

Challenging Heroic Masculinity: Leadership Myths of Nineteenth Century King Shaka Zulu

Jennifer Weir
Murdoch University
j.weir@murdoch.edu.au

Abstract

The Zulu of southern African have long been held as a particularly strong example of African patriarchy. Over almost two hundred years, king Shaka Zulu (b. 1787, d. 1828), has been credited with founding the great Zulu state, and he has often been described as a brilliant leader, warrior and military strategist conquering all in his path – the ‘black Napoleon’. Popular history books abound with ‘facts’ of Shaka’s life. Two books have been published in recent years that translate so called leadership secrets of king Shaka to modern leadership and management practice. Leadership lessons from *Emperor Shaka Zulu the Great* by Phinda Madi (2000), and *Lessons on Leadership by Terror: Finding Shaka Zulu in the Attic* by Manfred Kets de Vries (2004). On the basis of lessons learned from Shaka, or aspects of his psychology, Madi manages to produce 10 leadership lessons including ‘leading the charge’, while Kets de Vries provides 15 lessons. Not only is much of what is written about Shaka based on myth, but also totally ignores the leadership role of chiefly women. It is curious that these myths of Shaka still hold so strongly despite research findings to the contrary. Leadership by women was an intrinsic part of several pre-colonial systems in southern Africa, and Shaka did not rule alone. This is all very far removed from any lessons on modern management and leadership to be learned from king Shaka. Many of the points in this paper in relation to women have raised in previously published work (Weir 2006), but it is worth repeating in an effort to go some way towards limiting the impact and reproduction of Shaka myths in the modern leadership studies, and because the role of women has been left out. There’s enough evidence to show that the long enduring picture of Shaka Zulu presented by Kets de Vries, and many before him, is questionable.

Background

Zulu history has focussed predominantly on masculine militarism. Zulu king, Shaka ka Senzangakhona (b. 1787, d. 1828), is well known and has often been described as a great leader who almost single-handedly built the Zulu state. Popular perceptions of the Zulu have been built by images of Zulu savagery as represented especially via images of the very dramatic British defeat at *Isandlwana*, and their defence of Rourke’s Drift the following day in 1879, and where the Prince Imperial was killed. As Jeff Guy explains “all this was intensified by the grotesque imagination of H Rider Haggard who became the great popular writer of his time by showing the Zulu ‘as they were, in all their superstitious madness and blood stained grandeur’, and who successfully confused in his readers’ minds campfire anecdotes about the rise of Shaka with the later history of the kingdom” (Guy 1994: xx). Movies like *Zulu* (1964) featuring Michael Cane, and another later movie titled *Zulu Dawn* (1979), furthered the dramatic images of the ruthless savage Zulu warrior, with the most recent movie *Shaka Zulu* released in 2002.

There are few major historical primary sources when it comes to Shaka and the Zulu. Much swapping of ‘information’ went on. Much of our knowledge of the pre-colonial period comes from the writings of missionaries, and early nineteenth century travellers. As I have argued elsewhere (Weir 2008) the image of Shaka and the associated tales of the Zulu conveyed through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries owes much to H. Rider Haggard, Theophilus Shepstone, Henry Francis Fynn and James Stuart, and appears to have been interweaved. They were instrumental in crafting the image. That Rider Haggard’s and other novels such as that produced by EH Ritter in the

1950s have been accepted and reproduced as historical fact is alarming. Ritter's work was not the biography often claimed.

Stories of Shaka often go along the lines of the following: he was illegitimate, bullied as a child, exiled to his mother's people, seized the leadership, single-handedly build the Zulu state, was innovative in warfare, a military genius, a mass murderer, responsible for depopulating the region, a brutal and savage despot who maintained his state by terror and repression. More importantly, as Dan Wylie points out, most of it is wrong (Wylie 2006:1).

Nathaniel Isaacs (first published 1836) and Henry Francis Fynn (first published in Bird 1888) were among the first travellers to write about the Zulu, and so they had an enormous impact on subsequent writing - despite Isaacs' having a poor understanding of the Zulu language (Bryant 1929), and being semi-literate (Wylie 2000:94). They had their own motivations for presenting the Zulu as they did (i.e. possible spoils for British annexation). Wylie suggests that some of those who wrote the so-called eye witness accounts were "actually violent and lying ruffians whose accounts cannot be trusted" (Wylie 2006:3). Isaacs actually urged Fynn to "make them out to be as bloodthirsty as you can and endeavour to give an estimation of the number of people they have murdered during their reign, and describe the frivolous crimes people lose their lives for. Introduce as many anecdotes relative to Chaka as you can; it all tends to swell up the work and make it interesting (Kirby 1968:67)" (Wylie 2000:95). Indeed when it comes to Shaka, a lot of 'history' was made up to fill the gaps. For example, Wylie explains that the battle of Gqokli Hill, evidence of Shaka's great military tactics, never happened (Wylie 2000:8. Kets de Vries 2004:37).

Alongside this, much early historical writing about the Zulu is saturated with 'great man theory'. In the 1960s the Africanist group of historians rejected the confines of history of 'great man' and began to offer more complex explanations. One of these, Max Gluckman, saw pre-colonial Zululand as having attained a state of equilibrium through controlled expression of conflict and conflict resolution. However, Gluckman also incorporated a dubious psychoanalytic analysis of Shaka that has been picked up by some others. He tended towards "committing a psychologism (the use of individual psychology to explain social and cultural phenomena)" (Gordon 1990:32. Gluckman 1960:167). Somehow Gluckman concluded, "Shaka was at least a latent homosexual and possibly psychotic" (Gluckman 1960:168). Morris (1973:91) even claimed Shaka was impotent although it is unclear how we could know such personal details. Kets de Vries pick this psychological thread up and expands it substantially labelling Shaka a "psychologically wounded man" (Kets de Vries 2004:162).

Shaka's 'charismatic' leadership has been another theme in writing on the Zulu. Charismatic leaders may have a positive, or negative influence. They are characterised as transformative, visionary, excellent communicators, able to inspire trust, make people feel a sense of comfort, are action focussed and entrepreneurial, and can express emotion (Dubrin, Dalglish and Miller 2006:97). Although he is expanding views of charisma by including other related factors, in effect, Kets de Vries is reviving some discredited elements of older interpretations of Zulu history. He is heavily influenced by the approaches of Gluckman, and Walter who argued that Shaka instituted a regime of terror and violence as a mechanism for social control (Walter 1969).

Kets de Vries argues that we can take lessons from history and learn from Shaka's terror-based despotic leadership. Madi's (2000) *Emperor Shaka Zulu the Great* was unavailable at the time of writing. Despite my best efforts to locate a copy, I am still waiting for my second-hand book to arrive from somewhere in the world. Although Kets de Vries' Lessons seem at odds with the theme of a psychotic person whose style is based on terror, they are as follows:

- Lesson 1: Develop a clear and concise vision
- Lesson 2: Recognise the importance of strategic innovation
- Lesson 3: Know the competition

- Lesson 4: Act quickly and decisively
- Lesson 5: Empower subordinates
- Lesson 6: Promote entrepreneurship
- Lesson 7: Engage in effective symbol manipulation
- Lesson 8: Select and promote with care
- Lesson 9: Set a good example
- Lesson 10: Hold people accountable
- Lesson 11: Reward people fairly
- Lesson 12: Devote adequate resources to training and development
- Lesson 13: Be prepared for discontinuous change
- Lesson 14: Guard against hubris
- Lesson 15: Create a culture of trust (Kets de Vries 2004:140)

The lessons may be useful for leadership in general, but not because of Shaka. While there are many inaccuracies about Shaka in *Lessons on Leadership by Terror*, from his birth to the struggle with diviners, I would like to focus on some claims in the explanations associated with the Leadership Lessons and offer some challenges to his androcentric view. I will comment on several, but not all.

Lessons on Leadership

Lesson 1: Develop a clear and concise vision

“It was Dingiswayo’s statesmanship, supplemented by Shaka’s brutality in warfare, that planted the first seeds of the impressive Zulu empire” (Kets de Vries 2004:141).

Contrary to this claim, the Zulu were not the only group undergoing change and expansion in the early nineteenth century, and Shaka was quite simply not as significant as the extravagant claims. The Qwabe and the Hlubi were also expanding and forming part of what Wright and Hamilton (1989) termed the secondary category of defensive states. By the early nineteenth century several states were competing: “Mabhudu, Dlamini-Ngwane, Hlubi, Ndwandwe, Mthethwa and Qwabe.” (Wright & Hamilton 1989:66). By the 1810s the main struggle pitted Mthethwa against the Ndwandwe. By 1816 the Ndwandwe had attacked the Mthethwa, defeated the army and killed their king (Dingiswayo), which paved the way for the further growth of the Zulu under Shaka.

In earlier work I have argued that far from being victims of male power, many women can be shown to be political agitators, from a base of real power. Zulu royal women for example demonstrated such leadership before, during and after Shaka’s reign. In contrast to popularly held views, they were not the subordinates of Shaka. Women’s leadership took a variety of forms, sometimes military, but also economic and religious. There was also interlinking of these with ritual and religion being a component of leadership.

Hanretta suggests that as a result of the militarization of Zulu society a “new role for royal women developed” because the king needed “direct” representatives in the military establishments (Hanretta 1998). On the contrary, I found that women’s leadership had little to do with Shaka in the sense that he did not bestow leadership roles on certain women for the first time. Mnkabayi (d.1835), Shaka’s father’s senior sister, held power long before Shaka came to rule. Mawa (another sister of Shaka’s father), Langazana (a wife of Shaka’s father) and Nandi (Shaka’s mother) all exerted considerable influence in affairs of the Zulu. Some have argued that Shaka’s father, Senzangakhona, could not take charge because he was too young and so Mnkabayi his sister became joint chief of the Zulu with her male cousin Mudli (Bryant 1929:41, 45, 46. Fuze 1979:62). However, her leadership was not in any way a one-off event because even after her brother became chief, Mnkabayi continued to advise on political matters, most likely taking a key role in council. As before, she again assumed authority for a short time following his death and before Shaka became a chief. I say ‘a chief’ because we have always assumed singular chiefship, but perhaps that was not the case.

In contrast with the view of Shaka as the usurper of power expressed by Kets de Vries, and others before him, Mnkabayi's transitional leadership suggests a relatively smooth transfer to Shaka rather than him seizing it. One primary source even suggests that Shaka was actually "offered the position of king" (Webb & Wright 1976:199). That immediately raises the question about who might have offered Shaka the position of king. Mnkabayi perhaps? She also played a role in determining the outcome of the subsequent succession dispute between Dingane and Mhlangana by installing Dingane (Fuze 1979:72, 97. Webb & Wright 1976:196. Webb & Wright 1982:217), and other leadership matters and together with Dingane overruled a chief's decision to execute Allen Gardiner (Gardiner 1966:222-3). Mnkabayi was leader at three significant points in Zulu history — following the deaths of her father Jama, her brother Senzangakhona, *and* Shaka, meaning she 'survived the absolute ruthless despotism' of both Shaka (1816-1828), and Dingane (1828-1840), through to Mpande (1840-1872). This is because such women were actually part of the system of Zulu leadership, and it seems male chiefs did not rule alone. This also dispels details under Lesson 6 (Promote entrepreneurship) that claims, "Shaka had no interest in sharing power" (Kets de Vries 2004:147).

Lesson 2: Recognise the importance of strategic innovation

"During his tenure in the military and on the throne, he revolutionized the Zulu army's weaponry and military tactics Before battle, he told no one what his exact plans were. In later years, when he no longer accompanied his warriors on their campaigns, he entrusted only the commander in chief (and perhaps his next in command) with the details of the battle plan He breathed, lived and dreamed of war (Kets de Vries 2004:142).

To some extent this section also deals with Kets de Vries' description under many other lessons as well. Charles Maclean (who spent time at Shaka's capital) recorded in 1855 that certain women acted as Shaka's *aides-de-camp* and were the link between himself and his chiefs (although it's not clear what his specific definition of *aides-de-camp* is) (Maclean 1855:67). Particular women also held leadership positions of influence in the *amakhandas* (Zulu military 'kraals') of the successive Zulu kings Shaka (1816-1828), Dingane (1828-1840) and Mpande (1840-1872) (women's leadership of these military establishments is detailed in Weir 2000b). Like men, girls were organised into regiments (*amabutho* pl) (Webb & Wright 2001:41). Although there is very little written about female *amabutho*, the information that is available suggests something more than simply age-sets, and that they may very well have had a more significant and wider purpose than has previously been recognised.

Lesson 3: Know the competition

"He [Shaka] also introduced a sophisticated system of military scouts – brave men who went on missions to locate and evaluate the enemy, and who served as decoys, giving the main army the advantage of surprise.... Placing loyal subordinates in key administrative and military positions, he was ready to snuff out any resistance to his regime at an early stage" (Kets de Vries 2004:144).

I argued previously (Weir 2006) that women had a variety of roles from mat carrying in times of war during the Shakan period and protecting the king, through to combat. It is worth repeating here. According to one early source, Andrew Smith, Shaka had a female *ibutho* [regiment], which also had a female commander who cohabited with Shaka (Kirby 1955:46). It seems then that not all *induna* (army officer, headman) were male, and that an *induna* of a female *ibutho* could have been male or female (Webb & Wright 2001:56). An oral history source mentions that there were "girls of the king's *mdhlunkulu*" (Webb & Wright 1979:274) and that a section of a female *ibutho* in the *isigodhlo* [king's private enclosure] were armed (Webb & Wright 1982:328). One informant claims that "Tshaka used to go out to war with the *amakosikazi* [pl. principal wife of chief or head man, female monarch] as well as girls. They cut shields (*izihlangu*) and carried assegais, and had to fight when required to do so" (Webb & Wright 2001:41,56,69).

In pre-colonial southern Africa there are few examples of direct warrior or military activity by women, but what we do have does not fit comfortably with Gluckman's generalisation of all women were "demonstrating their abject subordination in daily life" (Gluckman 1963:115) especially when we also look beyond the Zulu to groups they engaged with in the region. A female chief named Machibise led two Nqondo offshoots (aba kwa Ngwane and emaHlavuleni) and had her own *impi* (armed force) who gained a reputation as fierce warriors (Bird 1888 Vol 1:129,137. Bryant 1929:256-7. Webb & Wright 1979:119,137. Webb & Wright 1982:54. Webb & Wright 1986:3). When Macingwane attacked, "Macibise offered so stout a resistance that Macingwane was obliged to give up the idea of capturing her cattle" (Webb & Wright 1979:119. Webb & Wright 1986:3,23). She was not the only woman involved in such activities.

MaNthatisi (Mosayane) of the Tlokwa (*ca.* 1781- *ca.* 1836), "the famous conqueror" was said to have had the first voice in his [chief Sekonyela's], council as well as displaying a celebrated "martial genius" and engaging in conflict (Bird 1965 Vol 1:369. Bryant 1929:150-2. Ellenberger 1992: 124). She quickly built her reputation and in 1817, her warriors attacked Ndwandwe chief, Zwide. It seems that in at least one case some of her warriors were women (Ellenberger 1992:127). She led her people westward and fought Moshweshwe and his people. MaMthunzini of the abaLumbi, also came into conflict with Shaka, and the Zulus dispersed her people. Matyatye (or Ssete), another chiefly woman, possibly clashed with chief Mzilikazi (Rasmussen 1978:186 n 53). Other military activity involved spying such as when chief Zwide's sisters acting as spies by seducing Dingiswayo and, in so doing, were able to secretly obtain significant and powerful personal substance (in this case semen), subsequently compounded into a medicine, that Zwide was able to then use to overcome his enemy (Webb & Wright 1979:186. Webb & Wright 1986:279. Bryant 1929:163,164). These variety of roles suggested here is such an interesting aspect of warfare and the role of women, but it has received little attention.

Lesson 4: Act quickly and decisively

None of the above on women fits with Lesson 4 that "Shaka teaches us this lesson not by commission but by omission. Empowerment of subordinates did not fit his Machiavellian vision of government. To Shaka, power was a zero-sum game. With a fixed pie of power, he saw giving to others as having less oneself" (Kets de Vries 2004:145).

In contrast it would seem that sharing, delegation or distributed leadership was part of the Zulu approach.

Lesson 5: Empower subordinates

"Late in the regime, the combined force of the bureaucracy, the espionage network and the military created an aura of invincibility that was heightened by Shaka's role as ultimate legal court of appeal and principal representative to the spirit world" (Kets de Vries 2004:146).

Like other chiefs, Shaka did have a very important religious role as the intermediary between the people and the ancestors, but ritual power was also in the hands of women leaders. It was evident in a variety of ways including rainmaking, administering ritual medicine, and as custodianship of sacred objects.

The grave and ancestors of Mnkabayi, for example, were important in purification rituals, and as a place of refuge. Linking ancestral shades to Mnkabayi was in many ways as important as linking to Shaka, Dingane and Senzangakhona (Webb & Wright 1982, 1986). One of James Stuart's informant said that at the place where Mnkabayi was buried, 'people might find refuge [because] in the case of a king giving the order that any man was to be killed, and this man escaping into the king's graveyard, he would not be molested any further' (Webb & Wright 1986: 360).

Lesson 7: Engage in effective symbol manipulation

“In addition to making the most of traditional Zulu religious symbols, Shaka helped create new ones...he introduced the inkatha – the sacred coil of the nation – which symbolized his sovereignty and the unity of the chiefdom. Building on his father’s idea of creating an object that would magically protect the Zulus from enemies and misfortune ...” (Kets de Vries 2004:149).

Langazana, one of Shaka’s father’s wives, had the key role of caring for the *inkatha*, the sacred symbol of the office of kingship. The *inkatha*, was ‘entrusted’ to Langazana and kept in her hut at esiKlebheni. One of Stuart’s informants believed that the *inkatha* was kept at Nobamba in Shaka’s father’s time, which suggests that although the location may have changed a woman seems to have been custodianship prior to his chiefship (Bryant 1929:56. Bryant 1949: 476-7. Webb & Wright 1986:373. Webb & Wright 1976:40). It is unclear whether Langazana’s was responsible for it, or whether she actually *owned* it. Because the *inkatha* symbolised the legitimacy of Zulu rule and was linked to the ancestors, the custodian could perhaps withhold it. If this were possible, she may have been ritually more powerful than the king. Ronald Cohen argues that by being in possession of the sacred objects of kingship, power passes through the “Queen Mother”. She in effect gives power, but can’t take it herself. She is the only one who can access the sacred objects and therefore safeguards succession (Cohen 1977:23). Other Zulu women such as Mkabayi, were leaders but we can’t be sure what role particular women, or the sacred *inkatha*, might have played but it is interesting when combined with the statement earlier that Shaka was actually “offered the position of king” (Webb & Wright 1976:199).

Lesson 9: Set a good example

“Because he knew what it meant to be warrior, because he ‘walked the talk’, the men could identify with him.... Eventually though, as we have seen, his preoccupation with internal enemies kept him from leading the army into battle himself” (Kets de Vries 2004:150, 151). Similarly, Madi’s (2000) leadership lesson comes from Shaka leading the charge.

In stark contrast to the image of Shaka as the brave warrior and military genius, Lieutenant Francis Farewell said in 1828 that Shaka never led the army into combat, but stayed “five or six days in the rear” (Leverton 1989:12) rather than put himself at risk, and this seems to have been the case with the *ihlambo* (Webb & Wright 2001:41).

The mourning of Shaka’s mother, Nandi, who died in 1827, can also be linked to military activities. I have argued elsewhere that rather than being an aspect of Shaka’s ruthless desire to rule by terror, the ceremonies and various sacrifices and taboos that were implemented following her death were related to her status in both the earthly and spiritual worlds and it was not uncommon for kings or people of rank to be accompanied in death. Her *ihlambo* ceremony, which was to mark the end of the mourning period, involved an attack on the Mpondo rather than the more usual ceremony that consisted of a hunt (Webb & Wright 1976:77,119,136. Webb & Wright 1979:249. Bryant 1929:621-2. Krige 1965:173). Shaka apparently took Mnkabi, “one of Senzangakona’s greater *amakosikazi*”, on this campaign (Webb & Wright 2001:41). There’s also mention of involvement of other women in the *ihlambo* campaign against chief Faku’s Mpondo people (Webb & Wright 1979:274. Webb & Wright 2001:56).

Lesson 11: Reward people fairly

“Shaka also distributed the iziQu, necklaces made of interlocking wooden beads, to warriors whose regiment had particularly distinguished itself in battle” (Kets de Vries 2004:153)

Despite the assumption that warriors and military activity were confined to men, there’s evidence that women engaged in military activities as noted above. There were some women who earned

and wore the *iziqu*, which was evidence of having killed an opponent. They “fought like men” (Webb & Wright 2001:69).

Kets de Vries also claims “the most valuable present Shaka could give, however, was an *isigodlo* girl from his harem” (Kets de Vries 2004:153). Chiefs sometimes sent daughters to greater chiefs. However, perhaps women were sent for the chiefly Zulu women as well. It is possible that not all women in the *isigodhlo* ‘belonged’ to males. The accumulation of highly prized cattle (usually seen as male privilege) by certain ‘elite’ women bought additional economic advantages. Such women could be involved in marriage exchange. They could also acquire wives of their own, and in so doing the labour, possibly the *lobola* (‘bridewealth’), and the children of those wives. These arrangements existed among rich or powerful women in various parts of Africa during the pre-colonial period. Several of Shaka’s female relatives were symbolically celibate and I have argued elsewhere that it was a symbol of particular status among ‘royal’ Zulu women that could be altered according to circumstances. It is also interesting to note that celibacy of female warriors was not unusual in other parts of Africa. Celibacy can take different forms and does not necessarily mean total lack of sexual activity. Shaka and Dingane were also symbolically celibate (see Weir 2000a, 2000b, 2006 for detailed discussion).

Several southern African groups, including the Zulu, had non-sexual woman-to-woman ‘marriages’, women-‘marriages’, or ‘female husband’ relationships. These kind of relationships involved obligations around patronage and labour power. Just as with males, additional wives enhanced the labour of a household, or group (Amadiume 1987:72. Struthers 1991:74). Woman-to-woman ‘marriages’ existed among the Zulu (Krige 1974: 29. Gluckman 1987:184). Such relationships would not have been well understood by Europeans, and evidence is scant, but nonetheless it does indicate that overriding patriarchy among the Zulu is a perception that should be reviewed.

Lesson 14: Guard against hubris

“... Shaka Zulu, with his despotical totalitarian leadership, was an exception In abolishing the traditional, participative decision-making process in not having effective organisational governance, Shaka lost the benefit of the wisdom of the clan’s elders, formerly the keeper of custom and law When true feedback disappeared, Shaka lost touch with reality and no longer learned from his mistakes” (Kets de Vries 2004:156). However, in the context of the above description of women, this lesson does not apply to Shaka either.

Lesson 15: Create a culture of trust

“Although a terror-based leadership style offers the despot short-term gains, in the long run it results in ritualistic, static behaviour. It froze the Zulu nation in a time warp and precipitated its decline” (Kets de Vries 2004:158).

The explanations for the decline of the Zulu state are significantly more complex than Shaka’s leadership including political, environmental and economic factors, but that explanation is for another day (see for example Guy 1994. Weir 2000b).

Conclusion

There is much useful information on leadership in Kets de Vries book including his broader presentation of charisma, and with regard to corporate psychopaths or ‘snakes in suits’ (Babiak & Hare 2006). Kets de Vries argues that Shaka is an example of ‘perverted leadership’. He says we all have a darker side, a violent streak – or a *Shaka Zulu in the attic* (Kets de Vries 2004:166). However, we know very little about Shaka and even less about his personality. Whoever might be in our attic, there’s a good chance it’s not Shaka.

Kets de Vries’ book is a good example of the way in which preconceived ideas about gender, values and ideologies influences approaches. If we examine his sources, it is evident that he has consulted both primary and secondary sources, which is commendable. Many of the same sources were also

examined by Hamilton (1985), Hanretta (1998) and Weir (2000a, 2000b, 2006) but with very different results. Wylie points out that much of the recent research that dispels many of the myths of Shaka has been “relatively inaccessible in academic theses and specialist journal articles” (Wylie 2006 2). While Kets de Vries’ bibliography is extensive, he is “committing a psychologism (the use of individual psychology to explain social and cultural phenomena)” (Gordon 1990:32. Gluckman 1960:167) — a danger that Winifred Hoernlé had warned of decades ago (1885-1960. Social anthropologist in South Africa).

History is about the search, sifting information, putting it together and asking questions. Kets de Vries missed much of the information from the primary sources on Zulu women chiefs during the Shakan period, but perhaps one has to be open to gender to see it. This is an example of why the sources and how they are read are so important when writing history, and why we should be cautious about using examples from history to provide the basis for lessons on how to lead.

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