

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

THE RIDDLE OF THE MFECANE; A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE NOTION AND SOME IDEAS ON HOW TO TEACH IT

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Introduction

For many years now the 'Mfecane' has been given a place of prominence in our history syllabuses. For most of the time it has been taught in an uncontested, factual manner suggesting that the events that occurred are not open to re-interpretation. However, now that the history of southern Africa is being examined afresh, it is high time that we as teachers turned our attention to presenting the 'Mfecane' in a more acceptable way. This means that we not only have to keep up to date with fresh interpretations of the events of the period but also teach the material in ways which will engage the interests and cognitive abilities of our students.

What is the 'Mfecane'?

Although the word 'Mfecane' has several shades of meaning, for most historians it describes the series of wars and population migrations set in motion by the explosive expansion of the Zulu State under Shaka. The trouble and general unrest which erupted in S E Africa, in the 1820s and 1830s has for most of the century been blamed on the destructive effects of the rise to power of the Zulu kingdom. Recently, a number of historians researching in the area have suggested that the term 'Mfecane' be abandoned. Indeed, a number of them have challenged the idea that it ever took place! So, for many years, it seems that most teachers may have been propagating yet another historical myth.

New Evidence

Before we throw up our hands in horror, let us look more closely at the evidence. Historians

who created the 'Mfecane' theory based it on the writings of a number of previously revered historians. One of these writers was AT Bryant, whose work *Olden times in Zululand and Natal*, first appeared in 1929. For over sixty years Bryant's account remained virtually unchallenged and formed the basis of the 'Mfecane' theory. This was also popularised by writers like Theal, Omer-Cooper, Morris and even Brookes and Webb. It is only fairly recently that a number of historians have begun to challenge the whole notion of the 'Mfecane'. One of these historians is Dr Johan Wright who, after analysing Bryant's work in his doctoral thesis, arrived at the conclusion that: "His narrative ended up as largely fictionalised interpretation of threadbare evidence. Its status as a definitive or even a reliable account must be rejected." The work of Julian Cobbing, Alan Webster and Jurg Richner has also supported the view that the 'Mfecane' as defined above, may never have occurred.

ARGUMENTS OF THE 'MFECANE' SCHOOL

Before we look more closely at the evidence advanced by historians who reject the idea of the 'Mfecane', let us first consider the main arguments of the 'Mfecane' school.

Although Theal first popularised the concept in the late 19th Century, it was actually Omer-Cooper who "repackaged and relabelled" it as the 'Mfecane'. Since 1966 the idea has, according to John Wright, "permeated the literature both popular and academic inside and outside southern Africa."

To trace the origin of the wars and general unrest which occurred in SE Africa in the 1820s and 1830s, historians of the 'Mfecane' school

have limited their investigation mainly to the Phongolo-Thukela region. (see map). Basing their work on writers like Bryant, Fynn, Isaacs and Kay, they concentrated on the rise of three powerful chiefdoms, the Mthethwa of Dingiswayo kaJobe, the Zulu of Shaka kaSenzangakhona and the Ndwandwe of Zwidi kaLanga. In doing so great attention has been devoted to **personalities**, particularly those of Dingiswayo and Shaka. However, it is Shaka who has been singled out as the main cause of the unrest which eventually spread beyond the Phongolo-Thukela region.

Both Dingiswayo and Shaka have been mythologised. In Dingiswayo's case his role has been greatly romanticised. After expulsion from his tribe for plotting to overthrow his father Jobe, he later returned triumphant, riding a horse and carrying a gun. He ousted his brother Mawewe, built up a powerful army and began a policy of expansion and established trade links with Delagoa Bay. Although he soon established dominance over groups like the Qwabe, Zulu, Buthelezi and Ngwane, he is viewed by most of the earlier white historians as a kind and generous benefactor. We should ask ourselves how reliable this view of Dingiswayo is.

Shaka became Dingiswayo's protégé. In 1817, however, Dingiswayo was captured by the Ndwandwe and put to death. This created the opportunity for Shaka to assume a central role in the region.

Myths about Shaka abound and it is difficult to separate out the 'facts' from misguided interpretations. Much of what has been written about Shaka was based on the views of traders and missionaries who had their own special agenda for portraying him in the worst possible way. The 'Mfecane' theory relies to a great extent on this view of Shaka. The sources A, B, C, D, D1 and E, illustrate how Shaka's personality, disposition and actions have been distorted by writers. Perhaps it is high time we looked at several other sources which present a rather different picture of Shaka. (see sources F, G and H).

How should Shaka be viewed?

What can be fairly safely said about Shaka is that as a result of Dingiswayo's protection, he rose high in the ranks of the Mthethwa army.

On the death of his father, Senzangakhona, he laid claim to the Zulu throne and seized power becoming leader of the small Zulu group which was still under Mthethwa domination.

After the defeat of the Mthethwa by Zwidi, Shaka subdued the Qwabe and rapidly established control over almost all the people of the Thukela with the exception of the Ndwandwe.

The formation of age-sets or **amabutho** whereby boys of similar age were brought together under the control of the king and his officials, had been instituted long before Shaka's time. So too had the basic bull's horn fighting formation. Much of what has been written about Shaka's personality, alleged cruelty and inventiveness has recently been disputed.

The 'Mfecane' school 'two phase' theory

It is claimed by the 'Mfecane' school that Shaka's dominance of the Phongolo-Thukela region sparked off a ripple effect of disruption which spread far and wide. (see map). A number of these historians believed it occurred in two phases. The first phase they describe as the relatively peaceful consolidation of power of chiefs like Zwidi into 'states' or areas of influence and the second, the aggressive phase sparked off by Shaka's attacks.

To explain why these areas of influence or 'states' developed, some historians have suggested that from the 1750s onwards, there was a significant population increase which led to conflict over resources like grazing and water. Others have suggested that centuries of unscientific farming led to a decrease in production and consequent conflict over resources like grazing and water. Another idea is that competition for trade with Delagoa Bay led to the formation of powerful 'states' and therefore conflict. However, all these historians agree that in the end it was Shaka's aggression which triggered off the 'Mfecane'.

Evidence of the anti-'Mfecane' historians

The historians who challenge the 'Mfecane' theory, notably Wright and Cobbing, have taken a fresh look at the available primary and secondary evidence. They have attempted to

look beyond the alleged biased views of many of the traders, missionaries and colonists and have re-interpreted the admittedly scanty evidence available. They believe that they are now in a position to challenge the whole idea of a Zulu-centric 'explosion' or 'Mfecane'. They do not dispute that the 1820s was a period of upheaval but they see the expansion of the Zulu kingdom as a **product** not a **cause** of instability which had begun decades before the birth of Shaka.

In their re-interpretation they pay particular attention to the reasons for certain internal changes which created tension in the Phongolo-Thukela region **long before** the emergence of the Zulu kingdom. From the 1750s onwards they believe that previously peaceful **amabutho** were militarised and smaller kingdoms swallowed up by more powerful neighbours. However, to understand really what had caused these changes they believe it is necessary to look at external factors rather than concentrate mainly on the Zulu.

What were these external pressures which had such a great effect on the Phongolo-Thukela region?

Widespread upheaval

There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that during the period just before the so-called 'Mfecane', there was increasing upheaval and unrest **throughout** southern Africa. This had a direct influence on the Phongolo-Thukela region.

Competition for trade

Much of the unrest can be traced to competition for trade, particularly from the Cape and Delagoa Bay. From the 1750s onwards there was a dramatic increase in the ivory trade. To support the **amabutho** system, cattle were needed for the purposes of rewards to loyal soldiers and for food. As the ivory trade declined there was a significant rise in the cattle trade. So although some pro-'Mfecane' historians mentioned economic factors in their argument, they tended to see them as more localised phenomena.

The slave trade

Anti-'Mfecane' historians have also begun to debate the effects of the slave trade on the region. Up to very recently, most historians rejected the idea that the slave trade was very widespread at the time. Now, however, there is evidence that this trade had been expanding rapidly after 1810, putting great pressure on all 'states' in the region. They also suggest that the evidence of the slave trade was covered up by colonists, traders and others who were involved because they were reluctant to admit what was going on. The so-called aggressive actions of Shaka are seen by these historians as a defence against slave traders.

Raiders

These historians also claim that there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that further pressure on the borders of the Phongolo-Thukela region was exerted by raiding bands of Griquas, Khoi, Xhosas and Boers from across the highveld.

Conclusion

The anti-'Mfecane' school is still in its infancy and needs to produce a more definitive and accurate picture of what occurred in the Phongolo-Thukela region and beyond. However, in general terms they do present a convincing argument that the Zulu-centric 'Mfecane' theory is lacking in credibility and far too simplistic a view of what occurred.

A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING THE 'MFEKANE'

This section lends itself to the child-centred, skill-based and empathetic approach which is gaining ground in many of our schools.

Biographical approach

For slower pupils it is suggested that greater attention be devoted to some of the personalities who played an important role in the Phongolo-Thukela region. The 'Mfecane' theory lends itself to this approach and both Dingiswayo and Shaka can be evaluated although it is suggested that the latter receive more attention because sources are readily available. In a biographical

approach it is important to consider opposing views if sufficient evidence can be found.

Sources

Different views of Shaka often tell us more about the historians than they do about the king. When examining sources A to H (see collection of sources), the teacher will need to explore the background and hidden agendas of the authors who wrote them. Students will then begin to appreciate that history is written from different perspectives and by people with divergent ideologies. The whole issue of interpretation and deduction can be explored by investigating sources of this kind. It is up to the teacher to set questions which will lead students in the right direction. The teacher will soon discover that by using a source-based approach, a wide range of skills can be developed in the classroom.

Empathy

Many teachers are increasingly making use of empathetic exercises to interest and engage their pupils. When making use of empathy in history one is not only trying to involve the pupils emotionally in the past but also students are using a wide range of different skills. In attempting to place themselves 'in the shoes' of people who lived long ago students often discover the universality of problems facing societies throughout the ages. Quite often it is only when students engage in empathy that they understand the relevance of studying the past. The following empathy exercise is an example:

When Dingiswayo (the name means 'Wanderer'), returned to his people after his period of absence with the Hlubi, he was riding a horse and carrying a gun. It is rumoured that he had acquired these from white traders or possibly even slavers. Horses and guns were almost unknown to the Mthethwa at that time. With the help of your fellow students write the script and act out a short play which concerns Dingiswayo's return and seizure of power from Mawewe. You will have to agree on several main characters (in addition to Dingiswayo and Mawewe) and a number of minor personalities. Try to make your play as historically accurate as possible.

An understanding of the influence of economic factors in history is becoming increasingly important. The following barter game is an interesting way to achieve this:

- Play the following barter game in the classroom.
- Students are divided into opposing teams of preferably four to a team.
- Teams represent either the Ndwandwe kingdom (during the time of Zwibe), or the Portuguese at Delagoa Bay. The Portuguese want 200 head of cattle and 30 tusks of ivory. In exchange they are prepared to offer quantities of cloth, beads, copper bracelets and rings, iron and a few guns and some ammunition. Each team negotiates what they consider to be a fair exchange of goods. It is important to bear in mind that if the Ndwandwe demand too much the Portuguese may be tempted to do business with the Mthethwa instead!

Mapwork

Far too little attention is paid in history lessons at school to mapwork. The following exercise, which can be adapted to suit a wide range of scenarios, is suggested as a way of solving this deficiency:

Refer to the map of the Phongolo-Thukela region:

- (a) Why do you think Delagoa Bay became an important trade centre?
- (b) Examine the river network in the region. What were the advantages and disadvantages of rivers for the black 'states' at the time? Are these factors still valid in the region today?
- (c) Using the scale on the map make a rough calculation of the distance from Shaka's Dukuza ikhanda to Delagoa Bay.
- (d) Trace the outline of the map and the river network. Using a modern map of the region as reference, fill in the most important towns and cities on your map.

Tables and Charts

It is suggested that more able pupils are introduced to both the 'old' and the 'new' theories relating to the 'Mfecane'. Although there should still be an emphasis on important personalities, a shift to more interpretative work is recommended. For example, when discussing the 'old' theory, the roles of Shaka and Dingiswayo could be explored and the sources examined. In the 'new' theory there is less emphasis on personalities but the issues of

trade and slavery can be presented in an interesting way (see empathy exercises).

To assist students in understanding the difference between the two theories, it is recommended that tables, charts or diagrams are used. The following table is an example. To make the exercise more interesting and challenging, parts of the table can be blocked out and students asked to fill in the missing information.

TABLE OF TWO THEORIES

THE 'MFEKANE' THEORY	ANTI 'MFEKANE' THEORY
ZULU-CENTRIC EXPLOSION	DEFENSIVE REACTION TO OUTSIDE INFLUENCES
FOCUS ON PHONGOLO - THUKELA REGION	EXAMINES EVENTS THROUGHOUT SOUTHERN AFRICA
LIMITED ANALYSIS OF TRADE	TRADE THROUGHOUT SOUTHERN AFRICA MAJOR FACTOR IN UNREST
CONCENTRATES ON LIMITED TIME-SCALE	EXAMINES PERIOD WELL BEFORE SHAKA'S TIME
SLAVERY LARGELY IGNORED	SLAVERY SEEN AS A MAJOR FACTOR
TENDS TO FOCUS MAINLY ON SHAKA AND OTHER 'GREAT MEN' - SOMETIMES LOOKS AT OTHER FACTORS	EXAMINES WIDER FACTORS

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SOURCE A

In December 1832 Nathaniel Isaacs, a young adventurer and trader, wrote to HF Fynn a fellow trader, urging him when he wrote about the Phongolo-Thukela region, to make Shaka and Dingane "as bloodthirsty as you can, and endeavour to give an estimation of the number of people they have murdered during their reign ... introduce as many anecdotes relative to Chaka as you can; it all tends to swell up the work and make it interesting ... it excites a public curiosity and will tend to make the Government settle it".

Africana Notes and News, Vol 18, No 2, June 1968, p. 67.

SOURCE B

Isaacs himself wrote a book about his experiences in Zululand. (L Herrman (ed), *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*, 1936). His descriptions of Shaka had a great influence on later writers such as Bryant. Read the following extract from the work of Isaacs.

"... Shaka seems to have inherited no redeeming quality. In war he was an insatiable and exterminating savage, and in peace an unrelenting and ferocious despot, who kept his subjects in awe by his monstrous executions, and who was unrestrained in his bloody designs."

J. Bird, *The Annals of Natal* Vol 1, p. 1755.

SOURCE C

JS King, another trader, wrote the following:

"History perhaps does not furnish an instance of a more despotic and cruel monster than Chaka."

J Bird, Vol 1, p. 93 (Note: Bird incorrectly attributes these words to Lieutenant F Farewell).

SOURCE D

Fynn, no doubt following the advice of Isaacs, expressed the following opinion of Shaka:

"The recital of his cruelties, though horrid, is necessary, for the omission might leave him entitled to be regarded only as a savage."

J Bird, Vol 1, p. 67.

SOURCE D1

Now began a policy which, a century later, was to be heard of again in Europe: the policy of Frightfulness. Tchaka is said to have massacred a million people. If a man sneezed before Tchaka he was put to death, and those who grieved over his fate were made to join him. He compelled men to kill their wives or brothers, and forced woman to butcher their babies. He put out the world, as useless encumbrances, the old women in the land; and when his own mother died, he induced an adequate mourning among his subjects by slaughtering seven thousand of them ...

SG Millin, *The South Africans*,
London, 1928, p. 23.

SOURCE E

The respected historians EH Brookes and C de B Webb, writing in 1965, expressed the following opinion:

"... there [was] a great cruelty, an apparently complete insensibility to human suffering. There is a tendency to rehabilitate him nowadays, but there is no escaping the facts."

EH Brookes and C de B Webb, *A History of Natal*, 1965, pp. 11 - 13.

SOURCE F

Charles Ballard presents a totally different picture of Shaka:

"There is no name more revered in the Zulu pantheon than Shaka, the first Zulu king and founder of one of black Africa's most famous and powerful states. Shaka's personal fame and legendary actions have touched the very soul and spirit of the African continent ..."

C Ballard, *The House of Shaka*, 1989, p. 13.

SOURCE G

"The evidence is that Shaka was a comparatively weak king who was murdered by an alliance of family rivals and white warlords. The Dingane state of the 1830s was stronger."

J Cobbing, "Grasping the Nettle: The Slave Trade and the Early Zulu." Unpublished paper presented to a workshop on Natal and Zululand in the Colonial and Precolonial Periods, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, October 1990, p. 18.

SOURCE H

... As a proof of Shaka's sentiments and concern for us, I recollect his saying very seriously to me one day ... 'if it were not for me I fear that there is scarcely [a common man] but would rejoice of having the opportunity to kill all my white people ... I have been often told by my Indaba (council) to kill you wild beasts of Mlungus ... I see and feel that you are a good and superior people; a strange, and wonderful people ...' (Charles Rowden Maclean).

S Gray (editor), *The Natal Papers of 'John Ross'*, University of Natal press, 1992, pp. 72 - 73.
