever wish to see. The Zulus were in the camp, ripping our men up, and also the tents and everything they came across, with their assegais. They were not content with killing, but were ripping the men up afterwards". (11)

At least one Zulu account agrees the disembowelment followed swiftly on death. Kumbeka Gwabe of the uKhandempemvu ibutho described how he killed a soldier at Isandlwana;

At Isandlwana I myself killed only one man. Dum! Dum! Went his revolver as he was firing from right to left, and I came along beside him and stuck my assegai under his right arm, pushing it through his body until it came out between his ribs on the left side. As soon as he fell I pulled the assegai out and slit his stomach... (12)

Although no post-mortem studies were carried out on the corpses of British soldiers killed in the war of 1879, a report on the body of the Prince Imperial confirms the practise of *hlomula*, and suggests that a slight cut to the stomach was sometimes sufficient to serve as a nominal disembowelment;

There was a large gash in the abdomen exposing the intestines, which were, as in the case of the trooper, uninjured...The gash...is not, I feel assured, inflicted with any idea of mutilating the corpse of the slain enemy, but simply because it is a belief among them that if this coup is not given, and the body swells, as it would by the generation of gases of decomposition, the warrior who neglected this precaution is destined to die himself by his body swelling. Apart from the gash which was in every case inflicted after death, for no blood had flowed, there was no mutilation whatever. Many of the wounds were so slight that I think they must have been inflicted after death, all members of the party probably 'washing their spears' in pursuance of some ceremonial regulations on the subject of a dead enemy. (13)

There was, however, one aspect of Zulu ritual that did result in true mutilation of the dead. It was a universal belief that body parts from a fallen enemy could be added to the ritual medicines with which an army was prepared before a campaign to devastating effect. These medicines were known as *intelezi*, and were spattered on the assembled impi by specialist *izinyanga* – war-doctors – before it set off on campaign. Parts from a dead enemy – particularly one who had fought bravely – would be an enormous boost to Zulu *itonya* – the mystical force which ensured supernatural ascendancy in battle. Since a number of *izinyanga* undoubtedly accompanied the army which triumphed at Isandlwana, they would presumably have taken the opportunity to collect the raw materials for such medicine from dead soldiers. These parts would have been used when doctoring the army for later fighting, such as the Khambula campaign of March 1879.

Specific parts of the body were thought to hold the courage of the enemy, and this dictated the pattern of mutilation. Mpatshana described an incident during the civil wars of the 1880s when Zibhebhu kaMaphitha, chief of the anti-royalist Mandlakazi section ...

... fetched *intelezi* medicines from a deceased man. Pieces were cut off him. A piece was taken from his forehead; it was taken by a doctor...His rectum, penis, bone of right forearm (throwing arm), also the cartilage from the bottom of the breast-bone were taken...The rectum is taken so as to cause fear by causing 'agitation' of the stomach, and to bring on diarrhoea. This is the method of causing fear. The doctor then treats his own impi with these bits of human flesh. (14)

For reasons yet to be fully explained, facial hair from dead Europeans was also highly prized in this context. When, at the outbreak of the Bambatha Rebellion in 1906, a police patrol was ambushed in the Mpanza valley near Greytown, and several policemen killed, one of the corpses was mutilated for medicine in a manner similar to that described above; in addition, however, the top lip was removed, since it boasted a particularly fine moustache.

While it is unlikely that many of the dead were so mutilated at Isandlwana – simply because it required a specialist to remove the necessary items – it undoubtedly did happen. Indeed, Archibald Forbes' graphic account of the state of the bodies at the time of the first burial expedition in May 1879 is highly suggestive,

Every man had been disembowelled,” he wrote, “some were scalped, and others subject to yet ghastlier mutilations. (15)

Despite deep-seated settler fears that these mutilations were carried out before death, and therefore mounted to torture, there is no evidence that this was in fact the case. Indeed, during the frenzy of battle it was usual for the Zulus to kill everything they came across, not only enemy soldiers, but non-combatants, oxen, horses, and even pet dogs. With just one exception, it proved impossible for the Zulu commanders to induce their men to take live captives, and it is extremely unlikely that men would have been captured for the purpose of preparing ritual medicines – especially when parts taken from a dead body were considered just as efficacious. In the one case which has often been cited as an example of ritual torture – that of Trooper Raubenheim, killed on 3 July 1879, whose body was used to prepare the army on the eve of the late great battle at Ulundi – the accusation does not stand up to a rigorous study of the evidence. (16)

The injuries inflicted by the Zulus to the bodies of the British dead were neither wilful nor cruel, but actually reflected both a deep spiritual belief and the respect the Zulus had come to feel for their enemy, seemed little consolation to their comrades at the time. However; the circumstances were too painful for such a huge gulf of cultural misunderstanding. Indeed, in the weeks following Isandlwana, any Zulu scout who fell into British hands could expect little mercy from men who had seen the devastated field at Isandlwana.

References.

1. Letter by Tucker, 19 March 1879, reproduced in Frank Emery's *The Red Soldier*, 1977.
2. Letter by Lt. William Weallans, 2/24th, 26 January 1879, reproduced *ibid*.
3. Letter by Sergeant W.E. Warren, N/5 Battery, letter first published 29 March 1879, reproduced *ibid*.
4. Private Cook, 2/24th, letter first published 29 March 1879, reproduced *ibid*.
5. Private Farrell, 2/24th, letter first published 27 March 1879, reproduced *ibid*.
6. Account of Mpatshana in Webb and Wright, eds., *The James Stuart Archive*, Vol. 3 1982.
7. For an eye-witness account of these rituals, see Mpatshana, *ibid*. For a full description, see Ian Knight's *The Anatomy of the Zulu Army*, 1994.
8. Interview on BBC Wales radio, January 1999. A photograph of a warrior mimicking this practice appeared in the South African press at the time of the Isandlwana re-enactment.
9. Account of Mpatshana, Webb and Wright.
10. Account by Mehlokazulu, given 27 September 1879, reproduced in the Zulu War supplement to the *Natal Mercury*.
11. Letter by Richard Stevens, dated Helpmekaar 27 January 1879, reproduced in Emery.
12. Account of Kumbeka Gwabe, supplement to the *Natal Mercury*, 22 January 1929.
13. Report in the *Times of Natal*, reproduced in D.F.C. Moodie, *Moodie's Zulu War*, 1988.
14. Account of Mpatshana, Webb and Wright.
15. Archibald Forbes, account in *The Daily News*, 10 July 1879.
16. See *Was Raubenheim Tortured?* By Ian Knight in Issue 74, September 1993, issue of *Soldiers of the Queen*, the Journal of the Victorian Military Society.