

Mfecane

The Image of Africa and the Land Question

by

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On February 13th 2013, Dr Pieter Mulder of the Freedom Front Plus and Deputy Minister of Agriculture, gave a speech in Parliament inflaming a decades-old debate. It concerned the question how much of the land that is now South Africa was populated by blacks when European settlers began migrating north and east from the Cape Colony in the early to mid-1800s. His speech caused uproar, drawing a stinging rebuttal from President Zuma and a question by Defence Minister Lindiwe Sisulu asking whether it was Parliamentary for a member ‘to blatantly distort history.’

In his speech Mulder said “There are also differences of opinion about the influence of the Difaqane on land ownership. Read the diaries of the Voortrekkers about what they found when they moved into the interior.” What he was referring to is one of the most controversial episodes in South African history, controversial not just for what it meant for the people living at the time but also to historians of the period and contemporary politicians. The bare facts are not in dispute and involve mass migration of black tribes, insurgency by newly arriving white settlers and raiders, the rise of the Zulu nation to ascendancy, crop failures, cattle killings and starvation, slave labour, violent death on a horrendous scale and even cannibalism. What are disputed are the motive forces behind these unusual behaviour patterns, which poses the question: can we get to the truth and if so how does the truth help us solve the land question today?

Since the early 20th century four broad paradigms have emerged, variously pointing to Zulu expansionism at one extreme and to the Cape Colony’s need for labour and cattle at the other. The first was championed by George McCall Theale in the late 1900s, and viewed Africans as inherently violent and inferior to Europeans. Then mid-20th Century came the revisionist, African nationalist-inspired interpretation which elevated African agency and self-determination to the fore, creating the Shaka-as-hero myth. In 1988, Julian Cobbing’s paper *The Mfecane as alibi* identified the prime mover as forced migration under the influence of Boer, Portuguese, British and Griqua settlers and raiders. Finally, with the appearance of a great deal of new evidence, a blend of the earlier theories is emerging which gives primacy not to one or other process but to a complex mix of forces.

The historiography of this period is underlain by political and ideological bias and has been taken up by different political groupings to serve their own interests. Theale-inspired historians propagated the view that this period of turbulence was caused by black inter-tribal warfare, leaving vast stretches of land open to Boer, British and Portuguese trekkers and settlers – hence the argument advanced by Mulder that much of the land was uninhabited by blacks when the whites arrived. The word Mulder uses, ‘Difaqane’, is a Sotho version of the better known Xhosa ‘Mfecane’, both of them neologisms describing this period of mass migration and killings. (It is worth speculating why Mulder used the lesser-known version in his speech).

Mfecane was coined by E A Walker in his 1928 book *A History of South Africa*, which he translates into ‘the crushing’ while others define it as ‘to be weak’ or ‘emaciated from hunger’. Its variant, Difaqane means ‘forced migration’. Taken together, the words suggest a period of socio-economic and spatial dislocation for the many clans, tribes and communities who occupied the lands from the Tugela River in the north east, to the Kei River in the south west and the Orange River in the west. The arrival of the Ndebele in what is now Matabeleland in Zimbabwe and even the push of some tribes as far as Tanzania are the rippling after-effects of this movement.

To understand what happened during this period it helps to drill down to the facts and try and avoid the ideological overlay which distorts the picture and prevents a clear narrative of events from emerging. In 1800, South Africa was populated by multiple tribes and racial groups which can be grouped into four: aboriginals, migrating blacks from the north, colonist whites from the south and mixed race. Over the ensuing decades they came into increasing contact with each other, resulting in power struggles, violence, skirmishes and occasionally all-out war, so that by 1860 the three dominant ethnic groups were the Afrikaners, the British and the Zulus. It took another fifty years for the struggle between Afrikaners and British to be settled (with the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910) and a further eighty six years for the Zulu and other black and mixed race groupings to be accommodated with the signing of the 1996 Constitution.

The aboriginals, known as the Khoisan, had lived in small groups scattered all over what is now South Africa, Namibia and Botswana for millennia. They were herdsmen and pastoralists and generally did not come into conflict with each other. From the 10th century A.D. Bantu tribes began to migrate south from central Africa and by 1800 had diversified linguistically into many clans and tribes, the main ones relevant to our story being Zulu and Xhosa who occupied the eastern and south-eastern coastal regions and Sotho and Tswana who occupied the central and western interior.

In 1816 Shaka became king of the Zulu clan and began an expansionary drive from his base north of the Tugela River, defeating his rivals as far north as Mozambique, west beyond the Drakensberg and south past the Kei River. In doing so, according to the Theale/Walker thesis, he created a chain reaction of forced migration. First, Shaka fought the Ndwandwe who once defeated split into smaller forces and moved north as far as Malawi and Mozambique. He fought and expelled the Bacas who were driven south into Pondoland. Then conflict erupted with the Ndebele, formed in 1823 by Mzilikazi, one of Shaka's generals who turned against him and raided south to the Orange River and north to what is now Pretoria eventually settling in today's Matabeleland in Zimbabwe. At the Orange River conflicts the Ndebele fought raiding Griquas (mixed race) and Khoisan. These in turn came under attack from the Sotho tribe led by King Moshoeshoe (who derived his name from his cattle thieving skills), who himself had to fight off raids by Boers from the west and British from the south. Griqua aggression led to hordes of Mantatee refugees escaping south into the clutches of advancing Boers, who pressed on to fight the Griquas in the north and Bacas in the east. The Boers trekked to escape British hegemony in the Cape, while the British – in their sweep from strongholds Cape Town and Grahamstown – formed expedient alliances with first one tribe then another in their quest for total control.

But history is dull if it deals only with pure facts. More interesting is how the facts come to be and how they are interpreted, which is why we love to create heroes and villains, forces of nature conflicting with powerful egos, why historians fight each other, the social Darwinians against the Marxists against the Liberals. In Theale's version, Shaka was a blood-thirsty marauder and the disaster and chaos that ensued was given the name Mfecane by Walker in 1928. This theme was taken up by National Party politicians to prove that only White domination could quell the inherently unstable and warlike black tribes.

In Omer-Cooper's 1966 interpretation, which became the new orthodoxy until Cobbing uprooted it, Shaka was instead a heroic figure, demonstrating the black man's capacity for sophisticated warfare (at its height his army numbered perhaps 60 000 full time troops), uniting a people behind a common vision and establishing territorial sovereignty for his people. As Wright deftly remarks, 'liberals, radicals, African nationalists, and Afrikaner nationalists remain in an unlikely, if unwitting, alliance, some propounding, some accepting, some bypassing, but virtually none challenging the validity of the notion of the mfecane'. In his paper Cobbing uses the term "alibi" to suggest the Boers and British, and historians sympathetic to their cause, created the Mfecane myth to justify their aggressive incursions and later claims that the land lay empty when they got there. Representing the newest, integrative approach is Jürg Emil Richner's 2005 paper which collects all the evidence to examine how the Mfecane myth came into being and whether the Cobbing thesis has any merit.

Each of these interpretations is filtered by the historian's "Image of Africa" – at one extreme the European image that Africa needed to be tamed and civilised, at the other that Africa has its proud history and traditions of African agency which the colonists destroyed. Thabo Mbeki's "I am and African" speech and

vision of the African Renaissance are perhaps the most articulate – if somewhat romanticised (or am I casting myself in the European Image mould?!) – example of the latter.

Similarly, Mulder's outburst in Parliament and Zuma's response are coloured by their own images of Africa – Mulder taking the Theale/Walker approach, Zuma the Omer-Cooper and post-Cobbing approach. This is relevant to us today because it exposes the as yet unhealed wound of land dispossession, perhaps the biggest unsolved legacy of colonial incursion and the source of the most heated debate between black and white South Africans. Can historians ever resolve this spat – “it was mine when you took it, no it wasn't, it was empty when we got there”? Should we be looking to them for solutions, would a commission comprising historians finally put the matter to rest so that the Mulders and Zumas can reach a compromise position? With pressure now rising for the willing buyer-willing seller method of resolving land claims to be abandoned, we will see further hardening of positions drawn along contrasting 'Images of Africa' lines.

The debate over Mfecane or no Mfecane shows this up in stark relief. The seemingly innocuous words “differences of opinion” used by Mulder in his speech cut to the core of the issue – was the land cleared by the Mfecane leaving it open to Boers to peacefully occupy, thus bolstering their current claims to land ownership, or did the Boers (and British) take it by force? Some historians claim they operate independently of the political landscape and that research is value-free, while others adopt a political stance and then weave the facts into a teleological narrative. No historian, however, can resolve what is essentially a political question. The politicians have to do it themselves, with input from civil society, including historians.

Can the DA, representing the Liberal tradition, create a land bridge between the Mulder-Zuma ideological divide? Is there such a thing as a DA interpretation of the Mfecane, or a DA “Image of Africa”? It is important to find an answer to this question, not for academic reasons (of interest to historians) but because it will inform DA policy on the land and a host of other questions which have their roots in contested history.

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