

Isithwalandwe: *The wearing of the crane feather*

by Adrian Koopman

JAMES Saunders King's picture of Shaka kaSenzangakhona wearing a single blue crane feather has been published countless times and is certainly the most well-known picture of the Zulu king.¹ This picture has led to an indelible association of the Blue Crane (*Grus paradisea*, Zulu *indwa* or *indwe*²) with Shaka in the popular mind, always as a single feather of the bird, not as images where Shaka and the whole bird are shown.

Biyela, for example, in a paper on Zulu bird lore, states that certain birds are

of historical or national significance, for example, the Indwa, (Blue Crane), which is now the South African national bird, and in the past was chosen by King Shaka who used its plumage for his head-feather.³

Note that not only does she say 'chosen by King Shaka', but also refers to a single 'head-feather'. In addition, a group of ten Zulu-speaking bird experts, gathered for a workshop on Zulu bird lore in June 2017 and at which this author was present, were unanimous in saying that only the present king had the right to wear the crane feather today. Current pictures of Zulu King Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu show him (when he is not wearing red turaco feathers) wearing a single crane feather. Zwelithini is known for reviving traditions of the Shakan era, and it is likely that this is one of them.

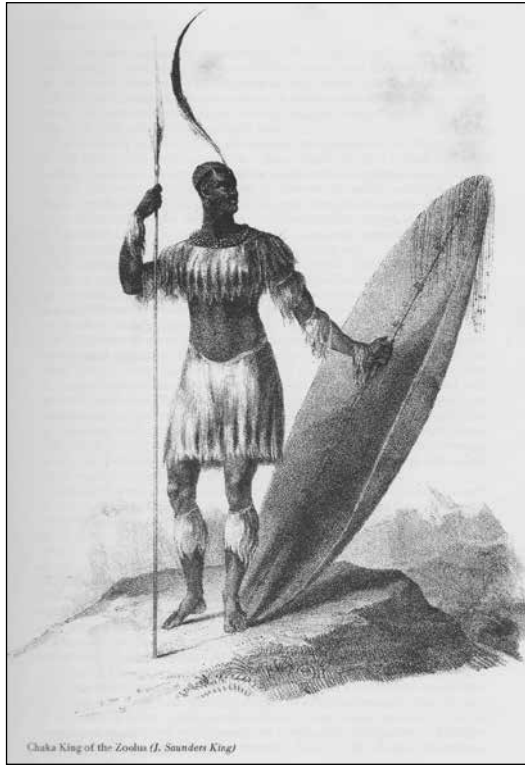
The association of the single feather with Shaka, and later with Zwelithini, has led to a commonly held belief that only Zulu royalty were allowed to wear

the feather of this bird. In this note I explore other sources which make it clear that this was not so, that the crane feather, or indeed feathers, was worn by regimental soldiers, especially notable warriors, and because of this the wearing of the single crane feather has become the basis of an African National Congress (ANC) special award to 'warriors of the struggle'.

The plumage of the blue crane featured in both Xhosa and Zulu culture: Godfrey is talking of the Xhosa people when he says of the blue crane that 'it was in the olden days distinctively a warrior's bird, whose feathers adorned the heads of the fighting men during drill or war'.⁴ Bryant is talking about Zulu traditions when he says 'This feather was presented to a full-grown man by the king and was a preliminary sign that the recipient was about to be called to the honour of the headdress'.⁵

Samuelson emphasises that the feathers were a specific gift of the king when he says 'This bird was one of the Zulu royal birds whose plumes were used by those to whom they [i.e. the feathers] had been specially gifted by the king'.⁶

The six volumes of *The James Stuart Archive*⁷ between them have much to say about the wearing of feathers and other head and body ornamentation in the Zulu military tradition of the nineteenth century. But there is no reference to Shaka kaSenzangakhona wearing blue crane feathers. In fact the single reference to Shaka and feather ornamentation in the six volumes says



James Saunders King's well-known illustration of Shaka kaSenzangakhona wearing a single blue crane feather

that 'T'shaka ... wore a bunch of loury feathers'.⁸ However, Cetshwayo kaMpande is mentioned: 'Cetshwayo ... had on his head a band of otter skin, with tassels of blue monkey skin, and a crane feather'⁹ and there is an interesting story about Dingiswayo kaJobe, king of the Mthethwa clan:

[Dingiswayo] ordered his war finery to be brought out. His crane feather was brought ... While he was busy, a number of locusts suddenly settled on the feather which he had put on. The *izinduna* cried, 'Hau, Nkosi, what are those things on the feather?' Others exclaimed, 'They are locusts' ... The feather came loose and fell on the ground.¹⁰

According to various sources recorded

in the *James Stuart Archives*, the following regiments wore crane feathers as part of their military identification: the amaMboza and Ndhlonhlo^{11,12}, the Tulwana and Dhlokwe,¹³ the Ndabakawombe, Bulawayo, Siklebe, Dukuza, Ngwegwe and Mbelebele,¹⁴ and the iziMpohlo.¹⁵ Another source echoes Bryant, quoted above, as saying: ‘Crane feathers were distributed to a regiment that had put on the heading’.¹⁶ Another source gives an account of how the ‘great men of Mpande’, immediately prior to an encounter with the Boers, exchanged clothing with commoners [At the time of the Boers coming to Maqongqo]:

A man who was there at Maqongqo, one of Mpande’s men – his name was Konjwayo of the Embo people – said that the next day the great men of Mpande’s side took their headbands (*imiqele*) and their *amabeqe* of monkey-skin, together with their crane feathers, and made their ordinary men (*abafokazana*) put them on (*qilisa*) ... For their part they took the garb of the ordinary men and put it on, and took the shields of the ordinary men.¹⁷

In one unusual case, a single crane feather featured in the ceremonial dress of a *woman*, not a warrior who was about to receive the honour of the heading: after the assassination of Shaka in 1828, Mnkabayi, the daughter of Jama and aunt of Shaka, and a powerful political figure in the Zulu kingdom, helped to decide on who the next king of the Zulus would be. A woman, yes, but she ‘dressed like a man’. The description of her outfit on this occasion is given in full, so as to give an idea of how a politically powerful man might be dressed at the time:

[Mnkabayi] was summoned either to

Dukuza or Bulawayo. She dressed as a man and came into the semi-circle ...had on a skin skirt (*isidwaba*), not covered with black powder (*umsizi*) like others [worn by women], but left ruddy and simply covered with scent [??]. Over this she wore *umqubula*¹⁸ of genet and blue monkey. She also had *imiklezo*,¹⁹ i.e. *amashoba*. When dressed, her identity could not be detected. She had a band of otter skin on her head, she had also *amabeqe* of monkey skin. She had also *imin-yakanya*²⁰ of the widow-bird, also [a] long crane feather.²¹

Godfrey was quoted above as saying of the blue crane that it was in the olden days distinctively a warrior’s bird. It is interesting to note that this notion still has life in South Africa today. The box below gives information on an award made by the ANC ruling party for ‘warriors’ in the struggle against apartheid. Awards are still being made in the twenty-first century:

The ANC website *SA History Online*²³

Isithwalandwe/Seaparankwe Award

Isithwalandwe/Seaparankwe is the highest honour awarded by the people of South Africa, through the African National Congress, to those who have made an outstanding contribution and sacrifice to the liberation struggle.

Isithwalandwe, literally translated, means ‘the one who wears the plumes of the rare bird’²² and was traditionally bestowed only on the bravest warriors of the people, on those who distinguished themselves in the eyes of all the people for exceptional qualities of leadership and heroism.

Chief Albert Luthuli, Dr Yusuf Dadoo and Father Trevor Huddleston were the first to be proclaimed *Isithwalandwe/Seaparankwe*. This was at the Congress of the People in 1955. Since then many outstanding leaders have been honoured.

from which this information was obtained, gives a full list of all people awarded this honour 'by all the people of South Africa' [*sic*]. The blue crane feather was first awarded to the warriors Chief Albert Luthuli, Dr Yusuf Dadoo and Father Trevor Huddleston in 1955. In 1992, a number of struggle heroes were honoured with the crane feather, including Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu and Helen Joseph. Then came a lull before Ray Alexander Simons was so honoured in 2004, and since then it appears that the award of the blue crane feather has fallen into abeyance.

The Isithwalandwe Award illustrates one way in which the Shakan-era tradition of wearing the crane feather is manifested in modern South Africa. Whether the wearing of this feather by current Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu is a feature of 'modern' Zulu society is not quite clear.

NOTES

- 1 Taken from Isaacs, Nathaniel, *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* (Cape Town, Struik, 1970) facing p. 176.
- 2 Both spellings are accepted.
- 3 Biyela, N. Gloria Irenata (F.S.F.), 'Popular predictor birds in Zulu culture', *Alternation*, 16(2), 2009, p. 35.
- 4 Godfrey, Robert, *Bird Lore of the Eastern Cape Province* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1941) p. 44.
- 5 Bryant, A.T., *Zulu-English Dictionary* (Pine-town, Marianhill Missionary Press, 1905) p. 123.
- 6 Samuelson, R.C.A., *The King Cetywayo Zulu Dictionary* (Durban, Commercial Printing Company, 1923) p. 89.
- 7 Webb, C. de B. and Wright, J., *The James Stuart Archive of Oral Evidence Relating to the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples*. Vols I to VI (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press and University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1976–2014).
- 8 Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, Vol III, p. 72.
- 9 Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, Vol II, p. 223.
- 10 Ibid. p. 186.
- 11 Stuart's original spelling has been retained here and in the following names.
- 12 Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, Vol II, p. 223.
- 13 Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, Vol III, p. 318.
- 14 Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, Vol IV, p. 119.
- 15 Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, Vol VI, p. 291.
- 16 Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, Vol IV, p. 311.
- 17 Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, Vol VI, p. 131.
- 18 *umqubula*: dancing apparel presented by the king to favourite warriors, consisting of three girdles of blue monkey (*insimango*) tails.
- 19 *imiklezo*: ox-tails worn suspended from the neck; *amashoba*: ox-tails suspended from the upper arms and from the calves.
- 20 *iminyakanya*: bunches of plumes of the long-tailed widowbird.
- 21 Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, Vol VI, p. 97.
- 22 In fact, it literally means '[the one] that carries the blue crane' from *thwala* 'carry' and *indwe* 'blue crane'.
- 23 <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/isithwalandweseaparankwe-award> (accessed 18 May 2017).