*Africa* 75 (2), 2005

# WHOSE *UNKULUNKULU*?

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Whether there was a pre-contact concept of a Supreme Being, *uNkulunkulu* or God among nineteenth-century Zulu is probably one of the most intriguing questions concerning Zulu 'religion'. Many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers influenced by Christianity were interested in the possible existence among the Zulu, and other southern African groups in Natal, of an understanding of Creation, God (or a Supreme Being), Heaven and the hereafter. Many accounts noted that the Zulu appear to have a tradition of *uNkulunkulu* who sprang from a bed of reeds. Others simply talk of a notion, either conscious or latent, of a Supreme Being. Early European writers, both missionaries and laymen, took belief in God to be critical to determine the existence or absence of 'religion' among southern Africans. The interpretation or 'invention' of *uNkulunkulu* as God, however, is an example of white systems of understanding being grafted on to African systems that are not necessarily compatible, and it has undermined the importance of ancestors in Zulu religion and their role in the ideology of the Zulu state.

## EUROPEAN PERCEPTION OF ABSENCE OF INDIGENOUS RELIGION

The survivors of the *Stavenisse* shipwreck in the late seventeenth century reported that the 'natives' of Natal had no religion whatsoever (Bird [1888] 1965: 45). One of the earliest accounts comes from the traveller Nathaniel Isaacs ([1836] 1937: 248), who said that they had 'no idea of a deity, no knowledge of a future state [and] they cannot comprehend the mystery of creation'. Reverend Francis Owen, who began his missionary work among the Zulu in 1837, also remarked that they had not the faintest notion of a God (Owen 1926: 94) as did Adulphe Delegorgue, who hunted in the KwaZulu-Natal region in the 1830s and 1840s (Bird [1888] 1965: 485).

Slowly, however, a contrary view began to take root.[1] Captain Allen Gardiner and Reverend Joseph Shooter subscribed to the belief that

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[1] David Chidester (1996: 17) argues that the 'discovery' of an indigenous religious system on southern African frontiers depended upon colonial conquest and domination. Yet, in Natal, this was not the case with 'discovery' beginning before colonial conquest.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.2.203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there had been an historical decay of knowledge particularly relating to the notion of a powerful creator of all things, heaven and an afterlife or eternity. When Gardiner questioned the people in the mid-1830s about who made the sun, moon, mountains and rivers, they replied that it was the 'Incosi pezulu', but that they knew nothing more. From his conversation with Umkolwani of the Ngwane, he concluded that:

> every tradition had worn out; and they presented the awful spectacle of immortal beings without the knowledge or acknowledgment of a Creator... Of a day of future retribution they had not the slightest idea, nor did they know anything of an evil spirit. [Gardiner (1836) 1966: 170–1]

Nonetheless, the enthusiastic Gardiner went on to identify 'Villenangi' (the 'First Appearer'), and 'Oukoolukoolu' (the 'Great-Great') and a secondary heavenly being known as 'Koolukoolwani'. Gardiner believed that even though most people knew little of 'Villenangi', contact with Europeans had resurrected their general understanding of a Supreme Being (Gardiner [1836] 1966: 178; Shooter [1857] 1969: 159–60). All that was required to fill out the concept of the one Christian God was to remind people of their lost understanding – despite Dingane, who had come to power as king of the Zulus in 1828 after assassinating his half-brother Shaka, having laughed at the name of God and the Christian notion of saving the soul (Owen 1926: 84; Hully [1880]: 5).

## THE QUESTION OF *UNKULUNKULU* (*UMVELINQANGI*)

In 1853 the Anglican Bishop of Natal, John William Colenso, undertook his own investigation into Zulu religion, accompanied by Natal's Diplomatic Agent to the Native Tribes, Theophilus Shepstone. Supporting the concept of 'religion' among the Zulus, while also incorporating aspects of degeneration theory, Colenso argued that the Zulu did not 'know' their Supreme Being. Nevertheless they had two names to refer to him: *uNkulunkulu* and *uMvelinqangi*. According to Colenso (1855: 59, 129; 1982: 120 n. 160, 194), *uNkulunkulu* was the Zulu name for the Christian God, and he proposed that the Zulu term be adopted by all missionary bodies. Yet, decades earlier Reverend Owen and American missionary George Champion had noted that the Zulu had no word for God, and that *Utixo* (a Hottentot word) was therefore introduced by Europeans. *UNkulunkulu*, they pointed out, was a Zulu word, but it referred to an ancient chief and on that basis was rejected by the American missionaries as a suitable word for God (Owen 1926: 89–90). After a fierce debate, there was no consensus and several different terms continued to be used to translate the name of the Christian God – *uThixo, iThongo, uYehova, uDio, uLungileyo, umPezulu, umkulunkulu* and *umVelinqange* (Colenso 1855: 56–59, 160). Unrelenting, Colenso insisted that *uNkulunkulu* and *uMvelinqangi* were the two Zulu names for the same God.

At Colenso's invitation, the German philologist Wilhelm Bleek arrived in Natal in 1855 and began to collect information on Zulu myths and

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legends. Rather than advancing the notion of degeneration favoured by so many others before him, Bleek approached the issue from a different angle. Although he proposed that Zulu religion represented evidence of an *original* religion, he also agreed with Colenso that the term *uNkulunkulu* approximated the Christian concept of God.[2] On the basis of linguistic evidence, and despite finding no evidence of worship of *uNkulunkulu*, Bleek affirmed this. Curiously, he determined from a comparison of traditions throughout various parts of Africa that widely differing groups had basically the same name for God (Bleek [1857] 1952: 29).

Anglican priest and missionary doctor Henry Callaway's conclusions differed markedly from those of Colenso and Bleek. He undertook his own independent investigations of Zulu religion in the 1860s and his findings on *uNkulunkulu* were challenging and enlightening. On the basis of the knowledge and experience of Wesleyan missionary Mr Hully (interpreter to Reverend Owen in 1837), Callaway argued in 1870 that *uNkulunkulu* was not a word of Zulu origin after all and Gardiner had actually coined it. Hully said that the term *kulu* by itself meant 'great', and refused to use *uNkulunkulu* in the sense of a Supreme Being as Gardiner had interpreted it (Callaway [1870] 1970: 54). This position was supported by Stuart's informant Ndukwana ka Mbengwa who reported that 'there was no definiteness about our knowledge of *Mvelinqangi.* We never used to apply the word *Nkulunkulu* to the creator; that has been imported by missionaries and *kolwas*' (*JSA* 4: 302).[3]

Callaway seemed to struggle explaining what he had found. In accommodating his Christian preconceptions he 'fell back on' earlier theories of the degeneration of Zulu religion in order to account for the predominance of ancestor worship. Nonetheless, Callaway's findings concerning *uNkulunkulu* are crucial. Criticizing the use of the word *uThixo* as a 'Hottentot' word for God introduced by the missionary Peter Kolb ([1731] 1738), Callaway pointed out that:

> Nothing is more easy than to enquire of heathen savages the character of their creed, and during the conversation to impart to them great truths and ideas which they never heard before, and presently to have these come back again as articles of their own original faith, when in reality they are but the echoes of one's own thoughts. [Callaway (1870) 1970: 105–6]

He was not alone is his views. Letters Owen received from the American missionary George Champion seemed to support his stance:

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[2] Chidester (1996: 151) says that Bleek concluded that 'the evolution of religion could be traced from Zulu ancestor worship, through Khoikhoi sidereal worship, to the heavenly God of European Christianity'.

[3] Whenever reference is made to one of James Stuart's informants as quoted in *The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples* (Webb and Wright 1976–), this is indicated by the abbreviation *JSA* followed by the volume number and page number(s).

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> The Zulus have no word in their own language to express the sublime object of our worship. The word used in Caffre land and which has been introduced *here* by Europeans, and hence known to some of the Zoolus is Uteeko, or as the Missionaries write it Utixo, but it has a harsh and difficult click in it, and has no meaning being a word of Hottentot extraction. The word Ukulunkulu a real Zoolu word with an emphatic signification 'the great, great' is objected to by our American friends as a suitable name for the great God, on the ground of its being applied by the natives to a certain ancient chief, whom they suppose to have sprung from a reed, and concerning whom they believe various other things inconsistent with a Deity. It is also the name of a certain worm which makes a covering for itself with grass. They recommend therefore the introduction of the Hebrew name Elohim, which is easy of pronunciation, besides possessing other obvious excellencies. [Owen 1926: 89–90]

Callaway attempted to unravel some of the misunderstandings that were current at the time pointing out that, rather than meaning God, *uNkulunkulu* 'expresses antiquity, age, lit., the old-old one, as we use great in great-great-grandfather' (Callaway [1870] 1970: 7). *UNkulunkulu* was the first ancestor, not eternal or immortal, a being who had existed in the past and, as part of that existence, had made those who formed the first groups of people. *UNkulunkulu* himself had been created before he gave people ancestors, doctors, diviners and medicines for diseases caused by the *ithongo* (*op. cit.*: 5–7). Thus *uNkulunkulu* was not God, nor Adam nor Jesus and there was no relationship with Christianity or Judaism. There is the *uNkulunkulu* who was the 'First Out-comer', but Callaway's information revealed that each house or family had its own *uNkulunkulu*. Moreover, Callaway found both male and female *uNkulunkulu*, which is not surprising especially given certain women's ritual roles (*op. cit.*: 35, 40–1).[4] A further distinction from the Christian concept of God was that *uNkulunkulu* was used not only in the name of good as is the case with the Christian God, but also associated with that which was not good (*op. cit.*: 25). The *uNkulunkulu* from which others originated was not 'worshipped' because its *isibongo* was not known. It was not possible, therefore, to praise this unknown *uNkulunkulu*. However, Callaway points out that 'the Onkulunkulu of tribes and houses, whose *izibongo* are still known, are worshipped, each by his respective descendants' (*op. cit.*: 17 n. 35). This 'worshipping' is referring to the praising of ancestors.

Not only did each family have its own *uNkulunkulu*, but so too did each lineage ('tribe') (Callaway [1870] 1970: 54 n. 3). Referring to the Ngwane, Callaway's informant says 'all nations have their own Unkulunkulu. Each has its own. The Unkulunkulu of our tribe is Ungenamafu and Uluthlongwana and Usangolibanzi' (*op. cit.*: 51). Thus *uNkulunkulu* is not fixed, could be acquired in relation to leadership and could belong to several families. Callaway's conclusions

[4] Berglund (1989: 34) claims that *uMvelinqangi* is always referred to as masculine.

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are supported by the recollection of an informant, Mankejane,[5] recorded around 1850, that *uNkulunkulu* had been introduced. He said: 'Now we are taught the story of God, our Father who is in Heaven, Unkulunkulu... But they (our fathers) know Him not. But the white people knew him.'

Despite Callaway's clarification and concerns about the authenticity of terms, *uNkulunkulu* has become synonymous with the Christian God. Many later writers merely reproduced earlier work unquestioningly. Myths that had been recorded were accepted as having a primordial origin – or as having an origin as ancient as the Old Testament biblical tales linking the Zulu to the Jews (Chidester 1996: 125–27; Garden 1851–1854; Kumalo *JSA* 1: 262).

Praising an ancestor or swearing by a chief was not the same as the Christian concept of worship but was part of a belief system linking chiefs, head people and paramounts with their ancestors rather than God. As Paul Landau (1995: xx) points out, 'historians, as opposed to theologians, must avoid treating religious beings as transcultural universals: the ''high God'' is the questioner's God, the ''Spirit'' the questioner's Spirit: they are ready-made decisions of translation not evidence.' Despite the fierce debate that was initially sparked, *uNkulunkulu* as God became firmly entrenched, which resulted in obscuring to a large extent the importance of the relationship that formerly obtained between chiefs and their departed ancestors.

## ANCESTORS (*AMATHONGO, AMADLOZI*), MEDICINES, RITUAL AND STATE-BUILDING

What the early missionaries did not fully appreciate was that ancestors (*amadlozi* or *amathongo*) were the key to the Zulu belief system and, therefore, intimately involved with social, economic and political life. As Bleek ([1857] 1952: 36) pointed out, the ancestors were 'rulers of their descendants' destinies'. It is also often assumed that only the male ancestors are significant but Callaway notes the honouring of both dead *grandmothers and* [emphasis added] grandfathers. The most important ancestors were those of the paramount chief and he approached the most important of the ancestors for the group. To gain ascendancy over others in the political world required ascendancy in the 'spiritual' world. Given the importance of ancestors, it would have been impossible to have one without the other. To endure, Shaka's power required legitimacy – the authority or legitimization of the ancestral shades within recognized ideological structures.

Ancestors had very strong socio-political importance, but the concept of Zulu identity and of a Zulu 'nation' was in its infancy during the Shakan period and thus the notion of 'Zulu' as a complete social unit did

[5] 'An account of the Ekukanyeni Mission Station'. G. 44a2, 25. Grey Collection, South African Library, Cape Town.

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not exist. Accepting that variations existed in political organization and ethnic identity within the Zulu state as argued by Wright and Hamilton (1989: 49–82) and accepting that changes in economic relations took place, then variations existed within 'Zulu religion' before the state came into existence, and changes occurred with the consolidation of the Zulu state under Shaka. Zulu did not 'worship' *all* their ancestors. Primarily, they honoured the household head, but they also honoured the *amathongo* of their lineage chief (Callaway [1870] 1970: 144–45). The groups incorporated or subjugated into the Zulu state would have owed a previous allegiance to their own chiefly ancestral shades. With the emergence of the Zulu state, the ancestor-honouring structures needed to change to reflect the new authority. The paramount chief assumed control over a group of other paramounts, instituted changes to established chiefships, and concentrated power in a single family. In the newly emerging Zulu state, incorporated people were required to give spiritual as well as political allegiance to a 'foreign' king. Yet ancestral connections to that chief and his *uNkulunkulu* were not direct and could not necessarily be traced. This had implications for the honouring of ancestors, ritual celebrations, legitimacy and authority, and created tensions. There were different categories of significant ancestors (and *oNkulunkulu* [pl.]) for an individual – the household or family, the chiefly ancestors at the 'tribal' level, and paramount chiefly ancestors. Which ones were invoked and by whom depended on the misfortune involved. In the case of local issues the 'commoner' shades would have been approached 'usually after obtaining the advice of izangoma or diviners, because it was believed they were the cause of the trouble, and that, on being propitiated, they would relent, thereby allowing the laws of nature to bring about their customary beneficent results' (Stuart n.d.: 10–12). However, in the case of misfortune that affected the entire group such as drought, famine or war, the ancestors of the chief would have taken precedence. Just as chiefs had a protective duty, their ancestors were important guardians, responsible for fertility and the general well-being of the group. A leader could not have retained his position without being seen to be sanctioned by the ancestors and thus have legitimacy.

The attainment of Zulu political ascendancy, which has so often been viewed in purely secular terms, had a critical religious dimension because the various groups which were incorporated or subjugated into the Zulu state (some of which had been undergoing their own state development) would have owed previous allegiance to their own chiefly and lineage ancestral shades and had their own *oNkulunkulu*. Establishing dominance entailed making the Zulu ancestors relevant for consolidation, legitimacy and dissemination of state ideology. This was a relationship or perception that was required to cement the legitimacy of the new regime and so new ideological forms had to emerge. There was the potential for conflict with the ideological aspirations of the king as he sought to alter old ideological structures, because each incorporated group had its own diviners and doctors of medicine with powerful medicines – especially relating to war and rainmaking – and

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they could have engaged in open communication with possibly rival ancestors. These three components of access, knowledge and control of powerful medicines were important. Shaka's aim therefore was to establish *his* credibility as an operator in the realm of ritual and religion.

Many great political contests were accompanied by struggles for control of ritual power and medicines. Combining the secular and the sacred roles in leadership in precolonial polities was not unusual. There are examples from East, Central, West and Southern Africa that attest to close linkages between religion and politics (Maylam 1986: 28; Slater 1976: 317; Gluckman [1940] 1970: 30–31; Peires 1982; Richards [1940] 1970).

The interpenetration of ritual and politics is also evident in north-eastern South Africa during the 1810s and 1820s. Communication with ancestors to procure rain, protect the people from sorcery, prepare medicines, treat the army before battle and choose the day for harvest rituals were important aspects of the relationship which formerly obtained between chiefs and their departed ancestors. A chief's power was enhanced by the ability to call on the power of the ancestors and to access powerful medicines. Shaka exercised the religious and supernatural powers which other chiefs had exercised before him, and would have found it difficult to extend his power over people outside his immediate following without reference to religious beliefs and practices.

Many early writers concluded that Shaka's engagement in the religious realm resembled divine kingship. Max Gluckman ([1940] 1970) noted the relationship between religion, ritual and power in ceremonies such as the 'first fruits' festival, rainmaking, war magic and the *inkatha*. He argued that the Zulu king 'performed religious ceremonies and magical acts on behalf of the nation... He was addressed as the nation. What tradition and history was common to all Zulu had to be told in the names of the Zulu kings and it was largely their common sentiment about the king and his predecessors which united all Zulu as members of the nation' (*op. cit.*: 30–31). But divine kingship, as Cohen (1978: 64) explains, 'is a particular form of such generally enhanced supernatural status in which, as in ancient Egypt, the ruler qua ruler is a god in his own right.' Zulu kings and chiefs were not considered divine in the sense of worshipped Gods. It was neither something new nor a militarized Shakan innovation connected to his pursuit of absolute power (Gluckman [1940] 1970: 31). Shaka's spiritual powers were not clearly distinguishable from those of other regional leaders such as the Ndwandwe chief, Zwide. However, they sought ascendancy in the spiritual world as keenly as they pursued ascendancy in the political world. Chiefs were important for communication with the chiefly ancestors for the common good – under their patronage chiefs acquired legitimacy. Callaway's informant mentioned Shaka's prominence in rainmaking practices:

> I saw a rain-man; his name was Umkqaekana. He was a great doctor even among the Amazulu, skilful in producing rain. But among the Amazulu he did not show himself much to the chief; for the chiefs of the house of Uzulu

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> used not to allow a mere inferior to be even said to have power over the heaven; for it was said that the heaven belonged only to the chief of that place. Umkqaekana therefore remained hidden. But he did not cease to produce rain in secret. At length he crossed to this side [*sic*] the Utukela, for he heard that Utshaka had said, 'Let all the heaven-doctors be killed.' He escaped, and came among the English... He became a dependant of the chief of the Amadhlala; it is the same to whom we were subject. [Callaway (1870) 1970: 389–90]

There was obviously potential for conflict where ritual power was shared by more than one person and by more than one group (chiefs and rainmakers).

Medicines were important in many rituals including rainmaking and war magic, and their use by chiefs, including Shaka, features strongly in oral traditions. Chiefs used medicines for both offence (to overcome an enemy), and defence (to protect oneself, army or community). There are many reports of Shaka's use of special medicines (Mtshapi ka Noradu *JSA* 4: 82; Jantshi ka Nongila *JSA* 1: 193; Mangati ka Godide *JSA* 2: 209). During the early nineteenth century, Shaka was one of several chiefs whose power was enhanced by their ability to call on the power of the ancestors through dreams, to acquire powerful medicines and to make rain. These were well-established features of chieftainship among large and small groups in south-eastern Africa. Zwide of the Ndwandwe, Dingiswayo of the Mthethwa, along with various Qwabe and the Hlubi chiefs all played significant roles in religious activity. In rivalry between them, religious practice was a strategic weapon. Equally important was gaining access to significant medicines, knowing their properties and being instructed in their use. Shaka needed to conquer his rivals spiritually as well as militarily. The *James Stuart Archive of Oral Evidence relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples* (Webb and Wright 1976–) reveals that power was very much conceptualized in religious terms. Traditions recall that Shaka's forces were initially unable to overcome Zwide; only when Shaka's *intelezi* medicine began to take effect were the Zulu successful (Mmemi ka Nguluzane *JSA* 3: 271; Jantshi ka Nongila *JSA* 1: 184–5). Not only did Shaka defeat Zwide militarily – aided by ritual and medicine – but he also absorbed the Ndwandwe ideologically by incorporating many Ndwandwe customs and practices. 'Bayete' for example, was a term generally recognized as reserved for the Zulu king, but several informants claimed it had non-Zulu origins (Madikane ka Mlomowetole *JSA* 2: 53; Dinya ka Zokozwayo *JSA* 1: 104, 122 n. 25; Melapi ka Magaye *JSA* 3: 76, 79). Shaka gained control of some of their most powerful medicines through his right as leader – as he had done with the Mthethwa before – a significant ideological, religious and political achievement.

The break-up of the Ndwandwe left a political vacuum in the area, which the Zulu sought to fill (Wright 1995: 170–1). The fragmentation of Ndwandwe coalition and related groups (including the Hlubi, Soshangane, Nxaba, Sobhuza and Zwangendaba) also left a religious vacuum. After the defeat of the Ndwandwe, the Zulu moved to incorporate groups formerly tributary to Zwide, including the

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Mabhudu to the north-east (Wright and Hamilton 1989: 71). In the late eighteenth century Mabhudu possessed *amabutho* and was pursuing its own expansionist ambitions. The chief Makhasane, who reigned from the early years of the nineteenth century until 1850, was reputed to be very powerful in ritual, ironworking and medicines, and was remembered for having sent the locust plagues to Zululand at various intervals between 1826 and 1854 (Bryant 1929: 305; Mahungane *JSA* 2: 147–8). Shaka defeated Makhasane and the Mabhudu subsequently paid tribute to the Zulu in the form of elephant tusks (Mahungane *JSA* 2: 143, 152; Ndukwana ka Mbengwana *JSA* 4: 285). Shaka was thus publicly acknowledged as the superior one who could bring down a locust plague.

The southern extension of the Zulu state was marked by the same programme of ritual conquest that had characterized the struggle with Zwide and the Ndwandwe allies. The Qwabe chiefs were powerful in ritual, medicines and rainmaking (Bryant 1929: 184–5). Shaka overcame the Qwabe through a combination of military and ritual means. This 'spiritual conquest' was remembered as a significant part of victory and Shaka overcame Pakatwayo through his more powerful medicines (Mmemi ka Nguluzane *JSA* 3: 240–2). As a result, Shaka also obtained items of Pakatwayo's clothing and bound them to the *inkatha* further demonstrating the victory ideologically. The symbolism attached to this action is powerful (Mpatshana ka Sodondo *JSA* 3: 327). Following his victory, Shaka annexed Qwabe medicine and skills – including rainmaking.

Following the subjugation of the Qwabe and the incorporation of sections of the Hlubi, Shaka sought to bring the other chiefdoms of the lower Thukela valley under his sway. Ngoza's Thembu shifted across the lower Mzinyathi, with the exception of some men who remained with Jobe (Lugubu ka Mangaliso *JSA* 1: 290). Jobe was then installed by Shaka as chief of the Sithole. Jobe appears to have been allowed to exercise some chiefly privileges in relation to religion, however they were controlled. He had the authority to put people to death but it seems that ritual authority and practice remained the domain of Zulu diviners and doctors (Lunguza ka Mpukane *JSA* 1: 330, 336). Ritual activities in the Zulu state were regulated. The reputation of Thembu chiefs in medicines and ritual had been long-established. Not only were the Thembu chiefs perceived to be powerful in ritual and religion, but Thembu diviners were important to Shaka. Mehlo of the Dhladhla is named as one of the 'true' diviners in a version of the story of Shaka and the diviners (Bird [1888] 1965: 144; Lunguza ka Mpukane *JSA* 1: 301, 330–1, 336). Hamilton (1985: 257) argues that the establishment of Zulu control over the old Thembu area was significant because of resources, supplying much of the royal insignia and *amabutho* attire including shields, monkey skins, lourie plumes and crane feathers (Madikane ka Mlomowetole *JSA* 2: 60). Because Thembu chiefs and the diviners were just as important to Shaka, his drive to control these human resources paralleled his drive to control the natural resources Hamilton identifies. Jobe himself had no pre-existing reputation for

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ritual power (unlike his predecessors), most likely because he had been installed by Shaka.

The Cube were known for their use of 'supernatural' power to gain ascendancy over others (*ithonya*) so they were 'quickly able to kill people with whom they were fighting' (Mpatshana ka Sodondo *JSA* 3: 322). The Cube were the most prominent ironworkers for 'the whole country' and they made assegais for the king (Baleni ka Silwana *JSA* 1: 41; Magidigidi ka Nobebe *JSA* 2: 84, 85; Mqaikana ka Yenge *JSA* 4: 14). As with the Thembu, both the human resources (ritual power of the Cube) and the skills with the natural resources (ironmaking skills) were important to Shaka.

For Shaka to consolidate a number of disparate lineages and chieftaincies successfully under his own leadership, he had to deal with potentially conflicting ancestral allegiances among his subjects. It was not open to him simply to appeal to the *uNkulunkulu* of them all because, as Henry Callaway notes, *uNkulunkulu* applies 'to the founders [*sic*] of dynasties, tribes and families' (Callaway [1870] 1970: 48). For the Zulu, *uNkulunkulu* was Shaka's ancestor. Shaka could not, in the beginning at least, have been 'representative in the direct line of the tribal ancestors' for *all* the people in his expanding kingdom. This was a relationship or perception that had to be created. New ideological forms had to emerge. As Claessen and Skalník (1978: 625) point out, ideology and legitimation are key factors in the further development of an early state. To facilitate the emergence of new ideological forms it was necessary for Zulu ancestors to take precedence. The way to achieve this was through ritual. Just as Shaka set out to control powerful medicines, he also took control of key rituals in which such medicines would have been used. As Shaka incorporated new groups into the Zulu state, he restructured social and political organization by removing much of the ritual authority of chiefs and centralizing key rituals – especially those related to fertility and prosperity (rainmaking and the *umkhosi*) – and by controlling rites of passage such as marriage and circumcision. Taking control of ritual was not a Shakan innovation, but he did elaborate 'traditional' patterns of thought and behaviour to disseminate Zulu ideology.

Once groups with rainmaking reputations were incorporated, Shaka needed to put an end to the 'owners of the rain ... [being] at variance amongst themselves' (Leslie [1875] 1969: 169). He allowed some groups to practise, while others not, in much the same way as some groups were excluded from the central decision-making processes. Taking control of rainmaking rituals provided a vehicle for the reinforcement of Shakan ideology by focusing on Shaka's ancestors as important in sending rain. This is because, as the Hlubi example showed, a chief was susceptible to double-cross by his 'doctors'. Callaway's informant said that Shaka:

> made his prayers greater than those who preceded him. He summoned the people, a great assembly, consisting of the chiefs of the villages. He collected black oxen, and sheep and black rams; and went to pray; he sang a song and

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> prayed to the lord of heaven; and asked his forefathers to pray for rain to the lord of heaven. And it rained. [Callaway (1870) 1970: 92]

The bid for central control would create tension between the Zulu king and other practitioners. Those seen as ritually significant and possessing medicines or relics of chiefship which might threaten or enhance the kingship were killed. Importantly the Zulu state retained control of both the medicines and the relics.

Shaka 'nationalized' what in many cases had been a local harvest ritual, enhanced the status and importance of the *umkhosi* ceremony, and focused it very much on the Zulu king and his ancestors (Champion 1967: 139 n. 49). Shaka was not the first to attempt to centralize the ritual; he was repeating a practice he may have learned from the Mthethwa chief, Dingiswayo. The 'right' to hold the *umkhosi* was reserved for the most powerful group and was thus an extremely important element in the ideology of dominance.[6] The *umkhosi* would also involve a ceremony at the 'royal' graves praising the Zulu ancestors and requesting rain (Mtshayankomo ka Magolwana *JSA* 4: 115–18, 146). Some groups, however, were allowed to hold localized harvest ceremonies – under Shaka's strict control as in the case of the Qwabe, for example. At the height of the kingdom's glory the *umkhosi* had been a mechanism for the assertion of Shaka's ritual dominance and the power of his ancestors.

The *umkhosi* was connected with human reproduction as well as fertility of the land because the *umkhosi* was the time when regiments of men and women were given permission by the king to marry (Lunguza ka Mpukane *JSA* 1: 317; Stuart n.d.: 4). Much has been written about the delay and control of marriage in the Zulu state. It is usually attributed to Shaka and explained in military terms, but as people were integrated into the Zulu state, the institution of marriage moved from the private (localized) sphere into the public (centralized) sphere. This was another way of chipping away at localized power and breaking down family alliances for the purposes of state-building. It gave Shaka greater, but indirect, control over the movement of people from place to place. Though there is much disagreement among Stuart's informants on this issue, it is possible that once again Shaka may have appropriated and enlarged upon existing practice (Maziyana ka Mahlabeni *JSA* 2: 292; Stuart n.d.: 5; Magidi ka Ngomane *JSA* 2: 79). As Maurice Bloch observes, increased ritualization of behaviour accompanies increased elaboration of authority. By its repetition, ritual emphasizes rules of behaviour. The entire group acts out, and accepts, the authority of those who direct the ritual. 'In this sense, says Bloch, ritual is culturized and symbolic authority... Thus, to increase the ritual associated with office, is to increase or to substantiate an increase in his authority' (cited in Cohen 1978: 63).

[6] See James Stuart Papers (Files 52/5, 52/6, 53/4), Killie Campbell Africana Library, University of Natal, Durban.

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A ban on circumcision among the Zulu has been widely attributed to Shaka and, like marriage bans, is most often explained in military terms, but it was another manifestation of removal from the ritual control of lesser chiefs and among *amabutho* even when they had returned to their chiefdom. Second, it is possible that it was an identity marker; to be Zulu meant not to be circumcised. This would effectively cut across other ethnic markers (e.g. *amaNtungwa* and *amaLala*) and provide a clear 'national' identifying symbol. This would be similar to the way in which Shaka had certain Zulu *amabutho* marked by ornamental incisions (Dinya ka Zokozwayo *JSA* 1: 104). Third, it would have been impractical to centralize circumcision and perform the ceremony on a mass scale. As with other so-called Shakan innovations, there is some doubt that Shaka was the first to tamper with this rite of passage. Stuart's informant, Jantshi, suggested that perhaps it began with Dingiswayo (Jantshi ka Nongila *JSA* 1: 195; Bird [1888] 1965: 64). Actively breaking the links between the other ancestors (*oNkulunkulu*) and fertility at the chiefly level broke down their ritual power in much the same way as Shaka had broken the control of rainmaking and the *umkhosi*. These assertions of ideological dominance lessened the need for direct physical coercion. There remained, however, another area of ritual power involving 'royal' women who were in leadership positions and held important religious roles.

## ZULU 'ROYAL' WOMEN

Rather than being peripheral in politics, key women were central characters.[7] Sean Hanretta (1998) suggests that women's leadership was new to the Zulu and that 'the potential for both exploitation and the acquisition of power and prestige increased as women's lives became integrated into the Zulu state' (*op. cit.*: 415). Their high status and their political power, however, were not altogether new and a spiritual aspect accompanied that leadership just as it did in the case of male chiefs. Zulu women were not participating in what had usually been 'male spheres of action' or exercising their power indirectly through a male family member (Hamilton 1985: 424; Hanretta 1998: 398). Women leaders existed throughout northern and central Africa since 'ancient' times. Key indicators of these women's positions and their power were their religious roles, position in *ikhanda*, mourning rituals and symbolic 'celibacy'. The focus for those people incorporated into the state had to be on Zulu *amakhosikazi* and *amakhosazana* and their *oNkulunkulu* rather than those of subjugated groups, as Shaka was consolidating a state dominated by the Zulu.

Hanretta does not fully investigate the range of abilities and attributes of individual *amakhosikazi* and *amakhosazana* and barely mentions Mnkabayi, yet she assumed a leadership role at three significant points

[7] For a full explanation, see Weir (2000a: 175–214; 2000b).

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in Zulu history – following the deaths of Jama, Senzangakhona *and* Shaka. She engaged in political manipulations, played a central role in installing the new king and retained a position of influence in the *amakhanda* (military 'kraals') of the successive Zulu kings. *Amakhosikazi* and *amakhosazana* were actually part of the system of leadership before, during and after Shaka's reign and were placed in charge in the *amakhanda* because they were *already* 'traditionally' part of the power structure having ritual, administrative and judicial power. Shaka carefully had to balance the pre-existing political power of the women with his own.

The ancestors of previous Zulu rulers – including women – were central to social life and to the legitimacy of the leadership. The women's Nobamba and esiKlebheni *ikhanda* were located near the graves of kings and provided a vital link to Zulu ancestors. This area (Makhosini district) was of great ritual and religious significance. 'When used in connection with the royal graves . . . [the praises of kings] brought about a sense of the power of the nation' (Mtshapi ka Noradu *JSA* 4: 77). The graves and ancestors of women such as Mnkabayi and Nqumbazi were also important in ritual, including purification rituals, and a refuge for those sentenced to execution (Mpatshana ka Sodondo *JSA* 3: 303–5; Ndukwana ka Mbengwana *JSA* 4: 360). Notwithstanding Gluckman's claims relating to female spirits, the ancestral shade of Mnkabayi was accorded as prominent a place as that of Shaka, Dingane and Senzangakhona. She was praised along with kings in a way that recognized both her political and religious authority (Mtshayankomo ka Magolwana *JSA* 4: 117, 144).

In the emerging state, women's political and religious position enhanced the king's. Publicly, the aim was for Zulu ancestors to be praised and acknowledged by all. Thus groups residing apart from the king's principal *ikhanda* could be linked to the central group through religion promoting overall unity beyond the regiment. These factors were all important in contributing to Zulu power and legitimacy because when 'the conditions under which people are living change the legitimizing notions must also be changed and adapted to the new conditions [and] views, from the past will continue to influence more recent views' (Claessen and van de Velde 1987: 15–16).

However, Shaka found his power ideologically constrained by the women's. On the one hand, Shaka had to rule with the women, but on the other hand he and Dingane tried to circumvent the power of *amakhosikazi* by claiming to combine in their own person aspects of both male and female power. 'Celibacy' was a symbol of particular status among 'royal' women that he took on.[8] As well, 'Dingiswayo and, after him, Shaka pretended to be afflicted with certain evacuations in the way that women are, though not at regular periods. On these occasions numerous cattle were slaughtered and many people killed'

[8] Celibacy is defined in this paper as the absence of formal recognized marriage or child while holding particular office or status.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.2.203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(Fynn 1969: 30). In effect, Shaka and Dingane mimicked the ritual celibacy and became like sisters and 'mothers' and reinforced this by mimicking menstruation. To this end he used old forms to facilitate change. The legitimacy of Shaka's kingship and his authority rested on the dominance of the Zulu ancestors. For the kings, access to the ritual power that certain women possessed would have been vital. Thus the dominance of Zulu ancestors could be asserted on a larger scale.

## CONCLUSION

Zulu conquest involved not only conquest of land, political institutions and economic power, but also capturing 'invisible' spiritual power and overcoming rival ancestors. Shaka's strategies for achieving spiritual dominance involved taking control of and centralizing the *umkhosi*, rainmaking ritual, certain rites of passage and medicines of stateship. Shaka could not have successfully incorporated surrounding groups without addressing the 'invisible' spiritual aspects of power as well as the visible. The interpretation of *uNkulunkulu* as God undermines the importance of ancestors and their role in the ideology of the Zulu state.

The legitimacy of leadership rested on the dominance of the ancestors (*oNkulunkulu*), but there was a multiplicity of *oNkulunkulu*. So, whose *uNkulunkulu* takes precedence in the context of consolidation and state-building is paramount. This is inextricably interlinked with ritual and religious aspects of leadership. An essential component of establishing dominance involved making the Zulu ancestors or *oNkulunkulu* relevant for the purposes of consolidation, legitimacy and dissemination of state ideology. This was a relationship or perception that had to be developed and was required to cement the legitimacy of the new regime and so new ideological forms had to emerge. Though the idea of *uNkulunkulu* as God is now well entrenched in African as well as missionary Christian theology, this concept of *uNkulunkulu* is a colonial construct and obscures important aspects of the relationship that formerly obtained between chiefs, significant women and their departed ancestors in ritual and leadership. The attainment of Zulu political ascendancy, which has so often been viewed in purely secular terms, had a critical religious dimension.

The term *uNkulunkulu* (or its plural form *oNkulunkulu*) itself was nothing more than a generic name for particular significant ancestors – family, chiefly or 'national'. Praises to ancestors went back several generations and once their names had fallen into disuse or been forgotten the generic name was also applied – or perhaps in some cases the term *uNkulunkulu* was used in accordance with name-avoidance practices.

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ABSTRACT

*UNkulunkulu* was a term taken up by certain missionaries in Natal as synonymous with the Christian God. Though the idea of *uNkulunkulu* is now well entrenched in African as well as missionary Christian theology, historically the concept of *uNkulunkulu*, as the High God of all, is inaccurate. This paper will argue that there was actually a multiplicity of *oNkulunkulu* (plural of *uNkulunkulu*) in the early nineteenth century – including females. *UNkulunkulu* was simply a generic name for particular significant Zulu ancestors – family, chiefly or 'national'. The development of the concept of *uNkulunkulu*, as the High God of all, obscures important aspects of the relationship that formerly obtained between chiefs and their departed ancestors. The attainment of Zulu political ascendancy, which has so often been viewed in purely secular terms, had a critical religious dimension.

RÉSUMÉ

*UNkulunkulu* est un terme que certains missionnaires du Natal avaient pris pour un synonyme de dieu chrétien. Bien que l'idée d'*uNkulunkulu* soit désormais solidement ancrée dans la théologie chrétienne missionnaire autant qu'africaine, la notion d'*uNkulunkulu* en tant que Haut Dieu de tous est inexacte. Ce papier affirme qu'il existait en fait une multiplicité d'*oNkulunkulu* (pluriel de *uNkulunkulu*) au début du dix-neuvième siècle, dont des femmes. *UNkulunkulu* était un simple nom générique désignant d'importants ancêtres zulus à l'échelle de la famille, de la chefferie ou de la «nation». L'évolution de la notion d'*uNkulunkulu*, en tant que Haut Dieu de tous, occulte des aspects importants de la relation qui prévalait autrefois entre les chefs et leurs ancêtres défunts. La réalisation de l'ascendance politique zulu, si souvent considérée en termes purement séculaires, avait une dimension religieuse critique.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.2.203 Published online by Cambridge University Press