The often-told tale of Zulu King Shaka and his diviners may tell us more about colonial religion and politics in the nineteenth century than it does about Zulu religion and politics. The tale unfolds in various nineteenth-century books, popular and contemporary histories, and in oral traditions. Writers have frequently portrayed it as a key point in King Shaka’s leadership, most especially E A Ritter in the 1950s, some 100 years after the earliest accounts. King Shaka is said to have secretly sprinkled blood in the doorway of his isigodlo (pl. izigodlo, the king’s private enclosure consisting of the huts of his women and children), then ‘innocently’ proclaimed it to be an evil omen, and called on his diviners to ‘smell out’, or reveal, the culprit/s. Most of the numerous references to the tale explain it as a test devised by Shaka to expose diviners as frauds. This chapter examines various accounts of the story, including similar tales relating to other chiefs, and highlights discrepancies between them. The main players are usually Shaka and the diviners, and they are wholly African. The chapter also adds other dimensions, notably the colonial role in manufacturing some of these accounts, and the significance of the relationship between African politics and religion.

The tale of Shaka and the diviners is a wonderful example of a perhaps questionable moment in history taking on a life of its own. The story is now a firmly entrenched in numerous books, from fiction to the academic. South African literary scholar Dan Wylie even found reference to it in the 1975 Guinness Book of Records, having achieved the dubious status of ‘the greatest “smelling-out” recorded in African history’.¹

Where the tale came from is a mystery, despite various claims for its authenticity. When Ritter grabbed the story from H Rider Haggard, he breathed further life into it by claiming it was an authentic oral tradition. Many subsequent authors felt little need to question that, and seemed to honour fiction by reproducing the tale with or without reference to Ritter. It became a spider’s web of links with new threads emerging from time to time. It is one of a bank of dramatic tales about the legendary King Shaka, and that it made its way into the Guinness Book of Records is truly remarkable.² The death toll (said to be 300), number of true diviners, type of animal blood, and the number of conspirators all vary depending on who is relaying the story, and when.

Captain R J Garden (45th British regiment) wrote what may be the earliest recorded reference to the story, some time between 1851 and 1854, though we do not know his source:

… Uzizmane a native doctor (now being near the Umzimkulu [River]) once did a bold thing before Chaka. The latter told his chief men that many of the native doctors were impostors, accusers of the innocent – to try their knowledge, with great secrecy Chaka caused blood to be dropped on the ground from his hut to a distance – assembling the doctors he pointed it out and demanded to know who had done it – they were confounded- at length some of them accused several innocent persons. Uzizmane alone said it was … Izulu, the only Izulu evidently meaning him who was above them all – his life was spared – the rest – some 30 or 40 were put to death.³
The hero, and possibly even a co-conspirator in this trick, appears to be the traditional doctor Uzizmane.

E A Ritter fills in many of the ‘blanks’ in a long descriptive version (almost an entire chapter). Ritter’s account is the most popularly known and is set within a power struggle between Shaka and the diviners. Shaka (aided in part by Mbopa, Shaka’s ‘head domestic’) sprinkled the sides of his hut and the ground around it with blood. He assembled the diviners for a ‘smelling out’ to determine who was responsible. Shaka’s brother and close friends and allies were the first to be ‘smelt out’. During the dramatic ritual, only two of the diviners (Songqoza and Nqiwane) concluded that Shaka himself was responsible for the blood, and Shaka thus designated them as ‘true diviners’. Ritter describes the execution of the other diviners and how Nobela, the powerful chief diviner, committed suicide to evade the punishment of impalement. According to Ritter’s account, she was an evil rival for power and a fraudulent diviner whom Shaka had to stop, because diviners smelled out victims for their own ends. In addition, Ritter claims that men were attempting to ‘avoid military service by apprenticing themselves to witch-doctors’, thus emphasising superstition and trickery within Zulu society.

Ritter incorporates various oppositions. Shaka is at once ‘all-powerful’ and too weak to deal with one troublesome diviner. His suggestion that Shaka did not believe in diviners does not fit with the centrality of divination in Zulu society. This dramatisation is largely fiction, and Ritter does not cite a direct source for the story of Shaka and the diviners. In the first edition of Shaka Zulu (1955), Ritter claimed that his major source was oral tradition that he gained during his boyhood contact with Zulu people. He also claimed to have information from his father, as well as the 15 sources in his bibliography. However, H Rider Haggard, whose character is also Nobela, is more than likely the source. Rider Haggard dedicated his romance, Nada the Lily (1892) to colonial administrator Theophilus Shepstone (1817–1893).

Haggard claimed that Africans had related some Zulu oral traditions to him and “most, indeed nearly all, of the historical incidents here recorded are substantially true”. In the preface, Haggard acknowledges Fred Fynney (inspector of African schools and Natal border agent in the 1860s) as a source, as well as John Bird (Natal magistrate) and the missionaries Henry Callaway and David Leslie, but gives no direct sources for the long and detailed (more than 1500 words) version of the story. He produced an immensely popular book that intensified both the image of the swift, bloodthirsty, superstitious and effective Zulu who had dealt such a severe military blow to the British at Rorke’s Drift in 1879, and the myth of the man who earlier in the century had led them, King Shaka. Haggard also related his story to pagan darkness and the ignorance of the African by emphasising that Zulu people lived in fear of being smelt out. These ideas related to European conceptions of the African. For Haggard, Shaka’s wickedness was also evident in those who served him. He hatched the plot along with Mopo (Shaka’s ‘head domestic’). The dreaded Nobela’s role is ambiguous, though. On the one hand she embodies all the treachery and superstition of ‘witch doctors’, but on the other she possesses clairvoyant powers – she foretells Shaka’s betrayal in a conversation with Mopo.

Fred Fynney, Haggard’s source, had published his interpretation of the story a few years earlier in 1884. By that time, divisions within the Zulu kingdom were evident and likely to have influenced his telling and, in accordance with nineteenth-century colonial perceptions of the degeneration of Zulu religion, Fynney (like so many others) saw divination as trickery and super-
stonishment. He suggests that Shaka used the institution of divination for political purposes, to get rid of his opponents, and that rather than being afraid, he was satisfying his lust for killing his opponents or rivals. Like Fynney, Josiah Tyler, an American missionary, interprets the story in political terms as a test of the diviners. Both his 1891 version in *Forty Years Among the Zulu* and Fred Fynney’s account are unreferenced and remarkably similar. Tyler believed that the diviners terrified and deceived people, that the practice should cease, and that diviners ‘possessed unlimited power over their deluded countrymen’.

Tyler, Fynney, and Haggard explain the story in political and to some extent religious terms, with Shaka testing the diviners. While the diviners were getting rid of his opponents, Shaka did not object. However, they became too powerful and Shaka was angry that his military leaders were being smelt out, so he devised the test. That fiction could have been a source influencing later academic writers, such as political anthropologist E V Walter in the late 1960s and as recently as P J Schoeman in 1983, is quite remarkable. If we look a bit further, then the matter becomes clearer.

Walter included a version of the story in *Terror and Resistance* (1969). He does include references, but those cited to support his claims are quite startling. Once again, Haggard and Ritter feature strongly and their authenticity is unquestioned. Referring to Haggard, Walter says that the novel is ‘based in part on the chronicles’ which note Shaka’s continuing struggle with the is-anusi (diviner), and that Shaka’s ‘trick’ is recorded by the oral tradition. Using this and Ritter’s 1957 edition of *Shaka Zulu*, Walter sets the scene for the story. The account itself, though, is drawn from Ritter and H W Garbutt rather than directly from Haggard. Garbutt reported it in 1909 in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Without citing a reference, he claimed it as a fact. Garbutt concluded his version by reference to a similar story and suggested that diviners were frauds. In addition, he suggested that having a person ‘smelt out’ was a method for chiefs to dispose of powerful or wealthy rivals. He was not referring specifically to Shaka, but rather to chiefs in general. Surprisingly, Walter quoted directly from Haggard’s novel that ‘the witchdoctors rule in Zululand, and not I [Shaka] …’ Drawing on Ritter, Walter further argued that Shaka was under threat from the diviners because of the possibility of his political associates being smelt out. Through accusations of witchcraft, diviners posed a threat to his bureaucracy and military officials. The ensuing struggle between Shaka and the diviners resulted in him devising the scheme to break their hold. Walter clearly believed that Shaka was suspicious of diviners and was challenging their authority and power.

In yet another historical romance about King Shaka, *Phampatha the Beloved of King Shaka* (1983), Schoeman like Ritter claimed credibility through childhood interaction with Zulu people, fluency in the language and ‘many years of personal research in and around Zululand’. This supposedly gave him intimate knowledge of the Zulu and their history. Schoeman says that he ‘found no difficulty researching Shaka’s childhood among the old men of Zululand. They talked as if it happened in their own lifetime’. Written in the form of a conversation between Shaka and his ‘true love’ Phampatha (‘fully authentificated in Zulu tradition’), this is another long and detailed account. Schoeman claimed that Mgobozi (an induna, or warrior) and Mdlaka (his chief military commander) aided Shaka in his scheme, and that Phampatha knew of his trick. His tale ends with Shaka sending Nobela away rather than executing her. Nobela does not feature so prominently in any other account that I have found except those of Haggard, Ritter – and James Langa.
(Geoffrey Bond), who alleges a conversation between Shaka and Henry Francis Fynn featuring Nobela:

‘I understood that kings such as yourself are only figure-heads, and that the witchdoctors are the real rulers of the African.’

Shaka grinned with amusement. ‘That may be so in other societies,’ he growled, ‘but it is unwise to depend upon old women who are half-mad. I had such a one, named Nobela, who would have ruled my people through me …’

Fynn waited for the sentence to be finished, but when his host said no more was forced to ask, ‘And what happened to her?’

Shaka, shrugged his heavy shoulders. ‘She eventually died,’ he said, ‘and her sisters of evil with her.’

While there may not be a published source of Fynn’s account, that does not exclude him as a verbal source.

There are few major sources when it comes to Shaka and the Zulu. Prominent figures included Henry Francis Fynn and Theophilus Shepstone. Much swapping of information went on, and so did tales of the Zulu. Of course, we will never know who told whom what and what may then have been repeated as fact, but we can make some suggestions. However, before doing that it is necessary to consider versions of the tale from more authentic oral sources such as those published in James Stuart Archive.

Stuart, a colonial magistrate, collected various accounts from various informants in the 1890s and early 1900s. The diviners said by informants to have correctly pointed out Shaka range in number between one and three, have different names, and come from different groups. In a version attributed to one of James Stuart’s informers, Ndukwanaka Mbengwana, there is no concept of sorting true from false diviners – they are all false. However, in another version, one true diviner is distinguished. This version strongly suggests that the storyteller himself is struggling with conflicting ideologies. On the one hand, he explains that Shaka was disabusing his people of an illusion, but at the same time he records that the one who guessed correctly had been ritually strengthened with seawater. In yet another account by Ndukwanaka, Shaka was helped by one of his great men, Ngqengelele (of the Buthelezi people), who actually did the sprinkling. There is only one true diviner in this account, and while Shaka killed all the false diviners, it seems a few survived. This version adds another dimension to the explanation, because as well as severely curtailing the activities of those who remained, Shaka also put a stop to new diviners being ‘called’, apprenticed and initiated. He practically eliminated this ‘class’, and men and women ‘became ordinary people’. In Jantshi ka Nongila’s version, reported to James Stuart in 1903, Shaka again is trying to sort the true from the false diviners, and one survives. When Stuart recorded this account, it was noted that Ndukwanaka was also present.

By 1905, when Stuart recorded the version of Mctoyi ka Mnini (chief of the Thuli), there are three survivors – though the inference is that they escaped rather than passed the test – whom he names as Mqayana ka ‘Mlongwe(?), Ntando ka Mbabba of the Dube people [added by Mctoyi], and Jele of the emaNgangeni [added by Stuart informant Dinya ka Zokozwayo]. The 1909 account by Ndabambi ka Sikakana of the Dlamini is interesting because there is no mention of
a test, truth or falseness. The diviner escaped because he was accurate. Lunguza ka Mpukane’s 1909 account was the second longest recorded by James Stuart. Here, Shaka himself does the sprinkling trick unassisted. He had to put a stop to his warriors being smelt out and killed, and it becomes a ‘national’ campaign. Again, three diviners are accurate in predicting that it was Shaka himself who sprinkled the blood. One of the few accounts given by a woman to James Stuart was recorded in 1919. Baleka ka Mpitikazi relates that Ngqengelele again features, just as he does in a version of the story by Ndukwana. However, whereas one version portrays him as an active participant in the scheme, in the other he is unaware. Too many people were being killed, and so Shaka had to both sort out the true from the false, and two true diviners emerge. James Stuart himself included another account in a booklet titled uTulasizwe (1923). Stuart’s own account suggests that diviners ‘threw the bones’ in separate groups and were then directed to sit ‘over there’. Haggard’s account depicts a similar pattern and it is likely that Stuart borrowed from Haggard.

Little is known of the informants in the James Stuart Archive who are supposedly relating oral tradition, nor how nearly Stuart may or may not have kept to the foundations of good qualitative research. It is entirely possible that written versions of the story may have affected oral ‘remembering’ about Shaka and his deeds, and thus the incorporation into African history. It is difficult to determine to what extent each informant had been affected by cultural imperialism through missionary education, or had embraced Christianity, but certainly this must have been the case to some degree. In this regard, as Norman Etherington points out, ‘the predominance of mission schools distinguished the British’ in their imperial exploits in the field of education of their African colonial subjects, and this was particularly the case in Natal and Zuluand. British officials and missionaries generally disapproved of many African religious beliefs and practices; some severely sanctioned such pagan practices, and it is unlikely that they would have given a full and accurate picture. More obvious difficulties concern the relating of oral history over long periods, as stories are not static and are subject to change.

Engagement by leaders with diviners and tests clearly did not end with Shaka. Claims of scepticism in relation to divination have been extended to include the Zulu kings Dingane, Mpande and Cetshwayo. Francis Owen said he witnessed Dingane testing a diviner. It seemed that ‘Dingarn [Dingane] had called him on purpose to put his professed skill in the knowledge of secrets to the proof. Dingarn who has a great deal of sense in him began once to ridicule the fellow for not telling him his secret’. Such claims of scepticism have been extended even to other parts of southern Africa, to include Sutu chief Mabulane (Ramaphulana, Venda chief), Ndebele chief Mzilikazi, and Barotse chief Lewanika.

SIMILAR STORIES ABOUT OTHER SOUTHERN AFRICAN RULERS

As well as reporting the story of Shaka and the diviners, James Stuart’s informant, Baleka ka Mpitikazi also relates a story involving the Sutu chief Mabulane. Stuart himself notes that this story is ‘similar to that of Tshaka testing the witchdoctors’.
**Text:**

goma should be called to bula, for he was sick – his cheeks were swollen. The izangoma came and bula’d, but could not find out what the trouble was. There were many of them but they did not find what sickness it was. Then one of them rose, and went and sat down in front of him. He held out his hands and said that the chief should take out what was in his mouth. Mabulane then spat out the fruit into the hands of the inyanga. He said, ‘This is the only true inyanga; let these others leave off, and never bula again.’ But he for his part did not kill them. He left them alone and they went back to their homes. 

The theme of separating the true diviners from the false ones is the same. However, unlike Shaka, Mabulane allows the false diviners to live, though he does not allow them to practise.

Another story involves the prominent Ndebele chief Mzilikazi and diviners. To trick the diviners, Chief Mzilikazi placed a stone in his mouth to give the impression of swollen cheeks and illness. According to Garbutt, Mzilikazi was trying to prove there were no true diviners. The stone in the mouth to swell the cheeks was the method for testing, just as in the account of Chief Mabulane. Walter also cites a story claiming Mzilikazi as a tester of the diviners, and seems to have elaborated on the article by Garbutt. In the version about Chief Mabulane, one diviner saw the trick and finally asked the chief to spit out what was in his mouth. This episode does not occur in the stories related by Garbutt or Walter, in which there are no ‘true’ diviners. Mzilikazi spat out the stone after several people had been smelt out, thus proving it was nonsense.

There is also a slightly different version of blood sprinkling involving paramount chief Lewanika of the Barotse, reported to have occurred in May 1887. The theme is the same: blood on the floor of his hut; a struggle with the diviners; divination being used as a weapon against him; Lewanika working to undermine the diviners’ influence; and diviners failing the test. However, it took Lewanika some 10 years to really crush the political influence of the diviners whereas Shaka supposedly accomplished this feat in a much shorter period.

In yet another version, recorded in the 1860s by D Frédéric Ellenberger, the Sotho chief Mohlomi (1786–1870), a generation before King Moshweshwe, tested by hiding a shield and then calling on the ‘witch doctors’ to determine what had happened to the missing shield: ‘Having let them accuse whom they would, Mohlomi produced the shield and delivered a speech urging his people to avoid the witch-doctors, whose bad faith he had just exposed’. 

Stuart Cloete’s 1964 novel *The Honey Bird*, includes a similar story linked to Christian enlightenment. In this version, the motive is the same – to test and expose deceptive diviners who were threatening the authority of the king. A young white woman from a missionary background outlines a plan for the Sesuto-speaking king, Maguda, to set a trap for his witchdoctors. The blood-sprinkling act is carried out by his most trusted induna named Afusi. All the witch doctors, male and female, led by one Negende are exposed as evil frauds and thus killed. In this account, the frauds are torn apart by the people themselves and the king thanks the white woman and greets her ‘like a queen’. They then embrace the woman’s all-powerful God who gave her the wisdom to devise such a clever plan.

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**Notes:**

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DISCREPANCIES

There are far too many discrepancies in all these tales to extract a single consistent narrative. As we have seen, some relate to chiefs other than Shaka. In the Shaka tale, discrepancies are as apparently unimportant as the type of animal blood used and the method of divining. The missionary Henry Callaway, in a work based on oral testimonies he recorded in the 1850s, and one of James Stuart’s informants, Ndukwana, describe the animal as a bullock; another of Stuart’s informants says a cow; Andrew Burgess (a colleague of American missionaries in Africa) an ox; and Levine Samuelson (eldest daughter of Norwegian missionary Sivert Martin Samuelson) a goat. In Schoeman’s account and Ritter’s early edition, the method of divination was by throwing bones.

Other differences are of greater importance. Some, for example, claim Shaka acted alone and unaided. Yet in other accounts he was helped. Some claim he told another person of his intention, but acted alone. Schoeman, for example, claims that Mgobozi and Mdlaka aided Shaka in his scheme. He also claims that Phampatha knew of Shaka’s trick. There are enormous discrepancies concerning the roles played by the main characters. In three versions – Ritter, Haggard and Schoeman – Nobela is a main character and a problem for Shaka. Yet in other accounts no such person is mentioned and the ‘problem’ is more widespread. In some versions only one ‘true diviner’ emerges, but in others there are two or even three. Some stories imply there were no ‘true diviners’. Further, the names of the so-called true diviners vary, as do the groups to which they belonged. At least twelve people have been named as true diviners, from six different groups. There is no consensus on sex either. Nobela is clearly female, but in some accounts most of the diviners are male; others include both males and females. Finally, the various accounts differ in their identification of practitioners called diviners: some restrict the diviners to persons claiming to be able to identify evildoers; others include specialists in ritual and religion. In addition to the problems of divergent and contradictory details are the vested interests of the narrators and the possible contamination of the story of Shaka and the diviners through ‘feedback loops’. In many of the accounts, very little direct reference is made to the source of the information provided.

In unravelling the tale of Shaka and the diviners, four figures with a range of backgrounds emerge as the major authorities on the Zulu, and thus the creators of the colonial image of Shaka: H Rider Haggard, Theophilus Shepstone, Henry Francis Fynn and James Stuart. They all seemed to be in touch with and to have influenced one another (and others). Fynn and Shepstone corresponded as early as 1836, when Shepstone was just nineteen. There was backslapping and mutual admiration among some of them at least. Haggard influenced Zulu fiction writers such as Ritter, but also other histories of Shaka. Dan Wylie explains that ‘in fiction, Rider Haggard expanded on the snippets of legend current among his administrator friends like Shepstone and Fynney, without really furthering anyone’s imaginative insight into Zulu society (though, significantly, it was believed that he had done just that).’ Wylie also shares with us Shepstone’s 1875 view of Zulu history:

In the first (phase) we have simple, primitive, unalloyed barbarism ... peace, prosperity, and plenty.

In the second we have the same barbarism [but with] a dash of civilization [Shaka’s abilities which poisoned all enjoyment, cut of all that sustains life,
turned thousands of square miles into a literally howling wilderness, shed rivers of blood, annihilated whole communities, turned the members of others into cannibals ...

In the third we see civilization ... in living bodily form protecting and ameliorating the remnants of this wreck.\textsuperscript{35}

Haggard’s influence does not end there. He was also in contact with James Stuart. Carolyn Hamilton notes the plans of James Stuart and Arthur Shepstone for Haggard to write a biography of Theophilus Shepstone. Stuart and Haggard corresponded for some time.\textsuperscript{36} They also travelled together, and collaborated. Hamilton describes this beautifully when she explains that ‘Stuart and Haggard thus entered into each other’s worlds: Haggard interviewed Stuart’s informant Socwatsha while Stuart helped craft fiction. The relationship was mutually influential’.\textsuperscript{37} She informs us that Haggard’s book, \textit{Cetywayo and his White Neighbours} (London, 1882), ‘championed Shepstone and his system of native administration’, and that following publication, Haggard gained the reputation of being something of an expert on South Africa.\textsuperscript{38}

Shepstone’s influence in the recording of Zulu history is significant. In the version of the tale of Shaka and the diviner attributed to Zulu King Cetshwayo (reigned 1872–79) by Captain J R Poole in 1880, Shepstone may have influenced the remembering. Poole claimed it to be a ‘narrative ... taken down from the lips of Cetywayo’.\textsuperscript{39} If indeed this is correct, then it is likely to have been collected while Cetshwayo was imprisoned at Cape Town. Poole’s account suggests an extraordinary disbelief by the king in a fundamental feature of Zulu life, and an ‘explosion’ in the number of individuals called as diviners following Shaka’s death. It is possible that Cetshwayo told a story about Shaka that was relayed to him from Shepstone rather than having originated in Cetshwayo’s own oral traditions. Indeed there is evidence that Shepstone reminded or ‘coached’ Cetshwayo in matters of history – and the tale. Replying to a letter from Cetshwayo in 1874, Shepstone wrote: ‘Cetywayo’s uncle Dingana killed or drove away all the raindoctors in Zululand but there was rain in the country after they were out of it as there had been before they appeared’.\textsuperscript{40} Even the epic versions of Zulu history such as those by A T Bryant are connected to Shepstone. According to Dan Wylie (2006), Bryant relied heavily on Shepstone’s material.\textsuperscript{41}

If earlier generations of South African historians often portrayed Henry Francis Fynn in somewhat saintly terms, this has occurred less so more recently. As Wylie points out, B J T Leverton wrote of Fynn: ‘until his death he was regarded both in and out of Natal as the final authority on matters relating to the natives of Natal, and it was said by many that his knowledge of the Natal tribes was even greater than that of Theophilus Shepstone’.\textsuperscript{42} However, when Leverton later edited \textit{The Records of Natal}, it included less flattering references to Fynn. In a letter to Sir Benjamin D’Urban dated 1835, Colonel H G Smith (frontier commander) describes him as ‘a retrograde Christian and a progressive barbarian’, and in another letter Smith says, ‘Fynn is a greater ass and Don Quixote than one could possibly conceive’.\textsuperscript{43} Fynn seems to pop up everywhere in contemporary records of Natal – even in relation to Captain R J Garden, who reported that very early version of the story. Garden wrote an article for the \textit{Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society} in 1855.\textsuperscript{44} He collected rocks from an area near the Umtamvuna River and it was Fynn who took him there. It is not unrealistic to imagine Captain Garden listening
to the tales of Fynn the guide and ‘expert’ during their travels through Natal and then relaying them on.

In his notes, James Stuart adds yet another dimension to Shaka’s blood sprinkling trick, which seems not to have attracted a great deal of attention, although it may have influenced the telling of the tale. Stuart suggests a connection between the tale and a biblical story. Like many others of his time, Stuart was attempting to make a connection with ancient Judaism, and in doing so, he further clouds the origin of the tale. The Old Testament has several references to blood sprinkling, including the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Some people supported the theory of the historical degeneration of Zulu religion and aimed to demonstrate that the Zulu could be traced back to the Ethiopians, Moses and the Israelites. Thus, analogies were sought and found. As Patrick Harries points out, ‘educated Churchmen in the outposts of Empire – sought and found– reflections of their own morality and belief systems, and a universality of religion in the behaviour and practices of primitive people. However, in the process they created (‘invented’ or ‘imagined’) rather than ‘found’ many non-European religions’.

The image of Shaka conveyed through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by these tales owes much to Haggard, Shepstone, Fynn and Stuart and appears to have been interweaved. They may not all have shared aims and objectives, but they were instrumental in crafting the image. On the one hand, we have Shepstone possibly grafting aspects of African leadership onto his own, perhaps to propagate his particular type of ‘native’ administration. On the other was the threat to British hegemony by the less than ‘cooperative’ Zulu. Alongside were trader and settler interests, as well as the civilising and saving ambition of the missionaries – a Christian ideology that could be ascribed to most colonialists. Over time, some colonialists shifted their roles from what are often portrayed as the fixed categories of administrator, missionary or settler, as Etherington has pointed out.

With all the discrepancies, biases and feedback problems, it is tempting to dismiss this story as baseless fiction. My argument is not that the tale is entirely false, but that it was largely a colonial embellishment of something far less sinister, less brutal, and certainly not Shaka-specific. There is a core of meaning about chiefly involvement in the realm of religion, and it indicates a tense relationship between the chiefs and diviners. The tales need to be read and interpreted in the context of invisible features of southern African power, including ancestors, diviners, medicines and ritual.

**INVISIBLE FEATURES OF ZULU POWER**

Religion and ancestors were an intrinsic part of everyday existence because the ancestors were considered ‘rulers of their descendants’ destinies’. Divination was firmly entrenched in the Zulu religious system, and diviners were among those who possessed the power and the authority to communicate with ancestors. Ritual and religion was also an important component of the king’s leadership. The combination of secular and the sacred roles in leadership was not unique to Shaka. Examples from eastern, central, western and southern Africa attest to close linkages between religion and politics. A chief’s power was enhanced by the ability to call on the power of the ancestors, and to access powerful medicines. A leader such as Shaka could not possibly have successfully overcome and incorporated surrounding groups without addressing the invisible
spiritual aspects of power as well as the visible. Shaka’s authority was not totally independent from the people, or the ancestors.

Shaka would have found it difficult to extend his power over people outside his immediate following without reference to religious beliefs and practices. Some scholars have noted his role in religion; however, their inference is usually that it was an innovation connected to his pursuit of absolute power. Many earlier writers concluded that Shaka’s engagement in the religious realm resembled divine kingship. In the 1970s (citing the work of the anthropologist Max Gluckman), Henry Slater described changes in the Zulu political structure and power relationships as a result of transformation from a feudal mode to a system with a power holder at the top, where ‘no longer was it an office of “paramount” chief amongst many chiefs, but of something approaching divine kingship’. 49 But divine kingship, as Ronald Cohen 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’. 50

Shaka’s authority was not independent of the people or the ancestors. He was not considered a god or the reincarnation of a previous god-king, nor was he deified or worshipped. The prosperity and continuation of the Zulu ‘nation’ did not depend upon him: the state continued after his death. Shaka did, however, have an important role in ritual, and a vital relationship between religion and power did exist. Most importantly, Shaka was simply exercising his normal religious role as a chief and it was not an innovation connected with his pursuit of absolute power. His spiritual powers were not clearly distinguishable from those of other regional leaders. Ritual and religion was an important component of the king’s leadership, but Shaka was also closely connected to diviners and traditional doctors of medicine.

During the competition for political dominance that was occurring in southeast Africa in the early nineteenth century, opportunities to seize and enhance power were more than military. Political control did not exclude ritual control. Shaka used ritual means to overcome rivals, and also aimed to incorporate groups that were recognised as ritually powerful. Strong medicines were seen to assist Shaka in gaining ascendancy over his rival Zwide and other groups jostling for power. Through conquest, Shaka was increasing his ritual power by controlling chiefs, diviners, rainmakers and medicines, by demonstrating that his umlingo (magical power, skill) was greater than that of his opponents.

Zulu conquest involved not only land, political institutions and economic power. It also meant capturing the invisible spiritual power, acquiring medicines and overcoming rival ancestors. The king’s medicine – an extension of the medicines of chiefship – would have become more important. So would the knowledge about such medicines – instruction of the medicines of chiefship. Fynn pointed out that knowledge of medicines could be bought and that some was in the hands of private families. No leaders could risk opponents using powerful medicines against them. Thus for Shaka, enhancing his own ritual status, and controlling ritual power, knowledge, activities and alliances, was essential to establishing supremacy and emphasising his umlingo.

In conquering and incorporating territories, Shaka is likely to have been confronted with the power of the ancestors of each subjugated group. This would have been very problematic, especially with groups who were unwillingly placed under Zulu influence. He would have needed to invoke the patronage of the spirits of each subjugated group and, in the unlikely event of that being forthcoming, to use other methods to destroy their power. Having shorn the chiefs of much
of their ritual power, he would also have had to deal with groups who had access to the power of the ancestors and medicines – most importantly, the diviners and rainmakers. A leader would need to sort out spiritual allies from enemies just as he differentiated between political allies and enemies. There was the likelihood of tensions between diviners and the king, not least because a diviner was ‘called’, had been through a series of ordeals, and had served an ‘apprenticeship’ in order to access the knowledge, perform certain religious tasks and communicate with the ancestors – all functions giving him a degree of power.

The independent power of the diviners, doctors of medicine and rainmakers, which was part of the pre-existing system, was at variance with the centralising aspirations of Shaka. Once he subjugated chiefs, their power depended on the Zulu king. However, this was not the case with the diviners, who could potentially inhibit the development of a strong central government and ideology. As Fynn pointed out, diviners applied to their ancestors for guidance.\(^{51}\) As the Zulu state grew and became more complex, so Shaka set out to concentrate its spiritual power, to take control of the independent power of the diviners in order to focus spiritual dominance on his Zulu ancestors. As the concept of Zulu identity and of a Zulu ‘nation’ was in its infancy during the Shakan period, the notion of ‘Zulu’ as a social unit did not yet exist. The Zulu king’s position, policies and practices were justified through old chiefly prerogatives and reinforced through ritual and ceremony. In this way the ideology, values and ideas of the Zulu rulers were passed on to the other members of the society.

CONCLUSION

Four new explanations can be put forward regarding Shaka’s ‘blood sprinkling trick’.

1. *The story has a wholly Zulu origin.* It represents the struggle in politico-religious relations between the king and the those diviners incorporated into the state, and directly relates to the assertion of Zulu dominance. Shaka’s struggle with diviners was about his domination as ‘the future agent between the spiritual and material world’.\(^ {52}\) The struggle extended to ancestors as well. During the period of change it is possible that the diviners were very influential with people on the periphery of the Zulu state. The vital point about the story is that the true diviners smelt out the heaven above, or *izulu*, thus recognising Shaka’s ancestors as dominant. It is highly likely that without this religious foundation, Shaka would not have been able to hold office. He challenged the diviners and rainmakers precisely because he shared the general belief in the efficacy of their power. His aim was to demonstrate his own superiority in their realm.

2. *The story is a contemporary reworking of an old story to acknowledge the religious dominance of the paramount chief.* This was not unusual. Several of the myths and legends collected by W H I Bleek, for example, did not have primordial origin, but were nineteenth-century explanations of the world. These stories tell not just of struggles between Shaka and his diviners, but of similar struggles by the Sutu chief Mabulane, Mzikazi of the Ndebele, Lewanika, paramount chief of the Barotse, Mpande, Cetshwayo and Theophilus Shepstone. While they may be merely a contamination of the Shaka story, it can be argued that these are similar cases of struggle with diviners during a period of political expansion, accompanied by the necessary spiritual expansion whereby chiefs demonstrated their religious dominance.

3 *The story was a modern colonial construct (possibly based on an African tale) originating with Theophilus Shepstone.* It was probably an attempt to discredit Zulu religion and the religious
role of chiefs in order to facilitate colonial domination. This would explain the apparent absence of any reference to the story before 1854. The link between the political and religious aspects of authority was not something that colonial officials could duplicate or replace. In a version by one of James Stuart’s informants, it is Shepstone himself who is the main actor:

[He] told with relish the story of the witchdoctors, which belongs to this period of Shepstone’s work. The role of the witchdoctor was so remunerative that it was becoming a ‘racket’ with deleterious effects. Theophilus endeavoured, by means of a Solomon judgement, to sort out the true from the false. About 50 men and women were summoned to Mountain Rise on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg, to demonstrate their skill in the grounds of the magistrate Mr Samuelson. Acting Governor Bisset and other officials were present and the whole day was devoted to the business.

Money was hidden in boots, holes in the ground and so on, and the witchdoctors were set to discover its whereabouts. At last three were singled out for their accuracy. One, a woman located by occult means the [five pounds] hidden in Theophilus’ boot, another woman found the money under the Governor’s feet and a young man a buried snuff box some distance away. Theophilus then declared that only these three would be permitted to exorcise and all the others would be punished. In 1843, Natal was annexed by Great Britain and in 1847 the Locations Commission ‘established the “location system” that brought the nearly one hundred thousand Africans living in Natal under the jurisdiction of the Colonial Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone. From that point, as Shepstone declared, ‘The Native’s own laws are superseded [and] the Government of their chiefs is at an end’. It was recommended that magistrates should take the place of supreme chiefs over the African population. The commissioners believed that the hereditary powers of chiefs should be curtailed in order to end any conflict between the chiefs and the magistrates. The Local Ordinance ‘allowed by her Majesty in Council (1850) ... constitutes the Lieutenant-Governor for the time being supreme or paramount chief over all the Kafirs in the district, with full power to remove or appoint subordinate chiefs or other Kafir authorities’. Carolyn Hamilton argues that Shepstone favoured a system of rule for Natal and Zululand that was based on Shaka’s strong central government, but that this system was equally imperial in nature. A declaration in May 1854, signed by Shepstone and Bhaca chiefs and councillors, stated that:

we do further acknowledge our faithful allegiance to the said Theophilus Shepstone, Esquire, as such Supreme Chief or Ruler, as effectually and to all intents and purposes, as firmly as if the said Theophilus Shepstone, Esquire, had been or had become such paramount Chief or Ruler by succession according to our laws or usage.

And we do hereby further vest in and acknowledge that the said Theophilus Shepstone now possesses and shall continue to possess all and singular the powers and authorities which according to our laws or usage are vested on or
possessed by any Paramount Native Chief in South Africa not subject to British jurisdiction or authority, to be exercised and enjoyed by the said Theophilus Shepstone, Esquire, as such Supreme chief or Ruler.58

But, Shepstone could never have demonstrated the links with their ancestors or the sanctioned medicinal and ritual authority required by a true chief. He could never ascend to the spiritual world and dominate the invisible powers. It would, therefore, have been useful to show that a European could be supreme chief like Shaka without the spiritual connection that African chiefs possessed. Shepstone would have had an interest in reproducing the story, to show that the influence and power of the ancestors could actually be separated from Shaka by attempting to demonstrate that the king himself did not believe in the religious system.

Shepstone attempted to behave like a chief in many ways. He instructed a chief to allow a man to put on the headring, had a snuff-box bearer, and represented Shaka in the installation of Cetshwayo.59 Previously, diviners would have had a role to play in that ceremony, and Hamilton argues that Shepstone perceived the ‘chance of intervening directly in matters of Zulu sovereignty’.60 There is some debate concerning the extent to which Shepstone represented Shaka, but Shepstone would have realised that he was intervening in both a political and a religious ceremony. He was by no means the first to employ this tactic. According to David Chidester, Shepstone’s youthful mentor, Harry Smith, ‘intervened in Xhosa religious life not only by insisting on being called Inkosi Inkulu, “Chief of Chiefs”, but also by outlawing the practices of witch detection, rainmaking and female initiation’. Harry Smith learned just enough about Xhosa religion to identify the precise points at which it could be ‘destroyed’.61 In any event, it seems highly likely that Shepstone had a role in reproducing and popularising the tale, particularly through his links with Rider Haggard.

4. The story was a modern construct originating with Henry Francis Fynn. It was in Fynn’s interest to show that the secular and the sacred aspects of leadership could be separated and that one could be ‘made’ a paramount chief without being a ‘native’. Hamilton’s argument concerning Shepstone could be equally applied to Fynn. In all its forms the story represents the relationship between leadership, authority and religion. It is also possible that Fynn relayed the tale, for whatever purpose, to Captain Garden during their travels together.

Sean Redding points out that ‘the state, whether pre-colonial and African or colonial and white controlled, depended partly upon beliefs in the supernatural powers of political leaders for gaining the acquiescence of the ruled’.62 It is likely that potential for conflict existed between ‘localised’ and centralised or ‘national’ issues, and establishing the spiritual domination of incorporated groups reduced the need for overtly coercive measures. Nonetheless, it is likely that some conflict persisted. Stuart was told that ‘only the Zulus retained their old laws and customs. Other tribes were made to relinquish many old customs by the Zulus’.63 It is precisely this tension that is represented in the story of Shaka and the diviners. In all its forms, the tale represents the dominance of chiefs in the spiritual realm within an accepted ideological framework. Any ‘test’, therefore, did not demonstrate Zulu scepticism about the concept of divination. What we end up with, then, are two possibilities. One is that African religion is grafted onto imperial, colonial, Christian ideology; the other is that Old Testament ideology is grafted onto African.
3 A1157, 10, IV A (ii): ‘Native Tribes; Customs and Beliefs’, 1040–1, R Garden Papers, 1851–1854, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR), KwaZulu-Natal Archives.
5 Ritter, *Shaka Zulu*: 211.
12 Haggard, *Nada the Lily*: 54.
17 Jantshi in *James Stuart Archive*, vol. 1: 67.
18 Ndabambi in *James Stuart Archive*, vol. 4: 177.
20 Baleka in *James Stuart Archive*, vol. 1: 9.
26 Garbutt, ‘Native witchcraft and superstition in South Africa’: 536.


32 Harriet Ngubane points out that the skin of goats sacrificed to the ancestors was considered to have ‘certain sacred properties’: H Ngubane. 1977. *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine*. London: Academic Press: 4. It would seem, then, that the ritual significance of a goat is not the same as of an ox.

33 See ‘Shepstone in Love’, this volume, ch. 2.


40 ‘Papers relating to Panda’, Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA) 1/6/2, PAR.


45 ‘Information on Shaka’ (‘Notes’), Stuart Papers, file 53/6, KCAL.


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