Who Was Maqoma?

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Maqoma, known by his praise name, *Jongumsobomvu*, the eldest son of Ngqika, king of the amaRharhabe, was undoubtably the most renowned Xhosa chief of South Africa's nineteenth-century wars. He has been described as "of the greatest fighting generals of the Xhosa nation, brave, intelligent, strong-minded and decisive. His opponents regarded him as a clever tactician". Colonial officials and three generations of historians, however, described Maqoma as a 'drunken troublemaker and an erratic and volatile ruler' Oral tradition and colonial and missionary documents paint a different picture (Stapleton, 1984*)*.

One must go back to his origins and the Eighth Frontier War or War of Mlanjeni to understand why he became known as the *leopard of Fordyce* according to oral Xhosa tradition.

In 1778, Gcaleka, chief of the Rharabe died. Ngqika, his son and heir was too young to take over as chief and, therefore, Ndlambe, a paternal uncle, became regent. Under Ndlambe's rule the Rharabe flourished and drove several of the smaller Xhosa chiefdoms, such as the Dange, Ntinde and Gqunukhebe, west over the Fish River where they fought the Dutch settlers in the 1778-81 and the 1793 frontier wars.

When Ngqika came of age, Ndlambe refused to relinquish power but in the subsequent war, Ngqika's loyal warriors expelled Ndlambe and his subjects were driven across the Fish River and defeated his Gcaleka allies. Centralizing his authority, Ngqika deposed Ndlambe's influential counsellors, absorbed entire homesteads into his Great Place, and imposed cattle fines on commoners to increase his royal herds. As a result, disgruntled people fled to Ndlambe. The Rharabe were thus split into two camps, the amaNgqikas and the amaNdlambe.

Ngqika, now 20 years old, took his first wife, Nothonto. She came from the common Ngqosini clan, being of both Sotho and Khoi ancestry. In about 1798, Nothonto gave birth to healthy twins, a boy and a girl. Ngqika named his son Maqoma and his daughter, Nongwane.

Maqoma, therefore, grew up at the Great Place of Ngqika during the height of his father's reign. He had no other full brothers.

Despite his mother's low birth, Ngqika planned to make Maqoma his heir and so Ngqika began educating Maqoma in the methods of Xhosa rulership where cattle patronage was the key. Portions of the royal herds were lent out to Ngqika's subordinate chiefs on an increase-sharing basis.

Commoners were 'employed' to care for the animals and in turn received their milk and blood. Ngqika kept his vassals in line by the ever-present threat of cattle repossession or fines.

Maqoma idealised his father, but in 1819, when Ngqika ceded the land between the Fish and the Keiskamma Rivers to Lord Charles Somerset, Maqoma became disillusioned with Ngqika, and never forgave him for this decision. He became committed to regaining his ancestral home and so became the greatest fighting general the Xhosa ever produced.

Later, on advice from his counsellors Ngqika took a Tembu princess, Suthu, as a wife, and she became the Great Wife and in 1820, Suthu gave birth to Sandile, who became the legal heir of the Rharhabe.

After his circumcision, Maqoma had established his own kraal on the lower Kat River, near the town of Fort Beaufort. Here he lived with other young men, his fellow circumcision mates. They became known as the *amaJingqi*, named after his favourite ox, *Jingqi.* Maqoma was known by his praise-name, *Jongumsobomvu* meaning 'watching the sunrise' indicating that he was alert and ready for action.

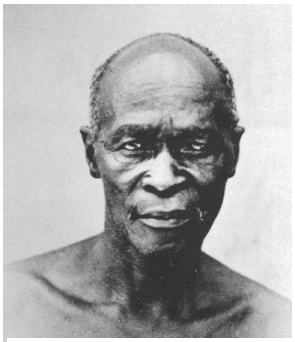


Figure 1: Maqoma [South African Library, Cape Town]

In fact, the military post named Fort Beaufort had been established to watch Maqoma and his amaJingqi consisting of young men detached as they were from Ngqika's Great Place. They were very active and made life difficult for the British colonial forces. The military post of Fort Beaufort, however, with its small garrison, had little effect on the actions of Maqoma and his men.

When Ngqika died in 1829, Sandile became Ngqika's legal heir. However, as Sandile was too young to rule, Maqoma and his half-brother, Tyhali, together with Sandile's mother, Suthu, divided the Nigqika kingdom between them. Maqoma became regent for external affairs until 1840, when Sandile came of age. Maqoma, however, was never well-disposed towards Sandile, whom he thought was weak and lacked determination.

Even though he was not the legal heir, Maqoma never lost his status as a royal prince of the amaNgqika. He wore the skin of a leopard, the sign of royal lineage, that he had killed, and was referred to as Prince Maqoma.

Although Maqoma was involved in the 1835 and 1846 wars, his true genius became evident in the Eighth Frontier War. Maqoma developed his ambush tactics into a sophisticated form of guerilla warfare. The heavily forested ravines of the Mtontsi contributed to Maqoma's ability to confuse the British soldiers who were trained to fight large, set-piece battles in the open (Klaas, 2023).

It was the longest of the frontier conflicts, lasting from December 1850 to March 1853. This conflict was also the most expensive and required a great military commitment, 8,000 regular British troops were deployed in the field. The casualties on both sides were heavy for a colonial campaign.

> "*This war was also the most desperate and brutal yet fought, with both sides guilty of committing atrocities to an unprecedented extent*." (Laband, 2020 p. 231)

> "*The amaXhosa remember this terrible campaign as the War of Mlanjeni, after the prophet of that name who rose among them and became Sandile's war-doctor.*" (Laband, 2020 p. 231)

Mlanjeni, or Riverman (his name which means 'In the River') was a Ndlambe commoner, who as a teenager, spent his time lying half-submerged in a stream to relieve his tuberculosis. He had displayed all signs of being called by the ancestral shades as being a diviner. In Xhosa religion, diviners communed directly with the *amathongo* and the nature spirits of earth and water. The Xhosa people turned to diviners to consult the occult forces and to prescribe remedies when their world was facing disaster as it was in 1850 (Laband, 2020 p. 232).

In 1829, Andries Stockenström, had expelled Maqoma and his followers from the upper Kat River. Stockenström established the Kat River settlement which was supposed to prevent Maqoma from re-occupying this fertile neutral zone.

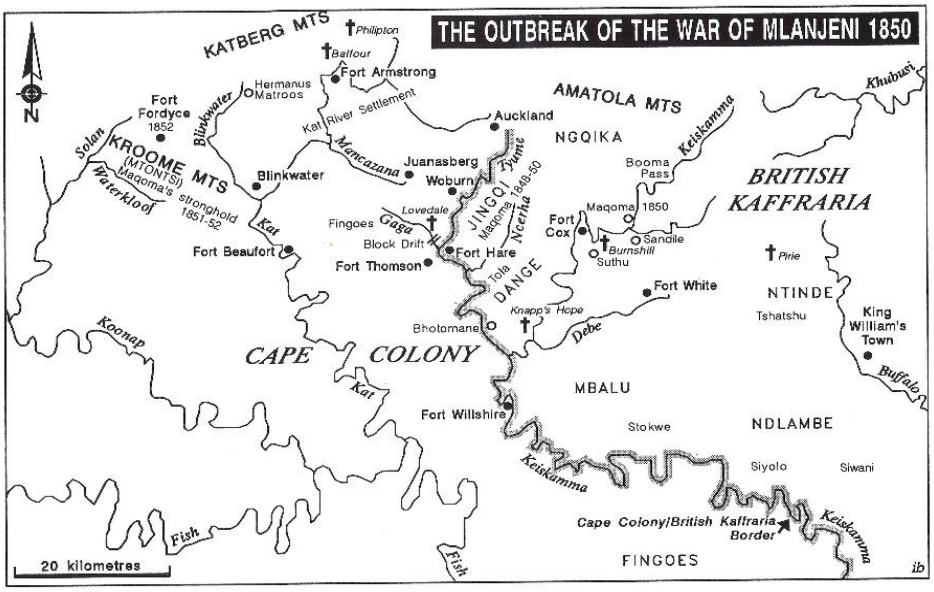


Figure 2: Map of Eastern frontier of Cape Colony (Stapleton, 1984 p.146)

Many thousands of amaJingqi were taken out of the Kat River Valley under military escort for Ngqika's domain in the Amatholes. 1829 was a year of terrible drought, and the Kat River Valley was one of the few areas that remained well-watered. The amaJingqi were left both hungry and resentful.

> '*The recovery of territory stolen by the colony would preoccupy Maqoma for the rest of his life.*' (Stapleton, 1984).

North-west of Fort Beaufort is the Kroomie range of hills in the heart of the country from which Maqoma had been expelled. In 1850, the break-up of the Kat River Settlement provided the opportunity Maqoma needed and Maqoma led his warriors back into the territory from which he had been expelled. Throughout April and May of

1851, Maqoma and the Jingqi burned white farms along the upper Kat River and seized immense herds of cattle from the Mfengu.

Maqoma also captured the Balfour Mission, which was near the site of his first Great Place. Party because Khoi deserters from the Cape Mounted Rifles who joined Maqoma possessed firearms and knew how to use them, a skill they had acquired during their colonial service. Thus, Maqoma put aside his traditional animosities and formed the disparate Xhosa, Themba and Khoi into a formidable fighting force. His small army occupied the Blinkwater, Waterkloof and Kroomie areas in the Winterberg and for eighteen months Maqoma defied all efforts to dislodge him. He conducted raids as far afield as Cradock and Somerset East.

Maqoma's guerilla campaign was conducted in the mountains, forests and valleys of the Mtontsilt and this region had been one of Maqoma's favourite boyhood haunts (the area was known as the Waterkloof to the settlers). It was only 80 square kilometres in size but contained some of the roughest and most impassable terrain in southern Africa (Stapleton, 1984 p. 157). This was the campaign that frustrated the most skilled British officers.

On the 7 September 1851, Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Fordyce of the 74th Regiment with a force of 613 men marched on the Kroomie with the object of clearing the area of Maqoma and his men. However, Maqoma, ambushed them and forced Fordyce to retreat. Further attempts also failed, leaving the troops worn out and ill, with both their morale and uniforms in tatters.

Finally, on November 6, Commander Henry Somerset ordered an attack on Maqoma on the ridge of the mountain which links the Kroomie to the plateau. Here, a horseshoe- shaped glen commanded view of both the Waterkloof and Fuller's Hoek valleys. This area was nicknamed *Mount Misery* by the troops. Fordyce and his Highlanders were ordered to hold Mount Misery. The morning was bright and clear, and hence Fordyce's men were soon under fire from Maqoma and the Khoi soldiers who had joined him, and were hiding in the bushes surrounding the glen. Colonel Fordyce foolishly ran out into the open to give an order to his men. As he stood waving his cap, a Khoi soldier shot him through his chest and he died soon afterwards. This incident gave rise to the amaXhosa regarding Maqoma as the 'Leopard of Fordyce'.

Two days later, Major General Henry Somerset ordered his troops to strike camp. He thought he had beaten Maqoma, but Maqoma and his men remained in control of the Kroomie range, and he defied all efforts to dislodge him.

Sir Harry Smith, Governor at that time, was determined to crush Maqoma and so he prepared to storm Maqoma's Den. Smith finally succeeded in clearing Maqoma and his men out of the Waterkloof and forced him to retire to the Amatholes.

In August 1857, Maqoma was arrested for being in the Cape Colony without a pass and he was sentenced to twelve months hard labour. Maqoma was further charged with complicity in the murder of a headman, Fusani, and found guilty and sentenced to death. However, his sentence was commuted, and he was sent to Robben Island where he stayed for eleven years. But Maqoma landed in trouble again when he

tried to re-occupy his confiscated land near Fort Beaufort and he was sent back to Robben Island where he died under suspicious circumstances in September 1873.

Maqoma was one of the most successful of the nineteenth century African chiefs who resisted European expansion in Africa. Many written histories have portrayed him as a cattle rustler and a drunken troublemaker. However, more recently, liberal historians have described Maqoma as a brilliant but volatile chief who provoked war with the colony.

Xhosa oral tradition views Jongumsobomvu as a hero in the two-hundred-year struggle against white supremacy. Maqoma was neither a villain nor a hero but a political ruler with established personal goals who believed that his goals were in harmony with the best interests of his people (Stapleton, 1984 pp.224-225).

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