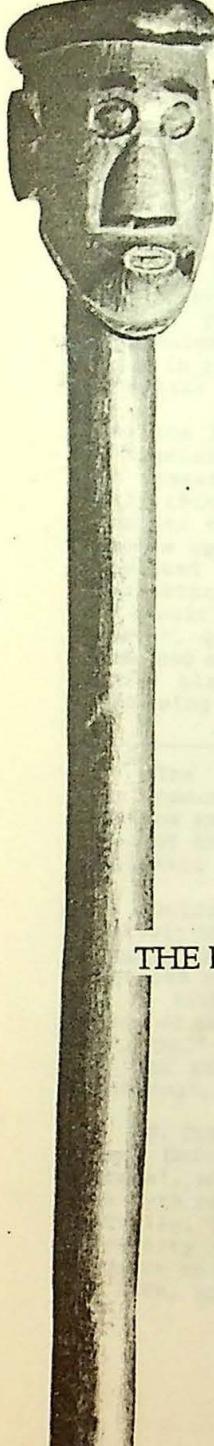


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# THE 'MFECANE' AFTERMATH

towards a new paradigm

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THE BATTLE OF DITHAKONG AND 'MFECANE' THEORY

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The Battle of Dithakong and 'Mfecane' Theory<sup>1</sup>

By Guy Hartley

Introduction

The events at Dithakong on 25-27 June 1823 have recently been subjected to serious scholarly re-investigation.<sup>2</sup> In the past, the battle of Dithakong has been viewed as a defence against the threatening advance of a vast and destitute 'mfecane' migratory grouping. However, latest versions interpret the events in terms of a slave and cattle raid on an unprovoked and unaggressive people. These alternative analyses have not been arrived at independently or in isolation but need to be considered as a whole in relation to the growing critique of 'mfecane' theory led by Julian Cobbing. // disrupt

Over the last decade, Cobbing has presented a number of papers re-examining the fundamental tenets of 'mfecane' theory.<sup>3</sup> Up to the present, 'mfecane' theory has dominated the literature of early 19th century history of the southern African interior and proposes that during the 1820's black society was thrust into immense upheaval and destabilization which was ultimately self-generated and Afrocentric in nature. Numerous conflicts and population migrations characterized the era that were in the end the result of the 'Zulu-centric' revolution under Shaka. Cobbing, however, questions whether the 'mfecane' ever occurred in this sense and suggests that the 'destabilizations and transformations within black society rather sprang from the synchronous and converging impact of European penetration at Delagoa Bay, the

<sup>1</sup>The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this paper, or conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

<sup>2</sup>Julian Cobbing began this re-examination in 'The mfecane as alibi: thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo', Journal of African History, 29, 1988, pp.487-519. Similar critiques have been forwarded by students who at some time have worked under Cobbing. See J. Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifaqane": or a change of paradigm', unpubl. B.A. Hons. essay, Rhodes University, 1988, pp.7-10; J.B. Gewald, '"Mountaineers" as Mantatees: a critical reassessment of events leading up to the battle of Dithakong', M.A. thesis, Rijks Universiteit Leiden, 1990.

<sup>3</sup>J. Cobbing, 'The case against the mfecane', unpubl. seminar paper, University of Cape Town, 1983; 'The case against the mfecane', unpubl. paper, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984; 'The myth of the mfecane', unpubl. paper, University of Durban-Westville, 1987; 'Jettisoning the mfecane (with perestroika)', University of the Witwatersrand, 1988; 'The mfecane as alibi: thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo', Journal of African History, 29, 1988, pp.487-519.

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Cape, north of the Orange and Natal.'<sup>4</sup>

Ever since Cobbing has challenged the prevailing notions, there have been efforts both by himself and his students to establish his thesis and give his ideas academic credibility. Key events within the 'mfecane' diaspora have been identified and explained in terms of the larger suppositions of 'European' expansionism and labour demands. Dithakong is one such case study that stands at a critical juncture for these ideas and, consequently, there have been a range of interpretations of Dithakong that display these similar broader intentions.

Although recognizing the advances made by Cobbing and others, this paper will argue that with regard to Dithakong the alternative analyses are forced and suited to meet the demands of Cobbing's larger thesis. The paper will attempt to establish the traditional accounts of the events, thereby necessarily posing questions of a broader nature.

#### The traditional accounts

For the last 160 years, Dithakong has been described as a defensive battle against the 'Mantatee', a desperate 'mfecane' migratory grouping that had come from the east. For many months prior to this confrontation, there had been numerous rumours concerning the approach of this 'Goth-like army' which was reported to have destroyed many communities in its advance. The 'horde' was depicted as 'hungry wolves' whose object appeared 'not so much to war, as to devour the produce of the land of which they [got] possession.'<sup>5</sup> In order to determine the accuracy of this information, Robert Moffat, the missionary at Kuruman who lived amongst the Tlhaping, journeyed to the Ngwaketse, a Tswana grouping to the north. Having established the authenticity of the accounts, Moffat made a hurried return to Kuruman where he counselled Mothibi's Tlhaping on what line of action to adopt. It was decided to seek the aid of the Griqua who resided to the south and whose possession of firearms could save Kuruman from possible destruction. After Moffat had failed to reach an agreement of peace with the 'Mantatee', the Griqua and Tlhaping entered into battle for their very lives on 26 June 1823 at Dithakong. Eight hours later, the 'Mantatee' had been dispelled, and Kuruman had been saved.

#### The recent accounts

Latest versions have suggested that writers have uncritically repeated each other when reviewing the course of events leading to Dithakong. Cobbing argues that an in depth reading of the evidence reveals the battle of Dithakong was no more than a slave raid organized by Moffat and Melvill, the government agent at

<sup>4</sup>Cobbing, 'Jettisoning the mfecane (with perestroika)', p.1.

<sup>5</sup>I. Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship at Kuruman, London, 1951, Robert Moffat, journal, pp.77,78.

Griqua Town. The 'Mantatee' threat was a mere alibi for the raid.<sup>6</sup>

Richner has clearly struggled to reconcile the integrity and compassion of Moffat with the appellation of slave trader. He has continued to present Dithakong as a raid but without implicating Moffat. In what he ingeniously calls the Tlhaping 'commercial jealousy scare', Richner argues that the trade monopoly of the Tlhaping was in danger of being undermined when Moffat ventured to the Ngwaketse. In order to prevent Moffat from reaching the Ngwaketse, the Tlhaping chief, Mothibi, used the 'Mantatee' scare and fed him messages about 'Mantatee' movements that were able to frighten Moffat into turning home. By this stage, Moffat completely believed the 'Mantatee scare' and made a hurried journey to Griqua Town to seek Griqua support. Mothibi's new 'commercial jealousy scare' had now developed a momentum of its own. Fearing the Griqua would take his cattle if there was no 'horde', Mothibi was forced to designate a victim people which unfortunately comprised the inhabitants of Dithakong. Once again, then, Dithakong was a raid for cattle and slaves that took place under the cover of the 'Mantatee' myth.<sup>7</sup>

Gewald continues in the genre of Dithakong-as-raid. He argues that it was the result of the quest for political power on the part of the Tlhaping, Griqua and missionaries that the inhabitants of Dithakong were attacked.<sup>8</sup>

#### The recent accounts: an analysis

##### 1. The perception of the eyewitness narratives

Although these alternative accounts differ vastly in terms of detailed explanation, they display a number of common features. Firstly, they show extreme scepticism towards the eyewitness narratives of the events which are emphatic about Dithakong being a defensive battle against the 'Mantatee horde.' Robert Moffat, John Melville and George Thompson, a Cape Town merchant, constitute the main literate reporters of the events.<sup>9</sup> In the

<sup>6</sup>Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', pp.492,493.

<sup>7</sup>Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifaqane"', pp.7-8.

<sup>8</sup>Gewald, '"Mountaineers" as Mantatees', ch.7, pp.1-2. *67-68*

<sup>9</sup>For Moffat's account, see his letters and journal in Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, pp.73-111, see also R. Moffat, Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa, London, 1842, ch.21-22; for Melville's, see G. Thompson, Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa, Cape Town reprint, 1962, (originally London, 1827), pp. 174-185; for Thompson's, see *ibid.*, pp.87-129. Thompson had undertaken a journey into the interior and arrived at Dithakong shortly before Moffat's hurried appeal there. He did not stay for the battle but returned to the colony to give 'speedy information' with respect to the 'Mantatee' threat.

final analysis, with the odd exception,<sup>10</sup> they are presented as outrageous liars who deliberately deceived the public as to their real intentions.

In a still-to-be-completed masters thesis, I argue that the eyewitness accounts have yet to be proved unreliable. Their narratives agree well with one another in both sequence and occurrence, and appear unlikely to be attempts at collusion. By examining each reporter's frame of reference and basic presuppositions about life, I argue that what they state is consistent with their character. If they had been lying, in each case the reporters would have been displaying complete incompatibility with their known lives.

Moffat lived remarkably closely in line with his basic conservative, evangelical assumptions. In his role as missionary, he attempted to function so that his words and deeds accorded with revealing the truth of the saving grace of the gospel. Anything detrimental to the gospel needed to be approached with caution. For this reason, Moffat was strongly condemnatory of his predecessors' self-interested involvement in trading which he believed caused their downfall.<sup>11</sup> He was also cautious to separate his central task of preaching the Word from the realm of state affairs.<sup>12</sup>

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Before the battle, whilst war preparations were being made at Kuruman, he did, however, venture to Dithakong in order to establish the reports about the numerous grouping. He found Dithakong deserted and a few miles further, confronted the immense 'horde' in their advance. For further sources of the events, see The South African Commercial Advertiser, 7 Jan. 1824, reprinted in G.M. Theal, Records of the Cape Colony, 34 vols., London, 1902-05, 16, pp.497-505; R.L. Cope (ed.), The Journals of the Rev. T.L. Hodgson, Johannesburg, 1977, pp.180-182.

<sup>10</sup>Richner, for example, suggests Moffat rather than lying was deceived. However, this is a difficult position to sustain. Moffat had met with the inhabitants of Dithakong on previous occasions. That he should recognise the local community for an aggressive 50 000 strong group of foreigners is difficult to accept. His descriptions of the grouping contrasted sharply with the people of his area. To be consistent, either Moffat was lying or stating the truth. Gewald suggests Thompson, too, was deceived in identifying the 'Mantatee' for the local community at Dithakong. Again, this position is not easy to maintain. Note the vast difference for Gewald's precedent - see "'Mountaineers' as Mantatees', ch.6, p.10, note 42 - in relation to Thompson's account, Travels, pp.121-125.

<sup>11</sup>Moffat, Missionary Labours, pp. 216-217.

<sup>12</sup>Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, Robert Moffat to James and Mary Smith, 20 August 1822, pp.61-63; Robert Moffat to James and Mary Smith, 15 November 1825, pp.204,205; J.S. Moffat, The Lives of Robert and Mary Moffat, London, 1885, p.77.

Moffat consistently displayed a high view of the worth and dignity of humankind, revealing a longing passion for the reconciliation of the individual with the loving, personal God of the Bible, and consequently reconciliation amongst one another.<sup>13</sup> These were the biblical sanctions to which Moffat steadfastly held as his primary objective point of reference. When offered many cattle by Tshosa to assist him in leading a commando against his father, Makaba, chief of the Ngwaketse, with whom he had seriously clashed, Moffat, true to his convictions responded, 'that such conduct was contrary to the Laws of God, and as the servants of God it was impossible for us to accept the invitation, no, not for all the cattle in Africa.'<sup>14</sup> Yet at Dithakong, according to Cobbing, Moffat uncharacteristically metamorphoses into a slave and cattle raider, collaborating as an agent of conquest to meet the demands of the colony's labour problem.<sup>15</sup>

Thompson, too, deviated little from his 'liberal' notions. He was involved in the circle of society that supported the ardent libertarians, Fairbairn and Pringle, and was engaged in many 'liberal' pursuits.<sup>16</sup> He was an energetic proponent of free market ideology and continually called for the annihilation of slavery. Thompson strongly reflected ideas of nineteenth century British liberalism and the demands of industrial capital. He believed a coerced and immobile body of workers was economically irrational. Slave labour was too expensive and uninventive. He was convinced that a free labour force encouraged to work by the incentive of wages was far cheaper and more efficient.<sup>17</sup>

His call for the abolition of slavery was not just economically motivated, but also inspired by the British humanitarian movement which itself was influenced by non-conformist Christianity. Fundamentally, humanitarianism stressed the moral equality of all people. The goal of ending slavery was not only a liberal and economically rational objective, but also a humane and moral one. Thompson was deeply affected by these ideologies as well, which is clearly illustrated by his vehement condemnation of the Boer commando at Tarka that had shot thirty San. He responded thus, 'This is certainly lamentable work, whatever be the cause of it,- that we should be under the necessity of hunting down our fellow-

<sup>13</sup>See Moffat, Missionary Labours, pp. 174, 134, 135, 325; Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, pp. 60, 131, 134.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., Robert Moffat, journal, 12 Jan. 1822, p.42.

<sup>15</sup>Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', pp.492,493. See also Gewald, '"Mountaineers" as Mantatees', ch.6, p.8. Gewald is not explicit on Moffat and his analysis is distinctive in its political explanation.

<sup>16</sup>H.C. Botha, John Fairbairn in South Africa, Cape Town, 1985, pp.36,141.

<sup>17</sup>Thompson, Travels, pp. 327, 353, 369.

men like the wild beasts of the field.<sup>18</sup> (my emphasis) For Thompson, a fervent 'liberal' steeped in Christian notions, slavery went against his very being. Yet at Dithakong, according to Cobbing, he acts as the spy seeking out the positions of the enemy and handing over the gunpowder for the preconceived raid for slaves.<sup>19</sup>

Melvill is the final case in point. A deeply religious man, he forsook his position as inspector of buildings, for which he received the handsome sum of 7000 rix-dollars per annum, for the government agency at Griqua Town at a salary of only 1000 rix-dollars. Having journeyed to Griqua Town and been moved by the unfortunate conditions of the Griqua, Melvill determined to help them by converting them to Christianity and bringing to them the benefits of western civilisation. As government agent, his ultimate concern was for the good of the people and he kept untiringly to his task of maintaining law and order. He consistently crushed lawlessness and suppressed illicit trading.<sup>20</sup> Yet at Dithakong again, according to Cobbing and Richner, he is unexpectedly engaged in illegal trading that he everywhere else condemned.<sup>21</sup>

Although the original reporters show a consistency of character in both words and deeds, Cobbing, Richner and Gewald have tended to dwell upon certain incidental details that have caused them to question the historical reliability of the narratives. They give a central position to these incidental historical details and attempt to seize hints of 'suppressed evidence.' However, while they exaggerate such evidence, they downplay that which does not suit their position. It is interesting that they accept as much of the reporters' accounts as they find convenient, then ignore or repudiate other parts of the same documents which contradict their notions. Their selection of what is 'authentic' and what is 'unauthentic' in the accounts is often quite arbitrary based on a preconceived bias, and supported by previous arbitrary conclusions.

Probably the major reason for their scepticism concerns the

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.42.

<sup>19</sup>Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', p.492. See also Gewald, '"Mountaineers" as Mantatees', ch.6, pp.8-11.

<sup>20</sup>For discussion on Melvill, see M. Legassick, 'The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries, 1780-1840: the politics of a frontier zone.', unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, University of California, 1969, pp.296,297; Thompson, Travels, pp.81,82; R. Lovett, History of the London Missionary Society, 1795-1895, London,1899; J.M. Marquard, Family Register of the Melvill Family, Port Elizabeth, 1977; C.J. Beyers (chief ed.), Dictionary of South African Biography, 4, Durban, 1981, pp. 357,358.

<sup>21</sup>Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', pp.492,493; Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifagane"', p.8.

events surrounding the aftermath of the battle. Once the 'Mantatee' had been put to flight, the Griqua rounded up over 1000 cattle, thirty-three of which were later given to Melvill. A number of women and children, too, who had been left on the battlefield were collected and taken to Kuruman, from where they were later distributed amongst the Griqua or sent into the colony. For Cobbing, this suggests Moffat and Melvill were 'consciously engrossed' in collecting slaves to meet the labour demands of the colony. The thirty-three cattle and the payment in ammunition received for the sale of the 'slaves' to the colony were the fruits of the raid for Melvill. Moffat kept several 'slaves' at Kuruman whom he later distributed to various destinations in the Cape.<sup>22</sup>

Without refuting the interpretations given to the events by the reporters, their internal testimonies are completely ignored and rejected. In all fairness, however, the fact that prisoners and cattle were taken on 27 June 1823 does not necessarily constitute a raid, but can be more rationally explained in terms of the inevitable aftermath of a victorious defensive battle.

The reporters wrote that the women and children left on the battlefield were completely destitute and famished. Having wandered across the interior for many months, they now appeared exhausted and broken, distressed with hunger and in a pitiful state. Alone on the battlefield, they were prey to the depredations of the Tswana who during the battle had only too clearly shown their intentions. Whilst the Griqua were putting the 'Mantatee' to flight, the Tlhaping had set about slaying the defenceless women and children left on the battlefield 'for the sake of a few rings, or of being able to boast that they had killed some Mantatee'.<sup>23</sup> In conformity with his biblical views concerning the dignity and worth of every individual human being as humankind is made in the image of God, Moffat displayed his fierce disapproval of the unnecessary bloodshed by riding in amongst the Tlhaping and preventing them from killing the innocent. Out of compassion, the missionaries offered the defenceless protection and a number followed them to Kuruman to find safety.<sup>24</sup> Many others, however, chose to remain on the battlefield and were later murdered by revengeful Tswana as they

<sup>22</sup>Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', pp.492,493. See also Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifaqane"', p.8. Gewald's explanation being primarily political is not as concerned with the slaving aspect and tends to deal with it as a side issue.

<sup>23</sup>Moffat, Missionary Labours, p.361.

<sup>24</sup>For a detailed account of these events, see: Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, R. Moffat, journal, pp.95-100; Thompson, Travels, ch. 16, headed: 'Mr. Melvill's Narrative of Transactions after the Battle, and of His Excursion to Rescue the Women and Children of the Invaders', pp.174-185. Note the compassionate response of Moffat, Hamilton and Melvill as opposed to their depiction as slavers.

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sought to reach their defeated peoples.<sup>25</sup> This was the realisation of the well-founded fears that had induced the missionaries to provide sanctuary to the defenceless.

It was considered that the 'Mantatee' might best be provided for under the supervision of the Griqua. However, since the Griqua seemed more concerned with the cattle they had gained than the people, Melvill applied for a share of the captured cattle, perceiving that the task of providing food might rest exclusively on him. Melvill was allotted the thirty-three head of cattle<sup>26</sup> and Hodgson, a Methodist missionary on visiting Griqua Town in July 1823, alludes to them being used for the said purpose when he relates, 'Mr. Melvill sent off this morning to Graaf-Reinet fifteen female prisoners, some of whom I saw most eagerly eating the dung of the oxen killed for their support.'<sup>27</sup>

With regard to the 'Mantatee' sent to Graaf-Reinet, it was claimed by Melvill that this was done with the prisoners' best interests in mind. The Griqua were finding it difficult to accommodate them in the face of a severe drought and dire food shortage. For some, there were just too many of them for which to provide. On account of the harsh material conditions as well as the indifferent and uncaring attitude of the Griqua, it would appear the initial scheme for the 'Mantatee's' provision seemed to be thwarted. Melvill seriously believed, then, that they would be looked after best in the houses of the colonists. He wrote accordingly to the Landdrost at Graaf-Reinet, noting how 'badly off' the 'Mantatee' were amongst the Griqua.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Moffat was at great pains to ensure the six women and the boy he

<sup>25</sup> Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, Robert Moffat to Mary Moffat, 13 August 1823, p.107; ibid., Mary Moffat to James and Mary Smith, 1 Sept. 1823, p.109; Cope (ed.), Journals, p.190.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, Travels, pp.176,177. Melvill is also unjustly charged of taking 'his customary cut of thirty cattle' in a 'raid' against Sefunela's Rolong in 1824. Cobbing's account in 'The mfecane as alibi', p.497, is based on conjecture and misrepresents the contextual evidence. For detail on the whole episode, see: Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, pp.145-154,198-200,206; S. Broadbent, A Narrative of the first introduction of Christianity amongst the Barolong tribe of Bechuanas, South Africa, London, 1865, pp. 130-133, 158, 173; Cope (ed.), Journals, pp. 9, 246, 322; D.F. Ellerberger, History of the Basuto, London, 1912, p.167; M. Legassick, 'The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries', pp. 307-310, 338.

<sup>27</sup> Cope (ed.), Journals, p.182.

<sup>28</sup> Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Inhabitants of Southern Africa Within the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope or Beyond the Frontier of That Colony, part 1, London, 1835, Melvill to the Landdrost of Graaf-Reinet, 31 July 1823, p.226. See also Somerset to the Commissioners of Inquiry, p.227.

distributed in the colony were well-cared for and that their freedom was guaranteed. He left two of the women in the care of the fervent humanitarian, Dr. John Philip.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to sustain the thesis that both Moffat and Melvill were consciously selling the prisoners into slavery.

The ammunition Melvill received need not be interpreted as payment for the prisoners. Below is a portion of the letter from the Colonial Secretary to the Landdrost of Graaf-Reinet that alludes to the ammunition:

Sir,- I have had the honour of submitting your letter of the 11th Instant with its enclosure from Mr. Melville to His Excellency the Governor. It appears to be desirable that Mr. Melville should be supplied with a larger portion of ammunition, than what had been sent to him at the period of your letter, and His Excellency does not imagine there will be any difficulty in so doing, now that it is understood that you can receive adequate supplies at Graham's Town.<sup>30</sup>

Cobbing fails to mention the fact that Melvill was the government agent at Griqua Town. It is clear from this letter and from the instructions on his appointment as government agent<sup>31</sup> that ammunition was forwarded from the colony for the necessary administration of the territory. Bearing in mind that the supply of gunpowder had been exhausted since its distribution to the Griqua before the battle, it is understandable that more ammunition was needed for the protection of the area, especially in the face of further threatened raids from the 'Mantatee.' On receiving the intelligence about the 'Mantatee' threat from Thompson and Melvill, the colonial authorities were quick to respond with the ammunition supply, as they were deeply distressed about the stability of the frontier region and feared the colony would be overrun.<sup>32</sup> To conclude that the acquisition of ammunition compounded a business transaction for the sale of slaves is unwarranted and remains at best conjectural.

## 2. The perception of the 'Mantatee'

The second common feature of the revisionist versions of the battle of Dithakong is dissatisfaction with the way in which the 'Mantatee' have been described. The original reporters were certainly emphatic about the existence of a foreign, threatening people. Moffat noticed how distinctively they contrasted with the

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.129.

<sup>30</sup>G.M. Theal, Records of the Cape Colony, 16, Bird to Landdrost of Graaf-Reinet, 27 Aug. 1823, p.223.

<sup>31</sup>Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Inhabitants, Instructions to Melvill, 21 March 1822, p. 212.

<sup>32</sup>CO 1/GR 16/12 Stockenstrom to Bird, 2 July 1823; ibid., Stockenstrom to Melvill, 12 Sept. 1823; Thompson, Travels, p.161.

Tswana of his area in dress, ornaments, weapons and behaviour.<sup>33</sup> However, the recent critics tend to suppose that the 'Mantatee' were 'mythical beings' invented as an alibi for the raid. Indeed, according to them, it was the local community at Dithakong who were the unfortunate and innocent people attacked.<sup>34</sup>

A number of factors have led to this conclusion. Firstly, it is believed the upheavals to the north-east of Kuruman prior to Dithakong can be explained without the existence of the foreign 'horde.' For Cobbing, this is demonstrated in terms of Koranna-Taung-Griqua attacks. He attempts to show continuity of such dislocations caused before and after Dithakong.<sup>35</sup> But this interpretation reveals critical shortcomings in periodization. The majority of examples are drawn from the post-Dithakong period, the impact and extent of which are well established. However, in the years prior to Dithakong there is evidence only of occasional depravations in this region by certain Griqua and frontier ruffians that were sporadic and not cataclysmic.<sup>36</sup> In the six months prior to Dithakong when the first reports about the devastations of the 'Mantatee' were being received, Cobbing can only produce one example of a Koranna-Taung-Griqua attack which lacks little substance in itself.<sup>37</sup> In a much larger

<sup>33</sup>Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, R. Moffat, journal, 25 June 1823, p.95.

<sup>34</sup>Cobbing is uncertain as to the precise identification of those at Dithakong. The fact that Dithakong had been a Maidu residence prior to 1823 suggests to him they were the ones attacked, but Moffat mentions Hurutse women amongst the prisoners as well which indicates to Cobbing that they, too, were victims. For Richner, the innocent involved included the Maidu, Hurutse and Kwena. For Gewald, it was the Maidu and the Rolong-Mariba. See: Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', p.514; Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifaqane"', p.8; Gewald, '"Mountaineers" as Mantatees', ch. 7., p.1.

<sup>35</sup>Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', pp.496-498.

<sup>36</sup>A review of Cobbing's evidences suggests the nature, extent and reach of Griqua-Koranna-European renegade raiding was distinct prior to and post-June 1823. His examples of raiding before June 1823 are by no means conclusive, involving particularly exceptional frontiersmen such as Coenrad Bezuidenhout, Cobus Vry, Gerrit Coetze and Coenraad de Buys whose impact was transitory and not catastrophic. Other examples of Griqua-Bergenaar-Koranna attacks similarly lack finality for this thesis. See Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', pp. 496-498, especially notes 49-51.

*See first chapter 2 of this*

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp.497,514. The example involves the Koranna attacking the Hurutse at Kaditshwene in 1822-3. Nowhere in the footnotes is there given explicit reference to this attack (see notes 54 and 141).

chapter of my yet-to-be-completed masters thesis, I argue it was only after Dithakong that the Bergenaars and Koranna penetrated this region causing significant disturbances. It was partly the result of the dislocations caused by the 'Mantatee' that Koranna-Bergenaar attacks became prevalent after Dithakong.

The second reason for their conclusions relates to the great confusion surrounding the etymology and composition of the term, 'Mantatee'. Since Moffat, Melville and Thompson referred to the vast 'horde' as the 'Mantatee', many have identified MaNtatisi's Tlokwa of the Vaal-Caledon region as the grouping at Dithakong. Earliest writers of African history such as Theal, Stow and Ellenberger all succumbed to this interpretation.<sup>38</sup> However, Marian How has since convincingly shown that the Tlokwa never crossed west of the Vaal.<sup>39</sup> Cobbing and Richner have therefore tended to draw the neat conclusion there was no massive grouping west of the Vaal. The 'Mantatee' were merely 'invented beings.' The word was merely coined as a euphemism for forced labour (Cobbing) or derived from the misheard 'Matabele' (Richner).<sup>40</sup>

Curiously, this was neither the conclusion of How nor subsequent historians such as Lye, Omer-Cooper, Schapera and Legassick.<sup>41</sup> On the testimony of the original reporters, these historians determined Dithakong was in fact overrun by a foreign migratory grouping who were not in the first place 'Mantatee'. Moffat, for example, wrote on the testimony of the prisoners that they themselves disclaimed the appellation of 'Mantatee' given to them. Instead, he was informed they consisted of a mixture of peoples, comprising essentially of the 'Maputee' and the 'Batlaquan', under the chiefs 'Chaane' and 'Carrahanye' respectively.<sup>42</sup> Thompson was similarly informed. On his return to Cape Town, he confronted a Rolong refugee at Griqua Town who had fled the interior. The man had been driven from his territory by invaders he called 'Batcloqueene' under chiefs 'Malahanye' and

<sup>38</sup>G.M. Theal, History of South Africa, 11 vols., London, 1915, 5, p.442. Theal did, however, recognise the 'Mantatee horde' was composed of many different groupings including the Tlokwa. G.W. Stow, The Native Races of South Africa, London, 1905, p.460; Ellenberger, History of the Basuto, pp.136-139.

<sup>39</sup>M. How, 'An alibi for Mantatisi.', African Studies, 13, 2, 1954, pp.65-76.

<sup>40</sup>Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', p.493; Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifaqane"', p.9.

<sup>41</sup>W.F. Lye, 'The Difagane: The Mfecane in the Southern Sotho Area, 1822-24.', Journal of African History, 8, 1967, pp. 107-131; J.D. Omer-Cooper, The Zulu Aftermath, London, 1966, pp.86-98; Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, p. xxiv; Legassick, 'The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries', pp. 328-341.

<sup>42</sup>Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, Robert Moffat, journal, 21 July 1823, pp. 102,103.

another he could not recall.<sup>43</sup>

Whereas Cobbing and Gewald just ignore this evidence, Richner is quick to dismiss it. How and subsequent historians have translated Moffat and Thompson's references into the Phuthing of Tsuane and the Hlakoana of Nkharahanye. This was substantiated on the basis of Ellenberger's independent identification of these groupings under the said leaders in his History of the Basuto, long considered the main source of Sotho oral tradition.<sup>44</sup> However, Richner believes Ellenberger's information to be derived from Moffat's sources and since there is little other independent evidence for the existence of such groupings, he suggests they can be safely rejected.<sup>45</sup> If this was the case, though, surely Ellenberger would have placed the Phuthing and Hlakoana at Dithakong instead of MaNtatisi's Tlokwa? Clearly, Ellenberger's knowledge could only have derived from oral sources. Interestingly, on the testimony of Setaki, son of Nkharahanye, he placed the Phuthing and Hlakoana across the Vaal at this time,<sup>46</sup> but it would appear he was not specifically informed that they were represented at Dithakong. Furthermore, Moffat's public memoirs published in 1842 did not mention these groupings.<sup>47</sup> It was only after Ellenberger had written, that Moffat's private journals and letters were published which revealed the identity of these groupings.<sup>48</sup> It is clear, therefore, that Ellenberger's identifications were arrived at independently of Moffat.

Further evidences can be cited for the existence of the Phuthing and Hlakoana. Breutz in the 1940's indicated from Kwenamodimosana oral traditions that they remembered the 'BaTlhakwane' war of 1823-4.<sup>49</sup> The Hurutse also recalled the advance of the 'BaTlhakwane' through their territory.<sup>50</sup> From old men of the Phuthing, D.F. Ellenberger's son, Rene, confirmed that 'Tsooane, chief of the Maphuthing, was killed by Makulukama (Coloured

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, Travels, p.137.

<sup>44</sup> Ellenberger, History of the Basuto, pp.34-37, 70-72, 121, 351.

<sup>45</sup> Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifagane"', p.9.

<sup>46</sup> Ellenberger, History of the Basuto, p.139.

<sup>47</sup> R. Moffat, Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa, London, 1842.

<sup>48</sup> Revealed in Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, published in 1951.

<sup>49</sup> P.L. Breutz, The Tribes of Rustenburg and Pilansberg Districts, 28, Pretoria, 1953, p.430.

<sup>50</sup> P.L. Breutz, The Tribes of Marico District, 31, Pretoria, 1953, p.7.

people, Griquas) in a fearful fight beyond the Vaal River.<sup>51</sup> Rev. Daumas, too, writing on behalf of Moletsane, chief of the Taung in the 1820's, documented that Tsuane and his people were defeated near Dithakong by the Griqua.<sup>52</sup> In addition, 3 October 1857, on a visit to Mzilikazi, Moffat was introduced to a foreigner who, on enquiry, was found to be one of 'Chuane's people' defeated at Dithakong. The man mentioned that three great chiefs had fallen that day, namely, 'Chuane, Kharaganye and another.'<sup>53</sup> That Moffat was securing his alibi of 34 years previous, certainly requires a stretch of the imagination.<sup>54</sup>

Although Moffat does not mention them, there does exist a small amount of evidence to suggest Sebetwane's Fokeng of Patsa was also represented at Dithakong. Ellenberger situates the grouping in the neighbourhood of Dithakong.<sup>55</sup> Livingstone, too, learnt from Sebetwane shortly before his death that his people had been

<sup>51</sup>How, 'An alibi for Mantatisi', p.68.

<sup>52</sup>G.M. Theal, Basutoland Records, vol. 1, Cape Town, 1883, p.517. Notice Daumas writes, "Tsuane, Chief of the Bafokeng (who were improperly confounded with the Mantatis)." R. Ellenberger thinks Daumas either misunderstood Moletsane for he knew little Basuto history, or he cut Moletsane short. Instead of speaking of the Fokeng of Sebetwane and the Phuthing of Tsuane, he joined them. R. Ellenberger was led to this conclusion for there has never existed a Fokeng chief called Tsuane. See How, 'An alibi for Mantatisi', p.75.

<sup>53</sup>J.P.R. Wallis (ed.), The Matabele Journals of Robert Moffat, 2, London, 1945, p.81.

<sup>54</sup>For further evidence related to the existence of the numerous, foreign grouping, see: Cope (ed.), Journals, pp.101-190; Broadbent, Narrative, pp. 20-77; W. Shaw (ed.), Memoirs of Mrs. A. Hodgson, London, 1836, ch.7. Hodgson and Broadbent were pioneer missionaries into the upper-Vaal region and provide the only other recorded material by people inhabiting the zone of conflict during this period. Lye has shown their accounts taken from a different perspective dovetail favourably with Moffats' with respect to the approach and retreat of the numerous and desperate grouping. See Lye, 'The Difaqane', pp. 112, 123-129. Griqua oral tradition also recounts uniform reference to a foreign grouping that came and warred over the nations of their quarter. See Evidence Taken at Bloemhof Before the Commission Appointed to Investigate the Claims of the South African Republic, Captain N. Waterboer, Chief of West Griqualand, and Certain Other Native Chiefs, to Portions of the Territory on the Vaal River, Now Known As the Diamond Fields, Cape Town, 1871, evidence of Kruger, pp.8,4,7; evidence of Jansen, p.12.

<sup>55</sup>Ellenberger, History of the Basuto, p.137.

part of the immense 'horde' driven back by the Griqua.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps Sebetwane was the forgotten third chief? Moffat did, however, note that the 'Mantatee' at Dithakong also included Hurutse refugees who had been absorbed into the conquering 'horde' as it marched through the interior.<sup>57</sup>

It seems strange that many of the early writers believed MaNtatisi's Tlokwa were represented at Dithakong when the reporters clearly illustrated this was not the case. If the etymology of the term Mantatee is considered, however, this designation becomes understandable.

From the earliest reports, it is especially clear that the word did indeed refer to MaNtatisi and her Tlokwa. The first messages Moffat received depicted the 'horde' as 'Mantateesa' and always spoke of her in the feminine.<sup>58</sup> Later the word 'Mantatee' became more frequently heard and the original references never again appeared in European accounts. The very word 'Mantatee' that was adopted and used broadly by Moffat, Thompson and others, has also inextricable links with MaNtatisi's Tlokwa. When the first literate European observers entered the Vaal-Caledon region, they discovered the Tlokwa indeed identified themselves as the 'Mantatee'. They did not make the 'Mantatee'-MaNtatisi elision as Cobbing suggests.<sup>59</sup> It was already in place. Andrew Smith, for example, stated explicitly that their principal name was the Tlokwa 'though at different times it has been called after some of its more remarkable chiefs upon the same principal as it has lately been styled Mantatees, or in other words, the people of Mantatee.'<sup>60</sup> With reference to the Tlokwa/Mantatees, Smith described in 1836 how this had occurred:

any remarkable instance of prosperity, or any occurrence which is calculated to raise a tribe in the estimation of the others around it, is sometimes considered by the tribe itself as best to be recorded by the adoption of a new name, and on such occasions the name assumed is generally made to refer either to the occurrence or to the ruler under whose government

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<sup>56</sup>D. Livingstone, Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa, London, 1957, p.84. The reference would appear to relate to Dithakong.

<sup>57</sup>See examples of incorporation in Thompson, Travels, pp.107, 108. For the Hurutse refugees, see Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, R. Moffat, journal, 21 July 1823, p.102.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., R. Moffat, journal, 16 May 1823, p.77.

<sup>59</sup>Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', p. 515.

<sup>60</sup>W.F. Lye (ed.), Andrew Smith's journal of his expedition into the interior of South Africa: 1834-36, Cape Town, 1975, p.92. See also, T. Arbousset and F. Daumas, Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the North-East of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, Cape Town reprint, 1968, p.31.

it happened. The other means by which changes are produced, namely, the influence of strangers, operate principally during warlike movements, when bodies come in contact who are unacquainted with each others previous designations. On such occasions the one speaks of the other as the people of such and such a chief, and by perseverance in that system often eventually succeed, at least to a certain extent, in establishing names hitherto unknown in the country.<sup>61</sup>

Through a combination of these two processes, then, the Tlokwa had come to be known as the 'Mantatee'. It would appear MaNtatisi had gained infamy as the leader of a warlike grouping and, given the extent of her power, her name became the epithet by which other warlike bands were characterized. This interpretation seems to be placed beyond doubt when Moffat writes:

The prisoners also inform us that they are not the Mantatees; but that numerous and powerful tribes bearing that name are also, according to report, infesting the interior, plundering, etc.<sup>62</sup>

The fact that Moffat continued to use the term 'Mantatee' to denote peoples he knew not to be the 'Mantatee' seems to have been the cause of much of the confusion in the past. Moffat used the word in a similar way to the Tswana for whom it signified 'Invader' or 'Marauder', describing wandering foreigners stemming from the east.<sup>63</sup> As was the practice, then, Moffat applied the word to other foreign invaders as well.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the word acquired a generic meaning within the Cape Colony by which refugees of the interior were designated including groupings of Tswana.<sup>65</sup> Over time, Moffat's initial identifications became obscured and later writers, removed from the events in both space and time, uncritically made the Tlokwa/Mantatee elision with the 'Mantatee' of Dithakong.

<sup>61</sup>G.M. Theal, Basutoland Records, 1, Extracts from the report of the expedition for exploring Central Africa from the Cape of Good Hope, under the superintendence of Dr. A. Smith, p.13.

<sup>62</sup>Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, R. Moffat, journal, 21 July 1823, p.103.

<sup>63</sup>Thompson, Travels, p.204. See also evidence of this in the vernacular histories, Dico tsa Secwana and Ditirafalo tsa merafe ya BaTswana, cited in E.W. Smith, 'Sebetwane and the Makololo', African Studies, 15, 2, 1956, p.53, note 1.

<sup>64</sup>Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, pp. 132-133, 144-152.

<sup>65</sup>CO 1/GR 15/71 Graaf-Reinet Register 1826-7: 'Apprentices of the Mantatee Nation'. See also, Lye, 'The Difaqane', p.122, note 94.

The battle of Dithakong and 'mfecane' theory

Given that there did indeed exist a numerous and destitute migratory grouping at Dithakong, it would appear certain aspects of 'mfecane' theory might in fact be tenable. In the final section of this paper some broader implications of the battle will be considered, with particular reference to the upheavals west of the Drakensberg in the years 1822-4.

It is certainly difficult to sustain the thesis that the chain of violence in the West was rooted in the Cape colony's demand for labour and cattle, that the raiders originated in the south and that the dominant flow of violence was from west to east or south-west to north-east.<sup>66</sup> To suggest that Griqua-Koranna-renegade European raids such as the alleged one at Dithakong were the cause of the destruction of African communities in the West in the years 1822-3, can only remain hypothetical. The empirical evidence indicates that Bergenaar-Koranna raiding played a minor part in the conflicts until after June 1823. In no way, for example, can Bergenaar-Koranna raiding explain the eruption of the Phuthing and Hlakoana from their homelands along the Wilge River west of the Drakensberg, onto the Highveld.

Before late 1823, Griqua and Koranna raids upon the Sotho-Tswana were occasional and not catastrophic involving renegade frontier groupings.<sup>67</sup> The majority of Griqua were restrained from illegal trading and raiding by the leading families in whose interest it was to dominate the trade and stabilize the region.<sup>68</sup> On the whole, the Griqua reach did not trespass Sotho-Tswana territory. Yet towards the end of 1822, the renegade Bergenaar grouping that was the cause of much devastation in the future began to penetrate the south-eastern fringe of Southern-Sotho settlement. But given their small numbers and initial disorganization, the Bergenaars appear only to have become effective raiders towards the end of 1823.<sup>69</sup> By no means did their reach extend so deep into the Vaal-Caledon region by the end of 1822 so as to cause the population migration of the Phuthing and Hlakoana. However, towards the end of 1823 a number of forces were unleashed that changed the situation. The

<sup>66</sup>Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', pp.498,499; Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifaqane"', p.3.

<sup>67</sup>See note 31. Richner's examples of raiding prior to June 1823 similarly lack finality on the matter. See Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifaqane"', pp.2-7.

<sup>68</sup>M. Legassick, 'The Northern Frontier to 1820: The emergence of the Griqua people', in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds.), The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820, Cape Town, 1979, p. 258.

<sup>69</sup>Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Inhabitants, Report by Melvill to the Colonial Secretary, Dec. 1824, p.214.

dislocation on the Highveld caused by the 'Mantatee' together with the growth of the Bergenaars who were free from any restraint;<sup>70</sup> the increase in guns and the possibilities of illicit trading<sup>71</sup> all fostered raiding on the Sotho-Tswana that proved devastating over the years. Cobbing and Richner have well-illuminated the nature and impact of these raids in this period. Yet they have not shown continuity between this later raiding and Bergenaar-Koranna raiding prior to 1823. Although these pressures might have played some part in fanning the initial conflicts, it is an over-ambitious task to suggest that they constituted the motors of violence that began the movement which resulted in the displacement of the Phuthing and Hlakoana.

It, therefore, becomes necessary to reconsider the traditional interpretations which attest that the initial devastations in the Vaal-Caledon Valley originated in the east. Based largely on oral reports, it has been traditionally argued that the arrival of the Nguni invaders across the Drakensberg began a great cataclysmic event amongst the Sotho, sending the Tlokwa, Phuthing, Hlakoana and others into careers of violence. The first European travellers into the region gave uniform report that it was Matiwane's Ngwane and Mpangazita's Hlubi who began a desperate time of turmoil. Lye has collated this evidence in his article, 'The Difaqane: The Mfecane in the Southern Sotho Area, 1822-24', which he regarded as 'tentatively substantiated' yet clear with respect to the identity of those involved. He was cautious to corroborate the oral traditions with other oral and documentary evidence, and noted the differences in these traditions when they conflicted.<sup>72</sup> The fact the 'Mantatee' prisoners related that they had been driven from their countries in the east by the 'Matabele' gives weight to these oral traditions. From the descriptions given, Moffat believed the Matabele either referred

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., report by Melvill to the Colonial Secretary, December 1824, p.217; Legassick, 'The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries', pp.302,303.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., pp.347,348. By 1824, 'Bushmanland' which had separated colonial society from the Griqua had been penetrated and the possibilities of illegal trading were more certain. Evidences of Bergenaars and Koranna selling captives clandestinely date to a large extent from this period. See: Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Inhabitants, Lord C.H. Somerset to the Commissioners of Inquiry, p.227; *ibid.*, Melvill to Colonial Secretary, December 1824, p.217; Legassick, 'The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries', pp.353-355; Ellenberger, History of the Basuto, p.214; Arbousset and Daumas, Narrative, p.228; J. Philip, Researches in South Africa, 2, London, 1828, pp.81-91.

<sup>72</sup>Lye, 'The Difaqane', p.131.

to the southern or northern Nguni.<sup>73</sup> This agrees with Ellenberger who, on oral evidence, noted the following about the derivation of the word:

It was during this period [the Lifaqane] that the designation Matabele was given to the Kaffirs of Natal by the Basuto. It is a derivative of the verb ho tebele, "to drive away", and means "the destroyers". . . . . the Basuto designated all those to the east of it [the Drakensberg] by the term Matabele, which includes the Zulus, Swazis, Mahlubi, Amangwane, and many others.<sup>74</sup>

Although the socio-economic-political processes behind these movements and their distinctive interrelatedness are as yet unclear, it would appear these oral reports need to be taken more seriously. The movement of communities dislocated from east to west in a period of intensive deprivation particularly around 1822-3 cannot easily be disregarded.

Does this study, therefore, serve to ratify the traditional 'mfecane' model? To be sure the study affirms in a limited way certain elements within 'mfecane' theory, but the concept of the 'mfecane' has become so broad and multiple over the decades as to deserve presently any continued analytical usefulness. Today, the 'mfecane' can refer in its broadest sense to the Zulucentric diaspora which affected vast regions of south-central Africa as far away as Lake Victoria encompassing an era of history beginning at the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. Cobbing has well-demonstrated the many myths that constitute this macro-theory, revealing errors of fact, problems of periodization and the theory's pervading Afrocentricism.<sup>75</sup> The challenge has become to deconstruct the development of the 'mfecane' as macro-myth.

Clearly the earliest 'mfecane' writers did not mean the word in this macro-sense. For them, the word signified the Transorangian disruptions amongst the Sotho west of the Drakensberg covering a relatively short period 1820-28. They emphasised little the self-generated internal revolution of Shaka and rather focused upon the displacements of chiefdoms west of the Drakensberg.<sup>76</sup> Once again, however, these writers over-elaborated the afrocentric nature of the turmoil. Cobbing and Richner have rightly re-located particularly the extent of Bergenaar-Koranna raiding after 1823-4. Indeed, the magnitude of their impact has

<sup>73</sup>Schapera (ed.), Apprenticeship, R. Moffat, journal, 31 May 1823, p.85, 21 July 1823, p.101. See also Cope (ed.), Journals, p.182.

<sup>74</sup>Ellenberger, History of the Basuto, p.120. See also Arbousset and Daumas, Narrative, p.134.

<sup>75</sup>See in particular, Cobbing, 'The case against the mfecane.'

<sup>76</sup>See Ellenberger, History of the Basuto, pp. 137-236; J.C. MacGregor, Basuto Traditions, Cape Town, 1905.

yet to be fully realised. Their raids were especially destructive given their ready access to arms and ammunition. Both Sotho-Tswana and Nguni groupings suffered greatly. Mzilikazi's Ndebele faced many frontal assaults just as it appears Griqua-Bergenaar attacks played an important part in driving the Ngwane southwards from the Caledon Valley.<sup>77</sup>

However, by attempting to explain the upheavals west of the Drakensberg primarily in terms of Bergenaar-Koranna raids within the wider supposition of European expansion for labour, Cobbing and Richner make the very same mistake for which they criticize 'mfecane' theorists. Their error is to shift the pendulum to the other extreme by only emphasizing the Eurocentric nature of the upheavals. Their view of the creation of the 'mfecane' myth becomes as Eurocentric as 'mfecane' theory is Afrocentric. Clearly, though, if there exists any truth within the concept of the 'mfecane', it must surely relate to the initial chains of violence around 1822-3 west/north-west of the Drakensberg that appear in essence African. If the 'mfecane' merely means the 'coming of the Nguni'<sup>78</sup>, then surely its truth lies in the initial devastations they caused in the Vaal-Caledon region that were largely over by 1823-4. They merely set certain chains of violence in motion that over time involved many less well-illuminated forces.

Certainly the precise functioning of these processes remain unclear. To what extent were eastern European forces involved behind the 'coming of the Nguni'? What part did economic and environmental factors play together with the development of internal dynamics within African polities? These are questions

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<sup>77</sup>See Richner, 'The withering away of the "lifagane"', ch.5,6; Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi', p.508.

<sup>78</sup>Peoples west of the Drakensberg referred to the northern Nguni as the 'Bakoni' or 'Lifakoni, that is to say, those who hew down, or cut their enemies in pieces with the chake, their formidable battle axe.' See Arbousset and Daumas, Narrative, p. 134. This relates to Lye's translation of 'difagane' as hammering which is rendered in Sotho orthography: Lye, 'The Difagane', p.107. Mabille and Dieterlen in their Southern Sotho English Dictionary, Morija, 1961, refer 'kone (Mokone, Bakone, Dikone)' to a member of the Nguni. Over time, the word 'difagane' appears to have gained a broader meaning signifying a period of wars 'waged by nomadic tribes accompanied on the warpath by their women, children and property, as distinct from the ordinary kind of war between settled tribes where only the fighting men go out.', MacGregor, Basuto Traditions, p.8. See also Ellenberger, History of the Basuto, p.117. Its initial rendering, however, seems to relate to the 'coming of the Nguni', bringing with them a distinctive time of trouble. I would suggest the term 'fetcane' used in the 1820's in the Eastern Cape referred ultimately to the northern Nguni and derived from the Sotho 'Bakoni, Lifakoni', and did not originate in the Eastern Cape as Cobbing proposes in 'The case against the mfecane', p.14.

that remain unanswered. This paper attempts to provide a more adequate framework for approaching these questions. It has been suggested that Cobbing's Eurocentric theory of the chains of violence west of the Drakensberg is built on an inadequate foundation. Instead, a synthesis approach has been proposed whereby the conflicts in the West need to be viewed as a complex interplay of 'European' and African forces, initially essentially African in character in the years 1822-3, stemming from the arrival of the northern Nguni west/north-west of the Drakensberg, with 'European' forces from the west increasingly coming to play after 1823-4.

In conclusion, the battle of Dithakong has shown itself to be crucial to the very heart of the latest debates with respect to the early 19th century history of the southern African interior. It has revealed both the poverty of the revisionists' singular Eurocentric theory of violence in the West and their practice, posing questions for other areas of their work. To be sure, Dithakong remains more than just an historical battle site of the 1820's, but is a critical location for the very future of 19th century southern African historiography of the interior.

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