

FROM AN APPENDIX TO SHAKA: KING OF THE ZULUS
IN AFRICAN LITERATURE BY DONALD

BURNETT, JAMES CONTINENTAL
PRESS, NEW YORK, 1976.

SHAKA'S SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND MILITARY IDEAS

by

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One cannot readily think of an African who rose from greater adversity to write across time for all men to read, a bolder and more enduring epic of human achievement than of Shaka the Great, founder and emperor of the Greater Zulu nation. The illegitimate son of Sensangakhona ka Jama Zulu, a princelet ruling over a tiny and weak Zulu clan whose only claim to fame rested on the excellent quality of the tobacco it produced, and Nandi ka Mbengi Mhlongo, a determined, headstrong and ambitious princess of the almost equally unimportant Langeni clan, Shaka Zulu has been hailed as a military genius and a symbol of African excellence.

He has also been denounced as a vindictive, insensitive and bloodthirsty tyrant.

The chorus of praise has come mainly from African historians, authors, journalists and poets while the calumnation has flowed generally from White explorers, scholars and writers. While the conflicting assessments might reveal Shaka's complex character, they need to be seen in the contexts provided by history as viewed from different angles by Africans and Whites and the different perspectives from which the two races see reality, society and the person.

Shaka's admirers and detractors continue to do him one injustice: they concentrate on his genius as a military leader and ignore the ideal he translated into action in everything he did. If he were to rise from his grave today, Shaka would point out that his truly enduring contribution to human progress was to demonstrate how to found a nation on the basis of a clearly stated ideal; he would say that his pioneering paved the way for the creation by Mshweshwe of the Basotho nation, of the Ndebele by Mzilikazi ka Mashobana Kumalo, the Shangane by Soshangane ka Zikode ka Gasa ka Manukuza Ndwandwe and of Zwangendaba's sixteen kingdoms in Central Africa.

He would explain that he built the Greater Zulu army not so much to establish his personal power as in response to the challenge presented by the political turmoil which had afflicted the Natal area for more than a thousand years before his birth. This challenge, he would add, made an efficient army the first prerequisite for promoting the ends of the revolution which he led. But the army was not the only vehicle he used; where diplomacy produced the results he desired, he did not hesitate to call it into service. He would call a long list of distinguished witnesses who lived in his time to testify on the conditions in Natal when he grew up, on his ideal, and on how he translated it into action.

The present effort presents Shaka the Great against the background provided on the one hand by conditions in Natal in his time and, on the other, by the testimony handed down from generation to generation by some of his contemporaries: the poets of his time.

We shall start with a recapitulation of the salient events in his life. Shaka was born some time in the 1780s, after a tumultuous love affair between his father, then a married chief, and Nandi who was not married. When the Langeni people announced to Senzangakhona's Zulu clan that Nandi was expecting a child by the prince, the Zulus replied through Mudli Zulu, the senior relative of Senzangakhona's, that the girl was not pregnant; that she was suffering from a women's disease known as *ishaka*.

The calculated insult inflamed the passions of the Langeni whose pride had already been hurt by the pregnancy. When the baby boy was born, the Langeni promptly sent word to Senzangakhona's headquarters to the effect that the Zulus should come and see their *ishaka*. Nandi gave the baby the name *Shaka*, always to remind herself of her rejection by Senzangakhona, her humiliation by her own people who sent her unceremoniously to Senzangakhona's kraal and, above all, to plant an abiding motive in Shaka and define life's purpose for him.

Senzangakhona did not have much love for Nandi. Besides, he was not the type of man to take too kindly to her determination and independence. Quarrels followed until Senzangakhona finally drove Nandi who, by then, also had a daughter, Nomcoba, out of his village. Humiliated once more, Nandi took Shaka and Nomcoba with her to her Langeni home.

The Langeni had not forgiven Nandi the disgrace she brought on them when she became pregnant. They did nothing to conceal their hostility to the idea of having to feed two extra mouths who had no father and nobody to support them. Shaka was as headstrong and determined as his mother was. These were not the qualities to make a beggar like him popular. To make matters worse, he cared as little for making friends as he had a good appetite. Angered by what they regarded as his boorish manners, the Langeni either composed this poem to make everybody know what they thought of him or, as some legends say, took it from the Qwabe clan to emphasize their contempt for him:

Igamatha-ndukwana,
Elidl'amasi ngengxwembe,
Inja liyishaye ngekhandla!

The little upstart;
He holds his fighting-stick in the middle,
Eats sour-milk with the wooden ladle
And hits the dog with his head! (Traditional)

It is difficult to convey in a Western language the cluster of insults conveyed in this stanza; the images lined up to describe Shaka project him as a subhuman little brute who was as gluttonous as he was uncouth. The properly trained Zulu male infant held his fighting-stick with his right hand and pressed his thumb against and not around one of its ends. He always held it at the end and not in the middle. This lesson he was taught as soon as he could walk. The idea was to instill in him the conviction that fulfilment for him lay in a disciplined, soldierly lifestyle. When the Langeni said Shaka held his stick in the middle they went beyond saying that he was effeminate and that he would never acquit himself as a man; they attacked Nandi for being a bad mother by not having a legal husband who would give Shaka the training that was the due of a Zulu-speaking boy.

People who hated the mother as they did the son were in the mood to be offended by everything Shaka did. The orthodox Zulu (the Natal clans all spoke Zulu) almost made no distinction between eating and a religious exercise. Dining was the ritual which effected the union of life in the cosmic order with life in the person. Zulu etiquette required that the person should never eat standing, or use the ladle for eating; that before touching raw or cooked food, one should wash one's hands, at least. When served, the food had first to be contemplated; portions would then be taken which were large enough to be masticated properly to extract maximum value. Eating was taken so seriously the child was forbidden to talk while dining. The person was required to concentrate on the food before him and avoid the distractions which would disturb the communion between the life outside and the life within. Only sub-humans and barbarians did not eat according to the rules enunciated above.

The contempt reached its height when Shaka was equated with dogs which felt he was as good as they were and therefore wanted to eat from his sourmilk bowl. He, in turn, was so sub-human he did not use his stick to frighten them off his food, but hit them with his head!

The land of the Langeni was hit by a severe drought in or about 1802. By this time Nandi, who had been separated from Senzangakhona for years, had had a third child, a boy, Ngwadi, by Gendeyana the Qwabe. The Langeni made it clear that there was no place in the community for all the mouths Nandi continued to breed. She took her

three children with her and went to Gendeyana's kraal where she was received warmly and given protection.

Shaka reached puberty. Up to that time he had known nothing but deprivation and humiliation; he had been thrown out of his father's house and had been rejected by his mother's people. The only persons who had loved him, stood by him and encouraged him in the moments of bitterness which were all too frequent an occurrence in the experience of the boy, were his mother, his sister Nomcoba and Ngwadi, his half-brother.

Shaka was a healthy, well-built and courageous giant of a boy. He excelled at the games which constituted an important part of a Zulu boy's education. This circumstance began to make him a center of attention among clans which were so frequently at war with each other, warriors had become a precious commodity. His father wanted him to return home and serve in the army of the Zulu mini-state. The Langeni village also clamoured for his return to his mother's people. Nandi would not hear a word of it. Word went round that if Shaka would not return to the Zulus, his father would have him killed. Senzangakhona, according to tradition, was afraid that if Shaka grew up in a hostile state he would want to succeed his father as head of the Zulu clan, and kill his father's chosen successor.

Nandi once more packed the few belongings she had and fled to the land of the powerful Mtetwa under King Dingiswayo ka Jobe. It was while Shaka was on Mtetwa territory that a development occurred which set him moving firmly toward a military career. Dingiswayo allowed him to enlist for service in his army. That gave Shaka his opportunity and he made the fullest use of it. He distinguished himself in battle after battle. Dingiswayo had an eye on stabilizing conditions by establishing the political, economic and military hegemony of the Mtetwa in Natal. Ever ready to recognize and reward talent, he promoted Shaka rapidly in the army and paid him generously for his services.

For the first time in his life, Shaka earned his keep. He drove the cattle which were his pay to Mbiya's village, under whose care he had been placed. From that moment, Nandi and her children, who had never owned anything other than the clothes they wore, possessed cattle! But Shaka made it clear that he was not interested in amassing wealth. From the day he was born, Nandi had drilled the idea into his mind that he was Southern Africa's man of destiny. Nandi wanted Shaka to be the greatest king Southern Africa had ever seen, partly to vindicate herself and partly to punish Senzangakhona for humiliating her, Shaka and Nomcoba. As he grew up, she had stopped calling him Shaka and had lovingly named him *Mlilwana*, the Blazing Little Fire.

She had stoked the Little Fire for nearly two decades and could foresee the day when it would reduce to ashes the social and political structure which had hurt and so much wounded her and her children.

The Conservatives

While self-vindication on the part of Nandi and Shaka was the powerful influences behind their attitude to men and events, it was not the only factors. Mother and son had been deprived people; they set out as a team to establish a social order in which it would never again be a crime for a person to be the child of his or her particular parents; a society in which the person could realize the promise of being human regardless of antecedents, sex or status. Both had a vested interest in a society where they would be able to make the best possible use of their lives in the light of their choices.

Nandi had been persecuted throughout her life for being the type of woman she was. As the daughter of a princelet, her private life was the subject of comment by the poets of the time and what the poets said was not always complimentary. Nandi contrasted the hypocrisy and greed of the conservatives with the system of values they never tired of praising. When she defied custom and slept with Senzangakhona the Langeni had raised a storm such as their land had never seen before. The poets were not going to allow her to escape with the indiscretion. A stanza in the poem on her had these lines:

U Sontanti
U Mathanga-kawahlangani,
Ahlanguana ngokubon'umyeni.

The Floater
Whose laps are never pressed together,
Except at the sight of a male organ.

From *Izibongo zika Nandi*

Zulu tradition gave the Court Poet wide latitude to comment as freely as he could on the conduct of a ruler or anybody in the public eye. Sometimes the Court Poet paid with his life for expressing the truth as honestly as he saw it. The great Magolwane ka Mkatini Jiyana criticized Mpande's weak rule so powerfully the king ordered his execution.

In *Izibongo zika Nandi* the poet uses *ukubhinqa* to focus attention on Nandi's carelessness about her morals. In *ukubhinqa* the speaker dramatizes or emphasizes an evil or weakness by projecting it as a virtue to emphasize the insensitivity of the person he attacks.

Tradition among the Zulu-speaking peoples regarded sex as an expression of being; as the experience by which woman and her neighbour, the man, brought each other to the moment of fulfilment and enlarged each other's personality. The sharing of bodies was one of the means for realizing the promise of being human. All adults had the right to attain fulfilment. Custom prescribed one set of rules for the enjoyment

of sex by the married and another by the nubile young. The *hlobonga* custom required the girl to have sex with her lover, but to press her thighs in a particular way to prevent the flow of semen down the vaginal passage.

The poet tells posterity that Nandi, who "floated" from one man to another, did not press her thighs together in the prescribed way once she saw the male organ. Nandi had not pressed her thighs together when she slept with Sensangakhona; her defiance of custom had led to the birth of Shaka.

Shaka had an appointment with destiny which his mother could never allow him to forget. Nandi was a devoted mother in spite of her love affairs. She showered her children, Shaka, Nomcoba and Ngwadi with so much love they were as devoted to her as they were to each other. Shaka so loved Ngwadi he established him as an autonomous prince with the right to maintain a small private army of his own. Ngwadi had been instrumental in killing Siqujana, the legitimate heir to Sensangakhona and in that way had paved the way for Shaka's seizure of power in the Zulu state.

Nandi saw herself and her children as the victims of the greed of the aristocratic families of her time. She awakened a hatred for the aristocracy in Shaka which made it impossible for him to want to leave behind any heirs. As a result, he never married; he did not want successors who would impose on the model nation he had built the deprivation which had been his constant companion as he grew up. Anybody with the requisite qualities had every right to become king of the nation he was to found.

Nandi was constantly pointing to the strife in Natal and the clamour people raised against it as the challenge which Shaka had to accept; she taught him at all times that his destiny was to set the heavens themselves on fire in the bid to vindicate himself, his mother and her children and, in doing that, to correct an historical injustice. His duty to all the human beings punished for being the children of their particular parents, she had told him as he grew up, was to overthrow the rule of the conservatives and substitute it with a just society in which merit fixed the position of the citizen in national life. His father, she never tired of reminding him, had fled from the challenge of creating the society for which all the peoples of Natal had clamoured for so long. It was Shaka's destiny to face and accept this challenge not only to demonstrate that he was a better man than his good-for-nothing father but, above all, because he would be obeying an order issued by the ancestors.

This order, she pointed out, had been issued in the 1780s through the Court Poet to Sensangakhona who had defined the destiny of the clan which called itself the Zulu people in the following terms:

Masiphoth'intamb' ende Menzi ka Jama,
Siy'emazulwini,

Lapho nezithutha zingey' ukufika;
Zobasakhwele,
Zephuk' amazwanyana!

A cord of destiny let us weave,
O Menzi, scion of Jama,
That
To heavens beyond the reach of spirit-forms
We may climb.
(So long must the cord be)
The spirit-forms will break their tiny toes
If they dare to climb!

From *Izibongo zika Sensangakhona*.

An order from the spirits of the ancestors was a call of destiny. This call combined with the desire for vengeance to arouse explosive passions in young Shaka's breast. These he set out to translate into action regardless of what it could cost him. His surrender here was total; he made himself an instrument of destiny and that defined life's purpose for him.

The relationship between mother and son was not unique. The times in which Nandi and Shaka lived were the age of the great matriarchs among the Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi and Bhaca) and the Sotho (Basotho, Bapedi and Batswana) of Southern Africa. Men laid down their lives in the bid to translate the wishes of these great ladies into action. The Court Poet to Shaka when he was king tells us that Sensangakhona's wives amused themselves by discussing the politics of succession to the Zulu throne. While sunning themselves in Sensangakhona's Nomgabi kraal they condemned as presumptuous Nandi's boast that her Mlilwana would one day be an emperor:

Uteku lwabafazi bakwaNomgabi,
Betekula behlez'emlovini,
Beth' uShaka kakubusa,
Kay' ukuba nkosi;
Kanti, yilaph'ezaunethezeka!

A joke he was of the wives from the Nomgabi kraal;
Sunning themselves, they exclaimed:
Shaka'll never rule!
He'll never be king!
But a king he was destined to be!

From *Izibongo zika Shaka*

There were other great luminaries in the galaxy of female stars. Ntombazi among the Ndwandwe ordered her son, Zwide, to behead the princes he conquered in battle. She stuck their heads on pegs and displayed them in a special hut where she kept the state medicines of the mighty Ndwandwe people. Mnkabayi kaJama once commanded the Zulu army and was an effective kingmaker. Across the Drakensberg, there was the great and dreaded Mantantisi of the Batlokwa, the mother of Sigonyela. A brilliant and fearless general, she spread terror, destruction and carnage over much of what later was to be the Southern Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Shaka himself treated her with respect when he was king. The Zulus told blood-chilling tales about her to their children. As the mother of Tatise, who had a toe longer and sharper than the largest sword, she mowed down her foes with her toe and used it to fell Africa's giant baobab trees to clear routes through forests for her army. Mjantshi ka Thobela lived in the north-eastern part of the Transvaal and men trembled at the mention of her name because it was said she had absolute power over the forces of nature. Mjantshi did not have an army; she punished her enemies by sending locusts to their lands or by withdrawing rain from their territory.

Unlike some of the great ladies of the time, Ntombazi was not a military leader. She saw to it and the Ndwandwes approved, that she remained the power behind her son, Zwide. She wanted no upstart, legitimate or otherwise, to threaten her son's position in the fierce struggle for leadership which had been gaining momentum in Natal in the five hundred to a thousand years before Shaka's birth. To make her point clear beyond any shadow of doubt, she insisted that Zwide should bring her the heads of all the princes he conquered in battle. Zwide was no small chieftain; he had staked his claim for hegemony in Natal long before Shaka became head of the Zulus. An outstanding soldier, he trained and directed a whole galaxy of distinguished generals. Soshangane was one of them and Zwangendaba, another.

Other Inspirations

Two other influences must be mentioned which made Shaka a revolutionary: the momentum of historical and socio-economic events in the thousand years before his birth and the conflict between this momentum and the Buntu evaluation of the person.

Although preliterate in the sense that the languages of the peoples who adhered to it were not reduced to writing, the civilization which translates the Buntu Ideal into action evolved its own techniques for communicating ideas. While some of these, like the laws, customs, notions of reality and the person are more widely known, inadequate attention has been given to one of the most reliable sources of information on the past of the Sub-Saharan Africans: the *patronymic legend* (isithakazelo). This was a short poem appended to a family name

as a title. Many Sub-Saharan Africans used it to pass family histories to future generations, to preserve the ideals which distinguished each family from the others and as expressions of gratitude or respect.

The Nguni system of education required that the properly trained and cultured person (*umuntu ofundiswe umteto*) should know all the patronymic legends developed by the main families or clans. Each such poem summarized the history or achievements of the greatest ancestors of each group. The legend served the purpose of passing on family history and in that way preserved the chain of cultural continuity by reminding the individual that he was the extension into the future of a cluster of ancestors and that his destiny was defined in the patronymic legend. He was the living embodiment of the ideals of the countless men and women whose bloods and achievements had gone into his making. Each family, no matter how large or small or rich or poor, had its own patronymic legend which was as important as that of any other.

The spoken word was the main vehicle for communicating ideas in a preliterate civilization. The Nguni, like many other Sub-Saharan peoples, evolved different genres in which to cast words to convey ideas and pass on information or entertain. Poetry, drama and story-telling were some of the main vehicles used; each category had specialized forms for the communication of given ideas. Each form, like each genre, was composed in terms of ancient rules. *Izibongo (Eulogia)* ranged from the poems on kings and other distinguished leaders to the praises of beautiful women, animals or babies.

The person-centered Buntu civilization was concerned with the establishment of the critical balance in all things which was the climactic moment in the creative experience; the moment of greatest excellence in all things. Nguni education and etiquette stressed this harmony. Every person, no matter how high or low had the right to go through the creative experience in the light of his or her abilities. The patronymic legend protected this right.

If, for example, a Ngubane gave something to another person, the latter did not say: "Thank you," as the White people say; he recited a line or a stanza from the Ngubane family's patronymic legend thus:

Ngubane! Nomafu!
Ngogo zabantu,
Nezezinkomo!

(May you live long) O Ngubane!
Element of the clouds!
In your disdain for your enemies
You crushed men and their cattle;
Their skeletons tell the story!

The Natal Nguni were neither the inventors of, nor the only Africans committed to, the Sudic evaluation of the person. Sudic communities

existed all over Sub-Saharan Africa before the coming of the Whites. Large and small communities had for thousands of years translated the Sudic Ideal into experience. Stanlake Samkange, the African historian from Rhodesia, notes in his book, *The Origins of Rhodesia*, that from about 850 A.D., the great Shona [Zezuru-speaking] people had settled in the lands between the Zambezi and the Limpopo rivers and over the centuries built an empire which stretched to the Indian Ocean. These remarkable people "established the great Empire of the Mwene Mutapa (the Monomotapa of the white historians) and the Rozwi Mambos whose grandeur and achievements stand unsurpassed by anything Africa had to show at the time. Its complex of stone structures and buildings," Samkange continues, "of which the Great Zimbabwe is but an example, remain a wonder of the world. Its gold mines supplied, through Kilwa and later through Sofala, the markets of countries across the seas centuries before the advent of the white man in Africa."³

An almost parallel situation was developing in South Africa where the Sudic family had split into the Nguni, who lived between the Drakensberg Mountains and the sea, and the Sotho peoples who inhabited the tablelands of what are today the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. While the two main groups spoke related, though mutually unintelligible languages, they were committed to the same evaluation of the person, embraced the same pattern of culture, operated identical legal systems and maintained similar political and economic institutions. They were organized into numbers of large and small clans ("tribes"), each of which regarded itself as a sovereign independent people with its own dynastic ruler and territory.

The clan-state was often ruled by the head of the family from which the clan took its name and his or his successors' exploits were the subjects of the patronymic legends. Wars were one of the main features of clan-state life in what is known as South Africa today. The strong did not hesitate to build their power at the expense of the weak. Mshweshwe's Bamkoteli clan was for a long time the vassal of its powerful neighbours, the Basekake. The Zulu clan had similarly lived in the shadow of the Mtetwa. One of the most remarkable women, Mantantisi of the Batlokwa, emerged not only as one of the outstanding military leaders of the revolutionary period but also as the terror of the larger and richer clans. Like Shaka the Great, she was hurled into the maelstrom of revolution by the general turbulence in southern Africa toward the end of the heroic age.

Like all Sudic societies, the Nguni and Sotho communities were person-centered; they existed to ensure that the individual was given enough latitude to make the best possible use of his life.

The Natal Nguni were a people with a restless mind; they always were asking questions concerning reality, the person and life's purpose; they wanted to know what lay beyond the horizon, the sky and death itself. They travelled up and down southern Africa not only as traders,

hunters or warriors, but also as explorers. The clan which produced Shaka, which was one of the smallest and weakest, as noted, was famous for the quality of tobacco it produced and traded. The Mtetwa, its powerful neighbours, had a flourishing commerce with the intruding Portuguese in Mozambique to whom they sold leather goods and elephant tusks. Clans living near deposits of ferrous ore smelted iron and manufactured weapons, implements, cutlery and other goods. Other groups mixed iron and copper to produce bronze for the bangles worn by the rich. In time, trade made the Natal Nguni a fairly wealthy group of clans. This attracted increasing numbers of people into Natal. The land was overcrowded with human beings and livestock when Vasco da Gama sailed past the Natal coast in 1497. Conflicts over land were the order of the day; they disrupted trade and created situations of continuing instability. This raised the clamour for a satisfying concept of larger nationhood to which Shaka was to address himself.

Another factor had come to the fore to ripen Natal in particular for the revolution. Zulu lore, more specifically the patronymic legends, suggests that by the ninth or tenth century (of the European chronology), Nguni society had been so corroded by the instability on one hand and, on the other, the decline in morals which develops with wealth; power had become the thing to live for—the determinant of morals and public policy. The strong used their might to give one meaning to the Buntu evaluation of the person among themselves and another among the weak and the poor. They hallowed and sanctified tradition in the bid to make it the prison of the mind which would stop events moving toward *imfecane*. They arrogated to themselves the right to be the custodians of tradition and culture and styled their commitment *ukudla ngengxwembe endala* (dining with the spoon of ancient origin).

The aristocrats were opposed by the deprived who regarded the conservatives as traitors who prostituted the Buntu evaluation of the person to promote their own interests. The deprived committed themselves to the overthrow of the conservatives; to *ukugebhuza izulu* (carving the sky with the spear into chunks of heaven-matter). The revolutionaries committed themselves, in other words, to doing the inconceivable in the bid to give a satisfying meaning to life.

The word *izulu* in Natal Nguni meant the sky, rain, rainstorm, the heavens, infinite power and eternity. To carve the heavens with the spear was to pit the human mind against the cosmic order itself in the bid to realize the challenge of being human; it was to explore the mazes of infinity. *Gebhuz'izulu* became a popular title in the patronymic legends of ancestors and heroes and came, in time, to describe the ultimate in heroism. The commitment to carving the sky was not confined to the Natal Nguni; a Swazi king was to be known as *Gebhuz'izulu*.

This glorification of the hero expressed a powerfully felt yearning among the Sudic communities of southern Africa for a satisfying concept

of nationhood. The yearning had inspired Malandela, the head of one of the smallest clans in Natal, to give the name Zulu to his infant son. The naming of the baby was an important event among the Sudic peoples. The name chosen conveyed the ideal by which the father sought to project himself into the future; it expressed his hopes or disappointments and was related to the events in the midst of which the child was born. In the name he chose, the father responded to the challenge of his nature as a living ideal in the process of becoming and to the call of the ages. The Zulus say he spoke to the generations still to be born. In all this, he made an enduring commitment to posterity.

Malandela made the enduring commitment some time during the second half of the fifteenth century. By calling his son Zulu, he announced to his times and the future that his wife had given birth to the man who would go beyond merely talking about *ukugebhuzwa izulu*; he would lead his people to heights of achievement never attained before. This desire for a satisfying form of nationhood, it must be repeated, was not confined to Malandela's tiny Zulu clan; it expressed the dominant aspiration in southern Africa in at least the thousand years before Shaka.

Zulu ka Malandela Zulu did not live up to expectations. His immediate and not so immediate successors did not fare better. In the succeeding three centuries it became increasingly clear that the clan wars had created a power-vacuum which threatened to destroy the Natal Nguni. Senzangakhona's Court Poet could, by the latter part of the eighteenth century, stand up before his clan and publicly demand that Senzangakhona should produce the quality of leadership and the concept of nationhood for which the Natal Nguni had clamoured for so many centuries; that he should "weave the cord of destiny" which would stabilize conditions in Natal.

Like Zulu ka Malandela Zulu, Senzangakhona was not the kind of prince to concern himself with questions of destiny; he allowed history to drift past him and, in doing this, exposed a point of weakness Nandi exploited fully to humiliate him not only in the eyes of the ancestors of the Zulu people, but before history itself. If the prospect of *ukugebhuzwa izulu* made Senzangakhona's knees quake, she told Shaka, the latter should rise and cut up the heavens and demonstrate before the ancestors and history that it could be done.

Sudic Roots

Senzangakhona's humiliation of Nandi, Shaka and Nomcoba had been enough to convince Nandi that he deserved to be punished in ways about which people would talk for the rest of history. The Zulu prince's crime was ultimately that he had done violence to the person; he had denied his wife and two children the right to be fulfilled as human beings.

The gravity of Senzangakhona's crime at this level has to be seen against the evaluation of the person adhered to by the Nguni of Natal.

Like the *Ingxwembe Endala* conservatives, Sensangakhona did violence to the person of the woman and showed little concern when this destroyed her. This was how Nandi saw her position.

The conservatives drew a sharp distinction between the people of quality, each of whom was *Mnta ka Bani* (Child of So-and-So) and *abafokazana* (the little persons or poorlings). This division of human beings into the *have* and *have-not* categories violated the Buntu evaluation of the person—the philosophy by which the Nguni gave meaning to reality, experience and the person. The violence had produced the *Gebhuz'izulu* revolutionaries who wanted to do the inconceivable but were handicapped by the absence of a leader who thought in terms of effective alternatives. By attacking Shaka when a fetus in his mother's womb and by subjecting him to continuing abuse, both the Langeni and Zulu royal families threw him out of the *Mnta ka Bani* category and fixed his place permanently among *abafokazana*. If this did violence to his person, it called for pulling down the entire structure of society based on categorization and deprivation and its replacement with another in which the person could realise the promise and the glory of being human. This was the ultimate challenge of everything he had suffered.

In many Buntu-based cultures blackness is identified with power. One of the Zulu king-emperor's titles was *The Black One* or *The Incarnation of Blackness*. This is how a Zulu Court Poet described Shaka the Great:

Ungangezintab' ezinde, o Mpehlela no Maqhwakazi,
Wen' omnyama!
Wena wakhula belibele!

You tower above everything,
Like the highest mountains, Mpehlela and Maqhwakazi;
You do, O Black One!
You accepted the call of destiny
When others enjoyed themselves!

From *Izibongo zika Shaka*, Nyembezi Collection

The Natal Nguni understood the *Sudic Ideal* to teach that the cosmic order was the sum-total of the individualizations of NTU, which was an infinite cluster of living forces. The infinity existed to express itself in terms of its law of agmination (or becoming or unfolding) and individualized itself into the infinite variety of phenomena which constitute the cosmic order.

NTU had individualized itself into primordial waters, the earth and all phenomena. To emphasize this fact and to stress the consubstantial

character of everything which exists, the Nguni evolved a whole cluster of derivatives from *NTU*:

| <i>NTU Derivative</i> | <i>Meaning</i> |
|-----------------------|--|
| Ulutho | The smallest particle or cell; |
| Into | the thing or phenomenon; |
| Isitho | the organ or portion of a phenomenon; |
| Untu | the stomach muscle in which the <i>NTU</i> consciousness was concentrated; |
| Umuntu | the personification of <i>NTU</i> ; the human being; |
| Isintu | humanity; |
| Ubuntu | the practice of the law of <i>NTU</i> ; virtue. |

The derivatives focused on the fact that nothing existed of itself, by itself, for itself and that each was related to all and all to each. The law of becoming extended the infinite consciousness into the person and the latter into the family, the community, the clan, the nation and humanity; it extended the ideal he incarnated into behaviour, custom, culture and civilization. Each culture, like each civilization, translated into action a given ideal of fulfilment. Each had a validity and legitimacy which could not to be alienated. Any frustration of life's purpose for the person, any derogation from his humanity and any deprivation was an attack not on the Buntu Ideal only, but also on society, humanity and the infinite consciousness itself.

To punish the person for being the child of his or her particular parents or to attach the label of *abafokazana* to whole groups of persons was an outrage practiced on everything Shaka considered decent or sacred.

Back To Dingiswayo

Dingiswayo had gone beyond giving Shaka security and the opportunity to make the best possible use of his life; he had made him aware of the nature of the complicated forces which clashed in the lives of the peoples trapped between the Indian Ocean and the Drakensberg Mountains. History and economic necessity collided in ways which called for a new balance in the dispositions of power among the Nguni of Natal.

Dingiswayo planned to establish himself as the fulcrum on which the balance would rest. He laid the foundations for an industrial and trading economy by encouraging the smelting of iron, the manufacture of metal goods and inter-clan trade. He encouraged mass production and established trade with the Portuguese in Mozambique.

The turmoil in Natal, however, militated against the development of a viable economy or of trade. Dingiswayo's solution, therefore, was the assertion of Mtetwa hegemonistic initiatives to establish a confederation of states led by the Mtetwa. While he did not hesitate to use the military weapon to move events in this direction, he was happiest when he could exert diplomatic pressures to gain acceptance for his new concept of nationhood. Where he could, he formed alliances to gain widening acceptance for his ideal.

Dingiswayo and Shaka were both revolutionaries and both had been rejected by their families when they grew up. Each admired the other and looked forward to a future of peace and power. While Dingiswayo believed that the personality-enlarging power of the Buntu Ideal was the most effective instrument for establishing the consensus on nationhood he (and Shaka) had set out to build, the latter saw things somewhat differently. For Shaka there was no possibility for translating the new concept of nationhood into a permanent or satisfying political structure where rival national or clan loyalties were the order of the day. The first precondition for the success of the revolution to which Dingiswayo and himself were committed, he insisted, was the overthrow of *Ingxwembe Endala*, the powerful ruling conservatives.

The two men respected and needed each other too much, nevertheless, for the difference on strategies to drive them apart. Shaka, in addition, had no choice of worlds. He hated the Langeni people and was sure that if he went to Senzangakhona, he would be sooner or later killed so as to eliminate a rival to the successor Senzangakhona had in mind. Dingiswayo, too, had his own weak points. The struggle for hegemony had brought powerful rivals to the fore. The strongest of them was Zwide ka Langa, the Ndwandwe. The Kumalos were also a power to reckon with.

Where Shaka distrusted *Ingxwembe Endala*, Dingiswayo believed he could form alliances with the class, a misguided faith which brought about the Mtetwa king's downfall. Zwide, then one of the most powerful princes, lured the credulous Dingiswayo into a trap, abducted him, and cut off his head which he quickly presented to his mother.

Earlier, Senzangakhona had died (about 1816) and Dingiswayo had wasted little time in sending Shaka with an army to seize the Zulu throne. Shaka in turn had dispatched his half-brother, Ngwadi, to the Zulu capital to kill Sigujana, the new lord of the Zulu clan. With that mission accomplished, Shaka had little difficulty in installing himself as the new head of the Zulu community, which owned a strip of about 100 square miles and had a little fewer than 300 men who could bear arms in an emergency.

Shaka had not been in power for long when Zwide beheaded his friend and protector, Dingiswayo. The execution started a chain reaction which sent southern Africa galloping into *imfecane*, the cataclysm to which events had been moving in Natal in the thousand years or so

before Shaka. Zwide asserted vigorous hegemonistic initiatives to make it clear that he would tolerate no actual or potential rival in the struggle for ascendancy in the power-vacuum which had emerged. Nobody on Shaka's side could mistake what Zwide had in mind.

Although Shaka took over the leadership of the Mtetwa and had incorporated a few small tribes into the Zulu clan, for him to think of tackling Zwide singlehanded would have been an invitation to disaster. He sent an emissary, Ncozana ka Moni, with the request for an alliance against Zwide to Pakatwayo ka Kondlo of the Qwabe. Pakatwayo sent back an insulting rejection of Shaka's request but, in due course, died of heart failure on the night of his defeat at the hands of Shaka's small but disciplined army.

Zwide had no intention of giving Shaka the time he needed to consolidate the power he had acquired as a result of Dingiswayo's death. He descended on Shaka during the first half of 1818 and fought a battle which is today one of the classics of military history: the battle of Gqokli Hill. The battle cost Zwide the finest part of his army and dashed his hopes for Ndwandwe paramountcy. Shaka's victory catapulted him to the fore as the man who would determine the destiny of the Natal Nguni.

This did not mean his troubles were over. The turmoil in Natal had produced powerful princes to the west and the north-west of the Zulu state. Like Zwide and Ntombazi, many of these were not in the mood to submit to Shaka's will without a fight. It was no secret at the time that Natal was a hotbed of conspiracy against Shaka's leadership.

Shaka, we have seen, had started his career as an insignificant chief of the Zulu clan controlling no more than 100 square miles of land. Two and a half years later his area had increased to no less than 7,000 square miles. By 1821, when he had almost completed the consolidation of Zulu paramountcy, he ruled over 11,500 square miles of territory. It is said that by 1826 he held sway over an area almost twenty times the above figure. His sphere of influence extended from the present Ciskei in the south to Lake Victoria in the north and from the Indian Ocean in the east to Botswana in the west. In twelve brief years he had created order out of chaos, welded the warring Natal clans into a single nation-state and given them pride in calling themselves the Zulu nation.

But, as has been pointed out over and over again in the present discussion, Shaka's claim to a place in history rests not so much on the power-structure he built, important as that was, as on the truly enduring achievements of the Greater Zulu experience. He accepted the *Buntu* evaluation of the person as the rationale by which to explain reality and give meaning to experience. From this, he proceeded to face the tremendous implications of the rationale in the situation of turmoil and deprivation in which he had grown up.

Where the person was not created and therefore could not be tied down to a mandate from a power outside of himself; where life's purpose for him inhered in his nature; where this made him a living ideal in the process of responding to the challenge of its nature; where, finally, his

entry into this world was an act of will, it was he and he alone who could explain why he had come into being, what it meant to be human and what he had emerged into this planet to do. He gave answers to these questions in everything he did, every moment of his life. In everything he did, he defined or explained the person to himself, his neighbours, humanity and the cosmic order—he discovered new dimensions of being human in the effort to realize the promise and the glory of being a person.

Shaka pursued the logic of this challenging assessment of the person and, in the process, created the Greater Zulu nation. He taught that where the person was a living ideal, his destiny was to translate the ideal into action—to achieve. This called for discipline, sacrifice and continuous application. Life in the nation-state he had established was never a holiday; it could not be where the nation was permanently mobilized for war to ensure, first, that the Greater Zulu did not return to the turmoil from which they had freed themselves and, second, that they marched successfully to "the heavens beyond."

The mobilization and the march had important social implications: they gave symmetry to life, stressed the value of personal responsibility and emphasized the mutuality factor in the relations between the person and his neighbour. The emphases were rewarding not only in material terms—in the establishment of order, the extension of territory and the accumulation of wealth—but also at the personality-enlarging or aesthetic level.

Shaka taught that the human body was nature's finest masterpiece; that its enduring beauty should constantly be enhanced by washing it daily, keeping it in good health, regular exercise and cleanliness of the mind. He had his daily bath in public to destroy *Ingxwembe Endala's* view that there was something to be ashamed of in the human body. A generation later, Mpande, one of Shaka's successors, established a state department to transform the Greater Zulu into the "most handsome" people in southern Africa. When a pretty woman and a handsome man could not marry because the man was too poor to pay the *lobolo*, the state loaned him cattle to pay the amount needed for the solemnization of the marriage. Not infrequently, the government lent him cattle to produce food for his children. All this, Mpande believed, conduced to the production of beautiful and healthy children.

E.A. Ritter, who wrote *Shaka Zulu*, gives this description of the Greater Zulu nation in its early days:

Many of the most intelligent people beyond Shaka's boundaries who were above military age moved with their whole kraals to Zulu-land, which now indeed lived up to its name of 'Heaven-land'. . . . so Zululand—as yet an embryonic state—became the mecca of thinking people beyond its boundaries, and an asylum for all the oppressed.

Ritter draws attention to another Greater Zulu achievement: the Zulu language, and observes that while the Zulu did not read,

he built for himself without a single borrowing, as recorded in Dr. A.T. Bryant's monumental dictionary, a vocabulary of some 19,000 words—truly a stupendous feat for an unwritten language and falling short by but 1000 words of the vocabulary used by Shakespeare. These 19,000 words were of a necessity used by the Zulus in their daily talk, for, being unwritten, they could not otherwise have been preserved. Again, it is strange, but true, that it was the womenfolk of the nation who were the most erudite exponents of the language”

Shaka was not the man to rest on his laurels. He made plans to lead the revolution in its next leap into the future; to enable the Greater Zulu to enrich their experience by mastering the technology of the White man.

Then, tragedy crashed into Shaka's life. Nandi died in October, 1827. That extinguished the brightest light in his life and left him a changed man; something vital cracked in him and unbalanced his faculties. Shaka was never to be the same man again. The sick emperor embarked on an insane programme of executions, persecutions and misrule; he alienated the army, antagonized his friends, spread fear and terror in the nation he had founded and imposed a tyranny more brutal than anything he and his mother had ever known.

Wherever people turned, it seemed as if Shaka had suddenly decided to destroy the nation he had worked so hard, every moment of his twelve years on the Zulu throne, to build. One of the Court Poets gives us this instance of his excesses:

U Mashongwe wase Zibisini wamxhoxh' amehlo,
Wamhambisa ngokhal 'okhulu luka Nkume,
Waze wambek'eHlokoHloko,
Wambuyisa wamzisa kuMaghwakazi,
Wabuyisa wamdlulisa wamus'eMatheku.

“As for Mashongwe of the Zibisi clan, he put out his eyes,
He made him go along the long ridge of the Nkume,
Until he placed him on the HlokoHloko range of hills,
He brought him back and sent him to the Maghwakazi hill,
Then again he passed him on to the Matheku hill.”

Trevor Cope, from whose translation of *Izibongo zika Shaka* the above is taken, reports that Mashongwe Sibisi was the man Shaka suspected of having poisoned Nandi. Cope adds: “His eyes were put out, and

he was left to wander about until he was killed by wild animals.”

When the Court Poets reported these things to the Zulus, people began to believe that Shaka had lost control of his mind; that he was sick beyond being cured. As each day of excesses went by it became increasingly clear that the choice for the nation lay between Shaka's life and the balanced society itself.

To Mnkabayi ka Jama, Shaka's paternal aunt who had befriended and protected Nandi in the days of her humiliation in Senzangakhona's kraal, Shaka's demented behavior was conclusive proof that he was mentally sick. It was evidence of a crime few Zulus could forgive: he behaved as if he owned the Zulu people. Nothing wounds a Zulu more deeply than a feeling of being owned.

Shaka towered so much above his contemporaries nobody could, or dared, to persuade or force him to abdicate. The only way to bring his bloodthirsty tyranny to its speedy end was to kill him.

Mbopa ka Sitayi had been closest to Shaka almost from the beginning of the nation-building experiment. He had been prepared to make every sacrifice to guarantee the success of the revolution and had devoted his life in total surrender to the demands of nation-building. As he saw the position after Nandi's death, Shaka's excesses struck at everything precious the revolution had achieved; while he was still Shaka's closest adviser, he saw the work of his own hands in a shambles.

Mbopa had never been close to conspiracy. Mnkabayi had never been in doubt about Mbopa's loyalty to Shaka; she had never doubted his humanity and honor, either. Mnkabayi was fearless when it came to epoch-making decisions. When she called him and confronted him with Shaka's crimes against the person and the revolution, some Zulus say, Mbopa, always a brave man, broke down and cried. When he wiped his tears, he told Mnkabayi he knew what his duty to the revolution was.

It was some time during the third week of September, 1828—a beautiful afternoon in the southern summer. Shaka, it is said, was in the Nyakamubi cattle post, just outside of his new, Dukuza capital. A group of bearers whom the emperor had sent to Pondoland had just returned, long after the date when they were due home. Their leader was explaining to Shaka the cause of their delay, when Mbopa rushed to them and started beating them up for having taken too long to return from Pondoland. Then, without warning, he turned suddenly on Shaka and shoved a spear into the emperor's side. Dingane and Mhlangana, Shaka's half-brothers who had conspired with Mbopa and Mnkabayi, jumped over the fence to administer the fatal stabs.

Shaka The Nation-builder

While the Zulus are proud of Shaka's genius as a military leader, they insist that his most enduring contribution to human history was his