

"Self-Sacrifice": An Example from the Anglo-Zulu War

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However one interprets the evidence concerning inter-cultural variability in concepts of the self, it would appear to be beyond serious dispute that with very few exceptions, humans do not sacrifice their lives frivolously. Indeed, it is an evolutionary truism that humans are, and must be, devoted to self-preservation not self-destruction (Badcock 1986). The Zulu army that fought against the British in 1879 illustrates both the power of culture in motivating men to die in battle, and the limits of that power. The Zulu army was probably the most effective military force ever developed in Africa. The men of this army fought with awesome bravery, died by the thousands, yet after fighting with what seemed to be utter fearlessness, they ran away in panic. Their behavior baffled the British and even the Zulus themselves were puzzled by these extremes in their willingness to die in battle.

Ernest Becker (1973) began his celebrated book, *The Denial of Death*, by referring to Dr. Johnson's observation that the prospect of death wonderfully concentrates the mind. Becker then went on to say that the thought of death does far more than concentrate the mind, it so haunts and dominates humans that the denial of death is a quintessential activity. If Becker's assertion is true, and there is much in the ethnographic record to suggest that it is, then the recklessness with which men sometimes risk their lives in battle is all the more perplexing. Freud's perplexity was so great that he tried to explain the slaughter of World War I in terms of a death instinct, and if he had lived long enough to be aware of the 55 million deaths of World War II (Dower 1986), it is unlikely that he would have changed his mind. Subsequent wars in China, Korea, Southeast Asia, India, Nigeria, El Salvador, the Falkland Islands, the Middle East and elsewhere continue to demonstrate that men are willing to risk their lives in battle for reasons as diverse as revenge, religion, self-defense, freedom and personal profit, among others.

Despite the daunting evidence that many men have faced self-destruction in battle willingly, even eagerly, the ethnographic record also clearly indicates that in most of the world's societies most warriors have been very cautious indeed about putting themselves in harm's way. There have been exceptions, to be sure, but the wars of most tribal societies, and many pre-modern states as well, were relatively bloodless affairs.² So it was in most of pre-colonial Africa. While it was true that the great West African states such as Dahomey and Ashanti could mobilize huge armies, recklessness in battle was the exception rather than the rule. Warriors from smaller tribal societies sometimes fought bravely but neither reckless courage nor large death tolls were common. The Zulus were a striking exception to this pattern; they fought with apparent indifference to death and their wars were so devastating that the shock waves of displaced people affected half a continent (Omer-Cooper 1966). The well-known early wars of King Shaka's armies were fought for land, cattle, and political domination, but I have chosen to discuss a later war, the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, because in this war the Zulus fought with amazing courage for six

months and died by the thousands. They did not die for revenge, religion, freedom, booty, or even self-defense. Their motivations were complex and any attempt to explain why they fought as they did in battles that took place over a century ago must obviously be speculative. Still, a great deal about these battles and the men who fought in them has been recorded. British accounts are voluminous and numerous accounts by Zulus have survived as well (Laband 1985). Many gaps remain, but enough is known to permit a plausible reconstruction of the reasons why so many Zulus sacrificed their lives in battle and perhaps, too, why those who survived ran away in fear (Edgerton n.d.).

Prior to the military reforms begun by King Dingiswayo early in the 19th Century and perfected by his successor, King Shaka, warfare between the various tribes of what later become known as Zululand was chivalrous, if not downright comic. For one thing, battles were fought by appointment. The belligerent tribes decided that a battle would be fought on a particular day, and when the two sides met, sometimes the "battle" consisted of shouting poetry back and forth. More often, the two sides threw spears at one another from considerable distances, then called the hostilities off before anyone was seriously hurt (Webb and Wright 1976). This too-sensible form of disputation ended when Shaka's armies were trained not to throw their spears at their enemies from long distances, but to charge at close quarters and stab with their short-handled spears. It is still not known how such a radical transformation in warfare and men's willingness to die could be brought about so rapidly but, in a period of a few years, casualties from a single battle often mounted into the thousands. In one epic battle it is reported that the Zulus killed over 20,000 men losing "only" a thousand or so of their own warriors (Fynn 1950; Otterbein 1967). These figures may be exaggerated, but when the forces of two princes who were vying for power clashed in 1856, British and Zulu eyewitnesses agreed that at least 20,000 people were killed in a single battle (Moodie 1888; Webb and Wright 1979). After this civil war, the 250,000 or so people of Zululand were largely at peace until 1879 when British colonial officials, with political duplicity that prefigured Hitler's diplomacy, manufactured a pretext for invading the Zulu Kingdom in order to bring the Zulus under British dominion (Duminy and Ballard 1981).

The Anglo-Zulu War

Although the willingness of the British soldiers and their officers to die in battle is not the issue here, some background on the British army is necessary. The British troops who first invaded Zululand were veteran soldiers with years of colonial service. These red-coated soldiers were recruited from the lowest strata of the British class structure. Most of them were tough, hard-drinking, hard-fighting men who had campaigned throughout the 9th Frontier War against the Xhosa in South Africa two years earlier. Their easy successes in that war left them dangerously overconfident but they were undeniably well-trained, well-armed and seasoned men, who fought so savagely against the Zulus that many Zulus later said they were stunned by the bravery of the "red soldiers" who fought "like lions." So many of these veteran soldiers were killed at the beginning of the war that they had to be replaced by raw recruits who were utterly terrified by the Zulus. But even after the veteran soldiers were replaced by recruits, the British army was a formidable force. They were armed with modern rifles, cannon, rockets and gatling guns and, of equal importance, they were disciplined to obey their officers' orders without hesitation. These officers, almost all of whom were gentlemen (and some were of high social rank) led their men by their coolness under fire and, if need be, by the lash.

When British troops invaded Zululand in January, 1879, the Zulus, including their King Cetshwayo and his councilors, had no idea why. The Zulus had no grievance with the British who governed Natal on the southern border of Zululand. In fact, the Zulus and British had been at peace for decades. Still, as the British troops advanced into the Zulu Kingdom, King Cetshwayo mobilized his army. Except for a few minor border skirmishes with the Boers and Swazis, the Zulu armies had not been called to battle for over 20 years, and as they prepared for war few among them understood what it would be like to face the massed firepower of the British. Although most Zulu warriors had acquired rifles by 1879, the majority of those weapons were obsolete muzzle loaders, and even those Zulus who had modern breech-loading rifles were terrible marksmen. Moreover, the Zulus had not integrated rifle-fire into their military tactics. They still relied on their traditional "charging buffalo" or "beast-horn" formation in which a large mass of men (the chest of the "beast") made a frontal attack while two flanking columns (the "horns") tried to encircle the enemy. The attacking Zulus would open fire with their rifles, usually at long range, but the goal of their attack was to use their short stabbing spears against their enemy in hand-to-hand combat. As the Zulus were to learn, when the British held a fortified position, attacking them in this way was tantamount to suicide.

After some minor skirmishing, the war began in earnest when three major battles were fought on the same day, January 22nd. The first battle pitted a British column of about 2400 men against a Zulu force of 6000 consisting of men not noted for their martial valor or skill.³ The Zulu charge gave the British enough warning to form ranks and open a heavy fire. After 90 minutes of repeated charges by the Zulus and heavy firing by the British, the Zulus fled. The British counted 390 dead Zulus near their lines; many others must have died later of their wounds. The British losses were eleven killed and fifteen wounded.

Later the same day, at a place called Isandlwana, a larger British force was attacked by the main Zulu army of approximately 25,000 men. The British had such little respect for the Zulus' military prowess that their commanding general, Lord Chelmsford, refused to circle his wagons or otherwise fortify his camp, and, to make matters worse, he marched out of camp with half his force the morning of the battle. When a message reached the general with news that the camp was being attacked by the Zulus, the general's aide was sublimely arrogant, saying, "How very amusing! Actually attacking our camp - most amusing." The British soldiers who took up positions to defend the camp were amused too. They laughed and joked as they fired on the still-distant Zulu lines, never dreaming, as a surviving officer later said, that unlike the Xhosa whom the British had defeated in South African wars, the Zulus "would actually charge home." The over-confident and poorly-positioned British fought in widely scattered units none of which had the advantage of any cover. The result was one of the greatest defeats in British military history. Along with 500 or so of their African allies, 806 veteran British soldiers were killed, and so were 52 of their officers, more British officers than were killed in the entire Battle of Waterloo. Although the British were virtually annihilated -- only a handful escaped -- they fought with desperation and inflicted terrible losses on the Zulus. No precise reckoning of Zulu dead is possible, but based on the reports of Zulus who participated in the battle and the estimates of Zulu leaders including King Cetshwayo, at least 3000 Zulus died.

Later that same afternoon near a river crossing called Rorke's Drift, the third battle took place. It was to become one of the most famous battles in British history because approximately 100 British soldiers were able to defeat about 4000 Zulus in a ferocious fight that lasted 10 hours. Although the British were greatly outnumbered, they were able to fortify a mission station primarily by using heavy bags of maize to build a tall parapet.

Beginning in the late afternoon and lasting through the night, the Zulus hurled themselves at the British wall time after time. To reach the British barricades, the Zulus -- most of whom were older married men in their mid- or late forties -- had to charge over a flat open area that was already littered with spears, shields and Zulu bodies into massed rifle fire. Zulus who lived long enough to reach the wall tried to stand on the bodies of their dead comrades to vault over the 8-foot high barrier. They were shot or bayoneted. Some tried to grab British rifles or bayonets to pull the red-coated soldiers down to them in deadly games of tug-of-war.

It is difficult to imagine what it must have been like for the Zulus. They ran toward muzzle flashes, stepping on the bodies of their own dead, slipping in pools of blood. Some hurled themselves at the 7- or 8-foot high wall with such force that in several places they pushed it back and almost toppled it over. One attack like this would have been an awesome display of courage, but at Rorke's Drift, there were dozens of them. One Zulu warrior later said, "all we saw was blood." The Zulus were masters of metaphor, but this comment was literally true. Over 1000 Zulus died in an epic example of futile bravery. Only seventeen British soldiers were killed.

In all, over 5000 Zulus were killed on this first day of battle. Even before these battles many Zulus believed that they could not defeat the British, and when the day's killing was over, many others agreed. Cetshwayo's most senior councilors urged him to end the war, and he tried, but the King's peace envoys were shot at, imprisoned or turned away. Two columns of British troops remained in Zululand, but they were belatedly so impressed by the Zulu armies that they built fortresses and waited for reinforcements to rescue them. The Zulu warriors returned to their homesteads and when their losses became known, the kingdom was paralyzed by grief and mourning.

There was no serious fighting for several months until the Zulus surprised a British supply convoy, killing 79 men. A little later, when British horsemen rode out of one of their fortified camps to raid a Zulu stronghold on top of a rugged plateau, they were soundly defeated with the loss of 94 whites, including 15 officers. The next day, a Zulu army of fully 20,000 men arrived at the fortified British camp nearby. The Zulus were under explicit orders not to attack the British as long as they were sheltered by their trenches and barricades, but they ignored their officers and attacked. The battle lasted over 4 hours. When it ended, over 3000 Zulus lay dead. The British losses were 29 dead. A short while later, a British relief column of 5000 men was attacked by about 10,000 Zulus. After another savage battle in which the British suffered only 13 dead, over 2000 Zulus lay dead. It is significant that despite the length and ferocity of these two battles, not one British soldier was killed by a Zulu spear. Hundreds of Zulus were shot down only a few feet away from British gun barrels, but not one man got close enough to use his spear.

After these terrible battles, there was another lull in the fighting until July when the British sent the largest army they had yet assembled to defeat King Cetshwayo's armies at his royal homestead, which the British thought of as his "capitol." In their "square" formation, protected against attack from any side, 5000 British soldiers, armed with cannon and gatling guns and supported by a regiment of Lancers, waited for some 25,000 Zulus to attack. The Zulus charged as always, and as was now to be expected, they were driven off with about 1500 dead. Again, British losses were light, with only 10 dead and 69 wounded. Soon after, the war ended. King Cetshwayo was captured and sent into exile, his Kingdom was partitioned into petty, warring chiefdoms and the British troops marched away, leaving the Zulus to cope with the civil wars that ensued.

By the end of the war, at least 10,000 Zulus had been killed by British bullets, shells, and bayonets. From the war's first battle to its last, the British expressed awe at the Zulus' bravery. This reaction by a battle-tested sergeant was typical:

I never saw the like, nothing frightened them, as when any of their numbers was shot down others took their places.... I confess that I do not think that a braver lot of men than our enemies in point of disregard of life, and for their bravery under fire, could be found anywhere (Emery 1977:185).

British officers agreed. This comment was typical (Moodie 1879:288): "Fancy, there were some of them twenty yards from the trench. Talk about pluck! The Zulu has all that. They were shot down one after the other, and they still came on in hundreds." The Zulus were so reckless with their lives that most British officers believed that the Zulus had no fear of death. This belief was strengthened when the British, who usually killed the Zulu wounded or watched while their African allies did so, witnessed the equanimity with which wounded Zulus waited for death, lying patiently, each man with his left arm upraised in anticipation of a spear thrust in the armpit that was the traditional Zulu *coup de grace*. This concept of the fearless Zulu quickly found its way into British popular culture where it remained for many years. For example, as recently as 1933, T. H. White (later famous for the *Once and Future King*) described the Zulus as an "army of ants" and "death-distaining stabbers" whose cries "were those of beasts and cattle" (White 1933: 79).

Death in Zulu Culture

The British were correct in describing Zulu courage in battle as being truly exceptional, but they were wrong in concluding that the Zulus did not fear death. Unlike many Christians and Muslims, the Zulus did not believe that death in battle would lead to heaven or paradise. They believed that an ancestor's "soul" (*isithunzi*) survived somewhere in a nether world, but except for the very old there was nothing in Zulu religious belief that made the prospect of death in the slightest way desirable (Webb and Wright 1982:173; Vilakazi 1962). Zulu eschatology at that time has been imperfectly recorded, but it is clear that death promised no rewards, only the need for survivors to protect themselves against the dangerous pollution it brought to all who were close to the deceased. In fact, the first thing a newborn child received in life was an amulet to protect it against danger. To avoid danger throughout its life, a growing child was told to avoid certain foods and places, while following other rules and taking various medicines that protected it against harm. Zulu doctors employed a large number of more or less effective herbal medications and their remedies were avidly sought as were those of the first Europeans to visit the Zulus. Zulus also engaged in unending efforts to protect themselves against evil spirits, malign ancestors, and the hostility of sorcerers and witches. Witches were so feared that they were not subject to trial within the Zulu legal system. They were summarily executed. Life was perceived as dangerous, and the Zulus took every possible precaution against those dangers. The services of specialists against danger were in constant demand, and sometimes the threat became so acute that the entire army was assembled and required to carry out rituals in order to drive away all evil spirits, pestilence, and disease.

Despite its successes and its mystique of invincibility among neighboring peoples, the army was in need of protection and strengthening. Warriors were fed specially prepared foods and given powerful medicines while they carried out all manner of rituals that involved everything from feasting to fasting. No matter how urgent the King's orders to mobilize for war might be, no man would report for military duty before he had visited

his homestead to pray to his ancestors for protection. Warriors also took with them various charms to protect them against enemy action and others to render their enemies foolish or feeble. They also observed countless food taboos. What is more, ritual specialists carried out complex magical procedures to weaken the enemy, and before war could begin, the Zulu army had to be ritually "strengthened." A special bull was magically prepared then, after it was wrestled to the ground and killed by men of the king's favorite regiment, it was slaughtered and fed to the army in tiny strips. Later the men marched by a pit six or seven feet deep that was surrounded by materials of great religious significance. After taking an emetic substance that was handed out like wafers at communion, each warrior vomited into the pit. Some of this vomit was collected and bound up in a python coil shaped like a rubber tire. This coil, known as the "national coil" (*Nkatha yesiwe*), was the Zulus most powerful supernatural possession (Samuelson 1929). Sometimes doctors cut small incisions into the flesh of soldiers, rubbing protective medicine into them as a kind of inoculation against death. The most potent protection was human flesh, which was cooked and served in small bits to the troops before battle. Zulu warriors did not believe in spending the night before battle in the arms of their wives or lovers. After more prayers to their ancestors, the troops took final precautions by avoiding the weakening influence of women (Krige 1950; Webb and Wright 1982: 296ff).

Before the men set off to war, they were cleansed again in a mass ritual conducted with great drama and flourish by ritual specialists, and if circumstances permitted, just before they went into combat they were ceremonially protected by yet another ritual involving fire and liquid. The same specialists who purified and protected the troops just before battle did so again if warriors were wounded. A warrior who killed an enemy became polluted and he was required to slit open his victim's abdomen to release his spirit; if he failed to do so, he ran the risk of going insane. All the British who were killed at Isandlwana -- 858 of them -- were disembowelled. He also had to wear some item of his victim's clothing. Even if the dead man wore nothing more than a small penis cover, his slayer removed that and wore it. Before returning to ordinary life among other Zulus, a warrior who had killed had to wear a sprig of wild asparagus in his hair and, to counteract his pollution he had to have sexual intercourse with a woman who was a stranger to him or, if necessary, a boy so that his pollution could be passed on to a stranger. Through the entire process of preparing an army for battle and returning warriors from it, women went through an elaborate set of ritual practices intended to insure the safety of their husbands, sons or lovers. Among other things, they marked their faces in black, wore some of their clothing backwards, beat large stones together and had to avoid quarreling.

Rather than having no fear of death as the British believed, the Zulus feared death enough to take every possible precaution against it. When despite everything death occurred, it meant more than the loss of a life, it meant pollution for the survivors, especially for those who were closest to the deceased. Pollution (*umnyama*) was contagious, and great care had to be taken to reduce its impact and to purify those who had been affected. On the day of a man's death no one in the homestead of the deceased could eat or drink, not even water. The cattle could not be milked and no one could work in the fields or even talk. If the deceased was the kraal's head man, there could be no work for a month, no sex, no joviality of any kind. Wives of the deceased were in mourning for a full year. Zulu grief was not a theatrical display demanded by custom. Men's tears mingled with those of women. There were few direct reports of mourning during the Anglo-Zulu War, but a Dutch trader, Cornelius Vijn, was in a Zulu homestead after one of the war's first battles. The headman of the kraal had been killed in battle and Vijn remembered the women's grief: "...in the night they wailed so as to cut through the heart of

anyone. And this wailing went on, night and day, for a fortnight; the effect was very depressing; I wished I could not hear it" (Vijn 1880: 28). After an internecine battle a year earlier, an old man was found sitting by the corpse of his son, "quite stupified with grief," saying "he was my only one" (Moodie 1880: 487); a young woman who came upon the bodies of her two brothers screamed and died, falling next to them.

If death was so feared, and the dead so profoundly mourned, why did the Zulus repeatedly risk their lives in battle? It might be argued that before the first round of battles on January 22nd, the Zulus did not comprehend the risk they were taking when they charged against British guns. If so, they soon learned because they endured British fire for hours, watching men next to them shot down. Nevertheless, they continued to charge. The following comment was made by a warrior who fought in the war's first battle where a second-rate Zulu army was defeated with relative ease:

We were told to advance and, grasping our [weapons]... we went forward packed close together like a lot of bees... we were still far away from them when the white men began to throw their bullets at us, but we could not shoot them because our rifles would not shoot so far.... As we advanced we had our rifles under our arms and had our *assegais* in our right hands ready to throw them, but they were not much good for we never got near enough to use them. We never got nearer than 50 paces to the English and, although we tried to climb over our fallen brothers we could not get very far ahead because the white men were firing heavily... The battle was so fierce that we had to wipe the blood and brains of the killed and wounded from our heads, faces, arms, legs and shields after the fighting.

(Laband 1985: 27)

Other Zulu combatants made similar comments (Vijn 1880: 114): "...we were lying prostrate, we were beaten, we could do no good. So many were killed that the few who were not killed were lying between dead bodies, so thick were the dead." Another man spoke of the horror he experienced in attacking the British when Zulu "arms, legs and heads" went flying in every direction. Similar comments were recorded from men who fought in the war's earliest battles and its last. The Zulus were quite rational men who feared death, yet in battle after battle they advanced even as they saw their comrades shot to pieces alongside them. Why did so many Zulus continue to risk their lives in battle?

The Willingness to Die in Battle

In search for an explanation of Zulu bravery in battle, it may be helpful to begin by examining what happened when their reckless courage finally failed. In each of the major battles in which the Zulus left the field of battle in the possession of the British, a critical point was reached when the Zulus stopped charging, stopped exposing their bodies to British gunfire, and ran away, each man for himself, with no attempt to offer any kind of rear-guard defense against mounted troops and African foot soldiers the British sent in pursuit of them. From the bravest soldiers the British had ever seen, soldiers who appeared to have no fear of death, the Zulus were suddenly and dramatically transformed into a panicky mob in which each man was concerned only with avoiding death.

It was traditional for Zulu battles to end in routs. When the Zulus won, their enemies fled in terror, and when the Zulus were repulsed, they fled in the same way. Contrary to the legends of Zulu invincibility that have been repeated by some anthropologists as well as historians, the Zulus did not win all their battles, and as British eyewitnesses such as Fynn (1950) and Isaacs (1970) recorded, they sometimes ran away in defeat even during

Shaka's reign. After the Anglo-Zulu War, several Zulu officers spoke candidly about the differences between themselves and the British, observing that whereas the British, even in hopeless defeat would stand back to back and fight with knives or even their fists until they were killed, once the Zulus gave way, the battle was over (Hattersley 1938:16): "You know what we are, when we once give way and run. There is no stopping us to fight with the pursuer."

There is nothing remarkable about soldiers running away from battle in panic. It has happened to troops in all armies, the British included; their young soldiers often panicked in the war against the Zulus (Edgerton, n.d.). The death of a leader, the death of one's friends, the sense of hopelessness -- these and other factors can lead to uncontrollable fear and precipitous flight. As all armies know, once some men run away, others are likely to follow (Holmes 1985). What remains problematic is the dramatic contrast between the Zulus' prolonged self-sacrifice in battle, and their sudden unwillingness to risk death any longer. The Zulus themselves offered no explanation except that it was to be expected. The Zulus were hardly boastful about their headlong flights from danger, but they weren't apologetic either. It was simply taken-for-granted that Zulu warriors would attack with suicidal abandon, but if the attack failed, they would flee. But if panic-stricken flight from battle could occur without remorse, then it is all the more puzzling why the Zulus charged so bravely for so long when they were being killed in such numbers. Simply listing the numbers of Zulu killed in battle is inadequate to describe the risks that many Zulus took. In several battles, as many as 25% of all men who assembled for battle were killed. But many men who were part of the Zulu force took little or no part in the fighting, because a large number of men usually remained in reserve, and others took cover far away from the British guns. The percentage of men killed or wounded among those Zulus who actually charged the British was even higher.

Why did the Zulus continue to fight despite such losses? First, although there was a tremendous emphasis on bravery in war, the Zulu warriors were not forced to fight. In fact, a significant number of Zulu men of military age did not answer their King's call to arms, and others who did report became malingerers. Also, although many Zulus did capture rifles and ammunition, the prospect of booty was never mentioned by Zulu survivors as a motivation for fighting. Similarly, there was no mention of a desire for revenge, or of hatred of the British. There was no question of ideology as a cause of the war, and although some Zulus believed that the British wanted to steal their women, and some Zulus who lived in areas where battles were fought were concerned about defending their families and herds, neither the defense of their herds nor their women were mentioned prominently as reasons for fighting. Instead, the Zulus most often said that they fought because they were warriors and they looked forward to an opportunity to prove their mettle. Simplistic as this seems, it is what they said and it is probably something that most of them felt. This was a warrior culture, and men who went to war were praised and sometimes rewarded, while those who did not were ridiculed and shamed, especially by women. Zulu culture was focused on warfare, and it exalted bravery in battle, but despite a lifetime of socialization, motivating men to face death in battle required special circumstances and practices. At the heart of the Zulu motivational system was rivalry among individuals and military units.

Rivalry was built into Zulu life. Although the Zulu kingdom was more than half a century old in 1879, it was a fragile congeries of competing interest groups, not a monolithic state. The kingdom had been built by conquering various tribes and incorporating them into the royal system of tribute as well as the royal regiments. For over 50 years, the kingdom had been perpetually on the brink of civil war. While royal factions vied for power, some districts and tribal groups were only nominally or occasionally tributary to

the Zulu king and some large tribal groups within Zululand were wholly independent. The Zulu army was a formidable instrument for state cohesion, and it was skillfully unified by the king and his councilors, who represented families of great wealth. The king organized age-graded "regiments", giving them unique names, uniforms, shields, and battle cries, and he appointed senior officers known for their bravery and their loyalty to the crown. Regiments were rewarded for their success with cattle, praise and insignia of bravery. But regiments were also encouraged to compete with one another. Because of the significance of age in a society in which marriage was often prohibited until men were 40 or older, Zulu age-based regiments needed no urging to be intensely rivalrous. Moreover, because of the heterogeneity of the Zulu kingdom, men of the same regiment had differing territorial and tribal affiliations that led to still further rivalry.

At least once a year, the regiments accompanied by their female guilds assembled to participate in grand and tumultuous ceremonies that included dancing competitions. The losers in these competitions were subjected to taunts by the winners and the resulting animosities were so profound that regiments frequently fought against one another, sometimes with substantial loss of life. Some regiments were so hostile to one another that they had to be kept well separated, even during the war against the British. In addition to these inter-regimented rivalries, individuals or a small unit of men challenged and insulted each other, boasting that when war came they would exhibit greater bravery than their rivals. These were anything but idle boasts; they so inflamed men that they had to be separated and disarmed. It is impossible to exaggerate the intensity of feelings that these rivalries could engender. As a result of rivalry, regiments routinely disobeyed orders in an attempt to outdo one another in displays of recklessness, and if a man who had challenged another was wounded, he had to be protected by his friends or his rivals would kill him. As a result some Zulus were in as much danger from other Zulus as they were from the British (Edgerton 1988).

When the Zulus fought the British, the "red soldiers" were respected as foes and the Zulus wanted to be able to boast that they had overcome them in battle, but the Zulu fighting men were less concerned with defeating the British than they were with outdoing and humiliating other Zulus. Zulus fought primarily to impress Zulus, not to impress or kill the white strangers. Rivalry was clearly the most fundamental force behind Zulu "self-sacrifice" in battle, but when it came to facing the devastating British fire not just during one charge, but many times over a period of hours, other factors also came into play.

Prior to battle, the Zulus were given an emetic that may have contained psychoactive substances. Some Zulus said that it "made their hearts feel very bad indeed, full of cruelty and daring" (Binns 1963:217). Zulu men smoked cannabis sativa on a daily basis and they may have ingested it as well as other narcotics in the snuff that they took before battle (DuToit 1975). Whether drugs helped to excite the Zulus or to diminish their fear is conjectural, but it is likely that pre-battle fatigue resulting from the many miles they ran before they reached the battlefield helped to diminish their fear. There is also little doubt that the emotions experienced by the Zulus as they advanced together in rivalrous units were exhilarating. The emotional power of men together, bonded to one another and determined to defeat their rivals, was sufficient to drive some men to the most rash acts of courage. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of men -- some young, some middle-aged -- felt a bond with other men like them who dressed as they did, hated as they did, and yearned as they did for the opportunity to prove themselves the bravest of the brave. For the Zulus, dancing together before battle was an emotional experience that resulted in nothing less than frenzy. Yet, no matter how inspiring these dances were, the Zulus still had miles to cover before they could do battle.

In order to understand how it was that the Zulus risked their lives in battle, it is necessary to describe in detail what it was like for them when they attacked the British. Driven by their past rivalries, boastful challenges, the exhilaration of their dancing, and perhaps by drugs, the Zulu warriors assembled in their assigned places to form the chest and horns of their charging buffalo formation before they began to trot forward toward the British. Often they trotted for 5 miles or more before they approached close enough to begin their deployment for the actual attack. Two or three miles from the British position, each regiment deployed into 10 or 12 ranks of men who charged the British one after the other. The men gathered speed despite the British shells that exploded among them. Ignoring the killing power of these explosives, the Zulu lines seldom wavered or slowed until they were within 1000 yards of the British and volleys of rifle fire began to knock men down. At about 400 yards the casualties were usually so heavy that the leading ranks took cover followed by the men in the rear. It is a truism in all armies that if men once take cover from enemy fire they are extremely reluctant to expose themselves to death again. When Zulus took cover, their officers exposed themselves to British fire, urging the men on by shouting reminders of their boasts and taunting them with accusations that their rivals were braver than they were. Invariably, the Zulus responded by dashing forward over the bodies of the many men who had already been hit by British fire. Usually, British fire drove the Zulus to cover again and the pattern was repeated until rank after rank had been slain within a few yards of the British guns. These rushes into British bullets continued for no less than one hour and, in one battle, as long as ten hours before the Zulus turned and ran for their lives. That the Zulus endured for so long might suggest that they saw some hope of victory, but the comments of survivors indicated that they knew full well that these battles were hopeless. Although long-range rifle fire killed a few of the British, after their first great victory at Isandlwana, the Zulus were never able to kill a British soldier with a spear. Knowing that they had no chance of defeating the British, it is remarkable that the Zulus fought as long as they did. It is equally remarkable that most of those who survived fought again, most of them taking part in three major battles. Their persistence is more remarkable in view of the fact that the bravest among them, including their officers, took the greatest risks and were killed in disproportionate numbers.

It is peculiar that the Zulus who survived the war so seldom used emotional terms to describe how they felt during these terrible battles or the flights that followed. Except for a few expressions of fear, the Zulus did not talk about their emotions. Instead, they spoke about their awareness of the behavior of other Zulus in the battle as if they were primarily concerned with comparing their own bravery to that of other men. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that they were, in a sense, keeping score. The Zulus were certainly capable of intense emotional displays ranging from rage, to hilarity, to grief, but their conduct in this war was far less visibly emotional than it was calculated. A few Zulus, like one man who charged a large British force single-handedly and was shot dead, were truly reckless, but most men seemed to be calculating their chances of performing a brave act and still surviving! Even during their first great victory over the British, most Zulus avoided taking chances as long as the British ammunition held out; even then they were wary of British bayonets. One British force built a formidable fortress well inside Zululand where they were besieged. The Zulus taunted the British but they made no effort to attack what they judged to be an impregnable position. Indeed, as the war drew on the Zulus made it clear that they regarded the British as cowards for fighting from behind walls. When the British elected to fight the war's last battle in the open, the Zulus seized the opportunity to attack. When the Zulus still could make no headway against the British guns, they gave up the war.

It was then, at the war's end, that the Zulus most clearly expressed their attitudes about fighting. The British sent mounted patrols to urge the Zulus to disarm. The Zulus did not attack these almost defenseless men, but neither did they hand over their weapons. Instead, they congratulated the British on fighting so well and gleefully described their own roles in the past fighting with obvious enjoyment. One man who had fought at Rorke's Drift reenacted his part in the fighting with such "fits of laughter" that he made it seem to the British that this battle had been "the greatest joke in the world" (Mitford 1883:266). A few of these surviving warriors complained to the British that they had "killed too many" (Montague 1880:280-1), but they did not seem resentful.

They said out, without the slightest hesitation, "what more do you English want? You have beaten us fairly -- we own that you are better at fighting than we are -- so now go away!"... Like boys at a public school, they had had a fight to see who was "best man": that decided, nothing was left but to be the greatest friends, and be off.

Montague 1880: 274

This interpretation of the Zulus' motivation is suspiciously ethnocentric coming as it did from officers who had fought this way themselves during their public school days and had watched their soldiers engage in bloody bare-knuckle fights simply to see who was the "best man" (Hamilton-Browne 1911), but there is much evidence from the Zulus to suggest that this is exactly how the Zulus felt. The Zulus saw this bloody war as an opportunity to demonstrate bravery and they respected the British for fighting well and for giving the Zulus a chance to compete for glory, to earn the reputation of a great warrior and the praises that went with it.

If the Zulus had seen the British as a hated enemy they could have used other tactics than they did, and they might very well have forced the British to abandon the war. The British supply lines were vulnerable and their soldiers were terrified of a night attack. The Zulus ignored the British supplies and never attacked at night. Neither did they employ guerrilla tactics that could have worn down the largely immobile British troops. All of these tactics had been used by Shaka, by other Zulu leaders in subsequent inter-tribal and civil wars, and in the Zulu rebellion of 1906, but as a Zulu survivor said of such methods of war, that sort of fighting was cowardly. To underscore his point, the Zulus never varied from their heroic but ineffective frontal attacks against the British, and when a small group of Zulus ambushed and killed Louis Napoleon, heir to the Bonaparte throne who was accompanying the British, King Cetshwayo ordered that his sword be returned with apologies for fighting in such an inglorious way.

For their part, the British officers did not hate the Zulus either. They admired them for their bravery, and, it must be said, for giving the British an opportunity to win glory, medals and promotion by displaying their own bravery against what they referred to as "splendid savages". The British risked their lives in the same competitive spirit as the Zulus and, like the Zulus, they expected their bravery to be seen and rewarded. Like the Zulus, war was "fun," "adventure," and "sport" (Baynes 1967), and so it has been for warriors in many parts of the world.

If many men in many cultures have risked their lives in battle to prove themselves braver than other men, what makes the Zulus bravery worth singling out? Many societies have been able to socialize at least some of their men to risk death in battle in defense of their children, property or sacred symbols. Some societies like the British or Japanese have developed military classes of men willing to die simply in defense of their honor. What, then, makes the Zulus anything other than another example of a banal, if sanguinary, phenomenon? First, the numbers of Zulus who were willing to die for the adventure or

the respect of other men and women was quite exceptional. With the exception of the Japanese, perhaps no other pre-industrial society including the Romans, and the Mongols, produced so many men who were willing to die simply for glory. Second, the Zulus achieved this commitment to bravery in a very brief period of time. Shaka's military reforms had begun only some 60 years earlier and before Shaka there were no precedents for reckless bravery among the many peoples of Southeast Africa. The Zulu tradition of bravery in battle was not only created very rapidly, it was imposed upon conquered people who had previously shown little aptitude for battle. Moreover, although the Zulu regimental system was maintained for 20 years prior to the British invasion of Zululand, the Zulu army had done no serious fighting. Finally, although the Zulus had no experience with the awesome destructiveness of British weapons that made the Zulus' traditional tactics suicidal, they continued to use their traditional forms of warfare because that was how brave men fought.

The attempts by many societies to overcome man's fear of death in the service of cultural goals have taken various forms. The Zulu ethos called for men to fight bravely when their king commanded, but many men avoided military service and even those who gave their lives so profligately in battle, stopped when "too many" had been killed. As great as the power of Zulu culture in motivating men to die for glory, its power was not unlimited. Given the difficulties of interpreting any single case, whether one interprets this as reflecting the strength of man's urge to avoid death or the power of culture to convince men that glory is worth dying for is a matter of choice. In my opinion, it reflects both phenomena.

Notes

1. I gratefully acknowledge research support from NICHD Grant Nos. HD 04616 and HD 11944-02.
2. See Turney-High (1972).
3. For a general account of the war, see Morris (1965); Laband (1985) examines the war from the Zulu perspective; Edgerton (1988) provides additional information.

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