

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND  
AFRICAN STUDIES INSTITUTE

African Studies Seminar Paper  
to be presented in RW  
4.00pm JUNE 1991

**Title:** The Character and Objects of Chaka: A Re-Consideration of the  
Making of Shaka as Mfecane "Motor".

**by:** Caroline Hamilton

**No.** 294

## INTRODUCTION

In a series of papers and articles beginning in 1983, Julian Cobbing has offered a radical, and often provocative, critique of the "mfecane" as the pivotal concept of the history of southern Africa in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> He asks vigorous new questions about everything from the identity of the "Fingoes" in the south and the "Mantatee hordes" on the highveld, to the extent of the slave trade around Delagoa Bay. Cobbing's work has stimulated a host of graduate studies on these topics, and has prompted a number of established students of the period to reassess aspects of their earlier work.<sup>2</sup> The sheer scope of the critique is, however, also the source of its greatest weakness. In particular, Cobbing has come under fire for making sweeping generalisations and employing imprecise periodisation.

Nowhere is this criticism more pertinent than in relation to the lynchpin of Cobbing's thesis, namely, his view of Shaka-the-monster as a European invention to mask illegal labour procurement activities and land occupation. In this paper, I focus on Cobbing's reconstruction of the making of the Shaka myth. My purpose is to disentangle the elaborate weave of Cobbing's powerful insights and implausible conspiracy theories. I suggest that while Cobbing's critique is extremely valuable, especially in the way that it forces historians to question many of the assumptions with which they have for too long been extremely

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Cobbing, "The case against the mfecane", unpublished seminar paper, University of Cape Town, 1983; in revised form "The case against the mfecane", unpublished seminar paper, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984; "The myth of the mfecane", unpublished seminar paper, University of Durban-Westville, 1987; "The mfecane as alibi: thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolombo", *Journal of African History*, 2, 1988, pp. 487-519; "Jettisoning the mfecane (with perestroika)", unpublished paper presented together with John Wright's "Political mythology and the making of Natal's mfecane", to a seminar at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1988 entitled "The mfecane: beginning the inquest"; and most recently, "Grasping the Nettle: The Slave Trade and the Early Zulu", paper presented to the workshop on Natal and Zululand in the Colonial and Precolonial periods, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> See the work of Cobbing's students, notably J. Richner, "The withering away of the 'lifaqane': or a change of paradigm", B.A. Hons. essay, Rhodes University, 1988; A. Webster, "An Examination of the 'Fingo Emancipation' of 1835", paper presented to the African Studies seminar, University of Cape Town, 1990; and that of John Wright on the genesis of the mfecane myth in Natal, notably "Political Mythology and the Making of Natal's Mfecane", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 23, 2, 1989, pp. 272-291. Also see E. Eldredge, "The 'Mfecane' Reconsidered: The Origins of Violence in South Africa, ca. 1800-1830", Paper presented to SERAS, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1990 (subject to citation restrictions). In April 1991 a panel discussion on the mfecane was held at the University of Natal, Durban. A large range of new studies, reassessments and responses will be presented at a workshop to be held at the University of the Witwatersrand in September 1991, on "The 'Mfecane' Aftermath: towards a new paradigm". Papers on offer cover everything from the analysis of early nineteenth-century cannibalism narratives to the "Great Trek Revisited".

comfortable, he fails fundamentally to come to grips with the full complexity of his primary object of study, past historical myth-making processes.

Cobbing identifies four key elements in the notion of the mfecane as most commonly espoused: firstly, "a *self-generated internal* revolution" within northern Nguni-speaking societies which culminated in the 1820s in the regionally-dominant Zulu power led by a savage despot, Shaka; secondly, attacks by the Zulu on neighbouring chiefdoms which forced the latter to flee their land and which, in turn, displaced other chiefdoms still further afield; thirdly, a "cataclysmic period of black-on-black destruction" (including cannibalism) leading to the depopulation of the interior of South Africa; with all of this culminating, fourthly, in the restoration of security with the advent of the Europeans.<sup>3</sup> Cobbing's observation that this explanation for the depeopling of much of the interior, and for the arrangement of the African inhabitants of southern Africa in a surrounding "horseshoe", serves to legitimate white occupation of the land and the ideology of separate development, is not new. But the case that he presents for the selection of its component elements, and how the myth became established, is challenging.

The central claim of Cobbing's critique is that by making "Shaka" the motor of the mfecane, white writers were able to ignore or cover up the devastating impact of white penetration into South Africa in the early nineteenth century. He suggests that this included the effects of a massive demand for labour in the form of slaves or variants thereof ("apprentices", "refugees" and so on) from both the Cape Colony in the south, which was experiencing a labour supply problem following the ending of the British slave trade in 1807, and from Delagoa Bay in the north, an increasingly important slaving port in the 1800s.<sup>4</sup>

Cobbing argues that the various elements of mfecane theory were established as part of an "alibi" by early missionaries like Moffat and Melvill, traders like Fynn and Farewell, and colonial officials like Somerset, all anxious to obscure aspects of their activities and policies in relation to the early nineteenth-century African inhabitants of southern Africa - in particular their roles in resolving these problems of labour supply. The components of mfecane theory, he argues, were subsequently taken up, developed and combined by a generation of settler historians like Theal, Cory, Walker and Ellenberger, eager to argue the case for "the empty land" in response to the 1913 Land Act. After the Second World War, Cobbing continues, the explanatory scope of mfecane theory was widened by apartheid historians to explain "the natural 'pluralism' of black societies and how they self-sequestered themselves into proto-Bantustans in the time of Shaka".<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Cobbing, "The mfecane as alibi", pp. 487-488.

<sup>4</sup>For Cobbing's argument on the slave trade, see "Grasping the Nettle", pp 5-20. This aspect of Cobbing's argument builds on the work of Patrick Harries, notably "Slavery, social incorporation and surplus extraction: the nature of free and unfree labour in South-East Africa", *Journal of African History*, XXII, 1981, pp. 309-330.

<sup>5</sup>Cobbing, "The mfecane as alibi", p. 519.

Cobbing's energetic interrogation of the available sources and his wide-ranging, highly inter-connected review of the central conflicts and forces at work across southern Africa offer an exciting reinterpretation of early nineteenth-century southern African history. His demonstration of the "spatial and chronological teleologies of mfecane theory", the collapse of the "shunting sequence" of population movements, and the absence of "hard evidence for Zulu agency" for many of its key events, are convincing reasons for "jettisoning" the "macro-theory or macro-myth of the mfecane" as an explanation for the depopulation of the interior.<sup>6</sup> We are obliged to agree that the mfecane is an "Afrocentric" explanation of events during the period which ignores or covers up massive white, or imperial, agency, and to concur that, as "a multiple concept around which to organise the history of the era, the mfecane is devoid of analytical usefulness".

But Cobbing's reconstruction of the making of the myth of the mfecane is as Eurocentric as the mfecane theory is Afrocentric. For Cobbing, the history of the period is entirely determined by settler and capitalist forces. No space is allowed, for example, for the choices made by Africans in their responses to the demands for labour exerted on both their southern and northern perimeters. No attention is given to the effects of intra-African political and economic dynamics, nor to other economic factors, either long term - such as the impact of the introduction of maize - or short term, localised phenomena like drought, famine or disease.

Equally problematic is the Eurocentrism of the manipulation of the history which he highlights. Cobbing argues that the construction of the mfecane as an "alibi" for the more criminal of their activities, was wholly determined by the interests and views of whites. The early whites, and their settler heirs, simply "invented" the relevant components of the mfecane myth as they saw fit, and as best suited their needs.

But as any aficionado of crime literature knows well, a good alibi - one that excites little suspicion or is likely to hold up under investigation - is well-grounded in the facts as far as they can be determined and is invested with detail that is convincing. It appeals to the general preconceptions of its interrogators, its victims and its perpetrators, and it only deviates from the actual events in certain crucial respects. That the mfecane has been proven to be a good alibi is attested to by its resilience over time. This is not a result of simple-mindedness, but is a consequence rather of the embeddedness in the myth, and in its key features, of African views of the past, notably that of internal African agency.

By arguing that Europeans "invented" the myth of the mfecane and its component elements, Cobbing assumes that the production of history in the nineteenth century was carried out by whites only, independent of the historical consciousness of the Africans with whom they were in daily contact. The implication of this assumption is that nineteenth-century Africans were without an intellectual history of their own and that they were unable, or at least

---

<sup>6</sup>Cobbing, "The mfecane as alibi", p. 518.

<sup>7</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p.3.

failed, to produce history in the service of complex ideological objectives worthy of comparison with their European neighbours, nor significant enough for the latter to need to take cognizance of. In other words, Cobbing's case against the mfecane is doubly Eurocentric: both in terms of his characterisation of the events and forces of the time, and in terms of their production in historical discourse. In so doing, Cobbing repeats the separation of black and white history in as serious a way as the myth of the mfecane itself does. In effect, Cobbing simply replaces the master narrative of Shaka-as-cause-of-violence with that of slave-trade-as-cause-of-violence. In so doing, he fails to harness his powerful insights regarding the mfecane myth in the service of an analysis that takes proper cognizance of regional developments and local particularities.

My case then, is not for the mfecane, but against the case as presented by Cobbing. In the rest of this paper I challenge his assumptions about the European manufacture of the mfecane, characterised as the perfection by settler propagandists of "their *piece de resistance*, 'the mfecane', combining partly contextualised facts, half-truths, and lies, both of commission and omission".<sup>8</sup> I suggest that this invocation of conspiracy depends on an untenable notion of European interests as monolithic and as unchanging over time. I attempt to give substance to my challenge through an exploration of a central element in the mfecane theory, that of Shaka.<sup>9</sup>

In the paper, I focus in detail on the period in which Cobbing posits the image of Shaka was established which became central to mfecane theory, namely, the 1820s. Cobbing asserts that from the first it was in the interests of the white traders to promote Shaka as a tyrannical despot. I try to demonstrate that this sweeping claim misses crucial changes in the circumstances of the early traders, and completely ignores the productions of Shaka taking place in contemporary African settings. My proposition is that at various times, the Shaka in different European perorations took cognizance of the many Shaka's that were heard in African voices, and vice-versa. It was out of this process that emerged the "Shaka" that became central to mfecane theory.

The paper examines the image of Shaka promoted in the Cape by the Port Natal traders in the 1820s and distinguishes between the versions sponsored by different factions within the Port Natal community. It looks at the way that these productions shifted during the period under review in response to specific

---

<sup>8</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p. 1.

<sup>9</sup>In his paper published in 1989 in the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (see reference in note 1) John Wright aligned himself closely with the main points of Cobbing's arguments on the Natal/Zulu material under review in this paper. Following a warm debate on the topic at the Conference on Enlightenment and Emancipation, held at the University of Natal, Durban, 1989, at which both Wright and I presented papers, Wright has refined his arguments regarding trader politics, and avoids many of the errors and generalisations which characterise his own earlier article, and the work of Cobbing. For his revised position see his doctoral dissertation "The Dynamics of Power and Conflict in the Thukela-Mzimkhulu Region in the late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries: A Critical Reconstruction", Wits, 1990, especially the final chapter.

developments in the traders' commercial ventures, and in their relationship with the Zulu court and their African neighbours. In sharp contrast to Cobbing's argument, the paper suggests that before the Zulu king's death in late 1828, the traders' presentation of Shaka was that of benign patron. There were two exceptions to this, and these arose in response to the particular financial difficulties which one of the traders, James King, faced at two specific moments in time. The paper shows that in the Cape, King came to be seen as manipulative and unreliable. His two negative depictions of Shaka were discredited in the eyes of both the colonial administration and the general public, and did not, before 1829, establish a negative image of Shaka in the Colony.

As was the case with the traders' images of Shaka, different versions of Shaka were promoted by different interest groups within the Zulu kingdom and the Natal area, and these also shifted over time in response to changing circumstances. The paper locates the origins of Shaka's image as a tyrant both in versions of Shaka current amongst disaffected elements in the Zulu kingdom in the 1820s, as well as in the picture of a despot painted by the Zulu authorities themselves. It suggests that the traders' productions of Shaka were not simply manifestations of the view of Shaka that most directly suited their material interests, but were also shaped by the form and content of the various African views which they encountered and with which they intersected during their stay in Natal.

Finally, I look at the production of Shaka by African communities on the Cape frontier. Examination of the correspondence amongst the colonial officials concerned with the frontier in 1827-28 reveals that the idea that Shaka posed a threat to the stability of the Cape, and was the agency behind a "shunting sequence" of "tribal attacks", originated independently of the Natal traders amongst the frontier communities who then relayed their information to the colonial authorities.

## EUROPEAN PRODUCTIONS OF SHAKA IN THE 1820s

### The Cape's Shaka before 1824

The first productions of Shaka to percolate down to the Cape Colony were contained in the reports of visitors to Delagoa Bay, then the port nearest to the Zulu kingdom. In 1822, Henry Francis Fynn joined the *Jane*, a vessel belonging to the Cape mercantile concern, Nourse and Company, trading with Delagoa Bay. In a stay that overlapped with that of a British naval squadron under Captain W.F.W. Owen, Fynn spent some six months at Delagoa Bay, and undertook extensive exploration of its immediate surrounds. In the *Diary*, Fynn records that he heard of "the Zulu tribe, under Shaka, [who] were a very powerful nation", and intrigued, arranged a visit to a Zulu homestead and would have continued on to Shaka's capital if the distance had not proved prohibitive. While much of Fynn's account of his visit to Delagoa Bay was clearly written long after the event, and was extensively informed by subsequent information and attitudes which he acquired, it is clear that the impression of Shaka which he gleaned at Delagoa

Bay excited his curiosity and was not threatening.<sup>10</sup> By 1823 reports of the prospects of trade with the Zulus received from Nourse and Co. were so favourable that Francis Farewell was able to secure significant financial backing by Cape merchants for an exploratory voyage to Delagoa Bay and Natal. Farewell chartered two ships, the *Julia* and the brig, the *Salisbury*, under James King. When they arrived at Delagoa Bay, Owen's vessel, the *Leven*, was in port, and Farewell went aboard to interview Owen. The interview contained nothing to discourage him and he and King immediately proceeded to the coast of Natal in an attempt to open communications with Shaka.<sup>11</sup> They failed to land successfully, and in the process sustained damage to their ships, lost two boats and a considerable amount of their trade goods.<sup>12</sup>

Undaunted, Farewell returned to the Cape, negotiated new financing with Messrs. Hoffman and Peterssen, hired a large party to accompany him - including the young Fynn - and engaged two ships to transport the party and their cargo to Natal. In response to a request from the Governor of the Cape for information regarding his activities, Farewell reported that the prospects for trade from a base at Port Natal were excellent, the "natives hav[ing] requested that we come and traffic with them..."<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> J. Stuart and D.M. Malcolm (eds.), *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, Pietermaritzburg, 1950, see chapters one and two, and especially p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> See Fynn, *Diary*, pp. 51-53, p. 56, note 1; J. King to the Sec. for Colonies, the Earl of Bathurst, 10 July, 1824, G.H. 1/39, pp. 45-58; J. King, *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 11 July, 1826; for details of Farewell's engagement of King see N.C.D. 35/8, pp. 534-541. Owen's journal was edited and published as *Narrative of voyages to explore the shores of Africa, Arabia and Madagascar*, in 1833. The publication includes material drawn from other sources, is heavily edited and cannot be treated as an accurate reflection of Owen's views in 1822. An account of Shaka, attributed to Farewell writing in 1825, is reproduced in Owen's text and must be treated with the same caution. One of Owen's officers, T. Boteler, also published an account of Owen's trip in 1835 (*Narrative of a voyage of discovery to Africa and Arabia*). For some idea of Owen's contemporary opinion of Shaka and the Zulu, see John Philip's report to Acting Colonial Secretary, P.G. Brink, 13 April, 1824 (P.R.O., C.O. 48/62) believed to be based on Owen's information (see Governor of the Cape, Lord Charles Somerset to Bathurst, 22 April, 1824, G.H. 23/7, pp. 144-145), in which Philip comments optimistically on the prospects for trade with the interior.

<sup>12</sup> The precise nature of this setback in commercial terms is difficult to assess. The venture was well-insured and substantial claims were made. Unfortunately, the extent of the final settlement is not known. In his letter to Somerset, 1 May, 1824, Farewell noted that the earlier expedition "sustained a most considerable loss" (C.O. 211, pp. 222-225). It is clear that for his next expedition Farewell was obliged to seek other financial backing. See N.C.D. 35/9, pp. 67-75, 117-126, 144-149, 573-578, 585-589.

<sup>13</sup> Farewell to Somerset, 1 May, 1824, C.O. 211, pp. 222-225; N.C.D. 35/9, pp. 573-578, 585-589. It is not clear from Farewell's letter who precisely "the natives" were, i.e. whether he means the Zulu authorities or the

By June, 1824, both ships had landed their cargoes successfully, and Farewell and Fynn had travelled overland to meet Shaka themselves. In the first report from the Port Natal settlement to the Cape, Farewell confirmed the expectations that Shaka would make a good trading partner. He depicted the Zulu king as enthusiastic about the settlement, and well-disposed towards the British. He noted that his companions found the orderliness, manners and customs of the Zulu both "astonish[ing] and pleas[ing]".<sup>14</sup> Cape opinion of Shaka could not have been better. For the next two years not one single negative report concerning the king emanated from Port Natal.

#### The traders' Shaka, 1824-1827

Cobbing's characterisation of the Port Natal settlement and the objectives of the traders is a central aspect of his wider thesis about the invention of the mfecane myth. His argument can be broken down into two parts: his reconstruction of what the traders were actually up to at Port Natal; and secondly, how they represented their actions and those of the Zulu king.

Cobbing claims that the Port Natal traders were slavers, and that all evidence of this aspect of their activities has been systematically excised from their accounts of the period.<sup>15</sup> He uses two arguments to support these assertions: firstly, he argues for the existence of a vibrant slave trade centered on Delagoa Bay and the involvement of chiefdoms between the bay and Port Natal in slaving through the Portuguese port. He then locates the Port Natal entrepot firmly in this context. Secondly, he rereads the traders' narratives in search of hidden slaving activities.

Reconsideration of both of these arguments suggests that they do not support his conclusions. Firstly, it cannot be assumed that the region was the slaving vortex that Cobbing implies. The evidence which he marshals for a slave trade of significant volume through Delagoa Bay while enormously suggestive, is by no means conclusive. The major problem is Cobbing's failure to consider sources which contradict his claims. One instance of this must suffice to make the point, though others are available for review<sup>16</sup>: Cobbing claims that in the period after the Napoleonic Wars when slave exports off the southern coast of

---

inhabitants of the bay area; for continued reports of Shaka's "friendly disposition" arriving at the Cape in this period see W.H. Lys, Officer of Health, to Brink, 12 April, 1824, P.R.O., C.O., 48/62.

<sup>14</sup>Farewell to Somerset, 6 September, 1824, C.O. 211, pp. 650-651, 656-657.

<sup>15</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p. 25.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, Cobbing's assertion that in 1827 Cane supplied slaves to a schooner at Delagoa Bay. ("Grasping the Nettle", p. 27.) In my view the document cited as evidence is open to a very different reading. In such cases it is incumbent on the historian to discuss the quality of the evidence and the context of the document.



Mozambique shot up, Delagoa Bay enjoyed preeminence as a supplier<sup>17</sup> His evidence for Delagoa Bay enjoying "additional priority" in this period is a reference to a letter from Owen, captain of the *Leven*. In point of fact this letter does not assert that the slave trade at Delagoa Bay was especially active, but that it might become so in the future. "The Port", Owen writes, "is more convenient than any other for direct communication with Brazil, and if the temptation to make slaves be permitted to be held out to the natives, ... they will cut one another's throats without mercy, and the whole country will be depopulated in a very few years."<sup>18</sup>(my emphases) The context of Owen's speculations and opinions regarding the slave trade are further worth noting: this letter, and other of his communications<sup>19</sup>, take the form of strong motivations for the British government to oust the Portuguese from the southern Mozambique coast, as part of a strategy to secure British sea routes and the Cape Colony. To this end, Owen emphasised the iniquities of Portuguese trading practices. In this context, his emphasis on the relative lack of slaving at Delagoa Bay is noteworthy, an opinion not considered in the Cobbing thesis: "There are", Owen comments, "very few slaves exported from this place and the natives have a decided aversion to the trade".<sup>20</sup> Closer attention to specific sources, their tight periodisation and investigation of the contexts of their production is clearly imperative in any attempt to assess the volume the slave trade. They are essential prerequisites to the making of well-founded connections between the slave trade and wider regional politics, and more specifically, the trading activities of the Port Natalians.

Cobbing's argument that the southern Tsonga, Mthethwa, Ndwandwe and the Zulu<sup>21</sup>, amongst others, were active slavers, is based on evidence even more tenuous. The first source is the presence of Portuguese soldiers inland, on "expeditions", which, Cobbing claims - without a shred of further evidence - "can

---

<sup>17</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", pp. 4-5. Cobbing claims further that in 1822-23 the main trading item moving through the Bay was slaves. He cites as his sources "the relevant evidence " in two volumes of Theal's *Records of South East Africa*, without page references, and Fynn's *Diary*. The latter is a source, like so many others, which he elsewhere discredits thoroughly. Dismissal of some of the major sources for the period as white "forgeries", and subsequent citation of them, is a characteristic feature of Cobbing's argument, and is subject to two criticisms. The first is that such texts are significantly more complex constructs, and are shaped by a more complex set of interests than Cobbing allows. (See my more detailed discussion below of precisely the same problems in Cobbing's treatment of James Stuart.) The second is that, having indicted such sources, subsequent citation of them requires specific argumentation as to why they may be relied on in relation to a particular matter.

<sup>18</sup>G.M. Theal (ed.), *Records of South-East Africa*, London, 1903, vol. ix, p. 37.

<sup>19</sup>*Records of South-East Africa*, vol. ix, pp.32-35, 37-39.

<sup>20</sup>*Records of South-East Africa*, vol. ii, p. 487.

<sup>21</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p.8.

only have been for slaves".<sup>22</sup> At the very least, Cobbing needs to consider the possibility that they were engaged in securing traffic in ivory and cattle, both well-documented items of trade between these chiefdoms and Delagoa Bay.<sup>23</sup> The second source is evidence that Cobbing is yet in expectation of one day uncovering:

Other powerful Tsonga chiefs ...had fearsome reputations and are likely to have been involved in the slave trade, although evidence has not yet come to my hand."<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Cobbing's argument regarding the slave trade as the context in which Port Natal must be viewed is based on the level of warfare and violence in the region. This is ascribed, without evidence beyond that already discussed above, to the vicissitudes of raiding "presumably with slaves".<sup>25</sup> (my emphasis) The teleology is surely untenable, and casts serious doubts over Cobbing's methods more generally. Nonetheless, there are indications that some chiefdoms did trade prisoners taken in war through Delagoa Bay, and this does warrant further investigation.<sup>26</sup> What is at issue, and which remains to be established with any reliability is the volume of this trade.

What evidence does Cobbing present for involvement of the Port Natal traders specifically in the supposedly vibrant regional slave trade? Cobbing sets the scene by claiming that Port Natal was at the time of the traders' arrival "already a fairly well-known slaving port"<sup>27</sup> but gives no reference; of the traders' participation in certain of Shaka's campaigns, he claims that "[t]here can be no doubt that these raids were for slaves"<sup>28</sup>, and again cites no evidence. Other scholars<sup>29</sup> have argued that very different reasons underlay the traders' armed forays at Shaka's behest - such as the growing insecurity of the Zulu rulers at this time leading Shaka to insist that his clients, including the traders, provide military support - and again, it is incumbent on Cobbing to consider these arguments.

---

<sup>22</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p.9.

<sup>23</sup>D.W. Hedges, "Trade and politics in southern Mozambique and Zululand in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries", Ph.D, SOAS London, 1978; A. Smith, "The Trade of Delagoa Bay as a Factor in Nguni Politics, 1750-1835" in L.M. Thompson (ed.) *African Societies*, London, 1969, chapter eight.

<sup>24</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p.10.

<sup>25</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p.10.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, the comments on p.48 of Fynn's *Diary* to this effect.

<sup>27</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p.26.

<sup>28</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p.27.

<sup>29</sup>Roberts, *The Zulu Kings*, pp.100-103; C.A. Hamilton, "Ideology, oral traditions and the struggle for power in the early Zulu kingdom", MA, Wits, 1986, p. 363.

Finally, Cobbing claims that "[s]hips calling at Port Natal in 1827-7[sic] could easily have taken out slaves".<sup>30</sup> The claim is based on the arrival of ships at Port Natal after the attacks (i.e. slave raids, in his terms) on the Ndwendwe and Khumalo. Not only is there nothing to indicate that the traders returned to Port Natal with prisoners, but all evidence points to Shaka as controlling the timing of the two attacks. One wonders how the traders managed to orchestrate the timeous arrival of the ships. In fact, the correlation in timing was not as neat as Cobbing claims it was. This Cobbing explains away as being the result of "a scrambled chronology in Fynn's material...to prevent the historian from putting two and two together".<sup>31</sup> No source of an alternative chronology is cited. In fact, Isaacs, another of the traders, confirms that the "raid" concerned took place in June 1826, while arrival of the ship concerned can be dated to April, 1826.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Fynn's chronology is borne out by other sources, and Cobbing's is incorrect. More importantly, at least one of the ships concerned was the *Helicon*, a British naval vessel! Cobbing's persistent failure to consider the counterfactuals to his case, is the greatest weakness of his argument.<sup>33</sup> Although the evidence for the involvement of the traders in slave trading is insufficient for it to bear the weight placed on it by Cobbing's argument, the possibility that the traders occasionally traded in slaves cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, the assertion that the traders were heavily involved in slaving is inconsistent with the next element of Cobbing's argument, his claim that the traders, and their backers at the Cape were keen to see the establishment of a colony at Port Natal: an official British presence would undoubtedly have nipped any slave trade in the bud.

It is my contention that not only is it unlikely that the traders were active slave hunters, but also that their lobby for the establishment of a colony at Port Natal only developed after 1828 in response to the changed circumstances that prevailed after the death of Shaka. Cobbing's misplaced assertion that the traders sought to persuade the British to annex Natal in the 1820s skews our understanding of the relations between Port Natal and the Zulu kingdom. Cobbing posits that the desire to see a colony established in Natal was the reason for the traders' obsessive discussions of the depredations of the Zulu king. While it is clear that after the assassination of Shaka at least some of the traders were eager to see the establishment of a colony, and that by that time they were

---

<sup>30</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", p.27.

<sup>31</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", n.217.

<sup>32</sup>N. Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*, London, 1836, reprinted Cape Town, 1970, p. 60; *The Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, 28 April, 1826.

<sup>33</sup>Thus, when he so suggestively draws our attention to the fact that after leaving Natal, one of the traders, Nathaniel Isaacs, went on to become a slaver elsewhere, he should also tell us that another member of the trading party, John Ross, alias Charles Rawden Maclean, later in life became an avid anti-slaver. (S. Gray, "South African Fiction and a Case History Revised: An Account of Research into Retellings of the John Ross Story of Early Natal", *Researches in African Literatures*, vol.19, 4, 1988, pp.473-474.)

unanimous in describing Shaka as a tyrant, in 1824-25 neither case prevailed. If Cobbing's attribution of motives to the traders is somewhat problematic, so is his argument that they demonized Shaka to promote their dual aims of slave trade and colonisation. In fact, the image of Shaka presented by the traders between 1824 and 1830 was nearly always benign - with two exceptions.

Cobbing describes Farewell's expedition as "a large colonising party" which landed "in the hope of creating a *fait accompli* for the only slightly interested Cape Government".<sup>34</sup> Farewell's report to Somerset in 1824 contains references which, taken at face value, may lend themselves to this interpretation.<sup>35</sup> Farewell notes the circumstances of a "grant" of land to the traders by Shaka, and describes conditions conducive to settlement. He suggested that these benign conditions would provide a "few families" from the distressed settler community in the Cape with a "comfortable assylum [sic]... as a colony". When placed in context, however, these comments resist interpretation as an insistent campaign for the colonisation of Natal.

The context includes that of Farewell's preoccupation with creating a viable base for his trading venture. The small Port Natal community was experiencing a crisis over the cultivation of agricultural products for their own consumption, as well as a shortage of labour more generally.<sup>36</sup> While there is nothing to indicate that the traders feared Shaka, Farewell was sensible of the small settlement's vulnerability, and of the need for the traders to operate from a secure and relatively self-sufficient base. It was on Farewell's agenda to establish clearly in the minds of the Zulu the extent and nature of the traders' power and commercial interests.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, by September, 1824, twenty members

---

<sup>34</sup>Cobbing, "The mfecane as alibi", p. 490; "The myth of the mfecane", pp. 11-12; The *fait accompli* idea originates in the work of B. Roberts, *The Zulu Kings*, London, 1974, see p. 138 in particular. As evidence, Cobbing cites Farewell's first communication with Somerset, without noting that Farewell was not approaching Somerset but *responding* to a query from the Governor; he also cites Fynn's comments that in retrospect he realised that Farewell was going to stay longer than he said, but the remark does not necessarily connote a campaign for colonisation. Neither is the latter borne out by Farewell's contracts regarding the ships, which were for 15 months only. (Notarised Affreightment Declaration, between James Gosling and F.G. Farewell, 15 April, 1824, NCD 35/9, pp.573-578) In his discussion of Farewell and King's motives for going to Natal, Fynn makes no mention of colonisation.

<sup>35</sup>Farewell to Somerset, 6 September, 1824, C.O. 211, pp.650-651. Cobbing does not, however, cite this document.

<sup>36</sup>Lt. E. Hawes to C.R. Moorsam, Commodore of the British fleet at the Cape, 16 May, 1825, C.O. 233, pp. 245-246. For the published report see *The Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, 4 June, 1825.

<sup>37</sup>Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures*, pp. 15, 22, 24, 42, 52, 53, 71; also see King's comments, *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 11 July, 1826; Farewell to Somerset, 6 September, 1824; also see correspondence between the commander of the *Helicon* and the Cape administration regarding the first Zulu visitor to the Cape (C.O. 270, pp. 202-204).

of the original party had left Port Natal, and still another ten desired to go.<sup>38</sup> Farewell's suggestion that a "few families" could prosper in Natal was not a move to encourage formal colonisation, but rather an attempt to maintain at Port Natal the infrastructure necessary for the prosecution of trade.

It would be equally problematic to read off from Farewell's claim to have received a land grant from Shaka a desire for British intervention in Natal.<sup>39</sup> Farewell had successfully negotiated access to the area around Port Natal with Shaka, although obviously not on the terms or in the form in which he represented it in his report. The "grant" at this stage offered no inducement to colonisation in and of itself, but it did serve to underwrite the security and stability of the trading venture, and appealed to Farewell's backers in the Cape. In fact, the report of the grant was sent first to them, and then forwarded on to Somerset.<sup>40</sup>

In the meantime, the traders prospered, acquiring ivory directly from Shaka, from the amaMpondo country and from the inhabitants in and around Port Natal.<sup>41</sup> In a report that was subsequently published in the *Cape Gazette and African Advertiser*, Lieutenant Hawes, the officer commanding the *York*, which called in at Port Natal in May, 1825, observed that the traders were "living on the best terms of friendship with the natives and under the protection of king Inguos Chaka", who, he noted, "professes great respect for white people". As Hawes reported, "The success of the party in their mercantile speculations is believed to be the extent of their expectations."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup>Hoffman and Peterssen to Moorsam, 9 March, 1825, C.O. 233, pp.103-104.

<sup>39</sup>Cobbing, "Mfecane as alibi", p. 490.

<sup>40</sup>Farewell to Somerset, 6 September, 1824, C.O. 211, pp. 650-651 and 656-657.

<sup>41</sup>Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures*, pp. 18, 22, 31; Fynn, *Diary*, pp. 110, 117.

<sup>42</sup>Hawes to Moorsam, 16 May, 1825, C.O. 233, pp. 245-246. For the published report see *The Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, 4 June, 1825. Hawes' report was passed on to the Cape Governor, Somerset, C.O. 233, p. 244. Note also, for example, that when Farewell's backers, Hoffman and Peterssen lost contact with him as a result of the wreck of the *Julia* in late September, 1824, they were dilatory in contacting the authorities, and once they did, expressed no alarm on behalf of the party at Port Natal. Hoffman and Peterssen to Moorsam, 9 March, 1825, C.O. 233, pp. 103-104. The authors of this letter comment that they returned from Natal because "the country and natives were different from what was told them". In the *Diary*, Fynn indicates that Peterssen was disappointed to find that Shaka's residence was not built out of ivory, and being corpulent and temperamental that he was not fitted for the rigours of Shaka's kingdom (Chapter five). Also see Moorsam's comments about their dilatoriness, Moorsam to Hoffman and Peterssen, 17 March, 1825, encl. N.C.D. 25/11, pp. 765-783.

But small storm clouds were gathering on the Port Natal horizon: Hawes also commented on the traders' lack of a boat and supplies.<sup>43</sup> Since their arrival in Port Natal, the traders had only once been able to use the *Julia* to replenish their supplies and transport their ivory before it was lost off the Natal coast. The cargo lost in the wreck of the *Julia* was in excess in value of the amount it was insured for. Coming on top of the previous losses (see p.6), this latest disaster almost certainly meant that Farewell was beginning to experience financial pressures on top of his supply problems.<sup>44</sup>

It was at this point that James King re-entered the picture. Although he had been on the earlier exploratory voyage with Farewell, he had done so in the latter's employ. He struggled to raise the necessary capital for a venture independent from Farewell.<sup>45</sup> In the loss of the *Julia*, however, King saw an opportunity for entering into the trade at Port Natal. The motivation for Cape capital to back him at this point consisted of two parts: the first was the humanitarian aim of succouring Farewell's party now cut off for some time from the Colony; the second, more commercial, aspect lay in the calculation that by arriving with much-needed supplies and a vessel, King would be able to take over the transport side of the venture, if not actually insert himself into the trade itself.<sup>46</sup>

King's expectations were dashed when his vessel, the *Mary*, was wrecked on entering the bay at Port Natal in October, 1825, and its cargo lost.<sup>47</sup> King's party suddenly found themselves entirely dependent on Farewell, even for their sustenance. Undaunted, King tried another tack. The new arrivals set up camp in a separate area of the bay and immediately set about building a ship. However, their aim was not to be able to quit the shores of Natal, which they could have done on any one of a number of ships that called in at Port Natal during their sojourn there. Rather, the building of the ship offered a means of recouping

---

<sup>43</sup>Hawes, *The Cape Town Gazette*, 4 June, 1825.

<sup>44</sup>C.O. 233, p. 247; Hoffman and Peterssen to Moorsam, 9 March, 1825; N.C.D. 35/11, pp. 765-783 and enclosures; N.C.D. 35/9, pp. 573-578.

<sup>45</sup>King to Bathurst, 10 July, 1824, G.H. 1/39, pp. 45-58; Farewell to the editor, *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 31 January, 1829.

<sup>46</sup>Nonetheless, King's expedition was not heavily capitalised, and drew on credit as well as special concessions from the authorities. King to Somerset, 9 August, 1825 (C.O. 3929, pp. 136-139); also the response from the colonial authorities, Sir Richard Plasket, Chief Sec. to the Govt. to King, 12 August, 1825, (C.O. 4853, pp. 393, 409; also see C.O. 3929, pp. 184-185; C.O. 243, pp. 147-152; C.O. 235, pp. 511-512; C.O. 4853, p. 453; C.O. 293, pp. 1323-1326).

<sup>47</sup>Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures*, pp. 13, 18.

losses, and of gaining a hold over Farewell who still lacked access to a much-needed vessel.<sup>48</sup>

However, the building of a boat was a lengthy undertaking. Isaacs' account makes it clear that King's party, of which he was a member, soon began to run short of provisions. They had nothing much to trade for supplies, while Farewell's party was constrained to husband its resources. After King's first visit to Shaka, together with Fynn and Farewell, the traders came away with 107 head of cattle; one solution to the problem of supplies was to survive by Shaka's patronage. This King initially tried to do by salvaging gifts for the Zulu king such as the *Mary's* figurehead, but when ingenuity in this area ran out, his party was faced with a stark choice: either to be cut off from Shaka's patronage, or to become Zulu clients - a course of action which King realised would involve military services.<sup>49</sup>

While the party hesitated over this issue, their conditions declined still further. Thus when, in April, 1826, the *Helicon* arrived at Port Natal, King took passage aboard in order to proceed to the Cape to obtain a new cargo, leaving his comrades in what Isaacs describes as a "miserable situation".<sup>50</sup>

Cobbing argues that the traders promoted a negative image of Shaka at the Cape in order to encourage British intervention in Natal in the form of colonisation.<sup>51</sup> Although he generalises their source and timing, the images to

---

<sup>48</sup>Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures*, pp. 25, 60; also see Farewell's comments in the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 31 January, 1829; King to Bathurst, 10 July, 1824, G.H. 1/39, pp.45-58. In fact, the building of a boat at Port Natal had been on King's agenda from the first, and to that end, he had taken with him to Port Natal the necessary tools and a shipwright.

<sup>49</sup>Isaacs, *Travel and Adventures*, pp. 60, 64, 66.

<sup>50</sup>A section of King's party, under Norton, the mate of the *Mary*, gave up the ship-building exercise, and in defiance of King, departed from the Cape in the wrecked ship's longboat. Those who remained behind began to find it impossible to obtain food or porters without invoking Shaka's name as a threat. Things became particularly severe in the period immediately prior to the traders' crops being ready for harvest. Isaacs, *Travels*, pp. 27-28; 38; 41, 42, 47, 57, 64, 67-70; *The Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, 6 January, 1826, and 28 April, 1826; report of the mate of the late brig *Mary*, J.E. Norton, to Sec. for Govt., Sir Richard Plaskett, 19 January, 1826, C.O. 293, pp. 97-100.

<sup>51</sup>The argument that the two stereotypes - "depopulated Natal and Shaka-the-monster" - were designed to encourage settlement and British involvement in Natal is in itself not convincing. Both stereotypes can be seen as disincentives for colonisation. As good or better a case can be made to the effect that the very opposite stereotype - a stable and orderly Zulu society under the firm hand of a powerful king on the borders of the proposed colony and the existence of a plentiful supply of labour, preferably rendered docile by the conquering Zulu (especially in the face of the turbulent Cape frontier and that Colony's labour problems) - would have constituted a significantly

which he refers actually arise out of this and a subsequent visit by King to the Cape visits.

Reports of the traders' circumstances which immediately preceded King's arrival in the Cape, and indeed, his own initial remarks, contain no negative references to Shaka or the Zulu. "The natives" were described as "harmless" and as behaving "extremely well".<sup>52</sup> So satisfied was the colonial administration with the intelligence at its disposal for Natal and the attractiveness of conditions there, that they had no hesitation in sanctioning proposed visits to Natal by botanists, missionaries and the like.<sup>53</sup> Thus, when King arrived in Port Elizabeth in April, 1826, both the general public in the Cape and the colonial authorities had only heard praise of Shaka.<sup>54</sup> In his first public comments, contained in an article in the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, King continued in this vein, describing Shaka as obliging, charming and pleasant, stern in public but good-humoured in private, benevolent, and hospitable.<sup>55</sup>

In the meantime, however, King's attempts to raise money for another ship and a cargo failed.<sup>56</sup> He was thus obliged to approach the colonial authorities for assistance. In his application he resuscitated the claim that he wanted to

---

more powerful inducement to the British authorities. However, even had the traders wished to encourage settlement, they could not have argued that labour was plentiful, for it was not.

<sup>52</sup>Norton to Plasket, 19 January, 1826; *The Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, 28 April, 1826.

<sup>53</sup>See the requests of C.H. Wehde mann, (8 November, 1824, C.O. 2659, pp. 693-694; granted 9 November, 1824, C.O. 2659, pp. 691-692, 695; C.O. 4851, p. 487; U.I.T. 15/9, p. 247) and James Whitworth and Samuel Broadbent (4 March, 1825, C.O. 230, pp. 375-378; and the response, C.O. 4852, p. 488) for permission to proceed to Natal.

<sup>54</sup>The *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, 6 January and 28 April, 1826.

<sup>55</sup>*South African Commercial Advertiser*, 6 June, 1826.

<sup>56</sup>In May, King attempted to negotiate the purchase of a schooner on a two-thirds mortgage. Pointing out that his finances were precarious, King sought colonial aid with the financing by stressing that his object was to assist his wrecked crew, or failing aid, he requested the use of a government vessel. King was not allowed to bring ivory with him on the *Helicon* from Port Natal, despite Mrs. Farewell's request to the governor to allow an exception. King to Plasket, 2 June, 1826, C.O. 293, pp. 619-622; Elizabeth Farewell to Somerset, 27 Dec. 1825, C.O. 235, pp. 946-949. Amongst other things, King also heard at this time of the failure of another of his schemes to come to fruition. See G.H. 23/7, p. 401, concerning his lease on the Bird and Chaun islands. Note that the Ordnance storekeeper at the Cape was pressing his backer Collison for debt settlement, while Collison himself was petitioning the Lieutenant Governor of the Cape for relief. See C.O. 293, p. 1319; C.O. 219, pp. 1317-1318.



succour those left behind.<sup>57</sup> When he heard on 7 June that even this appeal had failed, King chose a new approach. In an article on the 11th June in the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, King, for the first time, represented Shaka as a "despotic and cruel monster".<sup>58</sup> On the basis of the threat posed by Shaka to the apparently vulnerable "castaways" at Port Natal, he succeeded in rallying sufficient support to fit out another vessel, the *Anne*, for a "rescue" mission, and, in this way, King returned to Port Natal with a cargo of trade items, and Mrs. Farewell.<sup>59</sup> As Roberts notes in a much neglected study that focuses on the contradictions between the traders' pronouncements of Shaka's murderousness, and their actions, Mrs. Farewell's inclusion in the party makes "one suspect the disparity between King's words and actions".<sup>60</sup>

Thus King's second article in the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, which stands in marked contrast in content and style to his first article, cannot be seen a bid to encourage colonisation, nor as yet another instance in a stream of "mendacious propaganda" about Shaka, but as a highly specific strategy pursued at a particular moment. This image of Shaka stands in marked contrast to his own earlier statements, as well as to the reports of the other traders, notably Farewell. The Cape authorities however, clearly set little store by King's latest intelligence on Shaka, and continued to sanction trips to Natal.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, within months, King himself was obliged to try and repair the damage by convincing his backers in Cape Town that Shaka, although a despot, "to do him justice, is for a savage the best-hearted of his race".<sup>62</sup>

With King's cargo-laden return to Port Natal, the situation of his party improved dramatically.<sup>63</sup> But conflict immediately erupted between Farewell and King. The tensions between the two parties which prevailed before King's first

---

<sup>57</sup>C.A., C.O. 293/138.

<sup>58</sup>*South African Commercial Advertiser*, 11 June, 1826; note that this is the same description that is ascribed to Farewell in J. Bird (ed.), *Annals of Natal*, vol. 1, Pietermaritzburg, 1888, reprint Cape Town, 1965, p. 93, and which was quoted in G. Thompson, *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*, vol. 1, London, 1827, second edition, Cape Town, 1967, pp. 174-175.

<sup>59</sup>On 22 July, 1826, King, with the backing of one William Hollett hired from John Thompson (Farewell's agent in the Cape), the *Anne*, and on the same day appointed Thompson his agent as well. N.C.D. 25/14, pp. 145-155, 156-159; N.C.D. 25/11, pp. 765-783.

<sup>60</sup>Roberts, *The Zulu Kings*, p. 98.

<sup>61</sup>Application by George Rennie and response, C.O. 293, pp. 911-912; C.O. 4895, pp. 60-61.

<sup>62</sup>King to "T", presumably Thompson, May, 1827, published in *The Colonist*, 3 January, 1828.

<sup>63</sup>Isaacs, for example, was able to resume the collection of curiosities, an endeavour he had been obliged for some time to forgo because of the lack of trade goods. See *Travels and Adventures*, pp. 70-71.

trip to the Cape, and the open conflict which ensued after his return, are ignored by Cobbing in his arguments about the image of Shaka, but have implications for the specific views of Shaka which the traders promoted subsequently. Even writers on the affairs of the traders who have taken note of the split, have failed to find a satisfactory explanation.<sup>64</sup> Isaacs, one of the major sources on the quarrel, noted that it was over "matters of a pecuniary nature", and elaborated on a particular tussle between the two over the question of under whose name trade goods sent to Shaka would proceed.<sup>65</sup> Farewell, in a letter to the *South African Commercial Advertiser* in January, 1829, claimed that King had undermined him and attempted to exclude him from the trade.<sup>66</sup>

These remarks are consistent with the thesis that King had proceeded to the Cape on the understanding that he would there procure trade goods on Farewell's behalf, if not on his own as well. This enabled him to tap Farewell's superior credit at the Cape.<sup>67</sup> All along, it had been King's aim to enter the Port Natal trade on terms more advantageous to himself. Initially these had collapsed when he lost all of his cargo in the wreck of the *Mary*. On his return to Port Natal in October, 1826, King sought to hold Farewell to ransom over the question of supplies.

Farewell refused to co-operate with King, as did Cane and Ogle of his party, although Fynn, previously one of Farewell's party, now began to play an increasingly independent role. Again, the answers for this are not hard to find when the trading, rather than colonising, interests of the traders are focused on. Fynn was one of the most active amongst the traders, particularly in the area south of Natal. He would have had none of Farewell's objections to "buying" supplies from King, if not exchanging ivory for them, and perhaps a greater need for fresh supplies.

As has been argued above, the greatest difficulties experienced by the Port Natal traders concerned the maintenance of a direct supply route to and from the Cape. The financing of ships for the task involved considerable expense, a problem exacerbated by the succession of losses and the difficulty of negotiating the sand bar at the entry to Port Natal.<sup>68</sup> One option investigated by King was

---

<sup>64</sup>Roberts, *The Zulu Kings*, pp. 99, 103-104. Roberts suggests that King wanted to take over Farewell's grant of land from Shaka, but cites no evidence for this. Note that Cobbing's treatment of the split is confined to a discussion of divisions on the eve of Shaka's assassination ("Grasping the Nettle", p.28).

<sup>65</sup>Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>66</sup>Also see the report in the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 27 December, 1828.

<sup>67</sup>See note 59 above.

<sup>68</sup>King faced an added problem when his shipwright downed tools. For evidence of continued problems of supply, see the journey of John Ross to Delagoa Bay, and the traders' bartering for supplies with the *Buckbay Packet*. Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures*, pp. 101, 102, 117.

the location of an alternative port. The other was the opening up of a route overland.<sup>69</sup> It was at this time that King and Fynn (the trader with the most southerly base) began actively to pursue a plan to open up a southern connection with the Cape.<sup>70</sup> This was the logic underlying King's next journey to Port Elizabeth with two ambassadors from Shaka, and the attacks at much the same time by Shaka and Fynn on the communities of Africans living in the area between the southern reaches of the Zulu kingdom and the Colony.

This series of events has also been misinterpreted and little understood largely because of the obfuscation caused by the thesis that the traders desired to use Shaka's southern campaigns to generate fear at the Cape and in that way to push the British authorities into establishing a colony in Natal. Wright argues that King went to the Cape to get recognition for his latest land concession from Shaka, and "to agitate for the establishment of some kind of British authority at Port Natal to give his claims effect".<sup>71</sup> In fact, King did not raise the issue of the land grant until the 29 July, 1828, that is, over two months after his arrival at the Cape, and, significantly, at the lowest point in his negotiations with the authorities. He used the grant to claim for himself the authority to negotiate on Shaka's behalf, something the authorities were expressly trying to avoid. Had King's primary objective been to obtain land grant recognition, he would surely have brought the original document with him, but he did not. Instead he made a copy from memory - or so he claimed, for the existence of the original, and of an original land grant, was later strenuously denied by another of the traders, John Cane.<sup>72</sup>

King's plan, it seems, was less ambitious. A more likely reconstruction of his objectives at this time is that he aimed to have Shaka support Fynn in clearing the way between Port Natal and the Colony; through the extension of Zulu rule, this would bring the area under efficient Zulu administration, thereby creating conditions more conducive to the prosecution of trade. But King knew, of course, that any attempt by Fynn and Shaka to subdue the intervening communities would cause alarm at the Cape.

Shaka was doubtless as eager to place the trade on a sound footing, and at this time began to supply the traders with ivory directly, as well as easing the restrictions on their other trading initiatives.<sup>73</sup> He was interested in

---

<sup>69</sup>See John Cane's deposition, 10 November, 1828, in which he asserts that Shaka "wished government to procure him a road that his people might come along with their sticks in their hands without assegai or any other weapon to see the white people" and that Shaka said "he would send no more ivory by sea but would collect some and send them to Faka's kraal [en route to the Cape] ... and deliver them to an officer who should be sent down and from whom he would expect a present in return...". G.H. 19/3, pp.388-415.

<sup>70</sup> By this time, moreover, Fynn's family were in Grahamstown.

<sup>71</sup>Wright, "The Dynamics of Power and Conflict", p.358.

<sup>72</sup>See G.H. 19/3, pp.473-475 and 376-384.

<sup>73</sup>See, for example, Fynn's *Diary*, p.131.

developing the southern reaches of his kingdom for other reasons. With the defeat of the Ndwandwe in 1826, the bulk of the Zulu army was freed for redeployment in the south. It has also been argued that internal disaffection at this time placed Shaka in a position of wanting to cement and monopolise the relationship with the traders, themselves based in the south. When Shaka mooted a plan to send ambassadors to the Cape, King immediately agreed.<sup>14</sup>

### The Cape's Shaka

The first move in the preparation of public opinion at the Cape for the plan to open the overland route was the release by the traders' backers in Cape Town of a letter from Port Natal for publication in the *South African Commercial Advertiser*.<sup>15</sup> In the letter, King praised Shaka, spelt out his plan for a southern campaign, and stressed that Shaka's intentions towards the colony were peaceful. Thus, if anything, when King set sail in the newly completed *Elizabeth and Susan* for the Cape, he did so with the aim of promoting a very positive image of Shaka. On his arrival at Port Elizabeth on 4 May, 1828, he continued to stress "the friendly disposition of Chaka towards our nation", and the absence of any threat to the Colony from Shaka's latest campaigns.<sup>16</sup>

However, King had made a significant miscalculation. In the period between his first (1826) and second (1828) visits, the colonial administration's policy shifted from a concern with the opening up of new markets and strategic bases beyond the Colony, to one of stabilising the independent frontier chiefdoms and containing expansion. By late 1827, Bourke stated that official policy was to maintain those situated immediately on our front in possession of their country as long as by their friendly and peaceable conduct they prove themselves deserving of our protection. This will be easiest and cheapest way of preserving the colony itself from plunder and disquietude...<sup>17</sup>

In terms of this policy, the colonial authorities could not countenance Shaka's campaigns on or near the borders of the colony.<sup>18</sup> By the time King came to compose a detailed written statement for the authorities on the purpose of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures*, p. 71; King to "T", presumably Thompson, 27 May, 1827, published in *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 3 January, 1828.

<sup>15</sup> Farewell to "T", presumably Thompson, published in *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 3 January, 1828.

<sup>16</sup> King to J. van der Riet, Civil Commissioner, Uitenhage, 10 May, 1828, G.H. 19\3, pp.30-33.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Bourke to Lord Viscount Goderich, 15 October, 1827 (G.H. 23/8, pp. 298-304).

<sup>18</sup> By the 9th of May, King had been in contact with military officials in Port Elizabeth from whom he would have learnt of this policy. (See Commandant, F. Evatt to Lt. Col. Somerset, 9 May, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 35-36.)

Zulu embassy, he was acquainted with the new policy. In his statement he stressed the urgency of sending one of the ambassadors back to Shaka as soon as possible to apprise Shaka and Fynn of this unexpected policy shift. To his injunctions for speed, King added the puzzling comment that he had left hostages, in Shaka's hand to guarantee the safety of the Zulu ambassadors. It is clear from the operations in the Mpondo country at this time, of one of the claimed hostages, Fynn, that this was not the case.<sup>79</sup> However, King's claim lent an added impetus to the urgency of returning a messenger to Shaka, at the same obscuring Fynn's role in a southern campaign which was increasingly showing the possibility of coming into direct confrontation with the British. It also contrived to suggest that the traders' role in Shaka's campaigns was forced upon them.<sup>80</sup> Once this report was submitted, King waited to see whether his communication regarding Shaka's peaceful intentions towards the colony would result in a change in policy.

King was also waiting for the registration of the *Elizabeth and Susan* to be completed by the Port Elizabeth port authorities. He anticipated that the boat, once registered, would either begin plying regularly between Port Natal and the Cape, thus alleviating the supply problem, or alternatively, if disposed of, would provide him with the necessary capital to obtain a new cargo and transport it to Natal. During May, King was optimistic on both counts. His statement of Shaka's friendly intentions had filtered through to the frontier, while on the basis of his positive intelligence regarding Shaka, the authorities sanctioned the expedition of Messrs. Cowie and Green to the Zulu kingdom. Likewise, the press assured the general public that there was nothing to fear from Shaka.<sup>81</sup>

When, however, it appeared that the registration of the boat might be in jeopardy, and the Cape authorities, already tardy in responding to the embassy, appeared to want Shaka to bring his campaign to a halt, King attempted, once again, to use the threat of Zulu hostility to achieve his ends. He declared that if his craft was not registered he would not risk sending it back to Natal with the one Zulu ambassador whose arrival Shaka was anxiously awaiting. If Shaka did not hear from his ambassador, he continued, the safety of the Colony could not be guaranteed.<sup>82</sup> The threat fell on deaf ears.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup>See the discussion in Roberts, *The Zulu Kings*, pp.129-136.

<sup>80</sup>King to Van der Riet, 10 May, 1828; see also the emphases on haste, and in particular on the urgency of the return of one of the chiefs in King's anxious communication to Van der Riet, 24 May, 1828 (G.H. 19/3, pp. 39-42); Fynn, *Diary*, pp. 141, 153. Fynn subsequently made the same use of the hostage argument.

<sup>81</sup>See C.O. 4888, p. 217; C.O. 4893, p. 249; C.O. 4895, pp. 312-313; D.P. Francis, port captain, to Col. Bell, 9 May, 1828, and 23 May, 1828, C.O. 359, pp. 191-192, 198-199; Evatt to Lt. Col. Somerset, 9 May, 1828, G.H. 19/3 pp. 35-36; *The Colonist*, May, June, 1828.

<sup>82</sup>King to Bourke, 6 June, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 48-53; King to Van der Riet, 6 June, 1828 (G.H. 19/3, pp. 66-69); Van der Riet to Bell, 7 June, 1828 (U.I.T. 15/12, pp. 45-47).

The colonial authorities refused to be drawn into what they recognised as King's machinations. A government representative, Major A.J. Cloete, was despatched to Port Elizabeth to circumvent King and to deal directly with the Zulu ambassadors. Cloete was instructed to inform the ambassadors that King enjoyed no status in the eyes of the British authorities.<sup>84</sup> Although at this time intelligence from the frontier indicated that Shaka's army was advancing on the frontier chiefs, there were no fears in the official mind that the Colony would be attacked by Shaka.<sup>85</sup> What they did fear was that a war north of the frontier would send large numbers of refugees streaming into the Colony. Cloete's subsequent discussions with the Zulus did not alter the picture of Shaka's intentions towards the colony as peaceful and the tenor of the pertinent official correspondence over the next two months indicates that King's image of Shaka-as-monster had failed to take root. The policy of the colonial officials was to meet with Shaka at the first possible opportunity to explain their position with regard to the chiefdoms across the border, after which, they believed, he would withdraw.<sup>86</sup> Over the next two months, the Cape authorities only became more sceptical of King, and what Cloete described as his "determined perversion of facts".<sup>87</sup> Likewise, reports in the press questioned the idea that Shaka was vengeful, describing him as "amiable" and as a better diplomat than the British officials.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup>C.O. 4322, pp. 151-152. Nonetheless Bell took sufficient cognizance of the threat to have the possibility of registration carefully checked out for a loophole. (See G.H. 19/3, p. 54.)

<sup>84</sup>Bell to Cloete, 14 June, 1828, C.O. 4893, pp. 255-357.

<sup>85</sup>Minutes of the Cape Council of Advice, 21 June, 1828, A.C. 2, pp. 453-460; Dundas to Bourke, 20 June, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 88-89.

<sup>86</sup>See Somerset to Dundas, 15 June, 1828, A.Y. 8/79, pp. 193-196, 189-199; Shrewsbury to Somerset, 12 June, 1828, Somerset to Bell, 20 June, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 85-87; Dundas to Bourke, 20 June, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 88-91; and deliberations of the Council of Advice in Cape Town, 21 June, 1828, A.C. 2, pp. 453-60; Bell to Dundas, 21 June, 1828, C.O. 4888, pp. 270-271; Cloete to Bell, 27 June, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 96-103. Also see P.R.O., C.O. 48/124; G.H. 19/3, pp. 92-95; C.O. 4888, pp. 274-275.

<sup>87</sup>Cloete to Bell, 11 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 159-166. The colonial authorities were extremely suspicious of King and his motives in bringing the chiefs to the colony. They were also alert to the contradictions and shifts in the account of things that he promoted. See Van der Riet to Bell, 7 June, 1828, U.I.T. 15/12, pp. 45-47.

<sup>88</sup>*The Colonist*, May-July, 1828. My interpretation of public opinion at this time differs radically from that of Roberts, whose account of wholesale panic amongst the Cape settlers in response to scares about an invasion by Shaka, is the root of Cobbing's mistaken periodisation of the image of Shaka. Nonetheless, it is probable that there were some rumours abroad to the effect that Shaka intended to attack the Colony.

King's strategies were by no means exhausted and, until his departure in August, he tried a range of other ploys to extort money out of the authorities as well as to try to shore up his position in the eyes of the Zulu envoys, but all of these were blocked by the perspicacious Cloete. The latter also put considerable effort into exposing King's manipulations to the ambassadors, indicating that the British government dissociated itself from King, and emphasising the colonial government's favourable disposition towards Shaka.<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps King's most outrageous manoeuvre was to approach the Chief Commissioner for Uitenhage, Van der Riet, in an attempt to circumvent Cloete, and on the basis of reports of Shaka's imminent advance on the Xhosa chief Hintza, to offer to broker an accord between Shaka and the Colony. With this ploy, King tried for the last time to invoke a threatening Shaka, claiming that if he did not intervene, both the Port Natal settlement and the Colony would be attacked by the Zulu. Once again, the authorities remained unconvinced, with justification it seems, for in the same week, King was claiming Shaka as a "friend of nearly three years" to whose "humanity and kindness" he owed a great debt.<sup>90</sup> By August, as the situation on the frontier deteriorated, the colonial administration deemed it best to return the envoys to Shaka with assurances of friendship and a clear statement of their determination not to countenance his southern attacks. The embassy, including King, were returned to Natal aboard the naval vessel, the *Helicon*. After their departure, the press continued to report favourably of Shaka. When British forces thought, mistakenly, that they had engaged the Zulu on the frontier, an editorial in *The Colonist* accused the commanding officer, Dundas, of "gross violation of the law of nations".<sup>91</sup>

In fact, so "civilised" did the press view Shaka, that it was speculated that he must be "of white extraction".<sup>92</sup> In the same edition one correspondent commented perceptively on the problem of interpreting Shaka:

The character and objects of Chaka it is not to be expected should be favourably represented by the tribes he had ruined, or threatened to

---

<sup>89</sup>King to Cloete, 4 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 125-126; Cloete to King, 4 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 126-127; Cloete to Bell, 4 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 115-124; Cloete to King, 5 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 167-168; King to Cloete, 5 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 169-172; Cloete to King, 10 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 174-177; Bell to King, 11 July, 1828, C.O. 4895, p. 336; Cloete to Bell, 11 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 159-166; King to Cloete, presumably 18 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 212-215; Cloete to King, 18 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, p. 216; Frances to Bell, 25 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 248-263; Cloete to Bell, 29 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 258-251; King to Cloete, 29 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 264-271; Cloete to Bell, 18 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 198-203; Cloete to King, 30 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 272-273; King to Cloete, 30 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 274-281; also see C.O. 4894, pp. 18-19; G.H. 19/3, pp. 178-181; C.O. 4893, pp. 265-267, 291-292.

<sup>90</sup>King to Cloete, 11 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 178-181; King to Van der Riet, 13 July, 1828, G.H. 19/3, pp. 206-209.

<sup>91</sup>*The Colonist*, 26 August, 1828.

<sup>92</sup>*The Colonist*, 19 August, 1828.

destroy, and considerable caution is therefore requisite in weighing the evidence only procurable through prejudiced channels; from sources of this kind the Invader is declared a determined, a systematic, and a practiced plunderer, raising no corn, breeding no cattle, and procreating no children.<sup>93</sup>

The same reservation was true for King's representation of Shaka, and, indeed, was widely held.

On the mission's return to Natal, Shaka received the reports of his ambassadors, including the chronicle of King's deceits and manipulations, as well as the messages from the British authorities. Incensed by King's duplicity and foolishness, and anxious that he had come close to provoking the British into battle, Shaka promptly despatched a member of Farewell's camp, John Cane, overland to the Cape to affirm his peaceful intentions and his compliance with British requests. He also asked for an official British agent to the Zulu kingdom.<sup>94</sup> Through Cane Shaka stressed that he "was no longer disposed to molest the frontier tribes of Caffers" and that his aim was "free intercourse with the colony".<sup>95</sup> The Cape authorities were highly receptive to this latest embassy, and in November, the *South African Commercial Advertiser* reported its belief that the "frightful stories" sometimes told about Shaka were "mere fabrications".<sup>96</sup> As far as the Cape was concerned, in 1828, Shaka was no monster. Nor, for that matter, had there been anywhere any suggestion that Natal should be colonised.

---

<sup>93</sup>*The Colonist*, 19 August, 1828.

<sup>94</sup>Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures*, p. 133; *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 31 December, 1829.

<sup>95</sup>Report of Sir Lowry Cole, G.H. 23/9, pp.78-86.

<sup>96</sup>*South African Commercial Advertiser*, 15 November, 1828.



"Shaka" posthumously

Unbeknownst to the *South African Commercial Advertiser* and its readers however, both James King, the opportunistic purveyor of rumours of Zulu attack, and Shaka, the king who-was-not-a-monster, were already dead. The former died mysteriously on 7 September, and the latter was assassinated on the 24th September. Cobbing argues on the basis of circumstantial evidence that Fynn and Farewell were behind the assassination of the Zulu king.<sup>97</sup> Cobbing's evidence is not conclusive, and in his preoccupation with white agency and white sources, he fails to take account of Zulu oral tradition on the event, in which there is no hint of involvement by the traders. Oral traditions are notoriously permeable to such information, while Zulu succession practices - which preclude an assassin from succeeding to the office of his victim - would have placed a high premium on the revelation by the contenders for the succession of any involvement by Fynn and Farewell. It should be noted moreover, that the traders' response to the assassination was defensive. They improved their fortifications at Port Natal, readied their boat for an emergency departure, and indeed, Farewell and Isaacs left soon thereafter for Port Elizabeth.

It was only after the death of Shaka that the traders began for the first time to talk about colonisation of Natal and to employ a rhetoric critical of Shaka.<sup>98</sup> Their monopoly over the Natal trade which had prevailed since 1824, was finally coming to an end. Their successful promotion of conditions in Natal had stimulated others to follow in their footsteps.<sup>99</sup> The traders had not yet established relations with the new Zulu king in the way that they had with the old, and circumstances in Natal in early 1829 were more volatile and less predictable than ever before. The traders had attempted repeatedly to make a go of the Natal trade on their own, and had failed. By 1829, and under these circumstances, colonisation offered the traders an excellent opportunity for making good their by now quite considerable losses. It was at this time that Farewell raised capital against his land grant in expectation of the rapid development of Port Natal.

The vilification of Shaka that began at this time was as specific to the conditions which prevailed in early 1829, as King's remarks in 1826 and early 1828 were specific to his particular circumstances at the time. On his return to the Cape, Farewell faced accusations that he had fought in the Zulu armies - an allegation not without substance. The thrust of his defence, an argument which was subsequently taken up by Fynn and Isaacs, was that the traders had been

---

<sup>97</sup>Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle", pp.28-29.

<sup>98</sup>See Farewell to Bell, 19 February, 1829, G.H. 19/3, pp.579-580; Farewell to the Chairman, Committee of the Commercial Exchange, Cape Town, 3 March, 1829, P.R.O., series C.O. 48/133; Saxe Bannister to Bell, 28 March, 1829, C.O. 3941, pp.403-404, and a host of other applications by Bannister. Note also the changed tenor of Farewell's communication to Barrow, of 15 March, 1829, P.R.O., series C.O. 48/13.

<sup>99</sup>Bell to Mr. Benjamin Green, 22 August, 1828, C.O. 4895, p.350; Green to Bell, 11 August, 1828, C.O. 3937, pp. 323-324; Farewell to Bell, 4 December, 1828, C.O. 357, pp.400-401.

threatened by Shaka and forced to participate in the campaigns.<sup>100</sup> At this point, precisely because the Zulu king was dead, the traders could malign Shaka to provide an "alibi" for their own actions without threatening the stability of conditions in Natal. In support of their case against Shaka, they drew on a stock of stories with which they had become acquainted in Natal, stories garnered from African informants.

Moreover, the traders were also aware that they could no longer monopolise the image of Shaka that prevailed at the Cape to the extent that they had previously done. The British authorities had resolved to send the agent requested by Shaka, and were highly suspicious of the traders. In addition, numerous other parties in the Cape announced their intention of proceeding north to the Zulu kingdom.

When these various parties arrived in Natal, they found that the image of Shaka as a tyrant which was gaining ground in the Cape in 1829 was strongly echoed by Zulu society. Shaka-the-monster was no more the "invention" of the traders in 1829, than it had been before that. Nor was a negative view of Shaka the only image that prevailed in Zulu society in 1829. Resistance to Shaka's assassin and successor, Dingane, ensured the continuity of positive productions of Shaka. It is to a brief examination of the various African productions of Shaka that the next section of this paper turns, so as to challenge another of Cobbing's generalisations, his view that there is, at best, a single "Zulu" voice, that "it" presented a view of the Zulu past that was essentially unchanged between 1820 and 1900, if not the present, and that white views of Shaka were impervious to that view.

## ZULU PRODUCTIONS OF SHAKA IN THE 1820s

### Domination and resistance in the Zulu kingdom under Shaka

Sometime before about 1820, in a controversial accession, Shaka kaSenzagakhona took over the leadership of the Zulu chiefdom with assistance from the local paramount power, the Mthethwa. The latter were subsequently defeated by the Ndwandwe, and, sometime before the first traders arrived at Port Natal, the Zulu forces, considerably enlarged and reorganised, themselves repulsed an Ndwandwe attack and ultimately succeeded in breaking up the Ndwandwe kingdom. Overnight, the Zulu became the predominant power in the Phongolo-Thukela region.

When the traders landed at Port Natal in 1824, they entered a relatively new and highly heterogeneous polity which the new Zulu leaders were in the process of consolidating into a centralized state. But the process of centralisation was far from smooth. The new Zulu rulers faced opposition from within the ruling house that was to culminate in the assassination of Shaka in 1828. The disputation within the royal house was, however, overshadowed by the struggle to assert their hegemony in the wider region, and to maintain Zulu ascendancy over neighbouring chiefdoms. By the mid-1820s, Zulu overrule was by no means well-entrenched. In particular, the Zulu rulers faced rebellion in two of the largest

---

<sup>100</sup> *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 27 December, 1828, 31 January, 1829; Farewell's report, G.H. 23/9, pp. 39-47; G.H. 1/15, p. 665.

chiefdoms subordinate to their rule: amongst the Qwabe in the south, and the Khumalo in the north. Another festering sore was the *Iala* tributaries on the southern periphery close to Port Natal. Zulu control over these areas was maintained only with difficulty by a combination of coercive and ideological measures. There were thus great inequalities within the Zulu kingdom, deep-seated divisions, and great disaffection. Even after the collapse of Khumalo resistance in 1826, Shaka's position was by no means secure.<sup>101</sup>

Ongoing resistance in the areas mentioned, and smaller outbreaks of rebellion elsewhere, prompted continued coercive and ideological responses from the Zulu authorities. These included merciless campaigns, and stern sentences for individual rebels. The effect of these actions was to invest Shaka with a reputation for harsh and arbitrary action. On the one hand, the Zulu authorities fostered this image through carefully managed displays of despotism and brutal justice at the court, using terror as a basis for absolute rule across a huge kingdom. The displays were not designed only to inspire obedience from their subjects, they were also meant to strike fear into the heart of their enemies, and to impress the traders with Zulu power.

This despotism was justified by the other component of Shaka's image, that of a leader of tremendous abilities, the great unifier, and the hero in battle. Both components of this image are present in his *izibongo*. The Zulu king was reputedly one of the architects of his own representation, collecting praises for himself that he liked. According to the informant Mbokodo kaSokhulekile, Shaka took for himself the praise "The one whose fame resounds even as he sits", after he heard it used in respect of the Mbo chief, Sambela.<sup>102</sup> Stuart's informant Jantshi recalled his father, Nongila, one of Shaka's most trusted spies, describing the Zulu king as a successful conqueror, but also one who frequently caused people to be put to death.<sup>103</sup> Nongila claimed that Shaka fed people to the vultures, but linked such acts to the maintenance of authority and discipline in the Zulu kingdom.<sup>104</sup> He related how Shaka would cut off a man's ears if he did not listen, i.e. obey, and he would pick out anyone wounded in battle and kill him for being a coward, for running away.<sup>105</sup> But as much as a reputation for harshness served Shaka's purposes, and was promoted actively by his supporters, so too did it form the basis of opposition to his rule. Qwabe accounts of Shaka villify him as a tyrant, *Iala* accounts depict him as a marauder a destroyer, and a "madman", sans caveats about the maintenance of discipline.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup>King to "T", presumably Thompson, 2 May, 1827, in The Colonist, 3 January, 1828.

<sup>102</sup>JSA, vol.3, p.15, Mbokodo

<sup>103</sup>JSA, vol.1, p.195, Jantshi.

<sup>104</sup>JSA, vol. 1, p.195, Jantshi.

<sup>105</sup>JSA, vol. 1, pp. 195, 201-202, Jantshi.

<sup>106</sup>JSA, vol. 2, p.232, Maquza; vol. 3, pp.55-56, 65-67, Mcotoyi.

By 1826, the traders were firmly inserted in the Zulu kingdom, and were closely involved in the extension of Zulu rule south of the Thukela. They encountered these different views of Shaka in a range of contexts such as at his court in circumstances of his making, or through their independent contacts with the Qwabe, Khumalo, Cele and Mbo. They also heard reports of Shaka's depredations from the African community at Port Natal which had previously been driven from their territories by Shaka.<sup>107</sup>

Shaka's supporters and opponents thus shared certain images of the Zulu king, and contested others. All of these, and the struggles between them, and their shifting content in response to changing conditions, both during the reign of Shaka, and subsequently, as well as the way in which they intersected with the views of the Port Natal traders, have been ignored by Cobbing.

### Listening for the voices of domination and resistance

Cobbing is oblivious to these processes because he collapses the different, contending productions into a single "Zulu voice", that, in recorded form, he conceives of as being contaminated.<sup>108</sup> Herein lies the reason for Cobbing's failure to come to grips with African views of Shaka. For Cobbing, there are none yet extant. He is deaf to the cacophony of conflicting images of Shaka contained in sources like the *Stuart Archive*, for he dismisses them as fundamentally "tainted" by their recorder. For Cobbing, Stuart, more than any other single writer, was responsible for the creation of the image of Shaka that sits at the heart of the mfecane stereotype. The *Stuart Archive* is poisoned not only by Stuart, but also by earlier white writers of Zulu history who shaped the range of "historical fantasies" that informed Stuart's approach, and, indeed, is further adulterated by the present editors.<sup>109</sup>

Cobbing is guilty of two significant oversights in his evaluation of the *Archive* and his discounting of its many Shaka's. The first is that while it is indeed true that Stuart was an avid Shaka-ophile - who delivered dozens of lectures in Natal and in London on the subject of the Zulu monarch, and who constantly directed his informants onto the topic of Shaka - the range of variant opinions in their statements, and the extent to which they differ from Stuart's own versions, are a strong indications of their integrity.<sup>110</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Fynn, *Diary*, pp.66,65-66, 130; Isaacs, *Travels*, pp.18, 19, 24-26, 32, 37, 41, 63, 67, 70, 78, 83, 89-90, 140.

<sup>108</sup> This view of Zulu oral tradition is spelt out at length by Cobbing in a review article on the *James Stuart Archive*, entitled "A Tainted Well. The Objectives, Historical Fantasies, and Working Methods of James Stuart, with Counter-Argument", *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, XI (1988), pp.115-154.

<sup>109</sup> While Cobbing dismisses Stuart's informants' versions of Shaka, he does concede that the *Archive* may yield historical data.

<sup>110</sup> Stuart never published anything on Shaka beyond the accounts in his four Zulu readers, *uBaxoxele*, *uTulasizwe*, *uHlangakula* and *uVusezakiti*, London, 1923-26.

The great well of bitterness towards Shaka, for example, which permeates the entire testimony of an informant like the Qwabe woman, Baleka, was no mere response to Stuart's promptings. The Qwabe chiefdom was in rebellion for much of the reign of Shaka and was subject to brutal repressive measures. Baleka's father, Mpitikazi, nearly lost his life at Shaka's hand. Baleka noted the details of Shaka's persecution of the Qwabe, and recounted a host of gruesome tales told to her by her father on topics such as the inhumanity of Shaka, his wanton cruelty - including stories of the cutting open of a pregnant woman, and the feeding of human corpses to the vultures.<sup>111</sup> Her judgement of Shaka was harsh:

That man used to play around with people. A man would be killed though he had done nothing, though he had neither practised witchcraft, committed adultery nor stole.<sup>112</sup>

For Mpitikazi and Baleka, Shaka was best summed up by this one of his praises, "The violently unrestrained one who is like the ear of an elephant".<sup>113</sup> Finally, for them, Shaka, who refused to father children, and whom they credit with having killed his own mother for concealing a child of his, was an animal. "A person like Tshaka is like a wild beast, a creature which does not live with its own young, its male offspring."<sup>114</sup>

Secondly, Cobbing fundamentally misunderstands Stuart when he describes him as "a representative and influential product of an unpleasant generation", whose "thought exemplifies the pathologies of colonial society..."<sup>115</sup> In fact, investigation of the vast residue of the unpublished Stuart papers - his private correspondence, draft manuscripts, and his notes to himself - reveals that Stuart was disenchanted with prevailing "native policies", that he objected to *isibalo* labour levies and the dispossession of people from their land, and that he evinced a powerful commitment to giving Africans a say in their own affairs, to allowing them to be heard in their own words. In significant ways, Stuart was painfully at odds with the prevailing sentiments of his fellow colonists. In terms strongly reminiscent of modern scholars concerned with the view "from below", yet also captive to the discourse of his times, he objected to the keystone of paternalism:

This question of the contact between the civilized and uncivilized races receives its expression almost entirely from the civilized themselves. The whole controversy is an *ex parte* affair - conducted by the civilized against one another, instead of by civilized and uncivilized. The uncivilized man's voice is never heard. In any case, it cannot be detected amidst all the Babel of talk that is constantly going on, most by people who know nothing of the situation as it is from the Native's

---

<sup>111</sup>James Stuart Archive, vol.1, evidence of Baleka, especially pp.7-12.

<sup>112</sup>JSA, vol.1, p.12, Baleka.

<sup>113</sup>JSA, vol.1, p.8, Baleka.

<sup>114</sup>JSA, vol.1, p.8, Baleka.

<sup>115</sup>Cobbing, "Tainted Well", p.120.

point of view. In a question of this kind surely the voice of the people primarily concerned is of the greatest importance.<sup>116</sup>

Cobbing claims that Stuart's motive for collecting so prodigious a body of oral tradition was to answer "the central riddle [as to] how ... the native [was] to be dispossessed of his land, set to work, administered, controlled, set apart, ordered around, treated as a child, impoverished, and dehumanised without the white man (and his wife) having their throats slit", but this takes no account of the complexity of Stuart's career, nor of the highly contested development of the Native Policies of the early twentieth century and the tremendous ambiguity of the positions of their early formulators.

Full investigation of Stuart in such a way as to facilitate a proper reading of the recorded traditions merits detailed attention and is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is essential that we begin to challenge Cobbing's characterisation of Stuart's recording activities, as well as his wholesale dismissal of African versions of the past.

Cobbing is undoubtedly correct to reiterate Vansina's seminal points concerning the need for scholars using information contained in collections of oral traditions to come to terms with the presences in the traditions of the collector. But, not only is Stuart's presence different from the stereotypical colonial functionary of Cobbing's depiction, the interests of the recorder of an oral text are not as all-determining as Cobbing supposes.<sup>117</sup> Texts frequently say things over and above what their authors, their editors, and even their "collectors" intend. The informant from whom the tradition is recorded constitutes yet another presence, as do any interests which the informant, and/or the collector intend the text to counter, avoid, or neutralize.

Oral traditions require thus the reconstruction of their own histories. We need to know under what circumstances the oral text came to be transcribed, and by whom. We need to know all about the background, interests and experiences of the transcriber. We also need to know who the informant was, his/her background, interests and experiences. We need to establish how he or she gleaned the information provided, and we need to know all the same things about his/her sources. On the basis of all this information we need to make judgements about the production, its periodisation and its faithfulness in written form to the oral original. Where transmutations may have crept in over time we need to assess their likely content and scope. Finally, we need also to come to grips with the stylistic elements of the texts, the way in which style changes over time, as well as with what is entailed in the transition from oral to written form.

Events internal to the Zulu kingdom were responsible for sharp debates over Shaka, not merely between his supporters and his detractors during his life time, but also subsequently as different Zulu interests drew on different Shaka's to support their actions in new presents. In particular, different versions of Shaka emerged throughout the nineteenth century at times of succession disputes. Indeed, any attempt to discover the kinds of views of Shaka that prevailed in the

---

<sup>116</sup>KCAL, Stuart papers, file 42, item xxi.

<sup>117</sup>See his comments, "Tainted Well", p.118.

1820s in the Zulu kingdom, must test the oral traditions for subversions or mutations that occurred subsequently.<sup>118</sup>

### The "frontier Caffers'" production of Shaka, 1827-1828

As early as May 1825, the Cape administration was beginning to wrestle with the "Fetcanie problem" - "tribes of savages ... advancing on the frontier of the colony".<sup>119</sup> The first recorded mention of Shaka's involvement in the disturbances immediately north of the border occurred on 25th July, 1827, when the Landdrost in Somerset, W.M. Mackay, interviewed a "Fetcanie" refugee. The informant claimed that his people, the "Masutu" and "Manquana", under "Maheta" and "Mathiana" were defeated by Shaka, who had seized their cattle. This, the informant was reported to have claimed, led his people, the "Fetcanie", to attack others for their cattle.<sup>120</sup> The report of this interview was subsequently discussed at the highest level in Cape Town, and the agency of Shaka duly noted.<sup>121</sup> Three weeks later, Lt. Col. Henry Somerset, Commandant of the Frontier, recorded a conversation he had with the "Tambookie" chief, "Powana", who asserted that his country was not safe for as long as Shaka continued his wars against the "Fetcanie".

Chaka is driving these people on and as long as he does I cannot remain...I heard it [the fact that Shaka was advancing] from the Fetcanie".<sup>122</sup>

There is, as far as I can see, no discernible reason for the officials concerned to have "invented" the conversations which they recorded so meticulously.<sup>123</sup> In

---

<sup>118</sup>For a detailed assessment of the various versions of the life story of Shaka that occur in the *Stuart Archive*, and their dating, see my "The production of Shaka and "the weighing of evidence only procurable in prejudiced channels", paper presented to the Conference on Enlightenment and Emancipation, Durban, 1989.

<sup>119</sup>See Cape Archives, Z.P. 1/1/33 and 1/1/36; C.O. 234, pp. 270-271, 672-687, 691; C.O. 233, pp. 400-405; C.O. 287, pp.204-218, 224-225, 285-303; C.O. 333, pp.18-21, 39; C.O. 2692, pp.923-940; C.O. 48887, pp.341-344.

<sup>120</sup>W.M. Mackay to the Chief Secretary of Government, 8 August, 1827, C.O. 2693, pp.783-794.

<sup>121</sup>Minutes of the Council of Advice, 23 August, 1827, A.C. 2, pp.55-59.

<sup>122</sup>Quoted in Somerset to Bourke, 31 August, 1827, C.O. 2693, pp.833-835.

<sup>123</sup> It was at this time, i.e. 1827, that Thompson's *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa* containing a reprint of James King's description of Shaka as "a cruel and despotic monster" from the *South African Commercial Advertiser* in 1826, was published. By August of that year *Travels* was being read by Cape colonial officials and although King's report contained no mention of Zulu campaigns anywhere near the Colony, it is possible that his tirade intersected with and reinforced the reports of Shaka as the agent behind the disturbances. Nonetheless, it is notable that, although in this period the administration's frontier policy was determined by this identification of Shaka as the cause

other words, the colonial administration's understanding of Shaka as the agency behind the disturbances was not, as Cobbing claims, the result of the Natal traders' propaganda.<sup>124</sup> Rather, it was reported as coming straight out of the mouths of the "frontier Caffers".<sup>125</sup>

This paper has shown that before 1829, the Port Natal traders were not trying "to tempt the British north" as Cobbing has claimed, nor was it the case that between "1825-27, as an aphrodisiac for the scarcely interested Cape administrators and merchant houses, a villification campaign was unleashed against Shaka and the Zulu". Shaka-the-monster and "Zulu tyranny" had other origins. In the 1820s both images were well-entrenched in the oral traditions of both Shaka's supporters and his enemies, although in different forms. In 1829, however, following his death, these images became for the first time the dominant images in both Cape Town and in the Zulu kingdom.

## CONCLUSION

### History as alibi; alibi as ideology

Cobbing is arguing a familiar case: that in South Africa, history is distorted to cover up past misdeeds and to legitimate conditions in the present. In that form, history becomes a component of the dominant ideology. The implication of Cobbing's particular "case" is that this happens in a mechanical and reductionist fashion; that, to paraphrase his argument in a bald fashion for the sake of clarity, ideologues, in the guise of early travelers, and later historians, "invent" the version of the past that best serves white interests, and this "invention" is then incorporated wholesale into the dominant ideology.

The argument presented in this paper is that like alibis, both histories and ideologies which are successful resonate in a body of information known to both their promoters and those whom they seek to persuade. Moreover, although any one version of the past may be the best known one, or any one ideology the dominant one, neither exist independently of other versions or views. Rather, the struggle between dominant and subordinate ideologies and versions of the past are part of each one's *raison d'être*.

In its drive to assert hegemony therefore, any ruling group has to represent more than simply its own corporate interests, and it has to find ways moreover of universalising the latter. What results then, as Gramsci suggest, is a form of

---

of the frontier disturbances, the officials concerned did not set any store by King's report, nor did they adopt anything of King's hysterical rhetoric. See, for example, Lt. Governor of the Cape, Gen. Richard Bourke to Lord Viscount Goderich, 15 October, 1827, G.H. 23/8, pp.298-304.

<sup>124</sup>Cobbing, "Mfecane as alibi", p.200.

<sup>125</sup>Even that was recognised in the Cape as "a prejudiced channel". See *The Colonist*, 19 August, 1828.



consent that is the product of a real interchange between rulers and ruled.<sup>126</sup>  
Or as Ernesto Laclau puts it:

A class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different versions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized.<sup>127</sup> [my emphases]

The intimacy of the relationship between history and ideology, and the reworking of the past that is entailed, ensures that similar constraints are placed on history as on the ideology itself. New versions of the past, no less than the ideologies which they seek to underpin, must articulate different versions of the past in such a way that their potential antagonisms are neutralised, and the argument is convincing. The various elements that make up a version of history that serves well any particular ideology must incorporate and neutralise the arguments of the opposition. Just as any ideology is always in a state of being struggled over, that is, is always "in process", so too is the historical account constantly shifting to take account of the changing terrain of the struggle, the subtle elaborations and shifts in the argument of the opposition.

This paper makes two theoretical points: firstly, that to view history simply as ideology's handmaiden is inadequate, and secondly, that both history and ideology are never fixed, they are always in flux and contested. In terms of the making of the mfecane myth, it asserts the importance of Africans as historically significant producers of the past, and challenges the idea of a massive conspiracy at work for well over a century in the production of the mfecane as a white alibi.

---

<sup>126</sup>A.Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London, 1971, in particular pp.198-199, 530, 538, 547.

<sup>127</sup>E.Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London, 1977, p.161.