

A HOUSE DIVIDED:

The Zulu Princes Who Fought For The British in 1879

By Ian Knight

At the crucial moment at the height of the battle of iSandlwana, when the companies of the 24th in the firing line began to withdraw back towards the tents and the Zulus in the opposing 'chest' rose up triumphantly to attack them, a conversation took place between two important men on the British side who represented a coalition of interests opposed to the ascendancy of the Zulu king, Cetshwayo; Chief Gabangaye of the Chunu tribe, accompanied by Cetshwayo's brother, Sikhotha, who had previously fled into Natal from Zululand, was also present, the former with a number of levies. When Sikhotha saw that all was lost, he advised Gabangaye to flee with him but the latter refused saying that he wished to see what his Mbungulu, or regiment of bugs, could do. Sikhotha, being recognised, was allowed to ride away unharmed, but Gabangaye, not being known, was killed...(1)

Both men were serving with the 3rd Regiment, Natal Native Contingent, and the incident has received little enough attention in most histories of the battle, being overshadowed by the drama of the 'last stand of the 24th' and consigned to the traditional degree of neglect afforded the part played by the NNC (2). At the time, however, it was so significant that it was remembered by African communities on both sides of the colonial divide. A Zulu boy named Muziwento, whose father fought in the battle, and who was interviewed after the war, had much the same version of events;

There was present to Usikota, brother of Cetshwayo; he saw the Zulu army coming up and cried, 'O! Not for me! I'm off! I know those fellows over there, it is just 'coming, come' with them, they are not to be turned aside by any man, and here we are sitting still for all the world like a lot of turkeys!' Then he called his brother, 'Away! Let's away, Ungabangaye, let's make a run for it!' Said Ungabangaye; 'Oh stop a moment, just till I see them tackled by the white men!' 'O! cried Usikota, 'A pleasant stay to you!' He seized his horse and bolted, he escaped through the 'neck', before the impi encircled the (camp). Up came the Zulu army and made an end of Ungabangaye...(3).

In fact Sikhotha and Gabangaye were not related, except in being the heads of distinguished African lineages representing conflicts with King Cetshwayo which pre-dated the British invasion. Gabangaye was in fact the son and heir of inkosi(chief) PakhadekaMacingwane, of the amaChunu people, who lived in the rugged Msinga district on the Natal side of the border with Zululand. The amaChunu had once been a significant independent people but they had been chased out of their territory in the Mzinyathi valley by King Shaka during the wars which marked the rise of the Zulu kingdom. The amaChunu had made their peace with Shaka's successors and returned to Zululand only to quarrel with King Mpande, and to flee once more. They had been settled in one of the hottest, most barren of the Natal African reserves – 'locations' – at least in part to provide a buffer between the Zulus and the more fertile white-owned farmland beyond. They harboured a deep resentment towards the Zulu kings, however, and when the colonial administration in Natal had agreed to recruit African

auxiliaries for the British invasion of Zululand. Inkosi Pakhade had been an enthusiastic supporter and had supplied over 700 men to join the 3rd Regiment; too old to take to the field himself, Pakhade had sent his son – who was himself a middle-aged man – Gabangaye to represent him. The death of Gabangaye at iSandlwana, together with hundreds of his men, dashed all hopes that the amaChunu might finally pay out their grievances against the Zulu kings.

Sikhotha was, however, possessed of an even greater lineage than Gabangaye – he was a son of the late Zulu king, MpandekaSenzangakhona, and as such a member of the Zulu Royal House, a brother (by another mother) to King Cetshwayo himself. Nor, indeed, was he the only member of the royal family to fight in 1879 for the British invaders.

The causes of the split within the Zulu Royal House dated to the actions of King Mpande. Unlike his predecessors, King Mpande had fathered a large number of children – 29 sons and 23 daughters - by his various queens. As these grew up so tensions arose between his sons over the question of the succession. Although there was a distinct protocol in this regard – the heir was identified as the senior son of the King by his designated ‘Great Wife’ – it was not unknown for protocol to be manipulated or overturned and King Mpande, wary of raising up an heir so secure that he might try to activate his claim prematurely, had played the ambitions of his sons off against one another. This merely postponed the decision, however, so that by the 1850s two princes were increasingly determined to press their claim, each collecting a group of brothers and half-brothers around him who supported him. The prince with the greater claim was Cetshwayo, the son of King Mpande by his great wife, Queen Ngqumbazi, but Mpande himself seems to have favoured another son, Prince Mbuyazi, whose mother was the rather more junior Queen Monase. Throughout 1855 tension mounted, with both factions courting support within the country, until November 1856 when, tacitly recognising that Prince Cetshwayo was proving more popular, Prince Mbuyazi gathered up his followers and fled to sanctuary in Natal. Unfortunately the flooded state of the Thukela river prevented him crossing out of Zululand and on 2 December 1856 Cetshwayo’s warriors caught them and, after a brief battle, destroyed not only Mbuyazi but those princes who had supported him, and most of their followers – perhaps as many as 20,000 people.

The battle at ‘Ndongakusuka, as it became known, effectively secured Cetshwayo’s succession, although King Mpande managed to retain the crown until he died peacefully of old age in 1872. In the aftermath of the battle, a number of junior princes, who had not been present but who were suspected of favouring Mbuyazi’s cause, also fled Zululand for the safer haven of Natal. Among the most important of these was Prince Mkhungo, who was a full brother of Prince Mbuyazi, Mkhungo’s friend Prince Sikhotha, and Prince Mthonga, who was the son of a young wife, Nomanshali, much favoured by Mpande as an old man.

Together these three provided a focus for royalist sympathisers who rejected Cetshwayo’s ascendancy. Mkhungo and Sikhotha were settled by the Natal government at Weenen, in the uKahlamba mountain foothills, and here a number of Zulu émigrés gravitated towards them. They were known collectively as the iziGqoza, the same name by which Prince Mbuyazi’s followers were known in 1856. Prince Mthonga, whilst remaining close to his exiled brothers, was perhaps the most ambitious of the three, and tried several times to return to Zululand. On one occasion he took refuge among the Boers in the Khambula district, in the territory disputed between Zululand and the Transvaal Republic, and the threat of armed intervention

by Cetshwayo forced the Boers to give him up. To salve the Boers' consciences, however, Cetshwayo had promised not to harm Mthonga; this proved something of a mistake as Mthonga escaped again to Natal, where he did not scruple to involve the Natal authorities – for whom he was a useful pawn to influence affairs in Zululand – in his schemes.

When Cetshwayo finally became king in 1873 he was faced with a number of challenges to his authority both within and outside his kingdom. While a number of royal princes remained staunchly loyal, not only was there a lingering threat from the three émigrés in Natal but one major figure within the kingdom resented his succession. This was Prince Hamu, who was biologically a son of King Mpande but who, by the complex laws of Zulu genealogy, was barred from the succession; Mpande had made Hamu heir to the estate of a dead brother, Nzibe, which meant that Hamu was considered of the house of Nzibe, rather than the king himself. Prince Hamu ruled his followers, the Ngenetsheni, from northern Zululand where he allowed little intervention by the King, and the tension between the two was well-known. Even before the British ultimatum began, and war broke out in January 1879, Prince Hamu had been secretly in touch with the British, opening the possibility of his defection.

In the run up to the war Lord Chelmsford had been well aware of the presence within Natal of pretenders to the Zulu throne and he had encouraged them to actively support the invasion since it legitimated the British claim that the British were not quarrelling with the Zulu people but rather with Cetshwayo himself. Prince Mkhungo was rather beyond the age of active service but sent Prince Sikhotha to represent him in his stead. Over 300 members of the iziGqoza were drafted into the NNC, and they proved to be some of its most enthusiastic members, having not only been raised directly in the Zulu warrior tradition, but also being motivated by the desire to settle old scores. When the 3rd NNC assembled at Sandspuit, near Helpmekeer, in late 1878 the British were impressed by Prince Sikhotha's imposing presence, and incorporated him on the regimental staff. One of the officers, Rupert Lonsdale, presented Sikhotha with a shirt and noted that, despite the fact that the Prince was a bigger man than the short and wiry Lonsdale and the shirt was decidedly tight, Sikhotha wore it with evident satisfaction as a sign of British approval.

The 3rd NNC were attached to the British Centre Column, which crossed into Natal at Rorke's Drift on 11 January, 1879, and the following day attacked and dispersed the follower of King Cetshwayo's appointed guardian of the border, inkosiSihayokaXongo. Although studies of the war traditionally concentrate on the obvious confrontation between British and Zulu forces, there were subtler political implications to the Centre Column's advance which were only too clear at the Zulu royal capital at oNdini. Not only had the British targeted a Royal favourite for their first attack of the war but the Centre Column included a leading representative of the émigré princes. To King Cetshwayo and his followers it must have seemed obvious that the British were intending to depose Cetshwayo, overturn his administration, and place either Sikhotha or his senior brother Mkhungo on the throne. These factors, as much as the obvious aggression of the Centre Column, surely influenced the decision to direct the main Zulu response against that column

In the event, Prince Sikhotha was among those of the NNC left in the camp at iSandlwana when it was attacked on 22 January. The NNC defended their position well in the line until the British line fell back, precipitating a general collapse. Gabangayeka Pakhade stayed with his men in the hope of seeing the Zulus defeated by the white soldiers – and paid the price.

Prince Sikhotha managed to escape, joining the general rout towards the crossing on the Mzinyathi later known as Fugitives' Drift. Prince Sikhotha later noted that he managed to cross the river with a number of other survivors but was so exhausted he felt completely vulnerable to any Zulu pursuit. Across the river, one of the King's full brothers, Prince Ndabuko, urged the Zulus to cross and finish off the survivors but, ironically, was countermanded by the King's influential councillor, Vumandabaka Nthathi, a commander of the uKhandempemvu, who shouted out that the King had in fact ordered his men not to violate Natal territory. Sikhotha said that had he owed his life to Vumandaba's intervention (4).

The defeat of the Centre Column shattered not only Lord Chelmsford's first invasion strategy but also the iziGqoza hopes of riding back to the Zulu throne on British coat-tails. As Sikhotha and his exhausted followers returned to Weenen Prince Mkhungo expressed his concern at failings in the way the British had handled their auxiliary troops. Although Sikhotha himself was willing to return to Zululand it was decided to use the iziGqoza in a largely defensive capacity thereafter, and Sikhotha did not fight on Zulu soil again.

Once the British began to repair their fortunes in the aftermath of iSandlwana, however, two of the remaining royal dissidents made their play. Although men from Prince Hamu's districts had taken their places in the King's amabutho (regiments), and had fought at iSandlwana, Hamu had remained at home and in February indicated that he was preparing to defect. Despite royalist attempts to block his route he managed to reach the British camp at Khambula, the base of Col. Evelyn Wood's Left Flank Column, on 10 March with 1,300 of his followers. He was taken to safety in the Boer town of Utrecht while his fighting men were drafted into the local auxiliary unit, Wood's Irregulars.

At about the same time Wood was also joined by the last of the royalist pretenders, Prince Mthonga, who had long cultivated contacts along the Boer/Zulu border. Like Sikhotha in the Centre Column, Mthonga briefly joined Wood's staff, advising on local conditions and providing intelligence. When, by the middle of March, Lord Chelmsford was encouraging his garrisons along the border to make diversionary attacks on the Zulus, Col. Wood's expedition against the local Zulu stronghold of Hlobane mountain was accompanied by both Prince Mthonga and numbers of Prince Hamu's warriors.

In the event, Prince Mthonga found himself dangerously close to the action during the attack of 28 March. Wood and his staff, riding up the mountain in the wake of the first British assaults, came under fire from Zulus concealed in rocks ahead; Wood's interpreter, a civilian named Llewellyn Lloyd, was killed, as was Wood's staff officer, Captain Campbell, when he attempted to rush the Zulu position. Wood recovered the bodies and it was Mthonga's followers who dug a shallow grave for them with their spears. Wood then decided to return to his base at Khambula, and to allow the attack to continue without him; on his way back he was alerted by Mthonga's excited gestures to the fact that a large Zulu army was approaching rapidly to assist the defenders of Hlobane. Wood and his staff just managed to escape them, unlike many of those still fighting on the mountain.

The debacle at Hlobane demoralised Wood's local supporters, and many of his auxiliaries deserted him that night, including apparently Prince Mthonga. The following day, however, Wood was able to decisively defeat the main Zulu army at the battle of Khambula.

The fighting during the early part of the war had not played out well for the émigré princes, none of whom took part in the new British offensive which began on 1 June. Following the Zulu defeat at Ulundi on 4 July and the capture of the King in August, the princes no doubt hoped that their loyalty to the British would be rewarded. Sir Garnet Wolseley – who succeeded Lord Chelmsford at the end of the war, and was responsible for imposing the peace settlement – interviewed Prince Hamu and gained the distinct impression that he hoped to be set up as king in Cetshwayo's place. In fact, however, Wolseley was determined to overthrow the influence of the Royal family, and was prepared to do no more than make Hamu one of the thirteen chiefs among whom the British divided the kingdom.

If that was a poor reward for a man who had already enjoyed a high standing within the country before the war it was more than his émigré brothers would secure, despite the fact that two of them had come under fire in the British cause. Although both Mkhungo and Sikhotha continued to live in Natal, the British saw no reason to further support the cause of the iziGqoza, which had effectively been marginalised long before the war. When Evelyn Wood visited Zululand in 1880, accompanying the Empress Eugenie on her visit to the spot where her son, the Prince Imperial, had been killed, he passed through Utrecht, and Prince Mthonga begged an interview in which he asked for greater recognition for the part he had played in the invasion. Yet, having overthrown the legitimate claimant, King Cetshwayo, the British no longer had need for a pretender, the more so because Mthonga's own support within Zululand was minimal, and he left empty-handed.

In the final analysis the support of the émigré Royal princes must have seemed significant to King Cetshwayo but their usefulness to the British was time-limited. Whilst they served to legitimise British intervention they contributed only a small amount to the British military effort, and once Cetshwayo had been toppled they discovered – like many a collaborator before and since – that they had become largely irrelevant.

Both Mkhungo and Sikhotha lived out their lives in Natal. Prince Mkhungo had no children of his own and, according to Zulu custom, gave two female members of his household to Sikhotha to raise heirs on his behalf. One of them produced a son, who thus tied the two branches of the family closer together; interestingly she was the daughter of inkosi Zikhali of the amaNgwane people, whose followers – known to the British as the Sikhali Horse – had also fought against the Zulu at iSandlwana. Clearly the connection between those groups who had allied themselves against King Cetshwayo remained strong after the war as Prince Mthonga's thirteen wives later included a daughter of inkosi Pakhade of the amaChunu – a sister of Gabangaye, who had died at iSandlwana.

Towards the end of the century Prince Mthonga returned to Zululand and settled in the Eshowe district. During the 1906 Rebellion he supplied a number of followers to serve as auxiliaries with the Government forces. And yet to some extent he became reconciled with the ruling house; as late as 1915 his name appears on a list of prominent Zulus proposed by King Solomon kaDinuzulu – Cetshwayo's grandson – to meet with the Government of the Union of South Africa to delineate the role of the Zulu king.

FOOTNOTES;

- 1). H.C. Lugg, *A Natal Family Looks Back*, Durban, 1970. Lugg, whose own father fought t Rorke's Drift as a trooper in the Natal Mounted Police, was told the story by Prince Sikhotha's son, Gomonxo.
- 2). The politics of the NNC groups who fought at iSandlwana is examined in Ian Knight's *Zulu Rising*, London, 2010.
- 3). George H. Swinney (translator), *A Zulu Boy's Recollections of the Zulu War and of Cetshwayo's Return*, London, 1884.
- (4). Bishop Colenso's notes in Cornelius Vijn, *Cetshwayo's Dutchman*, London, 1880.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1). Prince SikhotakaMpande, photographed in Natal a few months after his return from the iSandlwana campaign.



Prince Hamu kaNzibe, the only senior member of the royal House to defect to the British



during the war, photographed during his time in Utrecht.

- 3). Two of the important émigré princes, Mthonga (left) and Mkhungo, photographed at the turn of the century.

