

# Men of the Mendi

South Africa's Forgotten Heroes of World War 1

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# 1

## Chapter

### The Festival of Fruits

**I**t was still dark when Madondo took his seat on the rocky outcrop. Below, the valley slept; no sound stirred the cold night air. With a grunt, he gathered his skin cape about his body, then, leaning back against the cold stone, he closed his eyes. In the moonlight, his face had a skull-like appearance; beneath his heavy brow his eye sockets were accentuated by the sharp line of his cheekbone and jaw. His breathing grew long and slow and as his body relaxed, the mists circled him, drawing him closer to the ancestors.

Suddenly, he experienced the sensation of falling. Suffocating blackness was pulling him down into its icy clutches, sucking the breath from his lungs. He fought back; clawing at the air, grabbing out at the blurred images that twisted and turned before him. Just when the agony reached its peak, the air rushed back into his lungs.

Gasping for breath, he stared wildly about him as his spirit returned from the world of the ancestors. It is a dream, a dream, he thought, shaking his head. Running his tongue over his dry lips, he found he was trembling. His mouth was filled with the foul taste of death. Something is not right, he thought, pulling his legs up close against his body. A sense of foreboding rose within him as he stared down into the shrouded valley below.

A veil of smoke from the hundreds of small fires that flickered like hungry orange tongues hung over the grassy slopes. Families had begun arriving some days before the Festival of Fruits was due to take place. Small figures appeared in the distance, driving their cows and goats before them and carrying bundles on their heads in preparation for the days they would spend camped out in the open. Some had travelled great distances, journeying from as far afield as the diamond and gold mines of the Transvaal; others came from neighbouring towns and farms.

Sikonyana had brought the warriors down from the place in the mountain known to the people as *Ntabamabutho*, the Mountain of Warriors, to a camp by the river. They were within sight of the camps set up by the warriors of the neighbouring amaHlubi and amaZizi tribes, together with their families. When a warrior from another tribe came too close, taunts and jeers rang out from all sides. But Sikonyana kept a tight

rein on his men. "Hold yourself back until the competition," he instructed them. "Do not give way to foolish weakness."

Finally, the day of the festival had come. In the early morning light the warriors stood lined up, bristling with pent-up energy. Skirts of animal skin hung from their waists and bands of cattle tails adorned their elbows and knees. Kula stood tense, the feather in his leather headband barely moving.

"You will not fail," Sukwana spoke under his breath as though he talking to himself, but his words carried to Kula's ears.

Kula turned to him. Sukwana smiled, his brown eyes shining with excitement. "You have trained hard for this day. Do not doubt yourself." Ever since Kula's return from the Cape, he had practiced up in the hills with Sukwana until his muscles had ached and his body stung from the blows of his stick.

Sikonyana came to stand before them. His eyes moved from his nephew to the prince beside him but he did not address them directly. Instead, he called out in a loud voice, "Warriors of the amaNgwane, today is ours for the taking. Today our sticks will taste victory."

"*Bayete! Bayete!*" The warriors roared back thrusting their fists into the air, stamping the ground.

Madondo felt some of the warmth return to his limbs as the faint battle cries carried on the breeze. Then the lowing and bleating of cattle and goats corralled amongst the makeshift shelters drifted up, mingling with the shouts and whistles of young herd boys. Unmoving, he watched them as they drove the animals into the hills to graze, their shapes growing smaller and smaller, until they disappeared from sight.

It was only when the sound of the drums reached him that he rose stiffly to his feet and turned to face the hill lying deep in the shadow of the mountain. Behind the stockade of branches that rose out of the rocks in a spiked crown lay Chief Bambazi's *umuzi*, the thatched beehive huts sprawled across the hilltop, screened from view by the protective camouflage.

The drumming grew louder. Madondo watched as the figure of his chief passed through the gates. Bambazi was not a big man but his figure was enlarged by the leopard skin cape that draped from his shoulders to below his knees, the tails moving as though alive with every step he took. Madondo did not wait to see the procession of elders, advisors and members of his family that followed. Instead, he hastily made his way down the hill. It was time for the festival to begin.

Reaching the royal shelter specially constructed for this day, Bambazi stepped inside. A canopy of cowhides draped across the tall branches cast him in shadow. He sat down on his ornately-carved seat. "There are so many," he murmured as he leant forward, a hand resting on each knee, far more than he had expected. People covered the valley for as far as the eye could see.

“It is not often the government gives permission for such a celebration. They are fearful when the people come together,” the amaZizi chief said as he took up his seat on the low three-legged chair beside Bambazi, glancing across at the chief of the amaHlubi seated on his opposite side.

“Today, we do not worry about the government. Today, we celebrate. Many of the finest heads of cattle have been slaughtered for the feast,” Bambazi replied as the advisors, *indunas* and guests of honour arranged themselves on the grass mats spread out over the freshly swept ground.

Abruptly, the drums cut off, as though by some unspoken command. As silence fell on the people Msebenzi stepped forward.

“*Nkosi! Indunas!* People of Matiwane, of amaZizi, of Langalibalele!” The *imbongi* thundered, flinging his arms wide.

For a moment he stood silent, his nostrils flaring as his eyes raked the seated figures. Then, with a loud intake of breath, his chest swelled out. “Son of Masumpa, son of Matiwane, Son of Zikhali, Son of Ngwadi,” he recited in a rapid stream. Around his neck, the strings of yellowed animal teeth swung backwards and forwards as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Madondo watched him from his place in the shadows, his lips mouthing the words to the well-known praises that had been passed down through the generations. The *imbongi* was the herald of the clan, the genealogist, the historian and the custodian of lore. None other present could claim to be as knowledgeable as he was.

Bambazi sat with his head cocked to one side. Beneath his royal headdress his black eyes shone as the *imbongi* sang his tributes, followed by praises of the bountiful harvest, of beautiful women and fertile mothers and the bravery of the warriors. Then the *imbongi*’s expression suddenly changed; his head thrust forward, his lips pulled back in a snarl as his eyes fixed on his chief. “The sluggard that seizes the grain of the industrious ones,” Msebenzi spat. Then, in a low growl, he launched into matters of a more serious nature; of cattle disputes, of the shortage of land, of conflicts that had not yet been resolved.

Fire flared up inside Bambazi as the *imbongi* blatantly spoke of his flaws and his weaknesses and found fault with his judgements. There was truth in his words—but if anyone other than the *imbongi* had dared to criticise him so openly, his fate would have been sealed before he had drawn another breath.

Finally, the *imbongi* fell silent and Madondo stepped forward to take his place. “I bring you a gift on this day sent to you by the ancestors, *Nkosi!*” The skin cape covering his shoulders flared open exposing the jackal skin covering his chest, adorned with amulets and charms and hung with pouches of medicines and potions. Reaching inside his leather skirt, he pulled out a gourd. “It will wash away bad luck and disease from our people,” he said holding it out to Bambazi.

Carefully Bambazi shook the gourd between his hands; then raising it up above his head, he sprayed its sacred contents over the people nearest him with one swift movement. Immediately, the drums struck up, the beat echoing through the valley like the distant rumble of thunder to announce the start of the celebrations.

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Against the blue sky, the crags and peaks of the Drakensberg rose in carved relief as the two horsemen drew closer to the foothills. Zikode galloped alongside the magistrate but the pounding of the hooves was now replaced by the pounding in his head as the beat of the drums and the roar of voices grew steadily louder. This was his valley, the land of his people. He glanced across at the magistrate and once more, he was filled with apprehension. Since they had left the courthouse, Field had hardly spoken. His slender figure sat erect in the saddle with the reins resting loosely between his hands, but his mouth was set in a tight, thin line.

It had been his suggestion that the magistrate used this day to speak to Bambazi but now doubts gnawed at him. It was a big thing the magistrate was to ask of the chief; tempers could easily become inflamed.

Zikode dug his heels into his mount, pulling ahead to take the lead on the worn track that led across the valley. In the distance, he could see the mass of people stretching out like a dark shadow beneath the mountain, but there was no-one there to challenge them when they pulled up amongst a motley collection of donkeys and mules.

“Follow me,” Zikode instructed tersely, once the magistrate had dismounted and he had tethered the horses to a stunted tree.

With a deliberately unhurried step, he walked towards the royal shelter. People called out in greeting to him, then seeing the white man following closely behind, they deliberately looked away. At the sight of him, small children ran to their mothers and hid their faces.

Under the brim of his hat, Field’s eyes darted from side to side at the wall of black flesh that surrounded him. The heat, the smell of sweat and dust mingled with the sickly, sweet smell of roasting meat made his stomach churn. He clenched his jaws to quell the fear that rose in his throat.

“He comes,” Madondo growled hotly into Bambazi’s ear as he watched the white man approaching. He had sensed his presence but now, at the sight of him, every nerve in his body was on edge.

Bambazi’s head snapped up, his body stiffened in his seat. Across the sea of heads, the magistrate’s white face floated towards him.

Msebenzi’s eyes fixed on the slender figure neatly dressed in a dark suit, the fabric worn and shiny. “Zikode,” he announced to the chief, rattling off his lineage

beginning with his father's father; then his voice dropped as he added, "Educated by the missionaries of Emmaus; he speaks the language of the European; he works at the court in Bergville; he is the interpreter."

"Good afternoon, Chief Bambazi." Field removed his hat as he stepped forward. Sweat trickled down the side of his face but he made no move to wipe it away. "It is quite a gathering you have here today." He spoke in measured tones but with the blood pounding in his ears, his voice seemed to come from a great distance away.

Bambazi surveyed him from behind hooded lids. He had received word that the magistrate would come but he was wary of his purpose. "We celebrate the coming of a good harvest," he said, purposely drawing the English words.

"I bring you an important message from General Botha." Field reached inside his jacket but Bambazi held up his hand. He would not permit a shadow to be cast on this day.

"Come; enjoy the celebrations with us. Then we can consider this message." He saw the magistrate's hesitation but it did not deter him. "Sit," he said with a firm wave of his hand.

Field wiped the sweat from his face with the palm of his hand. The movement served to suppress his irritation. "Thank you," he said simply, not wanting to antagonise Bambazi at this time. Then, as he turned to take his seat, the unexpected sight of a white face staring back at him from amongst the seated men, stopped him in his tracks.

Zunckel shifted his large frame to make space on the mat beside him. "We are neighbours after all," he said with a sheepish expression and, as Field dropped down beside him, he added in a low voice, "we have spoken enough times of my farm gate."

"Yes, we have," said Field, crossing his legs. Many times he had heard the complaint of Zunckel's cattle straying after the amaNkwane left the gate open on his farm, but it puzzled him that he should be present here today. Before he could question him, the tempo of the drums rose to a crescendo. Warriors armed with sticks and shields rushed towards them.

Field caught his breath and instinctively drew up his legs, as though to flee.

"Stick fighting, sir," Zikode informed him, leaning towards him from behind, so that his chin almost rested on his shoulder. "It is part of the celebrations."

"*Bayete!*" Bambazi rose from his chair, thrusting his short spear into the air in salute as Sikonyana led the warriors past. In the bright sunlight, their lean, muscular bodies rippled with each chanted step.

"*Bayete!*" he shouted again as he spotted the figure of his eldest brother following closely behind. Kula was as tall as the men surrounding him, and as broad, but his skin was the colour of river sand and it glowed like rich honey in contrast to the gleaming black skins of those surrounding him.

“*Bayete!*” Kula shouted, the feather in his headband dipping as a mark of respect to his chief. Although he was the firstborn son of their father, chief Ngwadi, succession to the throne had passed to Bambazi, the eldest son born to the chief’s great wife, his *indlunkulu*. By her birthright, the daughter of a chief, his mother was the undisputed great wife of all Ngwadi’s nineteen wives.

Kula took up his position. He rolled his shoulders lightly, feeling the sweat break out on his brow as his heartbeat increased. Opposite him, just yards away, stood his opponent; his black eyes staring straight into his. Kula felt a tremor pass through his body, sweat trickled from his armpits but his face showed no emotion.

“I am the bull!” he shouted, his voice joining in the challenges hurled by the warriors as they beat their sticks against their shields and stomped the dry ground with their bare feet.

Sikonyana walked behind the line of warriors, he took in the figure of his nephew standing beside Kula. Sukwana was beating his shield and shouting insults, words aimed at stinging his opponent’s pride. He stopped behind Kula. In a loud voice, he instructed that all may hear, “Easy, take it easy. Watch his eyes.”

Kula squared himself. The protective sheepskin gloves used in training lay discarded at the camp and now his hands felt exposed and vulnerable to attack.

Sikonyana then took up his position between the two lines of warriors. The air was charged with adrenalin. The noise was deafening but all eyes turned to him, waiting for him to give the signal. “Let the fight begin,” he shouted. The reaction was immediate. The warriors lunged forward, their shouted cries mingling with the clash of wood on wood.

The sticks flashed before Kula in a blur, too quick for him to see, but he reacted instinctively. His left hand rose, the short stick aimed to block the blow while the long stick in his right hand flew back, then blurred round in an arc aimed to strike at his opponent’s hand, to deliver a blow that would strip the stick from his hand. The sticks cracked together, the intensity of the strike sent shock waves coursing through his arms and body but his opponent moved fast, his stick flew back then round.

Kula flexed his torso, swaying to the side, narrowly warding off the blow. He bared his teeth but he was not smiling as he swung his stick round. He was not fast enough; his opponent stopped the well-aimed strike that would have felled his stick to the ground.

Kula was breathing hard, his pulse thundered in his head while his opponent worked with his mouth closed; he seemed tireless, his strikes growing faster and bolder. The stick flashed round in an arc. It struck a hard blow to Kula’s right arm, knocking his feet from under him and felling his stick to the ground. Eyes gleaming, his opponent swung round in triumph as he moved in to claim his victory.

The pain in his right arm made him dizzy but Kula twisted himself to one side. The stick whistled past his head and by the time it hit the ground, he had rolled forward, snatched up his stick and was back on his feet in one fluid movement. He lashed out at his opponent's legs, his hips, his body, in a set of moves so quick that the stick was a blur of movement. Caught off-guard, his opponent doubled over. Kula swung his stick round, cracking against his opponent's jaw with such force that his head whipped back as though it had been severed from his neck, sending a stream of bloody spittle flying through the air.

In that moment time slowed to the beating pulse in his head. Through a red haze Kula watched his opponent's head loll down onto his chest, his hands fell limply to his sides and his legs buckled beneath him as he crumpled to the ground.

"He has not forgotten his fighting skills," Bambazi turned to the magistrate, chuckling in delight, but he quickly sobered as he caught sight of Field and the expression of fear and fascination on his face. As though perfectly timed, the beer passed to him.

Field stared at the clay pot, its sides streaked by congealed spills of the milky white substance. Oh, good Lord, he thought, swallowing hard as he tried to control his revulsion.

"You *must* drink the beer, sir." Urgency sounded in Zikode's voice. Although the men talked and laughed amongst themselves, he could feel they were watching. "It will be an insult to the chief if you do not."

Field looked around as he ran his tongue over his lips, as though seeking a way out.

"Drink it!" Zunckel urged out of the corner of his mouth as Field's hesitation became obvious, "Come on man, drink it!"

Steeling himself, Field reached over and dipped the wooden spoon into the pot, as he had seen the others do, and raised it up. The lumpy white mixture lay heavy on the spoon and as he lifted it to his lips a sour aroma assailed his nostrils.

It was like nothing he had tasted before. The beer was warm and thick with a gritty texture and stuck to the back of his throat as he swallowed, but he did not show his distaste; instead he smacked his lips, as those had done before him and passed it on to Zunckel.

Bambazi turned to him. "Now, it is your time, Mr Field."

Field's eyes widened. He stared at Bambazi and then at the assembled warriors. All eyes were fixed on him.

"Tell us the news you carry from Botha?" Bambazi said, a quizzical look on his face as he sat back in his chair, his hands resting loosely in his lap.

Field rose shakily to his feet. "Chief Bambazi, there is a great war being fought in Europe, in the lands across the water. It does not go well for England." There was

no use in him pretending otherwise. Already, the war had dragged on for two years and with great loss of life. There was no indication that it would end any time soon.

Bambazi nodded, his expression curious. There was a rustle of movement and he could feel Madondo standing closely behind him, his breath fanning the back of his neck. He could picture his fleshless skull, his deep-set eyes glistening like wet stones.

“The Great King of England asks for the Africans of South Africa to help him in his war against the Germans,” Field announced. Reaching inside his jacket, he pulled out the envelope containing the circular he had received a week before.

“What are you doing man! You could get us all killed here today!” Zunckel hissed. The air was charged with emotion and much beer had already been drunk. The slightest spark could ignite the volatile tempers.

“Kula!” Bambazi barked, pointing to the envelope in the magistrate’s hand. “Read the King’s words aloud, for all of us to hear.”

The crowd had gone almost silent, save the murmur of voices eager to hear what news the magistrate had brought.

“My brother has been to college in Cape Town,” Bambazi informed Field with a triumphant glint in his eye as Kula stepped forward. He had been sent by their father to learn the ways of the white man.

All eyes rested on Kula as he extracted the sheet of paper from the envelope and unfolded it. His eyes passed from the crest of the Union of South Africa emblazoned at the top of the page, to the typed words below. In silence, he read it through once. Nobody spoke as his lips moved over the words but they saw his expression change beneath the sweat and dust lining his face.

Thoughtfully, he raised his eyes. “Are these the King’s own words?” The boldly printed words “God Save the King” stared back at him from the bottom of the page but the signature below was unmistakable. The initial L was looped dominantly round the body of the Prime Minister’s surname, in a flourish of black ink.

Field cleared his throat and glared at Kula over the top of his glasses. There was no warmth in his eyes. He turned to Bambazi. “General Botha sent this to me in the name of King Edward.”

Kula saw a fleeting shadow pass over Bambazi’s face. Their eyes locked and Kula could sense his brother’s thoughts as though they had been clearly spoken.

“What does it say?” Bambazi’s voice was low but it sliced through the hot air like a knife.

Kula focused on the document and in a clear voice read the words as they had been penned, in English: “The Imperial Government agrees to pay three pounds per month for the contract period of twelve months, to provide rail fares and food to the depot at Cape Town, free uniform, free food and free medical. In addition, the Imperial Government agrees to exempt those that enlist from the hut tax.” He

looked up; the high cheek bones of his face emphasised the oval shape of his eyes. Then, in a slow and deliberate voice, he translated the words that all present might understand.

Bambazi leant forward to catch every word, his hands gripping the arms of the chair, his eyes fixed firmly on Kula's face. He watched his lips forming the words that had the power to change the destiny of his people.

"To France." Kula said the words slowly as he looked up. His eyes glittered but whether it was with excitement or fear, it was difficult to tell. "They want us to join the army and go to France."

Bambazi's chest tightened. "France?" He breathed out heavily; unaware that he had been holding it. "You want me to send my men across the water to France, to Europe, to fight in the war?" It took great effort for Bambazi to conceal his emotions, to show nothing in his eyes as he spoke to the magistrate.

"Naturally, they will go by ship, like all soldiers have to do." Field spoke calmly. "They will be in no real danger; they will be safely behind the lines." He hesitated before adding, "They will form part of a labour force."

Bambazi frowned. "They will not have guns? No guns?" he repeated louder this time.

"No," Field shook his head but he could sense the change in the atmosphere. "The King asks for their strength. It is important work they will be doing, like ... like unloading the ships in France."

The two men stared at each other. Bambazi's dark eyes burned with such intensity that Field could not tell him that the purpose of an African labour contingent was to free up able-bodied white men for active service; that it was not considered proper for an African to spill the blood of a white man even if he was the enemy.

"What is a soldier without a gun? He is no soldier." Bambazi spat scornfully, his eyes moving across the assembled warriors.

The seated men stirred at this breaking of the spell that had held them silent. They drew a collective breath and turned questioningly to each other, muttering loudly.

"It is for your King, for your country," Field replied, raising his voice above the din.

Bambazi felt a chill that, despite the heat, prickled his skin. He forced a smile and said: "We are loyal subjects of the King; we have shown our loyalty in the past to the English Crown."

Madondo leant over and spoke directly into his ear; "If the King commands us, we want to know what we will receive in return. We want our lands restored to us."

"They will be well paid ... and well provided for, in France," Field added as an afterthought. He did not mention that in France the soldiers would be housed in