

## THE ASSASSINATION OF KING SHAKA: ZULU HISTORY'S DRAMATIC MOMENT

by JOHN LABAND

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226 pages, illustrated, general index, reading list, referenced with endnotes, historical time line, list of characters, glossary of Zulu words

JOHN Laband, for many years a lecturer and professor in the Department of History at the erstwhile University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, is a well-known writer on the history of the Zulu kingdom, with his best-known work probably his 1995 *Rope of Sand: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Kingdom*.<sup>1</sup>

From the 1830s (shortly after Shaka's assassination) to today, a considerable amount has been written and published on the history of the Zulu kingdom and its celebrated founder, Shaka kaSenzangakhona kaJama. *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, eventually published in 1986,<sup>2</sup> has a preface written by Fynn in about 1833, and Nathaniel Isaacs's *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* was first published in 1836.<sup>3</sup> Other books have followed at regular intervals, some of the best-known being Gibson's 1911 *The Story of the Zulus*,<sup>4</sup> Bryant's 1929 (1965) *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*,<sup>5</sup> Bulpin's 1952 *Shaka's Country: A Book of Zululand*,<sup>6</sup> Morris's 1973 *The Washing of the Spears*,<sup>7</sup> and Ritter's 1978 *Shaka Zulu*.<sup>8</sup> Between 1976 and 2014 six volumes of *The James Stuart Archive* have appeared, with considerable detail about the life and times of Shaka, collected from Zulu oral sources by James Stuart in the early years of the twentieth century and made available to modern scholars by Webb and Wright.<sup>9</sup> There have even been books about the writ-

ing of books on Shaka and Zulu history, such as Hamilton's *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention*<sup>10</sup> and Dan Wylie's 2000 *Savage Delight: White Myths of Shaka*,<sup>11</sup> followed by his 2006 *Myth of Iron: Shaka in History*.<sup>12</sup> What more, then, I thought, when asked to review Laband's *The Assassination of Shaka*, could he say about Shaka and his role in the history of the Zulu Kingdom?

Laband's book is unquestionably an academic history: elegantly written, it is meticulously referenced, with an average of 29 endnotes to each chapter (and a high of 69 endnotes in Chapter 5). In addition to the endnotes, the book has a general index, a reading list, a historical time line, a list of historical characters, and a glossary of Zulu terms. While the endnotes show how widely Laband has read to create this work on Shaka's assassination, most of them refer to a source in *The James Stuart Archive*, and it is clear Laband has gone through the evidence of Stuart's sources minutely, seeking out every statement that relates to Shaka's life, and, of course, his death.

At the same time Laband's book unquestionably belongs to the murder mystery genre, placing him squarely in the company of such greats as Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, Mickey Spillane and Erle Stanley Gardner.<sup>13</sup> All the essentials of this genre are present: the detective work, the regular releases

of clues for the reader to work on, the presentation of possible suspects (each given plausibility), and the suspense leading up to the main murder. This suspense is heightened by ending all the chapters with cliffhangers. See, for example, the last two lines of Chapter 15, the chapter immediately prior to the one that contains the actual assassination of Shaka:

There was nothing for it now. Mbopha and the two *abantwana* must strike immediately or suffer their own deaths.

To heighten the suspense, Chapter 15 is headed ‘Are You Not Going To Stab Him?’

Indeed, all the chapters in the book have similarly intriguing titles, such as Chapter 5: ‘He who beats but is not beaten’. After a while, the reader becomes aware that most of these intriguing chapter titles are taken from some quote in the text within the chapter. Chapter 11 (‘Splasher of water with an oxtail’), for example, comes from a Cope translation of a line in the praises of Sothobe kaMpangalala, leader of Shaka’s delegation to the Cape, and Chapter 12 (‘Buffalo that stood glaring with a spear’) is from a Cope translation of a line from Shaka’s own *izibongo*, and relates to accompanying his army on their campaign against the Mpondo. Identifying the origin of the chapter titles eventually becomes a kind of a game for the reader, a sub-mystery as it were, in a book that is itself a murder mystery.

Laband says in his preface (p. x) that he does not intend to undertake ‘another scholarly investigation into the formation of the Zulu kingdom in the reign of King Shaka’. Rather, he says, he is attempting ‘a focused inquiry into a single pivotal event in Shaka’s life: his

assassination’. It is of course impossible to write an entire book about such a single event without putting it into context, and Laband does this, taking fifteen chapters to do so before getting to the actual assassination. A good murder mystery has at least two murders, and while Shaka can only be murdered once, Laband does look – in detail – at the attempted assassination of Shaka in 1824, four years before he lost his life. Chapter 1 (‘Stabbed while dancing’) recounts this attempted assassination and ends with

The most urgent question in the minds of Shaka, his *izikhulu* and the general throng throughout all this mourning uproar must have been: who was behind the assassination attempt? Three possibilities occurred to them.

These three possibilities occupy the next three chapters: Chapter 2 (‘A royal spear?’), Chapter 3 (‘An Ndwandwe spear?’) and Chapter 4 (‘A Qwabe spear?’), with Laband leaving it to the reader to sift the evidence and make up their own minds as to the guilty party. The book then proceeds through much of what has already been written previously about Shaka by other writers: his character (was he a nation-building warrior king or a savage monster?), his battles with and his eventual conquest of Zwide of the Ndwandwe, his relationship with the earliest white traders at Port Natal, and so on. The death of his mother Nandi and the subsequent excessive mourning decreed for the nation gets two whole chapters. There is also detailed treatment of Shaka’s dispatching of a delegation to establish relations with officials at the Cape (and ultimately with King George), not to mention to acquire the famed Macassar oil to keep his hair

permanently dark. Chapter 12 ('This is King Chaka's name') concludes the lead up to the major event of the book. Part IV ('Are you stabbing me, the king of the Earth?') then follows, although two more anticipatory chapters must be gone through before we get to what the title of the book promises: the assassination of King Shaka – Zulu history's dramatic moment.

The actual dramatic moment is not at all clear. Laband points out (p. 138) that there are 'divergent versions as to what happened next', and the reader is treated to a full and detailed account of them. First Mbopha is presented as the person who actually killed Shaka:

There were those that pinned the major role on Mbopha. Maclean was convinced that because Mbopha alone carried a spear he 'stole behind and assassinated his master'. Despite the active participation of the two *abantwana* Isaacs had no doubt that it was Mbopha who actually 'speared him to death'. Some oral traditions similarly pointed the finger at Mbopha. Makewu related that when Shaka turned his back on Mbopha the *inceku* threw a spear, which struck him, while Ndukwana stated it was Mbopha who 'actually stabbed'. Likewise, Jantshi declared that it was Mbopha who stabbed Shaka, though he had the integrity to admit that he was not in a position to 'speak accurately on this matter'.

Next is Mhlangana – Laband immediately goes on to say:

Others believed it was Mhlangana who stabbed first, including Jantshi, thus contradicting his assertion that it was Mbopha. It was said the brothers agreed that Mhlangana would strike first ... Andrew Smith heard that Mhlangana stabbed his brother twice in the back.

Laband then goes on to ask 'What then of Dingane, who had mastered

the conspiracy?' and once again the testimony of all those who believed that Dingane was the actual assassin is recorded.

The murder mystery then comes to an end with two chapters detailing how Dingane eventually eliminated the opposition to end as the ruler of the Zulu kingdom. In a repeat of the incident several years previously, when Shaka arranged the drowning of his half-brother Sigujana so as to clear the way for him (Shaka) to take over the chieftaincy of the Zulu clan, so too did Dingane arrange for his co-conspirator and brother Mhlangana to be drowned while bathing. Laband puts it like this (p. 151):

Dingane's *izibongo* recalled the deed in these chilling words:

Deep river pool at Mavivane, Dingana  
The pool is silent, and overpowering,  
It drowned someone intending to wash  
And he vanished, heading and all.

Laband frequently uses extracts from praise poetry (*izibongo*) to illustrate or justify a point, as he does here. While this unquestionably adds value to the text, there are also certain dangers. Two such can be mentioned here.

First, Dingane's *izibongo* did *not* recall the drowning of Mhlangana in the English words given above. Dingane's *imbongi* would have *bonga*'ed him in Zulu, and what Laband has given above is an English translation of the original. Rycroft and Ngcobo<sup>14</sup> have given the Zulu version as:

ISizib' esiseMavivane, Dingana,  
ISiziba sinzonzo, sinzonzobele,  
Siminzis' umuntu eth' uyageza,  
Waze washona nangesicoco.

In their 1988 *The Praises of Dingane: Izibongo zikaDingana* Rycroft and Ngcobo have combined various oral

performances of Dingane's praises into one single written version and have then translated them. They are thus mediators between the original words of Dingane's *izibongi* and the English version given by Laband. When Laband quotes from the *izibongi* of Shaka, which he does frequently in this book, there are even more intermediaries between the words of the original *izibongi* who praised Shaka and the version quoted by Laband: the praises in Cope's 1968 *Izibongi: Zulu Praise-Poems* were collected by James Stuart, translated by Daniel Malcolm, and then edited by Trevor Cope. Occasionally these translations can be queried as when Koopman<sup>15</sup> questions Cope's translation of the line *Ujojo kathekeli kanjengamakhafula* in the praises of Henry Francis Fynn. Cope gives this as 'Finch that never begged, unlike the Kaffirs', but Koopman instead suggests, and substantiates, that the line refers to Fynn as 'the chap who speaks Zulu in a *zunda* style' (i.e., like the Zulus themselves). This is a completely different interpretation and shows the importance of including the Zulu original when quoting from *izibongi*.

Second, Laband suggests that Dingane's *imbongi* specially composed the four lines quoted above to refer to the drowning of Mhlangana as plotted by Dingane. However, if we look at the praises of Shaka, Dingane's predecessor, we find the lines:

*Isiziba esiseMavivane*

[Dark pool which is in the Mavivane river]

*Eseminzis' umuntu eth' uyageza*

[Which drowns a person as he is washing]

*Waze washona nagesicoco*

[So that he disappears as far as his head-ring]<sup>16</sup>

Cope points out that this stanza refers to the murder by drowning of Shaka's half-brother Sigujana, an event that Laband mentions in his second chapter. Zulu *izibongi* were known for borrowing images and lines – even whole stanzas – from the praises other *izibongi* had composed for other clients. Dingane's *imbongi* would have been very aware of the earlier image of the deep pool in the Mavivane river, which drowns a person as he is washing, and causes him to sink up to his head-ring. All he needed to do was add the word 'Dingana' to the first line of the stanza, and add the splendidly alliterative line '*Isiziba esinzozo, sinzonzobebe*'. The result is a stanza highly appropriate for recording and commenting on the drowning of Mhlangana, but it cannot be said that these lines were especially composed for that event.

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At the beginning of this review I asked what more could Laband have to say about Shaka and his life and death that had not already been said by the considerable number of authors who have written on this topic. What could be added that was new? I can only speak for myself here, and say it was news to me that there were *two* previous attempts to assassinate Shaka. I did not know that Shaka accompanied his army on the Pondo campaign to 'wash the spears' after Nandi's death, and while sitting on a flat rock near the lower drift of the uMkhomazi River, Dingane, Mhlangana and Mbopha 'decided to seize the fleeting opportunity to kill him' (p. 125). Unlike the previous attempt when Shaka was actually stabbed, but survived, this 'fleeting opportunity' was aborted when 'an *induna* of Magaye kaDibandlela ...

chose that moment to wander in sight with his companions’.

So in this murder mystery, the first ‘almost-murder’ is followed by a second; and in this second ‘almost-murder’ the characters are introduced who will eventually complete the assassination promised in the title. Agatha Christie would have loved it.

ADRIAN KOOPMAN

NOTES

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- 2 Stuart, J., Malcolm, D.McK., Fynn, H.F., *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter and Shooter, 1986).
- 3 Isaacs, N. *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa, Descriptive of the Zoolus, Their Manners, Customs, etc. etc. with a Sketch of Natal* (London, E. Churton, 1836).
- 4 Gibson, J.Y., *The Story of the Zulus* (London and New York, Longmans, Green, 1911).
- 5 Bryant, A.T., *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal; Containing Earlier Political History of the Eastern-Nguni Clans* (Cape Town, Struik, 1965).
- 6 Bulpin, T.V. and Tyrrell, B., *Shaka's Country: A Book of Zululand* (Cape Town, H.B. Timmins, 1952).
- 7 Morris, D., *The Washing of the Spears* (London, Cardinal, 1973).
- 8 Ritter, E.A., *Shaka Zulu* (London and New York, Penguin, 1978).
- 9 Webb, C.de B. and Wright, J., *The James Stuart Archive* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal/KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1976–2014).
- 10 Hamilton, C., *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1998).
- 11 Wylie, D., *Savage Delight: White Myths of Shaka* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2000).
- 12 Wylie, D., *Myth of Iron: Shaka in History* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006).
- 13 Although in the first line of the preface, Laband suggests a comparison with George Martin's *Game of Thrones*.
- 14 Rycroft, D.K. and Ngcobo, A.B., *The Praises of Dingana: Izibongo zikaDingana* (Durban, Killie Campbell Africana Library and Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1988), p.71.
- 15 Koopman, A., ‘Henry Francis Fynn: The Long-tailed finch that came from Pondoland?’, *Natalia*, 47 (2017), pp. 39–42.
- 16 Stuart, A. and Cope, A.T., *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968), pp.114–15.