

An attempt to pin down a phantom?

Kevin Shillington, *Luka Jantjie: Resistance Hero of the South African Frontier*

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The school teacher in me wants to say: “Put up your hand if you have never heard of Luka Jantjie.” I had not, even though, while pursuing my interests, I compiled a substantial list of Khoisan and persons of part-Khoisan descent in the relevant period. He makes an important addition.

Throughout the book under review, Luka Jantjie is referred to as Luka: his father was “Jantjie”. Luka was born c. 1835 to parents of “mixed Batlhaping–Korana ancestry” – the latter a branch of Khoisan who settled amongst the Batlhaping, southernmost of the Batswana. Both parents were descendants of Chief Mothibi (1772–1845) and thus were cousins. On Jantjie’s death in 1881, Luka became chief, or *kgosi*, of one branch of the Batlhaping.

The author’s *The Colonisation of the Southern Tswana, 1870–1900*, published in 1985, laid the foundation for this present work. I have not read *Colonisation*, but the dates suggest a focus less on the history of the indigenous inhabitants than on their interactions with colonists and other intruders following the mineral discoveries of that era. With *Luka Jantjie* we get detailed reconstructions of genealogy; Batlhaping politics; and the indigenes’ responses to missionaries, hunters and farmers, tax collectors and so on. Of particular note is the endless physical dislocation that resulted from those encroachments. Readers familiar with the Cape Colony’s eastern frontier will find the north, depicted here, an alien and confusing environment: land is won and lost but without the rivers that define boundaries; wars are won or lost but they defy orderly numbering. Luka’s world was harsh in ways that strike the reader as strongly determined by its physical features. A

diverse cast of characters vied for dominion of parched and rugged lands, no longer linked to users by custom but by ever-changing lines on maps.

The book gains lustre from the fact of Shillington's early acquaintance with Luka's territory and the interviews he conducted then with descendants and others of that community. It is something to be able to cite the evidence of oral accounts he himself collected at the outset of his engagement with the region, as he did in 1978. This biography conveys a feel of the place and its people, over and above its understanding of the politics which drove events. It also works well as a detailed military history.

So what manner of person was Luka? Here the author had a difficulty. There are various records of correspondence and meetings with the colonial authorities. Where Luka speaks, as *kgosi* and adult, he impresses as skilled in representing his interests and those of his followers. Unsurprisingly, in the circumstances, most assessments of Luka by the authorities are negative. Such dichotomies are the stuff of history and historians must find ways to deal with them. But Luka's early life is largely undocumented: how to reconstruct his childhood, the telling influences, the attainment of qualities that will be useful to a future leader? What are the options?

Shillington adopts a "would have", "must have", "possibly", approach. This is ubiquitous in chapter 2, "Birth and Early Life", and persists throughout the book. A page with seven "would haves", plus a "probably" and a "likely" (p 22) seems an excessive dose of uncertainty. The practice continues:

Sometime in his teens, probably after he left school, Luka would have learned to load and fire a gun and he would have acquired at least one gun of his own. He probably also learned to ride a horse (p 25).

Now and then, a speculative conclusion is adduced: Luka "would have witnessed and perhaps taken part in the battle of Dithakong. It is possible that the slaughter witnessed in that battle instilled in him a lifelong aversion to warfare" (p 14). After the slaying and beheading

by Boers of Gasebonwe, half-brother to Jantjie, in 1858, we are told:

It was an image that would have made a deep impression upon Luka, even though he was not present at the time. It may even have influenced his determination not to surrender when he himself was confronted by armed colonists later in his life (p 37).

Leap ahead to 1897 and the denouement of the story when Luka takes stock of certain ominous developments: “It would have reminded him just how dangerously volatile colonial volunteer forces could be once their blood was up.” After an unsatisfactory interview with an official, Luka departs “with a heavy heart” (p 214). Where sources are plentiful, historians have, to a point, to imagine the subject (and, be it not forgotten, to rigorously evaluate the sources). Where sources are sparse, and a subject’s achievements overlooked or made to seem peripheral, the task of reconstruction appears more challenging. Suppose, in this case, the author began with a journal article: no “heavy hearts”, no “deep impressions”, a few sober ventures beyond the probable. The book that followed could present a life story more effectively affirmative. The approach adopted has the consequence that the book reads as a sustained attempt to pin down a phantom.

One point of interest to this reader is the matter of Luka’s command of reading and writing. Jantjie’s conversion to Christianity meant, in part, that Luka enjoyed the special attention of London Society missionaries who taught him to “read and write in Setswana” (p 23). That knowledge

demystified the world of the makgona [white people], enabling him to read documents and formal communications for himself. His ability to write added authenticity to messages sent between dikgosi [chiefs] and in due course it enabled him to communicate in writing with colonial officials (p 24).

At a meeting (1869) with M.W. Pretorius, the president of the ZAR, the *dikgosi* were required to put their names to an agreement. It is “likely,” we are told, “that Luka was able to read enough of the Dutch document to understand its central thrust” (p 46). Later, that claim seems tenuous: “Although Luka is believed to have spoken some Dutch/Afrikaans, he appears not to have spoken any English

...” (p 128). “Believed to have spoken some” makes “able to read” most unlikely. Luka’s level of literacy need not influence our respect for his role as a “resistance hero” but it does, in my view, deserve more careful treatment than it receives here.

I was struck by the following: “... the lay missionary James Read, proved only too willing to trade guns in exchange for ivory and other hunting produce ...” (p 9). In the way of “popular” histories, footnotes are kept to a minimum but I hope that the source for this bald assertion of fact is to hand.

The book is beautifully illustrated. The pictures include two of Luka: one when he enjoyed success as a stock farmer, big game hunter and diamond prospector; the other prior to his shocking beheading after he was shot while defending his last redoubt, in the Langeberg. There are also fine maps, a glossary, and a helpful list of “Key Characters”.

V.C. Malherbe
Cape Town