

African Traditional Government: A Case Study of Shaka the Zulu

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Abstract

Bantu is a general name given to a vast group of peoples who speak several hundred different languages that can be shown to be related to one another. The Bantu who settled in South Africa belonged to a branch of Bantu peoples known as the Southern Bantu. They can be divided into a number of groups by reference to their languages. The east-coast strip was the home of numerous tribes belonging to the Nguni-speaking group. By the 18th century they occupied the coastal area as far as the Great Fish River and were beginning to settle to the Southwest of that river in a land known as Zuurveld. The Bantu were organized in tribes, each of which consisted of one central clan, though it may contain members of other clans as well. The advent of Europeans on African soil did not meet a vacuum. Africans had systems of government that served them well. This paper investigated the rise of Shaka, the Zulu and his contribution to African traditional government that became a formidable obstacle to British imperialism in Southern Africa in the 19th century.

Keywords: administration, military, despot, and loyalty

1. Introduction

Zululand and Natal had a considerable population of the Bantu of the Nguni-speaking group. The Bantu population increased rapidly and grazing land became scarce. By the end of the 18th century tribal wars became more severe. Tribal leaders emerged determined to win more land at the expense of neighbouring groups. As the struggle between tribes and their leaders became more intense three great figures emerged, each of whom began to build a tribal empire. They were: Sobhuza, leader of the people who later came to be known as the Swazi; Zwide, ruler of the Ndwandwe and Dingiswayo, the famous Mthethewa chief.

The Zulu was originally a small clan living in the territory of one of the Nguni rulers in Natal, Dingiswayo. Shaka who was born in 1787, was one of the sons of the Zulu clan chief, Senzangakona. His mother's bad temper led to her being driven away from her husband's household and Shaka grew up among strangers. He had an unhappy childhood; he was bullied and mocked by his companions. Memories of humiliation gave him a ferocious thirst for power. As a youth he joined Dingiswayo's forces and earned a reputation for reckless courage. This found him favour with the chief. In 1816, after the death of his father, with the aid of Dingiswayo, he removed a brother from the chieftaincy of Zulu and became the chief of Zululand. Shaka proved to be a military leader of outstanding genius.

He built up his forces by training his followers in new methods of warfare. The traditional warfare of his day had been a casual business conducted by spear-throwing warriors who advanced in loose formation. Little permanent damage was done by these war games which were not designed for slaughter but for cattle raids. In place of the traditional spear throwing he introduced the short-handled stabbing spear that could be retained throughout a battle. This enabled the troops to manoeuvre and fight in close formation. The formation most generally used was crescent-shaped and was known as the 'cows' horns'.

Two years after Shaka became the chief of Zulu, Zwide's forces murdered Dingiswayo and Shaka took over the military empire that he had started to build up. Unrestrained by obligation to any overlord, Shaka began to put his military ideas and strength to test. Thus began the Mfecane—the crushing. He hastened to recruit his strength by bringing as many tribes as possible under his control. The Mthethwa themselves were conquered and their new chief, Mondisa was killed and replaced by another member of the royal family appointed by Shaka. Shaka added the remnants of the Mthethwa to his Zulu forces.

Zwide could not afford to look on passively while the hostile bloc he had just destroyed was reconstituted under a new leader. He sent a powerful expedition against Shaka and in a fierce battle at the Gqokoli Hill; the new fighting methods of Zulu were put to test for the first time. In spite of the numerical superiority of the Ndwandwe the discipline of the Zulu enabled them to hold their ground.

Zwide determined to crush his opponent forever, sent, towards the end of 1818, his whole army in overwhelming strength into the Zulu territory. Faced with massive invasion Shaka adopted elusive tactics. He wore out the invaders by retreating before them, destroying crops and removing cattle as he went. As Zwide's forces advanced further, they began to feel the effects of starvation. It was at this time that Shaka attacked them at

Mhlatuze River with all his forces. Worn out with long marches and prolonged hunger the Ndwandwe could not stand against the Zulu. They were decisively defeated and Shaka immediately dispatched some of his regiments with orders to destroy the whole Ndwandwe civil population. After the battle, the Ndwandwe divided into three groups. Zwide remained at home and succeeded in making his escape with some refugees from the battle.

This battle was a turning point in Shaka's career and in the whole history of the Mfecane. Though he had not ridded himself of the Ndwandwe threat completely, Shaka had for the time being eliminated all serious threats to Zululand and could continue to build his power with little resistance. Every year, Shaka's regiments went out on campaigns that increased his herds of cattle and widened his sphere of influence. Tribe after tribe was defeated and were either incorporated into the Zulu kingdom or were driven away as homeless refugees. After a long series of campaigns, the entire area from the Tugela River to within a few days journey from Delagoa Bay, was brought under Shaka's control.

2. The Administration of the Zulu Kingdom under Shaka

As his conquests continued Shaka constructed a new type of state. Its primary purpose was to maintain and expand efficient fighting force completely loyal to its leader. Conquered tribes were simply grafted onto the territorial hierarchy, their chiefs becoming sub-chiefs. Shaka frequently removed existing chiefs of the tribes he has conquered and in cases where he did not do so; he made it clear that they ruled at his pleasure.

In Shaka's system the territorial chiefs lacked the power and importance that they had in the traditional system. Though they might continue to adjudicate over cases that arose in territories under their control, their authority was restricted. All young men were drafted into the army and it was in the army that all the power resided. Without an effective backing the sub-chiefs could not exercise great influence and were entirely at the mercy of Shaka's whims.

In the central area of the Zulu kingdom a series of military settlements was established at Gibixhegu, Bulawayo, Nobamba, Isiklebhe, Mbelebele and Dukuza. Each settlement was under the command of a military *induna*, generally a commoner, appointed personally by Shaka. Each settlement also contained a section of royal women under a senior woman of the royal family who exercised considerable authority in association with the commanding officer. At these settlements young boys gathered from every section of the kingdom. They were employed at first to help guard the cattle and act as shield-bearers, then when they reached manhood they would be enrolled in age regiments.

The regiments were kept on permanent service until the king officially dissolved them. During this period they were castrated and were not allow to marry. In Shaka's time the period of active service was very prolonged as a consequence of almost continuous warfare. Each regiment was commanded by an officer appointed by the king with junior officers under him in charge of squadrons. They were distinguished from one another by shields of different colours and other regalia such as headgear. The king supplied the shields and other items of military apparel. Each regiment was in charge of a section of royal herds. So far as possible the herd attached to a particular regiment would be made up of cattle of the same colour as their shields. These cattle served to provide the soldiers with meat and milk.

Together with the young men, young women were also assembled in large numbers. They were made wards of the king and counted as sections of his household. They too were organized into regiments for ceremonial purposes and Shaka often held great dances in which male and female regiments took part. Under such a system of universal conscription there was little room for the aged and the infirm. Shaka had large numbers of old and incapable men put to death on the grounds that they were useless encumbrance and it was in commemoration of this that one of his military settlements was called Gibixhegu (finish the old men).

This military system not only provided Shaka with the most efficient fighting machine in Bantu Africa but also a means of rapidly assimilating conquered tribes. The young men soon came to feel a strong sense of *esprit de corps* and the nature of the system was such as to strengthen and emphasize the loyalty of the soldiers to their ruler in every possible way. From him they received their arms and regalia and their immediate leaders owed their position to his will. Through him lay the only hope of advancement and from him they would ultimately receive their wives. Even their food was largely provided from royal resources. The regiments had a direct interest in the wars of their ruler for they were allowed large quantities of meat which tended to outstrip the natural reproduction of the royal herds. Only by repeated victories in the king's service could their standard of living be maintained.

The concentration of power in the army and its extreme dependence on the king raised Shaka's authority far above that of the traditional Bantu chief. Shaka did not need to consult the traditional tribal council. He ruled to a great extent as an absolute despot, deciding cases while taking his morning bath and ordering men to death with a nod of the head. Ultimately, his position depended on the loyalty of his troops and their commanders. The military *indunas* held the position traditionally occupied by the territorial chiefs. Shaka ensured that they did not meet behind his back and unauthorized conferences between military leaders were punished by death. However, the traditional rulers of the subject chiefdoms still held local administrative authority. When Shaka was not sure of the loyalties of a subject community he often stationed a trusted friend or relative with a group of followers in the neighbourhood in order to keep an eye on the behaviour of the chief concerned. In addition, the military *indunas* as trusted favourites of the king received many cattle from him and were able to build up large personal followings. These developments resulted in the emergence of powerful figures in later reigns, as they have been able to build up local power bases through royal appointments and favours.

3. An Appraisal of Shaka's Zulu Kingdom

The Mfecane wars and migrations associated with the birth of the Zulu kingdom led to the development of larger and more strongly centralized states over a vast area. The Zulu kingdom itself united more than a hundred chiefdoms through its military system and was the prime example of this revolutionary development. It brought about within a very short time a sense of common identity amongst identity amongst the peoples of many different origins. This laid the basis of for a latter-day Zulu national cohesiveness and pride. It also concentrated immense power in the hands of the king.

Other states founded at this time by Nguni-speaking peoples, including the Swazi, Gaza, and Ndebele kingdoms together with the Ngoni kingdoms in what are now Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania, also made use of the age regiment system of military organization in a variety of ways as the basis of their political organisation.

The development of the military system involved major economic and social changes. The concentration of so much of the youth of the kingdom in the royal barracks meant a massive transfer of economic potential from private households to the state. The loss suffered by the households, however, was probably balanced by the fact that the energies of the young men were used more fully and effectively for amassing, guarding and herding cattle through the age regiments. Thus the cattle wealth of the whole community was greatly increased. Even though a much larger proportion of the total herds was owned by the king, his chiefs and the *indunas*, all shared in the benefits to some extent. All members of the kingdom also shared in the pride evoked by the magnificence of the royal herds as well as the consciousness of unrivaled military power.

The new system offered particular benefits to the administrative class of the kingdom—the sub-chiefs and the *indunas* who shared most directly in this public wealth. Though the sub-chiefs might have little independence, they gained greater security from incorporation in the kingdom. So long as they had the king's favour, no local rival could challenge them and their subjects could no longer evade paying their dues by deserting to another ruler. The young men also found some attractions in the system to balance the hardships and restraints it imposed on them. Service in the regiments not only offered excitement and adventure but the possibility for a person from a poor background to achieve fame, wealth and power within the political system of the kingdom.

Shaka's whole system was built on force and this was both his strength and his weakness. The purpose of the state was the formation of a strong military establishment and the purpose of this in turn was political aggrandizement. A decade of warfare had taken its toll on the regiments. Even the most sanguine were tired of unrelieved campaigning and bloodletting and even the most savage spirits were shaken by Shaka's remorseless brutality. While the armies were far from home on campaign, an assassination plot was conceived and his brother, Dingane, much to the relief of friend and foe alike, murdered Shaka. Shaka's career had lasted a brief ten years but in that short span a whole new nation and way of life had come into being. Not only that the consequences of his conquests would carry on long after his death and far beyond the limited frontiers of Zululand.

4. Zulu Kingdom after Shaka

Dingane became the new Zulu king despite the wave of reaction which raised him to power. In a bid to win the favour of the people, Dingane relaxed the military discipline of his predecessor. Regiments were disbanded and allowed to marry and no campaigns were undertaken for sometime. The new ruler felt insecure on his throne and attempted to remove many of the more powerful men who might be a threat to his authority. Nqeto, chief of the Qwabe tribe feared that he might be marked out for execution and took advantage of the relaxation of military

discipline to organize rebellion. The Qwabe rebellion persuaded Dingane to change his policies. Military discipline was restored and the army was sent on numerous campaigns.

Dingane's problems, however, were to originate in another quarter. A colony of British merchants and missionaries had for some years been gathering at Port Natal, which became a natural rallying point for Zulu rebels as well as a potential colony of the Cape Government. More importantly, the Boer cattlemen of the Great Trek, singling out Natal as their ultimate destination, had defeated the Zulus in 1838 and forced Dingane to evacuate all the territory below the Tugela River. From that point forward the European influence slowly overwhelmed the Zulu state. The withdrawal north across the Tugela so undermined Dingane's prestige that he was unseated in 1840 by his brother, Mpande.

The reign of Mpande marked the beginning of a second phase in the history of the Zulu kingdom. During his lifetime he maintained good relations with the Boers and the British government which succeeded them in Natal. Finally during the 1870s, the Zulus unwittingly became an issue between the British and the Boers which ultimately led to the defeat of Cetewayo, Mpande's successor, in 1879. Thus ended for practical purposes, the independent Zulu nation.

5. Conclusion

The defeat of Cetewayo may be said to mark the end of the great period of the Zulu kingdom but not of the Zulu as a people. The unity that Shaka had forged in ten brief years survived even this disaster. In the aftermath of their victory the British did not annex the country but tried to break the power of the Zulu by dividing them into thirteen different states. The experiment failed and Zululand became a prey of anarchy. In 1894, the remnant of the Zulu kingdom was annexed to Natal but Zulu pride found the new yoke hard to bear. In the Bambata rebellion in 1906 the old fighting spirit was flared up again in one of the most serious revolts faced by any colonial power in Bantu Africa and even after this rebellion had been crushed the sense of Zulu identity was not destroyed. Under white rule, traditions of exploits of earlier days have been kept alive in songs and stories and to this day the old men become more enthusiastic when they talk about kings and they love to recite their praises. The fame of the Zulu name and the fact that Europeans tend to use it indiscriminately to describe all Nguni-speaking Bantu of Natal has led to a situation where many, who were never part of the Shaka's state, now believe and feel themselves to belong to the Zulu people. The work of Shaka in creating a sense of unity wider than the traditional tribe is still continuing.

The administration of the Zulu Kingdom was based on militarist policies but even at that there was a sense of common identity among the hundreds of chiefdoms brought together under the Zulu kingdom. Although those militarist policies cannot be adopted in the contemporary Nigerian government but the sense of common identity, the cohesiveness and pride that the Zulus had, can be emulated. In order to achieve this, the government and the citizens of Nigeria would have to work for the growth of that common identity. The government will have to provide the necessary amenities and infrastructure for the people just like Shaka did for the age regiments. When this is done, the people will develop an attachment to the government that sees to their welfare. More so, when these amenities are provided the citizenry should be patriotic to the government just as those in the time of the Zulu kingdom. It should however be noted that the Zulus remained loyal to Shaka even when he imposed many hardships on them at the time of the death of his mother and grandmother. Therefore, the citizens of Nigeria should be ready to remain loyal at any point in time. This loyalty, patriotism, sense of common identity among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria will contribute to a large extent to the economy of the country.

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