

## Light on a Rebellion of 1906

**P.S. Thompson, *Bhambatha at Mpanza: The Making of a Rebel***

P.S. Thompson, 2004

153 pp

ISBN 0 620 31692 6

R190.00

Thompson's contribution to the historiography of KwaZulu-Natal is welcome. The book is well-researched. The fact that it is predominately based on the archival research, is also commendable.

It is "only half a biography" of Bhambatha. It looks at him from his early childhood as "a headstrong boy, fond of fighting". He was very good at shooting and a fast runner. He took over a Zondi chiefdom that had a lot of problems, including a scarcity of resources and shortage of land. His chiefdom was situated on white farmlands. Bhambatha was never on good terms with his white landlords. From his installation as chief (*inkosi*), circumstances caused him to be a rebel, hence the sub-title of the book: *The Making of a Rebel*. He was also not on good terms with other chiefdoms. In the late nineteenth century, the white farmers declared him unfit to rule.

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the book is divided into nine chapters. In Chapter 1, Thompson discusses the location of the Zondi chiefdom under Bhambatha in the Ngome area, tracing the genealogy from Jangeni, who was Bhambatha's grandfather. The strained relationship of the chiefdom with the white community and other chiefdoms, as well as Bhambatha's marriage and the establishment of his homestead, is explored. Chapter 2 discusses the appointment of John Cross as Resident Magistrate of the uMvoti Division in 1904. It was also during this time that a number of chiefs (*amakhosi*) were deposed by the government. Faction fighting was not uncommon amongst the chiefdoms, but Bhambatha and his people found themselves charged in January 1906 for faction fighting. He was deposed as chief on 29 January 1906. Chapter 3 examines the promulgation of the Poll Tax in 1905 and the ways in which some sections of the black community understood it to be "a tax for and of the head". Rumors emanated that Dinuzulu, a Zulu paramount chief, was in cohort with other leaders in southern Africa to drive away all colonial settlers. Dinuzulu was consulted by other *amakhosi* about the payment of the poll tax. He encouraged them to pay. The tax was to be collected by the white magistrates. Bhambatha's people refused to pay the tax. Imminent fighting caused tension in Greytown amongst the colonial settlers. Chapter 4 explores the dismissal of Bhambatha. His throne was taken by his uncle, Magwababa, who had to act as regent in the place of Funizwe (Bhambatha's brother), who was still a minor at the time. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on Bhambatha's visit to the Zulu king, Dinuzulu. Bhambatha was accompanied by his wife, Siyekisiwe, as well as their children, Kholekile, Ndabayakhe and Nonkobotshe. These chapters deal with their journey and the people Bhambatha met en route both to and from Dinuzulu. He spent four days at the homestead of the king, and acquired new recruits on his way back to Ngome. One of these recruits was Chakijana, who became his lieutenant during the fighting. Chapters 7 to 9 examine how Bhambatha and his co-leaders organized and mobilized his people to fight the colonial settlers. The first thing they did, was to arrest his uncle and forced him to be part of the rebellion. The actual fighting started on 4 April 1906. The Natal colonial government sent reinforcements to Greytown and declared war on the so-called rebels. Some "loyal" blacks supported the colonial forces against their fellow people. Bhambatha and his warriors crossed the uThukela River to eNkandla in Zululand. They took refuge at eNkandla forest where guerilla warfare ensued. Bhambatha was defeated.

Reading this work in the current post-apartheid time, one is taken aback. Despite the acknowledgement from the author that the "old terms

that seem irreplaceable in the context of this work” are used, these terms and words still have a negative connotation (particularly so to the majority of the people who held the rough end of the stick under colonialism and apartheid) in present-day South Africa. This mars his work. To gloss over the negativity of these words is typical of a Western perspective. Thompson claims that the orthographic contest over the Zulu names is “bewildering”, but the question is to whom? As a first language speaker it is bewildering for me to read words that are used incorrectly. To mention but few examples: the black people referred to Cross as *Dlovunga* – a ruffian, or a violent person. Though Thompson uses the word *Hlovanga* on page 18, this word does not exist in isiZulu. On page 9 it should be “*Magaduzela owabonel’ impunzini*” – see Bhambatha’s poems of excellency (*Iizbongo zikaBhambatha*). It is not *impanzana*. This is extremely disturbing because it makes no sense at all.

Regarding the use of sources, one wonders about the lack of an African voice. Professor Thompson is aware of this, as he talks about the lack of oral history in his work. However, to me, it is more than that – he should have made an attempt to consult the speakers of the language to research his use of isiZulu words.

There is not much interpretation of the facts about Bhambatha. The author sees him as a rebel, hence statements like he was “a headstrong boy, fond of fighting”. This is not the case with black people – somebody described in this manner will be regarded as a brave person. In Chapter 3 there is a flaw. The author does not state the cause of the Richmond Incident, but instead writes: “a band of armed tax resisters also resisted arrest by the police and in a fracas killed two of the policemen”. The fact of the matter is that the white policeman (Sub-Inspector S.K. Hunt) shot first and killed one of the resisters (“a handcuffed prisoner”) which led to the “fracas”. In this regard, see Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-8 Disturbances in Natal* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970), p 176; *Ilanga Lase Natal* and *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 16 February 1906. The brutality of the government as expressed by its martial courts and the firing-squad that executed the resisters in public, is glossed over.

Bhambatha and his men were crushed, but their efforts laid a solid foundation for the liberation struggle. As Thompson has rightfully pointed out in his foreword, “the spirit of resistance could not be crushed”. It is not surprising that six years after 1906, the first liberation movement in Africa was formed, namely the South African Native

*Resensies*

National Congress which came to be known as the African National Congress in 1923.

Lastly one could raise the issue that the work lacks scholarly editing due to the fact that Thompson published it himself. The use of primary sources is appreciated, but there is no bibliography. Institutions of higher learning stress the importance of referencing and one wonders how this book could be used to teach undergraduates about the importance of a bibliography. Thompson did a good job and one hopes that scholars will take over where he left off, or that he will eventually examine other aspects of the rebellion of 1906 himself.

M. Muziwandile Hadebe  
Indiana University