

History's Lost Voices

By Nadia Davis

When historians attempt to discover facts behind events from the past, they face the inevitable truth that history is vulnerable to distortion. This distortion either comes from the sources that tell it or from the subjective interpretations of fellow historians and social commentators. The story of Africa's Zulu nation has not escaped this warping of historical facts.

Zulu history has been done a great disservice because it has been viewed through the ethnocentric lenses of Western observers. This has led to the portrayal of Africa's people as uncivilised, their complex cultural systems and beliefs discounted, and has resulted in the distortion of a continent's history. So when exactly did the historical misrepresentation of the Zulu people begin? I will discuss aspects of Zulu culture, the reasons behind their historical misrepresentation, the consequences of this and conclude with ways to counteract further distortion. This aims not to be a historical text, but an interpretation of information sourced from actual events. All historical texts should be treated as such.

The Zulus originally came from a race of people called the abaNtu, who according to anthropologists probably originated in what is now Cameroon. They embarked on an immense migration to southern Africa. A movement sparked off by refined agricultural methods and the resultant population growth. Before the 19th century, these abaNtu-speaking peoples had displaced their Khoi-Khoi and San predecessors (Bushmen) in southern Africa and established a number of states. One of these states grew in prominence to become the Zulu nation and held claim to an immense territory of rich pastures, which became known as Zululand.

By the time the British encountered the Zulus, their Impis had already earned a reputation for their military might. At the battle of Isandlwana, the Zulu army defeated the British, partly as a result of British error but also by the Zulu Impis' strategic skill and organisation. Far from being a large band of disorganised spear wielding tribesmen, as portrayed in some books and films, the Impi was an effective fighting force led by a man who was ultimately their General and King.

Under the reign of Shaka Zulu, the nation was at its most powerful and most bloody, similar in fact to the imperial histories of his European counterparts. Shaka developed the Zulu military force and with innovations in tactics and weaponry shaped it into a fighting machine. He maintained tactical control over opposing clans, absorbing them into his nation and increasing its numbers. He developed and recast the flat bladed Ikwa, the assegai and shield. Shaka was also the architect of *the Impondo Zankhomo* - the tactical encircling technique known as the horns of the buffalo. This technique was later used rather ineffectively by the British and eventually filtered down into modern 20th century warfare as the 'pincer movement'.

The Zulu Impi was not only a fighting force. In addition it helped to maintain economic, political and social control of a civilised farming nation. The Zulu economy was based mainly on the raising of cattle and the cultivation of millet. They also smelted iron for a variety of purposes, brewed beer from millet, tanned animal hides, created intricate geometric beadwork and wove baskets for carrying goods. Families lived in beehive-shaped homes, constructed of layers of thatch covering a framework of flexible wooden board. These houses were usually arranged in a circular compound, or Imizi, with cattle usually enclosed in the centre. Like many abaNtu nations, the ownership of cattle, a prized source of food and hides, had come to symbolize wealth amongst the Zulu people. As ownership of cattle had been a symbol of social standing, it quickly became a source of conflict when the Boers traversed into Zululand, fleeing British anti-slavery laws and taxation. As one means of survival for the Zulu had been stalking free-roaming herds, the Boer's farmsteads with their acres of farmland and apparently plentiful supply of cattle were an ideal target. This was one aspect of their culture, which gave rise to anti-Zulu hostility amongst the Boers, who alongside later historians saw cattle raiding as malicious theft.

However historians do note that in 1824, despite conflict between the Zulus and Boer farmers, Shaka apparently signed an agreement allowing the British trader Farewell and fellow settlers 4,000 square miles of land around Port Natal. This was in return for saving Shaka's life after an assassination attempt, but how the agreement was signed is unclear, as the Zulus did not possess a written language. Then followed the death of Shaka's mother and a period of great instability in the Zulu kingdom occurred as the grief-stricken leader executed thousands of his people for the slightest transgressions.

Dingane, the half-brother of Shaka, together with other members of his family, finally conspired to assassinate their increasingly despotic leader whilst Shaka's army was away on campaign. In the spring of 1834 an incident that led to the killing, by British settlers, of a Zulu Impi, which may have raised suspicion in Dingane's mind about the trustworthiness of the Boer people. It was during this volatile period that Boer leader Piet Retief, unaware of the incident, visited Port Natal en route to Dingane to seek settlement for his

band of European migrants. Dingane would have been acutely aware that Retief's party would double the numbers at the port settlement, posing a threat to the Zulu kingdom.

Retief sent Dingane a letter aimed at smoothing the way for talks, which was translated by English missionary Francis Owen. Apparently Retief's attitude towards the king was far from one of reverence or even respect. His letters to Lord Carnarvon spoke bitterly of the cattle raids his people had been subjected to during their passage through clan territories and wrote that:

'it has become absolutely necessary to declare war against him (Dingane).'

Dingane via his network of messengers knew that Retief's fellow trekkers to the North had been in conflict with the Matabele. In addition, British settlers had also killed several members of a Zulu hunting party prior to the migrants' arrival. Yet the king treated his Boer visitors well at his impressive fortress at emGungundlovu. After eight days ceremonial arts and feasting had passed, Dingane suddenly offered the Boer leader a bargaining chip- they would be allowed to settle on the land if Retief recovered stolen cattle from his rival Sikonyela. Retief reluctantly complied, temporarily imprisoning the chief whilst retrieving the cattle.

Meanwhile, Owen noticed that the numbers of young soldiers arriving at the compound had increased and there were rumours that Dingane was angry that Sikonyela had not been killed. At the same time, Boer pioneers were already coming over the Drakensberg Mountains with their wagons and cattle, and news reached Dingane of the complete defeat of Mzilikazi, another Zulu leader, by separate Boer forces. In addition little known remnants of Zulu history reveal that Dingane suspected treachery as horse droppings and hoof prints were found around the forbidden royal compound. Any sign of mistrust remained hidden, as Dingane seemed to show appreciation for the return of his cattle. Retief and Dingane signed a document witnessed by three chief Indunas and he gave oral agreement for Boer settlement. There is the likelihood that the signatures on this treaty were forged, because the Zulus did not use a written language. In that case it's difficult to see how Dingane and his Indunas could have signed their names.

As Retief and his settlers were about to depart, Dingane invited them to one last feast. As a mark of respect to the King, the settlers were asked to stack their guns outside the royal compound. As the ceremony commenced, Dingane suddenly rose to his feet and the multitude became silent. He apparently gave the order, '*Babulaleni abathakathi*', which depending on what source you read means 'Kill the wizards.'

According to Owen's records, the Zulu warriors seized the Boers and after binding their limbs, dragged them out of the compound and executed them. Within a few hours, Dingane assembled his Impi and they set off to suppress any further threat to the Zulu people. Unsuspecting Boers who awaited Retief's return were set upon under cover of darkness. Their bodies were found bearing the marks of ritual mutilation, which would have filled their discoverers, and later historians, with horror and disgust.

It was at the Battle of Blood River where the Boers sought and took their vengeance on December 16th 1838, where apparently 3,000 Zulus were killed. Curiously, although the Zulus acknowledged their presence at Blood River, they did not recall as many casualties or that even a major battle took place. Nonetheless, Dingane withdrew his army and began to rebuild emGungundlovu. Boer migrants now flooded into the central territory after crossing the Drakensberg Mountains and re-named it the "Free Province of New Holland in South East Africa." Shortly afterwards the British occupied Port Natal re-naming it Durban and then abandoned the port to the Boers. At same the time, Dingane tried to establish control over non-Zulu tribes by launching a campaign against rival leader and half-brother Mpande, but his opponent fled to the Boers for protection. Realising the Zulu nation was split; the Boers promptly launched a large military strike against them with Mpande's assistance. Dingane was eventually forced to flee but he too was executed, but this time by his own people who were seeking a return to order.

After the death of Dingane in 1841, indigenous clans who had been banished from their homelands returned to find Boer settlers. The Boer council ruled that the now homeless clans were to be rounded up and deposited on land elsewhere, but when the British at the Cape learned of the plan they re-seized Durban, and promptly dispatched administrators to govern the port. Meanwhile Britain seized the opportunity to annex the whole of Natal into the Cape Colony, including Boer held territory. During the change of power in Natal, the Zulus under their new king Mpande, had been forced to the north side of the Buffalo and Tugela rivers where they remained surrounded on all sides by Portuguese, British and Boer migrants. It was during this time that Mpande's son Cetshwayo assumed leadership of the Zulu people after waging a successful war against his brother. Observing the augmenting tensions between the British in Natal and the Boers, Cetshwayo realised he was at a great advantage. Cetshwayo was appointed heir apparent in the name of Queen Victoria in a ceremony that was little more than a charade, as it was in Britain's interest to support the Zulu people in order to deny the Boers access to the seas. In the meantime Cetshwayo had established a Royal Umizi at Ondini, ruled over a united nation and had the ability to raise an army of 50,000 warriors. He enjoyed five years of peace and reaped the rich rewards of an efficiently

controlled society and prosperous nation. However, Cetshwayo also thought that he enjoyed good relations with the British.

Britain on the other hand had other interests, mainly subduing the natives in other parts of her sprawling empire. There were conflicts between indigenous clans and white settlers over numerous disputed territories in Southern Africa. Land had become scarce and migrants were still arriving in Natal. Then in 1876 a severe yearlong drought struck. Up to 1878 Boer and Zulu confrontation was steadily rising to the point of war. More significantly from the British point of view, the junction of the Orange and Vaal rivers was suspected to be a good source of diamonds. So through Confederation, a neat system of land appropriation, the British decided to combine all the territories in South Africa to control its resources and policy. The system had already been used in India, Australia, the Caribbean and Canada to further British interests, often to the detriment of the countries' indigenous populations.

Cetshwayo at first supported annexation, as he believed it would keep Boer migrants away from Zulu territory. Yet Zulu history reveals that at the height of this tension between the Zulu and the Boers, Shepstone, the British Officer for Native Affairs, encouraged Cetshwayo to place combined Impis, of over 30,000 warriors, at tactical crossing points along the Transvaal border to frighten the Boers into submission. He enjoyed such good relations with the Zulu people that he was given the title, 'father' so it's likely he was well trusted by Cetshwayo. At the same time Shepstone attended secret talks with the Boers, to persuade them to surrender the Transvaal to the British on the basis that they faced annihilation from the Zulu and that their government was close to insolvency. He convinced them that Confederation would also subdue the Zulus and suppress further black resistance to expanding white domination. Once the Boers complied, Shepstone is then said to have ordered Cetshwayo to withdraw his men. This would explain why Cetshwayo after this event regarded him as a fraud and untrustworthy.

With the annexation of the Transvaal, Britain gained responsibility for the conflict between the Zulu nation and Boer migrants. Previously, Zulu leaders had repeatedly asked the British governor in Natal for assistance in dealing with Boer aggression, which was forcing the Zulus to edge away from their lands. Now that the Boers were regarded as British subjects, the dispute became an entirely British-Zulu conflict.

In 1878, matters came to a head when displaced indigenous settlers and Boers began illicitly farming in Zululand. Sir Bartle Frere handed the issue over to a reluctantly created Boundary Commission, which consisted mainly of British and Boer representatives with conflicting interests. Cetshwayo was consulted and agreed to abide by any ruling as long as three senior Zulu Indunas were allowed to attend. To Frere's surprise, the Commission found for the Zulus, and ruled that the disputed territory was Zululand and that the illicit Boer settlement of Utrecht must also be forfeited. Now that defiance aimed at European settlement had been partly justified, Sir Bartle Frere feared that the indigenous people would rise up against the British. He also feared that angry Boers would attack British-controlled Natal. At the same time Shepstone suggested that the Zulu Impis might launch a military campaign against Natal, although there seems to be no evidence of such a plan being hatched by Cetshwayo. The only solution would be for British forces to embark on a pre-emptive strike.

The ultimatum given included the disbanding of the Zulu army. Under the conditions every Zulu would be free to marry and the British would be allowed further intervention in Zulu matters and culture. In effect they were asking for no less than the complete dismantling of Zulu society, conditions they knew he could not fulfil. This was in order to justify an invasion. Some historians claim that Cetshwayo defied the conditions and that it was Zulu non-cooperation which was the catalyst for war, but when examined closely we can see that the terms laid down were completely unacceptable from a Zulu point of view. Compliance was not the main purpose of the ultimatum; it was a smokescreen for the real motive. The British had set their sights on Zululand.

Firstly, the Zulus were blocking British progress to the north. Suppressing the nation would smooth the way for Confederation. Secondly, any suppression of the Zulus would appease the Boers. Thirdly, a show of strength would discourage any uprising against British expansion from other abaNtu nations. Invasion of Zululand would eliminate the King's military force and release labour for British and Boer commercial activities. On a personal level, a successful Zulu campaign would strengthen Frere's political career. But no Zulu king would ever dissolve his entire nation and calmly surrender his territory just so that Britain could further its economic development.

So Frere embarked upon a campaign of creating unrest amongst the white settlers, through means of a propaganda war. These prejudices and stereotypes were to remain in the psyches of Europeans and white South Africans as late as the 20th century. News quickly spread of a savage Zulu army plotting to invade Natal and as white settlers seized more of their land, the frequency of Zulu cattle raids increased. This escalated the crisis and European fervour to wage war. Later on, the Battle of Blood River was used as political capital to further the cause of the Afrikaner. More examples of propaganda were exploited in July 1878, when Frere manipulated an incident to encourage widespread anti-Zulu sentiments. Some sons of a local Zulu chief had crossed the river border to retrieve two of their father's absconding wives who had

been accused of adultery. They were captured and executed under Zulu codes of law. Bearing in mind the fact that the King would already have several sons to contest the throne should he die, he could not risk the offspring of another man in his Amakhandanda or royal household. Yet the incident's reportage was carried out in such a way to raise the levels of tension and urgency amongst the settlers. This was one small facet of the well-orchestrated demonisation of Britain's former allies, which would alter the European perception of the Zulu people. Earlier in December 1877, the Zulu 'father' Shepstone had even written to Lord Carnarvon stating that "The sooner the root of evil, which I consider to be the Zulu power and military organisation is dealt with, the easier our task will be." How aware Cetshwayo was of this stirring of anti-Zulu feeling is unknown.

Meanwhile, Frere ordered his British forces under Lord Chelmsford to prepare for a war against the Zulus, with complete certainty that Cetshwayo could not comply with the ultimatum. Frere had corresponded with his superiors in Britain, exploiting the 10-week delay for messages to travel back and forth to London. He was aware that once he started a local war against the Zulu, the British government would be unable to stop him. By 1879, the Zulu nation had not been involved in full-scale war for 23 years and, although well trained, Cetshwayo's army had little war experience and still relied upon the tactics gained from Shaka's era. As expected, Cetshwayo failed to comply with the ultimatum and British forces invaded Zululand on the 11th January 1879, immediately attacking a small Zulu clan living a few miles within their border.

In response, Cetshwayo's Impi carried out their rites of purification, before setting off from their base on the Mahlabatini Plain to a rocky outcrop known as Isandhlwana. He mobilised the Zulu Impi and ordered wild animal hunts to be held along the borders of the neighbouring territories so that Shepstone's spies could see them. Meanwhile the Zulu general observed the invaders, located the point where the British were gathering their troops and correctly anticipated their next move.

General Lord Chelmsford's tactic was to fight the Zulu using an inferior imitation of the Impondo Zankhomo tactic. It was a tactical decision that could only have been born through sheer arrogance, over-confidence in British firepower, or a serious error of judgement. It was also regarded as one of the worst military blunders in British history. The Zulu army executed a crippling defeat on the British troops, and it is clear from this battle that Chelmsford's error had not gone unnoticed by Cetshwayo, whose superior knowledge of the complex technique would have placed him at a massive advantage. 1,300 British soldiers were annihilated at Isandhlwana on January 22nd 1879; the worst defeat ever inflicted on the British army by its colonial subjects. Records estimate 25,000 Zulu soldiers were on the battlefield, but knowing how embarrassing such a defeat would be to the British it is not known whether these figures were inflated. The British took their revenge on July 4th 1879 and defeated the Zulu army at Ulundi. The British annexed Zululand and in 1897 it became a part of the Natal colony. This was to sound the final death knell for the freedom of the Zulu people.

So what has been the legacy of the Anglo Zulu war? First, Natal's European settlers remained fearful of an uprising by this once powerful nation and other indigenous clans. This fear, which had already developed racial undertones, had partly been generated by the British to subdue Boer defiance against annexation. It was also brought on by the Boers themselves who, perhaps more concerned with fleeing from British rule, did not take into account that their attempts to settle in large numbers within Zulu territory might be perceived as a threat. These negative images of South Africa's black population remained indelibly etched into the psyches of the Europeans and were used to justify racial segregation.

These images formed the foundations of apartheid; an oppressive system of racial segregation designed to stop the majority population of black people from overthrowing its white government. It denied them any representation in national government, and most critically denied black people the means to regain power in the land of their forefathers. It is fact that during the events leading up to and after the Anglo Zulu war, the seeds of apartheid were being sown.

So how did they become historically misrepresented? To draw the conclusion that the Zulu people were misrepresented in history purely as an act of racism would be far too simplistic, although their depiction in historical texts and film was often based on stereotype. For example in films such as *ZULU* and to a certain extent the 1979 film *ZULU DAWN*, lip service is paid to the Zulu cause, but they appear a great deal less than their British counterparts. When we do see the Zulus, they are depicted in their popular historical images: as dancing tribesmen or as a faceless, menacing swarm: images which filter into the consciousness of their audiences along with any hidden meanings and prejudices. It is not sufficient, however to blame the filmmaker. After all, the image of the Zulus had stemmed from history books, which were sourced from military reports and journals from an entirely British or Boer perspective. A perspective, which would have obscured the true motives for British seizure of Zululand: commercial gain. To justify seizure of their land, the perception of the Zulu as ally had to be changed. Hence the British became a handful of heroic soldiers fighting against uncivilised marauding tribes and for the compliance of pious Boer settlers, the Zulus became godless cattle-thieving savages.

To those who claim that the balance is now being redressed, I argue that the popular image of spear-throwing, cattle thieves still pervades in some sections of society: even in some academic circles. This will persist until the re-writing of history is carried out, not in the name of political correctness but to uncover the truth no matter how unsavoury for black and white people alike. In the meantime, the events of 1879 remain incomplete without a Zulu perspective included alongside British and Boer accounts.

It is acknowledged that few documents reveal the viewpoint of the Zulu people because they had no requirement for a written language. Remnants of history however, would have been committed to memory and passed down from generation to generation, which brings me onto the subject of Zulu 'folklore'. I do not believe that it should be merely alluded to or relegated to footnotes by historians who regard Zulu oral accounts as unreliable. In the West, we have a cultural bias towards the written word, even though it is known that military records kept by the British were presented in such a way as to save political and military careers. So why not utilise what remains of Zulu spoken records? It is likely that folklore may have originated from recollections of the Anglo Zulu war, which were committed to memory. Wherever possible they should be collated and investigated.

Perhaps a solution would be for a Zulu historian to tell his or her people's history. I would argue that in the present state of South Africa, Zulu descendants have more pressing matters at hand. While we may have the luxury of delving into the past, the stark realities of native life may mean that its people must keep their minds sharply in the present. This is not to suggest that a historian of Zulu origins may not surface, but right now it is simply a case of priorities. This also suggests that non-Zulu historians are incapable of maintaining a reasonable amount of objectivity, which is untrue. There are historians who strive for balance and have written about the stark facts of the Anglo-Zulu war without trying to manipulate readers with emotive language.

The fact is that the Zulu people were standing in the way of British and Boer progress. As a result they were demonised and then assimilated: just as the Zulu displaced indigenous Khoi-Khoi and San peoples before them. Once Zululand had been seized and its people suppressed, the controlling tools of racism and segregation were then implemented out of fear of revolt. The British repeated this process of land appropriation and assimilation all over the world as it strove to further its financial interests. Another fact: this assimilation was not spurred on by racism, but by an attitude of imperialist superiority and the acquisition of wealth. A nation's leaders *will* rationalize the subjugation of other races if it means the increase of their own prosperity. This is the mindset of many 'conquering' nations, of all races and faiths. It is this mindset that led to the events of the Anglo-Zulu war.

People of all races should not turn history into a lesson in political correctness, or a guilt-making exercise; nor, as victims, become so emotionally entangled in the atrocities of the past that any rational debate or questioning of the facts becomes taboo. Most crucially, certain groups and individuals should not distort history's stark facts for their own ends.

If we are to learn anything about the Anglo-Zulu war, it is the need to uncover the psychology and motivations behind the leaders of conquering nations. Until this is done, the cycles of ethnic oppression will continue. We also need more prominent historians of other racial backgrounds to offer their perspective on historical events instead of relying entirely on European views. And finally it is up to the Zulu people themselves to keep whatever remnants they have of their oral history and culture alive. Otherwise the voices of Zulu history will have been lost forever.