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Zulu Empire Decolonised: The Epic Story of the Zulu from Pre-Colonial Times to the 21st Century by Shalo Mbatha Johannesburg, South Africa: iZigi Publishing, 2021, p. 392.

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Abstract

The Zulu Empire is one of the well-known empires in Africa and the world. It is well-known for having resisted and militarily defeated the English army in the battle of Isandlwana. However, history writers who predominantly wrote from the outsider perspective distorted a lot of historical events. This article reviews a book written by Shalo Mbatha entitled “Zulu Empire Decolonised: The Epic Story of the Zulu from Pre-colonial Times to the 21st Century”. The article argues how the title remains true to the project of decolonisation. It further demonstrates how Shalo reverses the popular history created by colonisers by presenting events as known by those who lived through them. Her greatest success is in writing the history in the language of the colonised, thus restoring their dignity and having them rewrite their own history.

Keywords

decolonisation, Zulu history, battle of iNcome

The review

Whilst in many sectors there are signs of uneasiness and resignation when it comes to the issues of decolonisation, some of which can be blamed to the metaphorisation of decolonisation; the urgency of the project of decolonisation remains with us. Simply put, decolonisation seeks to undo the exploits of colonisation. That is, usurped lands must be returned; damaged personalities must be restored; distorted

histories must be rewritten. I have argued elsewhere that the conquer of African nations went beyond the military campaigns but was achieved through textualisation (Ntombela, 2012). Every form of documentation including birth, death, matrimony, existence, movement, identity etc., sought to construct a certain image of an African that fit the imaginations of the colonisers. This documentation of every aspect of being went to the extent of historicising about the origins, the progress, and the essence of Africans in ways that fed to the exotic imaginations of Africans' darkened personae. This distortion was not just a past-time activity; it followed the steps of an English proverb that the pen is mightier than the sword. The logic was that even if the colonisers could not totally obliterate the colonised through the sword, they would write them off through the pen. In fact, the very rhetoric of pioneers and travelers such as Christopher Columbus who are said to have gone about discovering lands hinges on the textualisation of those lands, which was part of annexing them through the pen. This textualisation through a plethora of documents was achieved in the language of the coloniser as they were speaking to themselves about those they were conquering through the pen.

So, what has all this to do with the Zulu Empire Decolonised?

This book has remained true to its title of a decolonised Zulu Empire. In the main, it takes the stance of rewriting what was distorted by colonisers about the history of the Zulu Empire. It foregrounds the Zulu Kingdom by celebrating not just its origins but the richness of the philosophy of life of the Nguni people. This is important because the established colonial history painted Africans in general with the brush of savagery, backwardness and primitiveness (Conrad, 1961). The power of the depiction of the life of the Nguni people is buttressed by the fact that it does not come from outsiders who often come with an objectifying ethos in sync with western theorisation. This depiction mimics live stories told around the hearth that connect present heroes with those of the past.

The handling of the Zulu Kingdom through the historical accounts of its dynasty is refreshing. Located within the ethos of oral tradition, these accounts resonate with the richness of storytelling complete with live characters and fascinating plot. It is not just dry historicisation that is not sensitive to the realities of the construction of identities. It owns up to the glories and flaws of characters and happenings.

The book's crafting of the circumstances surrounding the birth of King Shaka, particularly the reign of his grandfather, Jama, reveals fascinating truths about the trappings of stereotyping polygamy especially in royalty. Jama typifies a character that writes own history and thus shape futures for years to come. Not only was he resistant into taking more wives, he was equally opposed to the tradition of killing a twin. That action had lasting impact in the maintenance of the Zulu Kingdom and in the elevation of women in the affairs of the kingdom.

The juiciest part of the book comes from the formation of the most powerful empire in the African soil. Contrary to the dominant discourses that historically presented King Shaka as nothing short of a monster that killed his own people willy nilly, the book faithfully presented a genius who like many characters in world history suffered a tragedy not of his own making. The tragedy that King Shaka went

through is the same tragedy that his nation suffered and continue to suffer. Whilst King Shaka lost his life in the tragedy, his nation gradually lost the land of their ancestors. This tragedy unfolds in the succeeding emperors documenting the scale at which land started to be grabbed by land snatchers. Beginning with King Dingane right up to King Zwelithini, landlessness continued to plague the Zulu nation.

But throughout these difficult times, the book presents the people of the Zulu nation as resilient and uncompromising survivors who welcome death as an inevitable companion. Whether in wars to defend the borders of their remaining ancestral lands or in resistance to brutal regimes past and present, Zulu people live a heroic life but not without enviable hospitality. The book has made such a depiction that makes any Zulu person wish they were nothing else but Zulu.

The book's presentation of the Battle of iNcome is absolutely decolonial. Ncome River was renamed Blood River because history constructed by colonisers depicted a massacre of biblical proportions that turned the river red through the blood of the slain Zulu warriors. According to Van der Walt (2009, p. 36), "So many Zulu died from severe bullet wounds that the Ncome River turned red with blood. The Swiss, F P van Gass, tracked the blood one mile downstream". Even Credo Mutwa (1998, p. 653) in his version of those happenings posits that

... the Zulu tribe paid a ghastly prize. ... The Zulu race bravely faced their punishment at the Battle of Blood River, the only battle in human history where more people were killed than there were shots fired. Ten thousand Zulu warriors laid down their lives in exchange for two slightly wounded Voortrekkers.

Mutwa's version resonates with Van der Walt's (2009, p. 34ff) description of the brutality of Zulu warriors as quoted from Delegorgue's writing:

Did the amaZoulous not delight in stabbing the corpses through and through, stripping them naked, slashing open the bellies of all women whom they believed to be with child, snatching out the unborn infant, and dashing its head against the iron rims of the wagon wheel? It was these self-same men who subsequently came under fire from the Boers. It was these same black warriors tainted with the blood of white women, whose bones we have found.

This is the dominant version that has been constructed both about Zulu people as savage and about the Battle of iNcome. But no one seem to have questioned the logic of renaming Ncome River into Blood River, by non-Zulus. Surely, if the Zulus had been routed so severely that the river turned into blood, the renaming would have been their initiative and it would not have taken a non-Zulu name: Blood River or Bloed Rivier (in Afrikaans). This renaming by non-Zulus would most probably fit the script of constructing the happenings as imagined by colonial historians.

This book has dispelled this dominant history as fallacious. It was a constructed story meant to favour the Boers and present the Zulus as historically conquered and exterminated in order to legitimate land theft. But such construction was conveniently foregrounded by presenting the Zulu as savage and thus expected to suffer the consequences of their inhumaneness. It is this kind of logic that made Mutwa

(1998) conclude that such defeat must have been some form of punishment. It turns out that such a historical account was only a fabrication.

The other decolonised history in this book concerns the genealogy of King Cetshwayo. The dominant history presents King Cetshwayo as the direct descendant of King Mpande (Van der Walt, 2009; Ntombela, 2014). Mbatha (2021) however, explains how King Cetshwayo directly descends from King Shaka, which immediately changes the line for all the succeeding kings. Most importantly, it corrects another construction that King Shaka murdered the sons he had sired.

Perhaps the biggest success in the book lies in speaking to the hearts of the Zulu people in their own language. The title of the English version sets out the agenda of decolonising the Zulu Empire. The criticism of many projects of decolonisation carried out by academics is that they fall short of speaking to the people who are victims of colonisation. This book has succeeded in writing '*uZulu Nobuqhawe BukaZulu*' in a language that resurrects the truthfulness of the essence of being Zulu. To the Zulu, it is part of reliving the story that has always been circulating orally, but to the white, it is correcting the distorted history that they propagated and hence an act of decolonisation. In other words, the book has succeeded in confirming to the Zulu that the stories they always shared around the hearth, sometimes in hushed tones, do not come from mental fabrications but are a connection to the past that goes back even to the land of asazi—a far ancient time that baffles knowledge.

In my opinion, the book presents a practical illustration of how to decolonise history. It highlights how people's trajectories are altered through the pen. If the image of the Zulu people was constructed in this way so as to distort who they are, it would take a bold step to create a counter-construction that represents things from the perspective of the subjects. The book is therefore equally emancipatory for the Zulu people because they have always been spoken about and now, they speak in their own voice, writing back to the empire and conversing among themselves in their own language.

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