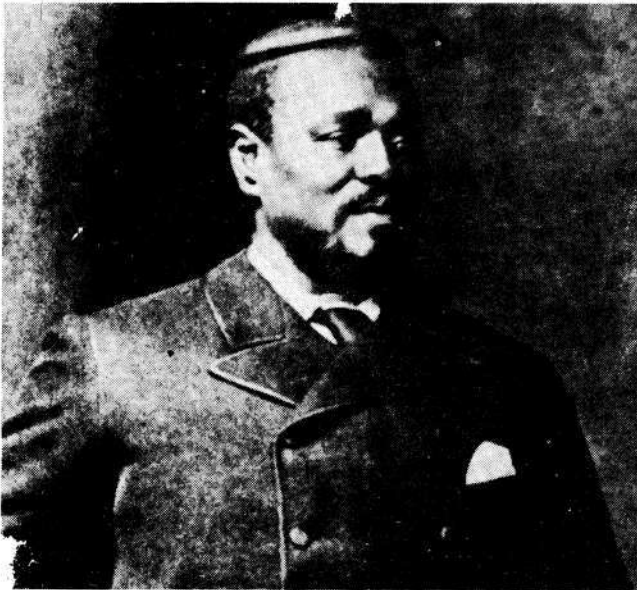


THE 'YEAR OF CETSHWAYO' REVISITED



Cetshwayo kaMpande in exile, 1882

Nineteen eighty three as we are all aware—perhaps too aware—was designated the 'Year of Cetshwayo' by the Kwa-Zulu authorities, and was celebrated in commemorative ceremonies and speeches, the opening of national monuments, and the appearance of one excellent little booklet (1). Are we not, under the circumstances entitled to a respite, particularly as we have in the recent past commemorated the centenary of the Anglo-Zulu war, and been treated to a number of publications dealing with Cetshwayo's career? Need any more be said? Indeed given the outstanding calibre of works such as Jeff Guy's *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom* (Ravan, Johannesburg, 1982), can anything more be said? Appearances to the contrary, there are I believe good reasons why Cetshwayo, both as historical figure and as a symbol in present day South Africa is deserving of further brief attention at this time.

The first and most obvious of these is that while the relevant authorities had sound historical reasons for singling out 1983, in that it marks the centenary of Cetshwayo's final defeat, it was on 8 February, 1984, that he, the last of the independent Zulu rulers, was found dead in his hut near Eshowe. The circumstances of his death are undeniably the stuff of which tragedy is made. Having been banished to the Cape immediately after the Anglo-Zulu war, Cetshwayo was allowed to return to a truncated

portion of his former realm early in 1883. At the insistence of the Natal colonial authorities, a large slice of territory abutting on the Thukela and Mzinyathi rivers was set aside as a reserve for those who allegedly no longer wished to accept Cetshwayo's authority. More ominously, independent control over the north-eastern portion of the former kingdom was vested in Zibhebhu, a chief who even before 1879 had displayed inclinations to greater independence, and who had given vent to his political ambitions in the years which intervened between Cetshwayo's banishment and restoration. In a situation in which many of the king's loyal supporters desired vengeance for the indignities and material losses they had suffered in the recent past at the hands of Zibhebhu and his ally, Hamu, the king's hostile half-brother, and in which Zibhebhu himself feared for his new found prominence, conflict was inevitable. After one major and particularly bloody battle, and much devastation, Zibhebhu launched a surprise attack on the royal homestead at Ondini on 21 July, 1883. The ensuing slaughter was terrible, and large numbers of Zulu leaders loyal to the king lost their lives. Indeed Cetshwayo himself narrowly avoided death, and was left with no option but to seek refuge, firstly in the Nkandla forest, and later at Eshowe, where the British resident in the reserve had his administrative headquarters. It was in this situation, with his country ravaged, his followers in disarray or dead, and he himself a virtual exile, that Cetshwayo died. The official version of the cause of death was 'fatty disease of the heart', but it was widely believed that he had been poisoned. In the view of Jeff Guy, irrespective of whether he was assassinated or died as a result of the hardships endured as a fugitive and refugee, broad responsibility for his death, 'lay with the officials in London who devised his return, and those in Natal who attempted to manipulate the situation in the colony's interests' (2). To this should be added the part played by Hamu, and particularly Zibhebhu, and, perhaps in lesser degree, by some of the king's adherents, and possibly even the king himself. Indeed it is arguable that by 1883 divisions in Zululand already ran too deep, and that short of active British supervision, which was not contemplated, it was as much the fact of Cetshwayo's restoration, as the particular conditions attaching to it, that gave rise to the ensuing civil conflict. Be that as it may, the defeat and flight of Cetshwayo, and his subsequent death have come to symbolise the demise of the old political order in Zululand, for civil war had broken the material power of Zulu society, and ruptured its political cohesion.

On the basis of the circumstances and symbolic import of his death alone, Cetshwayo's entitlement to historical

prominence would seem secure, and the same could be said of his earlier career. Not everyone, however, would agree, for as Carolyn Hamilton has pointed out in a recent number of this journal (3), precolonial history as a scholarly discipline and as a teaching subject has its critics. In their view, precolonial history is at best irrelevant to the needs of Black South Africans, and at worst is a hindrance to those working for change in this country; ethnic divisions are emphasized and legitimized, as are aspects of tribal authority whose dangerous meaninglessness today is thereby obscured. Whatever the validity of these assessments of precolonial history as such, they do acquire a certain additional force when figures from the precolonial past are appropriated as public property, and become objects of inspiration and exaltation. The 'Year of Cetshwayo' may be a classic case in point. Might not his commemoration be used to mobilise support for an ethnically based, quasi-traditional political organisation? Indeed has it not already acquired this status? For it is both illuminating and sobering to reflect that the recent tragic events on the campus of the University of Zululand occurred at the time of a ceremony which formed part of the 'Year of Cetshwayo' celebrations. Might it not be that his recent resurrection and elevation provided not only the occasion for this tragedy, but also part of the animus behind it? If this is so, his memory will indeed have served to divide Blacks in their struggle, to compound the difficulties they face, and to delay and jeopardise the prospects of change. What a bitter irony it will be if Cetshwayo, who in life opposed white domination, should in death effectively prolong it. Cetshwayo will then be arrayed on the side of 'volksheide' like Retief, Pretorius and Kruger, while the ghosts of his arch-enemies in later life, Shepstone and High-Commissioner Frere, look on perplexed, but not without approval.

All in all, one might justifiably regret Cetshwayo's public commemoration, even if it is now fruitless to do so, and even if we may have thus confirmed for ourselves the dangers of ethnic mobilisation. But notwithstanding these unpromising omens, a commemorative re-appraisal of Cetshwayo's career can yet prove valuable. Nor does this require that we should claim especial personal merit for Cetshwayo, admirable and capable through he undoubtedly was.

For one thing, Cetshwayo need not be seen as an ethnic hero; indeed the extent to which he can accurately be cast in that mould is debatable. Cetshwayo was indisputably the King of the Zulu, but it is worth remembering that ethnic designations are liable to redefinition - both by the rulers and the ruled (4). The category, Zulu, is no exception, for over the last one hundred and eighty years it has changed radically in scope and content. Whereas at the beginning of the last century, it referred to an insignificant socio-political group residing in central Zululand, some thirty years later it embraced those incorporated into the Shakan state, who had hitherto regarded themselves as something other than Zulu. By the end of the nineteenth century, it had come to apply to growing numbers of people outside Zululand who had never acknowledged the rule of Cetshwayo, while our current understanding of the term as applying to all Zulu speakers is a relatively recent development. From this perspective, Cetshwayo is not the embodiment of the Zulu ethos, but represents at most a phase in its continuing evolution. Certainly, the historical data do not support the contention of our

rulers that ethnicity is an immutable and timeless social phenomenon. The evidence from the more recent past, not to mention the present, highlights further that it does not necessarily reflect the highest stage of social organisation; it can coexist and interact with, as well as be superseded by other forms of social, racial and, in a wider sense, national identification.

Beyond that there are other good reasons why Cetshwayo need not and can not be simply depicted as an ethnic folk hero; in a very real sense he is part of our common heritage as South Africans. And this is more than just a matter of the history of South Africa being the sum of its component parts, or, especially in the case of Whites, of 'getting to know' about the other inhabitants of the sub-continent, important as these considerations are, given the prejudices, distortions and Eurocentric bias which still pervade the structure and content of some school and other syllabuses. For, looking at the career of Cetshwayo as a whole, one is struck by the extent to which the problems he faced, and, perhaps in lesser measure, the solutions he attempted, had as much to do with circumstances beyond his kingdom's borders, as within them⁽⁵⁾. What is equally true is that his actions had repercussions not only in Zululand, or even in the communities adjoining his own, but as far afield as the imperial metropole itself. In this sense also Cetshwayo personifies less the archetypal ruler of a pristine traditional society, as some of the critics as well as proponents of his commemoration might argue, than a transitional figure, increasingly caught up, and influenced by wider political and economic forces beyond his control, which were ultimately to envelop him and his country, as they did others in South Africa. But the import of his final death and defeat is even more stark. As I have already suggested, and the earlier changes that had begun to take place notwithstanding, they signify the onset of a new epoch in the history of those whom he had ruled. Within a matter of years, they were to be stripped of much of their land, to fall under European jurisdiction and increasingly to seek work on the farms and mines and in the towns of South Africa, a fate that was, however, by no means peculiar to them. In the process, their former rulers were gradually transformed into agents of White domination.

From this perspective then, remembering Cetshwayo may have much of value to tell all of us about South African society as it was and has become.

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