

## The Inherent Limits of Collaboration; Chief Hlubi and the Tlokoa Sotho

By Ian Knight

---

Throughout the war in 1879 the British had a habit of referring to their mounted African auxiliary as 'Basutos'. This was a reflection of the favourable impression the baSotho had made on the British consciousness rather than a statement of fact; in reality, they were drawn from a number of chiefdoms in the Colony of Natal, and only one troop of mounted auxiliaries were Sotho in origin, and their story highlights the painful choices which framed the decision of some African groups to ally themselves with British Imperialism whilst others resisted – and the limits of what they could achieve as a result.

They were the followers of HlubikaMota Molife, *inkosi* of a group of Sotho-speakers living in Natal called the Tlokoa. The Tlokoawere an extensive group who, at the end of the eighteenth century, were living to the east of South Africa's modern Free State, on the western side of the Kahlamba (Drakensberg) mountains. In the 1820s they had been heavily disrupted by the violence which characterised the rise of the Zulu kingdom. Cut off from their established settlements and crops, they had wandered the interior for a number of years, earning a fearsome reputation under their queen, MaNthathisi. After MaNthathisi's death the main section of the Tlokoa remained in the high-veldt under her son Sikonyela, but a section under Sikonyela's brother, Mota, apparently quarreled with its neighbors and crossed the mountains into Natal. Here they settled in the Kahlamba foothills in what became the Natal Midlands, as neighbours of the amaHlubi people. Mota had previously established a relationship with the amaHlubi, and his son - born about 1835 - was named Hlubi to commemorate this.

In 1845 Natal officially became a British colony, and the presence of several large chiefdoms, with established lineages and modes of government, was to remain problematic for the British administration. White settlement of the colony grew slowly, and white settlers were always outnumbered by an African majority. With few military resources at their disposal, the settlers were both wary of potential African resistance whilst at the same time dependent upon them as a market and as labourers. Natal's famous Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, evolved a system of government which co-opted African traditions but placed himself, as representative of British authority, above the various chiefs as 'Supreme Chief'. Whilst acknowledging the reality of African authority at a local level, however, he remained suspicious of any chief who acted too independently, or who seemed to challenge the rights of local settlers, or insisted on pursuing African customs which Shepstone and the settler elite considered inappropriate under British rule.

The result was a series of minor campaigns in the 1860s and '70s in which Shepstone reduced the power of 'recalcitrant' chiefs. The most significant occurred in 1873 when the Hlubi *inkosi*, Langelibeleleka Mthimkhulu – whose young men had joined the extensive migrant labour network which supplied the booming Kimberley diamond fields on the other side of the mountains – allegedly refused to surrender firearms with which his followers had been paid. Faced with Shepstone's growing wrath, Langelibalele decided to take his followers in the opposite direction across the Kahlamba and to seek refuge among the independent Sotho.

Although the extent of Langelibalele's act of rebellion is debatable, it was a challenge which Shepstone could not afford to ignore. He despatched a handful of white Volunteer troops under a regular Army Major, Anthony Durnford, to cut Langelibalele off at the passes.

By this point, however, it was clear that the colony had far too few troops to manage a significant military campaign, and Shepstone decided to call out allies among the African population. It had already become obvious to much of Natal's Africans that the right to live a traditional lifestyle within the colony was dependent upon Shepstone's whim; he had already deposed several chiefs who had displeased him, and dispersed their followers. Whatever individual *amakhosi* might have thought of the rights and wrongs of a particular conflict, they were gradually coming to realise that their own survival offered them a stark choice between resistance or collaboration. Some, like the Sithole *inkosi*, Matshanaka Mondise, were able to slip away from the colony and beg sanctuary from the nearby Zulu kingdom; most, however, were settled in Natal precisely because they had long-standing feuds with the Zulu Kings and that option was not available to them - by the 1870s they were finding themselves squeezed uncomfortably between a rock and a decidedly hard place.

Among those who chose collaboration were the Tlokoa. Whatever ties of friendship they had previously enjoyed with Langalibalele's people they now found themselves under pressure from Shepstone to join the colonial forces sent against him. Unlike most African groups south of the Limpopo, the southern Sotho had recognised early in their contacts with Europeans the value of the horse and by the 1870s sure-footed mountain ponies had become a major factor in Sotho warfare. Furthermore, they knew the mountain terrain, and they were therefore ideal for Shepstone's needs. A small group, with little enough hope of resisting themselves, they were also well aware of the advantages which followed compliance and accrued to Shepstone's favourites.

Hlubi therefore answered Shepstone's call and with a small force of mounted Tlokoa joined Durnford's men as they prepared to push up into the mountains. Hlubi - who was still a young man - acted as Durnford's personal guide. Also present was a contingent of Christian Africans from the Edendale mission outside Pietermaritzburg. On 4 November 1873 Durnford's command intercepted a strong column of amaHlubi attempting the cross the Bushman's Pass into BaSotholand. In the ensuing skirmish Durnford was wounded and several of his men killed but the black auxiliaries retained their discipline and covered his retreat.

The Langalibalele campaign had proved to be a political embarrassment for Shepstone and a personal one for Durnford, who found himself unpopular within Natal settler society, and blamed for the death of his men. Both the Tlokoa and the Edendale men had emerged well from the conflict, however, and Shepstone increasingly regarded Hlubi as one of his best enforcers, who could be relied upon to police his instructions. In accepting this role, Hlubi and the Tlokoa increasingly tied themselves to the continued success of British authority in Natal, and distanced themselves from their African neighbours.

By 1878 a new conflict was looming, a projected British invasion of Zululand. Despite the cloud hanging over him, Durnford's practical local experience was too valuable for Lt. Gen. Sir Frederic Thesiger (shortly to be Lord Chelmsford) to ignore, and he was appointed the commander of one of Chelmsford's invasion columns. When Durnford was asked to draw up a plan for raising auxiliary forces he naturally turned to both the Tlokoa and Edendale men who had served him well in 1873. Hlubi, by now in his forties, agreed to raise a troop of fifty men. Dressed like most of the mounted auxiliaries in hard-wearing yellow corduroy, wearing hats wrapped round with a red band and armed with Swinburne-Henry carbines, they were attached to Durnford's No. 2 column.

The column was initially deployed at Middle Drift but, once the invasion had begun on 11 January 1879, it was ordered to Rorke's Drift to support the advance of the Centre Column. They arrived at iSandlwana on the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> to find that Chelmsford had already taken half the force out to investigate Zulu movements further along the line of advance. Reports of Zulu movements close to the left of the camp, however, prompted Durnford

investigate the iNyoni heights and the discovery of the main Zulu army lying in a sheltered valley there precipitated the battle. His men - including Hlubi's BaSotho troop - made a determined stand in the bed of the Nyogane stream in front of the camp but retired when their position was outflanked and their ammunition was nearly spent. Durnford chose to fight – and die – in the camp but Hlubi kept his men together, fighting their way through the Zulu right 'horn' and retreating towards the crossing at Rorke's Drift. At the crossing they halted briefly to rest their exhausted horses, then crossed by way of the Drift and reported to Lt. Chard who was commanding the Rorke's Drift post. At Chard's request they deployed in a screen to the south of the Shiyane hill, but after firing a few shots at the advancing Zulus they broke and rode towards Helpmekaar. Chard later commented that he saw them fight well later in the war and attributed their flight at this time to their exhaustion and demoralization following the death of Durnford.

In fact Chard's men withstood the Zulu attack at Rorke's Drift, and the post held. Lord Chelmsford and his men retired to the border and remained there for several uncomfortable months in expectation of a renewed Zulu attack. Throughout February the Tlokoa and Edendale men were based at Helpmekaar and patrolled the exposed border. Once no Zulu attack took place, however, and British confidence began to return, the auxiliary units were reorganized in expectation of a fresh offensive. The Tlokoa and Edendale men were posted to Col. Wood's column. When fighting began again towards the end of March, the Tlokoa were heavily engaged at the battle of Khambula on the 29<sup>th</sup>, where they formed part of the mounted sortie which rode out to harass the Zulu right into a premature and uncoordinated attack. Rather than retreat towards the dubious safety of the British *laager*, however, a number of the auxiliaries preferred to trust to their horses and remain in the open. They stayed outside throughout the battle and harassed the Zulu flanks.

Despite their failings at Rorke's Drift by the middle of the war the Tlokoa had earned a good reputation among the British. Hard-riding, resourceful and courageous, they seemed to represent the best that the auxiliary forces could offer, and their tough, wiry ponies epitomised their spirit to the extent that the British took to calling all mounted auxiliary units 'Basothos' after them.

The Tlokoa took part in various patrols towards oNdini at the beginning of the second invasion in June 1879, and formed part of the mounted force which skirmished across the White Mfolozi on 3 July. On the following day they played a major role in the battle of Ulundi, at first harassing the Zulu attack, then riding back to take shelter in the British square before riding out again during the pursuit.

After the war Sir Garnet Wolseley, in implementing a political settlement on Zululand which best served British interests through indirect rule, offered Hlubi chieftainship of swathe of land on the eastern bank of the Mzinyathi. His intention was to provide a sympathetic buffer beyond the Natal border and to eradicate the influence of the prominent Zulu royalists, the amaQungebeni of *inkosi* Sihayo. Sihayo was deposed and moved to the western edges of his old territory. Hlubi and his followers arrived in the area in October 1879 and built a homestead in the Batshe valley, not far from the ruins of *inkosi* Sihayo's old homestead. Those Zulus living in the area became his subjects, and he ruled over them with a Sotho-speaking elite. Throughout the 1880s Hlubi repaid his appointment by turning out his men several times to support British intervention in the successive crises which wracked post-war Zululand. In 1882 the traveller Bertram Mitford suggested the extent to which Hlubi associated himself with the European world;

A middle-aged man, rather stout, with an intelligent face, dressed in a velveteen jacket, tweed trousers, and flannel shirt, and with a general air of native well-to-do-ness, such is the chief Hlubi. His aspirations tend in the direction of comfort, for he

lives in a substantial stone house with a verandah, and uses tables and chairs. Furthermore, he drives his own trap, an American 'spider' - albeit given to loading up the same rather inordinately: for to drive seven full-grown persons in a vehicle constructed to seat four *is* inordinate loading-up. At the time of my arrival the chief was engaged in presiding over a 'trial-at-law' ... About fifty natives - Zulus and Basutos - were squatted around in a circle, with the defendants, six in number, in the centre; the 'court' was held in the open air, Hlubi being the only man who affected a chair, the others sitting on the ground tailor-fashion. (1)

Mitford also noted the fact that the missionary, Charles Johnson, who had once cultivated Sihayo's friendship, had now transferred his allegiance to Hlubi.

For most of the 1880s Hlubi's Sotho formed the governing elite of the Mzinyathi border community. With increased British intervention in Zululand following the rebellion King Cetshwayo's son, Dinuzulu, of 1888, and Britain's subsequent decision to annex Zululand, however, Hlubi found his services to be less essential to the colonial authorities. His position became increasingly marginalised, his power restricted to those of his immediate followers in the Batshe Valley. Ironically Hlubi discovered a truth which underpinned the advance of British Imperial interests across southern Africa - that it ultimately undermined the power and prestige of all traditional African leaders, whether collaborators or not.

Hlubi became ill in 1897, showing signs of mental instability which may have been the results of long-term exposure to malaria. He died in October 1902. He was succeeded by his son, Isaak Leneg, but in the 1940s the South African Government effectively removed what remained of Tlokoa authority in Zululand.

Their influence effectively came to an end but their cut-stone round Sotho-style huts can still be seen among their descendants in the Nquthu and Nondweni districts.

1). Bertram Mitford, *Through The Zulu Country*, London. 1883.

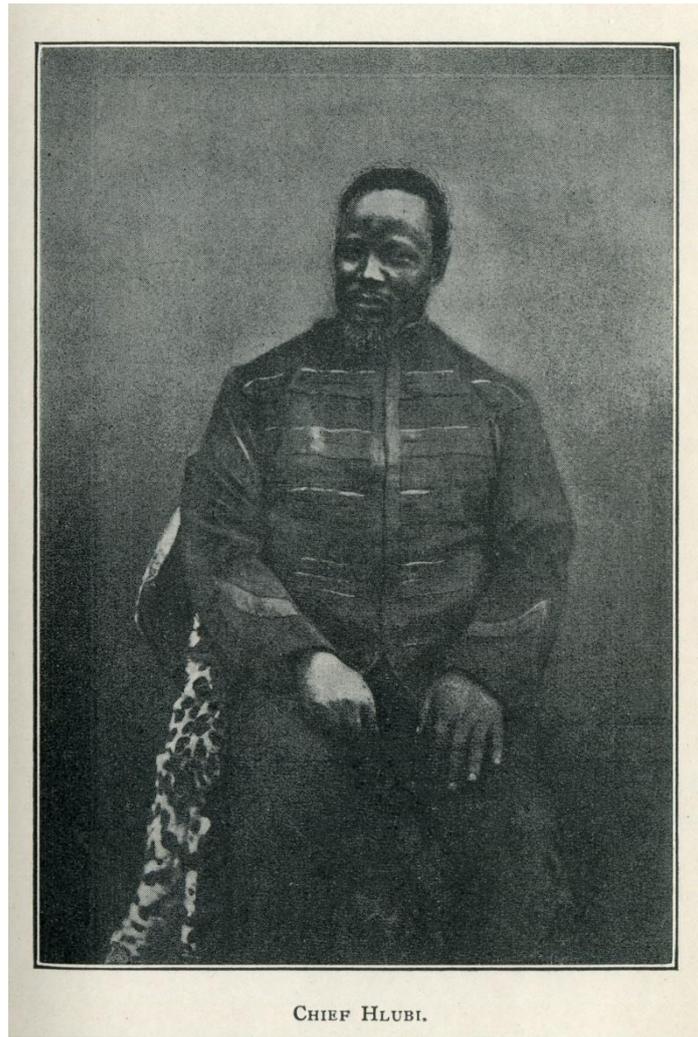
#### ILLUSTRATIONS;

1). Chief HlubikaMota Molife, photographed in the British-style uniform he liked to wear, in the 1880s.

2). Hlubi's followers photographed in the Kahlamba mountains during the mopping-up operations which followed the Bushman's Pass affair.

3). Recently installed in Zululand Hlubi - in uniform, right - and his followers are photographed outside their homestead, built on the ruins of that of the former occupier, the Zulu chief Sihayo.

4). The new order in Zululand; Hlubi in the centre flanked by two senior members of the Zulu Royal House, King Cetshwayo's brothers, the princes Ndabuko, left, and Shingana, right.



1.



2.



3.



4