

# The zulu kingdom



The Zulu Kingdom became famous for its military exploits and unification under the leadership of Shaka. However, before the Zulu kingdom of South Africa became such power in the 18th century, the Zulu kingdom undertook a process of state building, amalgamation among other states and ferocious wars. Moreover, Shaka was not the only chieftain mainly responsible for the unification of the Zulu kingdom. There were other chiefs such as Dingiswayo and Moshoeshoe who made innovations in the kingdom.

Shaka was mainly known because of his alleged ferocious and militaristic rule and invasions of other clans in Southern Africa. His reign also proved to be atypical of the south African chieftaincy and despotism. This paper highlights the chiefs in the Zulu kingdom and of south Africa which brought about the kingdom's rise and fall. Among them are Dingiswayo who was Shaka's mentor, Shaka whose reign was mainly known to be despotic and terror-filled and violence; and in contrast Moshoeshoe who in contrast to Shaka was able to provide protection and refuge to those displaced by Shaka's attacks and raids.

Origin The Zulu kingdom was originally comprised of the Nguni people who migrated from the west and the north in the middle of the 15th century probably before the Portuguese circumnavigated South Africa. The Nguni are divided into three groups: the northern Nguni who are Bantu-speaking people and now called Zulu; the southern Nguni and the Swazi. Prior to the late 18th century, the northern Nguni were very similar to the southern Nguni in their political situation. A number of chieftains had the tendency to divide among themselves. There are several factors as to why these people divide among themselves.

Among such is the fact that as the tribe and polity gets larger and bigger, members of the tribes often feel left out thus they end up seeking another alternative leader to be close to. But for the Nguni society, there are two different reasons as to why polity divides among themselves. First is the family structure of the chieftaincy which is polygynous. As each wife is given her share of hut, she nevertheless becomes a "house" unto herself. This means that land would be assigned to her in order to cultivate while cattle would also be assigned to her "house" and her children.

Whatever proceeds of the products in the field and cattle may not be disposed without her consent and permission despite the fact that these belonged to her husband. Second is the practice of marrying the Great Wife. Typically, the chieftain marries the Great Wife later in life in order to produce an heir who succeed the chieftain. The rationale behind this practice is the belief that having an heir who reached maturity before succeeding in the throne would be come impatient and might lead in an uprising against the chief.

Opposite the Great Wife is the Right Hand wife who usually comes from a powerful family while the Great Wife comes from a neighboring clan. Other wives are ranked after the Great Wife and Right Hand Wife. When the Great Wife fails to produce an heir for the chief or if the heir is mentally or physically incapacitated, the heir may come from the Right Hand Wife's house or those coming from the wives under both houses. This practice then results in an inevitable scenario: the heir who comes from whatever house would usurp power upon succession of the throne.

Militarising and State-Building Prior to the late 18th century, the Zulu kingdom was merely a number of small groups from the Northern Nguni. However, at the onset of the 18th century, a process of militarising and amalgamation among the Northern Nguni took place and for three decades a number of innovations in terms of militarization and politics were introduced. Foremost in the innovation was Dingiswayo who started a number of innovations among the Zulu contrary to the popular belief that it was Zaka who was mainly responsible for all these.

Dingiswayo introduced and practiced the age-regiment system in the military. Although the age-regiment system has been used in different societies, such system was not instituted and practiced by the Nguni. He was also responsible for the abolition of the practice of male circumcision which was a practice among adolescent boys as part of their initiation into manhood and warrior. For the Nguni however, this practice was done only at times when the chief's heir was circumcised so other boys will be circumcised with him as well.

The process of waiting for the chief's heir to be circumcised is a process by which the other boys might be given status as well because eventually these boys become advisors to the heir later on in life. With the abolition of male circumcision, the age-regiment gained a new face and system. Whereas prior to its abolition, boys can only enter the army as soon as they become initiated through the practice of male circumcision. Dingiswayo hoped that by abolishing the practice of male circumcision and the introduction of age-regiment, it gave a different light to the military and in the process of militarizing society as well.

The reason behind the abolition of the practice of male circumcision was to cut down on the time and resources used and allotted for the circumcision of these adolescent boys. It entailed that boys will be integrated into the army earlier than waiting for the initiation. Through Dingiswayo's efforts, his army which was grouped into military regiments and engaged in extensive training began to build a confederacy of peoples by conquest and incorporation.

Zwide, the leader of the Ndwandwe people, began to adopt the same innovations.

As a result there was a process of conquest and consolidation of the northern Nguni into 2 confederacies. (Mills) During Dingiswayo's reign from 1808 to 1818, he conquered several chiefdoms around the Mthethwa territory in his desire to end the internecine fighting between the different communities and to integrate them into one single government. Among the reasons as to why Dingiswayo's conquests were very successful was the restructuring the former fighting units of different lineages into unified, age-graded regiments.

This military reorganization had important sociopolitical implications since it weakened the influence of territorially based kinship relations. (Deflem)

Moreover, Dingiswayo also changed the political system of the kingdom by using a centralized power over the conquered area. This military reorganization had important sociopolitical implications since it weakened the influence of territorially based kinship relations. Dingiswayo also changed the political order by centralizing power over the conquered area.

He increased control over the defeated chiefs when they accepted his dominion or when he considered them loyal favorites. Dingiswayo's exercise

of force was said to be relatively mild beyond the actual conquest, and the chiefdoms submitting to his power and offering tribute were largely left intact. (Deflem) Shaka Shaka was born in 1787 whose father was chief of a small Zulu clan about 10, 000 people. His mother, Nandi who was not at all politically significant was subsequently forced to leave the clan thus Shaka was raised and brought up among his mother's people and outsiders.

Shaka and his mother were constantly treated badly and historians attribute such treatment to be responsible for Shaka's ferocity later on. He finally end up with the Mthethwa where he proved himself a skilled warrior in Dingiswayo's army. He entered Dingiswayo's army in 1809. Being used to fighting mean and bigger boys while growing up, he easily adapted to the army where he caught Dingiswayo's attention. He became the leader and commander of Dingiswayo's regiment and eventually became the chief's protege.

Shaka's clan was part of Dingiswayo's Mthethewa confederacy and being a protege of Dingiswayo, he eventually gained the throne upon his father's death to whom Dingiswayo intervened in the succession despite the fact that Shaka had little claim to the chieftaincy. Upon assuming the chieftaincy Shaka instituted innovations early on. He ran long distances without footwear in order to harden himself physically. He began to drill his men the same way sometimes with less or no food or water at all. Shaka's reputation as being a hard and bloodthirsty leader became more widespread.

He would force his men to run along thorny bushes and those who showed fear and hesitation were killed for being a coward. In 1818, two years after

Shaka became chief of his father's clan, his mentor Dingiswayo was captured and killed by Zwibe who also launched a series of attacks on the Mthethwa confederacy. The confederacy which Dingiswayo held began disintegrating and Shaka who stepped in with his small but very dangerous arm against Zwibe's large one. At the start, Shaka avoided head on confrontations with the Ndwandwe armies but would chase and harried after retreating enemy forces.

Eventually he gathered the Mthethwa into his small army and integrated them into the Zulu clan and defeated the Ndwandwe as well. Period of Despotism Because of the success of his conquest, Shaka soon thereafter engaged in extensive programmes of incorporating the people from Zululand and Natal. His methods were considered effective although very brutal. Some of the leaders of the conquered kingdoms were retained while those who resisted were killed as Shaka did not take prisoners. Old people were killed while the young ones were placed in the regimental system.

Under his rule, the Zulu kingdom or society was considered violent. Political, social and economic aspects were arranged to support the militarisation of society. It was often compared to ancient Sparta, but, in fact, the proportion of the male population involved full-time as warriors was substantially higher than in Sparta. (Mills). Compared to Sparta to which the military was mainly limited to the elite, the Zulu kingdom was comprised by the military with all the able-bodied young men.

Terror went hand in hand with violence during the reign of Shaka who ordered executions to those who angered him. Thus when his mother died,

Shaka who was torn with grief ordered that all sexual activities be banned and those who did not display grief were killed. When Shaka changed the internal political structure of the kingdom he mandated that his warriors remain unmarried and ordered that the organization of the age-grade regiments a matter of his personal decision, thus further weakening traditional kinship ties and the powers of the elders in favor of his central authority.

However, Shaka's authoritarian rule relied mainly in the delegation of chiefly powers. He was assisted staff of chiefs who surrounded him in the royal kraal (a territorial dwelling unit with the house of the King located at the center). While Shaka needed the chiefs to execute his will, he was careful to limit their effective powers and stir rivalry among them so they would check one another but never dispute his will. (Deflam) In economic terms, Shaka insisted that all trade remain a royal monopoly.

Trade was never a huge element, but there was certainly some limited trade with Mozambique and later with a small group of Englishmen who established a small trading post on the coast at present day Durban in the early 1820s (a lot of our information about Shaka and the Zulu kingdom comes from these traders whom Shaka permitted to stay there). (Mills) Because of the delicate balance of Shaka's authoritarian rule and the reliance of the kingdom on the various chiefs while being assaulted by terror ceased to be maintained.

This disintegration manifested when Shaka's mother died. Such regime of destruction and viciousness finally affected the people's loyalty for Shaka. In



1828, three conspirators, two of which were brothers of Shaka, stabbed him to death. Dingane, one of the assassins and a brother of Shaka, then murdered his fellow conspirators and became the new King of the Zulu. Despite his despotism, Shaka was responsible in successfully building a large kingdom within a period of 10 years.

Moreover, the Zulu kingdom maintained its own identity even if it faced a lot of disasters although some areas were vastly devastated and destroyed culminating in a period of turmoil. The Fall of the Zulu Kingdom As the era of Shaka's militaristic and authoritarian rule ended, the kingdom's effects all through out southern and central Africa were felt. At the end of the process, not only the northern Nguni been incorporated in the kingdom or had been driven out. Those refugees and chieftains displaced by the conquests of Shaka organized and became powerful units once again.

Shaka's successor, Dingane tried to restore political order and peace throughout the kingdom and promised to bring forth happiness once again, he failed in such endeavour. Like his predecessor, terror and violence were once again used to restore political order and strengthen the weakening system of the kingdom. The tribes that have been unified under the authoritarian rule of Shaka became conscious of the disintegration of the Zulu kingdom and tried to remove themselves under Dingane's rule. Dingane in response to the situation used Shaka's method again.

During Shaka's regime, the British and Boer settlers in the area had not interfered with Zulu rule, largely because they could not stand up to the military might of Shaka's army. But as the European presence grew stronger

and the economic advantages of trade with the Zulu decreased, the autonomy of Zulu political developments were affected. Dingane's brother Mpande joined the Europeans, and, united in military force, they rebelled against the Zulu king. Dingane retreated into Swaziland, but in 1840 he was killed by conspirators led by Mpande, who took over the Zulu throne.

(Delfem)