

Language, power and politics in colonial Natal:

John Colenso, Magama Fuze and the Matshana Inquiry

by Milner Snell

From 2 August to 6 September 1875, an inquiry was held at Government House in Pietermaritzburg into the activities seventeen years earlier of John Shepstone, brother of Theophilus Shepstone, the powerful Secretary for Native Affairs.¹ Misjan, as he was widely known, had concocted a duplicitous, but seemingly simple, plan to arrest inkosi Matshana kaMondise of the Sithole for murder. At a peaceful meeting held in front of the iziThuli homestead at Nomakhabela in 1858, Shepstone attempted to arrest the inkosi. Matshana escaped, but thirty of his men were killed in the ensuing chaos. Theophilus Shepstone wrote a report on the incident in which he exonerated his brother by distorting events to portray

Matshana and his men as the aggressors. Shepstone's account was accepted as accurate among settlers and imperial officials until the inquiry.

The aims of this article are twofold. First, to show that Shepstone used his linguistic abilities and political position to ensure that oral accounts remained unknown to settlers and white officials, while keeping his written account in English hidden from the African population. Second, to explore how by the 1870s the dynamics in the Colony had changed. There were now a small number of people, including John Colenso and Magama Fuze, who used their contacts among African communities and their linguistic skills to put into writing the oral testimonies of the men

who had been at Nomakhabela. Despite intimidation by the Shepstones, they used these written accounts, which had greater permanence and were considered more important in the colonial world, to establish narratives different from the official one. The events surrounding the inquiry further highlight the role of the Kholwa as intermediaries between the colonial world and the chiefdoms of Natal, and the increasing influence of government indunas and policemen in the politics of the Colony.

Nomakhabela, 16 March 1858

In December 1857, Ncanda reported to the magistrate at Ladysmith, Thomas Kelly, that her husband, Sigathiya, had been fatally assaulted by three of Matshana's men for causing the illness of Ntwetwe through witchcraft. Kelly demanded that Matshana report to the magistracy to explain what had transpired. After threats from Kelly, Matshana agreed to hand over the culprits, but would not report himself. His refusal to meet the magistrate was probably motivated by an accusation three years earlier by colonial officials that he had murdered one of his uncles, as well as a concern that the policemen at the Ladysmith magistracy were misrepresenting his role in the killing for their own ends.² In January 1858, John Shepstone led a force of colonial volunteers and 500 men from the Hlubi and Ngwe chiefdoms against the Sithole at KwaJobe on the assumption that Matshana and his followers were planning a rebellion. There is no evidence to support the idea of an uprising. Matshana's men had gathered around him to protect their chief, and when colonial forces arrived his supporters fled in an attempt to avoid them.³ Shepstone's force seized 7 000 head of livestock and torched

homesteads, although Matshana escaped to Zululand. Theophilus Shepstone visited the area and informed the Sithole elders that they could reap their crops, but if they wanted to retain their land at KwaJobe, Matshana would have to hand himself over to the magistrate. Under pressure from his followers, Matshana agreed to meet John Shepstone. There were two unsuccessful attempts at a meeting as Matshana was suspicious of Misjan's intentions and would not meet him without a bodyguard. Eventually, Matshana met Shepstone on 16 March 1858 at a camp he had set up at the iziThuli homestead at Nomakhabela.

On their way to Nomakhabela, Matshana and his followers, approximately 300 men, came across two messengers from Shepstone who told them that they needed to lay down their spears.⁴ Matshana was suspicious about the request and sent two of his party to see if a military force had accompanied Misjan. They did not encounter armed men, but spoke to Shepstone who repeated his order that Matshana should not come to the meeting with weapons. Matshana hesitated, but Thole, his father's chief induna, convinced him to continue so that the 'matter will come to an end'.⁵ The young men were still reluctant to lay down their arms, but the older men persuaded them to do so. They left their spears, except three that Matshana's retainer, Nomqoza, carried for him and a small travelling shield Matshana kept to protect himself from the sun, about 500 metres from the meeting place. The men arrived at iziThuli at three in the afternoon carrying only their sticks.⁶

Shepstone was sitting on a chair with a skin spread out in front of him. Seated next to him were his indunas, Nozitshina, Setshatha and Thiba. Matshana

and his party sat opposite Shepstone, facing the afternoon sun. Matshana, still suspicious of Shepstone's intentions, was kneeling opposite Misjan, moving restlessly. The three men who had killed Sigathiya were called to relate their story. They insisted that they had assaulted Sigathiya with Matshana's knowledge. The chief's *induna*, Mphako, stood up and faced the men, calling them liars. Mphako's confrontation was interrupted by the sound of horses as a group of mounted men, who had been out of sight in the homestead behind Shepstone, rode to the rear of Matshana's followers to cut them off from their weapons. As this was happening, Shepstone uttered, 'suka umbambe' (up and seize him) and Nozitshina and Setshatha attempted unsuccessfully to arrest Matshana.⁷ Shepstone took out a double-barrelled shotgun that he had hidden under the skin, and fired at Matshana.⁸ He missed and struck Deke below the knee. He fired again at Matshana as he was scrambling over his men to escape. The shot went wide and on this occasion hit Mathonga, son of Mbengana. Matshana's *induna*, Sondlovu, rallied his men to fight with sticks and stones against Shepstone's force. Matshana's men made for a valley behind the camp to escape the colonial troops who followed them and a skirmish ensued in which thirty of Matshana's men were killed. In the mêlée, Mudemude stabbed Misjan in the side with a spear he had pulled out of his own arm. Matshana made his escape across the Thukela back to the Zulu kingdom.

The cover-up, 17 March 1858–16 January 1874

A day after the fatal meeting, Misjan wrote a report from Nomakhabela about what had happened for Kelly to forward

to the Lieutenant-Governor. He wrote that when his men attempted to arrest Matshana 'short assegais were raised on all sides to rescue him, and one of my men narrowly escaped being stabbed'.⁹ Matshana escaped by scrambling over those seated behind him and Shepstone's men gave chase, 'some without arms', and a general skirmish ensued 'my 30 against his 300'.¹⁰ He reported that 'notwithstanding all my efforts to prevent bloodshed, several of his [Matshana's] men lost their lives'.¹¹ He was stabbed and 'although he had a loaded gun and brace of pistols at the time, I permitted the man to escape, wishing thereby to show them that Matshana's apprehension was my only object'.¹²

While he lay in a hut at Nomakhabela recovering from his stab wound, Misjan sent a messenger to Pietermaritzburg to inform his brother of what had happened. The Secretary for Native Affairs was furious and a witness later recalled that he blamed Misjan for what had occurred, exclaiming 'I hoped that Mr. John had left off by this time doing such things as these, whereas Mr. John does evil practices of such a character'.¹³ Regardless of his response, Shepstone had 'to clear up after his brother's botched attempt at an arrest'.¹⁴ In May, Lieutenant-Governor Scott sent a formal report to London. Scott's covering letter laid out how Matshana had defied the authority of colonial officials. He emphasised that the case involved witchcraft, which demanded a response to stop the practice spreading. Enclosed in the Lieutenant-Governor's despatch was Theophilus Shepstone's report, loosely based on what Misjan had written to Kelly. He did not mention that his brother had concealed a weapon at a peaceful meeting or that he had shot at Matshana. Jeff Guy points out that

Shepstone 'reversed the account – it was Matshana and his men who had hidden weapons and, at a given word, were to seize John Shepstone'.¹⁵ The attempt to kill Shepstone failed and his men, angry that Misjan had been stabbed, retaliated and killed thirty men. Theophilus Shepstone's distortion of what occurred at Nomakhabela was not only to cover up his brother's actions. He was subject to criticism from white settlers, especially those from the farms and towns of the inland regions of Natal. They resented the establishment of locations by Shepstone, as they believed this deprived them of cheap and plentiful labour, and thus prevented their prosperity.¹⁶ In these circumstances, he put into writing a version of events that shielded him from his critics.

Hundreds of men who had been at the meeting returned to their homesteads at KwaJobe with their own accounts of events. Yet for the next seventeen years Shepstone's written account in English remained hidden from the African population and the oral accounts in Zulu were unknown to settlers and imperial officials. Theophilus Shepstone used his linguistic abilities and political authority to suppress the truth. Guy has convincingly argued that

few of Shepstone's colonial contemporaries had his linguistic skills and Shepstone used his knowledge of African languages to hide the nature of his dealings with Africans from them. At the same time, he used his literacy to keep Africans ignorant of what he was writing in his official correspondence and reports.¹⁷

This enabled him to conceal and obscure African perspectives or reveal them on his own terms. Literate English speakers in turn could not question or challenge his translations and interpretations on

native affairs.¹⁸ He successfully moved between African orality and European literacy.

Shepstone had to ensure that his written account in English was accepted, especially by his superiors, as reliable and honest, while making sure that the Zulu oral accounts did not become known. He used language in his reports to obscure the truth. He would give a great deal of detailed information, which gave the impression of a scrupulously informed writer, but his writings were actually purposely vague.¹⁹ At a vast distance from Natal, imperial officials in London depended on these reports to draw conclusions about events in the Colony. By virtue of his position, Shepstone was considered an authority on native affairs, and with no dissenting voices, his account of what took place at Nomakhabela was accepted as accurate and trustworthy. Those settlers in Natal who took any notice of events accepted the official version.

Besides his use of language, there was for the Africans of Natal a far more threatening dimension to the cover-up. Shepstone kept control of the African population of Natal through intimidation, force and reward. The day-to-day coercion of the black population, Guy argues, was carried out by an extensive network of indunas, court messengers, policemen and colonial-appointed chiefs who monitored and informed on the actions of the African population to Shepstone and other white officials.²⁰ These intermediaries often became wealthy and influential men through receiving land and cattle from Shepstone, extortion, acting as gatekeepers to magistrates and sowing division among loyal chiefs. Shepstone's head induna Ngoza kaLudada, originally a commoner, built up the largest chiefdom in Natal. In the

1860s, Ngoza and many of his followers settled at KwaJobe, where, at the time of the inquiry, many of the men present in 1858 at Nomakhabela were living under the authority of Ngoza's son. On five occasions Shepstone took direct military action against amakhosi he considered recalcitrant. Using white volunteers and depending heavily on African troops, he organised destructive campaigns against the Nhlanguini chiefs Fodo and Sidoyi in 1847 and 1857 respectively, Mdutshane of the Bhaca in 1854, Matshana in 1856 and the Hlubi inkosi Langelibalele in 1874. Taking advantage of the vulnerability of the scattered African homesteads, colonial troops burned huts, looted large numbers of cattle and confiscated land from these chiefdoms. Their amakhosi, often well-known and influential, were forced to surrender or flee beyond the colonial borders to Nomansland or Zululand. These military forays, often to remote parts of the Colony, showed that colonial authority could not be avoided.²¹ The campaigns also demonstrated the benefits of supporting Shepstone, as cattle were distributed to allies and land of exiled amakhosi placed under the authority of indunas. Africans, vulnerable and fearful, but also alert to the rewards of remaining loyal to the colonial government, were dissuaded from questioning the actions of Shepstone and his acolytes, and so what actually happened at Nomakhabela remained hidden until the 1870s.

'Events gradually brought to light', 17 January 1874–1 August 1875

The truth was 'gradually brought to light' as a result of the involvement of Bishop John Colenso in the trial of the Hlubi inkosi Langelibalele kaMtim-

khulu.²² Colenso was consecrated the first Bishop of Natal in 1853 and, after a visit of ten weeks in 1854, took up his position permanently in May 1855. He had been in the Colony for just over two years when the fatal events took place at Nomakhabela. He knew that a commando had gone against the Sithole but 'heard then little or nothing about the details of that affair, and not a word about this attempt at arresting Matshana'.²³ At this stage, still perfecting his Zulu and a relative newcomer to the Colony, Colenso not only accepted and respected Shepstone's opinions about the African population, but also was reliant on him and his indunas for contacts with the chiefs.²⁴

However, by the early 1870s, through his missionary work and a school and printing press he had established at Bishopstowe, Colenso could rely on his own network of contacts, independent of Shepstone, among the African population. Two men, Magesa Fuze and William Ngidi, acted as vital links between Colenso and his African informants. Fuze, son of Magwaza kaMatomela, an elder in the Fuze section of the Ngcobo people, became a pupil at about the age of twelve at the school in 1856.²⁵ Fuze trained as a printer and, even after the school closed down in 1861, stayed on to run the press in the 1860s and 1870s. When Colenso returned to England in May 1862 to fight his excommunication, Fuze oversaw the printing of numerous books that the bishop had prepared before his voyage. Colenso wrote that the books printed by Fuze had 'not only been printed, but corrected and revised, entirely by himself, and there is scarcely a single misprint to be found in any of them'.²⁶ Hlonipha Mokoena argues that by the 1870s Fuze was 'one of Colenso's main sources of

information on African opinion in the colony'.²⁷ William Ngidi had converted to Christianity in the early 1850s under the teachings of American missionaries. He was Colenso's guide and interpreter during his ten-week tour of the Colony in 1854 and later moved to Colenso's settlement at Bishopstowe and helped the bishop to translate the Bible into Zulu.²⁸ It was Ngidi's questioning of the literal accuracy of the Bible that influenced Colenso's biblical criticism in the early 1860s. As a result of his religious enthusiasm, Colenso nominated him to study for the priesthood. In 1867, he left the church and encouraged the embracing of old customs, including polygamy and lobola.²⁹ He remained, however, on good terms with Colenso.

Fuze and Ngidi were part of a small but important number of Christian converts 'who were literate and therefore no longer confined to an oral culture'.³⁰ Natal was one of the most evangelised parts of Africa and the missionaries of various denominations introduced writing at the same time as the Christian gospel. In colonial Natal, the written word was what counted for colonial officials, and so the Kholwa wanted to ensure that the spoken word was put into writing.³¹ The Kholwa, as Mokoena has shown, were intermediaries between the colonial world and traditional society.³² It was, she points out, a paradoxical position, embracing Christianity and literacy, while retaining an intimate knowledge of local oral culture.³³

Colenso, Fuze and Ngidi's ability to move between the literate and oral, and colonial and traditional societies was put to the test during Langalibalele's trial, generally considered by historians as a sham. The prosperity and independence of the Hlubi attracted the envy of white settlers and officials,

who used Langalibalele's supposed refusal to register guns and disobeying orders to report to Pietermaritzburg to break up the chiefdom. For Theophilus Shepstone, the crisis reached a point that demanded a response when his messenger, Mahoyiza, who was sent to deliver an ultimatum to Langalibalele to report to Pietermaritzburg, was allegedly ill treated.³⁴ A force consisting of British troops, colonial volunteers and African levies attempted at the end of October 1873 to arrest Langalibalele. He fled across the Drakensberg into Basutoland and sought refuge with Chief Molapo. Molapo handed Langalibalele over to a detachment of the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police who in turn handed the chief to officials in Natal in December.

On Friday, 16 January 1874, Llangalibalele's trial began in Pietermaritzburg. Colenso was not present for the first day. However, he read a report the next day in the *Times of Natal* about how the government's messengers had been 'stripped of their clothes, prodded every now and then with the points of assegais' and kept without food for several days by Llangalibalele's men.³⁵ Colenso showed the report to Fuze who responded that he had been told by Nofihlela, who had accompanied the messengers, that they had not been ill treated and that Llangalibalele had only insisted that the messengers remove their overcoats. When Colenso asked Fuze why Llangalibalele had made the messengers remove their coats, he replied, 'because of what Mr. John [Shepstone] did to Matshana'.³⁶ Fuze then recounted a story he had heard as a boy from two of Matshana's men, Mpungushe and Mpuphuma, who often visited his father. According to Fuze

Shepstone assured the chief he would not be harmed and through that

enticement Matshana was persuaded and came near, expecting that they would talk over the matter. While they were still delaying – Mr John having sent a force to take post by Matshana's weapons which he and his people had laid down some way off by Mr. John's desire – behold! Mr. John takes out a short [*sic*] gun and tries to shoot Matshana with it; but the gun hit another man. A young man of Matshana's came forward and stabbed Mr. John with an assegai. And so Matshana got the better of them, and crossed the Tugela to Zululand, where he still lives.³⁷

Fuze wrote down the statement in Zulu the next day and added, perhaps with prompting by Colenso, 'that was the "little trick" which was mentioned repeatedly by Langelibalele and his people, referring to Matshana – "We were there at Matshana's affair" – for Langelibalele thought he would be assassinated by Mawiza, as Matshana was nearly by Mr. John'.³⁸

On Sunday 18 January, Colenso told Theophilus Shepstone, then still a close friend, what Fuze had told him about the treatment of the messengers by Langelibalele and that Misjan had drawn a gun at the meeting with Matshana. Shepstone insisted he had never heard the story about the concealed weapon.³⁹ Colenso began to doubt Fuze and asked him to get further information from Nofihlela and, if possible, to find eyewitnesses to what had transpired at Nomakhabela. Nofihlela and Ndabezimbi, also a member of the party sent to Langelibalele, gave Colenso accounts of what had happened. On Sunday 25 January, Colenso repeated their stories to Shepstone. Shepstone, alert to the dangers of Colenso and Fuze continuing to probe what had happened to Matshana and Mahoyiza, replied that

he must examine Colenso's witnesses and 'if they were found to have been maligning a Government messenger and witness, such as Mawiza, they must be severely punished'.⁴⁰ Shepstone had changed tactic from feigning ignorance to intimidating the African witnesses. Colenso

felt that this threat was meant for Magma, more than the other two, and that his position would be very awkward one if the others, however truthful in their original tale, should break down or back out, when confronted not merely with Mawiza, but with the S.N.A. himself and the whole body of Indunas attached to his Office.⁴¹

Without asking the witnesses, Colenso agreed that Shepstone could question them on the condition that if Mahoyiza was found to be lying he would be punished even more severely. That afternoon Colenso visited Langelibalele in the town jail, with Theophilus's son Arthur serving as translator. The chief had not seen Colenso since 1854 and initially did not recognise him. The encounter ended with Colenso assuring the chief he would try to get him out of jail. When Colenso returned to the Shepstone home, he and Theophilus had words about the treatment of Langelibalele. This encounter marked the end of the friendship between Colenso and Shepstone and the relationship would become increasingly hostile.

Colenso's concerns about Shepstone's threats were not unfounded. When the witnesses appeared before Shepstone on Monday 26 January, Ndabezimbi, a dependant of Mahoyiza, sent a message that he was ill and could not attend. On the next day, Ndabezimbi, who changed part of his testimony, and the other three witnesses, with Colenso, appeared in Shepstone's office before

twenty indunas and chiefs, as well as the Attorney-General. The Hlubi witnesses said that the messengers were well treated and Mahoyiza was only ordered to remove his coat. Those present examined Mahoyiza who could not sustain his story and it was clear, according to Fuze, that he 'was a liar'.⁴² Some of the Africans admonished Mahoyiza for misleading Shepstone. Colenso again mentioned the particulars of the meeting between John Shepstone and Matshana. Theophilus replied, according to Colenso, that he 'did not believe' the story and that Fuze's account was hearsay.⁴³

The bishop came to believe that Langalibalele had not reported to Pietermaritzburg because he was, first, scared that he would be subjected to the same treatment that Matshana had received at the hands of John Shepstone; and second, Mahoyiza had lied about his experiences when he delivered the ultimatum. Over the next eighteen months, Colenso and Fuze collected the statements of numerous witnesses who were at Nomakhabela in 1858 and with Langalibalele in 1873. These witnesses were found and gave their testimonies because of Fuze's connections among the chiefdoms of Natal and communities in the Zulu kingdom. He played a key role in finding witnesses that Colenso could use in Langalibalele's defence.⁴⁴ Colenso was assisted in recording some of the testimonies by William Ngidi who knew some of the men who had been at the meeting between Matshana and Shepstone, including Deke, who had been shot by Shepstone. Ngidi wrote down his account and later arranged for him to travel to Bishopstowe to see Colenso.

The fear of the Shepstonses was always present. Nozwenzwe, who had been at the meeting at Nomakhabela,

'shut his mouth resolutely' when Colenso wished to interview him.⁴⁵ Ncamane, who had also been at the meeting and had surrendered to government forces during the campaign against Langalibalele, was in hospital 'sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour'. Fuze took down his statement on 4 July 1874 in which Ncamane recalled that John Shepstone had fired at Matshana. On his release, Ncamane was placed under Shepstone's induna Adam. Colenso heard 'he had been tampered with' and requested that he come to see him.⁴⁶ Ncamane told Colenso that his original statement was correct, but added that a large number of spears had been picked up on the spot where Matshana's men had been seated. Two of Matshana's indunas, Noju and Mabona, were present at Bishopstowe when he said this and vehemently denied his statement, pointing out that if they had spears they would have used them, rather than sticks and stones. When Ncamane returned to Shepstone's farm and Adam heard that he had been to see Colenso a row followed between him and Adam. Ncamane left with his family for Bishopstowe. On 12 August, a policeman from John Shepstone, who was now acting SNA as his brother had left for England, summoned him to appear before John Bird to give a deposition. On the way, Shepstone's induna, Manxele, met him and took him first to the SNA's office. When he came out of Shepstone's office and his son asked what had happened, he replied that he had agreed with John Shepstone that Matshana's men had spears present at the meeting, although they denied it.⁴⁷

While Colenso and Fuze were collecting testimonies from Matshana's men, Langalibalele's trial was taking place in Pietermaritzburg. The death of

white volunteers in the campaign against Langalibalele, which took place at a time of growing racism and economic uncertainty in the Colony, led to intense 'colonial fury' against the chief and the Hlubi.⁴⁸ Colenso expressed his concern about the actions of white volunteers and the injustice of Langalibalele's trial in letters to the Natal press.⁴⁹ Colenso's support for Langalibalele made him increasingly unpopular among the white population; and as a result missionaries and settlers, who had at times clashed with the Shepstones themselves, were not prepared to assist the bishop to reveal the truth of what had happened to Matshana. Both missionaries working at KwaJobe would not help Colenso because of his views on Langalibalele. Reverend Robertson, the missionary at KwaMagwaza in Zululand where Matshana and some of his followers were living, used the excuse of an ill wife as the reason why he was unable to write down Matshana's account when Colenso asked him to do so.⁵⁰ According to Colenso, a 'thoroughly respectable colonist' while visiting Zululand had heard an account of what happened from Matshana himself, but refused to put down on paper what the chief had told him 'as he had no sympathy with any efforts made on behalf of Langalibalele and his people'.⁵¹

Colenso spent most of 1874 preparing appeals for Langalibalele who had been found guilty. (Guy has chronicled Fuze and Ngidi's involvement and the unsuccessful attempts by Theophilus Shepstone to intimidate them.)⁵² As part of this campaign, Colenso had written a pamphlet called the 'Defence of Langelibalele', which was printed by the press at Bishopstowe. In the pamphlet he mentioned John Shepstone's actions in 1858. On 23 July, John Shepstone wrote

to Colenso demanding he retract the aspersions made in the pamphlet. Colenso was not a man easily intimidated; he reacted by writing on the same day to Sir Benjamin Pine, the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal, requesting an inquiry be held into John Shepstone's behaviour. Pine declined the request in a letter written on 3 August, and three days later Colenso wrote a lengthy letter directly to Lord Carnarvon, the Secretary of State in London, laying out what had transpired between him and John Shepstone.

In mid-August John Shepstone's solicitor demanded Colenso make 'an immediate and unqualified retraction of the libel falsely and maliciously' made in 'Defence of Langelibalele' or he would begin legal proceedings against him.⁵³ Colenso left the matters in the hands of his legal representative as he was sailing for England the next day. Colenso had sent information on the treatment of Langelibalele and the Hlubi to the Aborigines Protection Society in London who in turn passed it on to the liberal press and members of Parliament. The increasing critical press coverage concerned Theophilus Shepstone and Pine who decided that Shepstone should sail to London and defend native policy in Natal and the actions against the Hlubi in person to the Secretary of State. When Colenso heard of this, he too decided to sail to England to present his interpretation of events. Shepstone had impressed Carnarvon at an interview on 12 September and had already drawn up a response to events in Natal, but after a meeting with Colenso on 5 October agreed to delay his despatch to give Colenso time to put his research into print. Carnarvon in his response to the crisis in Natal tried to reach a compromise between Colenso and Shepstone. He instructed

that Langalibalele be removed from Robben Island and settled in the Cape; the Hlubi be allowed to return to their location; Pine, who was held responsible for the actions against the Hlubi, be recalled; and native policy in the Colony be reformed.⁵⁴ Shepstone, however, who would oversee the reform of native policy, was bestowed with a knighthood and became central to Carnarvon's confederation plans for South Africa.

Colenso's interview with Carnarvon led to an important development as far as John Shepstone was concerned. Carnarvon wrote to Pine on 19 November that the most satisfactory course for all parties 'will be to allow my decision to be the only one'.⁵⁵ Pine persuaded Shepstone to withdraw his libel case and leave matters to Carnarvon. In late April 1875, Carnarvon wrote to Sir Garnet Wolseley, who had recently arrived in Natal to initiate changes in government and native administration, that it was 'necessary that a careful enquiry should be made into the charges preferred by the Bishop against Mr. Shepstone with reference to his conduct in attempting the arrest of Matshana in 1858'.⁵⁶ Wolseley appointed Colonel George Pomeroy Colley, a senior member of his staff, to conduct the inquiry. Wolseley informed Colenso that the inquiry 'will be of a private nature' and 'no reporters will be admitted, nor would any lawyer be permitted to examine or cross-examine the witnesses'.⁵⁷ Colenso and Shepstone would be allowed 'to have one friend present during the Enquiry; but he will not be permitted to speak to the witnesses'.⁵⁸ Wolseley agreed to allow Colenso to use his own translator.

Colenso had no legal power to subpoena witnesses nor official position that gave him the authority to insist that they appear. The decision to testify

was voluntary and the men were aware that they could face the wrath of the Shepstons. There were men who had been at Nomakhabela living as far away as Basutoland and the Free State, but most were at KwaJobe or at KwaMagwaza in Zululand. At Colenso's request, Fuze wrote to Ngidi, who was living at KwaJobe and knew some of the men present at Shepstone's attempted arrest of Matshana, asking him to ensure that witnesses from KwaJobe arrived at Bishopstowe a few days before 2 August so that he could examine them beforehand 'so as to put the necessary questions to draw out the most important facts before the court'.⁵⁹ There were messengers from Cetshwayo in Pietermaritzburg at the time and the bishop sent word with them back to the king requesting witnesses there be sent to the Colony. Although Wolseley pledged that no harm would come to Matshana if he came to testify, he understandably did not. At this point only three witnesses had appeared – Ntambama (a brother to Langalibalele), Deke and Mpuphuma. During the first week, a few men who had witnessed John Shepstone's botched arrest of Matshana appeared at Bishopstowe and later Colley, after representations from Colenso, instructed Theophilus Shepstone to bring in more of the bishop's witnesses. In all, there were 34 witnesses, 21 of whom were called by Colenso.

The inquiry, 2 August 1875–9 September 1875

The inquiry began on Monday 2 August 1875 at 11 a.m. at Government House. Arentz Tönnesen and Magema Fuze assisted Colenso. Tönnesen was the priest at Umgababa among the Thuli chiefdom of Mnini. He had proven his loyalty to Colenso, despite financial and

social pressures, by supporting him in the early 1860s during the controversy that ensued after the bishop had published works criticising the Pentateuch. Fuze served as Colenso's interpreter. Colenso, as Brookes and Webb point out, considered his work among the Zulu as his most important duty.⁶⁰ To succeed at his missionary work, he had to learn Zulu as quickly as possible, which would enable him to write grammars, dictionaries and to translate the Bible.⁶¹ His son, Francis, described how he mastered Zulu by 'sitting with natives who could not speak a word of English, day after day, from early morn till sunset'.⁶² By 1875, Colenso's Zulu was, by his own admission, 'sufficient for ordinary purposes' but 'unequal to meet the requirements' of the inquiry.⁶³ He was still 'always in the habit of conducting any important conversation with natives' through Fuze.⁶⁴ Two of Theophilus Shepstone's sons, Offie and George, assisted John Shepstone. Offie was a fluent Zulu linguist and advocate. George had accompanied his father to the coronation of Cetshwayo and served in the Langa libalele campaign. Edward Jackson acted as John's interpreter.

At Greytown on 16 June 1875, John Shepstone wrote a statement for the inquiry. He carefully constructed the statement to justify his actions and to shift the blame to Matshana, and at times even his own men. There were similarities to the report he had written in 1858, but the new statement was more detailed. He admitted concealing a shotgun, but claimed this was because there was a conspiracy to kill him. The narrative revolved around six key events:

- He had received 'authentic information' that Matshana and his men had planned to kill him at the meeting;

- Matshana's followers threatened him when they arrived at the meeting;
- Towards the beginning of the meeting, Matshana gave a signal for the attack to begin;
- Many of Matshana's followers were armed;
- Realising that his force was being overwhelmed, he shot 'perpendicularly', to create panic but not to harm anyone; and
- A general panic ensued and Shepstone attempted to stop the fighting between his men and Matshana's followers.

The 'authentic information' Shepstone received that there was a plan to kill him came from a policeman from the Ladysmith magistracy named Vamela. The evening before the meeting, Shepstone sent him to find out whether Matshana's men would be armed the next day. When he returned, he recounted in front of the other policemen that he had encountered three of Matshana's men who had threatened to resist if there was an attempt to arrest the chief. Vamela testified at the inquiry that the people assured Matshana that 'Mr. John would never be able to seize him, as they would defend him, and kill Mr. John and his followers if they attempted it'.⁶⁵ In Vamela's account, Matshana's followers made the threat. Hermanus and Qinelani also remembered the threat coming from Matshana's men.⁶⁶ Qinelani was adamant that Vamela reported Matshana would fight rather than be taken, but that 'Vamela did not say that Matshana would attack Mr. John and party'.⁶⁷ Two of the other policemen testified that the threat came from Matshana himself. Qagaqa remembers Vamela saying that 'Matshana was determined not to be taken by a little whiteman, but would kill Mr. John and his men'.⁶⁸ Nozitshina also testified at

the inquiry that 'Matshana was coming to meet Mr. John with full intention to kill him and his men'.⁶⁹

Some of Matshana's men as they arrived at the meeting chanted 'Wominza! Wominza! Wotshana lapa!' (You will bite the dust! You will die here!).⁷⁰ Shepstone insisted that this was a threat. The bishop called two of Cetshwayo's indunas, Mfunzi and Nkisismane, who had accompanied witnesses from the Zulu kingdom to Natal, to testify that 'wotshana' was an *isiga* (a regimental sign) that was customarily chanted when in the presence of a chief,⁷¹ and that it had no great significance.⁷² John called Theophilus Shepstone, considered a great expert on Zulu language and custom, who testified that 'wotshana' was an insult.

Towards the beginning of the meeting, Matshana had said to some of his men 'Kwozakubenini?' (When will it end?) Shepstone insisted it was a pre-conceived signal to begin the massacre. His evidence once again went back to Vamela and Nozitshina. Nozitshina testified that Vamela came to him in the middle of the night to tell him 'Matshana would say "Kwozakubenini?" and that would be the signal for his people to jump up and kill Mr. John'.⁷³

Colenso called Mathendeyeka who testified that Matshana had said 'Kwozakubenini?' as the matter had dragged on for so long and he wanted to know 'when will it be ended'.⁷⁴ Shepstone admitted that he had not seen any spears in the hands of Matshana's men, but had been told so by policemen and indunas.⁷⁵ Ncamane said 'Matshana's people all came armed. We picked up immense numbers (kw'esabeka) of short assegais (izininqindi) on the ground where they had been sitting. Even those behind in the farthest rows had all of them arms'.⁷⁶

Matshana's men who had been present all insisted that they had left their arms behind.⁷⁷ Ntambana raised the point that 'Matshana's people had no blankets: a few of them had small pieces of salem-pore. They could not hide izinnqindi: they were naked except for their tail-pieces'.⁷⁸ Shepstone could not explain how his men, outnumbered ten to one, were able to kill thirty of Matshana's men if they were still armed. A number of witnesses pointed out that if they were armed they would have used their spears rather than sticks and stones to fight Shepstone's men.⁷⁹

Shepstone insisted that when he realised his force was being overwhelmed, he decided that the only chance of escape was to create panic by shooting into the air, which would cause no harm to the people surrounding him. Many of the witnesses who had been present testified that he purposefully aimed at Matshana, but missed him and hit Deke.⁸⁰ Deke survived and, despite his age, attended the inquiry and was the first witness called by Colenso. Deke testified that 'he himself' was brought down by that wound above the knee, caused by the bullet of the fire-arm which was fired, as he believes, by Mr. John, meaning to fire at Matshana'.⁸¹ John Shepstone expended much effort trying to show that Deke's wound was not caused by a bullet, but was probably inflicted by a spear or by his falling onto the stump of a tree.⁸² He suggested that Magera Fuze was influencing witnesses to testify he had shot at Matshana, as shown by this cross questioning of Faku:

John Shepstone: Who put it into your mouth to say that I fired at Matshana?

Faku. No one: I was there myself.

Shepstone: Did not Magera put it into you?

Faku: I see Magera for the first time.⁸³

Shepstone, in his second statement, did not deny there was a *mêlée* that followed the botched arrest, but insisted that he had attempted to stop it. He effectively placed the blame on his own men, writing:

I asked my men why they were not in search of the Chief instead of fighting with the people. They replied they were only acting in self-defence, as they were kept back from following the Chief. I went from one party to another, threatening mine with punishment if they did not obey my orders, viz. to apprehend the Chief only.⁸⁴

In his questioning of witnesses, Colenso attempted to show that the policemen at the Ladysmith magistracy had implicated Matshana in the death of Sigathiya. Noju testified that when Sigathiya was smelt out for making Ntwetwe sick, Matshana wanted to expel him from the chieftdom. Mphako and four other men, without the chief's knowledge, bound Sigathiya in an attempt to get a confession. When Ntwetwe died, three of his relations fatally assaulted Sigathiya. According to Noju, Sigathiya's wife reported on numerous occasions to the police at Ladysmith that Ntwetwe's people had killed her husband. Initially, they did not respond to the allegations, but after a few days informed her that if she said Matshana killed her husband, she 'will obtain a satisfactory word' to the magistrate.⁸⁵ The Ladysmith police denied this and Hermanus insisted that Sigathiya's wife had told Valema 'that her husband was killed by Matshana's direct orders'.⁸⁶ In his questioning of Hermanus, Colenso pushed the idea that the policemen had untruthfully implicated Matshana, as shown in this record: *Hermanus*: 'We were sent to confront Matshana and hear what he had to say about the matter of the murder'.

Colenso: Were you not sent because Matshana had said that you had deceived Dr. Kelly?

Hermanus: [uncertain answer].⁸⁷

The court, seeking clarification about whether the policemen – Hermanus, Jantshi and Nsimbibi – had misrepresented Matshana's role, recalled Theophilus Shepstone. He testified that 'I never heard that there was any charge against the policemen; I never heard a question as to their having been inculpated'.⁸⁸ In an earlier letter to Kelly, which was never presented to the inquiry, Shepstone had mentioned that the policemen and messengers exaggerated Matshana's role.⁸⁹ Another witness, Nomatshinatshina, testified that Matshana told him he did not report to the magistrate because Jantshi had told him 'either a long rope would be waiting for me or a deep pit'.⁹⁰

On 6 September, Shepstone's last witness testified before the inquiry. On 9 September the inquiry was formally completed with Colley summing up the evidence. Colley then compiled his report for the Secretary of State who, on 9 February 1876, released his decision. He accepted Colley's conclusion that there was no pre-arranged plan to kill Shepstone or that Matshana's men were armed. However, he decided that the charge against Shepstone of having attempted to shoot Matshana could not be sustained. He accepted Shepstone's explanation that he had fired above the heads of Matshana's men in an attempt to disperse them. Colley generally accepted the integrity of Colenso's witnesses, but was of the opinion, when it came to Misjan's shooting at Matshana, that a story handed down by word of mouth over time would assume a 'form and colour not entirely of its own'.⁹¹

Colenso's report, 1 November 1876

Colenso and Tönnesen, obviously unhappy at Colley's conclusions, wrote their own account of the inquiry in a work they called 'The history of the Matshana inquiry'. (Fuze ran off a number of copies of the report on the printing press at Bishopstowe later that year.) This lengthy work, completed on 1 November 1876, included the testimony of the witnesses, John Shepstone's original account of what happened in 1857, letters by Colenso to, among others, Theophilus and John Shepstone, Pine and Carnarvon, and Colenso's remarks on the evidence. The work was not an attempt at neutrality or objectivity by Colenso. In a lengthy preface, he made it clear where he stood – John Shepstone had lied about events in 1858, his brother had covered it up, and Benjamin Pine was complicit as he refused to implement an inquiry. Although Colenso and Tönnesen repeated the witnesses' statements verbatim, they at times, clearly to influence their readers, inserted comments and made extensive use of footnotes in which they emphasised how the Shepstons had attempted to intimidate witnesses, and that the testimonies of the government policemen and indunas were not reliable.

For Colenso the inquiry was a part of a crusade for political and moral justice. Through the testimony of the witnesses, he attempted to establish the correct, or truthful, narrative of what happened at Nomakhabela, as this revealed the lies of Misjan and explained why Langalibalele refused to report to Pietermaritzburg. One is able to work out a clear series of events, different from John Shepstone's account, from the testimonies of the witnesses. However, there are contradictions: memories,

emotions and intentions created many, nuanced and personal stories. Fuze must have been aware that the written report ensured that the oral accounts had greater longevity and would be given greater weight in the colonial world. Besides the various narratives of events from Africans, and perhaps just as significantly, the personalities, attitudes and emotions of Matshana's men come through in the written report. The determination of Deke, now an old and frail man, is clear when he is asked if he adheres to his statement, and responds 'I, who was a soldier of Tshaka, so you think I would eat my own words?'⁹² When Njuba hears that Shepstone claims he shot into the air, he sarcastically says it is strange 'that the gun should have been fired upwards, and should have hit Deke and Matonga. Why? Were these then up in the sky?'⁹³ The frustration and anger of having been persuaded to put down their arms and therefore having been unable to protect themselves is often repeated. Njuba exclaimed, 'No! on that day we were killed like woman having no arms'.⁹⁴ Nomatshinatshina describes the trauma of counting the dead and finding 'one son of Mbengana [who] was shot under the jaw from side to side, the flesh being torn away'.⁹⁵

Conclusion

From 1857 to 1876, almost twenty years, Shepstone had used his linguistic abilities, his political position and connections among the African communities to separate the oral and literate and to ensure his report about what happened at Nomakhabela was accepted by imperial officials as the truth. A network of informants enforcing colonial rule, the threat of violence, as well as rewards of land and cattle, dissuaded

any serious questioning of Shepstone's actions. By the mid-1870s, however, Colenso and Fuze were in the position to counter Shepstone's narrative of what had happened in 1858. They had acquired the linguistic skills to record testimonies in Zulu and then translate them into English and so build up a body of evidence about events at Nomakhabela. Both men understood what was happening in the African and settler communities. Fuze, although a Christian, retained a deep connection to the African population, while being exposed to settler politics when living and working at Bishopstowe. As a skilled printer, he was able to produce copies of the inquiry, as recorded by Colenso and Tönnesen, that contained narratives of the Africans who were at Nomakhabela and so ensure a greater permanence of the oral record. Colenso and Fuze had bridged the oral and the written, Zulu and English, and the African and colonial worlds. They narrowed the differences that had allowed the Shepstone narrative to continue unquestioned for so long. The process was not, and is not, without pitfalls. Colenso was aware of some of the fears and personal and political motivations, including his own, that influenced the testimonies, but there would have been many more of which he, and we, were and are not aware.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank John Wright for commenting on a draft of this article.
- 2 Jeff Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013), p. 257.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 258.
- 4 Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR), Colenso Collection, C1280/5, 'The history of the Matshana enquiry with a report of the evidence as taken down by the Bishop of Natal and the Rev. Canon Tonnesen': evidence of Deke, p. 59; evidence of Mpupuma, p. 67.

- 5 *ibid.*, evidence of Mpupuma, p. 67.
- 6 *ibid.*, evidence of Deke, p. 59.
- 7 *ibid.*, evidence of Nozitzhina, p. 100.
- 8 *ibid.*, evidence of Ntambama, p. 73; evidence of Mabona, p. 120; evidence of Sikombamafusi, p. 121.
- 9 *ibid.*, Shepstone to Kelly, 17 March 1858, p. 38.
- 10 *ibid.*, pp. 38–39.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 39.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal*, p. 261.
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 262.
- 16 Norman Etherington, 'The "Shepstone system" in the Colony of Natal and beyond the borders' in *Natal and Zululand from the Earliest Times to 1910* edited by Andrew Duminy and Bill Guest (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press and Shuter & Shooter, 1989), p. 175.
- 17 Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal*, p. 2.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 262.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 230.
- 21 *ibid.*, p. 105.
- 22 PAR, Colenso Collection, C1280/5, preface, p. i.
- 23 *ibid.*, preliminary narrative, p. 4.
- 24 Vukile Khumalo, 'The class of 1856 and the politics of cultural production(s) in the emergence of Ekukhanyeni, 1855–1910' in *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Inspiration* edited by Jonathan A. Draper (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2003) p. 210.
- 25 Hlonipha Mokoena, 'Notes on a Kholwa writer's life: Magama Fuze' in *Archives of Times Past: Conversations about South Africa's Deep History* by Cynthia Kros et al. (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2022), p. 64.
- 26 Khumalo, 'The Class of 1856', p. 229.
- 27 Mokoena, 'Notes on a Kholwa writer's life', p. 67.
- 28 Paddy Kearney, 'Success and failure of Sokululeka: Bishop Colenso and African education' in *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Inspiration* edited by Jonathan A. Draper (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2003), p. 202.
- 29 Norman Etherington, 'Christianity and African society in nineteenth-century Natal' in *Natal and Zululand from the Earliest Times to 1910* edited by Andrew Duminy and Bill Guest (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press and Shuter & Shooter, 1989), p. 292.

- 30 Hlonipha Mokoena, *Magama Fuze: The Making of an AmaKholwa Intellectual* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011), p. 20.
- 31 John Wright, 'Thununu KaNonjiya Gcabashe visits James Stuart in the big smoke to talk about history' *Natalia* 49 (2019), p. 8.
- 32 Mokoena, *Magama Fuze*, p. 23.
- 33 *ibid.*
- 34 Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal*, p. 390.
- 35 PAR, Colenso Collection, C1280/5, preliminary narrative, pp. 2–3.
- 36 *ibid.*, p. 3.
- 37 *ibid.*, p. 4.
- 38 *ibid.*
- 39 *ibid.*, p. 5.
- 40 *ibid.*, p. 6.
- 41 *ibid.*
- 42 Jeff Guy, *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1983), p. 208.
- 43 PAR, Colenso Collection, C1280/5, preliminary narrative, p. 7.
- 44 Mokoena, 'Notes on a Kholwa writer's life', p. 67.
- 45 PAR, Colenso Collection, C1280/5, preliminary narrative, p. 8.
- 46 *ibid.*, comments by Colenso, p. 62.
- 47 *ibid.*, p. 63.
- 48 Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal*, pp. 392–394.
- 49 Guy, *The Heretic*, pp. 204–205.
- 50 PAR, Colenso Collection, C1280/5, preliminary narrative, p. 9.
- 51 *ibid.*
- 52 Guy, *The Heretic*, pp. 210–211.
- 53 PAR, Colenso Collection, C1280/5, preliminary narrative, pp. 10–11.
- 54 Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal*, p. 421.
- 55 PAR, Colenso Collection, C1280/5, Carnarvon to Pine, 19 November 1874, pp. 25–26.
- 56 *ibid.*, Carnarvon to Wolseley, 22 April 1875, pp. 28–29.
- 57 *ibid.*, Brackenbury to Colenso, 24 July 1875, p. 34.
- 58 *ibid.*
- 59 *ibid.*, preliminary narrative, p. 31.
- 60 Edgar H. Brookes and Colin de B. Webb, *A History of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1987), p. 106.
- 61 Kearney, 'Success and failure of Sokululeka', p. 202.
- 62 *ibid.*
- 63 PAR, Colenso Collection, preliminary narrative, p. 34.
- 64 *ibid.*
- 65 *ibid.*, evidence of Vamela, p. 124.
- 66 *ibid.*, evidence of Hermanus, p. 126.
- 67 *ibid.*, evidence of Qinelani, p. 135.
- 68 *ibid.*, evidence of Qagaqa, p. 129.
- 69 *ibid.*, evidence of Nozitshina, p. 95.
- 70 *ibid.*, statement by John Shepstone, p. 46.
- 71 *ibid.*, evidence of Mfunzi, p. 84; evidence of Nkisismane, p. 84.
- 72 *ibid.*, evidence of Faku, p. 89; evidence of Dabakazi, p. 111.
- 73 *ibid.*, evidence of Nozitshina, p. 95.
- 74 *ibid.*, evidence of Matendeyeka, p. 84.
- 75 *ibid.*, evidence of Nozitshina, p. 95.
- 76 *ibid.*, evidence of Ncamane, p. 65.
- 77 *ibid.*, evidence of Faku, p. 89; evidence of Magwaza, p. 103; evidence of Gwazizulu, p. 105.
- 78 *ibid.*, evidence of Ntambama, p. 77.
- 79 *ibid.*, evidence of Njuba, p. 71; comments by Noju and Mabona, p. 62.
- 80 *ibid.*, evidence of Maboyi, p. 78; evidence of Madhloli, p. 109; testimony of Dabakazi, p. 111; evidence of Nomatshinatshina, p. 141.
- 81 *ibid.*, evidence of Deke, p. 59.
- 82 *ibid.*, evidence of Yamela, p. 136; evidence of Qinelani, pp. 134–135.
- 83 *ibid.*, evidence of Faku, p. 122.
- 84 *ibid.*, statement by John Shepstone, p. 47.
- 85 *ibid.*, evidence of Noju, p. 116.
- 86 *ibid.*, evidence of Hermanus, p. 128.
- 87 *ibid.*
- 88 *ibid.*, evidence of Shepstone, p. 133.
- 89 Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal*, p. 257.
- 90 PAR, Colenso Collection, C1280/5, evidence of Nomatshinatshina, p. 141.
- 91 Norman Herd, *The Bent Pine: The Trial of Chief Langalibalele* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1976), p. 132.
- 92 PAR, Colenso Collection, C1280/5, evidence of Deke, p. 60.
- 93 *ibid.*, evidence of Njuba, p. 71.
- 94 *ibid.*
- 95 *ibid.*, evidence of Nomatshinatshina, p. 142.