

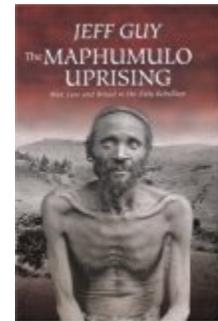
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeff Guy. *The Maphumulo Uprising: War, Law and Ritual in the Zulu Rebellion*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2005. xii + 276 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86914-048-9.

Reviewed by Bradley Skelcher (College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Delaware State University)

Published on H-SAfrica (August, 2007)



Shortly after his release from prison in February 1990, Nelson Mandela delivered a speech in Durban about apartheid in Natal. In the speech, he made reference to a protest against a poll tax in 1906 called the Bhambatha Rebellion. “The Zulu people, led by Chief Bhambatha [kaMancinza], refused to bow their proud heads and a powerful spirit of resistance developed, which, like the battle of Isandlwana, inspired generations of South Africans.”[1] Isandlwana was the location where King Cetshwayo kaMapande of the Zulus defeated the British army during the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War. In 2006, South Africa commemorated the one hundredth anniversary of the Bhambatha Rebellion of 1906. At the tenth anniversary celebration of the adoption of the South African Constitution in Cape Town on May 8, 2006, President Thabo Mbeki referred to the Bhambatha Rebellion and how it inspired the people to fight colonialism and then apartheid that followed.[2] The Bhambatha Rebellion evokes strong images of the long struggle against oppression in South Africa and has been invoked by political leaders in the country thereafter. Many claim it to have been the first resistance to apartheid in South Africa.

Jeff Guy has authored numerous works on the history of what is now called KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, including *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War, 1879-1884* (1994) and *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso, 1814-1883*(1983). He followed with a book about Colenso’s daughter titled *The View Across the River: Harriette Colenso and the Zulu Struggle against Imperialism* (2002). Most recently, Guy wrote *Remembering the Rebellion: The Zulu Uprising of 1906* (2007). With the release of *The Maphumulo Uprising*, Guy continues his exploration of British colonialism and its impact

on South African history, in particular Natal Colony and Zululand. As he has done with his previous works, Guy has accomplished an informative history chronicling the expansion of the British Natal Colony into Zululand and its solidification of colonial rule in southern Africa while making it enjoyable to read in his forceful writing style. His gripping method of writing compels the reader to engage in his works.

The Bhambatha Rebellion in the newly merged Natal Colony and Zululand occurred following the announcement of a poll tax, or a tax levied against all men who did not pay a hut tax. This tax directly challenged the traditional patriarchal authority of Zulus or at least what remained of it after the British conquest of Zululand in the late nineteenth century. By direct taxation of young men not yet married, the British colonial authorities “hastened the breaking up of the patriarchal rural homestead, the rupture of kinship links, and the further fragmentation of African communal life” (pp. 21-22). Guy probes more deeply into the effect of the poll tax and surmises, “it disrupted the spiritual forces that linked sons to their fathers and their fathers’ fathers whose shades watched over the homestead” (p. 22).

The poll tax struck at the basis of spiritual life among the Zulus, which in essence strikes at the core of Guy’s work. He not only probes the material impact of the poll tax, but also the spiritual consequences of British colonial actions. The Bhambatha Rebellion was as much a spiritual action as it was a physical response to British imperial authority. Many saw the imposition of the poll tax as a direct challenge to their ancestors’ power. Historian Sean Redding sees the rebellion against the poll tax as “placating the ancestors” that suggests their “ances-

tors strongly supported their resistance and would allow them to prevail.”[3]

The focus of the book, however, is not Bhambatha kaMancinza, *inkosi* or chief of the Zondi within the Mvoti division of the Natal Colony. It is not the story of Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo kaMpande, recognized by the Zulus as descendant of legendary Shaka kaSenzangakhona and their king; he paid the poll tax. Rather, Guy writes about a more localized rebellion in the Maphumulo and Lower Thukela divisions to the north and west of Durban on the border of Natal and Zululand. It was here that the rebellion spread bringing *inkosi* Meseni kaMusi of the Qwabe from the Mvoti valley. During the rise of the Zulu under Shaka, their distant cousins, the Qwabe, nearly disappeared as a people. By the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the Qwabe had reconstituted themselves into small homesteads with women and children as the producers of wealth with patriarchs controlling the means of production and beneficiaries of these units.

The other figure in the rebellion was Ndlovu kaThimuni Zulu of Nodunga chieftdom lying in valleys along the Otimati and Timati streams. His grandfather fell from grace with King Dingane regarding Boer intrusions into Zululand in 1838. Theophilus Shepstone, Secretary of Native Affairs, “recognized him as a colonial chief” thereby exploiting “divisions amongst chiefs” and catering to their “desire for authority” (p. 43).

In June 1906, the protest against the poll tax turned violent with the killing and mutilations of Adolph Sangereid, Albert Powell, and Oliver Veal. Following militia and military attacks and the killing of 1,500 people accused of rebellion in the Maphumulo and Lower Thukela divisions, the government began arresting people accused of insurrection and murder. The government focused its attention on two *inkosi* accused of leading the rebellion. Meseni and Ndlovu were accused of armed insurrection with the “intention of overthrowing the government” and of murder (pp. 111-112). In all, the government accused twenty-one men of murder. All were found guilty and sentenced to death. However, the government commuted all but five of the death sentences to prison sentences. According to Guy, Ndlovu and Meseni were chiefs and responsible for their people’s actions. Guy, however, characterizes them as “clever men, with a lifetime’s experience in adjudication ... who covered their tracks, literally and metaphorically” (p. 239). Both were sent to St. Helena rather than to the gallows, but eventually were released and exiled. Dinuzulu, too, was ar-

rested, imprisoned, and later exiled. In the end, British colonial authority in all of its brutality was preserved and expanded throughout Natal and Zululand. The rebellion, nonetheless, did hasten the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, which was responsible for releasing Dinuzulu from prison, but exiling him from his homeland. In fairness, the new government also released the others imprisoned at St. Helena; they, too, were not allowed to return to their homelands. The rebellion also accelerated the institutionalization of segregation with passage of the Natives Land Act in 1913.

Guy offers the latest work on the Rebellion, which has garnered little interest among scholars in the history of South Africa. Walter Bosman and James Stuart were two of the earliest who wrote about the Bhambatha Rebellion with the former publishing *The Natal Rebellion* in 1907 and the latter publishing *A History of the Zulu Rebellion of 1906 and Dinuzulu’s Arrest and Expatriation* in 1913. A contemporary, J. L. Dube, published a newspaper in Durban named *Ilanga Lase Natal* in isiZulu. Dube published accounts of the Bhambatha Rebellion with all the subtleties of the language often misunderstood by South African authors writing in English or Afrikaans. Both Bosman and Stuart described a rebellion of treacherous leaders who opposed progressive attempts by the British to move the native South Africans into modernity. Shula Marks followed over fifty years later with *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-1908 Disturbances in Natal* (1970). Marks describes a desperate situation in which native South Africans faced economic destitution because of infected cattle and the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War that devastated much of the region. Compelled to pay a poll tax, many rose up in protest knowing the impossibility of paying it. More recently, Benedict Carton wrote *Blood from Your Children: The Colonial Origins of Generational Conflict in South Africa* (2000). Carton takes the position that the rebellion was not aimed at colonial rule. Rather, it was between young native South Africans and the older generation. Both young men and women were rebelling against the patriarchal system that existed among the native South Africans in Natal and Zululand.

Guy, in many respects, agrees with Marks’s earlier work. He sees the rebellion as a response to colonial attempts to break patriarchal rule replacing it with a modern capitalistic system based upon wage labor. This was an attempt by colonial authorities to separate indigenous South Africans from their homelands, forcing them into the wage-labor system. In an act of desperation, Bhambatha and his followers protested. Faced with violent responses from colonial authorities, the rebellion re-

sponded in-kind. Out-gunned, the rebels turned to traditional methods of warfare rooted in war medicine and native religion. Other colonized people resorted to similar tactics, such as the Native Americans in their resistance to American expansion across the continent and the Chinese resistance against European hegemony in the Boxer Rebellion.

Guy describes the Bhambatha Rebellion by retelling the historical events through meticulous archive research and exploration of secondary works. He also provides the reader with a detailed account of the court proceedings using court records and newspaper accounts, all of which reveal the spiritual aspects of the rebellion yet to be significantly explored by other authors. The subject would benefit from a comparative approach that explored what was happening in other British colonies at the time. In all, however, this work is an important contribution to the understanding of colonialism in South Africa and

is recommended to any scholar interested in the socio-economic and political history of Natal and Zululand in South Africa.

Notes

[1]. Nelson Mandela, "Address to Rally in Durban," February 25, 1990, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1990/sp900225-1.html>.

[2]. Thabo Mbeki, "Address of the President of South Africa" at a Joint Sitting of the Houses of Parliament on the Occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the Adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Cape Town, May 8, 2006, <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2006/mbek0508.htm>.

[3]. Sean Redding, "A Blood-Stained Tax: Poll Tax and the Bambatha Rebellion in South Africa," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 2 (September 2000), 29.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Bradley Skelcher. Review of Guy, Jeff, *The Maphumulo Uprising: War, Law and Ritual in the Zulu Rebellion*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13482>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.