

# Ngcongco, Javabu, and the South African War

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When the South African war broke out in 1899, John Tengo Jabavu (1859-1921), founding editor of *Imvo Zabantsundu*<sup>1</sup>, the first African newspaper of significance in the Cape Colony, adopted an anti-war position. Jabavu was the most prominent member of the new African elite in the Eastern Cape in the late nineteenth century, and the leading spokesman for the Cape African voters. Not only were his views on the war unpopular with most Africans, who supported the British side, but they led the colonial authorities to close down his newspaper in August 1901 and it did not come out again until October 1902, well after the end of the war. Jabavu's attitude to the war, and the consequences for him and his paper, formed the subject of a pioneering article which Leonard Diniso Ngcongco, then registered for a master's degree at the University of South Africa (Unisa), published in October 1970 in *Kleio*, the journal of the History Department of that University.<sup>2</sup> A quarter of a century later, it is appropriate to recall some of the context in which that article was written, and to try to relate what Ngcongco wrote then to subsequent research done on the topic.

In expanded form, Ngcongco's article appeared as a chapter in his master's thesis on 'Imvo Zabantsundu and Cape Native Policy 1884-1902', submitted to Unisa in 1974.<sup>3</sup> He was not, unfortunately, to continue that research, and give us a full-scale modern biography of Jabavu. Instead, his research interests moved away from the Eastern Cape, and besides a short general sketch of Jabavu's entire career, published in 1979 but written some years earlier<sup>4</sup>, his later historical work concerned, not the Eastern Cape, but, as was appropriate, given the base from which he worked, University of Botswana and surrounding areas. At the University of Botswana, he became a leading figure in a historiographical tradition different from that which developed in South Africa itself<sup>5</sup>.

Ngcongco was the first scholar to attempt a reflective and balanced assessment of Jabavu's career, from the launch of *Imvo* in 1884 to the end of the South African war. Two years after Jabavu's death his eldest son, D.D.T. Jabavu (1885-1959), published a brief and uncritical biography of his father.<sup>6</sup> A quarter of a century later, the left-wing writer Edward (Eddie) Roux, in his pioneering survey of 'the black struggle for freedom' entitled *Time Longer than Rope*, presented a very different view of Jabavu in a chapter he entitled 'Javabu and the Cape Liberals'. No friend of liberals, Roux was highly critical of Jabavu, whom he saw as a virtual Uncle Tom and puppet of white politicians<sup>7</sup>. Ngcongco rejected such an interpretation of Jabavu,<sup>8</sup> but was critical of the way in which Jabavu had followed his liberal friends, J.X. Merriman and J.W. Sauer, so closely, and had, like them, given his support to the Afrikaner Bond in the aftermath of the Jameson Raid<sup>9</sup>. Ngcongco showed how this set Jabavu at odds with the majority of the readers of *Imvo*, as well as others who had previously supported him, and led him to make a series of political blunders. Jabavu's failures, Ngcongco concluded, loomed larger than his successes, so that he will be remembered by many not for what he did but for what he could not do<sup>10</sup>.

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When Ngcongco studied history at the University College of Fort Hare as an undergraduate, Jabavu was still a name to conjure with. John Tengo had been the key

person in the establishment of the South African Native College, known to all as Fort Hare, and his son D.D.T. had been that institution's leading teacher until his retirement in October 1944. In the mid-1950s Ngcongco was lectured by Donovan Williams, head of History, who was then working on a thesis on missionaries on the Eastern Cape frontier, and developing a deep interest in Tiyo Soga, the first African to become a Christian missionary. In 1968 Williams was to write a seminal article arguing that the Eastern Cape was the seedbed of African nationalism.<sup>11</sup>

Ngcongco was also to be influenced by four other papers, written in the late 1960s. For a University of London doctorate on liberalism at the Cape in the late nineteenth century, Stanley Trapido had collected material on Javabu, and presented a paper on him at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London in 1966.<sup>12</sup> Ngcongco also cited in his thesis a paper which Donald Denoon, another ex-South African, presented at a conference at Nairobi in 1969. Entitled 'Participation in the People's War, People's Non-War or Non-People's War', it embodied for the first time the argument that black involvement in the war was very important, a theme to be taken up in the 1970s and early 1980s by a number of scholars.<sup>13</sup> A third paper which Ngcongco drew upon was one which the present author gave at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in 1969, at the new seminar organised there that year by Shula Marks. Entitled 'The New African Elite in the Eastern Cape and some late Nineteenth Century origins of African nationalism', that paper was an offshoot of work I was then doing at Oxford for a doctorate on the annexation of the Transkeian territories;<sup>14</sup> in it I tried to suggest that the class to which Javabu belonged had played an important role in the beginning of African nationalism in South Africa. The fourth was the most important: that by Peter Walshe on the origins of modern African political consciousness, which was to form the first chapter of his seminal work on *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa*.<sup>15</sup>

Ngcongco's thesis was a larger, more substantial work than these papers: the first solid study of any African newspaper in South Africa, it made a significant, and, because it was not published, an often overlooked,<sup>16</sup> contribution to what was then known of the politics of the late nineteenth century Cape. And perhaps the most innovative chapter of his thesis was the one which had first appeared in *Kleio*.

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As Ngcongco pointed out in that article, most Africans throughout South Africa welcomed the war, hoping that a British victory over the Republics would win them back lost land and mean the extension of the political rights enjoyed by Cape Africans. Imperial propaganda asserted that the war would promote black interests, and the black elite was taken in. Those whose views have come down to us mainly saw the war as a great opportunity to further the cause of the advancement of 'civilisation' and Empire. Most Africans were keen to do what they could to demonstrate their loyalty to the Great White Queen across the seas, and many served in the anti-Boer forces.

Javabu and *Imvo*, however, already out on a limb politically,<sup>17</sup> took a very different position. In late 1899 Javabu was very critical of Britain and those in South Africa who had, he believed, been responsible for driving Kruger's Transvaal to war. In editorial after editorial, he spoke out against the 'war-party' whose actions had, in his view, produced a war which was bound 'to be accompanied by much carnage and damage'.<sup>18</sup> He was not taken in by the imperial propaganda that the war was being fought in African interests.<sup>19</sup> Did Javabu adopt this position only because he had become a Bond supporter, asked Ngcongco? Did he merely reproduce Bond views on the war? His answer was clear, and undoubtedly correct: Javabu was influenced by his political allies, but he was no-one's tool.

Ngcongco also made clear the subtleties of Javabu's position. That he accused the British government, British officials in South Africa and Rhodes of war-mongering did

not mean that he gave unqualified support to the Republics in the war. Given their anti-African policies, he could not have done that. Instead, he took a pacifist line, and agreed that Africans should keep out of the war. He printed a letter from 'A New Subscriber', who was delighted that Javabu 'had not conformed to the revised interpretation of the word "loyalty", i.e. abject surrender to Messrs Rhodes and Co, surrender of opinion and conscience'.<sup>20</sup>

But as the war continued, he realised that he could not afford to be openly disloyal to the British side. So despite his strongly expressed criticism of the 'war party', he wrote that he was still 'of the British side... conscious and proud of our own Empire', and he began to call the Boer forces 'the enemy', while still deploring what he saw to be Britain's apparent need to prove 'a self-evident military superiority over ignorant, wretched Boers'.<sup>21</sup> Given the way Javabu tempered his views as the war proceeded, Ngcongco found it surprising that *Imvo* was prohibited from continuing to publish in August 1901, in terms of the martial law regulations in force in the Eastern Cape from January that year.

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Let us now consider some more recent work relevant to Javabu's views on the war. My own work of the late 1960s, like other work of that time,<sup>22</sup> fell into the trap of seeing that class in proto-nationalist terms. With disillusionment with nationalism elsewhere in Africa, and a consequent redirection of the relevant historiography, such new scholarship as appeared on the emergent African elite tended to focus either on its links with America<sup>23</sup> or on the ambiguities of its position.<sup>24</sup> André Odendaal produced a major work on the political mobilisation of the elite in the Eastern Cape, using *Imvo* and *Izwi* as major sources and going over some of the ground Ngcongco had traversed, but arguing that for the new elite traditional values and associations were more important than had previously been argued.<sup>25</sup> The most important work picking up where Ngcongco's article on Javabu and the war had left off was contained in a brief chapter in Bill Nasson's masterly book on black involvement in the South African war, most of which focused on the north-western Cape.<sup>26</sup> Taken in all, however, relatively little further work was done on the elite; attention shifted to the masses, and to what Beinart and Bundy called their 'hidden struggles' in the rural Eastern Cape.<sup>27</sup> We still lack a modern biography of John Tengo Javabu.<sup>28</sup>

We now know from Catherine Higgs's work that Javabu's personal life during the war was far from easy. His eldest son had been sent to Morija in Basutoland in 1898, to learn Sesotho, and so was cut off from his family when war started. In mid 1900 he travelled back to the Eastern Cape through the devastated Orange Free State, where 'Farm after farm was wrecked, Boer homesteads looted, burning, going up in smoke...', a journey which must have caused his parents much concern.<sup>29</sup> Soon after his return, Javabu's wife died, shortly before her thirty-sixth birthday. He was to marry again six months later.<sup>30</sup>

More is now known about the wider context within which Javabu expressed his views. His chief rival, Alan Kirkland Soga, editor of the rival *Izwi Labantu*, which had been founded in 1898, and son of the famous Tiyo, supported the Progressives in the Cape Parliament, who agreed with Milner and were pro-British. Though we still know much less about Soga than we do about Javabu, he is as fascinating a figure. Educated at Glasgow High School and Glasgow University, he returned to South Africa and entered the Native Affairs Department. After passing the law examinations, he became an acting resident magistrate at Cofimvaba in the Western Transkei, and seemed likely to become the first African magistrate in South Africa when he was removed from that post in 1895 and transferred to the Labour office.<sup>31</sup> He resigned from the colonial service in the face of such racist treatment; 'The Europeans made his life too miserable', said one who remembered the episode.<sup>32</sup> It was then, however, that Soga was invited to edit *Izwi*, which

had been established with capital provided by Rhodes earlier in 1898. Not only did Soga fervently support the British cause in the war, but he participated actively himself, serving at the front as a trooper and coming under fire in-between stints editing his paper.<sup>33</sup>

*Izwi* rejoiced when *Imvo* was closed down. Disliking the *Mfengu*, and jealous of Javabu's influence, Soga was delighted at the opportunity to score over his arch-rival.<sup>34</sup> Soga proudly reminded his readers that he had consistently opposed what he called, unfairly, 'the pro-Boer policy of *Imvo*'. In an editorial headed '*Imvo* RIP' he wrote as follows: 'Nemesis dogs the footsteps of those who violate the laws of truth. The first principle to justify the existence of any paper white or black is loyalty to the Imperial factor'.<sup>35</sup> In the next few years he was to prepare a large manuscript history of Africans in South Africa, no copies of which survive, and to write articles which have led George Fredrickson to call him 'perhaps the most significant and influential African intellectual of the first decade of the twentieth century' and 'one of the forerunners of that special blend of Western economic radicalism and African communalism that would later be known as "African Socialism"'.<sup>36</sup> But Soga's exaggerated attacks on Javabu during the war do him little credit, and his loyalty to the Crown blinded him to the damage his rivalry with *Imvo* did to the cause of African advancement at the Cape.<sup>37</sup>

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In pointing out Javabu's independence of thought and the subtleties of his position, Ngcongco was asserting African agency and assertion. He did not go on to stress what with hindsight is clear: that Javabu was correct in much of what he said. The South African war turn out to be a great calamity for the country, while the hopes which Africans had that they would be rewarded if they were loyal during the war proved quite illusory. Javabu was proved correct in his predictions that they would be. In the aftermath of the war, the situation of Africans generally became, if anything, worse than it had been before the war, in part because the new British administration in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony was more efficient than its predecessors.

In the most recent re-interpretation of Javabu to appear in print, Leon de Kock of the English Department at the University of South Africa draws upon Ngcongco's work, but adds considerably to what Nasson and Odendaal had to say about Javabu's subtlety. They tended to write as if what Javabu wrote could be taken at face value, and did not explore how Javabu and other members of the educated elite took over and used the discourse of 'civilisation' for their own purposes. De Kock provides a post-modernist close reading of what Javabu wrote. He argues that Javabu and other members of the elite used the language of civility then current, as 'a kind of mimic counter-text', against the inconsistencies in the British position. Their responses were inevitably limited by the 'civil' limits of the discourse, but while Javabu and others showed respect for imperial values, they at the same time confronted the colonial world with the incongruities between those values and what was actually happening in South Africa. *Imvo* appeared conformist, but that apparent conformity covered subtle self-assertion. De Kock shows convincingly that Javabu sought to expose and emphasise the discrepancies between Britain's constitutional principles and colonial practice. He appeared subservient, but that very subservience could itself be subversive.<sup>38</sup>

De Kock argues that Javabu used the discourse of loyalty and civility to challenge British practice in South Africa to a greater extent than Soga in the pages of *Izwi*. Just because he was not as 'loyal' as Soga, Javabu was able to point out, as Soga, was not the discrepancy between the ideal of constitutionality in Britain and the colonial reality, the corruption of the imperial ideal on the ground. *Izwi*, committed to Britain, could not draw such a distinction between the Crown as an ideal and what was done in its name in South Africa.<sup>39</sup> Though De Kock goes too far when he claims that Javabu's 'discursive struggle... against misrepresentation and the rigging of "truth" was the beginning of a

process which led to the volte face of 1990 and the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994',<sup>40</sup> he has undoubtedly made a major contribution to our knowledge of Javabu and the way he saw the world.

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It is of course impossible to predict where the ongoing work of reinterpretation will take us in the future, but a few suggestions can be made. South African historiography must surely now at last follow that of Central Africa and become more Africanist, as African scholars come to dominate the discipline.<sup>41</sup> Now that the Eastern Cape is a separate province, it is bound to develop its own history and identity, and in its story Javabu is likely to play a large role. And as the centenary of the war approaches, Cape African involvement in the war may attract more attention, and many are likely to be sympathetic to Javabu's position.<sup>42</sup> Any new work in this field, however, will be built on what has come before, including the pioneering contribution of Leonard Ngcongco.

## Notes & References

- 1 *Imvo Zabantsundu* was established in 1884; earlier papers, of which the most important was *Isigidimi*, were all mission papers, and not independent.
- 2 L. Ngcongco, 'Javabu and the Anglo-Boer War', *Kleio*, October 1970
- 3 L. Ngcongco, 'Imvo Zabantsundu and Cape Native' 'Policy 1884-1902', unpublished M.A. thesis, Unisa, 1974. The eighth chapter of that thesis, entitled 'Imvo and the Anglo-Boer War', was an enlarged version of his *Kleio* article. Unisa alone at the time offered Africans the opportunity of obtaining higher degrees by correspondence; the first African to obtain an M.A. there was Simon Mohau Lekhela, who graduated in 1955 for a thesis on 'Native Settlement in South Africa from 1902 to 1936' (I thank Greg Cuthbertson of Unisa for this information.)
- 4 L. Ngcongco, 'John Tengo Javabu 1859-1921,' in C. Saunders, ed., *Black Leaders in Southern African History* (London, 1979). I had heard Ngcongco give stirring papers on Javabu, at a history workshop organised by Thomas Tlou at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland in Gaborone in September 1973, and at the University of Cape Town, to which I invited him to lecture. For me and my UCT students at that time, this was a unique opportunity to hear an African historian, and Ngcongco's lecture aroused enormous interest.
- 5 It is not possible here to explore this, but the Afrocentric tradition of Central Africa, so influential at the University of Botswana, was to reach its apogee in the multi-volume *Unesco History of Africa*, to which Ngcongco contributed. Africanism was only one strand in South African historiography, and radical, social and cultural history were dominant.
- 6 D.D.T. Javabu, *The Life of John Tengo Javabu, Editor of Imvo Zabantsundu, 1884-1921* (Lovedale, n.d. [1922]). Ngcongco cited, but offered no comment on this biography in his thesis.
- 7 Edward Roux, *Time Longer than rope: a history of the black man's struggle for freedom in South Africa* (1st ed., London, 1948), ch. 7: 'Javabu and the Cape Liberals'.
- 8 Ngcongco, 'Imvo', p.261, citing Roux, *Time*; the only other citations to Roux were on pp.262, 265. Roux's book received hardly any attention from South African historians, in part because it was not the work of a historian but also because of its polemical and political purpose. Very few copies of the first edition circulated in South Africa, and when it appeared in a paperback second edition in the mid 1960s (Madison, Wisconsin, 1964), it was banned in that country.
- 9 Javabu first supported Rose Innes, but when in March 1898 J.H. Hofmeyr, the Bond leader, made a speech in which he claimed he was not an enemy of African political liberties, Javabu switched his support to the Bond. He believed that an alliance of English and Afrikaners would best serve African interests, closed his eyes to the past anti-African record of the Bond, and now held Cecil Rhodes and Sprigg responsible for previous anti-African legislation.
- 10 Ngcongco, 'Imvo', p.268.
- 11 D. Williams, 'African Nationalism in South Africa: Origins and Problems', *Journal of African History*, XI (1970). After being forced out of Fort Hare, Williams moved into Indian history at Oxford, but when there on sabbatical in 1968, he showed this paper to the present writer, who was then beginning a thesis on the annexation of the Transkeian territories. Williams presented

- his paper that year at a historical conference in Alberta, and was offered a post in African History at Calgary, which he accepted, and he was to teach there until his retirement.
- 12 S. Trapido, 'John Tengo Javabu and Cape Party Politics 1893-1898'. Cf. Also S. Trapido, 'African Divisional Politics in the Cape Colony, 1884-1910', *Journal of African History*, 9, (1968). Trapido was much influenced by Jack and Ray Simons, whose *Class and Colour in South Africa* (London, 1969) contained a section on Javabu, but it was banned in South Africa and Ngcongco does not cite it.
  - 13 It was subsequently published in B. Ogot, ed., *War and Society in Africa: Ten Studies* (London, 1972). Denoon attended the Gaborone conference of 1973, mentioned in n.3.
  - 14 C. Saunders, 'The New African Elite in the Eastern Cape and some late Nineteenth Century origins of African Nationalism', *Collected Seminar Papers on the Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (hereafter CSP), vol. I (London, 1970). My related work at that time included 'Tile and the Thembu Church', *Journal of African History*, 1970, and 'The Annexation of the Transkeian Territories' in C. Saunders and R. Derricourt, *Beyond the Cape Frontier* (Cape Town, 1974). I had become aware of the importance of the new Afrocentric history through working with Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson at the University of Cape Town in the mid 1960s, but going to Oxford University I found myself pushed towards the study of imperial history, and my work on Africans became a side-line.
  - 15 P. Walshe, 'The Origins of African Political Consciousness in South Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, December 1969; P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa* (Berkeley, 1971).
  - 16 One example: in his Cambridge thesis, cited below, André Odendaal deals extensively with *Imvo* but does not draw upon Ngcongco's work.
  - 17 Javabu had waged various wars in his paper, the first with *Isigidimi*; by 1898 he was faced with a rival paper, *Izwi Labantu*. Many Africans did not forgive him for refusing to criticise the 1892 Franchise and Ballot Act, which limited the Cape African franchise.
  - 18 Ngcongco, 'Imvo', p.220.
  - 19 E.g. *Imvo*, 20 Dec. 1899, editorial.
  - 20 *Imvo*, 15 Jan. 1900.
  - 21 This is quoted by Ngcongco, 'Imvo', p.222.
  - 22 This included Walshe, 'Origins of African Political Consciousness' and esp. the work of T.O. Ranger, 'Connexions between "Primary Resistance" and Modern Mass Nationalism in East and Central Africa', *Journal of African History* 9, (1968).
  - 23 The most recent, and important, book in this tradition is G.M. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: a Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York, 1995). Cf. esp. ch. 1.
  - 24 I refer here especially to the work of Shula Marks, but the point was well made by Neville Hogan in 'The Posthumous vindication of Zachariah Gquishela. Reflections on the politics of dependence at the cape in the nineteenth century', in S. Marks and A. Atmore, *Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa* (London, 1980), pp. 275-277. See esp. S. Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism and the State in Twentieth Century Natal* (Johannesburg, 1986), which focused on African elite politics in Natal.
  - 25 A. Odendaal, 'African Political Mobilisation in the Eastern Cape, 1880-1910', unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Cambridge, 1983, which, however, touches on the South African war only in passing and in virtually the same way as he does in his published book, *Vukani Bantu!: the Beginning of Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912* (Cape Town, 1984).
  - 26 Bill Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War*. Nasson built on P. Warwick, *Blacks*. Cf. also the chapters in Warwick, ed. *South African War* (London, 1980).
  - 27 C. Bundy and W. Beinart, *Hidden Struggles*.
  - 28 Much work has been done on Javabu's career by Vuyani Mquingwana, who teaches in the History Department, University of Transkei, and it is to be hoped that he will soon publish the fruits of his research. A biography of Javabu's son D.D.T., based on a doctoral dissertation presented to Yale in 1992, is about to be published: C. Higgs, *The Ghost of Equality: the public lives of D.D.T. Javabu of South Africa 1885-1959* (Cape Town, 1997).
  - 29 N. Javabu, *The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life* (London, 1963), p. 249.
  - 30 Higgs, 'The Ghost of Equality: D.D.T. Javabu and the Decline of South African Liberalism, 1885-1959', unpublished Yale University Ph.D thesis, 1993, pp.33-35.

- 31 See W. Mills, 'The Rift within the Lute', *CSP*, 15 (1990), pp.34, 39 fn.41.
- 32 South African Library: Merriman Papers, M.G. Aporhp to Merriman, 21 August 1923.
- 33 Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 35-36.
- 34 Ngcongco, 'Imvo', p.247. Soga's later career is of interest. In 1904 he was preparing for publication a book on 'The Problem of the Social and Political Regeneration of Africa', but it seems never to have been published. Cf. S. Allen, 'Mr. Alan Kirkland Soga', *Colored American Magazine*, Feb. 1904, p.114. He did, however, write a series of articles under the title 'Call the Black Man to Conference' in the *Colored American Magazine* in that year. I thank Bob Edgar for providing me with copies of these articles.
- 35 *Izwi Labantu*, 27 August 1901.
- 36 G. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation* (New York, 1995), pp. 49-56, drawing upon articles in the *Colored America Magazine* and citing Odendaal, 'African Mobilisation', p.314.
- 37 In 1909 *Imvo* and *Izwi* did briefly join together in opposition to the Colour Bar clauses in the South Africa Bill, providing for the union of the four South African states but to no avail: African interests were sacrificed on the alter of conciliating the whites.
- 38 This is the title of de Kock's chapter concerned with *Imvo* in *Civilising Barbarians*, ch.4.
- 39 Leon de Kock, *Civilising Barbarians* (Johannesburg, 1996). De Kock's book is, alas, marred by sometimes impenetrable language.
- 40 *Ibid*, p.124.
- 41 I have recently written about African attitudes to Empire in a paper presented to a conference on South Africa and Empire, Oxford, March 1996. This paper is to appear in a book to be edited by Donald Lowry of Oxford Brookes University. See N. Parsons, 'Imperial History in the Ukay', *South African Historical Journal*, 34 (May 1996), p.214.
- 42 When the question of commemorating the centenary of the war was raised in the Cape Town municipal council in September 1996, a number of ANC members queried whether there should be any such commemoration; members of the council were clearly ignorant of the extent of black participation: *Cape Times*, 21 September 1996.