

# **Securing Women and Children at King Shaka's Well-Resourced and Formidable Refuge, Nkandla Forest**

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## **Introduction**

The primary purpose of this article is to return to King Shaka's most popular and formidable refuge, namely, Nkandla Forest, whose spectacularly mountainous ground and its depths witnessed, according to Gillings (1989), the famous battles between Shaka and Zwide of the Ndwandwe tribe. The article concentrates on Nkandla Forest as a well-resourced guardian of victims and refuge for women and children during the Shakan and Zulu-Anglo wars. During the former, King Shaka had to act responsibly and show courage in the face of great adversity by protecting and caring for the most vulnerable in his land. For him, the security of women and children was a priority in all conflicts and his planning involved attention to their specific needs prior to his campaigns.

This article further examines the environmental, socio-economic and pharmaceutical value of Nkandla Forest, which may explain why Shaka chose it as his stronghold while he exercised his intelligence and cunning in overcoming Zwide, a negative and dangerous opponent. Despite Nkandla Forest's perils and chances of terror during war, its mysterious rocks, flora, fauna and water supplies were beneficial to the 'refugees' as well as to the wounded warriors from the nearby battlefield.

## **Forest Power and the Protection of Victims**

Throughout human history, people have been fascinated by the beauty and diversity of forest life, and have found in forests an inspiration, a stimulus of the imagination and a source of spiritual reflection. A forest acts as a place of transformation where heroic acts tend to take place. Forests abound in Zulu folklore and are often used to offer practical advice, warnings, predictions or analytical observations, both spiritual and physical. For example, the folktale, '*Izimuzimu Nentombazana*' (The Cannibal and the Girl) in Noverino Canonici's collection of Zulu tales (1993:78) contains a clear warning to children that their parents are right when they give them directives on how to behave in strange places and with strange people, or when they insist on the children's not venturing alone into deserted places or a forest. It teaches that parents must be obeyed over and above peer group pressures because those places might be infested with hostile animals, or witches and their familiars. In the forests of these tales, there are often ogres, human beings who have degenerated into animals, intent on the utter destruction of human life, driven by greed and witchcraft. Such forest 'people' are seen to be half animal and half human.

There are also folktales such as '*UBuhlaluse Benkosi*' (Canonici 1993:95) (UBuhlaluse, the King's Favourite Daughter), which feature the unjustly victimized heroine, UBuhlaluse, who struggles for survival against the utterly destructive acts of her enemies. She cries for help and the man cutting wood in the forest saves her; finally, she regains her beauty as well as her royal status which her enemies envy so much. The king punishes all the culprits in the conspiracy against his daughter.

In his study on trickery and tricksters in forests, Canonici (1995:130) states:

The forest becomes a symbol of the wide living shield that protects human life, because forest trees span the three cosmic circles: the sky, the earth and the underworld. When a person is chased by evil forces the forest opens up to protect him or her.

Even in the underworld, the service of forest trees is still recognized in the poem of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1993:73), '*Ma Ngificwa Ukufa*' (When Death Comes):

*Ngimbeleni ngaphansi kotshani  
Duze nezihlahla zomnyezane,  
Lapho amagatsh'eyongembesa  
Ngamaqabung'agcwel'ubuhlaza.*

(Bury me underneath the grass  
Near the willow trees  
Where the branches will cover me  
With leaves full of green.)

Both Canonici and Vilakazi give us a powerful illustration of forest trees with elongated branches and the massive strength to stretch themselves out to embrace, cover and protect a victim or the one abandoned. The Catholic *Daily Prayer from the Divine Office* presents the following Morning Prayer verse to highlight the power of forest trees (1974:293-294):

Hail, true cross, of beauty rarest,  
King of all the forest trees;  
Leaf and flower and fruit thou bearest  
Medicine for a world's disease;  
Fairest wood,  
....  
Yet more fair, who hung on these.  
Bend thy branches down to meet him.

Here, the branches of the sacred Cross on which Jesus Christ was hung humbly bend down to meet Him in order to lift him up and exalt him to the great heights of the forest. The speaker concludes by calling the Cross the King of all the forest trees because through this Tree joy has come into the world.

It is assumed that Shaka also thought that the tall rejuvenating Nkandla Forest trees would bend low to welcome women and children into their abode. Elements of power and protection seem to be characteristic of human apprehension of forest trees. These elements remind one of the two prominent leaders in South Africa, namely, Gatsha Buthelezi and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, both of whose names are associated with trees. 'Gatsha', meaning a branch is the name of

Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who with the Zulu royal blood stretched himself high above others to become the first president of the Inkatha Freedom Party in 1975, to protect with integrity the indigenous values of the African soil. 'Rolihlahla' is Mandela's family name, which literally means to drag a bush or a cut branch. If you drag a branch in isiXhosa, they say, you initiate trouble. The other meaning of this name has an association with bravery because you cannot drag a branch if you are not capable of finishing your course. Consequently, the name means that you stand up for what you believe in. This is exactly what Mandela did. He took up arms and went to the forest as an Umkhonto Wesizwe (MK) warrior to confront the evil forces of apartheid through guerrilla warfare. In his autobiography through Cachalia's pen (1998:75), Mandela bravely tells his story:

From the beginning, I admitted to being one of the people who had helped to form MK. I told the court that whatever I had done, I had done to serve my people and, in a humble way, to contribute to the freedom struggle.

Like forest trees stretching out their branches for a stranded victim, Mandela audaciously dragged the citizens of South Africa across the apartheid bridge and protected their human rights through a democratic government in 1994.

Although forests are a rich natural resource, providing tranquility, protection and other gifts to humans, they still remain symbolically ambiguous because everything, real or unreal, is conjured up in forests. A person should, however, be able to decipher some aspects of the forests that constitute the common good endorsed by *ubuntu* (humaneness), which shapes and reflects the human social system.

In the Eastern Cape context, some Xhosa-speaking people tend to treat forests with caution, regarding them with a degree of ambiguity. On one hand, during the Frontier Wars with the British, the forests in the Amatolas and the Waterberg played a valuable role as places of refuge, and also as sites in which battles could be effectively waged and won. Moreover, forests are perceived as containing much of value, and a specially trained practitioner, such as an *igqirha* (a healer and diviner) or an *ixhwele* (herbalist) may venture into forests to gather plants and bark. On the other hand, they are also viewed as dark, mysterious, potentially

hazardous places, and sometimes even the abode of witches. (Gwadana Forest in the former Transkei is one such example.)

Nkandla Forest is no exception to the general ambiguity concerning forests, because stories of ghosts marching on the previous battlefields are commonly told by the people who live nearby. It is not clear whether what is reported by the renowned historian, Jeff Guy (2005:16), concerning the marching on the battlefield is associated with the 1906 Bhambatha Zondi uprisings or not: 'For Bhambatha had to die, and die publicly ... and [fall] back on the Nkandla Forest to continue his resistance.' One is left to speculate that the marching ghosts on the precious Nkandla Forest battlefield are probably resilient warriors from all nationalities who took part in the wars that have raged over this battlefield during the ages. They might have committed themselves like Bhambatha to die for the truth in order to fight endlessly against unjust rulers of all ages. Their continuous marching seems to show their dedication to their military mission of fighting for their land and the protection of society.

Nkandla Forest is also popular in the stories of *ufuqane*, a supernatural being that is believed to accompany and carry individuals around as if a person is walking in the 'air-lift'. This *ufuqane* is said to be very active on misty days. Nevertheless, in the next sections, we will turn to the more positive side of Nkandla Forest, focusing on its location, its link with the war between Shaka and Zwide of the Ndwandwe clan and on the question of why Shaka chose it as his stronghold and as the refuge for his vulnerable subjects, such as women and children.

### **Nkandla Forest and Shaka's Reasons for Choosing It**

Nkandla Forest is a remote area of breathtaking mountainous beauty, located within the uThungulu District in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The whole Nkandla area is of course named after Nkandla Forest. It is said that the name, Nkandla,

is derived from the verb *khandla* meaning 'to tire, exhaust or prostrate' and was given by King Shaka to the various connected forests that clothe the mountains, spurs and valleys of the area .... Separate names are given to some of the forests e.g. Dukuza (wander about), Elendhlovu (the elephant one), Elibomvana (the little red one) and Kwa Vuza (the dripping one). The slopes of

the mountains are remarkable for their steepness and heights [varying] between 2000 - 3500 feet (<http://www.kznwildlife.com/site/ecotourism/destinations/forests/Ncandla/History.html>).

Tradition holds that Shaka went to the area to resolve a dispute, but when he got there, he was exhausted due to the remarkable steepness and height of the mountains. As described by Duncan McKenzie and Pat Benchly in their birding guide to the forest (2007):

The Nkandla Forest comprises 1600ha of climax mistbelt forest and is one of the most outstanding examples in South Africa. The forest covers the crown and southwestern slopes of the ridge, which lie above the Umhlathuze and Thukela rivers at a height of between 1100 and 1300 m above sea level. Streams rising in the forest form deep gorges leading into the Nsuze River (500m), which runs southeast along the base of the ridge.

Before one starts a discussion about why Shaka chose Nkandla Forest as his stronghold during his war with Zwide, it is necessary to talk briefly about one of the causes of this bloody war. Tradition holds that the major catalyst of this war was the murder of King Dingiswayo of the Mthethwa clan, who was Shaka's foster father. To Shaka, Dingiswayo was a mentor and protector after he had been rejected by his own father, Senzangakhona. The murder of Dingiswayo by Zwide of the Ndwandwe clan put Shaka at centre stage, charged with taking revenge on a very powerful antagonist. The fight against this hated murderer of his protector became an obsession for Shaka that could only end with the complete crushing of Zwide, the harsh enemy. Shaka was still somewhat young and inexperienced to face the ruthless and unscrupulous Zwide. The informants maintain that Zwide looked at Shaka with great contempt—so much so that he had killed Phungashe Buthelezi for having been defeated by Shaka. To Zwide, such a defeat meant a loss of political status for Phungashe. Shaka was greatly alarmed at Zwide's actions.

It is assumed that Zwide's action towards Phungashe scared Shaka and made him start seeking a superior strategy to overpower the arrogant Zwide. Seemingly, Shaka began to think about his previous victories which took place in the forest while he was still under Dingiswayo's

mentorship. The *imbongi* (praiser) has a record of one of Shaka's historical victories in the forest:

*UsiShaka kashayeki kanjengamanzi,  
Umahlomehlathin'onjengohlanya,  
Uhlany'olusemehlwen'amadoda.*

(Shaka is unbeatable, is not like water,  
He who armed in the forest like the mad man,  
The mad man who is in full view of men.) (Cope 1968:89).

The informants say that the name of the mad man who is referred to in the above stanza and whom Shaka killed in the forest was uLembe or Somadela, the son of Malusi of the Nxumalo or Ndwandwe clan. The informants also mention that this man was in the true sense not mad, but a Goliath whom only people like Shaka could conquer. Shaka's memories of the strategies he used when he attacked uLembe probably led him to use similar tactics in confronting this new 'Goliath', Zwide. Possibly, the idea of using Nkandla Forest as a safe haven during war also came to Shaka from recollections of his tremendous victory over the so-called mad man of the forest. His reminiscences of this previous forest encounter seem to have empowered and encouraged him to start preparations for war with the arrogant Zwide.

In the next section, we will investigate some of the reasons why Shaka committed himself to protecting women and children. We will also examine the means he devised to show the nation that he was a responsible statesman and accountable for the safety and security of his most vulnerable, such as women and children.

## **Shaka, and the Significance of Protecting Women and Children**

According to Shaka's strategic plan for war, Zwide had to be crushed within the former's territory. Zwide had to be lured skilfully to the Nkandla Forest and Shaka had to evacuate women and children to a place where Zwide would not be able to find them to massacre. Like a male lion Shaka had to use all possible defensive mechanisms to protect his subjects. As Parker puts it in *Natural World* (1995:112),

The role of the male lions is to defend their pride's territory. They do this by pacing around it, by roaring, by marking trees and paths with their urine.

The lion represents the one who comes to the fore to take control in every critical situation that puts his or her dependents in jeopardy. It further represents an individual who does not display his or her power and authority only for his or her own glory and honour but for the welfare of those under his or her rule. It represents the one who goes out of himself or herself for the good of others.

Shaka designed tactful evacuation plans as a military necessity to save the population from the advancing army of Zwide and the atrocities that could be committed against his civilians under Zwide's occupation. Critics may perceive Shaka as an irresponsible statesman for hiding his subjects, especially, women and children in the forest. Others might argue that he had no choice because leaving them in their homes would have exposed them to Zwide's cruelty as the latter's intention was to burn all the homesteads, food storages and livestock on his way to the Nkandla battlefield.

If one takes note of the situation of Dukuduku State Forest, which lies at the entrance to the greater St Lucia Wetlands Parks, one begins to learn that Shaka was not the first or the only one to find sanctuary in a forest. Probably, Shaka learnt about the safety of forests from the people who used to live in the Dukuduku Forest, as the following quotation from Nicola Jones's 'Save the Forest' (1999)—published on a website sponsored by The Helen Suzman Foundation—suggests:

Dukuduku — meaning the sound of heartbeat or the place of hiding — is so called because it was a sanctuary for both men and cattle during the Zulu succession struggle following Cetshwayo's death in 1884. Historical research suggests that the region has been inhabited since before the days of Shaka and provided food and building materials and shelter for cattle.

It is interesting to note that the use of the forest as refuge did not end in Shaka's or Cetshwayo's times: in the Dukuduku State Forest,



Since 1994 the number of forest dwellers has been swollen by fugitives from justice, refugees from violence in the midlands, Mozambican immigrants and a growing army of unemployed and homeless folk looking for a new home (Jones 1999).

This statement seems to confirm that the forest is still perceived as a safe haven for the vulnerable.

Prior to evacuations to the Nkandla Forest, Shaka addressed the nation and re-affirmed the distinctive role that women play in society. He proclaimed women's importance in rebuilding war-torn societies and social resources. Women leaders often facilitate reconciliation through mediation in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and also constitute a primary force of immediate socio-economic stability in their families. For Shaka, such valuable contributions had to be retained and protected. He emphasized that if women and children were not looked after during the conflict, and were to fall under direct threat of attack, inequalities would escalate and social networks would break down, making these women and children more vulnerable to harassment and exploitation during and after the conflict. Children in particular would suffer, because it was likely that they would be subjected to conflict displacement and consequently end up living in extreme poverty without the support of their parents, families or communities. Therefore, the protection and safety of women and children became Shaka's primary duty as a statesman.

For Shaka, Nkandla Forest seemed the safest place for hiding women and children as it was near where the battlefield would be and he knew that the warriors were determined to die for their women and children. According to the Zulu patriarchal system, men have a bounden duty to protect their land, together with women and children, at all costs. For women and children, the presence of their audacious warriors seemed the best protection of all.

And a sense of protection was greatly needed at this time. Many people were unable to cope with the anxiety associated with a supposed attack and invasion by the ferocious Zwide. Some fled and others died of shock and fear. This fear, based on the pre-war reports that many people and domestic animals would be utterly destroyed, was important in Shaka's planning for emergency evacuations from probable targets to reduce demoralization and control panic, especially amongst women and children.

Close to the departure of refugees to Nkandla Forest, Shaka sent the *izinyanga zempi* (special war herbalists) to the forest to make a final thorough check-up on the natural resources such as the kind of water, animals, vegetation and plants in the environment for the safety and security of his subjects who were going to take refuge in this forest. Traditionally, *izinyanga* (herbalists) are well-respected for their superior knowledge of flora and fauna. Biyela (2003:47) states:

Amongst the Zulu community, *izinyanga* are regarded as primary health-care workers as well as protectors of society even from natural disasters.

An experienced *inyanga* (herbalist) is supposed to know the phase of the moon during which the majority of animals are involved in breeding so that they can communicate to the people that they should not interfere with or kill the animals during this season.

An *inyanga* is also supposed to know what phase of the moon or season of the year it is in order to tell the people what kinds of both plants and animals are available for medicinal use. To examine the environment prior to war was essential because some plants fluctuate during a certain phase of the moon and some plants have to be avoided during a particular season. Tradition has it that during the expedition to KwaSoshangana in 1828, for example, many of Shaka's warriors died from *umdlebe*. This is a species of poisonous tree of the *Synadenium cupulare* family. Many warriors died because they came to that place when this fatal plant was blooming. It is said that its scent causes death. Apparently, on that occasion, *izinyanga* of war had not been sent to examine the local environment prior to the expedition. The tragic deaths caused by this fatal tree, *umdlebe* are recorded in the following praises of Dingane:

*Uqambi-lankom, ukuba zilahlekile,  
Ziyakuf' umdlebe kwaSoshangana.*

(Detached drove of cattle, because the herd has strayed,  
and will be poisoned by the *Synadenium cupulare* tree in  
Soshangana's land.) (Rycroft 1988:70).

After a good inspection of Nkandla Forest to the satisfaction of the chief commanding general, evacuations began with women and

children, followed by the steady flow of a great exodus. The civilians were moved to safe areas inside the forest under a good protection of special warriors. According to DeWitt (1943:2), almost the same procedure was followed during the mass evacuations under military supervision during the Second World War.

During his war with Zwide, Shaka used a military strategy to lure Zwide to his stronghold, Nkandla Forest. It is important to note the same tactic of luring an enemy into this forest was used during the Bhambatha Rebellion in 1906:

*Yingakho inkosi uBhambatha yakhetha amaqhinga okulwa ihlehla, ibayengela ophathe, isebenzisa ukuvikeleka eyayikuthola ekucinaneni kwamahlathi aseNkandla.*

(This is why King Bhambatha chose the strategy of fighting backwards, leading them to the risk area, using the security which he used to find in the denseness of the Nkandla Forests.) (Guy 2006:3).

The person largely responsible for the use of Nkandla Forest as a refuge in this war was Sigananda Shezi, a popular activist of the 1906 uprisings who, like his father's cousin Shaka, saw Nkandla Forest as the appropriate refuge for women. Gillings (1989) reports that those observing the movements of the Bhambatha uprising were amazed to see how women poured out of the Nkandla bush and made their way to Gun Hill, only to return to the bush after the action. This is what Shaka's *imbongi* (praiser) says about the condition of this refuge:

*Obesixhokoxhoko singamatshe aseNkandla*

(He who is as strongly compact as the rocks of Nkandla.)  
(Cope 1968: 95).

The above discussion clearly illustrates that the Nkandla Forest was deemed to be a suitable place of refuge for women and children during periods of conflict. The place itself influenced Shaka's strategies of responding to threats and protecting vulnerable groups such as women and children. One may want to know to the spot where Shaka's stronghold was in the forest to map out the area where the evacuations

ended. The following statement from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife's website, which tells of yet another Zulu leader who kept his people safe in the forest, gives us a clue as to the exact location of this stronghold:

Above and at the rear of the Mome waterfall (which has a drop of fifty feet) is a natural stronghold, the one used by Cetshwayo in 1883. The Mome canyon gorge, takes its name from a stream that flows through it. It is about one and a half miles long, with great mountain walls on either side. At the head of the valley is the waterfall. Near the fall the ground rises on either side to an altitude of over 3000 feet, but at the mouth of the valley drops away with remarkable suddenness (<http://www.kznwildlife.com/site/ecotourism/destinations/forests/Ncandla/History.html>).

Probably, this is the same stronghold used by Shaka during war with Zwide. It is likely that King Cetshwayo, Sigananda and Bhambatha followed Shaka in using this natural fortress. In the following section, the discussion is on the mist belt, especially the portion around the Mome gorge. It is necessary to find out the role played by the mist belt in the fight as against Zwide.

## **The Mist Belt**

There are a number of stories told about the thick and heavy mist of Nkandla Forest. People living near the forest often speak about *izinkungu ezikhulumayo*, 'talking mist'. Probably, the hill, Nomangci (One Fully Covered) near the Nkandla Forest got its name from this mist, because, most of the time in summer, this hill is hidden by low cloud cover.

The mist that settles on the forest area is often so thick that its movement carries powerful sound waves. This 'talking mist' is terrifying because you first think that someone is walking behind you, but then you suddenly hear voices in dialogue in front of you. Moreover, the thickness of the mist also makes vision very difficult. Shaka may have calculated on Zwide's warriors' unfamiliarity with such a strange mist and guessed that it was going to be too difficult for them to make progress towards their opponents, especially at night.

With reference to this mist belt, Gillings (1989) mentions that, during the Bhambatha uprisings, Colonel Mckenzie issued orders for the men to prepare for a night march but the mist delayed their further movement as its density is found to be greatest around the Mome Gorge.

It appears that the choice of a mist belt area was one Shaka's most effective ploys in preventing his enemy from attacking his vulnerable subjects in the forest. Perhaps he was influenced by Zulu folklore in this choice, for, as Canonici (1995:132) observes, in folktales, a mist is 'a confusing natural element that creates seclusion and protection, like the magic circle'. In most of these traditional stories it functions beneficially, protecting the escaping victim and confusing the attacker.

Because of the mist, it was almost impossible for Zwide's warriors to confront Shaka's warriors who were on guard near the hiding place of women and children, and who were determined to die rather than letting the enemy into the forest to massacre their women and children.

The mist becomes more mysterious if one takes Maphumulo (1989:65) into consideration.

*'UNomkhubulwane yinkosazana eyisithunywa  
sikaMvelinqangi...Akabonwa uhamba nezinkungu zezulu.'*

(Nomkhubulwane is the princess who is the messenger of God....  
Human eyes do not see her, she moves by the heavenly mist).

In Zulu tradition, Nomkhubulwane is regarded as *iNkosazane* (a heavenly Lady or the Princess of fertility and nature). Many questions arise concerning what Maphumulo says about her relationship with the mist. During my field research, I came to a forest at KwaBulawayo near KwaMaqhwakazi. I was told that this forest as well as the field inside it were dedicated to Nomkhubulwane. Young women used to tend both the field and the forest. The story of the mist along the river, Amatheku, in this forest was told by the locals. The Khumalos of Ngome Forest at Nongoma say that Nomkhubulwane used to appear in this forest when there was mist.

If Nomkhubulwane goes by the mist, could it be possible that the voices and the movements in the 'talking mist' in Nkandla Forest have some association with Nomkhubulwane and her associates? Possibly, she

moves by the mist to protect travellers and refugees who might be victims of the dangers of the forest, especially when it is misty.

The Nkandla Forest mist, especially around the Mome Gorge, can be likened to that of the Great Victoria Falls in the Zambezi River admired by Vilakazi (1993:54) in his poem; '*Impophoma YeVictoria*' (The Victoria Falls):

*UNkulunkul' ogcobe isimongo  
Sekhanda lakho ngomudwa wothingo  
Lwenkosikazi, nenkung' engapheli  
Egubuzele izinyawo zakho.*

(God has anointed your forehead  
With the rainbow line  
Of the Queen, and the mist that never gets finished  
Which is covering your feet.)

Vilakazi here mentions the mist, the rainbow and the heavenly Lady as related entities, as if saying that where the Lady is, the rainbow and mist are also to be found. Traditionally, when the rainbow appears after rain, it is a sign of Nomkhubulwane's presence, for she has the responsibility of bringing calm after a storm in order to protect people from the after-effects of violent weather. Vilakazi further mentions that the mist of the Victoria Falls covers the 'feet' of this waterfall. The feet, in this context seem to symbolise the unfathomable depth of the waterfall, whose lower part is always covered by the thick mist. The mist has to shelter and protect the 'feet', probably, the delicate parts of this natural grandeur. One can conclude that the mist of both Nkandla Forest and the Victoria Falls have a similar responsibility, which is to hide and protect the vulnerable.

## **Water, Food and Medicinal Plants**

According to De Witt, writing of the evacuation of Japanese people from San Francisco during World War II (1943), the provision of hospitals and medical care to evacuees from the date of evacuation is essential. However, one may argue that without water and food, life is impossible for a refugee, and it is often difficult to obtain these basic life commodities during such testing times as war. Fortunately, Nkandla

Forest is the source of numerous crystal-clear streams, the principal ones being the Mome, Nkunuzane and Halambu. Almost all the streams from this forest join the Nsuze River along the south eastern side of the forest. Due to the abundance of running water, Nkandla Forest, abounds in wild fruit trees, vegetables, birds and animals that may be used for human consumption. About wild fruit, Gcumisa (1993:192) maintains that '*ezinye izithelo zasendle ziwukudla nakithina sintu*' (Other wild fruits are also food for us human beings). Examples of the wild fruit that children could enjoy in the forest are *izindoni* (black edible berry / forest myrtle) and *umgwenya* (kaffir plum/ *Harpephyllum caffum*) (Doke 1972:167, 287).

Informants maintain that species such as birds and monkeys in the Nkandla Forest canopy played a crucial role in helping children to obtain wild fruit during their stay in this forest. The informants say that when monkeys eat certain wild fruit, they have a habit of knocking them down from the trees. Children would enjoy picking up these fallen fruit for their own consumption and sustenance. There would also have been wild vegetables like *imbati*, an edible stinging gourd which, according to Doke (1972:491), is called *urtica* and *fleirya*; and *intshungu*, which Hutchings (1996:304) calls *gifappel*. These were greatly enjoyed during the war and are still admired by present-day Zulu people for their flavour and health components.

Besides the fresh running water and wild fruit and vegetables which the forest provides, it also hosts an impressive assortment of medicinal plants, many of which contain potential cures for fatal diseases such as cancer and cardiac conditions. *Unganu* (marula tree) and *unwele* (*Sutherlandia*) are among these. Plants with anti-muscular inflammation and anti-bleeding properties and the power of healing snake bites are also found in the forest. It is said that plants with broad and thick leaves and soft tree-barks such as *umunga* were used for binding the wounds of injured warriors from the nearby battlefield.

Herbal plants form the core of life for almost every African family. In fact, African herbal medicine is one of the most sophisticated herbal medicine systems in the world. Combinations of a variety of ingredients are used in formulas correlated to each individual's pattern of physical and emotional disharmony. The multi-ingredient formulas may be decocted and drunk, inhaled or licked.

During my field research, my informant, who is an *inyanga* (herbalist) at Umlazi Township, showed me a traditional medicine which

had a mixture of 46 ingredients. The formulas in that medicine were crafted together to work simultaneously, each ingredient designed to accomplish a part of the overall process of restoring balance in the body. Here, however, we will focus on a few selected herbs, especially those which are regarded as Nkandla Forest products.

Perhaps the most important of these plants is *Sutherlandia frutescens* subspecies, *microphylla*, commonly known by the Zulus as *unwele* or *insizwa*, and by English-speakers as club moss (Hutchings 1996:5). Nkandla Forest is a home to this plant, which has been traditionally used to cure a number of illnesses such as skin irritations, bladder inflammation and blood diseases and also to soothe more psychological ailments:

the Zulu warriors returning from battle used the plant to relax themselves. Grieving widows used it as an anti-depressant to help them through their loss ([http://www.sutherlandia.com/sutherlandia\\_frame.htm](http://www.sutherlandia.com/sutherlandia_frame.htm)).

It is thought that *unwele* was the first plant to be looked for by the herbalists during preparations for Shaka's campaign against Zwide, because it was the most relevant medicine for both warriors going into battle and women who were to lose their loved ones due to war.

Currently, it is being used for people suffering from HIV or AIDS:

A medicinal plant used in Africa for centuries to boost immunity—and currently being taken by people with HIV- is to be tested by scientists in a clinical trial .... The Medical Research Council (MRC) is setting up a phase 1/11 trial on *Sutherlandia* (referred to locally as *unwele*), and its ethics committee has already approved the terms of the trial (Cullinan 2001).

*Unwele* has been tested scientifically and is already on the dispensary shelves as a safe product, as Hutchings (2002:2) maintains:

Tablets made from dried leaves are taken by all patients attending the clinic and account for the observed improvements in weight, energy levels and general well being. Toxicity tests on the leaves from the chemotype grown for PhytoNova were recently conducted by the MRC on vervet monkeys and indicated



safety in all the variables tested. There are many anecdotes available on its efficacy, including anecdotal evidence of raised CD4 counts and lowered viral loads available cited by Dr Gericke in various presentations. Many patients report rapid improvements in appetite and strength.

It is remarkable to hear that anecdotal evidence, suggesting that *unwele* might improve the quality of life of thousands of people suffering from HIV/AIDS, is already mounting.

However, caution should be observed as far as biodiversity and sustainability are concerned, because of the risk that the growing herbal market and its commercial benefits could pose a threat to biodiversity through overharvesting. Use of natural resources, if not controlled, may lead to the extinction of endangered species and the destruction of natural habitats, not least in the Nkandla Forest, a rich source of *unwele* and other natural cures.

The other herbal plant that I want to bring in into this discussion is *amasethole* (*Vitellariopsis marginata*), which is used to treat patients with blood clotting disorders and other blood-related diseases. The herbalists use mainly the roots of this plant, which are of great help in controlling bleeding and blood clots due to gape wounds sustained during war. It appears that there are chemical components contained in the roots of this plant that are responsible for antiplatelet agglutination activity in the body. *Amasethole* is popular amongst indigenous herbalists because of these properties. Unfortunately, the medicinal character (antiplatelet agglutination) of its roots of this plant has not yet been scientifically investigated and is not widely known in the medical sector.

Another medicinal plant which is also not yet as popular as *unwele* is *inguduza* (*Scilla natalensis*, slangkop). This is my late grandfather's favourite herbal plant from Nkandla Forest. My grandfather used to call it *umuthi omhlophe* (white medicine). Probably, it got its nickname from the white foam it produces when crushed or whipped in water. My grandfather would always recommend it to other herbalists as a good medicine for sprains, fractures and purgative uses. My grandfather would also use *umhlabele* (embrocation) for sprains, fractures and snakebites.

Since there were children hidden in the Nkandla Forest during war, it is necessary to talk about the most common herbal medicine for children called *umphuphutho* (*Graderia scabra*), which could not have

been neglected during this period of evacuation. Amongst African homes, it is often observed that when the child looks sickly, or an infant's fontanel is sinking-in, the mother or grandmother of the child first checks its eyes. The checking is usually followed by the following comment: *unesilonda*, which literally means to have a 'sore'. This kind of sore does not mean a skin inflammation. It refers to a certain kind of irregularity in the body system of the child. *Isilonda* in a child is usually regarded as an indication of a low immune system. To boost the child's immune system, adults usually use *umphuphutho*, which is a brownish-powdered medicine as an anal suppository.

Traditional women seem to be specialists in this field of childrens's healthcare and they say that the eye can reflect any disharmony or imbalances that might occur amongst the organs of the body. They further maintain that they are also able to interpret the condition of the eyes by noting pigmentation changes. These eye pigmentation changes often correspond to the stages and types of disorders in the body.

Then there are herbal medicines administered specifically for women. I asked several women who used to be traditional midwives in rural areas about medicines that are used for labour-related pains and disorders. They mentioned that a particular variety of plants has been used for centuries as potent medicines by South Africa's indigenous peoples. They used these medicinal plants mainly as energy boosters, powerful anti-depressant and regulators of all sorts of body disorders. Among these is *ugobho/ugobo* (*Gunnera perpensa*), which is commonly known as a river pumpkin and has been mentioned as the most popular medicinal plant for women-related conditions. This plant is found in Nkandla Forest and could have been used during Shaka's war. It is used to treat infertility in women and to aid in the expulsion of the afterbirth. Zulus also administer this herb to facilitate delivery of the child or to initiate labour when it is retarded. Another medicine is prepared from the warmed leaves of a herb called *Udlutshana* (*Aster bakeranus*); it is used to facilitate menstrual discharge.

Unfortunately, most of these traditional herbs are not yet known in the western world of medicine, nor have they been scientifically researched for exposure and the identification of their molecular substance.

## United Person Power as Security: Shaka's Relatives and Friends

Besides medicinal plants, food, water and the physical features of Nkandla Forest, person power was also essential to Shaka's success during his campaign. The discussion will now turn to Shaka's close relatives and friends, for example, Zokufa Shezi and Zihlandlo Mkhize, who strongly supported him.

The *amaChube* or the Shezi clan is numerous in Nkandla and there is a legend that says that they originated in the Nkandla Forest. During Shaka's time, Nkandla Forest was under Zokufa, the father of Sigananda, the popular activist of the 1906 Bhambatha uprisings. Zokufa and Shaka were cousins and grew up together at eLangeni area near Melmoth. Zokufa's clan was already on the side of Shaka when the latter fought with Zwide.

Moreover, the Shezi clan or *amaChube* were specialists in metal work. It is said that the *iklwa* (Shaka's short shafted stabbing spear) was developed by them in the Nkandla Forest. This means that Shaka chose to fight near the production 'warehouse' of his weaponry so that he would have a constant supply close at hand.

Then there was Zihlandlo, who was Shaka's best friend. With reference to Zihlandlo, Kunene (1979:299) states:

Shaka visits Zihlandlo who from now on is to serve as a close friend to whom he can speak his most delicate thoughts. Zihlandlo is brave, gentle, humane and above all, intelligent.

The *imbongi* is quite aware of the intimate relationship between Shaka and Zihlandlo. He compares such a brotherly relationship to a single leaf of sweet reed:

*Owadl'izimfe zimbili.  
Enye kuwuZihland' enye kunguGcwabe,  
Kwaphum'ikhasi selilinye.*

(He who devoured two stalks of sweet reed,  
One was Zihlandlo and other Gcwabe,  
And there came out now one leaf.) (Cope 1968:111).

Informants mention that the sweetness of the reed in the above stanza symbolises the unique relationship that existed between Shaka and Zihlandlo. Some informants continue to emphasize that there were many other kings who submitted to Shaka voluntarily but they were not as close as Zihlandlo to his heart. Zihlandlo was so close that Shaka even called him *umnawami* (my younger brother).

Before facing Zwide, Shaka needed very strong person-based power and support. It was at such times that Zokufa, Zihlandlo and other friends would be called in for assistance, as is illustrated in the saying: 'a friend in need is a friend in deed'. This explains that the chiefs surrounding the Nkandla Forest battlefield favoured Shaka rather than Zwide. As a result, Shaka conquered his arrogant enemy. The *imbongi* acknowledges Shaka's victory as he proclaims:

*USikhunyan'uyintomb'ukuganile,  
Ukufinyanis'uhlez'enkundlen' esibayen'eNkandla,  
Engaz'ukuthi amabuth'akh' anomgombolozelo,  
Usishaya-ndlondlo bakushayile.*

(Sikhunyana is a girl and he is married to you,  
He found you sitting in council in the cattle-fold at Nkandla,  
Not knowing that your warriors had a cross examination,  
Beater of the horned viper, they have beaten you.) (Cope 1968:101).

The *imbongi* emphasises that Zwide's son, Sikhunyana, was conquered. Probably, Sikhunyana was the chief commander in Zwide's army. The *imbongi* also highlights the fact that Shaka's warriors encircled Zwide's impi at Nkandla Forest, Shaka's stronghold, which is referred to as a cattle-kraal. Elsewhere, the *imbongi* describes how Shaka finally destroyed Zwide himself:

*UZwide wampheq'amahlonjan' omabili.*  
(As for Zwide, he twisted his two little shoulders together.) (Cope 1968: 95).

The above discussion indicates that in addition to the strong spiritual and natural forces that influenced Shaka's affection for the Nkandla Forest as a refuge, the place was also associated with strong

social and political attachments. Within and near the forest were people whom Shaka could trust and depend on. The descendants of Zihlandlo agree that *amaChube* / Shezi and Mkhize clans were neighbours at Nkandla. This adds to the fact that there was a united power base for Shaka, which in the end gave him security against Zwide. Shaka is idealized as a warrior king. Relentlessly going after his mortal enemy Zwide, he caused his friends and allies to come closer to himself, and former enemies to become his allies.

The focus of this article is not on war *per se*, but rather on the resources available in Nkandla Forest as well as on Shaka's care and responsibility as a leader as far as women and children, security and safety were concerned. Cachalia (1998:108), in Nelson Mandela's autobiography, puts it this way: 'Like a gardener, a leader must take responsibility for what he grows.' For Shaka, his garden in this situation was his nation, which he had to protect. He had to act as a responsible statesman despite the testing times of war, to avoid the slaughter of his people by Zwide. With reference to a responsible person, Msimang (1986:160), states:

To the traditional Zulu, to act in a responsible way is the highest virtue and to neglect one's duty is vice. Consequently, the irresponsible are invariably punished. However, those who act in a responsible manner are rewarded.

## **Respect for Nkandla Forest as a Tourist Destination**

Because of its medicinal and food resources, its breathtaking beauty and mystery and its rich cultural heritage, Nkandla Forest is a tourist destination *par excellence*. But it is also a delicate and complex ecosystem. According to Michael Pidwirny (1999-2008), ecosystems are:

Dynamic entities composed of the biological community and the abiotic environment. An ecosystem's abiotic and biotic composition and structure is determined by the state of a number of interrelated environmental factors. Changes in any of these factors, for example, nutrient availability, temperature, light intensity, and species population density will result in dynamic changes to the nature of these systems.

Negative effects of change or lack of the interconnected balance in the ecological community are better explained in the *Catholic Link's* 'Greening the Liturgical Green Season' (2008):

Without a cloud, there would be no rain, without rain, the trees cannot grow ... and without trees, we cannot make paper .... If there is no light, the forest cannot grow.

Ecological changes have not yet drastically affected Nkandla Forest. Although road construction may have negative effects on its natural habitat at a later stage, the forest is at the moment enjoying its balanced bionetwork, as its natural vegetation is still able to nourish and shelter our soil and sustain wildlife like most rainy forests. Carbon dioxide in the air, created by burning and respiration, is absorbed and removed from the air and stored in the leaves, branches, roots and stems of forest trees, to be emitted as oxygen. This collection of carbon dioxide helps to reduce the amount of pollution in the air, and this in turn assists in reducing the greenhouse effect. Nkandla Forest has exceptionally high species diversity, including shy forest mammals such as Bushbuck, Nsimango Monkey, Bushpig and Blue Duiker. The forest is also adorned with magnificent birds, which tourists can enjoy with wonder, as the following account indicates:

The Nkandla Forest area is home to some 147 species. Species more typical of cooler forest include Kynsa Turaco, Orange Ground Thrush, White-starred Robin, Bush Blackcap, Yellow-throated Woodland Warbler, Grey Cuckoo-Shrike and Forest Canary. These birds are present throughout the forest, although the thrush is best seen along 'Thrush Alley'... Birds more typical of warmer forests include Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon (often seen along the road), Purple-crested Turaco, Red-capped Robin-Chat and Grey Sunbird. Other forest specials that can be seen include Olive Bush Bush Shrike, Collared and Olive... Waxbill, Emerald and Black Cuckoos, African Crowned Eagle, Black, Black Sparrowhawk, Bluff... Chorister Robin-Chat, Trumpeter Hornbill and Dark-backed Weaver (McKernzie & Brenchly 2007).

According to the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife 'Vital Information' website (2008), 250 bird species have been recorded in the Nkandla Forest. Tourists have much to enjoy in the Nkandla Forest as attractive sites of cultural and historical significance still exist, but they are all overshadowed by King Cetshwayo's grave site.

Nkandla Forest is highly respected amongst the Zulus. Informants say that the wagon that carried King Cetshwayo's body from Eshowe to Nkandla Forest, which lay at the entrance of this forest for years before being taken to uLundi Museum, was also respected by the Zulus because they believed that it represented their king. The continuing importance of Cetshwayo, even today, is illustrated by the fact that when the elderly Zulus swear, they usually say: '*Ngimfung' eseNkandla*' (I swear by the one at Nkandla). The presence of King Cetshwayo's grave in Nkandla Forest highlights the status of this indigenous forest as a revered heritage site. Maphalala (2005:5) states:

*Idlinza leNgonyama liyahlonishwa kukhulekwe umuntu esekude  
uma esondela kulo futhi kungashiswa tshani obumile phezu kwalo.*

(The grave of the king is highly respected. A person must say praises still very far from it. The grass growing onto it is not supposed to be cut.)

Generally, in Zulu culture, a grave is regarded as a sacred place.

In reference to the grass on the grave of King Cetshwayo, Vilakazi (1993:60) in his poem, '*Khalani Mazulu*' (Cry Zulus) observes:

*Omunye wamakhos'alele  
Emboz'wutshani baseNkandla.*

(One of the kings resting  
Covered by the grass of Nkandla.)

Vilakazi is deeply impressed by the uniqueness of Nkandla Forest's grass that is tenderly covering the body of the late King Cetshwayo under a beautiful grove of trees on a ridge near the confluence of the Nkuzane and Nsuze rivers. Vilakazi's observation further reminds the reader that besides Nkandla Forest being a famous stronghold during both Shakan and Anglo-Zulu wars, it is the eternal resting place of King Cetshwayo, the

victor of the most memorable battle of Isandlwana between the Zulus and the English where the English lost to the Zulus in January, 1879. English tourists, in particular, are often driven by the intention of seeing for themselves the grave of the exceptional Zulu king who challenged and defeated the apparently invincible army of their land. It has been realized that tourists who visit Isandlwana often extend their visits to Nkandla Forest as way of linking the history of the two heritage sites because, without King Cetshwayo, the history of Isandlwana is incomplete; he was the champion of the day. Following is the response of some tourists when the guardian of King Cetshwayo's grave asked them why they had come to the Nkandla

Forest: 'We want to visit the grave of the King' (Gillings 1972).

Vilakazi (1993:60) in an earlier stanza of '*Khalani Mazulu*' skilfully links the events of Isandlwana Mountain to the champion of that day, King Cetshwayo, together with the latter's resting place, Nkandla Forest, as he proclaims:

*Nentaba yeSandlwan'igeba*  
*Ivuleka...*

(Isandlwana Mountain bows  
And opens...)

## **Young Women for Entrepreneurship through Home-Made Craftwork**

Nkandla Forest provides livelihood for local people in a range of different ways, among others in its supply of clays, reeds, sedges, and other plants that may be used for arts and crafts. Indigenous reeds and sedges have been used by Nkandla women to weave household goods for many years. Nkandla women specialize in making traditional items such as *amacansi* (sleeping mats) and *amavovo* or *amakhama* (beer strainers). They are also well-skilled in clay- pot making. However, in this discussion, the focus is on *ugonothi*, a reed-like plant, which is a product found in the Nkandla Forest. According to Doke (1972:257), *ugonothi* (*Flagerellaria guinensis*) is a species of osier, a cane-like forest climber with tendrils on the top of the leaves. *Ugonothi* is mainly found



at Mvalasango Hill near the two rivers, namely, Nhlanhlakazi and Iziphishi, in the Nkandla Forest.

My late mother and my aunts used to harvest *ugonothi* from Nkandla Forest in winter, using the traditional hand-cutting method. Before weaving a basket, *ugonothi* has to be split vertically into two halves. *Ugonothi* baskets are woven using a traditional technique that pays homage to indigenous knowledge.

What I want to bring to light in this discussion is the noteworthy consortium that my own mother and my aunts formed with other women at Dlabé village for this home-based craft, which provided a regular and much-needed source of income to the Dlabé women to enable them to support their families. My primary school fees came from this small family business of home-made carrier baskets of *ugonothi*. This is why it does not come as a surprise to me to learn that the dwellers of Dukuduku Forest are also financially benefiting from their forest, as reported by Jones (1999):

A pressing concern is that if they move, they will no longer have access to the many resources the forest offers and will thus lose their current income. 'I have children to feed,' one woman said. 'I have built a life in this forest. What must my children eat if I agree to move?'

The dwellers of Dukuduku Forest demonstrate that indigenous forests such as Dukuduku and Nkandla provide fundamental resources for the sustenance and well-being of local women who become breadwinners for their families. However, it is important to underline at this stage the challenge the dwellers of Dukuduku Forest face as far as conservation is concerned. Jones (1999) further reports that the inhabitants of this forest practice slash-and-burn agriculture, snare animals and birds and strip forest trees.

These Dukuduku Forest dwellers, like the Dlabé community and other forest users, are obliged to give back to the forests through conservation methods which promote a sustainable usage of the forest's products in order to retain the ecological balance of the generous forests. In 'Greening the Liturgical Green Season', the *Catholic Link* (2008) comments on the ethics of using natural resources:

Chopping down a tree to use its wood is not wrong. It is how we use things that makes the difference. Indiscriminate felling of trees without a long-term plan of replanting is immoral.

Coming back to Dlabé women and the benefits they obtained from the *ugonothi* products of the Nkandla Forest, it can be said that these women not only became economically uplifted, but they also developed skills in working together as a small business group, which in the corporate world is presently known as a 'co-operative'. Dlabé women also expressed in their products their pride in their own local forest, namely Nkandla, which is about 10 km from Dlabé village.

At present, one perceives *ugonothi* products as suitable for further development. *Ugonothi* could be manufactured for the big corporate markets as laundry baskets, fruit baskets, gifts or functional items, curtain-blinds and garden windbreaks that reflect indigenous skills as well as the local people's traditional knowledge. These items would be wonderful assets to give local people income, which in return would be an incentive not to let the skill of weaving *ugonothi* die out and not to let the other natural resources of Nkandla Forest in general be destroyed. Such an initiative could be taken as a joint venture with KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, as the Nkandla Forest is managed by this organization.

It is, however, disappointing to find that this indigenous skill is being allowed to die out because, due to their modern lifestyle, the youth of Dlabé are not prepared to learn indigenous skills from the senior members of their community. As a result, the young women of Dlabé will never know about *ugonothi* products, because these reed types are utilized only by elderly people at present, and only on a limited scale. At the same time, poverty is striking the Dlabé community hard, so that most of the young women leave school early due to financial limitations and many end up involved in drugs and reckless lifestyles.

*Ugonothi* products together with other Nkandla products could provide the young women of Dlabé with regular income to support themselves and their families. Promoting the production of *ugonothi* and other products from Nkandla forest should form part of an ongoing integrated initiative to assist the people of the area, especially the Dlabé community, in manufacturing useful and culturally significant items from forest products and conserving the local rainforest in a socially and economically sustainable manner, as envisaged by the Inina Craft Agency

(2008), which is striving to promote the principles of sustainable environmental management.

## Summary and Conclusion

This article focuses on Nkandla Forest as a provider of a wealth of life-sustaining resources such as natural vegetation for craftwork, wild fruit trees, wild vegetables, medicinal plants, marvelous birds and animals. It represents the landscape of the forest and its surroundings, including streamlets meandering throughout the magnificent gorges of Mome, which is crowned with a cloudy mist belt, as a gift for any lover of nature.

The article also deals with the recognition and sustainability of Indigenous Knowledge, the focus being on the use of *imithi* (indigenous herbal medicines) as well as the raw materials for certain crafts. Of course, the forest's resources are not all known and tapped; perhaps there are plants growing there that have the potential to cure HIV and AIDS.

Due to the fact that a large portion of the population in a number of developing countries still relies mainly on traditional medicines to satisfy their primary health-care needs, there is an urgent need for research paradigms amongst local communities to ascertain the molecular characteristics and to identify the benefits of traditional herbal medicines. In the western medical sector, these traditional medicines need to be recognized, together with the African holistic approach, which takes into account the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of an individual in the process of healing a person. But, while greater attention should be paid to Indigenous Knowledge Systems, awareness campaigns also need to be undertaken, because the wide range of medicinal plants is in jeopardy due to the unregulated and fast-growing commercial herbal market. If local people, especially those near Nkandla Forest, could utilize their indigenous medicinal plants economically, indigenous medicinal plants from this forest might coexist with universalised scientific medicines.

The main focus of the article, however, deals with the cultural and political history of the Nkandla Forest, showing how profoundly the forest is steeped in the past for the Zulu people. The article looks at the reasons why King Shaka chose this forest as a refuge for women and children during his war with Zwide. At the same time, it highlights the

power which forests in general display in protecting unjustly ostracized and victimized individuals, even in folktales. It emphasizes the fact that King Cetshwayo, the champion of the battle of Isandlwana, rests eternally in the Nkandla Forest. And it points out that this forest is said to be the original home of the ancestors of Zokufa Shezi, the father of Sigananda, the hero of the Bhambatha uprisings.

To conclude, Nkandla Forest is a high conservation value forest that can be defined as an eco-cultural heritage of outstanding and critical importance due to its unique ecosystem and strong cultural and historical values. It consequently has great tourism potential, though this needs to be controlled in order to conserve its value. Nkandla Forest is one of those national treasures which can help people to understand and appreciate the power and grandeur of nature and humankind's relationship to it. As the following extract on 'Nkandla' from the *Zululand Experience Newsletter* (2003) claims,

Apart from being an area of great, often pristine, natural beauty, the Nkandla Forest represents a rare relic type of high wet rain forest, of which very few examples survive. They are relics of times in the distant past when the climate was wetter and even colder .... The many rare plants, and the rarity of the habitat type as a whole, are in themselves sufficient reasons for conserving this rare forest type.

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