

Crossing the river

by Adrian Koopman

Introduction

WHEN one reads any history of the early “Zulu kingdom”, before, during, and after the rule of Shaka kaSenzangakhona, one is struck by the wide-spread and continual movement of people across the landscape of the then Natal and Zululand. Some of this movement was part of the general southwards movement of the Nguni-speaking peoples as various clans continually sought that ideal valley where they could stop and settle; much of the movement was the movement of regiments and armies as they sought to dominate weaker groups and take their cattle; and consequently much movement was the result of weaker clans seeking to evade capture by stronger clans. Where such movements took place from west to east, from the higher ground inland (*enhla*) to the lower ground on the coast (*enzansi*), there was very little crossing of major rivers involved. But given the topography of what is now KwaZulu-Natal, any movement south and north involved the crossing of rivers.

A history such as Bryant’s 1929 *Olden Times in Natal and Zululand* continually mentions such crossing of rivers. The following are a just a few examples of hundreds:

“Shaka carried his arms across the Mzinyati river and invaded the territory of the Kuzes” (1929:232);

“Led by Mjoli, [the Xesibe clan...crossed the Mzimkhulu and sought hospitality of Faku, chief of the Mpondos” (1929:254);

“Macingwane led the terror-stricken multitude...reaching the Polela, he crossed it and the Mzimkhulu, above their junction, wheeled abruptly back down country, crossed the Ngwangwane...” (1929:270); and

“Mdingi of the Memela clan...on his ignominious flight back to Natal plunged through the Mzimkulu, the Mzambe and half a dozen other rivers until at length he found a cozy nook down by the mouth of the Mkomazi” (1929:351).

For many clans, crossing a major river as part of a migration to a final resting place, or, perhaps more importantly, relocating over a river after a major political upheaval, was important enough to be reflected in their clan praises (*izithakazelo*), and in this brief article we shall look at how some clan praises record river-crossings.

Izithakazelo

Each and every clan in KwaZulu-Natal has in addition to its own clan name (*isibongo*) its own clan praises (*izithakazelo*). These typically consist of a number of personal names of individuals important in the history of the clan (progenitor, kings and chiefs, notable heroes), and these names are frequently interspersed by short narrative or descriptive phrases. The length of a clan praise (as with all oral forms) is never fixed, and will depend on several factors, such as the memory of the individual reciting the praises, and the occasion when the praises are recited. Individual praise names may be used in casual greetings or references;¹ a more formal occasion such as a wedding or funeral will require the recitation of the full praises.

As an example of a clan praise, let us look at the following, taken from Sithole’s 1982 collection of Zulu clan names and clan praises:

Praises of the Jali clan (Sithole 1982:32):

Sijongo!	<i>Sijongo!</i>
Shongolo ngiyakwesaba	<i>I am afraid of the millipede</i>
Ngesab’ imiledzeledze.	<i>I fear its multitudes of legs.</i>
Nina bakwaBhengu	<i>You of the house of Bhengu</i>
Okwathi nidons’ entabeni	<i>Of whom it is said your hills are steep</i>
Naphenduka nathi “jati”	<i>You turned and said “jati”²</i>
Nabhek’ emuva kungafanele	<i>You headed back, which was unfitting</i>
Kwaze kwathiwa ningabakwaJati.	<i>Until it was said you are of the house of Jati.</i>
Sigampu!	<i>Sigampu!</i>
Ngwane!	<i>Ngwane!</i>
Dlabazane!	<i>Dlabazane!</i>
Nin’ enimbewumbili.	<i>You who are of two seeds.³</i>
Itshe likaNtunjambili	<i>Rock of Ntunjambili⁴</i>
Elingavulwa ngabantu	<i>Which is not opened by humans</i>
Elivulwa yizinkonjane	<i>It is opened by the swallows</i>
Zona zindiza phezulu.	<i>Those which fly above.⁵</i>
Nyaluthi ajingijole	<i>Bullrush millet and bramble-berry</i>
Ngcolosi!	<i>Ngcolosi!</i>
Phumela!	<i>Phumela!</i>
Mdineka!	<i>Mdineka!</i>
Nyawo kaziphumuli.	<i>The feet do not rest.⁶</i>

Let us look now at the praises of the Mazibuko clan, as they contain references to river-crossing. Note that the name of the clan is derived from the plural form (*amazibuko*) of the noun *izibuko* (“river-crossing, ford, drift”). As an example of how oral forms can never be “fixed”, two versions are given, the first from Sithole (1982:56), the second from the ZuluRing website.⁷

Praises of the Mazibuko clan (Sithole 1982:56):

Nzima!	<i>Nzima!</i>
Mwelase!	<i>Mwelase! (Mr River-crosser)</i>
Wen’ ongaweli ngezibuko	<i>You who do not cross by the ford</i>
Bath’ abanye bewela ngezibuko	<i>When others were crossing by the ford</i>
Wen’ ubuwela ngesihlengela somfula.	<i>You were crossing by means of a river-raft.</i>
UShumu laqhasha lashumbuka.	<i>Shumu got ripped up and torn off.</i>
Phuthini!	<i>Phuthini!</i>
Mgabh’ amafu	<i>Mr Depender-on-the-clouds</i>
Mafu aphezulu	<i>The clouds above</i>
Azenz’ ubuhalahala.	<i>Which move about restlessly.⁸</i>
Njingili ngokufulathela.	<i>Njingili through turning the back.</i>
Nina bakaMasine kaqhakazi	<i>You the children of Masine do not bloom</i>
Nina bakoDlungwane waseMangweni.	<i>You children of Dlungwane from eMangweni.</i>

Extracts from the praises of the Mazibuko clan (ZuluRing):

Wena ongaweli ngezibuko,	<i>You who do not cross by the ford,</i>
Owela ngezihlangu zamadoda	<i>Who crosses by the shields of men</i>
....
....
Okwathiwa ngoba nakhu	<i>Of whom it is said that here is one</i>
Esevula izibuko lokuwela	<i>Opening up a ford for crossing</i>
Kwathiwa nguMwelase.	<i>It is said he is Mr River-Crosser.</i>

It is perhaps ironic that a clan whose very name means “ford” or “drift” contains the line “You who do not cross by the ford”. Later in this article we will look at why certain people, when faced with the need to cross rivers, do not choose to do so at the fords. At this stage, however, we should note that the construction *You who do “A” while others do “B”* is a very common one in clan praises. It is a type of oral formula which emphasises the uniqueness of the clan being praised. The sub-narrative of lines 3-5 above (Sithole version) is something like “Most people cross a river by using the ford or drift. It is after all the most obvious and easiest way of crossing a river. We, however, we the Mazibukos, do not do things like everybody else. *We* choose to cross the river by using rafts (or by paddling across on shields)”.

The same kind of formula can be seen in the following extracts from the Sibiya and the Maphumulo clans:

Sibiya (Sithole 1982:107):

Sibiya ngankomo *Mr Encloser-by-means of cattle*
Abafokazana bebiya ngamahlahla. *[Whereas] the common folk enclose by means of branches*

Maphumulo (Sithole 1982:48):

Nina bakaNcama ngashishayo *You the descendants of Ncama⁹ of the hot food*
Abanye bencama ngabandayo *[Whereas] others satisfy themselves with cold food*

Let us now turn to the crossing of rivers, as reflected in Zulu clan praises.

Crossing the river

In the early days of what is now KwaZulu-Natal, before the days of colonial bridge-building, there can be no doubt that the easiest ways of crossing a river would have been at the shallow drifts where people could wade across. Bryant's *Olden Times* is full of references of wading across rivers at the shallow fords. For example we learn (1929:8) that in order to get to where they finally settled the "Mpukunyoni immigrants...forded the iNyalazi River" (1929:8) and that Matiwane of the amaNcwane "forded the Mzinyati river and skirted the vacant lands along the eastern flanks of the Drakensberg mountains in search of land on which to settle" (1929:139). "Hordes" and "punitive expeditions" alike had to "go by ford" when attacking their targets.

Bryant tells us (1929:253) that "Down towards the Tukela the Tembu horde swarmed, and, fording the river 20 miles ahead, fell upon the unexpectant amaMncwabe", and "The Cunu horde,...wading the broad torrent of the [Tukela]...entered the territory of...the eNadi clan" (1929:268), while a "punitive expedition" sent by Sobhuza of the amaNcwane to tackle Zwide of the Ndwandwes "...waded towards his Zombode kraal over the Phongolo [river]..." (1929:318).

The following extract from the praises of the Nzama clan refers to crossing by means of a ford, although the activities of those left behind may seem a little obscure (Sithole 1982:100):

Nina bakwaNombhoco *You of the house of Nombhoco*
Enawela ngezibuk' elibanzi *Who crossed by means of a wide ford*
Abafokozana basala becosh' izindondo. *The common folk remained behind picking up Brass balls.*

The ZuluRing version has it like this:

Wena owawela ngelibanzi *You who crossed by the wide one*
Kwasala izindondo *There remained behind brass balls*
Zacoshwa abafokazana. *They were picked up by the common folk.*

Where there is no mention of how the river is actually crossed, one must assume that it was done by a ford, as with the Sithole clan crossing the uThukela and the Majola clan crossing the uMzimkhulu:

Sithole (Sithole 1982:110):

Nina enabulala abathakathi njengoShaka *You who killed the wizards as Shaka did*

Nadlula nawel' uThukela. *You passed on and crossed the uThukela.*

Majola (Sithole 1982: 45):

Majol' omkhulu *The great Majola*

Owajol' inkomo yakwaNobhengu *Who stole a beast from the house of Nobhengu*

Weqa nayo phesheya koMzimkhulu *And crossed with it to the other side of the Mzimkhulu.*

Avoiding the fords

Despite the fact that using a ford was unquestionably the easiest and safest way of crossing a river, many clans have praises which indicate that fords were eschewed and some other way of crossing the river was chosen. We have already seen in the praises of the Mazibuko clan above that they did *not* cross by the ford, but by “river raft”. Bryant (1929:292) explains the “river-raft”:

Junod tells us that the Tembus came down by way of the Nkomati river ‘on a floating island of papyrus’, which being interpreted probably meaneth [sic] that they (or he) crossed that river by means of an *isiHlenga* (or raft formed of a large bundle of reeds, used for crossing rivers).

Bryant enlarges on the notion of a river-raft in his *Dictionary* (1905:248):

Isi-Hlenga, *n.* Float, consisting of a bundle of reeds, along the top of which a man lies on his stomach, holding on to a forked-stick thrust in at the front, and is thus pushed by a swimmer across a full river; hence, raft.

Like the praises of the Mazibuko clan quoted above, both the Nhlapho and the Shoba clan praises refer to this way of crossing the river, as we see in the following extracts.

The Nhlapho praises have (Sithole 1982:89):

Abangaweli ngezibuko *Those who do not cross by the ford*

Abawela ngesihlengethe *They cross by means of river rafts*

and the Shoba praises are almost exactly the same (Sithole 1982:104):

Ongaweli ngezibuko *You who do not cross by the ford*

Owela ngezihlenga zemifula *You cross by means of river rafts.*

The word that Bryant gives for the floating bundle of reeds is *isihlenga*, and *isihlengethe* and the plural *izihlenga* above are either regional variations or the result of not quite accurate memories. It is probably also a lapse in memory in the case of the person who supplied Sithole with the praises of the Mkhwanazi

clan, where the rafts are specifically identified as “sea-rafts” (Sithole 1982: 67):

Nin’ eningaweli ngezibuko *You who do not cross by the ford*
Kodwa niwela ngezihlengela¹⁰ zolwandle *But you cross by means of sea-rafts.¹¹*

The praises of the Khoza clan also show how crossing by the ford was avoided in favour of other options (Sithole 1982:35):

Mwelase *Mr River Crosser*
Ongaweli ngezibuko *Who does not cross by the fords*
Owela ngezimpambosi zomfula *Who crosses by the deviations in the river*
....
Msuth’ owawela ngesihlengela. *Msuthu who crossed by means of a raft.*

Note that here, as with the praises of Mazibuko above, the Zulu verb *wela* (“cross over”, with specific reference to a river) has been made into a personal name by adding the personal noun class 1 prefix (*u)m-* and the name-forming suffix *-se*. We see also that in addition to using a river-raft (again the variant *isihlengela*), the Khoza clan used *izimpambosi*, glossed by Bryant (1905:483) as “anything in the nature of a turning-off from a main-course, as a branch-stream...”.

Other clans too, in the past, eschewed the main fords when crossing rivers in favour of side-streams less likely to attract attention, and this is reflected in their praises. Sithole records the Mnguni clan praises as saying (Sithole 1982:70):

Mwelase! *Mr River Crosser!*
Ongaweli ngezibuko *Who does not cross by the ford*
Owela ngempambuse zomfula *But crosses by the deviations in the river.*

The Sangweni praises are similar (Sithole 1982:102):

Nina eningaweli ngezibuko *You who do not cross by the ford*
Eniwela ngezimpande zomfula *You cross by the roots of the river.*

The word “roots” here does not make sense, but as with “impambuse” in the Mnguni praises, the use of “izimpande” (“roots”) is surely the result of a faulty memory.

The question arises as to why people should avoid fords and drifts when these were the most obvious places to cross a river. The answer may well be simply be that *because* they were the most obvious places, it was simple to guard them if one did not want a particular group of people to cross a river. Bryant tells us (1929:25) that when Ngoza, chief of a junior branch of the Thembu clan, got wind of an impending attack by Shaka, he

...sent to the Cunu chief, Macingwane...to join against the common foe by guarding the lower fords, while he (Ngoza) barred the way above at Hlazakazi mount....

We also hear from Bryant (1929:508) of the Ngcolosi clan, who had established themselves on a bank of the uThukela river near a well-known ford, and were tired of various people using the ford trampling through their crops. To prevent this, these Ngcolosis

had a very serviceable tribal strong-man, who was highly respected by the enemy. His name was Njikiza, son of Cuba, and his massive knobkerrie, which did most of

the service, he had nicknamed **Nohlolamazibuko** (Miss Look-after-the-fords, that no undesirable immigrant may cross).

It is possible that the Ndlovu clan found themselves in a similar position, for in their clan praises we find the lines (ZuluRing)

Mthiyane *Obstructor*
Ngokuthiy' amadoda emazibukweni. *Through obstructing the men at the fords.*

Ironically for a clan whose name means “gateways”, the Masango (< the plural of *isango* “gateway”) were also in the business of closing of the fords, in their case with spears (ZuluRing):

Mvalane *Closer-up*
Wena owavala ngomkhonto emazibukweni. *You who closed up the fords with a spear.*

Other ways of crossing the river

So far we have looked at three ways of crossing a river: the obvious way, by using a ford or drift, avoiding the obvious way by using side-streams and “deviations”, and by floating across on a bundle of reeds. These are, however, by no means the only ways of crossing rivers.

In the praises of the Khambule clan, we find the lines (Sithole 1982:34):

Nina basemaNcubeni *You who originated from the Mncube clan*
Enabalekel' uShaka *[When] fleeing from Shaka*
Naziphonsa emfuleni *You threw yourself into the river*
Kwakhuz' abantu banifihla. *Greatly surprising the people you were hiding from.*

Now this may not mean actually crossing the river, but could refer to hiding (perhaps among the reeds) while in the river. But throwing yourself into the river can also be a means of crossing the river, as in the narrative from Bryant (1929:382,3) concerning Mdingi of the Memelas, Nombewu of the enTlangwini and Madikane of the Zelemus, all three of whom crossed the Mzimkhulu from north to south *circa* 1821. When the Zulu army, looking for Macingwane of the Cunus, came across Madikane instead,

Madikane dived headlong into the Mzimkulu river, and over. When he rose to the surface on the other side, whom should he meet staring him in the face but that old rogue Nombewu....

In the case of the Myeza clan, it would seem that they crossed a river with the help of a rope woven out of *umzungulu*¹² fibre (Sithole 1982:81):

Nin' enawela ngomzungulu *You who crossed by means of an umzungulu rope*
Umzungulu wasala wabola. *The umzungulu rope remained behind and rotted.*

It is not clear whether they swung across the river on the rope, or tied it across the river to aid those wading through the waters. Even less clear is how the

umzungulu was used in the river activities of the Msomi clan (Sithole 1982:74):

Nina enehla ngomzungulu	<i>You who came down by the umzungulu rope</i>
.....	...
Izinyoni ezewasa umfula	<i>The birds¹³ who went down the river</i>
Ukuba ziwenyusa ngabe zafa zonke	<i>When they tried going upstream they all died.</i>

In the case of the Nyembe clan, the crossing is done by means of the large grain storage basket (*isilulu*) (ZuluRing):

Wena kaSiwela	<i>You the son of Mr Crosser</i>
Owawel' umfula ngesilulu.	<i>Who crossed the river in a grain-basket.</i>

The grain-basket usually appears in the phrase *Nina enehla ngesilulu* (“you who came down in the grain-basket”), a reference to the group of clans loosely known as the amaNtungwa, who were said to have come down from the north with this useful item for storing grain.

Although not reflected in any clan praises that I know of, Bryant (1929:463) records a most unusual way of crossing a river. He tells of Zwangendaba, founder of the aNgoni people of the north-eastern side of Lake Malawi, who, in attempting to cross the Zambezi river in his trek north found that “the mighty Zambezi presented an impossible barrier to further progress.” But Zwangendaba, says Bryant, knew that “what could not be accomplished by natural means, could as effectively be accomplished by magic”:

He accordingly summoned the tribal magician, Chitusi...and instructed him to bring his charmed *umShiza* [stick], such a one, no doubt, as Moses...possessed. With this the mighty river was struck, when lo! its waters divided and the host of Zwangendaba passed over on dry ground. Struck again, the waters returned, and the great Zambezi renewed its normal flow as before and ever since.

We might think that this piece of oral history owes a great deal to stories told by early missionaries of how Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea, but Bryant (*ibid*) is a little more cynical when he says “We have often wondered whether what was struck was not more likely the backs of obstreperous Tonga boatmen”.

Today the most obvious way of crossing a river is not by a drift, but by a bridge. We do not expect to hear, though, that in Shakan times any river was crossed by a bridge, and certainly there are no references to this in any recorded *izithakazelo*. And yet Bryant does have a story of a river (or rather, a stream) being crossed by a bridge, and in most unusual circumstances. I summarise roughly the story he tells (1929:516) of Majiya of the emaPhephetheni clan:

Majiya, the son of Msika, was killed by Zihlandlo of the Mkhizes. To avoid further loss, the Mphephethas sought protection from the whites in Durban. On their way there a grandson of the deceased Majiya contracted an ugly ulcer on the thigh. They thought that the child would die, but a huge mamba came into the hut and sucked the wound clean, and the child survived. It was determined that this snake was the deceased Majiya, “come to heal the child of his son”. Many years later, when they all returned to their homeland, one of Majiya’s descendants, a man named Ngqokwane, planted his hut on one side of a stream, old king

Majiya's deserted emZimvubu kraal-site being on the other. Soon afterwards the long-deceased Majiya came to Ngqokwane in his sleep and told him "Go thou and build me a bridge across the stream, that I might cross thereby and get to a (civilised) habitation, for I am sore distressed by the cold (out here in the veldt)." Following instructions, Ngqokwane and his sons felled *iminga*¹⁴ and *imisenge*¹⁵ trees and laid them across the stream and strewed earth on them. At sundown on that same day, when his son had brought the cattle back to the cattle enclosure and wanted to close the gate, he couldn't because

he beheld a huge snake slumbering upon [the cross-bars]. He shouted the alarm; but his father, coming said "Nay, do not bar the gate; it is the chief. Did he not tell us to make for him a bridge that he might come?"

The Queen of the Long-Breasts

When a clan migrates from its ancestral home and crosses a river in the seeking of a new home, the whole clan crosses the river. Bryant has, however, narrated a few cases of clans which have split up, with one half remaining on one side of the river, while the other half crosses over. The classic case is of course that of Mpande of the ruling Zulu clan, taking his supporters over the uThukela into Natal, while the supporters of his elder brother king Dingane stayed behind, contemptuously referring to those who crossed over as *umDidi kaNdlela* ("Ndlela's rectum").¹⁶ (See Bryant, 1929:325.)

This leaving behind of clan members after a river crossing is surely what is referred to in the clan praises of the Mthombeni, Nkabinde and Sangweni clans, expressed in the unusual metaphor of a woman with long breasts, long enough that she is able to suckle those left behind on the far banks of the river:

From the Mthombeni praises (Sithole 1982:79):

Mfaz' omabel' amade	<i>Long-breasted woman</i>
Oncelis' umntwana engaphesheya	<i>Who suckles a child on the other side of</i>
Komfula	<i>The river.</i>

From the Nkabinde praises (Sithole 1982:90):

Nina baka Mabelemade	<i>You the descendants of Mrs Long-Breasts</i>
Oncelis' umntwana	<i>Who suckles a child</i>
Engaphesheya komfula	<i>On the other side of the river</i>

and from the Sangweni praises (Sithole 1982:102):

Nina baka Mabelemade	<i>You the descendants of Mrs Long-Breasts</i>
Ancelis' umntwana ngaphesheya	<i>Which suckle a child on the other side of</i>
Komfula	<i>The river.</i>

I assume that these references to the woman with long breasts are metaphorical, for it is unlikely that **Mabelemade** in the Sangweni praises is the same **Mabelemade** that Bryant refers to (1929:210) when talking of the ruler of the Lovedu people in what is now the province of Limpopo. To elaborate, Bryant says that Queen Mjantshi, the daughter of Tobela, a chieftainess of a section of the baPedi people, was a great magician and also famous for her four breasts,

wherefore among the Zulus she was generally known as *Mabelemane*, “Queen Four-Breasts”: and so prodigiously long were these pendulous mammæ... wherefore other some [sic] named her *Mabelemade*, “Queen Long-Breasts”.

Incidentally, Mabelemade of the Lovedu had another claim to fame. Bryant claims (1929:306) that when a plague of locusts descended on Natal in 1895 (such a plague having last visited in 1854), and the devastated Zulu farmers had to determine the culprit,

they fixed upon the most suspicious potentate they could then think of, and declared, to their own complete conviction, that the mysterious chieftainess **Mabelemade** (Queen Long-Breasts), was also none other than Queen of the Locusts.

Naming the rivers and naming the river-crossers

I quoted earlier the following extract from the praises of the Shoba clan:

Ongaweli ngezibuko *You who do not cross by the ford*

Owela ngezihlengle zemifula *You cross by means of river rafts*

It is perfectly clear that these two lines refer to the crossing of a river: the repetition of the verb *wela*, the reference to a ford, and the very clear reference to “river rafts” tell us so. But the river itself is not named in the Shoba *izithakazelo*. There are, however, many clan praises which do name the river crossed at some stage in the clan’s history, as we saw above in the praises of the Sithole and the Majola clan, where the uThukela river was specifically named. The uThukela is named more than any other river in the body of Zulu clan praises, not surprisingly, as it is the biggest of all the rivers in KwaZulu-Natal. It is also a mental boundary as well as a geographical one, as it marks the boundary between the erstwhile Zululand in the north and Natal in the south. We see it again in the line **Nin’ enavela ngaphesheya koThukela** (“*You who appeared on the other side of the uThukela*”) in the praises of the Mkhize clan (Sithole 1982:65). Both the uThukela and one of its tributaries, the iMpofana,¹⁷ appear in the praises of the Makhathini clan (Sithole 1982:46):

Maweza ziwela zawela *Mr Causer-of-Others-to-Cross so they crossed*

Impofana zawel’ uThukela *The iMpofana and the uThukela.*

In the praises of the Mthethwa clan, two rivers are also named, but here the verb *kha* (“draw water”) is used, suggesting that rather than crossing the two rivers mentioned, the Mthethwas resided between the two rivers (Sithole 1982:78):¹⁸

Nin’ enekh’ emifuleni emibili *You who drew water from two rivers*

Inseleni neMfoloz’ emhlophe. *The iNseleni and the White Mfolozi.*

The Khumalo praises include the lines (Sithole 1982: 36):

Nina bakaMawela *You the children of Mr River Crosser*

Owawel’ iZambezi ngezikhali *Who crossed the Zambezi [River] by means of weapons.*

The Khumalo clan were at the time of King Shaka living well north of the uThukela. The reference here may be to Mzilikazi, son of Mashobana, who fled

from King Shaka and eventually settled in the area of Bulawayo in what is now Zimbabwe (in which case the reference to the Zambezi River is inaccurate, as it was the Limpopo River which he crossed), or to a much earlier Khumalo chief, who crossed the Zambezi River to get to what is now northern KwaZulu-Natal. The word *ngezikhali* (“by means of weapons”) implies that the river was crossed by force of arms, or with military intentions.

In the praises of the Gcabashe clan, the river named is the uMhlathuze (Sithole 1982:25):

Mhlathuze! *Mhlathuze [River]!*
Abawela ngaphesheya *They who crossed to the other side.*

An interesting onomastic feature is how the crossing of a river is personified in some clan praises. We saw above in the praises of the Mazibuko, Mnguni and Khoza clans the personal name **Mwelase**, usually in the formulaic phrase *Mwelase ongaweli negibuko* (“Mwelase who does not cross by the ford”). Checking the genealogies of these three clans in Bryant’s *Olden Times* reveals no individual with the name “Mwelase”. We must conclude, therefore, that either this was a nickname given to a clan chief or other leader at that time in the clan’s history when they crossed a major river, or that the crossing of the river itself has been personified, the act turned into an actor, as it were.

The same could be said for the name *Mawela* in the praises of the Khumalo clan quoted above. The name is based on the verb *wela*, as with *Mwelase*, but is created more simply by prefixing the name formative *ma-* to the verb. This is a common way of forming names from other parts of speech in the Zulu language, and usually indicatives someone who regularly behaves in a particular way. I have translated both *Mwelase* and *Mawela* above as “Mr River-Crosser”, but the latter might more accurately be translated as “Mr Habitual River-Crosser”.

The lines quoted above for the Makhathini clan warrant further scrutiny in this context and I repeat them here:

Maweza ziwela zawela *Mr Causer-of-Others-to-Cross so they crossed*
Impofana zawel’ uThukela *The iMpofana and the uThukela*

Here the name *Maweza* has been created from the verb *wela*. The common way of forming the “causative” form of a Zulu verb is by suffixing *-isa*, as in the pairs *bona* “see” > *bonisa* “cause to see”, *funda* “learn” > *fundisa* “teach”, i.e. “cause to learn”, and *thenga* “buy” > *thengisa* “sell”, i.e. “cause to buy”. Certain “irregular” verbs, however, form the causative by replacing final *-la* with *-za*, as in *khumbula* “remember” > *khumbuzza* “remind”. *Wela* is one of these verbs, so the form *weza* means “cause someone to cross a river”. In the two lines of the Makhathini praises above, *weza* is followed three times by the form *wela*, the first – *ziwela* – in the present subjective (“and so they crossed”) and the next two times as the past subjunctive *zawela* (“and then they crossed”). In a formal descriptive analysis of oral poetry these two lines would be said to feature noun-verb-verb parallelism, and parallelism through internal linking.

In our last example, the older Zulu word for a river – *umlambo* – is made into a personal name. The lines come from the praises of the Mtshali clan (Sithole 1982:80):

Nin' enaxosha kwaMlambo *You who were chased from Mr River's place*
Nawel' umlambokazi. *And you crossed the great river.*

The word *umlambo* also occurs in the Chibi *izithakazelo* (ZuluRing):

Mlambo, *River,*
Mful' omkhulu ongawelwa muntu, *River not crossed by any human,*
Uwelwa zinkonjane kuphela, *It is crossed by the swallows alone*
Zona ezinamaphiko! *Those which have wings!*

The core-image of not being crossed by anything except by “the winged swallows above” is usually found with the noun *ulwandle* (“sea”), which suggests that in these praises either the word *umlambo* is being used poetically to refer to the sea, or that the person from whom these praises were collected had a memory lapse. It seems fitting, however, after so many examples of the different ways in which rivers are crossed in Zulu clan praises, to have as a last example a river which is never crossed by human beings at all.

Conclusion

The dangers of crossing swollen rivers on foot are occasionally reported in the press today, especially in isolated rural areas where children may have to wade across streams and rivers to get to school. But for by far the majority of inhabitants in KwaZulu-Natal such dangers are no longer an issue as the trains, cars, buses or taxis they are travelling on cross the rivers on high concrete bridges. But *izithakazelo* – Zulu clan praises – remain an important part of a clan's identity even today, and when they are recited in full, at important clan events such as marriages and funerals those present are reminded of the dangers their ancestors faced when they had to cross a river.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 We are familiar, for example, with the use of “Madiba” when referring to the late Nelson Mandela, the use of “Shenge” in reference to Mangosuthu Buthelezi, and “Msholozzi” as a reference to President Jacob Zuma.
- 2 The clan name is given as “Jali” today. “Jati” would be the pronunciation in the Swazi-style “tekela” speech. We see the same in the *tekela*-style “imiledzeledze”, which in standard Zulu would be “imilenzelenze”. Together with the reference to Ngwane, one of the earliest ancestors of the Swazi royal line, these praises suggest a Swazi connection for the Jali clan.
- 3 These would suggest a dual origin for the Jali clan, perhaps a merging of two different lineages.
- 4 INtunjambili (“rock of two holes”) is the name for the mountain Kranskop near Greytown. INtunjambili features strongly in Zulu folklore.
- 5 The image of the swallows flying above is known as a “stock image”, an easily remembered image which occurs very frequently in the praises of unrelated clans. See for example Mnguni: *Lwandle olungawelwa/Luwelwa zinkonjane zona zindiza phezulu* (“Sea which is not crossed/ It is [only] crossed by the swallows which fly above”).

- 6 This phrase suggests a clan always on the move.
- 7 http://zuluring.blogspot.com/p/izithakazelo_11.html
- 8 Again suggesting a clan continually on the move.
- 9 The verb *ncama* means “eat food before setting off on a journey”. It is used as a personal name in the first line, as an ordinary verb in the second. This structure, known as “noun-verb parallelism” is a common feature of Zulu oral poetry.
- 10 As with *isihlengethe* and *isihlengela* above, *isihlengela* here is either a regional variation on *isihlenga*, or the result of a memory lapse.
- 11 It is not easy to explain this mention of “sea-rafts”. At no stage were any members of the south-eastern Nguni masters of the ocean, in any way. My only suggestion here relates to oral memory and the confusion of two different oral formulae common in Zulu clan praises. This article should make it clear that the notion of “crossing”, expressed by the verb *wela*, is a common one in *izithakazelo*, and is often linked to the noun *isihlenga* and its variants. An equally common stock image/oral formula is that of the sea which is not crossed [by humans], but is only crossed by the swallows which fly above. A poor memory which holds the words “cross” and “sea” together may simultaneously put the raft where swallows should be.
- 12 Doke and Vilakazi (1958:900) give *umzungulu* as “species of bush climber, *Dalbergia obovata*, whose fibre is used for binding”.
- 13 The use of *izinyoni* (“birds”) here refers to the clan name. The plural of *uMsomi* (member of the Msomi clan) is *amaSomi*, which is also the plural of the noun *isomi* (“red-winged starling”).
- 14 *Acacia* species.
- 15 *Cussonia* species.
- 16 Ndlela was at that time the prime minister of Dingane’s Zulu kingdom.
- 17 Also known as the Mooi River.
- 18 Bryant (1929:95) confirms this: “[Mthethwa chief] Dingiswayo established himself between the eNtseleni and the iMfolozi rivers”.