

## Introduction

There are certain stories, the world over, that stir our hearts and minds to imaginings richer and deeper than the bald facts of history can easily satisfy. Such is the legend of Thuthula, the young Xhosa girl whose beauty and grace won the heart of Ngqika, chief of the Rharhabe Xhosa; the woman who was later married to his uncle Ndlambe, and then taken by Ngqika to become his wife.

The events took place in or around the years 1806 and 1807 in what is now the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Prior to the central episode treated in the play, legend has it that Thuthula was out collecting firewood one day with her friends when she knelt at a spring to drink. Startled by the sudden appearance of a hunting dog crossing the stream below the spring, she looked up and saw a handsome young hunter chasing behind the dog. She was struck by his charm and good looks. Teasingly, as any young girl might do, she called her friends round her and challenged the young man to choose his favourite from among them. Amid much flirting and laughter, the object of all this girlish attention was pushed into making a choice. Inevitably, given her beauty, his playful decision fell on Thuthula. This was the first meeting of Thuthula, daughter of Mthunzana, with Ngqika, son of Chief Mlawu.

Told like this, the incident sounds like the start of a fairy story, a romance fit to spark sentimental feelings in people whose grasp of human affairs ends with Hollywood and the saccharine fictions of popular magazines. Sadly, there was more to it, more suffering, much more human complexity. As we know, love stories in the real world inevitably involve more than attraction between two people. There are families, relatives, traditions, social customs, religions, political allegiances to consider, powerful forces quite outside the feelings two people may have for each other. This was very much the case with Ngqika and Thuthula.

To understand the story, some background history may help. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Xhosa had long since been living along the eastern seaboard in the area between the Kei River in the east and the Mbashe River in the west, with Chief Phalo at their head. Colonial historians would have called him the ‘paramount’ chief, the chief who holds traditional and limited authority over the loose association of clans, each headed by a chief, that make up the people as a whole.

Phalo’s principle sons were his heir, Gcaleka, and the right-hand son, Rharhabe.\* A tremendous battle took place between the two sons, a battle which Gcaleka and his people won. Released from the captivity which followed his defeat, Rharhabe decide to cross the Kei and move with his clans into the lands bounded by the Kei in the east and the Great Fish River in the west. His father, Phalo, went with him. In this manner, the Xhosa became split into two large and independent divisions. This was how the distinction between the Gcaleka Xhosa of the Transkei, and the Rharhabe Xhosa of the Ciskei came into being, a distinction that has survived even the demise of apartheid with its bogus ‘homelands’.

[Footnote \* According to Peires, the tradition of the son of the right-hand house came into being as follows: “Phalo was one day embarrassed by the simultaneous arrival at his Great Place of two bridal parties, one from the Mpondo king and one from the Thembu king. By choosing one girl as his Great Wife, he would offend the father of the other. A wise old man named Majeke solved the problem by saying, ‘What is greater than the head of the chief? And what is stronger than his right hand? Let the one girl be the head wife, and the other the wife of the right hand’ (52-53).]

The story now moves to the next generation. Rharhabe’s heir was his son Chief Mlawu, but Mlawu was killed in battle at a young age. Fortunately he already had a son, Ngqika, a lad then too young to become chief. So in the interim Rharhabe’s second son, Mlawu’s younger brother Ndlambe, became regent, or ‘acting chief’, until such time as Ngqika was ready to assume office. He was in effect Ngqika’s guardian.

Throughout history, in many different polities and cultures, versions of this awkward relationship between regent and heir have caused political trouble. There are natural

tensions built into the relationship: the regent acquires a taste for power and privilege, the rightful heir becomes impatient and suspicious as the time approaches when he should assume office and authority, while the councillors around him come to relish their enhanced role. The historian J.H. Soga writes:

Between Gaika [Ngqika] and Ndlambe strained relations soon arose, for more reasons than one, and for which both were to blame. Probably, when Gaika came of age, he observed that Ndlambe was seeking to usurp his authority, and doubtless his councillors had hinted to the same effect; consequently their relations resembled those of the snake and the frog.

(Soga 154)

Snake and frog? Which was the snake and which the frog? Each seems to have played opposite roles at different times. Their antagonism was well-developed long before the events covered in the play. Ndlambe and Ngqika's forces clashed in 1795, and Ndlambe was captured and held in semi-captivity by Ngqika. In the year 1800 he escaped into the Cape Colony with his clans, and set up his great place among the sandy scrublands around the Sundays River in the east of what the colonialists called the 'Zuurveld', near what is today the village of Alexandria. The Xhosa tended as far as possible to maintain their homesteads in one location, while moving their cattle annually in accordance with patterns of rainfall in the region.

Ngqika's great place was established at Xhukwane in the foothills of the Amatolas on lands taken by his grandfather Rharhabe some forty years earlier from Chieftainess Hoho of the Khoikhoi. Tensions between the two chiefs and their people festered. As J.J.R. Jolobe puts it in his poem *Thuthula*, one of the sources upon which this play draws:

It was not long when muffled cries were raised:  
*Amaphakathi* [Councillors] said chief *Ndlambe* proud,  
The regent chief, was rivalling the king.  
No harmony nor peace can ever dwell  
Where there is found two bulls in single fold.

In 1805, Ngqika again prepared his forces to attack Ndlambe, trying to involve the British and the neighbouring Thembu on his side. For his part, Ndlambe formed loose alliances with the Dutch farmers in his area, hoping for their assistance should it come to asserting ultimate dominance over his nephew. Issues were clearly coming to a head.

At this point Thuthula re-enters the story. After her initial meeting with Ngqika at the stream some four years earlier, where Ngqika had been visiting his uncle, Ndlambe, Thuthula had been given in marriage by her father [Mthunzana](#) to none other than Chief Ndlambe. She was living with him as one of his junior wives at the great place. Then, amazingly, at the very time when tensions between amaNdlambe and amaNgqika were at their peak, what did Ngqika do but arrange for the abduction of Thuthula!

Why exactly he took this step must remain matter for speculation. We don't know, we can only guess. Was it jealousy? Was it a calculated political insult designed to provoke the subsequent military contest? Was it perhaps a pre-emptive strike to save this woman for whom he had conceived a passion before full-scale hostilities broke out? Or was it just a childish gesture, a random act of hubris from one whose judgment was known to be very erratic?

From the other side, what did Thuthula really feel? Did she leave her husband of her own free will? Was it brute force or her courageous choice that made her leave? How much was she a mere passive victim of political scheming in a patriarchal society? These are just some of the labyrinthine questions that rest gently on the enigmatic, historically silent figure of Thuthula.

Here is where imagination takes over from history. The play you are about to read offers an imaginative evocation of these complex events and their immediate aftermath. Where history tries to explain, drama strives to evoke a special kind of visceral experience: not mere surface reality, but a heightened and shaped sense of the significance of what we witness on the stage.

However one interprets relations between Ngqika and Thuthula, it seems certain that the abduction of Thuthula sparked the expected showdown between the forces of Ndlambe and Ngqika, one in which Ngqika this time was defeated, but not completely trounced. There was great loss of life on both sides. Subsequently, clans which had deserted Ngqika to fight for Ndlambe returned to him and an uneasy balance of power was reasserted, with Ndlambe agreeing to accept Ngqika as senior to him. But the underlying conflict was still there.

In 1812 Ngqika again allied himself with the British against his uncle and other clans that were defying his authority. The conflict rolled on to its horrific climax at the battle of Amalinde in 1818, an encounter described by Noël Mostert as “the greatest and most terrible battle ever fought among the Xhosa themselves” (466). It was especially devastating in that any pretence at ceremonial and formal contest, customary among the Xhosa, was abandoned in favour of ruthless, uncompromising slaughter. This catastrophic encounter today still haunts the memory of the Xhosa people, and some continue to lay the blame, to greater or lesser extent, at the door of Thuthula.

Strange, you may think? But remember the Classical Greek legend of the beautiful Helen, wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta, who ran away with a visiting Trojan, Prince Paris. Ten years of war ensued, involving all the tribes of Greece in a titanic struggle to get her back. She became known as Helen of Troy, ‘the face that launched a thousand ships,’ the cause of the siege of Troy, immortalized in Homer’s great poem the *Illiad*. Who actually believes that a war of this scale and duration was fought over a marital betrayal? Yet that is what the legend says. It is easy to blame the woman, a way of not thinking about the real causes, of not investigating where the responsibility actually lies. It is especially easy to do this in a patriarchal society where women’s voices are seldom heard in the public arena.

So it is with Thuthula. Today, we should think twice as we come to the climactic line of Jolobe’s long poem *Thuthula*, mentioned above, which reads: “*Thuthula* was the cause.” Was she? The irony seems intentional, given the wealth of alternative explanation

supplied elsewhere in the poem. In line with the compression and foreshortening characteristic of oral memory, many Xhosa-speaking people today still make Thuthula the catalyst of the entire quarrel between Ngqika and Ndlambe. It should be worth pondering in what way, and to what extent, Thuthula actually deserves the legend which bears her name. How much 'say' did she have over her fate, in her time and circumstances?

The perpetual internecine strife that forms the background to this story undoubtedly weakened the power of the Xhosa to resist colonial domination. For we must remember that while the events surrounding the central episode in the play were going on, the tentacles of colonial power were steadily encroaching up the eastern seaboard of southern Africa.

It was in 1806, the year before Thuthula's abduction, that the British finally decided to hold on to the Cape; and it was not until after this period that the Xhosa really woke up to the full extent of the depredations that colonial expansion was visiting on them. Later, it was indeed largely the resistance of the Rharhabe Xhosa, led by Ndlambe, which slowed the colonial advance. Who knows what might have happened had they seen the greater danger earlier on? And might they not have done so had they been less preoccupied with internal quarrels? In popular thought, Thuthula has come, perhaps unfairly, to be associated with this weakness, and so the romance of the story has been overshadowed by a sadness that has its origins in the larger forces of history.

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While not forgetting that this play is about historical people and real events, we need also to be open to the nature of the reality presented on stage. Veneration of the shades (*izinyanya*) is intrinsic to indigenous culture throughout Southern Africa. This play is a public ritual enacting something we intuitively know, that our inner life is densely populated by memories of other people, our forbears, those who have influenced us, those whose historical presence we cherish. We see this in the diviner's invocation which opens

the play, calling the actor-shades into the audience's presence, and in the frequent references to the shades or ancestral spirits throughout.

But Ngika and Thuthula were also historical people in the everyday sense. Much has been lost in the variable mists of tradition, but here and there we come upon written records that enlarge our grasp on legend. Charles Brownlee, the farmer son of the Presbyterian missionary John Brownlee, recorded in his *Reminiscences* that Thuthula was "reputed to be the most beautiful woman in Kaffraria" (197). Some fourteen years after her abduction, the 1820 settler Thomas Philipps met Thuthula at Ngqika's great place on his way to the twice-weekly trading fair that took place at Fort Willshire on the banks of the Keiskamma, describing her as "the lady who seems to hold him [Ngqika] under the most bondage" (287). Ngqika and Thuthula were also bound for the fair, and Philipps' account shows us Thuthula finishing her preparations:

She held out her hand quite gracefully, and her walk was perfectly courtly. Her head was uncovered, having just come from under the operation of the hair dresser who had well clotted it with red clay, and her whole face, neck, and arms were rouged over with the same material, delicately put on with a small piece of supple skin. An impartial observer could not but acknowledge that there was no mighty difference between this custom and the powder, pomatum, and rouge of Europe.

(Philipps 287 - 88)

What was Ngqika like? Although he was nearly fifty by this time, Philipps records that he "appeared to be 20 years younger - - - tall, athletic and his limbs of the most perfect symmetry" (287). Tradition has it that as a young man he was indeed very good looking. This is confirmed in the description left by the traveller Hinrich Lichtenstein (1780-1857), who met him in 1803:

Geika [Ngqika] is one of the handsomest men that can be seen, even among the Caffres uncommonly tall, with strong limbs and very fine features. His countenance is expressive of the utmost benevolence and self-confidence, united with great animation; there is in his whole appearance something that at once speaks the king, although there was nothing in his dress to distinguish him, except some rows of white beads which he wore round his neck. It is not

hazarding too much to say that among the savages all over the globe a handsomer man could scarcely be found. Nay, one might go farther, and say that among the sovereigns of the cultivated nations it would perhaps be difficult to find so many qualities united, worthy of their dignity.

(Lichtenstein Vol 1, 393-94)

There are two other historical characters in the play that need some introduction. The two chiefs in the story, Ndlambe and Ngqika, each had a prophet/diviner with whom they were closely associated. The divergent reputations of these particular religious figures contributed to the very different political influence of the leaders who sponsored them. Ndlambe adopted Nxele (more usually known today as Makana) as a spiritual (and later military) leader while Ngqika soon after began to be influenced by another unusual figure, the prophet Ntsikana. These two were in only the early stages of their careers when the Thuthula story took place, but it is worthwhile knowing something about what happened to them afterwards in order to understand the kind of impact they had on the aftermath of the Thuthula episode.

Nxele was a commoner, born to a man who worked for a Dutch farmer in the Cape Colony. He early began to exhibit the signs associated with the calling of a traditional diviner or *sangoma*, and may also have had some early exposure to Christianity through his father, who had been at Van der Kemp's mission at Bethelsdorp. The father died early, and his mother seems to have abandoned him. He lived alone in the bush for some time. According to Mostert, in his divinations he "railed against sorcery, polygamy, adultery, incest and the racing of oxen" (426-7). These advanced views ran utterly counter to Xhosa orthodoxy.

After circumcision, Nxele was nearly killed for the eccentricity of his message, but was saved by a perceptive stranger who must have seen something special in him. Thereafter he was taken to live with Ndlambe's people, where he gradually built himself into a figure of massive influence. In his early career – during the period in which our play is set – he had spent much time with the missionaries in Grahamstown, and began to develop a religious synthesis, his own mixture of Christianity and traditional religion. But afterwards he found, first, that the Xhosa were not particularly taken by the doctrine he



had to offer, and second, that Grahamstown missionaries were also wary of him, and unwilling to accept him as an equal.

As a result, he began to rely more on his own innate leadership abilities, and his mesmeric personality to win influence. Physically, he was a commanding figure, over 1.98 metres in height. As Nxele's power grew, so did Ndlambe's popular support. Ndlambe elevated him to the status of chief and he became a powerful ally in Ndlambe's struggle against his nephew Ngqika. He eventually developed into Ndlambe's 'war-doctor' and led the assault at the battle of Grahamstown in April 1819, where – in no small measure because Nxele insisted on attacking in broad daylight – the Xhosa forces were decisively defeated. Nxele was captured and imprisoned on Robben Island. He drowned while attempting to escape on 9 August 1820.

Impelled by his experiences of the greed and untrustworthiness of the invading colonial forces, Nxele's doctrines moved further and further away from Christianity as his power grew, till he was preaching that the world was involved in a struggle between *Thixo*, God of the whites, and *Mdalidiphu*, God of the blacks – the first time racist assumptions of any kind had explicitly entered the thought-world of the Xhosa. His counterpart at Ngqika's great place, Ntsikana, moved in roughly the opposite direction.

Ntsikana was a very different character. Unlike Nxele, who was of humble origins, Ntsikana was of royal stock, a descendant of the line of Chief Cira, brother of Tshawe from whom the royal dynasty, to which both Ngqika and Ndlambe belonged, descends to this day. He too underwent certain mystical experiences.

One morning an unearthly beam of light shone on his favourite ox, Hulutshe, at the entrance to his cattle enclosure; later that same day, whirlwinds sprang up to prevent him joining a traditional dance; on his way home from the dance, he felt an irresistible urge to cleanse himself of his red ochre adornment. "This thing which has entered me, it says 'Let there be prayer! Let every thing bow the knee!'" was how he put it (Peires 81). The thought of humble submission – not necessarily an exclusively Christian sentiment, and

well-rooted in Xhosa cosmology – became his guiding principle. He offered his services to Ndlambe, but Nxele was already in position there. So he turned to Ngqika, who set him up to rival Nxele, and his teaching clearly developed in opposition to Nxele's. He is recorded as urging:

Nxele is wrong in saying that God is on earth: God is in the heavens. He is right in saying that there are two Gods, but they are not Tayi and Mdaliidiphu, but Thixo and his son - - - He lies in saying the people must put away witchcraft, for what is witchcraft but [the badness of] the heart of man?

(quoted Peires 81)

It has been argued that as a youngster Ntsikana may have heard the early preaching of the missionary Van der Kemp at Ngqika's great place (Mostert 462); he was certainly influenced much later (after 1816) by another missionary, Joseph Williams. In any case, he became more and more attracted to Christianity, as perhaps the most significant of the early nineteenth century converts. His powerful and moving 'Great Hymn', which is still sung today, opens (in translation) as follows:

O! Thou great God who art on high,  
Who art the only shield of truth,  
Who art the only fort of truth,  
Who art the forest sure and true,  
Who art the One in secret place,  
Who didst make life and made the skies,  
Creator great of heavens high.

(trans. Jolobe 19)

Ntsikana's political message was one of caution. It was a message tailored not only to the current economic and military weakness of his patron, Ngqika, but to his keen sense of the extraordinary vigour and ruthlessness of colonial encroachment. He welcomed the new religion, but feared colonial power and aggression. He opposed Ngqika's alliances with the British, seeing them as foolhardy, but urged peace and cooperation where possible. He seems to have had a sense for 'the big picture'. Combined with his doctrine

of submission to a heavenly order, this encouraged a political ideology of endurance, passivity, patience, and adaptation to change.

Ntsikana was never the popular hero that Nxele became – indeed, his influence even among Ngqika's followers seems to have been limited – but in the long term his outlook was very influential, not because of what he said, but because he articulated what many people felt. In a sense, the figure of Ntsikana anticipates the spread of Christianity among the Xhosa in succeeding decades, leading eventually to the runaway growth of African independent churches at the close of the nineteenth century, a social and spiritual revolution on its own.

In their different ways, Nxele and Ntsikana were early exponents of two different strands of Xhosa nationalism. Nxele's thought lent itself to the deep issues of immediate political and military resistance to colonial oppression; Ntsikana's asked the larger questions concerning relations between the Xhosa and the rest of humanity, and he foresaw the troubling exposure to modernity which would come in the wake of conquest and dispossession.

Not surprisingly, the legacy of these two extraordinary figures still echoes in the political positions current in post-liberation South Africa. The accommodationist stance of Ntsikana, favouring reconciliation and unity – an outlook deeply ingrained in Xhosa tradition and perhaps more generally concordant with African worldviews than any other – is exemplified in figures such as Sol Plaatje, John Dube and Nelson Mandela. Although Mandela was reluctantly forced by white intransigence to support and lead an armed struggle in the early 1960s, he turned wholeheartedly to reconciliation as soon as his cause had been won. The line of uncompromising resistance, exemplified by Robert Sobukwe and the Pan Africanist Congress or the militancy of Chris Martin Thembisele Hani, the assassinated Chief-of-staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe, is consonant with the history of Ndlambe and Nxele. As the process of transformation goes forward in today's South Africa, there are many eddies and cross-currents complicating this shared stream of social thought, but the dialectic between resistance and accommodation which came into

being at the time of the events treated in this play is still there, working away in decisions large and small.

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Chris Mann has created a poetic drama in which we can explore the story of Thuthula, a play written largely in blank verse. It is worth pondering this artistic choice. Blank verse is unrhymed iambic pentameter, with five stresses or beats and ten syllables to a line. Ordinary English speech rhythms tend naturally to fall into iambic pentameter, since ten syllables is roughly the duration of the sound sequence that people can comfortably utter without running out of breath. Blank verse is free of the necessity to rhyme (that's where its name comes from), and easily adaptable to different levels of formality, different registers of address.

It is therefore not surprising that blank verse is a very popular medium for longer poetic compositions, for narrative poems, dramatic monologues, poetic meditations and the like, and especially suited to poetic drama. No wonder this is a verse form which has very often been used in writing about royalty and affairs of state.

Nevertheless, we must still ask ourselves, if blank verse is so close to the rhythms of ordinary English speech, why choose to write in verse at all? Why not simply create the play in prose? The answer may be that although blank verse is close to ordinary spoken English, it has a formality of rhythm, a pulsing, incantatory effect, which subtly creates a tension between this highly crafted language and the looser rhythms of everyday speech.

It is this slightly heightened tension that the poet deploys to make his audience listen to the language itself with a concentration beyond the intensity we ordinarily grant to it. This is the magic linguistic space a poet creates to draw our understanding deeper into realms of feeling, intuition and dream, that wonderland in which communication spills over into communion.

Of course there are many other kinds of writing in *Thuthula*. Short humorous or earthy interludes are written in prose. We meet excerpts from traditional praise poems, and the play deploys Ntsikana's stirring Great Hymn in Episode 5. Throughout, the play is saturated with Xhosa exclamations and common fixed expressions as well as proverbial language rendered into English. The indigenous music and dance we encounter on stage in the performance is only another realization of the formal dance which the language of the play is making all the time, as we listen.

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An early version of *Thuthula* was written in 1980 and first performed by students. A revised version featured on the main programme of the National Arts Festival, Grahamstown, in July 2003. Some measure of the power of its subject matter may be gauged from the outcry that preceded this second production. While the play was still in rehearsal, dozens of letters and articles appeared in the press alleging that the Royal House had heard that the play was a travesty of historical truth, yet another example of a white artist exploiting African culture and producing a mish-mash of idiosyncratic art at the expense of the dignity of those whose story was being told. So perturbed were they at the possible outcome that respected Xhosa-speaking academics were requested to view the play and report back to the Royal House.

To cut a long story short, the verdict was positive and at the invitation of the author and the producer (Janet Buckland), members of the Royal House attended the premiere and by all reports were delighted by what they saw. So much so, that at a later meeting with Chris Mann, they urged him to 'take the play to the grass roots'. It is in response to this gracious invitation that an edition of the play has been prepared, and it is offered to readers in the hope that many more writers and dramatists will seek out and explore the wonderful stories that lie dormant in our history.

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