SHAKA ZULU: 
“BLACK NAPOLEON”

1787 Born
1810–16 Served under Dingiswayo
1816 Became chief of the Zulus
1817–23 Conquest of Natal
1828 Died

To a remarkable extent the Zulus dominated and defined the history of southern Africa in the nineteenth century. And the man who brought this about was the warrior-chief of the Zulu nation, Shaka the father of his people.

The Zulus belonged to a large ethnic conglomerate, the Bantu. A migratory, cattle-keeping people composed of many subgroups and speaking some two hundred related languages, the Bantu had gradually moved from the north into the eastern portion of southern Africa. A large subgroup of the Bantu, the Nguni, settled in the pleasant coastal strip of rich grazing land between the Drakenberg Mountains and the Indian Ocean, between Cape Colony to the southwest and what would be the Transvaal to the north. One of the Nguni clans was the Zulu, “the people of the Heavens.” But they were neither numerous nor powerful, the entire clan probably numbering fewer than two thousand people in the last years of the eighteenth century.

It was into this setting that Shaka was born about 1787. By the end of his reign Zululand had been extended over an area of eighty thousand square miles, containing nearly half a million people. The slaughter of his enemies and the magnification of his own people were the two parallel accomplishments of Shaka, “the great elephant.”
From Folklore to History

E. A. RITTER

The central problem of any history of the sub-Saharan African tribal peoples is the absence of written sources. This is the case with the Zulu and their leader, Shaka. These were preliterate people and, like most such people, they preserved their history and their lore, their religion and their magic in an oral tradition scrupulously passed down from generation to generation. Even today that lore has never been systematically written down. But bits and pieces of it have found their way into white people’s accounts. One of these is E. A. Ritter’s Shaka Zulu: The Rise of the Zulu Empire, excerpted below. This is a pivotal work in South African history precisely because Ritter has, as the Manchester Guardian reviewer wrote, “amalgamated, as perhaps no one else could have done, the printed records and the Zulu oral tradition.”

Ritter was born in 1890 and raised in South Africa, where his father was a magistrate in Natal, in the heart of Zululand. The father’s chief court orderly was a Zulu named Njenga-bantu Eman Bomvini, then almost seventy. His father Mahola had been one of Shaka’s fellow-soldiers in Dingiswayo’s army, and Mahola had passed down to his son his own recollections of Shaka. Young Ritter’s first language was Zulu, which he learned from his nurses. As a boy he was a nearly daily listener to Njenga-bantu’s recitals of Shaka’s deeds, “taking in every word with the same rapt attention the other listeners. Thus was laid the foundation of his being able to see Shaka as the Zulus saw him.”

Ritter also had access to another aged Zulu, Chief Sigananda Cube, who, as a boy, had been a personal servant of Shaka. At the time of Sigananda’s death, about 1906, he had been recognized by Pika Zulu, Shaka’s great-nephew and custodian of the Zulu royal family’s unwritten history, as the leading exponent of that history.

As Ritter observed, however, “when Zulus give an account of a historical event their method is not dry reportage, it is more akin to drama, and the feelings and words of all protagonists are recounted as in epic poetry.” This is clearly evident in Ritter’s work, especial

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2Ritter, Shaka Zulu, p. xi.
3Ibid., p. xiv.
in the early part of his account of Shaka, where there are no reliable non-Zulu sources. We start there.

Shaka's father, Senzangakona, a young Chieftain of the Zulu clan, is said by the Zulu tradition to have come upon his mother, Nandi, while she was bathing in a woodland pool and, fired by her beauty, to have boldly asked for the privilege of *ama hløy endlela.* To this, after some banter and mutual teasing, she consented, both parties lost their heads, broke the rules governing casual intercourse, with the result that three months later Nandi realised that she was pregnant.

As soon as Nandi's pregnancy was discovered, a messenger was rushed off bearing a formal indictment against the young Zulu chief. But Mudli, Ndaba's grandson and chief elder of the clan, indignantly denied the charge. 'Impossible,' said he, 'go back home and inform them the girl is but harbouring *I-Shaka.*' But in due course Nandi became a mother. 'There now!' they sent word to the Zulu people over the hills; 'there is your beetle' (*I-Shaka*). 'Come and fetch it for it is yours.'

And reluctantly they came, and deposited Nandi, unwedded, in the hut of Senzangakona; and the child was named *u-Shaka*—the year 1787.

The unhappy Nandi was now not only illicitly a mother but, what was worse, within the forbidden degrees of kindred—her mother being Mfunda, daughter of Kondlo, the Qwabe chief, with whose clan intermarriage with the Zulus was taboo. But Senzangakona, being a chief, 'could do no wrong', and without the wedding-feast—there being no ceremonial celebration of the coming of a bride already with child—Nandi, doubly dishonoured, was quietly installed as the chief's third wife. . . . Shaka’s first six years were overshadowed by the unhappiness of a mother he adored. At the age of six he went out to care for his father's sheep, with the other herd-boys; in a moment of negligence he allowed a dog to kill a sheep, his father was angry, his mother defended him, and they were dismissed from Senzangakona's kraal.

Shaka now became a herd-boy at his mother's I-Nguga kraal in E-Langeni-land, twenty miles away from his father's kraal. He was immediately subjected to much bullying by the elder boys, and what hurt him more deeply still was that his dear mother felt herself to be disgraced through the dismissal by her husband, and tongues were

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4 A form of mock, external intercourse called "the pleasures of the road."—Ed.
5 An intestinal beetle thought to cause interruption of menstruation.—Ed.
not wanting to rub this in. Thus, his years of childhood in E-Langeniland were not happy. . . .

Modern psychology has enabled us to understand the importance in after life, of a child's unhappiness. Perhaps we may trace Shaka's subsequent lust for power to the fact that his little crinkled ears and the marked stumpiness of his genital organ were ever the source of persistent ridicule among Shaka's companions, and their taunts in this regard so rankled that he grew up harbouring a deadly hatred against all and everything E-Langeni. . . .

'Never mind, my Um-Lilwane (Little Fire), you have got the isibindi (liver, meaning courage) of a lion and one day you will be the greatest chief in the land,' Nandi would tell him. 'I can see it in your eyes. When you are angry they shine like the sun, and yet no eyes can be more tender when you speak comforting words to me in my misery.' So the Zulu chroniclers give her words. . . .

In due course Shaka went to Senzangakona's kraal and went through the ceremonial rites of puberty. But when his Royal father presented him with his umutsha he rejected it with disdain, and otherwise succeeded in getting himself so generally disliked that his early return to his mother became imperative.

Shaka had a very definite reason for deciding to continue living unclothed. He wished it to be known that he was now physically adequate. In particular he wanted all his associates of the E-Langeni tribe to see and know this, and especially his former tormentors, who would now, if anything, be envious of him. . . .

Nandi now sent the boy to her father's sister, in Mtetwa-land, near the coast. Neither Shaka nor his mother was a person of any consequence at this period; indeed, as destitute vagrants, they were everywhere despised. But the headman, under King Jobe, in charge of the district in which they settled was Ngomane, son of Mqombolo, of the Dletsheni clan, and with him they soon became acquainted. He treated Nandi and her son with a kindness which Shaka never forgot, and there in a 'real home' surrounded by sympathy Shaka at last had come to rest. . . .

The Chief of the Mtetwa tribe, with whom Shaka dwelt, had been Jobe. His sons had conspired against him, one had been put to death and the other, Godongwana, had fled. He changed his name to Dingiswayo (The Wanderer). When Jobe died, Dingiswayo returned and became chief in 1809. He revived the Izi-cwe (Bushman) regiment by calling-up Shaka's age-group, including Shaka. Thus Shaka became a soldier. . . .

Shaka's commander, Buza, and in fact the whole regiment, did not fail to note the prowess of the young warrior; he was allowed to lead the

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6The ceremonial loincloth or apron worn by adult Zulu men.—Ed.
giya or victory dance. Shaka was pleased with his progress, but pondered deeply over the fact that he constantly broke the light throwing assegais with his mighty stabs into the opposing warriors' bodies. But the custom of hurling an assegai,⁷ mostly without any effect, at a distant foe, was to him as though merely throwing one's weapon away. According to the chronicle, it was then that he conceived the idea of a single, massive-bladed assegai with a stout, short handle. This would mean fighting at close quarters, with deadly physical and psychological effect.

Like other great conquerors, Shaka began his career by reforming not only tactics, but weapons. His own prowess as an infighter had shown him what was needed, but, as we have seen, he had found the throwing spear dangerously fragile when used as a striking or thrusting weapon. He was determined to get his stabbing blade which, however, had to conform with the very definite specifications formulated in his mind.

The Mbonambi clan, south-eastern neighbours of the Mtetwas, were the most renowned blacksmiths and one of their best craftsmen was Ngonyama (Lion), and to him Shaka went with his problem. Shaka now told him exactly what he wanted, and why, and his fervour soon infected the old 'Lion', who agreed that none of the existing blades would quite answer Shaka's purpose.

'What you want, Zulu, you shall have,' responded the 'Lion' at last. 'But it will take time, for we might as well start at the very beginning. A new furnace shall be equipped with new bellows to ensure that the iron is of the best. The blade will be tempered with the strongest fats, and in your hands it will ever be victorious. It will cost me a lot, but for you I will do it for the price of one heifer, and that you may send to me when you are satisfied with my work, and in your own good time.'

With the magic rites completed, Ngonyama once more became a practical and ardent blacksmith, and again the forest resounded to his hammer blows as he put all his craftsmanship into finishing and refining the blade.

Thus was born the blade which was the model of others which were destined to sweep irresistibly over half a continent. As Shaka held it in his hand and gazed at it with admiration his eyes shone, but not yet had he finished with his tests. He tried it for its 'ring' and vibration, and its resiliency, and, as it had not yet been sharpened he gave a part of its forward edge a good rub on a hard sandstone provided for that purpose. It took a lot of rubbing before it became sharp, razor sharp, as Shaka demonstrated by shaving a few of the sparse hairs which grew on his arm. Then at last he was satisfied and expressed his gratitude to the smith.

⁷The traditional Zulu spear or lance.—Ed.
Very soon the Izi-cwe regiment was doctored again for war. . . . In the following campaign Dingiswayo took personal command of the Izi-cwe regiment, brigaded with the Yengondlovu regiment. The year was 1810 and Shaka twenty-three years old. . . .

In the ensuing battle Dingiswayo’s forces are victorious.

After some twenty head of cattle had been killed for the victors and the vanquished, Dingiswayo told Buza, the commander of the Izi-cwe regiment, to present Shaka to him. He had already had a very favourable report on his first battle, and was greatly impressed by what he had seen that day.

At his first glance into the sharp and intelligent eyes of the huge young warrior, he instantly recognized a leader. After putting a number of questions to him, he was agreeably surprised at the prompt and clever replies. He then questioned Shaka on the matter of fighting without sandals, and with a single stabbing assegai, and conceded that Shaka was right as far as war only was concerned, but for the time being he was content to fight in a less sanguinary way, and to achieve his aims by persuasion with the minimum employment of force. However, after conferring with Buza and Ngomane, he there and then promoted Shaka to Captain of ‘one hundred’, or the equivalent of a leader of two ‘guilds’, and also presented him with ten head of cattle . . .

Shaka now joined the other two regimental commanders and the headmen who were in attendance on Dingiswayo, and the heads of the contingents supplied by allied tribes. Presently the campaign was discussed and Shaka remained silent whilst his seniors gave their opinions. In fact he said nothing until he was invited by Dingiswayo to speak.

Shaka then said that in the next battle the army should be drawn up with a central head and chest, with half a regiment on each side thrown out as enveloping horns to ensure the complete annihilation of the enemy force. Only thus would they gain the complete submission of the remnants of the tribe, and do away with the periodical reconquests necessitated by the present easygoing methods which had proved to be so futile and inconclusive. Moreover, in future campaigns the broad-bladed, stout stabbing assegai should replace the light throwing spears, and sandals should be discarded to increase the mobility of the warriors.

Dingiswayo conceded the advantages in an impi ebomvu (red war, or war to a finish), but emphasized again that he did not wish to destroy,
but merely to teach a lesson, whereupon Shaka sharply rejoined, ‘Which will never be learned’.

Nevertheless, Shaka continued to be a successful war leader and to be advanced by Dingiswayo.

Shaka was now promoted to Commander-in-Chief of all Dingiswayo’s armed forces, and a member of the inner Council. As such, he insisted on visiting each military kraal in rotation to tighten up the discipline and extend the drill with rapid forced route marches. In fact he constituted himself an Inspector-General of the Forces.

Towards the end of 1815 Senzangakona’s health rapidly declined, and early in 1816 he died. Weak and wasted, he had in the end given way to the incessant importuning of his eighth wife, Bibi, to appoint her son Sigujana as his successor. When Shaka and Dingiswayo heard that Sigujana had appropriated the chieftaincy by prevailing upon the dying Senzangakona to nominate him, the former was furious, and the latter much annoyed, as he had not been advised or consulted.

Dingiswayo now summoned Shaka and told him to take over the chieftaincy of the Zulu clan. He put at his disposal the 2nd Izi-cwe regiment (subsequently known as ‘Ngomane’s Own’), which had recently been formed under Shaka’s energetic recruiting policy for the expansion of Dingiswayo’s armed forces. He also provided him with an imposing staff, headed by Ngomane and Dingiswayo’s own nephew, Siwangu of Mbikwane. At the head of this triumphal and irresistible force Shaka entered his father’s Esi-Klebeni kraal—the home of his childhood days.

With his immense size—perfectly proportioned—and in his full gala dress, his regal, dignified bearing, the easy grace of all his movements, his piercing eyes set in a strong, stern face, and the general look of authority, made plain to all that here was a warrior-king indeed.

Ngomane now advanced to address the headmen of the Zulu clan, who, each with their following, had been assembled for the occasion.

‘Children of Zulu! To-day I present to you Shaka, son of Senzangakona, son of Jama, descended from Zulu, as your lawful chief. So says the “Great One” (Dingiswayo) whose mouth I am. Is there anyone here who can contest the righteousness of this decision? If so, let him stand forth and speak now, or hereafter be silent.’

‘No one speaks,’ said Ngomane, ‘then salute your chief.’

Finding that he had no army, Shaka at once called up the whole manhood of the Zulus, capable of bearing arms. . . . Shaka was tire-
less in getting his little army into shape. Nearly every day he visited one of his two other military kraals and woe betide the defaulters. His kingdom was so small—a paltry ten miles by ten—that from his central position he could reach any of its confines within an hour.

Shaka, having effected all his reforms in his own tribe, proposed to extend his reformatory and retributive activities. He had dealt with individuals; now he would deal with clans, beginning with the E-Langeni, of which his own mother was a daughter, in which he and she had spent those first hideous years of exile and sorrow, and where they had been so cruelly treated. His army was now a war machine indeed. He marshalled it and made a night march of twenty-five miles over the Mtonjaneni Heights to E-Langeni-land. Before dawn he had silently surrounded the Esiweni kraal, the capital of Makedama, the E-Langeni chief. As soon as it became light the chief was summoned to surrender, and he did so without any waste of time.

Shaka ordered all the inhabitants to be brought before him, and singled out all those who, so many years before, had inflicted untold misery on his mother and himself. Some other kraals which harboured his youthful tormentors had also been surrounded by detachments of the army, and their inhabitants were also brought up for scrutiny and judgment.

Whilst this was being done Shaka called for two bowls of water, and then deliberately disrobed in front of all the gathering. The bound men on the left were ordered to approach and squat on their haunches. Shaka then arose and towered over them.

‘You will all die,’ he roared. Then after a dreadful pause he resumed in deep, even tones, ‘Before I tell you the manner of your going there are some things I have to say to you. You are such a filthy collection of utuvi (excrement) that the very sight of you contaminates me, and I must wash before I proceed.’ Very deliberately he now poured water over his head, and rinsed his whole body carefully, until the first bowl was empty. Then he reminded them of how they had sneered at his bodily inadequacy and bade them note that they had lied.

‘This is the death I have in mind for you. The slayers will sharpen the projecting upright poles in this cattle-kraal—one for each of you. They will then lead you there, and four of them will pick you up singly and impale you on each of the sharpened poles. There you will stay till you die, and your bodies, or what will be left of them by the birds, will stay there as a testimony to all, what punishment awaits those who slander me and my mother.’ As the anguished victims were led away Shaka taunted them with ‘Hlalani gahle’ (‘Sit you well!’ not the customary ‘Salani gahle!’ i.e. ‘Stay you well’). Then he ordered the second bowl of water, and again washed his whole body to ‘cleanse it from the last defiling look’ of those he had sent to their doom.
After a time Shaka sent orders to the slayers to end the death agonies of the victims by placing bundles of grass under them and firing them. As the flames licked about them, those who were still conscious shrieked out in their death agonies, which were now short-lived.

The White Man’s History of Shaka

HENRY FRANCIS FYNN

White people first came to Zululand in 1824. Francis George Farewell, a Capetown businessman; James Saunders King, the captain of a coastal brig; and several other investors formed the Farewell Trading Company at Port Natal, a harbor about a hundred miles south of Shaka’s home kraal. Shorty the company was joined by a young Englishman, Henry Francis Fynn, who had been educated at Christ’s Hospital in London and had worked for a while as a surgeon’s assistant, but had decided to come to South Africa looking for adventure. He had already learned some African dialects when he joined the Farewell Trading Company. He discovered from the natives near Port Natal that the land they had settled on—indeed all of Natal—was Shaka’s personal domain. Fynn decided to visit the great Zulu chief. On his first venture to the north along the coast he came across one of Shaka’s military parties and watched in amazement as some 20,000 warriors tramped past him. Fynn sent word ahead that he wanted to meet with the chief, but Shaka was not ready, and bade him return to Port Natal; he did send him a gift of ivory and forty head of cattle.

Later that summer of 1824 Shaka invited the white men to visit his kraal. Farewell and Fynn and several others mounted their horses, packed an assortment of gifts, and set out in mid-July. Fynn, of course, took his medical kit. After meeting Shaka and exchanging gifts, the party returned to Port Natal, but Fynn stayed on. He quickly became fluent in Zulu and was to be in more or less constant contact with Shaka for the next four years. He would later write his account of his adventures, based on his diary, from which the following excerpt is taken.

On entering the great cattle kraal we found drawn up within it about 80,000 natives in their war attire. Mbikwana\(^8\) requested me to gallop within the circle, and immediately on my starting to do so one general

\(^8\)The leader of their native servants, who served as interpreter.—Ed.
shout broke forth from the whole mass, all pointing at me with their sticks. I was asked to gallop round the circle two or three times in the midst of tremendous shouting.

Mbizwana, standing in our midst, addressed some unseen individual in a long speech, in the course of which we were frequently called upon by him to answer “Yebo,” that is to affirm as being true all he was saying, though perfectly ignorant of what was being said.

While the speech was being made I caught sight of an individual in the background whom I concluded to be Shaka, and, turning to Farewell, pointed out and said: “Farewell, there is Shaka.” This was sufficiently audible for him to hear and perceive that I had recognised him. He immediately held up his hand, shaking his finger at me approvingly. Farewell, being near-sighted and using an eye-glass, could not distinguish him.

Elephant tusks were then brought forward. One was laid before Farewell and another before me. Shaka then raised the stick in his hand and after striking with it right and left, the whole mass broke from their position and formed up into regiments. Portions of each of these rushed to the river and the surrounding hills, while the remainder, forming themselves into a circle, commenced dancing with Shaka in their midst.

It was a most exciting scene, surprising to us, who could not have imagined that a nation termed “savages” could be so disciplined and kept in order.

Regiments of girls, headed by officers of their own sex, then entered the centre of the arena to the number of 8,000–10,000, each holding a slight staff in her hand. They joined in the dance, which continued for about two hours.

The people now dispersed, and he directed a chief to lead us to a kraal where we could pitch our tents. He sent us a sheep, a basket of corn, an ox, and a pot of beer, about three gallons. At seven o’clock, we sent up four rockets and fired off eight guns. He sent people to look at these, but from fear did not show himself out of his hut. The following morning we were requested to mount our horses and proceed to the King’s quarters. We found him sitting under a tree at the upper end of the kraal decorating himself and surrounded by about 200 people.

While he was dressing himself, his people proceeded, as on the day before, to show droves of cattle, which were still flocking in, repeatedly varying the scene with singing and dancing. In the meantime, we observed Shaka gave orders for a man standing close to us to be killed, for what crime we could not learn, but we soon found this to be a very common occurrence.

Mr. Petersen, unfortunately, at this moment placed a musical box on the ground, and, striking it with a switch, moved the stop. Shaka heard the music. It seemed to produce in him a superstitious feeling.
He turned away with evident displeasure and went back immediately to the dance.

Those portions of regiments which had separated prior to the dance now returned from the river and from behind the adjoining hills, driving before them immense herds of cattle. A grand cattle show was now being arranged. Each regiment drove towards us thousands of cattle that had been allotted to their respective barracks, the colour of each regiment's cattle corresponding with that of the shield the men carried, which, in turn, served to distinguish one regiment from another. No cattle of differing colour from those allotted to a given regiment were allowed to intermix. . . .

Two oxen were slaughtered for us. After dinner we prepared to retire, but messengers from Shaka requested us to go to him, with Jacob the interpreter. I was then led into the seraglio, where I found him seated in a carved wooden chair and surrounded by about 400 girls, two or three chiefs and two servants in attendance.

My name Fynn had been converted into Sofili by the people in general; by this, after desiring me to sit in front of him, he several times accosted me in the course of the following dialogue:

"I hear you have come from umGeorge, is it so? Is he as great a king as I am?"

Fynn: "Yes; King George is one of the greatest kings in the world."

Shaka: "I am very angry with you," said while putting on a severe countenance. "I shall send a messenger to umGeorge and request him to kill you. He sent you to me not to give medicine to my dogs." All present immediately applauded what Shaka had said. "Why did you give my dogs medicine?" (in allusion to the woman I was said to have brought back to life after death).  

Fynn: "It is a practice of our country to help those who are in need, if able to do so."

Shaka: "Are you then the doctor of dogs? You were sent here to be my doctor."

Fynn: "I am not a doctor and not considered by my countrymen to be one."

Shaka: "Have you medicine by you?"

Fynn: "Yes."

Shaka: "Then cure me, or I will have you sent to umGeorge to have you killed."

Fynn: "What is the matter with you?"

Shaka: "That is your business to find out."

\[9\]Some time had passed and this was an incident which had occurred several days before.—Ed.
Fynn: "Stand up and let me see your person."
Shaka: "Why should I stand up?"
Fynn: "That I may see if I can find out what ails you."

Shaka stood up but evidently disliked my approaching him closely. A number of girls held up lighted torches. I looked about his person and, after reflecting on the great activity he had shown during the day, was satisfied he had not much the matter with him. I, however, observed numerous black marks on his loins where native doctors had scarified him, and at once said he had pains in his loins. He held his hand before his mouth in astonishment, upon which my wisdom was applauded by all present. Shaka then strictly charged me not to give medicine to his dogs, and, after a few commonplace questions in which he showed good humour, I was permitted to retire for the night.

The following day had been appointed by Shaka for receiving our present, which, fortunately, had been well chosen by Farewell for presentation to so superior a chief as Shaka. It consisted of every description of beads at that time procurable in Cape Town, and far superior to those Shaka had previously obtained from the Portuguese at Delagoa. There was a great variety of woollen blankets, a large quantity of brass bars, turned and lacquered, and sheets of copper, also pigeons, a pig, cats and dogs. There was, moreover, a full-dress military coat, with epaulettes covered with gold lace. Though Shaka showed no open gratitude, we saw clearly that he was satisfied. He was very interested in the live animals, especially the pig, until it got into his milk stores where it committed great havoc, and set all the women in the seraglio screaming for assistance. All this ended in the pig being killed.

The showing of cattle and dancing continued during the day, whilst other regiments, which had come from a great distance, arrived and took part in the festivities.

In conversation on our object in coming to Natal, this part of South Africa, Shaka showed great desire that we should live at the port. Each evening he sent for me and conversed with me through the Kaffir Jacob, the interpreter, for three or four hours.

On the first day of our visit we had seen no less than ten men carried off to death. On a mere sign by Shaka, viz: the pointing of his finger, the victim would be seized by his nearest neighbours; his neck would be twisted, and his head and body beaten with sticks, the nobs of some of these being as large as a man's fist. On each succeeding day, too, numbers of others were killed; their bodies would then be carried to an adjoining hill and there impaled. We visited this spot on the fourth day. It was truly a Golgotha, swarming with hundreds of vultures. The effects of this together with the scenes of death made Mr. Petersen decide at once to dissolve the partnership and leave for the Cape.
During Fynn’s visit an assassination attempt is made on Shaka’s life, apparently at the insistence of a distant rival chief. Fynn is summoned.

I immediately washed the wound with camomile tea and bound it up with linen. He had been stabbed with an assegai through the left arm, and the blade had passed through the ribs under the left breast. It had made the King spit blood. I could not account for the assegai not entering the lungs; it must have been due to mere accident; I was for some time in doubt. His own doctor, who seemed to have a good knowledge of that nature, also attended him. He gave the King a vomit and afterwards administered purges and continually washed the wound with decoctions of cooling roots. He also probed the wound to ascertain if any poison had been used on the assegai.

Shaka cried nearly the whole night, expecting that only fatal consequences would ensue. The crowd had now increased so much that the noise of their shrieks became unbearable, and this noise continued throughout the night. Morning showed a horrid sight in a clear light. I am satisfied I cannot describe the horrid scene in language powerful enough to enable the reader, who has never been similarly situated, to appreciate it aright. The immense crowds of people that arrived hour after hour from every direction began their shouting on coming in sight of the kraal, running and exerting their utmost powers of voice as they entered it and joined those who had got there before them. They then pulled one another about, men and women throwing themselves down in every direction without taking care how they fell. Great numbers fainted from over exertion and excessive heat. The females of the seraglio, more particularly, were in very great distress, having overtaxed themselves during the night. They suffered from the excessive heat and from want of nourishment, which no one dared to touch, whilst the four brass collars each had, fitting so tightly round the neck as to make it impossible for the wearer to turn her head, nearly suffocated them. Several of them died. Finding their situation so distressing, and there being no one to afford them relief, I poured a quantity of water and threw it over them as they fell; this went on till I was myself so tired as to be obliged to desist. They then made some attempt to help one another.

All this time I had been so busily employed as not to see the most sickening part of this tragical scene. They had now begun to kill one another. Some were put to death because they did not cry, others for putting spittle into their eyes, others for sitting down to cry, although strength and tears, after such continuous mourning and exertion, were quite exhausted. No such limits were taken into account.

We then understood that six men had been wounded by the assassins who wounded Shaka. From the road they took, it was supposed that
Fynn: “Stand up and let me see your person.”
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Fynn: “That I may see if I can find out what ails you.”

Shaka stood up but evidently disliked my approaching him closely. A number of girls held up lighted torches. I looked about his person and, after reflecting on the great activity he had shown during the day, was satisfied he had not much the matter with him. I, however, observed numerous black marks on his loins where native doctors had scarified him, and at once said he had pains in his loins. He held his hand before his mouth in astonishment, upon which my wisdom was applauded by all present. Shaka then strictly charged me not to give medicine to his dogs, and, after a few commonplace questions in which he showed good humour, I was permitted to retire for the night.

The following day had been appointed by Shaka for receiving our present, which, fortunately, had been well chosen by Farewell for presentation to so superior a chief as Shaka. It consisted of every description of beads at that time procurable in Cape Town, and far superior to those Shaka had previously obtained from the Portuguese at Delagoa. There was a great variety of woollen blankets, a large quantity of brass bars, turned and lacquered, and sheets of copper, also pigeons, a pig, cats and dogs. There was, moreover, a full-dress military coat, with epaulettes covered with gold lace. Though Shaka showed no open gratitude, we saw clearly that he was satisfied. He was very interested in the live animals, especially the pig, until it got into his milk stores where it committed great havoc, and set all the women in the seraglio screaming for assistance. All this ended in the pig being killed.

The showing of cattle and dancing continued during the day, whilst other regiments, which had come from a great distance, arrived and took part in the festivities.

In conversation on our object in coming to Natal, this part of South Africa, Shaka showed great desire that we should live at the port. Each evening he sent for me and conversed with me through the Kaffir Jacob, the interpreter, for three or four hours.

On the first day of our visit we had seen no less than ten men carried off to death. On a mere sign by Shaka, viz: the pointing of his finger, the victim would be seized by his nearest neighbours; his neck would be twisted, and his head and body beaten with sticks, the nobs of some of these being as large as a man's fist. On each succeeding day, too, numbers of others were killed; their bodies would then be carried to an adjoining hill and there impaled. We visited this spot on the fourth day. It was truly a Golgotha, swarming with hundreds of vultures. The effects of this together with the scenes of death made Mr. Petersen decide at once to dissolve the partnership and leave for the Cape.
During Fynn's visit an assassination attempt is made on Shaka's life, apparently at the insistence of a distant rival chief. Fynn is summoned.

I immediately washed the wound with camomile tea and bound it up with linen. He had been stabbed with an assegai through the left arm, and the blade had passed through the ribs under the left breast. It had made the King spit blood. I could not account for the assegai not entering the lungs; it must have been due to mere accident; I was for some time in doubt. His own doctor, who seemed to have a good knowledge of that nature, also attended him. He gave the King a vomit and afterwards administered purges and continually washed the wound with decoctions of cooling roots. He also probed the wound to ascertain if any poison had been used on the assegai.

Shaka cried nearly the whole night, expecting that only fatal consequences would ensue. The crowd had now increased so much that the noise of their shrieks became unbearable, and this noise continued throughout the night. Morning showed a horrid sight in a clear light. I am satisfied I cannot describe the horrid scene in language powerful enough to enable the reader, who has never been similarly situated, to appreciate it aright. The immense crowds of people that arrived hour after hour from every direction began their shouting on coming in sight of the kraal, running and exerting their utmost powers of voice as they entered it and joined those who had got there before them. They then pulled one another about, men and women throwing themselves down in every direction without taking care how they fell. Great numbers fainted from over exertion and excessive heat. The females of the seraglio, more particularly, were in very great distress, having overtaxed themselves during the night. They suffered from the excessive heat and from want of nourishment, which no one dared to touch, whilst the four brass collars each had, fitting so tightly round the neck as to make it impossible for the wearer to turn her head, nearly suffocated them. Several of them died. Finding their situation so distressing, and there being no one to afford them relief, I poured a quantity of water and threw it over them as they fell; this went on till I was myself so tired as to be obliged to desist. They then made some attempt to help one another.

All this time I had been so busily employed as not to see the most sickening part of this tragical scene. They had now begun to kill one another. Some were put to death because they did not cry, others for putting spittle into their eyes, others for sitting down to cry, although strength and tears, after such continuous mourning and exertion, were quite exhausted. No such limits were taken into account.

We then understood that six men had been wounded by the assassins who wounded Shaka. From the road they took, it was supposed that
they had been sent by Zwide, King of the Ndwandwes (Ndwandwe tribe), who was Shaka’s only powerful enemy. Two regiments were accordingly sent off at once in search of the aggressors.

In the meantime the medicines which, on his leaving, Mr. Farewell had promised to send were received. They came very opportunely, and Shaka was much gratified. I now washed his wounds frequently, and gave him mild purgatives. I, moreover, dressed his wounds with ointment. The King was in a hopeless condition for four days. During all that time people were continuing to flock in from the outskirts of his country and joining in the general tumult. It was not till the fourth day that cattle were killed for the sustenance of the multitude. Many had died in the interval, and many had been killed for not mourning, or for having gone to their kraals for food.

On the fifth day there were symptoms of improvement in the King’s condition; these favourable indications were also noticeable on the day following.

At noon on that day the party sent out in search of the would-be murderers returned, bringing with them the dead bodies of three men whom they had killed in the bush (jungle). These were the supposed assassins. The bodies, having been carried off, were laid on the ground in a roadway about a mile from the kraal. Their right ears were then cut off and the two pursuing regiments sat down on either side of the road, while the whole of the people, men and women, who had assembled at the kraal, probably exceeding 30,000, passed up the road crying and yelling. Each one, on coming up to the bodies, struck them several blows with a stick, which was then left at the spot, so that nothing more of these was to be seen; only an immense pile of sticks remained, but the formal ceremony still went on. The whole body now collecting, and three men walking in advance with sticks on which were the ears of the dead and now shattered bodies, the procession moved to Shaka’s kraal. The King now made his appearance. The national mourning song was chanted. After this a fire was made in the centre of the cattle kraal where the ears were burnt to ashes. . .

Early in 1828 Shaka sent his army south to raid clear to the Cape Colony border. When they returned he sent them far to the north. Such random, irrational behavior apparently gave his two brothers their long-awaited opportunity to assassinate Shaka.

During the life of Shaka his despotic sway was so feared that his name was seldom mentioned but as the form of an oath, and much more dangerous was the attempt to trace in any way the particulars of his
family, who were not permitted publicly to be known as his relatives. His brothers, though numerous, were not allowed to call themselves so, except Ngwadi, brother on his mother's side. Dingane and Mhlangana were only partially known, the former much resembling Shaka in person. Their apparent fondness was so great that one was seldom seen without the other. In the same house lived M珞pha, son of Sithyi, a Zulu chief and principal servant of Shaka. These were the three conspirators who put Shaka to death. . . .

On the 24th September, 1828, Shaka, while taking his usual sleep at midday, dreamt he was killed and M珞pha's sister, one of the seraglio, knowing the result would be likely to prove her brother's death, told him what had transpired, to give him an opportunity of killing a cow as soon as possible, to invoke his spirit. This information induced M珞pha to urge his accomplices. Some Bechuanaas arriving with crane feathers, which Shaka had long expected, these people were brought to him, he being in a small kraal he had built about 50 yards from Dukuza, calling it Nyakomushi or Ugly Year. There he went to receive them. The two brothers, being informed of it by M珞pha, took a circuitous route to come in at the back of the kraal, having concealed assegais under their karosses, and sat behind the fence. Shaka asked the Bechuanaas what had detained them so long, in a harsh tone. M珞pha immediately threw a stick at them. They ran away instantly, supposing it the signal for their death, which had been given to M珞pha by Shaka unperceived by them, as was his custom in those cases. Shaka asking why he had struck them, Mhlangana embraced the opportunity and, from behind the fence, stabbed at the back of his left shoulder. Shaka had only time to look round and, seeing the two brothers, exclaim: "What is the matter, children of my father?" when Dingane stabbed him. He then threw the blanket from him and, taking the assegai from his side with which Dingane had stabbed him, fell dead near the kraal gate.

A Modern Shaka

BRIAN ROBERTS

The Zulu Kings, by Brian Roberts, from which the following excerpt is taken, has been called "the first tempered account we have of Shaka and the rise of the Zulu nation."10 He presents us with a healthy skepticism

about the reports of Europeans such as Fynn. Like E. A. Ritter, Roberts relied on records derived from Zulu oral tradition. But where Ritter tended to reflect the colonial attitudes of the turn of the century, Roberts reflects careful modern research and a skillful reading of both Zulu and non-Zulu sources. He has created both a "plausible" and a "not unsympathetic picture"¹¹ of Shaka. His assessment follows.

As far as is known, Shaka was forty-one when he died. If he had come to power in 1817—the year Dingiswayo is said to have died—he had been the effective ruler of Zululand for eleven years. In that time he had forged one of the mightiest empires the African continent has ever known. Under his leadership, his small insignificant clan had risen from obscurity and given their name to an all-powerful nation. During his lifetime the Zulu army had been organised into a fearsome military machine which had transformed the age-old pattern of southern African society. The Nguni system of clanships and petty chieftainships had been replaced by a single, authoritarian state, feared by its neighbours and acknowledged far beyond its borders. Few leaders in history have accomplished so much, so quickly. Shaka not only established Zulu supremacy but ensured the lasting renown of his nation. For generations to come the word Zulu was to be synonymous with might. It was an awe-inspiring achievement.

But, like all such achievements, it was not come by gently. Shaka was a tyrant; he could have been nothing else. He rose amid appalling bloodshed. It has been estimated that no less than two million people died as a result of the upheavals created by Shaka. When the white men first arrived in Natal, they found the country desolate, the landscape littered with skeletons. Shaka reigned supreme because he had obliterated all semblance of opposition. He took no advice, he demanded blind obedience; he was intolerant, ruthless and inflexible. He knew nothing of the softer virtues, had he done so he would not have achieved what he did: his strength was derived from his callousness.

Living as he did, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, it was inevitable that he should be compared with a contemporary despot: he has been called the Black Napoleon. But the comparison is more romantic than real. The system instigated by Shaka was unique. To compare it, even superficially, with that of a European power is misleading. The aims, methods and values of the white men were unknown to Shaka. The society he ruled and the opponents he

¹¹Atlantic, June 1975 (235), p. 95.
fought were so far removed from the regimes of nineteenth-century Europe that to set his achievements against those of a sophisticated conqueror like Napoleon is meaningless. Shaka had no set objectives and was uninfluenced by political and moral considerations. He was guided by intuition; he learned from his own experience. It is necessary to realise this to appreciate his extraordinary genius.

Shocking as was his apparent cruelty, this also must be judged in isolation. The ethics of the white man meant nothing to him. He relied on his own interpretation of humanity. Treachery, disobedience and cowardice were, for him, the cardinal sins; he did not regard life as sacred—any more than did most of his subjects. When white men, fresh from Regency England, were plunged into a society that recognised none of their values, they were appalled. The fact that that society was rigidly organised only increased their horror: the frightful punishments inflicted by Shaka appeared to them all the more cold blooded. It was difficult to reconcile fine discipline with primitive values. But there was nothing so exceptional about the grim Zulu penal code. Shaka was by no means the only African ruler to order summary executions; he was, however, one of the few whose activities have been reported in vivid detail.

One must accept that European and African values were often irreconcilable. Nowhere was this divergence more apparent than in an early conversation between Fynn and Shaka. The Zulu King was flabbergasted to learn that the white men imprisoned offenders for months, even years. Such punishment seemed to him far more sadistic than the tortures he inflicted. To kill a man, however painfully, was preferable to the living death of confinement. As a warrior he could imagine nothing worse than a long, meaningless captivity. . . .

Reports of Shaka spread by the traders, make him appear an unnaturally fiend whose activities went far beyond the dictates of even the most primitive code. He is shown as a mass murderer, a depraved ogre who revelled in the tortures he devised and drooled over his victims. ‘History,’ said James Saunders King, ‘perhaps does not furnish an instance of a more despotic and cruel monster than Chaka.’ . . . Anyone wishing to present a lively picture of the monster Shaka can find plenty of material in Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa by Nathaniel Isaacs.\(^{12}\) It does not do, however, to enquire too deeply into the authenticity of Isaacs’s account. Many of his observations on Natal and Zulu customs are undoubtedly accurate and will be of lasting value. But when he

\(^{12}\) Nathaniel Isaacs came to Port Natal somewhat later than Fynn and only knew Shaka at the very end of his reign. His work, however, is second only to Fynn’s in value as a contemporary account.—Ed.
comes to deal with the terrible Shaka his comments are, to say the least, sus-

pect. . . .

Fynn was more honest, less sensational. His account is far more factual; it contains none of the purple patches Isaacs delighted in. . . . Nevertheless he] had some covering up to do. What is more, his so-called ‘diary’ was written many years after the events it describes. He is said to have lost the original notes he was collecting for his book when they were mistakenly buried with his brother Frank and he thus had ‘to rewrite the whole of the contents from memory as well as he could’. Unfortunately his memory was not all that reliable. The re-written notes were fragmen-
tary; often he gives more than one version of a single incident; invariably the versions differ. It is possible that, when recalling some events, he was influenced by Isaac’s Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa.

Fynn does not dwell on Shaka’s sadism to the same extent as does Isaacs. Nevertheless he gives many examples of torture and executions. The executions mostly result from some offence to Shaka, often a trivial offence. Fynn says, for instance: ‘On one occasion I witnessed 60 boys under 12 years of age despatched before he had breakfasted.’ Precisely why these boys were killed he does not say. The implication would seem to be that Shaka did not require a reason for butchery. . . .

What is difficult to understand is the reaction of the traders. If they really believed that Shaka was a capricious, indiscriminate killer, then why did they remain in Natal? They were given repeated opportunities to leave but they refused them all. One would have thought that, with a monster like Shaka breathing down their necks, there would have been a mad scramble to board the first ship that called at Port Natal. Yet Farewell, Fynn, Cane and Ogle stayed for four years under Shaka; King, Isaacs, Hutton and the seamen were there three years. Young boys like Thomas Halstead and John Ross wandered about the country, apparently without fear. King even brought Farewell’s wife to Natal.

Did they really think they would be protected by their white skins and magic medicines? Or were they so self-seeking that they were willing to risk their necks for a haul of ivory? Given their picture of Shaka, neither explanation is particularly convincing. A man who murdered his own family and wilfully massacred his own people could hardly be relied upon to respect a difference in skin colour indefinitely. Their medicines were limited and by no means infallible. Shaka is said to have commanded an army of 30,000; if, in one of his unpredictable moods, he had turned against the traders, their firearms would have counted for nothing. The chance of a fortune might have inspired them to take a reasonable risk, but it does not explain why they—down to the last seaman—willingly remained at the uncertain mercy of a savage extremist. . . .

But the undeniable fact is that the traders did not recoil ‘at the ser-
pent's hiss or the lion's growl'. They stayed on for years with this terrifying fiend who, according to Isaacs, was continually threatening their lives. James Saunders King tried desperately to force the British to occupy Port Natal and thus provide the traders with protection, but his failure to achieve this did not prevent him, or the others, from returning to the Zulu territory. Just how afraid of Shaka were the traders?

There can be little doubt that the tortures and executions described by Isaacs and Fynn did take place. This was part of the Zulu system and was to be observed, independently, by others who later visited those Zulu rulers trained at Shaka's court. Painful death was the inevitable punishment for those who offended the King; and the King was easily offended. An ill-suppressed cough, sneeze or fart in the royal presence could result in a menacing finger being raised and the executioners moving in. The sixty boys whom Fynn says were put to death before breakfast might have done no more than titter at a serious gathering. Immediate death was the only punishment allowed for such offence. Was this, as Isaacs suggests, simply the means by which Shaka indulged a sadistic whim? If it was, then the traders had good reasons for their professed fears.

But it seems more likely that Shaka's behaviour was not as erratic as they pretended. The Zulu system was based on a harsh, rigid, but recognisable discipline. By means of this discipline Shaka had made his army invincible; in the same way he had ensured his supremacy. From Fynn's description of the mass hysteria which was so easily generated among Shaka's subjects, it is obvious that the Zulu nation could never have reached the heights it did under a ruler less severe and determined than Shaka. To say this is not to excuse a cruel despotism, but to understand the motivations of an intelligent but barbarous ruler. Only by resorting to the abnormal could Shaka—like many another tyrant—retain his hold over his people.

The traders must have recognised this. They, as well as Shaka's subjects, must have been aware of the disciplinary code laid down by the King. They must have realised that, as long as they observed that code, they were safe. Safer in fact than a more ignorant and emotional Zulu...

The only first-hand, detailed reports of Shaka are those given by his white visitors. Knowledge of the first Zulu King depends entirely on the biased observations of Isaacs and Fynn. Stripped of their subjective judgements, the few facts to emerge from these accounts are not entirely to Shaka's detriment. Confronted by a group of strange white men, with seemingly mysterious powers, the King offered them friendship when he might have destroyed them from fear. He not only welcomed them but gave every indication of wishing to meet their fellows. He granted them land, he supplied them with ivory, he
fell in with their schemes. He stood between them and the wrath of his people. While Shaka lived no white man in Natal was harmed.

It is unfortunate that no contemporary Zulu account of Shaka exists. Did his people loath him as his enemies—both white and black—later maintained? There seems little evidence to support such a claim. Not even Fynn and Isaacs suggest the possibility of a popular rising against Shaka. The only recorded assassination attempt on the King apart from that which killed him, was, as far as one can tell, that of an enemy agent. This might be explained, in part, by Shaka’s iron-handed rule. Nevertheless, the Zulu were a warrior race, by no means servile, and when Shaka’s brothers decided to strike they did so with relative ease. If discontent under Shaka was widespread, it was certainly not apparent.

But there is further evidence in Shaka’s favour. Zulu sources are not entirely silent on the founder of their nation. Far from it. For generations oral tradition has hailed Shaka as the greatest of Zulu heroes. His name is frequently invoked in Zulu councils, his example is cited as a supreme authority. Any criticism of Shaka can, and often does, earn a sharp rebuke from Zulu elders and statesmen. He is the subject of eulogistic praise chants and poems; the hero of more than one African novel. The Zulu people have erected a monument in his honour at the site of his Dukuza kraal. When, in 1972, the Zulu Territorial Authority nominated a national day for the newly created kwaZulu, they chose the anniversary of their founder’s assassination: Shaka’s Day.

Review and Study Questions

1. Can the unwritten, oral tradition of such a preliterate people as the Zulus serve as an authentic source for their history?

2. What reforms did Shaka undertake to turn his army into a superb fighting force?

3. Why, do you imagine, did Shaka receive the white men so favorably?

4. How do you assess the nature of Shaka’s accomplishments? Were they important in the history of southern Africa?

5. Could Shaka be described as “the Black Napoleon”?

Suggestions for Further Reading

No written Zulu account of the oral tradition about Shaka exists. We have already noted the skillful and sympathetic use of portions of that
tradition by E. A. Ritter, *Shaka Zulu: The Rise of the Zulu Empire* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1965), excerpted for this chapter. Probably the closest thing we have to an authentic ethno-history of the Zulus is in two works by A. T. Bryant, *The Zulu People as They Were Before the White Man Came* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970 [1948]) and *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal* (London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), both compendia of Zulu customs and behavior written by a missionary and the most credible Zulu scholar and linguist of the early part of this century.

