

THE PLACE OF THE ELEPHANTS?

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What have the following words in common: Goobinschlofe, Megoonloof, Umgungiloova, Umkugings Sloave, Umkunkinglove?

They are all variations of 'Umgungundlovu', the name of King Dingane's capital between the two Mfolozi Rivers, which he built immediately after the assassination of his brother Shaka in 1828. The early traders and missionaries in Natal in the 1830s had, of course, no knowledge of Zulu, and the above are five of the sixteen variations of the name that they were responsible for.* It is interesting to see how quickly they developed a knowledge of Zulu. The Revd Owen, for example, who was responsible for 'Umkunkinglove' in an August 1837 letter, had changed this, in a letter dated October 1838, to 'Umgungunhlovu', the form which appears on the City of Pietermaritzburg's coat of arms today.

Dingane's capital was burned by the Zulus after their defeat by the Trekkers at Blood River in December 1838, and for no apparent reason, the name was given to the newly laid-out town of Pietermaritzburg. J. Forsyth Ingram, in his 1898 history of Pietermaritzburg, *The Story of An African City*, suggests that this was a 'natural transition':

'Umgungunhlovu', The Kafir name for the city ... was originally applied to Dingaan and his Kraal. By a natural transition it came to signify the seat of Government and Capital of the Colony. [1898: 52]

A statement by a Zulu who was eight years old at the time, recorded in Vol. 4 of *The James Stuart Archive*, is even more vague:

The name Mgungundhlovu ... was the name of Dingana's great kraal. This was burnt and destroyed by the Boers, so we natives call Pietermaritzburg Mgungundhlovu because the other had been destroyed ... The name ... was given only after Dingana's kraal had been destroyed.

The various spellings of the name became standardized in the last century as 'Umgungunhlovu', in the first half of this century as 'Umgungundhlovu', and the modern spelling is 'Umgungundlovu', although the motto of the civic coat of arms (registered in the College of Arms, London, in 1961) still retains the spelling 'Umgungunhlovu'.

The number of different spellings of 'Umgungundlovu' is matched by the number of interpretations of the name. The following are the various suggestions put forward by historians over the years: 'Enclosure of the Elephant', 'The Place of the Rumbling of the Elephant', 'The Secret Conclave of the King', 'The Secret Plot of the Elephant', 'Lair of the Elephant', 'What is surrounded by elephants', 'The Conqueror of the Elephant'. Small wonder that Pietermaritzburg is popularly known as the 'Place of the Elephant'. An ingenious theory was put forward by James Stuart in his 1925 book *uKulumetule* ('he speaks while being silent'):

The name Mgungundlovu seems to have derived from *isangung* a bull with horns so bent that they almost meet. Also it is like the tusks of elephants which are curved (*kumbele*) in such a way that if you put them on the ground so they face each other like those of a cow they look like a circle of warriors (*umkhumbi wamabuto*) or a cattle kraal. That is the origin of the name.

Harry Lugg, the well-known Natal historian and Zulu linguist, was obviously impressed by this theory, for in his *Life under a Zulu Shield*, he writes:

The kraal was designed by placing two curved elephant tusks on the ground to form an oval (*umgungu*) ... It is therefore an abbreviation of *Umgunguwendlovu* or enclosure of the elephant, i.e. the king. Pietermaritzburg, known also by this name, was named after it.

It is clear that most of the proponents of the various interpretations above were aware of the Zulu verb *gunga* 'to surround, enclose', and the Zulu noun *indlovu*, 'an elephant'.

*The sixteen variations:

Goobinschlofe	Gungunhlovu	Megoonloof	Mgungundhlovu
Mgungundlovu	Ngungunhlovu	Umgungiloova	Umgungunhlovu
Umgungundhlovu	uMgungundlovu	Umgungunhlovu	Umkugings Sloave
Umkungunlovu	Umkunkinglove	Umkunkunglovu	Ungungunhlovu

Lugg and Stuart's theories of *isangung* and *umgungu* are an attempt to explain the presence of the third *u* in 'Umgungundlovu'. Their theories are marred somewhat in that *isangungu* in Zulu is a 'flat-topped basket or earthenware pot (with small mouth) used for beer' (Doke & Vilakazi p. 12), and that *umgungu* does not exist as a separate Zulu word.

The name 'Umgungundlovu' is a compound noun with the first element meaning 'enclosure of', 'encircling', etc., and the second element meaning — apparently — 'elephant'. Perhaps the most common way of forming a compound noun in Zulu is verb + noun. As Zulu verbs end in a vowel and Zulu nouns begin with one, and as Zulu does not permit two vowels to come together, clearly one of them will have to be dropped. So if Zulu wishes to join the verb *dlula* 'to surpass' with *imithi* 'trees' to produce the compound meaning 'giraffe', the result will be either 'indlulamithi' or 'indlulumithi' but not 'indlulaimithi' or 'indlulemithi' or 'indlulumithi', or indeed anything else. (The *in-* at the beginning is the compound noun prefix, as is *um-* in Umgungundlovu. The Zulu word for giraffe is *indlulamithi*.)

Lugg is aware of this: he knows that if one compounds the verb *gunga* with the noun *indlovu*, one must get 'umgungandlovu' or 'umgungindlovu' but not 'umgungundlovu'. Hence his theory of abbreviation from 'umgungu we indlovu' ('enclosure of the elephant'). But as I have said, *umgungu* does not exist as a word. And compound nouns with the possessive element 'of' do not drop this, as in the Zulu for the elephant's ear plant: *indlebeyendlovu* indlebe 'ear' + ye'of' + ndlovu 'elephant'. This is never abbreviated to 'indlebendlovu'.

So what is the answer? Lugg put his finger on it when he wrote '... of the elephant, i.e. the king'. Since at least Shaka's day, the king has been addressed or referred to by the honorific title of 'Sir Elephant'. But since in Zulu there are noun classes which contain words referring to animals, and others, like class 1(a) which refer *only* to people, it is normal when words referring to animals are used metaphorically for people, for these to be shifted to the personal noun class. Thus Shaka in his praise-poems is addressed as *uNyathi* ('Mr Buffalo', cf. *inyathi* 'buffalo'), *uNgonyama* ('Mr Lion', cf. *ingonyama*, 'lion') and *uMamba* ('Mr Mamba', cf. *imamba*). In the same way does the Zulu king become *uNdllovu*. The mysterious third *u* in 'Umgungundlovu', then, does not belong to the first element of the compound but the second element.

Charles Pettman in his *South African Place Names* has stated:

Umgungundlovu, the name of the 'great place' built by the monster Dingaan, immediately after his murder of Chaka the terrible, means 'the place of the rumbling of the elephant'.

But despite such rumblings, the name of Dingane's royal capital is much more prosaic — it simply means 'royal capital' — '[the place that] encloses the king'.

The elephant symbol (invariably the Indian variety) adorns both buildings and lamp poles.

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