## Short biography accessible yet flawed

**Dan Wylie, *Shaka: A Jacana Pocket Biography***

Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2011
155 pp
ISBN 978-1-77009-962-3
R99.95

The arguments presented in Dan Wylie's new *Jacana Pocket Biography* of Shaka, the famous nineteenth-century king of the Zulu, are those for which he has already become well known. As is to be expected,

the volume is a condensed summary of his previous works, *Savage Delight: White Myths of Shaka* (2000) and *Myth of Iron: Shaka in History* (2006), the latter being the first comprehensive scholarly biography of Shaka. In terms of this new volume's accessibility to a wider audience, there is much to praise. Written as an introduction to the topic, in a witty, engaging style, it will almost certainly be well received by a novice readership. Arranged in eleven concise chapters, it can also be recommended as a valuable initial foray for those interested in reading more substantial scholarly works on Shaka and early Zulu history.

That being said, Wylie is no less the omniscient narrator in this short biography than he was in *Myth of Iron*; an approach for which he was criticised after its publication but which survives intact in the current volume. As with *Myth of Iron*, we are presented with a biography of one of South Africa's most mythologised characters, which the author insists is actually impossible to write. While Wylie "would love to write a proper biography", he informs us that "the evidence on which to base one doesn't exist" (p 96). This is due to serious uncertainties surrounding the integrity of the available evidence, which the author describes as "a limited number of dubious sources with dubious anecdotes" (p 96). What this means, however, is that as with *Myth of Iron*, the credibility of this volume's rehashed arguments remains questionable. Indeed, for those familiar with Wylie's previous works, there is nothing new on offer here and the old flaws unfortunately remain.

At the outset, Wylie is at pains to contend that most of what we think we know about Shaka is simply wrong. The most famous monarch in the history of the Zulu people has been the victim of "politically motivated myth-building, outright lies, culturally biased misconceptions, sloppy scholarship and unthinking repetition" (p 9). His analysis is arguably at its strongest when it comes to reappraising the related historiography and, in particular, the earliest accounts of Shaka by an assortment of European adventurers and traders. Chapter One is dedicated to highlighting the lack of verifiable written sources,

as well as the shortcomings of *The James Stuart Archive*, a rich collection of oral testimonies of Zulu history and traditions provided by Zulu informants around the turn of the twentieth century. According to Wylie, the latter is "the main source upon which the present book is based" (p 24). Still, like the published "eye-witness" accounts of Nathaniel Isaacs (*Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa,* 1836) and Henry Francis Fynn (*The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, 1950; compiled by the same James Stuart of the eponymous archive), the collection of oral testimonies of Shaka are also "contradictory", exhibiting "political biases, forgetfulness, propaganda, [and] lies" (p 25). Those accounts of Shaka which do appear in *The James Stuart Archive* were recorded many decades after his death and are undoubtedly "riddled with malicious stories put out by Dingane", Shaka's half-brother, assassin and successor (p 97). Wylie acknowledges that "[i]n short, there is practically no one we can trust entirely" (p 26).

Having sufficiently discredited the sources upon which the subsequent chapters are based, the reader is nonetheless expected to follow along as the author sets out to de-mythologise Shaka and re-represent him in a more nuanced and accurate guise. Wylie certainly succeeds in complicating an often taken-for-granted story of "the genius militarist who rose from humble beginnings to forge a nation" (p 10). The Shaka that emerges from the text is a complex individual. It is an image far removed from that of the bloodthirsty despot who orchestrated the rise of the Zulu "nation" through ingenious military tactics and a series of strategic offences against neighbouring peoples, throwing the African subcontinent into political and demographic upheaval during the 1820s. Here, Shaka is portrayed as "tough, wily and adept" (p 97); an "able man" who was a "canny politician"; an "opportunist" and a "make-do artist" (p 146). Wylie argues that initially, during Shaka's early reign in the 1810s, the key motivation for expansion was the quest for security in an already turbulent south-east African interior. The crux of this line of argument is that by the early 1820s, "Shaka had cobbled together a Zulu-centred polity primarily for defence" (p 123). It is argued that when Shaka went on the offensive in the years just prior to his death in 1828, again, this was in response to the need for security; it was "not conquest for its

own sake" (p 123).

For anyone with a keen eye on Zulu historiography, the mfecane-busting mould in which this biography has been written would have become glaringly obvious by now. At the beginning of Chapter Two, Wylie asserts that "this whole book will be devoted to overturning" the mfecane model. This is a bold ambition for such a little book. Given the condensed nature of the text, it is disappointing that this thread is not sufficiently sustained as a theme throughout the book and it is not even revisited in the conclusion. While it is certainly plausible that a thorough re-conceptualisation of the life of Shaka would add much to the stalled, though far from settled mfecane debate – contrary to Wylie's contention that "[w]e know now ... that the 'mfecane' model is simply untenable" – the author continues to remind us that the evidence upon which he is basing his reassessment is imprecise, vague and questionable. Thus, nothing is conclusively proven and the debates about the character and rule of Shaka and the mfecane remain open and contested.

Whether this work presents a more authentic account of Shaka's life is difficult to determine. The lack of in-text referencing makes it impossible to interrogate the sources Wylie has used to supposedly refute numerous embellishments and inventions which he argues have become "truth" (p 15). In numerous instances Wylie, the authoritative biographer rescuing his subject from a litany of misconceptions, makes sweeping dismissals of what we have been led to believe. This is "rank nonsense", that is "rubbish"; Shaka "was not a pathological mass murderer"; "he did not slaughter large numbers of cowards"; "he did not obliterate the Langeni or any other group"; "he did not kill his own mother" (p 97). Given that throughout the text we have been regularly reminded of how unreliable the sources are, these forthright dismissals invite a healthy dose of scepticism.

The contentious and complex nature of the "Shakan" myth is also not sufficiently fleshed out. Apart from a few fleeting references to the factually incorrect, though internationally famous 1986 television series (p 7), as well as the largely fictional best selling "biography" by E.A. Ritter (p 10), the "Shakan" myth is underplayed. This is to the

detriment of the overall discussion. The tension between who Shaka really was on the one hand, and what has been written and spoken about him, and why, on the other is imbalanced. The various accounts of the European explorers and traders are systematically dismissed; those of Isaacs and Fynn labelled as suspicious testimonies of "two frontier ruffians" (p 21). Their motives for representing Shaka as a deranged bully are easily established as "Shaka's depredations became a crucial element in a wider imperial campaign" (p 21) and it suited their own commercial ambitions in the interior.

However, the oral testimonies of James Stuart's Zulu informants are too often simply judged on the basis of their counter-weight to the European travel accounts. Yet, they are not necessarily more authentic than the written stories. As Wylie notes, they too are full of contradictions and discrepancies. This is to be expected, for they are a reflection of oral tradition and are not necessarily intended to convey historical accuracy. As oral tradition, the generational influences upon the transformation of what may have been literal accounts into metaphorical "truths" need to be taken into account. The possible motivations for why certain informants emphasised particular "Shakan" "truths" as opposed to others is not addressed at all. With oral tradition, the telling detail is not to be found in the minutiae, but in the meaning that is conveyed. The divergences in the details of specific events in no way points to fabrication by default, but rather what individuals, several generations on, thought Shaka had been capable of.

Nonetheless, one of the volume's strengths is the discussion of how the Zulu polity came into being through what Wylie terms a "propaganda of belonging", which is discussed in some detail in Chapter Seven (p 94). Whatever the methods employed to incorporate neighbouring groups, it was Shaka's policy thereafter to assimilate those groups into the Zulu fold (p. 85) and to "institute a new language of belonging which cut across former, fragmentary clan or ethnic identities" (p 93). It would appear that a bewildering array of tactics was used to foster a shared Zulu consciousness although it is unclear how many of these strategies can be attributed to Shaka

or to others in his inner circle. Together with the appropriation of rituals and the invention of genealogies in order "to assert common origins" (p 93), "linguistic propaganda" was also used "to suggest a new, common identity" (p 92).

In the end, scholarly justice cannot be done to a life as literally and historiographically rich as Shaka's in a pocket biography. Most of the criticisms levelled here are perhaps unfair given the scope and intended target audience of the book. Then again, some of the witticism, while no doubt meant to appeal to a lay audience, appears ludicrous. The most fitting example is when Wylie suggests, though "[i]t's not possible to say [so] with certainty", that he "wouldn't mind betting that throughout his reign Shaka sentenced to death fewer people than the 269 executed by the state of Texas during the governorship of George W Bush" (p 94). Setting the analytical and stylistic blemishes aside, the book would have also benefited from the inclusion of a glossary and a few more detailed maps.

*Jared McDonald*
*School of Oriental and African Studies*
*University of London*