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In search of native dissidence: RT Kawa's *Mfecane* historiography in *Ibali lamaMfengu (1929)*

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Abstract

This paper situates RT Kawa's *Ibali lamaMfengu (1929)* as a canonical text of South African historiography, and mfecane historiography in particular. In *Ibali lamaMfengu* Kawa attempts an account of the origins of the Mfengu clans who were Mfecane refugees and their political situation when they were incorporated into the Gcaleka kingdom of King Hintsa in the 1820s and 1830s. Kawa's work on this topic is significant in clarifying key disputes on the origins of the Mfengu, though not comprehensive in its detail on their early life amongst amaXhosa. Though a key text, its analysis was not only excluded but rejected by 'mainstream' South African historians in the 1980s and 1990s. The omission resulted in dominant scholarly versions of the Mfecane dismissing the validity of the interpretations and analyses of African writers, in effect, rendering Mfecane historiography a 'white-only' debate. In this paper, it is demonstrated that Kawa's work is in fact a valid and persuasive history of the Mfengu and is largely accurate on the question of their origins, their life under Hintsa, and the reasons for their exodus from amaXhosa that led to their loyalty pledge to the British in 1835.

Xhosa history, African historiography, Mfecane, Eastern Cape, Mfengu

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Mfengu - 'the Fingos' in settler-colonial parlance - has been a key point of debate in South African historiography. The Mfengu have been of interest because of three

related questions – firstly, were they refugees of the so-called ‘Zulu’ Mfecane; secondly, what was their class position and general treatment amongst the Gcaleka Xhosa during the reign of King Hintsa; and lastly, why did they pledge allegiance to the British in 1835 and become allies of the colony against the Xhosa? Richard Tainton Kawa’s *Ibali lamaMfengu* (The History of the Mfengu), was the first book written by an African which attempted to provide some kind of holistic answer to the three questions as well as document the clan genealogies of the Mfengu clans in the Eastern Cape.

Kawa’s *Ibali lamaMfengu* was published after his death by Lovedale Press in 1929, five years after his death. Born in 1854 into the Zizi clan of the Mfengu, Richard Kawa was raised in the Christianised Mfengu settlement of Peddie in the Eastern Cape (Kawa 2011, v). He went onto become a teacher, writer in the African press including editor of *Izwi Labantu* (Kawa 2011, v). Like most educated Mfengu, Kawa expressed forms of loyalty to the British Empire and its civilizational ideals, and he even fought on the side of the colony in the 1877 War of Ngcayechibi against the Xhosa (Kawa 2011, Odendaal 2013, 76). However, as was characteristic of many educated Africans, Kawa also expressed an ambivalence that often became out and out criticism of white Cape colonial politics and took the opportunity to write in the African newspapers to express his disapproval of ongoing African disenfranchisement and dispossession in the Cape colony.

Ibali lamaMfengu was an expression of Kawa’s critique of colonial writing and perspectives on Mfengu history. It took Kawa many years from the late 1880s to gather the material that would form a viable manuscript, a mission that he records in the book as psychologically taxing and almost gave up on (Kawa 2011, 2). Moyer (1976, 39) documents that “Kawa had great difficulty bringing his book to publication... According to D. D. T. Jabavu, the first time he began his research, government officials confiscated his notes and did not return them; the second time, all his notes were stolen and never recovered; and when he finally completed his manuscript, he could not find a publisher.” However, he persevered because he felt the book was key to setting straight the historical record of the Mfengu, particularly after Reverends John Ayliff and Joseph Whiteside’s *History of the Abambo, Generally Known as Fingos* was published in 1912; a work put together by Whiteside based on Ayliff’s work amongst the Mfengu. Kawa (2011: 2) disagreed with aspects of Whiteside’s rendition of the Mfengu story, particularly the matter of

Mfengu political status under the rule of the Xhosa Gcaleka king, Hintsa. Kawa explains that he felt compelled to write his own after the missionary version was published: “Kute ekwenziweni kwe*History of AbaMbo* ngu Rev. J. Whiteside, ndacelwa yi-Komiti nge organizing Secretary yayo, u-Mr Isiah Bud-Mbelle ukuba ndike ndifake isandla kulomcimbi.”¹ By 1922 he was able to submit a manuscript to the book editor D.D.T Jabavu, a peer and one of the founders of the University of Fort Hare who enabled its publication by 1929. Jabavu (Kawa 2011, no page number) commented that “I did my utmost to call public attention to the existence of this valuable manuscript and requested Dr James Henderson, the Principal of Lovedale Institution, to act as treasurer for the proposed fund. The raising of the fund proved a very slow affair...Meanwhile the author passed away and it was with difficulty that the manuscript could be recovered.”

Kawa and the Rise of early 20th century African Historiographers

The publication of Kawa’s *Ibali lamaMfengu* cannot be seen as an isolated historiographical event. Educated Africans had been active for over 50 years, publishing the opinions and histories of Africans through the vernacular newspapers beginning with the mission owned papers *Indaba* and *Isigidimi samaXhosa* in the 1860s in the Cape Colony (Switzer 1997, Tisani 2001, Mokoena 2011, Odendaal 2013). Networks of mission educated Christian Africans in South Africa and across the world, built extensive intellectual networks of political and literary mobilisation, and through these networks “alternative political narratives began to develop” (Odendaal 2013, 13). Writers like Kawa who attempted to record and analyse the history of Africans were amongst the first South African historiographers. By the early years of the 20th century, writers who had been prolific in the columns of the 19th century African press began publishing full books, some of the most seminal being Walter Rubusana’s compendium of African clan histories *Zemk’inkomo Magwalandini* (1906), Solomon Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), and S.E.K Mqhayi’s canonical novel *Ityala Lamawele* (1914) an example of literary work steeped in historical themes.

In the 1920s and 1930s Africans “were engrossed in a world in which racial segregation, social oppression and ethical demoralization were omnipresent” but the epoch was profoundly

¹ Where translations of isiXhosa are not directly provided, the gist of the meaning is provided within the context of the specific sentence.

productive in terms of sheer published output” (Ndlovu 2017, 116). Across the Black diaspora including in the United States, writers, poets, musicians experimented with new creative forms of expressions and political dissidence shaped by urban modernity in towns and cities (Masilela 2012). In South Africa, Black writers began synthesizing their work into books which were often published in African languages and only later translated into English. The books had a very clear African and Pan-Africanist sentiment that asserted the authority of Black people in the domain of telling their own histories and stories and the choice of publishing in the vernacular being deliberate and political (Masilela 2012)

Kawa’s *Ibali lamaMfengu* emerges within this highly productive context, in which disillusionment with the promises of Christian universalism had become the handmaiden for African counter-hegemonic writing. Kawa and his contemporaries in African historiography were clear in their mission to produce books aimed at Black people. In *Ibali lamaMfengu* he refers to ‘Ndlu emnyama’ and ‘Mz’ontsundu’ (Black nation). In Magma Fuze’s path breaking historical work *Abantu Abamnyama Lapa Bavela Ngakhona* (1922, v), Fuze conveys his political commitment to producing histories for Black people: “For a very long time I have been urging our people to come together and produce a book about the black people and whence they came, but my entreaties have been to no avail...I think that there will be many of us desirous of having the book *Abantu Abamnyama* in our schools, in order that our children may get to know where they originally came from, because at present they do not know.”

Petros Lamula’s *Zulu kaMalandela* followed in 1924; it was a “feat of synthesis in which biblical history, white historical texts, Zulu oral history and personal experience were all rich grist to the mill of a febrile historicist imagination” (La Hausse de Lalouvière 2000, 101). Similarly, Kawa’s *Ibali lamaMfengu* adopts this kind of narrative syncretism that fused broad biblical Hamitic mythology with African origins myth of uNtu, writing, “...tina Ndlu emnyama sipuma kuNtu” and thereafter writing, “Inxelenye yabantu ambamhlophe naba ntsu iti, iNdlu Emnyama iyinzala ka Ham, unyana ka Nowa (Noah)” (Kawa 2011, 5). African cosmology was deliberately put alongside Christian mythology in what must surely have been an expression of epistemic defiance and African self-assertion by a mission educated African such as Kawa.

These African authored books were politically-infused historiographies, as “much political statement as...narrative history”, so Nhanha and Peires describe *Ibali lamaMfengu* (2011, xiv).

Evidence from colonial historical documents and texts, oral histories as well as political commentary were woven into the narrative mode. At the heart of the African authors' political mission was to both correct colonial historiography and provide the African people's accounts of their history as based in oral history forms such as clan genealogies, *izithakazelo/ iziduko*, and historical accounts known as *umlando* in isiZulu or *imbali* in isiXhosa. Ndlovu (2017, 117) notes that Lamula drew on oral traditions as his primary evidence, and that they had mainly "come from his parents and uncles and from some of the oral testimonies chronicled by Stuart." Falola and Agbo (2018: 633) argue that "By writing historical texts, the authors were making a profound contribution to knowledge; they were converting oral traditions to written forms, a process that preserved the traditions and made them available to a wider audience...They contributed to the creation of written sources that a later generation has relied upon for the construction of historical knowledge."

Oral tradition was particularly key to Kawa's *Ibali lamaMfengu*, which provided the first substantive published book based on the clan genealogical records of the Mfengu clans. Kawa foregrounds his Black community as the key epistemic resource for his work, naming his sources by their *iziduko* and *izibongo* (clan names and praises): "Lengxelo ye-Bali endizakulinga ukuyenza isekwe pezu kwemfundiso endayamkela ko Gamaliel ba abanjengo Mqikela, into kaMlwandle....abanjengo Mazizi, into ka-Ntuli...abanjengo Mfo into kaLujopo.... Abanjengo Maxwayana, inkosi, into ka-Njokweni..." Nhanha and Peires (Kawa 2011, x) note that the detailed and all-encompassing genealogical accounts of Mfengu clans in *Ibali lamaMfengu* cannot be found elsewhere in writing.

The use of oral accounts and traditions by no means implied consensus or agreement amongst African historians (La Hausse de Lalouvière 2000, Ndlovu 2017). In fact, each historian demonstrated their own assessment or interpretation of the evidence – both oral and written – in putting their histories forward. Upfront, Kawa states the limits of his work, and invites open critique. From the outset, he is aware of the limitations posed by any narrative and thus states:

Mzi! Ibali lamaHlubi, lamaZizi, nelama-Bele njengalo lonke ibali lendlu emnyama, alizanga labalwa zincwadini kwamhla mnene; ngoko ke lisuke limane lisiba nendawo ezingacacanga kakuhle, se liti kwezinye indawo inge ingxelo yalo iyapikisana. Ukuba ke ngoko ndenza ibali ngendlela eningabaliselwangwa ngayo nina, nize nindixolele, nazi

ukuba andiqali lulwimi nje lomqala wam; kodwa ndibalisa ngendlela endafundiswa yona... (Kawa 2011, 1)

Kin! The historical account of amaHlubi, of amaZizi and the Bele, like all history of Black people, was not written down from time immemorial; as such there are areas where it lacks clarity and parts where the accounts has contradictions. If thus, I tell this account in a way that you were not taught please forgive me, and know that this is not just my own account, but this is the way I was taught...

Kawa knew that historical accounts were contested and that the version people believed was very much an outcome of the perspective that they had been told, thus he invited dispute and debate from readers. The editor of the book, D.D.T Jabavu commented that Kawa “adopted modern scientific methods in sifting history from legend, and fact from fiction” (Kawa 2011, no page number). In the 1970’s, Richard Moyer (1976, 38) wrote the first academic critical appraisal of Mfengu history, relying extensively on Kawa’s *Ibali lamaMfengu*, and noted its significance for African historiography, observing that it was not written for whites but for Africans themselves:

Kawa’s book, *Ibali lama Mfengu*, the story of the Mfengu, was the second book written solely about the Mfengu. Written after Kawa’s retirement from a lengthy teaching career, it sought to correct “flaws” in earlier published accounts of the Mfengu, offer information not generally of interest to white authors and, most important, to provide an account of Mfengu history in Xhosa. He devoted considerable attention to legends about the Mfengu prior to 1835 and the genealogies of the numerous Mfengu chiefs. He also included brief biographies of prominent Mfengu he had known: John Tingo Jabavu; Veldman Bikitsha; and Mpambani Mzimba. As Kawa held a place in the chief list of the Shweme Zizi, his interest in genealogies is understandable.

Kawa chose to write his version of Mfengu history in an African language, isiXhosa, for an African audience. The question of which language to write in became a political debate amongst educated Africans (Masilela 2012). Fuze’s *Abantu Abamnyama* was written originally in isiZulu and later translated, whereas Kawa’s *Ibali lamaMfengu* still remains untranslated. There are two important consequences for *Ibali lamaMfengu* being written in isiXhosa – the first being that the subtleties of the language and its idiom convey Kawa’s voice as a historian; the second

consequence, is that the significance of his work would be lost to later generations of influential, largely English speaking South African academic historians who failed to study his work.

Kawa's Mfengu History: Vernacular Historiography

In the late 1800s, the history of the Mfengu became a key debate for educated African Christian converts in the Cape colonial public. There was an interest in who they were, secondly, how they got to the Eastern Cape, and lastly why they left the custodianship of King Hintsa of the Gcaleka Xhosa, to pledge allegiance to the British in 1835. Writing in *Isigidimi samaXhosa*, newspaper editor, William Gqoba called for the history of abaMbo and the Mfengu to be researched

Sicela imbali maxhego akowethu nonke. Sifuna ezaseBunguni zonke. Sifuna ezaseMbo zonke. Sifuna ukwazi ngalamarwintsela akhoyo pantsi kweli gama liti 'abaMbo'. Kanti akutetwa Mamfengu onke, njengoko inxenywe ihlala inqwena ukunga kungatshiwo" (Tisani (2001, 251)

We seek the histories from you our old men. We want those of abeNguni. We want those of abaseMbo. We want to know about [the details] under this name of 'abaMbo'. It is said it does not speak of all the Mfengu, even though a segment does wish it could be said to be so.

As an element of documenting Mfengu origins, in the 1880s, Gqoba tackled the history of the late 18th and early 19th century upheavals that came to be known in the vernacular as imfecane or difaqane. In 1887 Gqoba wrote a column titled "Imbali yaseMbo: The History of the Eastern Territory" which dealt largely with the conflicts arising from Matiwane of the Ngwane and the subsequent dispersals of various clans in early 19th century KwaZulu-Natal region, including those who would become known as Mfengu upon arrival among the Xhosa (Gqoba 2015). Tisani (2001, 259- 260) notes that Gqoba relied on many different narratives, including possibly missionary interpretations. Gqoba makes it clear in his 1887 article that he is not entirely confident about his rendition of this history and requested help from those who knew the stories (Gqoba 2015, 300 – 301). A version of Mfengu history was published in Rubusana's *Zemk'inkomo Magwalandini* in 1906. However, it was only when Kawa set about to write his more comprehensive book that a fuller history of Mfengu clans emerged.

In *Ibali lamaMfengu* Kawa also revisits the history of the mfecane dispersals and their relation to the migration of abaMbo who became Mfengu amongst the Xhosa. What is significant is that the core of Kawa's argument is based on very detailed clan genealogies (iziduko) and clan praise poetry traditions (izibongo). Kawa lists several segments of abaMbo clans in the Cape colony generally grouped into the broader kin iziduko groups of the Hlubi, Zizi and Bhele. The detailed clan names form the empirical kernel of Kawa's work. He narrates, "AmaZizi ayemi pezu koTukela, eNcome naseSandlulube. AmaHlubi ayesekupumeni komlambo onguMzinyati – Buffalo ese Mgeni naseNdumeni. AmaBele ayemi kwisixaba soTukela, iNadi asingisa kwintaba yeLenge" (Kawa 2011, 39). Kawa also attempts to identify the royal houses – ubukhosi- of the various clans – this is important for the very existence of Mfengu royal lineages, distinct from the Xhosa, in part explained their pledge of allegiance to the British in 1835.

Kawa then accounts for the migrations of these clans towards the Cape colony, and he ascribes the dispersal of these abaMbos to attacks by Matiwane against the Hlubi and his killing of their king Mthimkhulu. He gives four accounts of the Mthimkhulu-Matiwane episode, two from missionaries, and two from Africans (Kawa 2011, 42). Kawa makes no commitment to one version or the other of Mtimkulu's death, but he does infer that it was after the episode that the Hlubi were dispersed and that these are the clans that called themselves Mfengu in his day.²

Importantly, Kawa disputed the idea that the abaMbo clans were dispersed by Shaka himself, and argues that Shaka went after Matiwane after the Hlubi had been devastated:

Zasezisuka zibaleka, zicitakala zonke izizwe zabaMbo. Ibali liti uTshaka, owayengu Napoleon womzantsi Afrika, esakuva ukuba u Matiwana umbulele u Mtimkulu waqumba wazifunza ezake izimpi ku Mangwane ukuze acitakale nje. Ayisekwa pezu kwenene into eti aba Mbo bacitwa ezweni labo ngu Tshaka. Andiyipiki into yokuba u Tshaka wayengesiso isiralarume esatshabalalisa kwesi gidi – 1 000 000 – Nantsi into endiyitetyayo: AmaZizi ama-Bele, ama Hlubi, ama Zotsho, ama Bhaca nezinye izizwe zaba Mbo ezilapa kwelilizwe ngoku, ezibizwa ngegama lobu Mfengu azicitangwa ngu Tshaka konkena, zacitakala mva kokubadwa kuka Mtimkulu ngu Matiwana. (Kawa 2011, 43)

² Mthimkulu's died in 1819.

Thus while Kawa draws on missionary and settler exaggerations about Shaka in relation to how may he killed, in the above argument he explicitly disputes any analysis that blames Shaka for the Mfengu dispersals.

Kawa describes the devastated condition of various abaMbo clans as they fled stating, hunger forced them to subsist on plant roots along the way: “Liti iBali bati bewuwela umlambo onguMkomazi babe sebefile lipango, kuba kaloku babehamba sebe sidla – Yo! Udaka nengcambu zemiti neyemifino” (Kawa 2011, 43) Eventually, some passed through the land of the Mpondo and the Thembu during the reigns of King Faku and King Ngubengcuka respectively as Kawa states that “bapatwa kakuhle kanye ngobubele nguNgubengcuka, uMhlekezazi (Ngubengcuka died in 1830). Some he traces to Lesotho. Maxengana (2012, 52) notes that “Kawa lists all the chiefs of the different nations of abaMbo and their genealogies, he mentions where each resided before their dispersal”. The picture painted by Kawa is “that abaMbo/amaMfengu did not arrive in a whole body in Gcalekaland, some came as individuals or in small leaderless groups, while others came in large groups with hereditary leaders” (Maxengana 2012, 58).

Kawa makes it clear that a large remnant of abaMbo of the Mlambo-Hlubi clan led by Goceni and Mavundlela were the ones who ended up in the Gcaleka Xhosa territories under King Hintsa, where Hintsa’s is described as receiving them with sympathy: “Uninzi lwaba-Mbo lwahamba lwaya kwaGcaleka, apo bati befika babesebatiywa igama elitsha lobu Mfengu ngabafo bakwa Mlambo-Hlubi oGoceni noMavundlela. Eyivile imvela-pi yabo uMhlekezazi u Hintsa, wabangenisa ekaya ngemvelwano entle wababiza ngokuti ngabantwana bako kwabo” (Kawa 2011, 44). On arrival amongst the Gcaleka, abaMbo royals were given land and accorded privileges by Hintsa while ordinary Mfengu were assimilated through ukukhonza and the practice of ukusisa (Kawa 2011). Maxengana (2011, 60) describes their assimilation thus “On the cultural front, in due course amaMfengu were assimilating into amaXhosa. For example, assimilated Dlamini-Zizi became amaGcaleka of the Dlamini-Zizi clan. AmaMfengu were required to adopt some amaGcaleka customs, but, while modification of particular customs may have been regretted, they were not particularly drastic.”

The term ‘mfengu’ was adopted upon their arrival into Xhosa territories when the refugee clans were asked where they were coming from and the answer they gave was “Siyamfenguza” which

meant they were in need of assistance and seeking to some kind service to reciprocate (Kawa 2011, 47). This explanation of the origins of the term ‘mfengu’ appears to have been accepted by Kawa and others, including the missionary writer Joseph Whiteside who likely repeated what African informants had told him. Newspaper editor William Gqoba had also given this explanation in 1888, stating that

Eli gama mhla lafika, lafika no Goceni iDladla, ehamba nomnye. Bati ba kubuzwa apo bavela kona bati - Siyamfenguza, kwase kusuleleka izizwe ngezizwe, nezo bezicita ezinye ukuze zimfenguze, ndawonye nezazingatshongo kwa nezingamfenguzanga kweli lasema-Xoseni. Naleyo into seli jekiwe. Iti enye incwadi yababalisi, eli gama liti Mfengu liteta ukuti yinja, into ke naleyo engekoyo kanye. Ukumfenguza kukucitakala, kukuswela ikaya, nento yokuzinceda. Nanko ukumfenguza.” (quoted in Bradford and Qotole 2008, 81)

This name came with Goceni the Dladla, travelling with someone else. When asked where they came from they said – ‘We are ‘mfenguza-ring’, then it influenced other nations, even those conquering others began to mfenguza, including those who never said so even those who did not mfenguza here amongst amaXhosa. And as such it has become transformed. A certain book of accounts states that this word means ‘a dog’, there is no such thing. To ‘mfenguza’ is to be dispersed, to have neither a home nor the means to assist yourself. That is to mfenguza.

Writing in 1903, Isaiah Bud-Mbelle (1903, 37) also accepted this explanation and further argued that there exists a distinction between the broad term ‘mfengu’ and the actual abaMbo clan names:

The term Ama-Mfengu is a conventional epithet, first applied by the Fingoes to themselves in reply to the Kaffirs’ query ‘What do you want?’ Siyamfenguza, which signifies ‘We seek service,’ implying at the same time total destitution of the person who uses it. The word amamfengu will accordingly mean, ‘destitute people in search of service,’ and correctly characterises their condition when they arrived amongst the ama-Xosa. Their proper tribal (as well as their clanish) epithets they still retain up to this day. They call themselves ‘aba-Mbos.’

The image of King Hintsu in Kawa’s Work

Having established the general explanation for the dispersal and migration of abaMbo to the Eastern Cape, Kawa's book then tackles the key point of contention he had with colonial missionary depictions of Hintsza's leadership and the reason for the Mfengu exodus from his guardianship. It seems clear at this juncture in *Ibali lamaMfengu* that correcting the depiction of Hintsza is a key political objective of the book. D.D.T. Jabavu, Kawa's editor, highlighted the positive depiction of Hintsza's leadership as a key element of why Kawa's work is valuable, "Ndiyishiyela kwabanolwazi indawo yokuncoma umsebenzi obanzi Kunene kamfi uKawa nokuhamba nzima kwake kulo lonke ilizwe ukuwaqokelela amanqaku elibali ade wafa ekwezohambo. Okokwam ndiyayibulela kakulu into yokuba umfi ayibeke ngendlela eyinyaniso indawo yokuba amaMfengu awazange apatwe ngokwama koboka nguKumkani obekekileyo uHintsza..." A negative image of Hintsza had been spread by the settler press in Grahamstown in the 1830s and in the book *History of AbaMbo* by Ayliff and Whiteside (Webster 1991).

Probably not too long after the abaMbo had themselves arrived at Hintsza's place, around 1827, the Methodist missionary John Ayliff arrived into Gcaleka territory and was permitted to open up a church mission by Hintsza (Ayliff and Whiteside 1912, 20; Maxengana 2012). Hintsza had initially been friendly to Ayliff, as Webster (1991, 107) describes;

During Ayliff's entire period at Butterworth, Hintsza allowed him occasionally to preach to large gatherings at the royal komkhulu, and he was unhampered in his itinerant proselytising. From 1832, though, Hintsza began to become upset with Ayliff's challenges to his authority." Ayliff's main success was amongst the Mfengu, unsurprising because of their general state of displacement, they were responsive to the missionary presence "The Fingos crowded the little church door. In their bondage, they eagerly listened to the News of Salvation for the poorest and most degraded. Their children attended the Day and Sabbath Schools, and acquired the wonderful art of reading from the printed page. (Ayliff and Whiteside 1912, 21)

However, Ayliff's arrival destabilised Hintsza's authority over his incorporated subjects and it is likely that he would have been unhappy with Ayliff's growing importance to Mfengu converts. In his missionising of the Mfengu, Ayliff began to construct and communicate, to the colony, an image of an oppressed people held in servitude by Hintsza and the Gcaleka,

A resident population settled on the station, desirous of hearing the Word of God. Occasionally, Hintsa entered the church when service was being held, would listen to a few words, and then leave muttering, ‘This word may suit my dogs, the Fingos, but I and my people will not have it.’ (Ayliff and Whiteside 1912, 21)

Maxengana (2012, 63) argues that “there was a marked deterioration in the relations between Hintsa, the missionary and Mfengu, especially those residing at the mission station. Hintsa’s change in attitude may have been caused by extraneous factors, including the deteriorating relationship between whites and the amaXhosa west of the Kei. In case of an eruption of another war, Hintsa had to secure his own chiefdom.” Hintsa’s fear of imminent war was well founded given the aggressive expansionism of settler-colonists in Grahamstown (Webster 1991).

According to Moyer (1976, 11) in early 1835 a faction of Mfengu chiefs sent a delegation to the Governor Benjamin D’Urban to petition him to accept the Mfengu into the colony, a request he granted on the grounds of British colonial interests, Ayliff’s portrayal of subjected Mfengu facilitated provided justification. The self-serving actions by Ayliff and the colony is why Kawa used *Ibali lamaMfengu* to critique the portrayal of ‘oppressed’ Mfengu under a despotic Hintsa and used oral history to dispute this version:

Ititshara zam ezandinika isiseko endakela kuso eli Bali azizanga zandixelela ngabukoboka bamaMfengu kuma Xosa, zingazange zindibalisele nangampato imbi eyayisenziwa ngu Mbuso wama Xosa kuma Mfengu; ngoko ke ndifikelela kwisigqibo sokuba wawumhle u Mbuso wama-Xosa. (Kawa 2011, 44)

My teachers who gave me a foundation for this history did not tell me about the enslavement of the Mfengu amongst the Xhosa; they did not tell me about bad treatment perpetrated by the kingdom of the Xhosa to the Mfengu, thus I come to the conclusion that the rule of amaXhosa was good.

While Kawa (2011, 45) conceded that there may have been some maltreatment as Ayliff described, he felt that it was within the general conflicts that occur between human beings. AbaMbo royals were treated well, to the extent that Sarili son of Hintsa was told to treat them as kin, as far as Kawa was concerned

Nokuba ke ngaba wayembi uHintsa kwisi Mfengu esininzi wayemhle ko Njokweni, koMabandla, koMhlambiso noMatomela nditsho kuba aba wabapata njenge nkosi, wabanika imihlaba amabeme kuyo nesizwe sabo. (Kawa 2011, 45)

Even if Hintsa was unfriendly to the general Mfengu he was good to Njokweni Mabandla, Mhlambiso, Matomela and he treat them as kings, and gave them lands so that they could rule their own fiefs.

Amongst the ordinary Mfengu, Kawa (2011, 45), reports that when they were mistreated, legend had it that Hintsa asked if they were not capable of defending themselves as they would have in their home of origin, the implication being that, under Hintsa, the Mfengu had full rights to defend their being and property:

U Mr Labase omdala oyinkosana yakwa Mashiyi uti ‘u Hintsa wayenembi, wayemhle kuba citakali.’ Kuti ngenye imini kubeko isikalazo esenziwa ngama Mfengu atile wayesiti ayabetwa ngamaXosa. U Mhlehazi, u Hintsa upendule ngalamazwi, “naningemadoda na maxaka ako kwetu elizweni lenu? Elu Tukela ayengeko na amahlathi anentonga? Nabo banemizimba babeteni besakuni beta. (Kawa 2011, 45)

Mr Labase a prince of the Mashiyi says, ‘Hintsa was not mean spirited to the refugees.’ It was said on one occasion when there was a complaint from the Mfengu saying they were being beaten by the Xhosa, his Highness Hintsa replied with these words ‘Were you not men in the land of your origin? At this Tukela were there no forests with sticks. They also have bodies, beat them also if they beat you.

Furthermore, elites of the abaMbo clans had been made amaphakathi, royal councilors, by Hintsa, some of which Kawa (2011, 46) claims were so satisfied with their life and fortunes under Hintsa that they did not leave when segments of abaMbo left with the British military for Peddie.

In the political haste to defend Hintsa, Kawa’s account overlooks the differentiation of social status and class between powerful and ordinary Mfengu. We do not hear much from Kawa on the experience of the ordinary Mfengu, some who may have genuinely had miserable experiences as outsiders to Gcaleka society especially when they were accused of being the source of witchcraft and other social maladies (Maxengana 2012, 61). The absence of these layers of history

demonstrate that Kawa's intent was largely to tackle the missionary narrative of Hintsa, not to write a comprehensive history of the Mfengu's years amongst the Gcaleka Xhosa. The work thus suffers severe limitations for his choice not venture to tackle these other historical elements.

Having put to rest the question of the treatment of the Mfengu under Hintsa, Kawa offers an analysis for why the Mfengu moved out of Gcaleka custodianship and chose to pledge allegiance to the British in 1835. From Kawa's perspective, the historic Mfengu pledge of allegiance to the British on 14 May 1835, under the milkwood tree at Fort Peddie needs to be understood within the context of the abaMbo clans seeking to recover their prior independence. Kawa (2011, 46-47) states that the heads of the departing Mfengu did not leave because of poor treatment, but because the British promised land and a restoration of their royalty in exchange for oath to never attack the colony, an alliance that would prove disastrous for the Mfengu in Kawa's view:

...uti u Nkosi Mbovane Mabandla: 'Into eyabangela ukuba u Mabandla no Njokweni nezinye inkosi nesizwe bemke kwaGcaleka asiyiyo mpato-mbi yo Mbuso wakwa Hintsa, batenjiswa ukupiwa umhlaba noku buyiselwa kubukosi babo njengoko babunjalo eluTukela. Ukuzipata ngobukosi bako, nokuba nomhlaba olaula kuwo akunjengoku konza. Umntu owayesenza lonteto ngu Mfundisi uElefu – Ayliff- etolikelwa ngu Harmanus Matroos – u Ngxukumeshe.' Ngoko kubetwa ngalo 'mfe ipindiwe', akohliseka amaMfengu. (Kawa 2011, 46-47)

According to Nkosi Mbovane Mabandla: 'What led Mabandla and Njokweni and other inkosi and clans to leave kwaGcaleka was not bad treatment of the rule of Hintsa, they were promised land and to be restored their royal status as it was when they were in the Tukela. The prospect of regaining your royalty and to have your own land where you rule is not the same of being a tributary class. The person who did this was the Reverend Ayliff, who was being translated for by Hermanus Matroos, Ngxukumeshe' That is how the Mfengu were deceived.

Kawa (2011, 51) describes the exodus of the Mfengu as a voluntary act of allegiance to the colony, and as such in their being led out of the Gcaleka territory, are said to have sung songs that described their collective state of mind such as "Kade sikamba" – 'We have been long travelling'. Kawa's description of the way the Mfengu left in 1835 is in agreement with missionary accounts of what happened. Nhanha and Peires (2011, xi) argue that "Kawa accept

the Ayliff and Whiteside version of the Mfengu exodus to Ngqushwa (Peddie) and the Mfengu oath under the milkwood tree.” According to Kawa (2011, 51), Colonel Somerset who was supervising the Mfengu migration, let them rest along the way, “akabangxamisanga eluhambeni, bahamba kancinci bemane bepumla.” This narrative underscores the notion that the Mfengu voluntarily went on this journey, leaving their Gcaleka Xhosa hosts, to ally with the colony.

Kawa (2011, 53) emphasises that acquiring land of their own was the primary motive for the Mfengu fighting on the side of the British in subsequent wars: “...amaRarabe ati alwa nomzi wakulo John Bull, aza amaMfengu anceda ama Ngesi ngoko Mnqopiso... kuba kaloku kwakusitiwa balwela umhlaba wabo, kwanomnye abaya kuwunika ekupeleni kwe mfazwe.” Kawa’s point however, was to demonstrate that the British were untrustworthy, in his view, they promised one thing only to take away another. In 1878 the British enacted a policy of disarmament that barred Africans from owning guns; this included the Mfengu who had fought alongside the British in every war against the Xhosa since their 1835 pledge. Moyer (1976, 472-473) argues that this was received as an act of betrayal by the Mfengu who were left unable to defend themselves from incursions by other Africans and also showed them that they were no political equals to the British. Kawa (2011, 69) notes this as a turning point in Mfengu conceptions of the British, “Ukuhluthwa kwemipu ...kwadala isihluku ezisasibambileyo nanamhla oku, esabangela ukuba umntu ontsundu apelelwe kukumkolelwa umlungu, angasamtembiyo nanamhlanje oku.”

Kawa’s book thus ultimately lays the blame for the later defeated status of the Mfengu under the British, on the naiveté of Mfengu leaders who left the Gcaleka to specifically follow the missionary Ayliff whom he saw as having deceived the Mfengu with promises of land and return of kingship. Kawa argues that Ayliff’s narrative of Mfengu mistreatment must be received “*cum grano salis*”, with a pinch of salt, arguing that the narrative is aimed at dividing Africans. Kawa does not let Ayliff and Whiteside off lightly, stating sarcastically that whites cannot be changed- “inyaniso emsulwa yile: umlungu ngumlungu” – the truth is “a white person is a white person” (Kawa 2011, 47).

The Dismissal of Kawa by the Anti-Mfecane School

Even though Kawa’s account damns the British and exculpates Hintsa, and was favourably viewed as a source by Moyer in 1976, Kawa’s account came to be dismissed and indeed, rejected

by the South African academic mainstream in the 1980s and 1990s. It is only more recently that Maxengwana (2012) comprehensively engaged *Ibali lamaMfengu*, unpacked and contextualised the clan histories it documents. During the height of Apartheid, Julian Cobbing's (1988) major deconstruction of the Shakacentric Mfecane, led radical academics to revise the colonial narrative on the death of Hintsa in relation to the 1835 exodus of the Mfengu to Peddie. A new generation of white scholars within universities attempted to deconstruct areas of scholarship, such as the Mfecane', which had been used to serve colonial and Apartheid propaganda.

Underlying this new anti-Mfecane historiography was a deep and noble suspicion of colonial sources. Where Eastern Cape history was considered, new Mfengu histories were generated by the likes of Alan Webster (1991), Timothy Stapleton (1995), Poppy Fry (2007, 2010) and Jurg Richner (2004) who approached the history of the Mfengu to engage Cobbing's various anti-Mfecane theses. While these new works generated much scholarship, none of this scholarship ever bothered to tackle African perspectives or sources with any seriousness. No doubt, language was a barrier. However, instead of the anti-Mfecane historians conceding that their lack of proficiency in African languages were a barrier, they dismissed African writers wholesale and argued that oral histories had become too tainted by missionary narratives to be trusted (Stapleton 1995, Richner 2004). Without re-hashing the details of the voluminous Mfecane debate, it is important to explore the historiographical consequence of the dismissal of the likes of Kawa by the academic mainstream.

The most comprehensive and perhaps also most influential work on Mfengu history within the anti-Mfecane school, is Alan Webster's The War of 1835 and the 'Emancipation of the Fingo', a 1991 Masters thesis produced at Rhodes University, the hub of anti-Mfecane historiography. Webster's thesis attempted to re-write the history of the Mfengu in light of the Cobbing (1988) hypothesis in Mfecane As Alibi which rejected the explanation that the Mfengu were Mfecane refugees. Cobbing (1988, 487) also went so far as to reject the word 'Mfecane' itself, arguing that "...Walker coined the term 'mfecane' in 1928. Walker's neologism, meaning 'the crushing', has no root in any African language, but it crudely conveyed the myth of a cataclysmic period of black-on-black destruction in the era of Shaka." However, a reading of Xhosa newspaper sources shows that William Gqoba (2015, 349) used the word 'Mfecane' in 1887 to describe Matiwane's forces: "ezi zizwe za Bungune azinako kanye kulwa ne Mfecane." Bud-Mbelle (1903, 38)

defined it as thus “Fecane is the root of imfecane the Kafir word for desolator or marauder.” Walker (1968, 175) merely transliterated the word into English and added his own new twist to the definition.

These sorts of speculative leaps about African language meanings are replete in the anti-Mfecane school. For example, Webster (1991, 132) ascribed the word ‘mfengu’ to colonial invention rather than to African linguistic invention to describe a condition of the time, stating that

The etymology of the term ‘Fingo’ remains elusive. ‘Mfengu’, the word used to describe the Fingo in modern historiography, is assumed to derive from the verb ukumfenguza meaning to wander about seeking service. This supposedly alluded to the social status of all the Fingo. But if, as Whiteside claimed, the British had saved the Fingo from poverty amongst the Gcaleka and given them all land, why should they need employment, and why should they be destitute wanderers within the Colony? ‘Mfengu’ only became standardised in the 1960s as an Africanisation of ‘Fingo’, and the term ‘Fingo’ has thus been retained in this thesis, as the anglicised word for a British creation.

Stapleton (1995, 360) also advanced the colonial invention thesis;

... British officials at the Cape and white missionaries such as Ayliff invented the orthodox account of the Fingo to disguise their aggression as philanthropy. Subsequently, over a century of colonial-sponsored tribalization produced a distinct pseudo-ethnicity known as the Fingo... paved the way for future colonial conquest in that region. Furthermore, throughout the entire twentieth century the Fingo identity, complete with its fictional history, was institutionalised by the South African educational system along with government retribalization and homeland policies.

By rejecting the possible African origins of the word, the historian had to go down a ‘rabbithole’ of circular logic in order to account for the successful invention and imposition of a giant fiction onto Africans of that time. In contrast, Kawa’s narrative offer a sensible explanation- the Mfengu were destitute because they were displaced refugees. In Kawa’s analysis, the missionary Ayliff and British military exploited this sense of displacement when they persuaded the Mfengu to voluntarily become allies. The voluntarism, and the wish for an independence lost, provides a

better explanation for why the Mfengu communities were easily mobilised to fight again and again on the side of the British in subsequent wars against the Xhosa.

At the core of Cobbing-Webster's thesis is the contention that the majority of the Mfengu who left Gcaleka territory in 1835 were actually not originally refugees of the Mfecane, but largely Gcalekas who were being captured in a labour raid by the British. Thus Webster posits that (1991, 7) "the majority were Thembu, Mpondo and Gcaleka from the Wesleyan mission stations east of the Kei River. These men, women and children - less than a thousand - were provided with land at Peddie in May 1835. A second group, similar in constitution, was settled on the west bank of the Tyhume River in August. By October 1835, both groups were being identified as 'Fingo'." 'Fingos', argued historians, were disparate groups of Xhosas and Ngwane war prisoners, militarily coerced to work for the colonists" Webster's (1991, 7) further states, "The military and collaborator Fingo totalled approximately five thousand in 1835. The majority of the Fingo who came into Albany in 1835, however, were labourers presented to farmers in the eastern districts to solve the serious labour shortage. For decades there had been a lack of labour in the Cape in general, and especially in the east."

Yet, Kawa details the Mfengu abaMbo clans that left and noted that others stayed with Hintsá. Kawa's voluntary migration thesis is supported by Maxengana who argues that

Kawa, K.K. Ncwana and others expended much energy identifying the precise nations which later became known as amaMfengu, and everyone of them originated in KZN. Kawa was born in 1854, a mere twenty years later, and was well familiar with the generation which endured the Mfecane. He was moreover profoundly disillusioned with colonialism, and we may be sure that he would have blamed the British for the enslavement of the amaMfengu if any such had taken place. (Maxengana 2012, 51)

No doubt, of course, as Moyer (1976), Bouch (1992) and Fry (2007, 2010) show, over time, the term 'Mfengu' came to encompass other displaced segments of Africans facing the economic vagaries of African subordination within the colony. However, Kawa does not record any oral memory of a giant labour raid by the British of Gcaleka women and children; that would have surely caused isikhálo – a massive traumatic mourning. The narratives of Mfengu trauma relate entirely to their displacement from 'eMbo', their Thukela home of origin.

Perhaps, the greatest historiographical travesty committed by the anti-Mfecane school was the misconstrual of the idiomatic function of clan names as historical sources. Stapleton (1995, 359) expressed a skepticism of oral history sources: “There is a disturbing trend emerging in South African history. Unquestioning acceptance of African oral tradition threatens to become a requirement of politically correct scholarship. The African voice knows all.” Stapleton (1995, 365) questioned the validity of abaMbo clan names in so far as they distinguished the Mfengu from the Xhosa. Stapleton, an English speaker, disagreed with scholar Cecil Manona, a Xhosa speaker, when Manona asserted that “clans never change!”

But of course Manona was largely correct, and therein lies the significance of Kawa’s methodology of tracing clan specifics as part of his historiography. Stapleton demonstrated a misunderstanding of the vernacular function of clan names, most likely because he did not understand their encoded functions. Clan names are closely linked to ritual, praise recitations, and other custom-bound elements of clanship and belonging that are linked to many elements of social custom and socialization within the southern African kinship system of ubuhlobo (relationality). Clan names do not change wholesale, in so far as they are linked to totems, taboos, rituals, and social obligations that are specific to clans. Rather, they change organically through gradual additions and deletions over substantially longer periods of time. Kawa’s ability to name specific abaMbo clans and royals, owed to his understanding of these oral forms, and profoundly challenges the ‘invention thesis’, which also propagated the “idea that amaMfengu had no authentic chiefs” (Maxengana 2012, 58).

Importantly, in *Ibali lamaMfengu*, Kawa’s (2011, 47) questions of abaMbo’s origins are idiomatically rooted in the vernacular concept of *ubuni* – a reference to customary-ontological belonging, which led him to ask - “neligama lobuMfengu latetwa ngamaHlubiabati besaku buzwa imvela-phi, *bengamanina?* (emphasis addeed).” Bud-Mbelle’s (1903) statement that the word ‘Mfengu’ was distinct from the abaMbo ‘clan names’ speaks to this matter. If anything, the retention of clan names remained one of the strong forms of epistemic resistance to the colonial onslaught.

Finally, anti-Mfecane historians were concerned with the fact that the narratives of educated Africans mirrored those of missionaries. Indeed, this is not necessarily because missionaries invented entire African histories, but also because they based many of their writings on oral

accounts by African informants (Tisani 2001). Thus it is that Kawa's own narrative mirrors Whiteside's because Kawa was in fact an informant for Whiteside as Moyer (1976, 37) documents; "Whiteside consulted three Mfengu in preparing his book. Richard Tainton Kawa of Lydenburg, Chief Zibi Sidinane of Mt. Fletcher and I Bud Mbelle of Kimberly. However, he does not attribute specific comments in the book to them."

The missionary narrative of the Mfengu was thus co-produced with Africans who later went on to write their own versions. Over time, these interactions produced texts that are historiographical palimpsests of the voices of the coloniser and colonised. Whiteside (Ayliff and Whiteside 1912, 1) reveals his dependence on the African input in *History of AbaMbo* when he states that "The earlier portions of this story have come down to us in the form of narratives told by old men who had good memories." Unhappy with Whiteside's rendition of the voice of Africans, Kawa, with the support of other educated Africans, took it upon himself to write the alternative Xhosa-language history of the Mfengu explicitly intended for Africans by an African.

Conclusion

Kawa's *Ibali lamaMfengu* demonstrates a methodology of vernacular historiography that was being produced by other African writers who were publishing in the early decades of the 20th century. Many of these books, including *Ibali lamaMfengu* were characterised by their use of African languages and vernacular oral forms. As is clear in *Ibali lamaMfengu*, these African written histories were a syncretic mix of narratives that the writers were exposed to at the time. As such, histories such as *Ibali lamaMfengu* appear as mixture of prose, clan genealogies, praise poetry, biblical mythologies, and documentary evidence. Be that as it may, it is clear that Kawa wrote *Ibali lamaMfengu* with a clear political intent to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the British and rescue the image of King Hintsa from what considered to be missionary distortions. Kawa's version of Mfengu history is at odds with the later anti-Mfecane version propounded by Cobbing and Webster. That these historians failed to engage these works raises questions about the general pattern of South African academic historiography which for the most part has not systematically engaged early African writers. The result of this is that there is little academic recognition and engagement with what one might broadly call an African Nationalist historiography into which people like Kawa fit. This is a glaring vacuum in the South African

academy and must be rectified through the re-centering of African works such as *Ibali lamaMfengu*.

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