

A visit to uSitaku

by Nellie Fincher

Introductory Note

Nellie Fincher (1872–1946) was a writer who worked for the Natal Witness. She was married to William Wells-Wyld. Between 1908 and 1910 she had six novels and collections of short stories published, of which the best known is The Heir of Brendiford.¹ Her books were published either in Durban or Pietermaritzburg, and some were also published in England. In her preface to Good Measure she explained that the novel was the outcome of four months that she spent in Zululand, staying with missionary friends, during which time she interviewed Zulus.² The letter published here describes an episode during her stay. A typed copy of the original manuscript is held by the Killie Campbell Africana Library of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Permission to publish it here has been granted by the Campbell Collections of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.³ The letter has been shortened and edited for publication. Where possible, the Zulu names and terms have been corrected.

Notes

- 1 Nellie Fincher, *The Heir of Brendiford: A South African Sketch* (Durban, 1909).
- 2 Nellie Fincher, *Good Measure: A Novel of South African Interest* (Pietermaritzburg, 1910).
- 3 University of KwaZulu-Natal, Campbell Collections, Killie Campbell Africana Library, The Nellie Fincher collection, Uncatalogued Manuscripts.

Elwyn Jenkins and Adrian Koopman

KwaMagwaza
Melmoth P.O.
Zululand
March 1st, 1910.

DEAR Mrs Mackeurtan,

I see that you are appointed secretary of the S.A.N.S., and I write to draw the attention of the Society to an ancient and interesting landmark, a link with the past, which in a little while will be swept away. The old order of things in Zululand is passing away and giving place to new; evolution-transition is going on silently and steadily, and in a generation or so there will be nothing left to denote the power and greatness of the old Zulus. There is an old prince, son of King Mpande, who has escaped the effect of transition going on all around. USitaku is living as the people of the country lived a hundred years ago, in a traditional town, such as described by Rider Haggard, and now almost obsolete. There is no other kraal of the kind in Zululand; Zulu huts there are plenty, but they have been modified, improved, or altered to suit the state of transition of the owner. When one reads of a kraal in which thousands of people lived, and how the writer said they were tired of walking down the long street of huts, one realises how altered Zululand of to-day is, and soon the oldest inhabitant will not remember what a real Zulu town was like.

When I visited eNtembeni on Sunday afternoon, and was told that when old uSitaku died the huts would be pulled down or allowed to fall to pieces, I began to understand. A patriotic Zulu, who had himself passed through several stages of transition, said, "There is not another town like eNtembeni left in Zululand, and when

it is finished there will be no more."

My friends had not a horse available so I determined to walk, with two Zulu Christian girls as escorts. "I want to see uSitaku before he dies," I said. "He is so old and feeble that I must go while I can." We followed tracks up-hill and down, through a heathen country out of the beaten track of white people. We went through several kraals, when the people were eating or sleeping and the babies were crying; then we came to a rushing, surging river in a beautiful thorn valley. A glade here and there was blue with agapanthus lilies or bright with glorious pink ones. I said to the girls, "I believe we have lost our way," and so we had, the short way. However, we had to cross a river. The girls got through easily with their scanty clothing, but I had to take off my shoes and stockings, and hold up skirts above my knees. I hung on to Matilda. The rock on which I stood began to slope backward, and I felt myself slipping into the deep, cold water. A heathen woman sprang forward, and I grabbed her tight. She saved the situation, and then how we did laugh. The rushing water made such a noise and confused one. The saver of the situation directed us up over the mountain in front of us. Then we went up and up until we seemed to be on the edge of the world, but how beautifully cool and fresh the air, but how burning the sun!

Again I said to the girls, "I cannot go a step further. I am sure we have gone out of our way. We never ought to have gone down into the thorn valleys. We ought to have kept up." ENtembeni, like all Zulu dwellings, is on a height. My companions carried a change of raiment, a coat and things for the night on their heads for me, and at last weary

and almost speechless with fatigue we reached eKuthuleni (the House of Hope), a Swedish mission station where we were to stay over Sunday. We had started at half-past eight in the morning, and we arrived at the mission station at half past four. All that time we were walking except for one hour when the girls made a fire, boiled water and made tea for me. Miss Stokes had put some sandwiches for me in a basket and some thick slices of bread and jam for the girls, and I gave them the teapot afterwards. It was very fortunate we had some food with us, as we got lost.

Close by eKuthuleni is eNtembeni, the old Zulu town. On Sunday afternoon my hostess woke me. One of the princes had been to church in the morning, and the same young man, uBafana, was in the sorghum fields directing the servants who were scaring birds away from the crops and killing them with a sling and a stone as we passed. He saluted us, and Mrs Sandstrom told him we wanted to visit the old man, his father. He left his work and conducted us. We entered between two huts. There were huts, two- and in some places three-deep, covering a space of several acres. The township was laid out in a circle, and in the centre is the huge cattle kraal. USitaku used to have 200 or 300 cattle at eNtembeni, and others at kraals of his ministers and relations. Now there are only 20 left of those at the huts or 300 at eNtembeni, the others have died of sick fevers. The young prince could not tell us how many huts there were. It is unlucky to count. Someone will die, they think, if huts, cattle or people are counted. He said about 40 huts and looked uncomfortable. In the Natal blue-book afterwards we

read that there were 60 living huts and 600 people. We deliberated about that although the place seemed teeming with women and children, and there was quite a busy hum of life – such as it is. There are kitchen huts and store huts. USitaku has had 50 to 60 wives; each wife has a hut and every man has more than one wife. There are councillors, indunas, servants. Great etiquette is maintained and we all agreed there was a certain dignity about the old royal Zulus themselves. They are tall, fine and courtly in their bearing. USitaku is Shaka's nephew, quite of the old stock, and the very last to keep up the old order of things.

UBafana went in with our message and then stood on guard at the entrance, until word came from the servant to say we could be admitted. We heard the poor old man coughing and speaking in his quavering voice. It was piteous. A servant came to tell us we might come and the prince conducted us into the royal presence. New mats had been put on the floor for us to sit on. It is not etiquette to speak until spoken to. It was dim in the hut, and I could not distinguish anything at first. Then I made out the great big figure of a man rolled in a blanket on the floor. He must be over eighty, but his hair is not white. There is always something grand, I think, about the very old, and I have visited old men in the hospitals and work-house at home and have noticed the same thing. USitaku has been accustomed to command and has been treated with the greatest respect all his life. It gives him a distinguished, grand air. I wished that I, a white woman, understood Zulu etiquette. For instance, I made a great mistake in going out of the hut backwards; in fact I wondered how I

was going to get out at all. It expresses suspicion of hospitality.

USitaku said he had lost five children last year. When he heard I was English and came from London, he immediately asked “How was uDinuzulu, and where was he?” His father’s voice was so weak and quavering that uBafana had to translate. Again, when the old man wanted to turn over to view us better, the servant, a very nearly naked umfana, was called to roll him over. In parenthesis, so to speak, he asked uBafana how they were working in the fields, and if such-and-such a one was taking his or her part. I asked him about uMzimele, Mr Robertson, the first S.P.G. missionary at KwaMagwaza. USitaku said he had once been there to see uMzimele, and uMzimele had been to see him at eNtembeni.

When we talked of iSandlwana the old man was too polite to say anything. He very cleverly changed the subject by making a joke. Mrs Sandstrom said she was born on that day. USitaku said she must be a baby indeed, and as for uBafana, he was born since and knew nothing. We all laughed heartily. They told him I wanted to know all the old stories. He said, “You ask my sister Hannah (a Christian). She is older than I, and remembers more.”

In a few minutes the old man was exhausted in spite of his good humour and courtesy. It is not etiquette to go until we are dismissed. Mrs Sandstrom whispered, “USitaku would not understand if we got up and said good-bye in the ordinary way. It would be an insult.” After a fit of coughing uSitaku bade us farewell. He offered his hand and shook hands, murmuring compliments and blessings and smiling all over his pleasant face! I moved aside so that I could see him well, and

the sun lit up his countenance while he shook hands. He has a high forehead and clear-cut features. “Goodbye, Sitaku,” I said again, forgetting Zulu etiquette, which does not permit one to mention the name of a prince in his presence. “Ah,” thought I, “this grand old man is the last of the old order. His people are rapidly putting on European clothes and moving on, but he has stood still. It would be fitting that he should be a Christian and depart in peace. Who knows what he thinks as he lies there. His sister is a Christian and he lives within the sound of a church bell. When the missionaries first came he wanted to kill them, but his manner of greeting us showed that his attitude had changed.”

I talked about this to Mrs Sandstrom. She told me that not long since one of the store huts was in flames, and the fire was spreading to the whole town. An induna was on the roof of the next hut, imploring the aid of the spirits to aid them in extinguishing the flames. The Christian schoolchildren ran out to see the flames, and then the bell rang for church. “Ehe!” said the induna, dropping his hands and ceasing to pray. “The umfundisi will pray better than I.” The wind turned and took the flames out into the fields instead of amongst the other huts. “It is the God of the abelungu,” said the men, “who has the keys of the Winds.” The fire was soon extinguished, and the Christian children ran back laughing and chatting, full of excitement, and told about everything, and how uNkulunkulu had helped to put the fire out.

We walked round the town, stopping to admire the different huts and to laugh with the children, conducted by uBafana. We talked to old Hannah a

bit, and then uBafana took us a short cut through the fields, and then left us. By the bye, this young man had a fine sense of humour, with all his dignity. I turned round on the path and said to him “Oh, I never heard ‘Ndabezitha’, the royal salute which all the people say to those Zulus of the royal blood when they speak. They told me this visit to uSitaku was the only chance and you didn’t say it.” The young man laughed heartily but courteously. “The inkosi is my father,” he said.

I must not stop to tell you of the journey back. How I rode on a horse with a man’s saddle, the stirrup thrown over, for 15 miles, and just as the girls and I got near a gate, the horse stumbled and I tumbled over his head, and how he looked at me with his kind brown eyes, and waited. I scrambled

up and found I was not hurt a bit.

I hope this visit to eNtembeni and uSitaku will interest you and your society. I have not told it well, but if any members of S.A.N.S. were in eShowe I should advise them to drive to eNtembeni, about 20 miles. The people at the Swedish Mission Station are always pleased to put people up and act as interpreter, and they have a large comfortable house and do not expect anything. Perhaps strangers would like to give something to the sick and poor fund for the Mission.

Poor uSitaku will not last long. Then eNtembeni will be no more.

With kindest regards,

Yours sincerely,

Nellie Fincher

Published by kind permission of the Campbell Collections, University of KwaZulu-Natal.