

# **U Zulu: Umlando Nobuqhawe BukaZulu (The history and heroism of the Zulu nation)**

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## **Introduction**

The book basically provides a narrative account of the long history of the Zulu nation during and after the colonial period. It focuses on the series of battles and wars fought during the reign of King Shaka, including their encounters with the colonial forces, which caused the displacement of many tribes and their settlement in various parts of the African continent. The battle of Isandlwana in 1879, where the Zulu troops conquered the British forces, is a classic example. The author attempts to paint a picture of different layers of the struggle for colonial emancipation of the black people in general and the Zulu nation in particular. Mbatha believes that black South Africans should be writing their own history as they were directly impacted by colonialism. The eyewitness accounts provided by the elders who were directly involved in colonial battles and wars should inform the writing of such histories. The author seeks to address competing perspectives on the subject of colonialism and its impact on the Zulu nation.

Shalo Mbatha was born and raised in Soweto, which is located in South Africa's Gauteng province. After the Soweto uprisings of 1976, she went into exile in Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Germany and Australia. She has a strong background in journalism and communication, which enabled her to work as an interpreter, analyst and expert in the field of communication. She worked as a speaker on Robben Island where political prisoners

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were kept during the apartheid regime. It was later converted into a historical museum. She also worked as the spokesperson of the University of Zululand, Director in the Department of Basic Education in Limpopo province, Director-General in the office of the Minister of Arts and Culture in Pretoria, as well as the Director in the Gauteng Film Commission in Johannesburg. Mbatha's political activism accounts for her interest in the history of the Zulu nation. However, her academic background does not seem to provide a solid foundation to venture into the terrain of mainstream history. She has a strong background in journalism and communication, but her courage in taking on such a challenging academic assignment is commendable.

## **Structure**

### **Cover page**

The picture of King Zwelithini of the Zulu nation on the cover page of the book was a brilliant and relevant choice. It helps define the national character of the Zulu nation. The role played by King Zwelithini encompasses a very important segment of the Zulu history. One cannot discuss the history of the Zulu nation without tapping into the pivotal role he played. This visual image helps the reader draw parallels between the king and expectations of what the book is most likely to cover.

### **Title**

The title of the book, *The history and heroism of the Zulu nation*, is somewhat restrictive. It compels the author to confine her narratives to segments of the Zulu history where the nation emerged victorious. Furthermore, the heroic character of the Zulu nation, informed by acts of heroism, should be the only key drivers of the historical narratives in the book. "The history of the Zulu nation", for example, would have been an all-encompassing title as the book deals with various facets of Zulu history across the social, cultural, economic and political spectrums. Contradictions are therefore anticipated in terms of what the title spells out and the actual contents of the book.

### **Foreword**

The book does not have a foreword. It only presents a list of individuals who provided support and the personal rationale behind the writing project. The omission of a foreword

lends credence to the supposition that the book was never critiqued, particularly by seasoned scholars in the field of history. Subjecting it to high levels of intellectual and academic scrutiny would have been helpful in the conceptualisation and refining process. Furthermore, its credibility and validity would have been enhanced through various forms of critical engagements with esteemed minds from diverse academic backgrounds. It would easily compete with other publications on the history of the Zulu nation. As things stand, it might be difficult for the book to reach a wider audience on a global scale. It might also struggle to permeate social, political and academic spaces, chiefly because of its limited interaction with the most influential people who could be instrumental in its promotion and marketing.

## Language

The book is written in Isizulu, a gesture which is congruent with the subject of the narrative. It seems logical to write about the Zulu nation in their own language. It fits the current discourses on transformation and decolonisation, as well as South Africa's recognition of 11 official languages. Isizulu is one of the official languages and is widely spoken across the country's nine provinces. The Isizulu version of the book might accommodate the majority of South African citizens. However, a large segment of the global community might be left out, thereby limiting the opportunity for competition in the international arena. One may argue that English is spoken and understood by people in all corners of the globe. Books written and published in English accommodate everyone in terms of readability and understanding. The bitter truth is that it will take a very long time for other languages to compete with English successfully on the international platform. The issue of languages and their status on a global terrain, remains debatable and controversial. Mbatha is therefore well within her rights to write in Isizulu as one of the indigenous languages of South Africa. In fact, it has made her book unique and more attractive to previously marginalised ethnic groups.

## Chapters

The book has 14 chapters wherein the author provides incisive accounts on the history of the Zulu nation. However, it turns out that the word *ubuqhawe* (heroism) does not fit the context. As previously stated, the narrative is not confined to acts of heroism by the Zulu nation; it cuts across various episodes, some of which are shameful. The conquering of the

formidable army of King Zwide, the son of Langa Ndwandwe, compelling the small clans to form a strong Zulu nation, could well be regarded as *ubuqhawe*. Another Zulu King who could be associated with heroism is King Cetshwayo because of the role he played during the battle of Isandlwana in 1879. On the contrary, King Dingane, who was King Shaka's successor, gruesomely killed Piet Retief, who had presented himself for land negotiations. This treacherous act of King Dingane culminated in the battle of Income where the Zulus were defeated. The role played by Princess Mkabayi in Zulu royalty presents another layer of betrayal which resulted in the loss of human life. She was instrumental and supportive in Shaka's rise to kingship. Ironically, she was equally instrumental and supportive in plotting his death. In the battle of Ndongakusuka in 1856, which is mentioned on page 209, King Mpande's sons Cetshwayo and Mbuyazwe fought each other as brothers. The battle of Tshaneni in 1884 near Mkuze, between Usuthu (under the leadership of King Dinizulu) and Mandlakazi (under the leadership of Zibhebhu of Maphitha), was more of a domestic feud, wherein people of the same bloodline fought each other. The Bhambatha rebellion of 1906 was merely an attempt to fight against colonial taxation that was imposed on the Zulu nation. However, this battle did not yield the desired result as the colonial tax continued. Some of the Zulu kings, including King Zwelithini and his predecessors King Cyprian ka Bhekuzulu and King Solomon, did not engage in battles in which their heroism was clearly demonstrated. This goes to show how crucial it would have been for the title of the book to be carefully revised in order to ensure congruence with the narrative presented in the text. The only Zulu king in recorded history who succeeded in setting the tone of heroism within the Zulu nation was King Shaka. He demonstrated his military prowess in expanding the Zulu Empire and succeeded in extending its sphere of influence and consolidating its military strength. It therefore stands to reason that King Shaka's role must feature prominently in any historical narrative on the heroic character of the Zulu nation. This sentiment should have come through as one of the dominant narratives in the book, given its title.

## Conclusion

The author must be credited for her extensive coverage of the Zulu history, featuring some episodes of heroism. Her use of Isizulu and choice of words clearly demonstrate her rich vocabulary, which is also highly commendable. The chronological presentation of the Zulu regiments, including the genealogy of kings in the concluding section of the book, is absolutely phenomenal.