



A Short History of AmaBhele

As a clan, amaBhele have a long and vast history, which links them to other various Nguni language-speaking groups who are understood to have once lived in the central African region many centuries ago before they set on a long southward migration until they eventually settled along the east coast of what is now known as South Africa. This discussion serves as a short summary of this vast history. The main emphasis is on the period from the late 1700s and early-to-mid- 1800s when the clan was divided (or got separated) into numerous sections thereafter; and highlights how they were differently affected by the course of history from that period.

As is customary with other Nguni clans, amaBhele got their clan name from one particular ‘Bhele’ who lived approximately four centuries ago. Not much information is known about ‘Bhele’ himself - except that the members of ‘Bhele’s’ family later became known as amaBhele, and that they later grew and expanded to become a large clan. It is to the same ‘Bhele’ that abakwaNtshangase (distinct from Ntshangase/Mgazi), abakwaKhuboni and abakwaShabangu, respectively, also trace their descent. The circumstances around which these three above-mentioned sections separated from their parent clan, amaBhele, are not known. It is probably that there are other surnames that also historically derived from amaBhele (or ‘Bhele’). But for the purposes of this brief summary only these three are mentioned at this point because information concerning them is easy to verify and trace through a careful analysis of the information obtained from traditional African oral history pending a more in-depth inquiry. [Although the various surnames are now used by amaBhele clans in the Eastern Cape, these are not referred to here. Hence they will all be referred to by the generic term of “amaBhele” – to which they all still subscribe to nonetheless.]

iLenge, also known as ‘Jobs kop’ in some circles, which is situated to the east of the town of Mnambithi (Ladysmith) in the vicinity of lower Washbank River, is the small but symbolical mountain that has become synonymous with the history of amaBhele since they settled in northern Natal before they dispersed to various parts of the country. Information regarding the history of amaBhele indicates that members of ‘Bhele’s’ family and their descendants later grew in size, expanded and then separated into either two or three (perhaps more) sections due to an internal dispute in the latter part of the 1700s, which resulted in two sections of the clan being either driven away, or separated, from their kin when they left iLenge, which, however, continued to be the location of amaBhele.

Also known to have been living alongside amaBhele at the time in the region were amaZizi, amaHlubi, and abakwaDlamini – all of whom lived independently as separate clas with each having its own leader, who acted as the clan’s figure-head. In the case of amaBhele, it is likely that Mahlaphahlapha was the clan’s leader, or figurehead at the time of the separation. However, it is difficult at this stage to locate Mahlaphahlapha’s name in any of the lineages of amaBhele that are available from old historical sources, even though he is commonly understood to have been the ruler of amaBhele in the late 1800s. But suffice it to say, history took its course as each of the two sections of amaBhele (those who left iLenge at the time) charted its destiny in a march towards a future characterized by great uncertainty. After a period of wandering, one section of amaBhele, now with Sompisi kaGuqa as its leader went on to settle as a tributary clan among the Zulu under Senzangakhona at the time, where they were to become known as the ‘Ntuli’ clan.

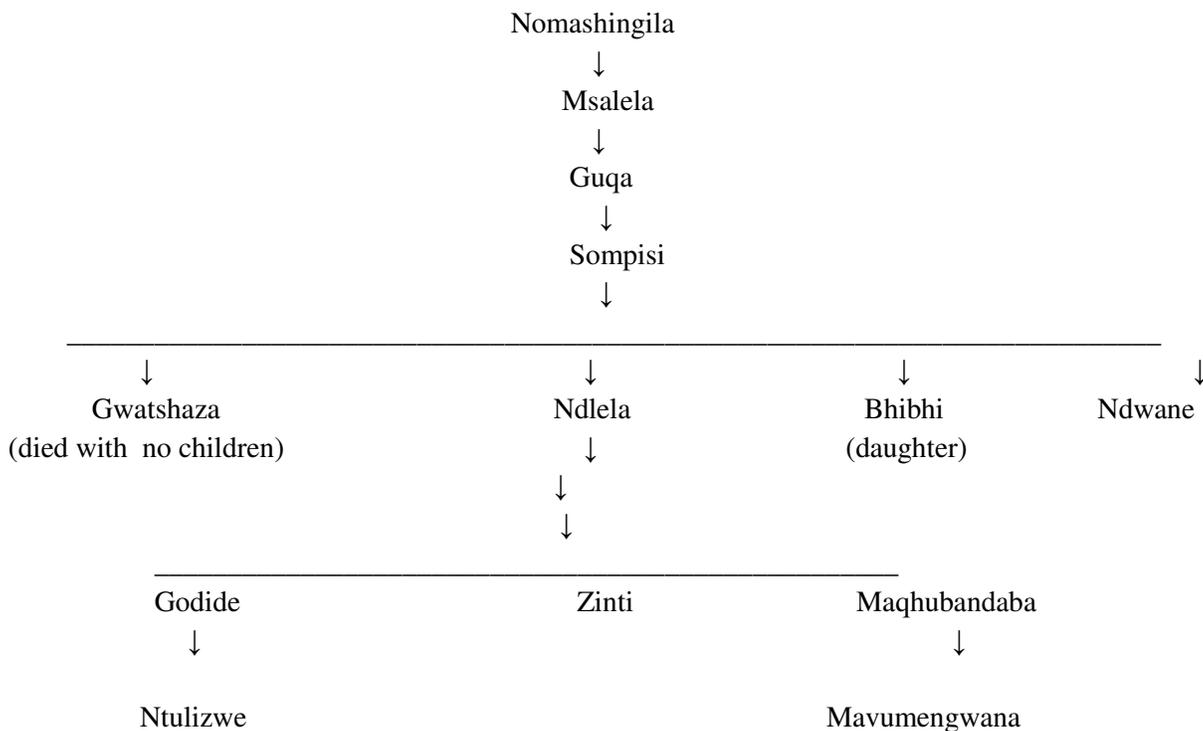
The Ntuli section

After their arrival in Zululand, Sompisi's section was readily admitted by Senzangakhona who was popular and liked by a number of clans who were prepared to submit to his authority. This was working in Senzangakhona's favour as it served to help increase the strength of the Zulu clan as it did those who joined it as tributary clans. Sompisi was to become very close to Senzangakhona - such that he soon became his (Senzangakhona's) personal servant, while his two sons Gwatshaza and Ndlela enlisted in the Ntontela regiment. Sompisi's daughter, Bhibhi, on the other hand, became one of Senzangakhona's wives and was affiliated, together with Shaka's mother Nandi, to the eSkebheni kraal. As their status grew later on within the Zulu Kingdom, another group of amaBhele who were part of Sompisi's section (but who had initially not been part of those who went to seek Senzangakhona's protection also realized that there was no reason to be skeptical any further) and decided to join those who were already settled in Zululand and settled at Mpaphala and also became known as the 'Ntuli' section.

Sompisi was not of royalty, but merely a leader of one of the sections of amaBhele. The following discussion will show how his descendants rose up the ranks to eventually occupy an influential position within the ranks of the Zulu Kingdom starting with his son Ndlela beginning from the 1820s. Ndlela easily became noticeable as a brave warrior whose daring courage captured the attention of not only Senzangakhona, but also his son and successor, Shaka – to whom Ndlela was a favourite warrior and hero; and later Dingane – who promoted Ndlela to the influential positions of prime minister and army general, respectively.

To put it more clearly, various figures from the Ntuli section featured very prominently throughout the nineteenth-century serving various Zulu Kings in various capacities and in many cases suffered or perished executing the duties on behalf of the Zulu Kingdom.

The Ntuli lineage of amaBhele



In his case, in addition to the role he played in the establishment of the Zulu Kingdom under Shaka, Ndlela also played a critical role to thwart Dingane's attempt to kill his younger brother Mpande – who was seen by many as Senzangakhona's only surviving son in the line of succession since Dingane himself did not have a son. It is now history that Mpande survived Dingane's attempt to kill him; and that Ndlela is credited for making that possible even at the risk of his own life. Ndlela was eventually killed on Dingane's orders after the latter became aware of Ndlela's complicity in alerting Mpande about Dingane's plans to eliminate him. Ndlela's son Godide also died serving King Cetshwayo, while his grandson Mangati also served King Dinuzulu as his induna, and went on to play a significant role in the 1906 Zulu uprising.

[Dingane had intended to present Mpande with cattle with the intention that when the latter came to thank him he would be killed. For this he dispatched Mathunjana and Nxagwana to Mpande to deliver the cattle as his present to his brother. But before the two left, Ndlela called Mathunjana aside and hinted to him the actual objective of the present of cattle. The two messengers arrived the following day and met with Mpande. On their way back, Mathunjana pointed out that he had mistakenly left his stick behind and went back on the pretext that he was out to fetch it. This is when he got the opportunity to speak to Mpande secretly and told him about Ndlela's secret message to him. This led to Mpande's flight to Natal with some of his followers, only to return later to topple King Dingane, his brother].

Once in power, Mpande decided to award the man who had saved his life posthumously. Among other things, Mpande gave Ndlela's eldest son Godide a number of cattle as a token of appreciation and also elevated him to the position of *isikhulu* and member of the King's Council. He further placed another of Ndlela's sons, Maqhubandaba, to head the Ntuli section based at Mpaphala. But his son, Mfungelwa, is the one who was put in charge of ruling this section of the Ntuli clan. Maqhubandaba who had served under the *Umusi weGudu* regiment which was a junior branch of the senior *Isangqu* regiment was later placed second in command over the *Mkhulutshana* regiment under Mnyamana of the Buthelezi clan. Another large *ubukhosi* of the Ntuli developed around the same time at kwaMaphumulo during Mpande's rule.

Qunta's section of amaBhele

As already pointed out earlier, as Sompisi and his followers (who later became known as abakwaNtuli) headed towards Zululand, one section of amaBhele had continued to stay at iLenge and surrounding areas following the split. Qunta was the ruler of this particular section of amaBhele. But one disaster after another soon struck resulting in a rushed flight towards the south. These developments coincide with beginning of the reign of Shaka as King of the Zulus – a nation that was on the rise at the time. First it was the invasion of amaNgwane under Matiwane; then it was the attack by Ngoza's abaThembu. The main significant of Matiwane's invasion is that even though a number of his followers later joined the rush to the south, a substantial number of them elected to set up permanent homes in the area as Matiwane himself did for a while. This development alone drove large numbers of people from their established homes and lands to seek new areas for settlement within the region in some instances, while in others groups began a steady flight towards the south as they suddenly began to leave the area in search of safety in distant lands.

Other clans that became significantly affected by these invasions were abakwaDlamini, amaZizi, and amaHlubi – with the effect that their settlements were significantly affected as amaNgwane under Matiwane attacked and looted their food and livestock. Established clans were not only uprooted but also dispersed in groups of varying sizes in the process. Others kept together as large groups and joined the sudden flight, while some travelled as families, small or isolated groups until they reached the seemingly tranquil UMzimkhulu region, where others either reconvened and settled or opted to proceed further south.

Leaving the area around the same time in the flight towards the south, amaBhele under Qunta and abakwaDlamini first settled at UMzimkhulu, while their former neighbours - amaZizi and amaHlubi – continued further and crossed the Mzimvubu River at a large scale. But it should be pointed out that isolated groups of varying sizes within each of these clans stayed behind and continued to settle in the troubled Khahlamba-Mnambithi-Klip river region of northern Natal, as others still do even now. Ngoza and his followers was the next group to invade the area as they also fled from Zululand resulting in even more disturbances as the fleeing abaThembu raided homes for food and cattle as well as people on their way towards the south.

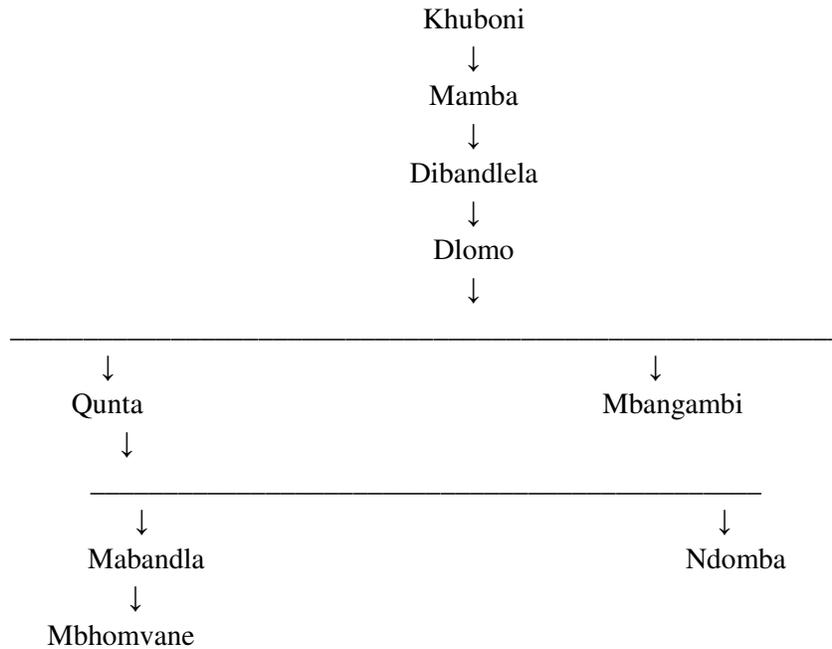
This meant another catastrophe for amaBhele who had remained in their former areas as some of them were compelled to join the flight towards the south. Things took a turn for the worst for amaBhele following Qunta's death in the 1830s. Qunta was accordingly succeeded by his son, Mabandla. But the transition from Qunta to Mabandla was not an easy one for the clan due to the prevailing conditions; and the fact that Mabandla was still new in his position it required time for him to establish his full authority over the clan that was weakened by the circumstances. Although the UMzimkhulu area had earlier promised to offer hope of stability this soon proved to have been a temporary illusion as scores of people continued to flock towards the south in their flight from both Zululand and Natal. This is also the period when amaBhele under Mabandla abandoned Umzimkhulu and ventured further south with the intention of setting up base around Butterworth. But before getting to their destination they were pounced upon first by abaThembu, now under Ngubengcuka, who killed a great number of amaBhele, and later by Madikane and his followers who inflicted severe blow on the fragmented and weakened amaBhele.

Defeated, wounded and dispersed yet again, amaBhele broke up and fled in different directions as separate and isolated groups culminating in others submitting to Faku's authority, while others decided to settle among the Gcaleka under Hintsá. Others still ended up as either servants and/or fugitives among amaMpondo, abaThembu, amaXhosa and other kraals. In most of these instances they all faced the common destiny of being labeled as *amaMfengu* – as were many former refugees from Natal and Zululand who found themselves under similar conditions. It was clearly obvious that amaBhele and other groups who had recently arrived in the region were subordinated by those who had arrived earlier or had longed established their presence in turbulent region. And in addition to that, the various established groups in the region were on the receiving end from the then Cape colonial administration bent on subverting what they saw as powerful wayward groups.

As fragmented units, some amaBhele who were under the leadership of Mabandla eventually settled in Qumbu, while another section was led by Nkwenkwezi, the son of Mbangambi. Mbangambi was one of Qunta's brothers. In 1835, Mabandla together with other numerous *amaMfengu* chiefs reportedly petitioned the Governor of the Cape, Sir Benjamin D'Urban, who was in the area to address the concerns of the colonial administration over the actions of Hintsá. The Governor promptly granted them their request to be freed from the stranglehold of the Gcaleka, and to be admitted as and be "accepted" as "British subjects". Their request was promptly granted, and this facilitated the "emancipation" of the Mfengu. After his death, Mabandla was succeeded by his son, Mbovane. Nkwenkwezi, the son of Mbangambi (Qunta's brother), who also in time became a leader of one section of amaBhele and is credited for the role

he played in the “emancipation” initiative of amaMfengu. Other various ubukhosi of amaBhele also developed around this period in what is now known as the province of the Eastern Cape.

Qunta’s lineage amaBhele



Meanwhile Mabandla’s brother, Ndomba (who together with a section of amaBhele, realizing the hostile conditions in southern Natal at the time, unlike his brother Mabandla) had chosen to return back to their former land in northern Natal rather than join the flock into Mpondoland, when the clan left UMzimkhulu. Another explanation could be that Ndomba decided to return to northern Natal when the news of the death of King Shaka reached him. But when they arrived in the area they found that the Dutch (Boers) settlers were already in occupation of certain parts of the region and Matiwane had already left the area leaving only a section of his amaNgwane clan behind. Ndomba first served as a headman for the local colonial court in Ladysmith before being recognized and appointed as “chief” over the amaBhele clan in a small location under the “Letters Patent of the Queen of England”. Ndomba passed away in 1899 and was succeeded by his son Noxhaka, who himself passed away in 1918, and was succeeded by his son Gilbert (Gilibethe).

This particular section of amaBhele was later forcefully removed from their area of settlement and crammed into a small territory bordering on white-owned farmlands in the Weenen area, resulting in others leaving the area yet again and breaking with the group to set themselves up as small family units. The remaining section of the group was later forced to live as labour tenants in white-owned farms in different parts of the area. Half of this section of amaBhele was removed totally from this area and resettled in a government trust land at Nkandla in 1967.

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