

**Title:** Shadrach Boyce Mama and the 'Kaffir Depot': navigating imperial networks to agitate against the forced removal of Xhosa women and children from Cape Town, May-December 1879

**Abstract:** On 15 May 1879, 60 Xhosa – primarily women and children – were forcibly removed by the Cape government from an indentured labour market in Cape Town called the 'Kaffir Depot.' The Xhosa interpreter who worked at the Depot, Shadrach Boyce Mama, was present at their removal and witnessed one of the women screaming and attempting to kill herself rather than be ripped from her children. In response to this moment of intense colonial violence, Mama fought throughout 1879 to publicize the Cape government's cruel actions. This paper tells the story of Mama's campaign on the behalf of the women and children expelled from the Depot, and demonstrates how Mama moved fluidly through local newspapers, colonial politics, and imperial humanitarian spaces to demand justice for those so brutally ejected from Cape Town.

**Keywords:** History of Cape Town, imperial networks, colonial history, knowledge production, Kaffir depot, indentured labour, native informants, Aborigines Protection Society, Shadrach Mama, Saul Solomon

## Introduction

An emotional and highly contested incident occurred in Cape Town on 15 May 1879. A crowd of 60 Xhosa - 34 women, 24 children aged between eight and thirteen, and two men - were escorted by four armed policemen from New Market Street to the docks. One of the women, Nonanti, refused to leave New Market Street, screaming that she would not be taken away from her children. When the guards would not leave her behind, Nonanti produced a knife from her pockets and attempted to cut her own throat rather than leave her children. The policemen restrained Nonanti, took away the knife, and marched her and her 59 companions to the Cape Town docks and onto the R.M.S. Balmoral Castle, where they were removed to East London.

This incident, the closing of the 'Kaffir Depot' (as it was called, hereafter 'the Depot'), marked the culmination of a year-long indentured labour program whereby the Cape government transported at least 3,878 prisoners of war from the Eastern Cape to be contracted around Cape Town.<sup>1</sup> The Depot itself was essentially a Cape Town slave market, a place where Xhosa prisoners of war could be housed in New Market Street until contracted and sent away. The story of the Depot began during the Ninth Frontier War (1877-78), when thousands of Xhosa women and children were taken into custody. These arrests were justified by the Cape government in various ways. Some of these women were arrested for 'supplying the enemy with food and ammunition' while others were allegedly taken into custody for their own good, as they had been

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<sup>1</sup> Official government records report that 3,878 people were transported, but Denver Webb suggests that this number was actually much higher. Cape Prime Minister Gordon Sprigg once estimated that between 5,000-6,000 people were transported. See D. Webb, 'The Historian, the Premier and Forced Labour in the Cape Colony, 1878-1879,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 46, 3 (2020): 502.

found 'suffering and dying from exposure, hardship, and want in the field.'<sup>2</sup> Such justifications may have held some truth in them, but these women and their children were also taken to destabilize Xhosa society and to satisfy settler demand for black labour. The prisoners were first held in gaols and available buildings around King William's Town, and then were transported to various labour depots between the Eastern Cape and Cape Town.<sup>3</sup> By indenturing the prisoners of war, the Cape hoped to alleviate the constant labour shortage while simultaneously alleviate government responsibility for feeding and housing the prisoners. Moreover, within a context of the settler-colonial drive to establish control over African societies, the forced labour system can also be understood as a political scheme to break the power of the Xhosa.<sup>4</sup> On 25 February 1878, William Ayliff - the Secretary for Native Affairs - posted Government Notice No. 222, announcing that

any person desirous of employing native labour may send an application to the civil commissioner of their district, stating the nature of labour required; and as soon as labourers can be obtained they will be forwarded, at the expense of Government.<sup>5</sup>

Notice 222 established that no wages were to be paid for the first six months and that indentures of adults were to be for no less than three years, although children could be indentured until they turned seventeen (for girls) or eighteen (for boys).<sup>6</sup> It is important to recognise that few of these indentures went without resistance. Forms of resistance included abandoning contracts and attempting to return home or to Cape Town by foot, working slowly, or trying to refuse contracts in the first place. Yet the Cape's web of master-servant and pass laws made such resistance

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<sup>2</sup> ProQuest UK Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PQPP), Further Correspondence Respecting the Affairs of South Africa (hereafter FCSA) C2482, Minute by Gordon Sprigg, 11 August 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers>.

<sup>3</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Warren to Bartle Frere, 26 June 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 19 July 1879.

<sup>4</sup> Webb, 'The Historian, the Premier and Forced Labour in the Cape Colony,' 497-8.

<sup>5</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Government Notice 222, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

dangerous, and many who tried ended up in goal or indentured somewhere else.<sup>7</sup> All but 60 of the 3,878 reported Xhosa prisoners transported to Cape Town by 15 May 1879 had been successfully indentured, and it was those remaining 60, either unwilling or unable to secure a contract, that were forcibly escorted out of Cape Town.

The Cape's policy of hiring out prisoners of war as indentured labour was not unique to 1878-79. Denver Webb identifies how 'one of the many consequences of the wars and the disruption of Xhosa society was to force Xhosa women and men on to the colonial labor market,' and points not only to 1878-79 but also to how 'several hundred women and children were seized' during the Fourth Frontier War (1811-1812) as well as to the massive employment of destitute Xhosa refugees following the cattle killing movement (1856-1858).<sup>8</sup> Nor is the 1878-79 labour system novel to either contemporary or modern historians. George Theal's *History of South Africa* (1919) referred to how 'nearly four thousand Kaffir women and children were forwarded to the west,' where 'they were willing to enter into service, and the government was equally willing that they should do so.'<sup>9</sup> Les Switzer also mentions that 'nearly four thousand men, women, and children were transported to the western Cape between April 1878 and January 1879 and indentured for three years to work in Cape Town and nearby farm districts.'<sup>10</sup> The most extensive accounts of the policy are given by Christopher Saunders and Denver Webb. Saunders reveals that George Theal was actually working as the 'Native Agent for the Western Districts' between May 1878 - February 1879 and was tasked with finding labour placements for the

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<sup>7</sup> Webb, 'The Historian, the Premier and Forced Labour in the Cape Colony,' 503-504.

<sup>8</sup> D. Webb, 'African Women and the Wars of Resistance and Dispossession in the Cape Colony and Xhosaland in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,' *Safundi*, 20, 3 (2019): 308.

<sup>9</sup> G. Theal, *History of South Africa from 1873 to 1884: Twelve Eventful Years*, vol. 1 (London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1919), 124.

<sup>10</sup> L. Switzer, *Power and Resistance in an African Society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the Making of South Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 378.

women and children.<sup>11</sup> Webb, in a recent article dedicated to the forced labour system, provides a fantastic overview of the details of the system, emphasising its roots in settler-colonial domination and the terrible conditions and depredations forced upon indentured Xhosa men, women, and children.<sup>12</sup>

However, while the policy itself is neither unique nor unknown, the forced removal from Cape Town and brutal treatment of Nonanti and her 59 companions on 15 May 1879 is both. Nowhere in the 100-year historiography of the 1878-1879 indentured labour system have historians discussed the forced removal from the Depot in anything more substantial than a passing reference. Theal glossed over it, writing only that 'in 1879 the government sent those who had not taken service back to the east, and with this act the narrative of the removal of the families of the rebels to a distant locality ends.'<sup>13</sup> Switzer merely writes that 'the labor distribution center in the port city, called the Kafir Depot, was closed down after criticism over the treatment of unemployed women and children sent back to Xhosaland by ship in May 1879.'<sup>14</sup> Webb provides a few more details, noting that when the Depot closed, 'several of the women had to be forced on to the ship by armed guards, as they did not want to abandon their young children who had been indentured and were being left behind to complete their contracts. One attempted suicide rather than forsake her child.'<sup>15</sup> All of these statements are true enough, but they amount to a very superficial coverage of a complex and contested moment of colonial violence. Saunders gets closest to this deeper story, but only in passing and only in footnotes:

A young African working in Cape Town alleged that the women and children had been ill-treated and forced to leave against their wishes. Saul Solomon raised the

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<sup>11</sup> C. Saunders, 'The Missing Link in Theal's Career: The Historian as Labour Agent in the Western Cape,' *History in Africa*, 7 (1980): 274-6.

<sup>12</sup> Webb, 'The Historian, the Premier and Forced Labour in the Cape Colony'.

<sup>13</sup> Theal, *History of South Africa*, 125.

<sup>14</sup> Switzer, *Power and Resistance*, 378.

<sup>15</sup> Webb, 'The Historian, the Premier and Forced Labour in the Cape Colony,' 505.

matter in the Cape Assembly and the Aborigines Protection Society took it up in London...The Kafir Depot was closed in May.<sup>16</sup>

A young African, Saul Solomon, and the Aborigines Protection Society (APS): these are indeed the three crucial elements of the story, yet no account has so far worked out just how these pieces fit together. Saunders began to move in the right direction, identifying the young African as a translator named Shadrach Mama and suggesting that he 'wrote a letter to the *Christian Express* deploring the way these women and children had been treated,<sup>17</sup> but Saunders was incorrect. Saul Solomon indeed claimed that Mama had written to the *Christian Express*, but an article appeared in the *Christian Express* on 1 August 1879 repudiating Solomon. 'There has been a good deal of mis-statement or mis-conception on the matter...No such letter was published in the *Christian Express*. It appeared in the *Isigidimi* a small newspaper published in Kaffir.'<sup>18</sup> As I will show, Mama did much more than write to the *Isigidimi*. Beyond merely connecting Mama to the Depot, no attention has been given to what actually happened on 15 May 1879 or to what Mama did about it. Webb also nearly touched upon the story, recognising that 'muted criticism of the labour scheme – especially of the indenturing of children – came from the Cape Argus and the Aborigines Protection Society.'<sup>19</sup> Yet Webb does not connect the *Argus* and the APS to Mama, upon whose agency, I argue, the *Argus* and the APS efforts were based. Webb also dismisses the importance of the *Argus* and the APS, concluding that their criticisms were drowned out and ignored.<sup>20</sup> I show that not only were the criticisms of the Depot launched by the *Argus* and the

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<sup>16</sup> Saunders, 'The Missing Link,' footnote 19, 280.

<sup>17</sup> C. Saunders, 'Africans in Cape Town in the Nineteenth Century: An Outline,' in C. Saunders and H. Phillips, eds, *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol. 2 (Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1980), footnote 53, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Gale, Nineteenth Century Collections Online (hereafter NCCO), Religion, Society, Spirituality, and Reform (hereafter RSSR), *The Christian Express*, 1 August 1879, 'Parliamentary Discussion on Kaffir Prisoners,' <https://www.gale.com/intl/c/ncco-religion-spirituality-reform-and-society>.

<sup>19</sup> Webb, 'The Historian, the Premier and Forced Labour in the Cape Colony,' 504.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

APS powerful enough to prompt an official investigation into the closing of the Depot, but that they were entangled with Shadrach Mama's condemnations of the Cape's brutal forced removal of Xhosa prisoners and cannot be considered the work of British and colonial humanitarians alone.

The object of this paper is not simply to describe what happened in Cape Town on 15 May 1879. The historiography tells us that the Depot was closed down, that 60 women and children were forcibly removed, and that one woman tried to kill herself rather than be separated from her children. While this paper does provide substantially more details on how these events unfolded, the overall narrative of the events remains the same. Rather, this paper focuses on what happened *after* the Depot was closed, for 15 May 1879 marked not only the end of the forced labour system and the Depot. It also marked the beginning of a year-long campaign by Shadrach Mama to bring the Cape government to task for its cruel treatment of the women and children of the Depot. In telling the story of the Depot from Mama's perspective, I demonstrate how Mama acted as an intermediary between Xhosa and British worlds, moving fluidly through local, colonial, and imperial spaces to critique the Cape government. I demonstrate how Saul Solomon and the APS became entangled with Mama's critiques, empowering them to push the Cape government to launch an official investigation into the Depot. However, while Mama succeeded in pushing the Cape to investigate his critiques, he eventually ran up against the wall of colonial power, and I demonstrate how the Cape's determination to avoid imperial interference in its affairs led it to deny the accuracy of Mama's criticisms in the face of rock-hard evidence produced by its investigation.

## Shadrach Boyce<sup>21</sup> Mama

Little is known about Shadrach Mama's life. I have found only four references to him in the archival record. First, on 15 May 1879 he wrote a letter to *Isigidimi SamaXhosa* using the initials 'S.B.M.', reporting the closing of the Depot. I have not been able to locate an original copy of this article, but a translation of it was published by Archibald Jordan and it includes no details about Mama himself. Second, on 16 July 1879, Saul Solomon read to the Cape House of Assembly a letter he had received from Mama regarding the Depot. This letter, again, tells us nothing about Mama, although in the ensuing debate the attorney general, Thomas Upington, gives us some small clues about him.

The writer of the letter [Mama] did, on one occasion, come to me [Upington] and say that he was anxious to enter into a profession, and as he seemed a very well-educated and respectable man I [Upington] promised to do what he could to advance his views, if possible.<sup>22</sup>

It is only his third archival record, a letter to the Aborigines Protection Society dated 29 December 1879, that provides any real details on Mama. He began his letter with an introduction.

I am Shadrach Boyce Mama and a young man of fine constitution of health and I am between 19 and 20 years old. I am a Kafir of Kama's tribe a loyal chief, Kama is my uncle by birth - my own father is a Wesleyan Ordained Missionary by the late Bishop Impey - who lately resigned his office - my father Rev Boyce Mama is now in charge of New Lovedale Mission Station in Graham's Town District. I was educated at Heald Town Wesleyan Institution by H.W. Graham and I passed my Government

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<sup>21</sup> It is uncertain whether Mama's middle name was Boyce or Boyle. Mama's own handwriting makes it difficult to discern, and Christopher Saunders interpreted it as Boyle. However, the *Mama v Magistrate of Herschel* case writes it as Boyce: J.D. Sheil, *Reports of All Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of the Cape of Good Hope, During the Year 1897*, vol. VII (Cape Town: Cape Times Office, 1898), 54. Additionally, we know from Mama's letter to the APS that his father was a reverend in the Eastern Cape, and an article in the *Christian Express* makes reference to a Reverend Boyce Mama in that region around the same time: Gale, NCCO, RSSR, *The Christian Express*, 1 May 1876, 'The Graham's Town Wesleyan Native District Meeting.' I thank my anonymous reviewer for also pointing out that they were most likely named after William Boyce, the Wesleyan missionary.

<sup>22</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, 'Native Immigration,' *Cape Argus*, 17 July 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.



Examination, and got my Government Certificate of Competency in 1877, signed by Dr Dale, the SupI - General of Education. When I left school I was taken by the government as an interpreter in the magistrates court at East London and after a while I was transferred to Cape Town, as an interpreter for the Kafirs who were brought down here during the late tribal rebellion of the Gaikas and the Gcalekas in 1878...I am out of Civil Service on my own accord because I preferred after that case of the Kafir Women to leave and get into an attorney's office as an articled clerk, and study law, so that I might go and practice amongst my own country men in British Kaffraria.<sup>23</sup>

This letter tells us many things about Mama. He was a nephew of the chief of the Gqunukwebe Xhosa, who had been expelled from the Neutral/Ceded Territory in 1819 and later established themselves as British loyalists on the border of British Kaffraria. His uncle was the first Xhosa chief to publicly convert to Christianity,<sup>24</sup> and his father, Boyce Mama, became a reverend at a mission school in Graham's Town. Mama himself was educated at the Heald Town mission school, received his Government Elementary Teacher's Certificate in 1877, and afterwards worked as an interpreter for the Cape government. This was how he became a witness to the clearing of the Depot: he was the interpreter for the Xhosa prisoners. We also learn that Mama quit his interpreting job shortly after the depot incident and that he desired to become a lawyer, which explains Upington's comment that he was 'anxious to enter into a profession.'

The fourth and final appearance Mama makes in the archival record is in the Cape Times Law Reports, in *Mama v Magistrate of Herschel* of 11 February 1897. According to the report, Mama was 'an enrolled agent practicing in the Resident Magistrate's Court, Herschel.'<sup>25</sup> The details of *Mama v Magistrate of Herschel* are as follows. Mama had received permission from the headman of Herschel to build a house and live in the location, when legally he had been

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<sup>23</sup> University of Oxford, Bodleian Libraries (hereafter BL), MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 18/C142, fols. 15-16, Mama to Chesson, 29 December 1879.

<sup>24</sup> J. A. Millard, *Malihambe: Let the Word Spread* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1999), 25-27.

<sup>25</sup> J.D. Sheil, *Reports of All Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of the Cape of Good Hope, During the Year 1897*, vol. VII (Cape Town: Cape Times Office, 1898), 54.

required to also obtain permission from the Resident Magistrate. When the Magistrate learned of this, he arrested Mama for 'being in a native location without authority' and ordered him to leave Herschel.<sup>26</sup> In response, Mama sued the Magistrate on seven counts, including incompetence, conflict of interest, lack of evidence, and lack of jurisdiction 'inasmuch as he had no authority to order the removal of the accused from the Herschel native reserve.'<sup>27</sup> Mama's case was decided in his favour, with the court ruling that 'the judgement and order of the Magistrate must be set aside [...] The Magistrate was a material witness in the case, and being a material witness, ought not to have sat and tried the case.'<sup>28</sup>

Mama's letter to the APS and the record of his trial against the magistrate of Herschel locate him within the African intellectual and political elite that was emerging in the late nineteenth-century Cape. This elite possessed western educations and sought to utilise them to resist colonisation through the creation of South Africa's first African political organisations (e.g. the Imbumba Yama Afrika in 1882 and the Native Education Association in 1884) and political newspapers (e.g. the *Imvo Zabantsundu* in 1884 and the *Izwi Labantu* in 1898).<sup>29</sup> Mama's position within this elite enabled him, in 1897, to challenge and overcome the authority of a Resident Magistrate, and this paper demonstrates how this position enabled Mama to spark a moderate scandal in imperial politics over the closing of the Depot.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> For overviews of African elite politics in the late nineteenth century, see A. Odendaal, *The Founders: The Origins of the ANC and the Struggle for Democracy in South Africa* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013); A. Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu! The Beginnings of Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984); S. Johns, T. Karis and G. Gerhart, eds, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990*, vol. I (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2014).

Moreover, as will be shown below, Mama's critiques of the Depot incident locate him within the larger historiography of native informants, African clerks, and indigenous interlocutors who constantly negotiated and undermined imperial and colonial power throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> These intermediaries were crucial agents in the creation and application of colonial and imperial knowledge. In some contexts, they enabled the generation of colonial/imperial knowledge as well as determined the extent of that knowledge. In other contexts, they enabled colonial and imperial regimes to operate on the ground as well as controlled how these regimes were implemented and enacted. Examples of such intermediaries in South Africa include Jan Tzatzoe and Ndukwana kaMbengwana. As a Xhosa chief who testified before the Select Committee on Aborigines and who lectured across the UK, Tzatzoe translated and interpreted the Xhosa to British audiences.<sup>31</sup> KaMbengwana, on the other hand, was a Zulu clerk working for James Stuart, a colonial official, in Zululand, Natal, and Swaziland in the late nineteenth century. Stuart had embarked on a research project to understand Zulu political and cultural life, and engaged kaMbengwana in many extensive informational interviews resulting in over 70,000 handwritten words of oral history. As an intermediary between the Zulu and Stuart, kaMbengwana had a substantial impact on British understandings of Zulu society. Throughout the rest of this paper I demonstrate that Shadrach Mama also fits

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<sup>30</sup> For discussions of this historiography, see: G. Colenso, 'Breaking with the Old Patterns of Control: African Deputations to Britain from Southern Africa in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,' *South African Historical Journal* 69, no. 4 (2017): 501-547; N. Dirks, 'Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive,' in C.A. Breckenridge and P. van der Veer, eds, *Orientalist and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 279-313; C. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); J. Carey and J. Lydon, *Indigenous Networks: Mobility, Connections and Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 2014); B. Lawrence, E. L. Osborn, and R. Roberts, eds, *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); F. Paisley and K. Reid, eds, *Critical Perspectives on Colonialism: Writing the Empire from Below* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> R. Levine, *A Living Man from Africa: Jan Tzatzoe, Xhosa Chief and Missionary, and the Making of Nineteenth-century South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 1-5.

into this tradition, playing the role of an intermediary between African and imperial knowledge of the closing of the Depot.

### **The closing of the Depot**

As the interpreter for the Depot, Mama witnessed first-hand the brutal forced removal and cruel separation of mothers from children that took place on 15 May 1879, and he responded immediately. That very day he wrote a letter to the *Isigidimi* and his account was published in the June 1879 issue. Archibald Jordan's translation of his letter reads as follows:

I write in tears. Children of the ages 3, 5, 6, and 10 have been hired out as servants. The mothers, who were kept at a place called the "Kaffir Depot," had no idea what had become of their children. This morning, I happened to be at the "Kaffir Depot" when five policemen came and ordered the women to pack up and board a ship which would take them to East London immediately. When the women refused to leave their children behind, they were forced out at the point of the bayonet. One woman actually took out a knife and tried to stab herself to death. But she was immediately seized and dragged like a log of wood to the docks where all the women were shipped amidst heart-rending cries.<sup>32</sup>

This letter immediately conveys the pain and emotion that Mama experienced at witnessing this moment of colonial violence. As the interpreter who accompanied these women and children since their capture in the Eastern Cape, Mama was clearly invested in their welfare, and his testimony reflects the trauma and despair felt by Nonanti and the others at being sent from their children. Moreover, this letter is interesting because it is his only account (of Mama's three accounts) which mentions the specific ages of children who were indentured, and they do not match the official return provided by George Stevens, the officer in charge of the Depot. The youngest child that was indentured according to Stevens' return was seven years old,<sup>33</sup> while

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<sup>32</sup> A. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 115.

<sup>33</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, 'Return showing the Number of Natives sent away from Cape Town by the Steamer "Balmoral Castle", on the 15<sup>th</sup> May last, for the Frontier,' in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

Mama talks of 'children of the ages 3, 5, [and] 6.' Was Mama's information incorrect? Unlikely, as he was the interpreter at the Depot and it was his information that informed the official return. Were the official numbers fudged? Possibly. According to Government Notice 222, which established the rules for indenturing the Xhosa prisoners of war, children could not be indentured until they were six years old. However, the language of the notice suggests that children could be placed on a farm, only to *labour* upon turning six: 'Children under the age of 6 years shall be apprenticed on attaining that age to the same master.'<sup>34</sup> As such, there was little reason for the government to hide the indenturing of children under six when doing so was publicly allowed. This leaves the last option: was Mama exaggerating in his letter? I think this to be the most likely explanation. The *Isigidimi* was a Xhosa-English publication, with half of its content in English and half in Xhosa. Mama could have published his letter in English or in both languages, but he specifically published it in Xhosa alone, indicating that he was specifically targeting a Xhosa audience. Thus, this letter was not about challenging or whistleblowing on the government, it was about raising awareness and stirring the emotions of the Xhosa. This is further evidenced by the exaggerated pathos of Mama's writing. The women were not simply taken by force, they were 'dragged like a log of wood.' This is the kind of language designed to provoke emotion, and with such a purpose in mind, the details of the children's ages were less important than the impact of their ages on the reader.

Despite Mama's intended local audience, his letter in *Isigidimi* ended up having a far larger impact. In London, the APS wrote a letter to the Colonial Office dated 28 June 1879 informing them of their latest intelligence from South Africa, and included an account of the closing of the Depot.

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<sup>34</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Government Notice 222, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

Our correspondent at Capetown writes: "Not long ago a scene took place in Capetown which two years ago would have caused an outcry of indignation, and now is not noticed. The Kaffir depot was broken up. The old and lame and infirm that were left after all their friends were giving out to service, were dragged by policemen through the streets, and were placed on board a steamer, and sent back to be restored to their respective clans, that is to relieve the Government of their maintenance. One woman attempted to commit suicide in the street on account of being thus torn by violence from her children."<sup>35</sup>

The Society's correspondent was anonymous, and I have been unable to either locate the original letter or to identify the author. It certainly was not Mama himself, as the introduction he provided in his letter to the APS in December 1879 clearly indicates that it was his first letter to the Society. There are also details, specifically the suggestion that government cleared the Depot in order to relieve itself of their maintenance, which do not appear in any of Mama's other accounts and sound like they were written by a political critic. Even Governor Henry Bartle Frere picked up on this, and in a later response to the APS wrote that their anonymous correspondent 'is more likely to be a disappointed political adversary of the present government than a seeker of justice for natives.'<sup>36</sup> But there is one detail in the correspondent's account that matches Mama's account in the *Isigidimi*: the imagery of the women being 'dragged by policemen through the streets.' No other account of the Depot make reference to women being dragged through the streets, this imagery is unique to Mama's letter in the *Isigidimi*. Thus, whoever the anonymous correspondent was, it is likely that they were influenced by Mama's *Isigidimi* letter. On 17 July 1879 the Colonial Office forwarded the APS's account of the Depot to Governor Bartle Frere and requested a report, but long before the letter reached Bartle Frere, Mama himself confronted the Cape government.

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<sup>35</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Aborigines' Protection Society to Colonial Office, 28 June 1879.

<sup>36</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

Sometime between 15 May and 16 July, Mama wrote a letter to Saul Solomon detailing his account of the closing of the Depot. Solomon, member in the Cape parliament and founder of the *Cape Argus*, was well known for his liberal views and 'negrophilism' and so promised to be both a powerful and a sympathetic ally for Mama.<sup>37</sup> Upon receiving Mama's letter, Solomon read it aloud to the House of Assembly in July 1879. The letter read:

I want to report the following matter, which took place here on the 15th of May 1879, the departure of the Kafir women captured during the recent outbreak and brought down here to Cape Town. Under the Government Notice, No. 222 of 1878, these women are to be kept together, and those who chose and who might like to get some work might do so, but without compulsion of any kind; they must voluntarily enter into service. When the children were indentured, the women were taken, while not expecting anything, and sent on board the ship, and in spite of their reluctance and the confusion they exhibited, they were forced to go. There was great commotion that morning, and everyone in Newmarket Street was out to witness the unfortunate mothers who were leaving their young folks behind. I do not hesitate in saying that every person who was there that day must confess that the sight was a sad and sorrowful one. There was an escort of police, armed with guns and swords, and when these women were ordered to leave the depot they did not know their destination. When they were only about 10 yards from the depot, they raised such a cry as must have moved the hearts of every spectator. With their children, these women would have gone home without a word, but they could not bear to leave them behind. Amidst the confusion and crying one of the women took a knife and attempted to commit suicide. One of the police, took the knife from her. At this time no one could bear to look at the sight; she cried out for her children, and yet she was forced to go, and it was a pitiable sight to see the poor mothers compelled to leave their youngsters, in fact, words fail me to describe the harrowing scene that was presented.<sup>38</sup>

This letter exhibits two significant differences from the letter in the *Isigidimi*. First, this letter focuses on specific details about what the government had done wrong. Citing Notice 222, Mama pointed out that women and children were to be kept together and that every contract was to have been voluntary. This was entirely true: Notice 222 stated that 'As far as may be possible,

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<sup>37</sup> S. Trapido, 'Solomon, Saul (1817–1892), newspaper proprietor and politician in Cape Colony,' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 25 May 2006, accessed 13 September 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/51112>.

<sup>38</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Mama to Solomon, quoted in 'Native Immigration,' *Cape Argus*, 17 July 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

they [prisoners of war] shall contract and be settled in complete families, and no force shall be used in the separation of the members of such families.<sup>39</sup> The Notice also emphasised that 'service [was] to be voluntary and freely given - coercion of any kind being carefully avoided.'<sup>40</sup> In contradiction to these policies, Mama insisted that families were broken apart by force, without any understanding or consent on the behalf of the mothers. 'The women were taken, while not expecting anything, and sent on board the ship, and in spite of their reluctance and the confusion they exhibited, they were forced to go [...] the poor mothers [were] compelled to leave their youngsters.'<sup>41</sup> By contrasting the established policy with the government's actions, Mama's letter to Solomon was certainly intended as a challenge to the Cape government.

The second difference between the letter in *Isigidimi* and the letter to Solomon is the intended audience. In sending his account to Solomon, Mama chose not only a person who was likely to support his point of view, but also the one person who, as both MP and owner of a prominent newspaper, could virtually guarantee the dissemination of his account throughout colonial society. Indeed, this is exactly what happened: Mama's letter to Solomon was not only read aloud in the House of Assembly, it was also published in the 17 July 1879 edition of the *Cape Argus*. Not only did Mama intend to challenge the government's actions in closing the Depot by providing evidence of its breach of established policy, but he also intended for his challenge to be circulated throughout the colony.

The House of Assembly's reaction to Mama's challenge was mixed. On the one hand, William Ayliff - the Secretary for Native Affairs – validated Mama's letter by requesting a report

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<sup>39</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Government Notice 222, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Mama to Solomon, quoted in 'Native Immigration,' *Cape Argus*, 17 July 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.



on its accuracy from George Stevens, the man in charge of the Depot.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, various members of the House let forth a wave of sanctimonious dismissal to discredit Mama's story. John Paterson, MP for Port Elizabeth, said that

nothing could be more unlike the moving picture presented by [Solomon] than the reality [...] It was very much to be regretted that such pictures were painted in the House; false impressions got abroad relative to the dealings of Colonists with the natives, and great mischief ensued.<sup>43</sup>

Philip Watermeyer, MP for Colesberg, said that Mama's account was

utterly untrue. [Watermeyer] had occasion himself to go to the depot when the Kafirs arrived, in order to engage two boys, and could speak from experience that the government were most anxious to prevent the separation of families, and showed every consideration for the people.<sup>44</sup>

Thomas Upington, the Attorney General, said that Mama's account 'bore upon it the impress of falsehood. If such a thing had been done he would be the first person to know of it, and he [Upington] firmly believed that no such thing ever occurred.'<sup>45</sup>

As it turned out, the inquiry made of George Stevens entirely corroborated Mama's account. Stevens explained that

deeming it advisable to have an escort to prevent the possibility of their mixing with the large body of Kafir convicts at work near the Dock Road leading down to the steamer, as well as to prevent straggling [...] I asked for and obtained an escort from Fort Amsterdam [...] Upon ordering the batch to start and go to the docks all went in an orderly manner with the exception of one woman, who was reported by the officer in charge of the depot Tulbagh to have deserted her children there, and on being requested to return to them, refused to do so. She refused to go to the frontier, and on being ordered to move on, threatened to destroy herself. Another woman then said, that as her husband had been killed in Kafirland, and her brother contracted in the

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<sup>42</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, 'Native Women in the Western Province,' *Standard and Mail*, 17 July 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

<sup>43</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, 'Native Immigration,' *Cape Argus*, 17 July 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

western districts, she had no desire to return. These ultimately joined the main body, and were placed on the R.M.S. Balmoral Castle and forwarded to East London.<sup>46</sup>

Despite being corroborated, Governor Bartle Frere maintained that the events described by Mama never happened. In a letter dated 25 August 1879 responding to the Aborigines Protection Society, Bartle Frere wrote that the evidence was 'founded on the testimony of one Shadrach Mama...it is more than doubtful whether such scenes ever occurred.'<sup>47</sup> While this letter is dated before Stevens's report was entered into the parliamentary archive on 8 September 1879, we know that Bartle Frere had seen an earlier version because a summary of an earlier version was published in the *Standard and Mail* on 17 July 1879.<sup>48</sup> The Aborigines Protection Society, for its part, was largely willing to believe that the Depot incident had been blown out of proportion. It wrote in its own journal, *The Aborigines' Friend*, that 'we were informed that those sent back [from the Depot to East London] included the "old, the lame, and the infirm." We hope that this is an exaggeration.'<sup>49</sup> This statement was published in the *Cape Argus* on 27 December 1879, and Mama had something to say in response.

On 29 December 1879, Mama wrote his letter to the Aborigines Protection Society in direct response to the Society's above statement published in the *Cape Argus*. Unlike his letters to *Isigidimi* and to Solomon, his letter to the APS is not primarily about providing an account of the closing of the Depot. That said, it does include the following description in which we learn the name of Nonanti, the only of the 60 prisoners whom I have been able to name:

The removing of Kafir women took place on the morning of the 15th May last and before my presence – and many white people were spectators of that most

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<sup>46</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, 'Report on the Native Depot,' 8 September 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 16 October 1879.

<sup>47</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

<sup>48</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, 'Native Women in the Western Province,' *Standard and Mail*, 17 July 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

<sup>49</sup> Gale, Nineteenth Century U.K. Periodicals (hereafter NCUP), 'The Cape Colony', *The Aborigines' Friend*, December 1879.

inconceivable sight. When mothers were separated and crying for their folks – who were in services – who perhaps they shall never see each other again. It was a sight not merely unbearable but also unspeakable. The confusion and commotion they exhibited was something more than desirable – one particular woman whose name was Nonanti, who had about four children at Paarl actually before our presence took a knife out of her pocket and attempted to cut her throat so a constable took the knife from her hands and she was throwing herself to and against the walls of the Parade there in New Market Street. The said officer in charge ordered the constables to go on in spite of the resistance and confusion the women exhibited. All this was actually done before our presence.<sup>50</sup>

This letter is also not primarily about challenging the Cape government, although it does that too. Instead, it is about establishing himself as a reliable witness and defending his account in the face of the Cape government's attempt to discredit him. He opened the letter by identifying himself as the original source of the Depot story.

My serious attention has been attracted by your correspondence with the Secretary of State for the Colonies - which appearing in the Cape Argus of December the 27th 1879 and I thought it my personal duty to write to you, as your correspondence on natives affairs was mainly based on what was written by me originally to the Cape Argus, and I am the man who brought it before the knowledge of Mr Saul Solomon - and the public- I am Shadrach Boyce Mama.<sup>51</sup>

With hindsight and archival access, we know that Mama was only half correct. The APS's correspondent could not have been informed by Mama's letter to Solomon because the letter to Solomon was only published on July 17, and the APS received its intelligence before June 28. As suggested above, the anonymous correspondent must have been informed by Mama's letter in *Isigidimi*, and Mama's assumption that the correspondent was informed by the Solomon letter further supports my assertion that he did not intend for the *Isigidimi* letter to be widely available to colonial audiences.

After reiterating his account of the closing of the Depot, Mama expressed his indignation at how his account had been dismissed by the Cape government.

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<sup>50</sup> BL, MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 18/C142, fols. 15-16, Mama to Chesson, 29 December 1879.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

I was very much troubled to hear some of the members in the House of Assembly notably the premier making such a strong denial of my statements, certainly as I said to Mr Saul Solomon I am prepared to prove and substantiate my statements from beginning to last, but because they do not desire to do so as they know that I will prove my case - I have got hundreds of witnesses to corroborate my statements who were the spectators from the New Market Street to the docks of that never to be forgotten treatment of those poor creatures.<sup>52</sup>

Most of all, Mama objected to the repeated accusations in the House of Assembly that he was lying. To combat this claim, Mama drew upon racialised discourses to cement his claim to accuracy and honesty.

My chief object is I want you to understand that I write this as any Englishman would provided he is honest - I write because my motto almost in all matter - I am more a whiteman than a Kafir - so I adopt in doing so honesty as my policy and guide.<sup>53</sup>

This is why he detailed his own and his family's background, as discussed earlier in this paper. By highlighting that his father was 'a Wesleyan Ordained Missionary,' that 'I was educated at Heald Town Wesleyan Institution by H.W. Graham and I passed my Government Examination, and got my Government Certificate of Competency in 1877,' and that 'I studied a little of Latin and Euclid, Algebra, and other branches of studies,' Mama used his Christianity and his Western education to buttress his status as a reliable witness.<sup>54</sup>

In the end, Mama's letter to the APS was the last word in the story of the Depot. The APS wrote its final letter on the subject to the Colonial Office on 6 March 1880, reiterating its

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> This was a strategy commonly employed by Africans and Indigenous peoples the world over to demand the same privileges afforded colonizers. For examples from the British world, see S. Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); J. Evans *et al.*, eds., *Equal Subjects, Unequal Rights: Indigenous People in British Settler Colonies, 1830s-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Z. Laidlaw, 'Indigenous Interlocutors: Networks of Imperial Protest and Humanitarianism in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,' in J. Carey and J. Lydon, eds., *Indigenous Networks: Mobility Connections and Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 114-139.

disapproval of indenturing Xhosa prisoners of war and calling 'for a more humane and discriminating administration of the law.'<sup>55</sup> And, in response, William Ayliff wrote his final letter on the subject on 17 April 1880, reiterating his stance that in regards to 'the removal of the Kafir women and children from the scene of war, and [...] being contracted to farmers in the Western Province [...] the Government [...] followed the course dictated by feelings of humanity as well as of sound policy,' and reasserting his dismissal of 'the correspondents of the Aborigines Protection Society, [who] are ever ready to misrepresent the actions of the Europeans towards the native races of South Africa.'<sup>56</sup> The removal of women and children on 15 May 1879 turned out to have been the last page of the history of the Depot, for the Ninth Frontier War had ended in 1878 and with it the flow of prisoners of war.<sup>57</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The closing of the Depot was clearly much more complicated, contested, and significant than the historical footnote it has been for the past century. Beyond directly and tragically affecting those 60 Xhosa forcibly removed from Cape Town, the closing of the Depot also became a minor imperial scandal. It reverberated through the interwoven worlds of the Xhosa, the Cape Colony, and the British metropole, carried through networks of correspondence and newsprint. It pushed humanitarians such as Saul Solomon and the APS into yet another fierce debate with Cape officials. And, last but not least, it sparked one determined Xhosa translator to begin a year-long campaign to bring the Cape government to task for its treatment of those 60 men, women, and children. Their forced march from New Market Street to the docks, and the brutal separation of Nonanti from her children, are yet another layer of the history of racialised

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<sup>55</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2676, Aborigines' Protection Society to Colonial Office, 6 March 1880.

<sup>56</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2676, Ayliff to Bartle Frere, 17 April 1880, in Bartle Frere to Wodehouse, 6 May 1880.

<sup>57</sup> Webb, 'The Historian, the Premier and Forced Labour in the Cape Colony,' 499.

violence in Cape Town, just as Shadrach's letters to the *Isigidimi*, Solomon, and the APS are a layer of the history of African politics and colonial resistance.

In terms of material impact, Mama's efforts appear to have been in vain. The Cape government refused to either acknowledge or accept responsibility for Nonanti's attempted suicide or any mistreatment of the Xhosa prisoners that may have led to it. And, while Les Switzer suggested that the Depot closed down due to Hicks Beach's criticism (sparked by Mama's efforts), there is no official document indicating that the Depot was closed for this reason. Instead, the end of the war and its flow of Xhosa prisoners is likely the most direct reason that the Depot did not reopen. However, while Mama's efforts to critique the Cape's closing of the Depot failed to produce a noticeable change in overall government policy, they did produce some results. By operating through Solomon to have his letter read in the House of Assembly, Mama won an official inquiry into the matter by William Ayliff. This inquiry resulted in a report written by George Stevens which corroborated every detail of Mama's account and which was published in the *Standard and Mail*: a substantial outcome for a Xhosa translator in a colonial context in which his voice was directly and repeatedly ridiculed and dismissed by the House of Assembly.

Furthermore, by operating through the APS, Mama succeeded in influencing British metropolitan opinion against the Cape government. As first proposed by Alan Lester, South Africa throughout the nineteenth century can be approached as a representational battleground in which different colonial groups – such as colonial officials, settlers, humanitarians, and Africans – fought to sway metropolitan opinion in their favour.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, during the House of Assembly

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<sup>58</sup> See A. Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001); A. Lester, 'British Settler Discourse and Circuits of Empire,' *History Workshop Journal*, 54, 1 (2002): 24-48.

debate over Mama's account of the Depot, the Cape government explicated its paranoia that Mama's account would weaponise metropolitan opinion against it. For example, Philip Watermeyer attacked Solomon's motives for raising the subject, claiming that all he wanted was 'to have his speech published in the *Cape Argus*, so that it might go home to England by the next mail steamer and prejudice the minds of the people there.'<sup>59</sup> Thomas Upington agreed, lamenting that 'this was the kind of statement which did so much damage in England [...] and it was very much to be deprecated.'<sup>60</sup> Jacobus Petrus De Wet, concluding the debate, summarised the House's position that it 'did not believe that any wrong or injustice had been done, and he deprecated misstatements being made, solely for the purpose of damaging the Colonists in the eyes of English people.'<sup>61</sup> The barrage of dismissive and deprecatory comments made by the members of the House to undermine Mama's account can then be considered attempts to prevent his account from gaining traction in England. Their attempts did not work. The APS took Mama's account very seriously, as expressed through the anonymous correspondent, and lobbied the Colonial Office about it. As a consequence, Secretary of State for the Colonies Michael Hicks Beach chastised the Cape government on 2 October 1879 for the manner in which they carried out the indenture of Xhosa women and children. Hicks Beach expressed his regret that the Cape 'did not limit the term of indenture in the case of the women to a considerably shorter period than three years, provision being also made for the return of the children with their mothers.'<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Hicks Beach requested that the Cape 'arrange for the restoration to their husbands of all those women who may be desirous to return, and whose husbands are anxious to

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<sup>59</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, 'Native Immigration,' *Cape Argus*, 17 July 1879, in Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, 25 August 1879.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> PQPP, FCSA, C2482, Hicks Beach to Bartle Frere, 2 October 1879.

receive them, accompanied by their children.<sup>63</sup> The Cape did not heed this request, nevertheless, Mama's determination to expose the cruel violence shown to the Xhosa prisoners by sending his account of the Depot to the *Isigidimi*, to Solomon, and to the APS resulted in the colonial secretary publicly chastising the Cape government.

Of course, the story of the Depot cannot be entirely subsumed within the story of Shadrach Mama. The story also belongs to Saul Solomon and the APS, without whose support Mama might never have achieved what he did. It certainly belongs to the thousands of Xhosa prisoners transported to Cape Town, let alone the 60 violently removed from the Depot and the children Nonanti was forced to leave behind. And it belongs to George Stevens, George Theal, William Ayliff, and all those involved in planning and carrying out the indentured labour policy. While I do not deny the importance of these other players, I have adopted Mama's actions as a framework to tell the story of the Depot for two simple reasons. First, because his role was the most substantial: it was Mama who first reported to the empire the cruelty shown to the prisoners of the Depot, and who fought to keep it on the desks of humanitarians and officials alike. Second, because his role has been the most neglected: Solomon, Theal, and the APS have all received substantial coverage within histories of the forced labour system while Mama has received only the briefest of passing references. As this paper has demonstrated, Mama is far from deserving of this historiographical neglect. His determination to stand up for the women and children so brutally ejected from Cape Town, and his ability to do so through imperial networks, mark Shadrach Mama as a significant, dynamic, and compelling character worthy of historical attention.

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*