

A brief history of the attack on Matshana kaMondise in 1858, with notes on the archival sources

South Africa history is a violent one generally, and has been marked by specific violent events when the state has turned its weapons against its own people. There have been many such incidents – names like Bulhoek,¹ Sharpeville, and now Marikana – are amongst the most significant. Investigations have followed which have attempted to reconstruct the events historically and then apportion responsibility and blame – with results that usually find in favour of the state.

This is the story of one of lesser-known acts of repression – the 1858 attack on the Sithole followers of the *inkosi* Matshana kaMondise, who lived in the isolated centre of the Colony of Natal, in the Msinga district, near where the Mzinyathi river, which marked the border between the Colony of Natal and the Zulu kingdom, joined the Thukela river.² Matshana had only just taken up the Sithole chieftainship but he had already been warned about the killing of a man accused of being an *umthakathi*. When another such killing took place amongst his people the magistrate, Dr. Thomas Kelly ordered him to come to Ladysmith and explain what had happened. Matshana refused to do so and Kelly reported this to the Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, asking permission to use force to “compel” him to attend.³ Shepstone was cautious. He knew how difficult it would be if an armed attempt was made to arrest Matshana. He handed the matter back to Kelly, who gave the job to Shepstone’s brother, John, or Misjan.⁴ Misjan drew on African support from the Drakensberg location – Hlubi and Ngwe people, and marched into the Sithole territory, and with the help of the settler Natal Carbineers from Pietermaritzburg, seized all the livestock they could – 4000 head of cattle and 2000 sheep and goats.⁵ Exactly what Theophilus Shepstone had feared, happened. Matshana and his people crossed the Thukela into Zululand or hid in the mountains and forests of the district. Nothing had been achieved and the colonial authorities had been made to look stupid.

Attempts were made to negotiate. But Matshana was frightened that he would be arrested and punished. Perhaps hanged. But not all his people agreed – they needed, they said, to eat *imbuya* – that is to return to their homes where the wild spinach – *imbuya* – grew.⁶ Reluctantly, not trusting Misjan, Kelly, or the indunas and African police they had with them, Matshana was eventually persuaded to attend a meeting with Misjan to negotiate a solution. It was held in the open near a homestead not far from “Job’s kop” (Matshana’s grandfather had been the *inkosi* Jobe) or the Elenge mountain. It was to be a peaceful meeting and Matshana and his men agreed to leave their weapons at a distance from the meeting place. They assembled behind their *inkosi*, who faced Misjan, seated on a chair, and flanked by his indunas. It was tense as they got themselves in order, each side suspicious of the others’ intentions, waiting for the meeting to begin.

¹ <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/history-bulhoek-massacre>. This interesting article has a brief Bibliography with references to new general histories of South Africa which you will find useful.

² See Map

³ PAR: 1LDS, 3-1-4. Kelly to Secretary for Native Affairs, 31 December 1857

⁴ That is “Mister John”. I will call him Misjan in this article so as to distinguish him from his brother Theophilus, the Secretary for Native Affairs. At the time he was unemployed and living in the Klip River district. Klip River became the Ladysmith district and is now the Uthukela District Municipality.

⁵ PAR: SNA 1-1-8. John Shepstone to Philip Allen (commander), 25 January 1858

⁶ PAR: Colenso collection, C.1280/5. *The History of the Matshana Enquiry with a report of the evidence as taken down by the Bishop of Natal and the Rev. Canon Tonnesen*. This is an extremely important document, especially because so much care is taken to record the African role in exposing what had happened.

Suddenly everything changed. The indunas on either side of Misjan made a move to grab hold of Matshana. But he was too quick and jumped over the men behind him as Misjan grabbed hold of a gun hidden beneath the zebra skin at his feet and began firing. One of Matshana's men, Deke, was hit in the thigh, another was killed. Matshana's men began to run off to get hold of their weapons, only to find that Misjan's horsemen had got to them first. Both sides began to fight, Matshana's men first with stones and sticks, before they were able to get hold of assegais for themselves. Misjan was stabbed but saved by his bullet pouch. The Sithole ran towards Job's kop, Elenge mountain. Matshana swapped his *umutsha* for a less recognisable one as he ran. Some 30 of them were killed in the pursuit but eventually they got to the mountain, Matshana in the lead, and, once he had got to safety on the mountain top he turned to the men scrambling up behind him and shouted "So here's that fine *imbuya* spinach you wanted from your fields" and "There's your fine *imbuya* which you said you would eat in your old kraals."⁷

And so the Sithole, recognising that they now had no chance of keeping their land or saving their *inkosi* crossed the Thukela river and took refuge in the Zulu kingdom, where Matshana was recognised as *inkosi* by a new authority, Mpande kaSenzangakhona. The government of Natal declared him to be an outlaw) and the Sithole were to be broken up.⁸ (Proclamation). Within a few years the land was sold by Shepstone to his favourite induna, Ngoza kaLudada of the Majozi.

Official reports were written. John Shepstone gave his account (although some of his letters were "missing". His senior officer, his brother Theophilus Shepstone, Secretary for Native affairs gave a full report, and it was sent to London with a covering letter by the Governor,⁹

But it was in fact what we would now call a cover-up. The reports explained the plot to capture Matshana at a peaceful meeting on the grounds that the Sithole *inkosi* in turn was plotting to attack Misjan and his men and had themselves hidden assegais. Misjan's actual hidden weapons were played down: Matshana non-existent assegais were played up. This misinformation was successful –

"I am of opinion that you acted on this occasion with prudence & moderation & I entirely approve of the Proclamation which you caused to be issued deposing Matyana from his chieftainship & removing his tribe from the location which they hold"

wrote the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London.¹⁰

How then was the authentic story revealed? Firstly, of course, the cover-up was not complete. What actually happened was known to Africans in Natal. At this stage they did not have the means or the opportunity to make their views public – to archive them – but they existed as popular memory as oral history. And this memory was to make its appearance 15 years later at the trial for rebellion of the Hlubi *inkosi* Langanlibalele. When he was accused of failing to obey the order to go to Pietermaritzburg it was said that he was afraid that what had happened to Matshana would happen to him. Reading the evidence of the court case in the *Natal Witness* this statement caught the attention of the Bishop of Natal, John Colenso. He asked

⁷ Colenso, *History of the Matshana Enquiry*, p. 118

⁸ There is a copy enclosed in TNA: CO179/48. 6407, Scott to Labouchere, 25 April 1858

⁹ The Governor's report, can be found in TNA: CO179/48. 6407, Scott to Labouchere, 25 April 1858. Enclosed in the despatch was Theophilus Shepstone's version of events written on 16 April 1858 .

¹⁰ TNA: CO179/48. 6407. Minute and Labouchere's reply of 13 July 1858 (draft).

his printer, Magera Fuze, what had happened to Matshana? When told, Colenso was outraged. This statement, he felt, should have been examined by Langalibalele's lawyer. But he had no lawyer – Langalibalele was being tried under customary law. Colenso felt that the injustice inflicted on the Hlubi *inkosi* had to be exposed and he collected evidence from Africans from all over Natal, including that of Deke, the man who Misjan had shot in the thigh, over just what had happened at the “peaceful meeting” between Misjan and Matshana 15 years before.

An inquiry was held.¹¹ It marks an important development in Natal's history. Despite intimidation by the authorities Africans gave convincing evidence of just what happened at the meeting twenty years before. The Investigator found that the Bishop and his witnesses had proved their case. But it didn't work. There were strong political pressures not to condemn Misjan. The very effectiveness of the case the Bishop presented worked against Colenso and his team. The African evidence, said the official investigator, was consistent because over time oral evidence tends to settle in pre-determined patterns.¹² Moreover “Shoot at” does not in fact mean “kill” And so John Shepstone escaped, and remained a leading Natal official in the office of the Secretary for Native Affairs. Colenso was accused in the Natal press of agitating on behalf of the colony's Africans and discredited.

In this way a brave and important attempt to expose official violence in Natal failed. Or did it? In the short term certainly, but in the longer term is this so? After all these events left behind a historical record which allows us to examine them again, and incorporate them into the long history of the struggle for justice in South Africa. And this would be impossible if it weren't for the archival holdings on the subject and the work of those whose job it is to protect them and make them accessible to the public.

Abbreviations

BPP	British Parliamentary Papers
CA	Western Cape Archives
CO	Colonial Office (London)
CSO	Colonial Secretary's Office (Natal)
GH	Government House
PAR	Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository
SNA	Secretary for Native Affairs
TNA	The National Archives, Kew
NLC	Natal Legislative Council

LDS PAR: Magisterial Records, Ladysmith

¹¹ BPP: Cd. 1401-1, 1876. Further Correspondence relating to the Colonies and States of South Africa. Natal

¹² BPP: Cd. 1401-1, 1876. No.24, Bulwer to Carnarvon, 13 September 1875, enclosure 1, Colley to Bulwer, 10 September 1875.