

REVIEW ARTICLE

Political myth and historical reality in Nelson Mandela's *Long road to freedom*

Jeff Peires

University of Fort Hare, Alice

peires@polka.co.za

P Bonner, "The headman, the regent and the 'Long walk to freedom'", *Journal of Southern African Studies* (2019); DS Yekela, "Unity and division: Aspects of the History of the AbaThembu chieftainship, c.1920 to c.1980" (PhD), University of Cape Town, 2011); DS Yekela, "AbaThembu politics: The era of the regents (1920-1954)", *Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 73(1), June 2019.

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In his autobiography, *Long walk to freedom* (henceforth *Long walk...*), Nelson Mandela himself emphasised that: "I was groomed like my father before me, to counsel the rulers of the tribe", and many subsequent commentators have regarded his princely status as a vital factor in the shaping of his impressive and distinctive political style.¹ But as memory of the living Mandela begins to fade, and more critical voices emerge, it becomes ever more important to distinguish between the myth and the reality of the great man's rural upbringing.

For *Long walk...*, whatever its many merits, is not a book to be taken literally. On the very second page occurs a major historical blunder, where the author asserts that, in the sixteenth century, the Thembu "were incorporated into the Xhosa nation". This is a mistake which Mandela was unlikely ever to have made himself, and is most probably due to his acknowledged collaborator, Richard Stengel.² The AbaThembu was one of the four great kingdoms of the precolonial Eastern Cape, fully independent of their amaXhosa neighbours, and only lumped together with them following the colonial conquest and the introduction of the migrant labour system.

To such misconceptions, Mandela added some of his own, on page 26 for example, where he cites the aged Chief Joyi's eulogy of Thembu King Ngangelizwe's "heroism, generosity and humility", none of which personality traits were applicable to the

1 N Mandela, *Long walk to freedom* (London, Abacus, 1995). For an example of this tendency, together with clarifications on the authorship of *Long walk to freedom*, see T Lodge, *Mandela: A critical life* (Oxford, University Press), pp. 2-3; 186-189.

2 N Mandela, *Long walk...*, p. ix. Stengel, an American journalist, was personally chosen by Mandela, who Mandela had admired, *January Sun* (1990), his book on life under apartheid in a small South African town.

historical Ngangelizwe.³ More significant however are Mandela's references to the political principles he absorbed at the Great Place of the Regent Jongintaba, which he explicitly describes as central to his political thinking as a leader of the African National Congress (ANC):⁴

My later notions of leadership were profoundly influenced by observing the regent and his court. I watched and learned from the tribal meetings that were regularly held at the Great Place ... Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form ... (the regent) was not above criticism – in fact, he was often the principal target of it ... The meetings would continue until some kind of consensus was reached. They ended in unanimity or not at all ... Democracy meant all men were to be heard, and a decision was taken together as a people ... As a leader, I have always followed the principles I first saw demonstrated by the regent at the Great Place.

As a statement of the principles and policies guiding Mandela, first as leader of the ANC and, later, as the first President of a democratic South Africa, such sentiments will be deemed by many to be broadly accurate. But can they be taken as an equally accurate guide to the history of Thembuland at the same specific point in time?

Until very recently, there would have been no way of answering this question, even if anybody had thought to ask it. As late as 2011, serious students of AbaThembu history would have had to content themselves with former Government Anthropologist WD Hammond-Tooke's *The Tribes of Umtata District*, and the works referenced therein. Lungisile Ntsebeza's *Democracy Compromised*, a study of Xhalanga District, had appeared in 2006, and AK Mager and PJ Velelo's *The House of Tshatshu* was in the early stages of composition, but both of these fine works dealt with outlying chiefdoms rather than the Great House. The most important isiXhosa-language history, EG Sihele's "Ibali labaThembu", and the most diligent thesis, EJC Wagenaar's "History of the Thembu" lay buried virtually unknown in the Cory Library, Makhanda (Grahamstown), and neither of them, in any case, dealt with the twentieth century.⁵ The notorious rivalry between Thembu King Sabatha Dalindyebo and his cousin, former Transkei Prime Minister Kaiser Daliwonga Mathanzima, was superficially ascribed to current politics rather than its deeper roots within the structure of the Thembu kingdom.

3 J Mvenene, *A history of the AbaThembu people from earliest times to 1920* (Cape Town, African Sun Media, 2020), pp. 86-89.

4 N Mandela, *Long walk...*, pp. 24-25.

5 WD Hammond-Tooke, *The tribes of Umtata district* (Pretoria, Department of Bantu Affairs and Development, 1956-1957); L Ntsebeza, *Democracy compromised* (Cape Town, Human Sciences Research Council, 2006); AK Mager & PJ Velelo, *The house of Tshatshu* (University of Cape Town Press, 2018); EJC Wagenaar, "A history of the Thembu and their relationship with the Cape, 1850-1900" (PhD dissertation, Rhodes, 1987).

In February 2011, Drusilla S Yekela completed the doctoral dissertation, “Unity and Diversity: Aspects of the History of AbaThembu chieftainship c.1920 to c.1980”, on which she had laboured for many years while bearing the burden of teaching History at the Alice branch of the University of Fort Hare. While the whole of the thesis is of great interest, the first two chapters, covering the period from the death of King Dalindyabo in 1920 to the accession of his grandson Sabatha in 1954, cover, almost exactly the period of the young Mandela’s youth and upbringing in rural Thembuland. At about the same time, Philip Bonner, a renowned History Professor but one with no special knowledge of the Eastern Cape, was commissioned by the Nelson Mandela Foundation to investigate possible discrepancies between *Long walk...* and the archival record. Though both Drs Yekela and Bonner consulted the same archives, they were seemingly unaware of each other’s work. Yekela’s article appeared as recently as June 2019, while Bonner’s research – the confidential property of the Nelson Mandela Foundation – was published only after his sad decease in 2017.⁶ There is surprisingly little overlap between the two, and, although review articles usually confine themselves to published books, the eternal interest of the subject matter together with the darkness in which it has been hitherto shrouded, has motivated me to recommend these both to scholarly attention.

I begin with Dr Bonner’s article, which concentrates mainly on the life of Nelson’s father, Gadla Henry Mandela. Readers of the first three chapters of *Long walk...* will surely be disconcerted to learn that Gadla was not the hereditary chief of Mvezo, but a junior royal parachuted in by the Thembu king to replace the headman, a former policeman dismissed for the illegal allocation of land; that Nelson’s mother and her young children removed to Qunu before Gadla was dismissed from his post at Mvezo; and that Gadla himself was dismissed not for defying the magistrate but, like his predecessor, for the illegal occupation of land. He confirms that Gadla was a close advisor to the Thembu Regent Jongintaba (ruled 1928-1942) and, on the basis of new information, concludes that *Long walk...* conflates Jongintaba’s regency with the prior regency of Silimela (1920-1924). The brief narrative covering the period 1928-1941, the time passed by young Nelson under Jongintaba’s guardianship, tells us a little more about the Regent himself, but does not explicitly compare the idyllic picture presented in *Long walk...* with the gritty reality on the ground. Nor does it consider the dramatic changes which occurred at the Great Place following Jongintaba’s death in 1942, though Nelson, in Johannesburg, must have been following events quite closely.

6 DS Yekela, “Unity and division: Aspects of the History of the AbaThembu chieftainship, c.1920 to c. 1980” (PhD, Cape Town, 2011); DS Yekela, “AbaThembu politics: The era of the regents (1920-1954)”, *Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa* , 73(1), 2019, pp. 37-52; P Bonner, “The headman, the regent and the ‘Long walk to freedom’”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* , 45(6), 2019, pp. 1013-1031. The published article, a shorter version of Bonner’s original, was edited, “with permission, into a suitable form for a journal article”. With due respect to the editors, one would have preferred to see Bonner’s own, unedited version.

Bonner's purpose, in putting forward these revisions, should not be dismissed as mere iconoclasm, negativity for negativity's sake. Though exposing Gadla's dismissal as due to the illegal allocation of land, he goes on to emphasise that "there was nothing particularly unusual or excessive" (pp. 7, 9) in Gadla's behaviour, following up this statement with an incisive analysis of the way in which contestation between (white) government magistrate and (black) government headmen over the authority to allocate land revealed the inherent contradictions of the colonial system. Some of his interpretations, however, are open to dispute (for example, his espousal of Professor Crais's views on witchcraft)⁷ and one wishes he had spent taken the time to talk to Thembu veterans, who might have told him that the mysteriously short-lived King Jongilizwe (1924-1928) was poisoned by his councillors on account of "ungovernability" and explicated in greater detail the criteria according to which royal wives are ranked in a polygamous household, still a matter of controversy today.⁸

More problematic however is that the relatively short period covered by Bonner is too narrow in scope to enable a proper appreciation of the political dynamics of the Thembu Great Place. It is here that the extended approach of Dr Yekela, informed moreover by an intimate knowledge of the people concerned, really comes into its own. As soon as one situates the events described in greater detail by Bonner within the broader framework provided by Yekela, one immediately notices the emergence of two factions at the Thembu Great Place following the early death of King Dalindyebo in 1920: the first, initially represented by Dalindyebo's widow Nojahisi, more accommodating of colonial authority and dominant between 1920 and 1928; and the second, more defiant faction, dominating during Jongintaba's Regency between 1928 and 1942. Gadla Mandela, as Bonner indeed makes clear was a strong proponent of Jongintaba but, had Bonner more firmly grasped the factional nature of Thembu politics, he would not have made the mistake of thinking that Gadla was deposed in 1926 because he was "stripped of political patrons". Gadla's problem was not that he had no patrons; it was that his patron (Jongintaba) was out of power.⁹

When the Regent Jongintaba died in 1942, "an unhappy and possibly unfulfilled man", according to Dr Yekela, Sabatha, the universally accepted heir, was not yet

7 C Crais, *The politics of evil* (Cambridge, University Press, 2002); J Peires, "Frankenstein visits the Eastern Cape", *South African Historical Review*, 51, 2004, pp. 224-242. Response by Crais, *South African Historical Review*, 52, 2005, pp. 243-250.

8 Novoti, the mother of Sabatha, was preferred, not only because she was Mpondo, but because Nonciba, the mother of Bambilanga, was descended from Chief Hlanga, the brother of King Dhlomo, from whom all subsequent Thembu kings, including Dalindyebo himself, were descended. Strictly speaking, according to the exogamy rule, Nonciba should never have been recognised as any kind of wife, let alone a Great Wife. The matter again became controversial in the 1970s, when Prime Minister KD Mathanzima installed Bambilanga as King to replace the deposed Sabatha.

9 A close reading of Dr Yekela's thesis shows that Bonner and his editors have misjudged such relatively minor personalities as Silimela and Melitafa. Such matters may be of little interest to Bonner's audience. On the other hand, Yekela's audience may not be much interested in Bonner's speculations concerning witchcraft and "public transcripts of deference to authority".

fourteen years old necessitating the appointment of another Regent. Quite contrary to Thembu custom, the colonial magistrates forced the appointment of Dabulamanzi, Dalindyebo's son in the *kunene* (Right-Hand) house. Clearly hostile to Jongintaba's faction, Dabulamanzi relied on colonial support, neglecting the heir Sabatha to such an extent that the royal heir had to visit Cape Town to beg for school fees. The limitations of chiefly despotism and colonial power were, however, laid bare in the famous "off-saddle" incident of September 1949 by which certain senior chiefs and councillors forced Dabulamanzi to enter the Great Place on foot, the privilege of entering on a horse being reserved for kings alone. Though clinging to power until 1954 when Sabatha's installation, at the mandatory age of 25, could no longer be delayed, Dabulamanzi's legitimacy was entirely shot.¹⁰

The fall of Dabulamanzi clearly demonstrates that however long obstructed by government authority, legal coercion alone could not indefinitely frustrate the power of tradition as exercised at the Thembu Great Place. But the government that ruled in the succeeding era, that of King Sabatha Dalindyebo (1954- 1980), was not the same government that ruled during the "era of the Regents", and the Great Place of King Sabatha was very different to the Great Place of the Regent Jongintaba.¹¹ Thus, before one can return to the main theme of this article, a brief consideration should be made of the new factors which rendered the "principles" which the young Mandela "saw demonstrated by a regent at the Great Place" inapplicable to the following generation. The first of these was the coming to power, in 1948, of the apartheid government, and the new policy of Bantustans and "Bantu Authorities" which it introduced. The second was the incorporation of the black rural areas into the mainstream of black politics at the national level. I deal with each of these in turn.

One of the first steps taken by the colonial authorities after completing their conquest of the so-called "Transkeian Territories" was to demarcate their acquisitions into districts, sub-divided into "locations (*iilali*)" administered by "headmen (*izibonda*)".¹² "Headmen" were a colonial innovation, explicitly conceived of as poles supporting the government. Though appointed by the district magistrates, almost all of these headmen were nominated by the local communities according to traditional criteria and, over the course of time, even former policemen turned headmen were addressed by the people as "*inkosi* (chief)" and accorded traditional rights and status,

10 DS Yekela, "AbaThembu politics...", *Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 73(1), 2019, p. 49.

11 There are many detailed references to King Sabatha in the literature, including Dr Yekela's thesis, but not yet a comprehensive biography of this major figure. For those unfamiliar with the region or the period, I can strongly recommend Ben Horowitz's 1994 video, "The Comrade King," now conveniently available on YouTube.

12 By far the best source on the colonial (pre-1948) period in the Transkeian territories, but quite difficult to access, is WJG Mears, "A study in native administration: The Transkeian territories, 1894-1943" (DLitt, University of South Africa, 1947); S Dubow, "Holding 'a just balance between white and black': The Native Affairs Department in South Africa c.1920-33", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12(2), 1986, pp. 217-239; J Peires, "Traditional leaders in purgatory: Local government in Tsolo, Qumbu and Port St Johns, 1990-2000", *African Studies*, 59(1), 2000, pp. 99-102.

including hereditary succession in the male line. Notwithstanding their differences by rank and birth, all headmen were equal in the eyes of the magistrate, and all headmen reported directly to him. The style of government was paternalistic and the use of force restrained but, on the other hand, the power of the white government was nakedly transparent and political procedures frozen until such time – in an inconceivable future – that the “natives” would become “civilised”.

The Thembu King had no place in such a system. That his kingship (and the kingships of the similarly placed Mpondo kings) was recognised at all was due to the fact that the Thembu kings had submitted to colonial rule by “treaty” rather than military defeat.¹³ Though his informal influence was significant, even among the colonial magistrates, the legal authority of the Thembu King was zero, except in his home “location” (*ilali*), where he exercised the same powers as any other headman. This ambiguous position naturally impacted on his relationships with other more junior members of his royal family, who were likewise chiefs by birth. At best, these others saw a regent like Jongintaba as a useful shield and mediator between themselves and the colonial magistrates. At worst, so long as he retained the confidence of the magistrate, a junior chief could safely ignore his king.

All of this became completely irrelevant once the apartheid government introduced the system of “Bantu Authorities” in the mid-1950s.¹⁴ On an ideological level, it appealed to many rural people by professing respect for African culture and African law, holding out the promise of eventual African sovereignty as opposed to the magistrate/headman relationship which regarded Africans as perpetual children. Second, by grouping erstwhile locations into tribal “authorities (*iinqila*)”, chiefs of royal blood were elevated above other headmen and their seniority recognised. Third, and perhaps most important, genuine authority and financial resources, however limited, were delegated downwards to recognised authorities providing recognised chiefs with a degree of power and autonomy which they had not previously enjoyed. Initially, Bantu Authorities were resisted mainly because they were confused with other unpopular government measures, especially so-called betterment, which was actually a hangover from the old system. Senior chiefs increasingly came to see in the new system potential benefits for themselves, and the hitherto unquestionable authority of the Thembu King was openly challenged, not only by the ambitious KD Mathanzima of Cofimvaba district but by his half-brother Bambilanga, who eventually replaced Sabatha as head of the Regional Authority of the Thembu heartland itself.

13 For details of Thembu submission to colonial rule, and for the text of the treaty agreed with the colonial authorities by Thembu king Ngangelizwe, see Wagenaar, pp. 123-148; 399-400.

14 There is no really good discussion of the introduction of Bantu Authorities anywhere. For a good introduction to the issues and atmosphere of the period, it is still worth reading Govan Mbeki, *The peasants' revolt* (1964: reprinted London, International Defence and Aid Fund, 1984). See also Ntsebeza, *Democracy Compromised*, especially Chapter V, but bear in mind that Xhalanga district is extremely unusual in that, other like all the other districts of Thembuland, it had no prior tradition of indigenous chieftainship.

As King Sabatha's authority drained away among his fellow-chiefs, it was conversely strengthened by political developments at a national level. Although Thembuland had produced a national President of the ANC (Dr AB Xuma) even before the time of Mandela, such political activities as were then possible were mostly confined to greater Johannesburg. Overt political mobilisation was attempted by such groupings as the Transkei Organised Bodies (TOB), consisting mainly of a small educated elite such as lawyers and teachers, affiliating eventually to the Non-European Unity Movement which collapsed as an organised political force in the late 1950s.¹⁵ Migrant workers continually brought home the politics of their labour centres (PAC, mainly Cape Town; ANC mainly Port Elizabeth) and, in the early 1960s, the small Liberal Party, an ally of the PAC, making a short but determined push into the Transkei, closely associated with Sabatha personally.¹⁶ After the banning of the organisations in 1962, underground networks such as that of the legendary James "Castro" Kati operated freely under Sabatha's protection, and Sabatha himself politicised students at Clarkebury College, meeting secretly at the nearby grave of his forefather, King Ngubengcuka.¹⁷ The Great Place had changed much, it is evident from the days of the Regent Jongintaba.

Not content with replacing King Sabatha with Bambilanga, his more pliable half-brother, or with arresting him in 1979 and driving him into exile; the victorious KD Mathanzima intercepted the king's body on its return from Lusaka in 1986, and organised his funeral against the wishes of the Dalindyebo family. Following the ejection of the Mathanzima brothers at the end of 1987, however, the political wheel once again turned, and General Bantu Holomisa came to power. Sabatha's remains were exhumed in October 1989 and reburied at the Great Place, an event which, for the first time, brought the Transkei homeland back into the political mainstream of the new South Africa.¹⁸

Which brings the discussion back to *Long walk...* . Clearly the Thembu Great Place, even during the time of the Regent Jongintaba, was not so much a political utopia as a hotbed of government interference, financial chaos and factional intrigue not

15 C Bundy, "Land and liberation: Popular protest and the national liberation movements in South Africa," in S Marks & S Trapido, *The politics of race, class and nationalism in twentieth century South Africa* (London, Longman, 1987). The later period is covered in T Gibbs, *Mandela's Kinsmen* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2014), Chapter 2, although I feel he over-emphasises the role of a few individuals whom he calls "the Great Place Gang" to the detriment of external influences, especially those emanating from Govan Mbeki and Port Elizabeth.

16 For this interesting but half-forgotten episode, see R Vigne, *Liberals against apartheid* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1997), Chapter 16. The Liberal Party stronghold near Baziya, home of the APLA commander Sabelo Phama, later inclined towards the PAC. I would like to thank the late Mr Joe Majja for many insights into the condition of Sabatha's Great Place during this period.

17 Discussion with Mr Mafuza Sigabi, then Mayor of the Chris Hani District Municipality, on a visit Clarkebury in May 2008.

18 For Mathanzima's persecution of Sabatha, see B Streek & R Wicksteed, *Render unto Kaiser: A Transkei dossier* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1981), especially chapter 13. For the funerals, see G Dennie, "One king two burials; the politics of funerals in South Africa's Transkei", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 11(2), 1992; for the broader context, JB Peires, "The implosion of Transkei and Ciskei", *African Affairs*, 91, 1992, p. 371.

stopping short of murder. Where does this leave President Mandela's encomium on traditional government, still a controversial and unresolved issue in the new South Africa? Should the reader now assess it according to the criteria of autoethnography?¹⁹ Write it off as a political myth? Or simply dismiss it as the nostalgic rambling of a sentimental old man?

Perhaps, instead, one should rather consider the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) approach recommended by Dr Mxolisi Mchunu (of the Albert Luthuli Museum Council/ KwaZulu-Natal Legislature).²⁰ While researching the oral history of the Bambatha uprising of 1906, Dr Mchunu discovered that, far from rejecting the conventional literature, community historians "assumed that it contained key narratives that would be taken up, confirmed, contested and retold." He later found that his research had enabled him to "tap into pre-colonial values and use these values to construct how African people convey the past in idioms that reflect their indigenous culture."

Long walk... is by no means diminished by the valuable critiques of Bonner and Yekela. Such incidents as the Regent Dabulamanzi being called to order by the "Off-Saddle command; or King Sabatha secretly teaching scholars at the grave of his royal forefather; or being reburied by a nation anxious to restore the integrity of a tarnished kingship; these can only be fully understood in the light of the shared political principles and moral values to which Mandela, in *Long walk...*, had drawn such vivid attention. However far the documentary record may correct the oral record, they clarify rather than refute, complement rather than contradict. Documentary sources should always work in tandem with oral sources. They need each other, and the judicious historian needs both.

19 On auto-ethnography, I have found the following especially helpful: MG Mendez, "Autoethnography as a research method: Advantages, limitations and criticisms", *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, 15(2), 2013, pp. 279-287; L Richardson, "Evaluating ethnography", *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 2000, pp. 253-255. For South Africa specifically, CJ Rassool, "The individual, auto/biography and History in South Africa" (PhD, University of the Western Cape, 2004).

20 Mxolisi Mchunu, "Are rural communities open sources of knowledge?", P Denis & R Ntsimane eds., *Oral history in a wounded country* (Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), pp. 138; 140.