

THE LATE GREAT PLOT: THE OFFICIAL DELUSION  
CONCERNING THE XHOSA CATTLE KILLING 1856 – 1857

*History in Africa*, 12 (1985), 253-279

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The very idea that the Xhosa chiefs and their allies engineered the great cattle-killing which finally broke their power seems so absurd that most people who hear of it dismiss it instinctively. And indeed, they are perfectly correct to do so. Yet the sheer mass of documentary evidence in support of the proposition is such that all historians who have come into contact with it have been forced to be more circumspect with regard to the "chiefs' plot."<sup>1</sup> We have to look very carefully at this evidence before we reject its conclusions, and once we have done so, we have to answer a further and even more significant question: If the "chiefs' plot" did not exist, why did the Colonial authorities maintain that it did? Paradoxically, we will discover that an investigation of the "chiefs' plot" can tell us nothing about the Xhosa or the cattle-killing, but it can tell us a great deal about the mind and methods of Sir George Grey, that colossus of early Victorian imperialism.

I

After nearly seventy years of epic struggle, the catastrophic defeats of the Seventh (1846-47) and Eighth (1850-53) Frontier Wars finally broke the military capacity of the Xhosa people to resist the Colonial advance from the Cape of Good Hope. Their political structures fragmented by partial incorporation into the Crown Colony of British Kaffraria; their belief structures fractured by the victories of missionary teaching and European technology; the slender remnants of their economic resources decimated by the onslaught of the lung-sickness epizootic in their cattle from 1855, the Xhosa turned as other peoples have done in like situations, to millennial hopes.

In April 1856 the ancestors addressed Nongqawuse, an adolescent girl residing east of the Kei River in that portion of Xhosaland which yet remained under the independent rule of Sarhili, king of the Xhosa:

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Tell that all the community is to rise again from the dead! Tell that all cattle must be slaughtered, for they are herded by hands defiled with witchcraft! Tell that there should be no cultivation, but that the people should dig new granaries, build new houses, erect great and strong cattle-folds...<sup>2</sup>

The Xhosa king Sarhili became a firm convert of Nongqawuse and her guardian, Mhlakaza. He ordered all his subordinate chiefs, including those living under colonial rule in British Kaffraria, to obey the injunctions of the prophets. The date of the first resurrection was set for 11 August 1856. The failure of this prediction was blamed on the unbelieving Xhosa, who refused to kill their cattle. As disappointment followed disappointment, similar rationalizations brought Xhosaland to the brink of civil war. They also prolonged the life of

the cattle-killing movement to such an extent that when Sarhili finally renounced all belief in July 1857, some fifteen months after its commencement, the Xhosa nation was destroyed beyond any hope of recovery.

The Colonial authorities were understandably puzzled by this unprecedented sequence of events, and concerned with their implications for the peace of the Cape frontier. They freely recognized the sincerity of the ordinary believers, but chose to insist that the root of the delusion was a sinister plot to destroy Colonial power in southern Africa.<sup>3</sup> The primary movers of this alleged plot were held to be the Sotho king, Moshoeshoe, and the Xhosa king, Sarhili. Moshoeshoe's alleged purpose was to distract Colonial attention from his wars with the Orange Free State, while Sarhili was exploiting the opportunity offered by the Crimean War to launch yet another war against the Cape Colony. He could not do this openly, since the Xhosa people did not want to fight, and he therefore deceived them into war through the manipulation of witch doctors. Starvation and hunger would force the common people into thefts, and Colonial retaliation would provoke them into war. Killing their cattle would free the warriors from the duties of herdsmen and hunger would drive them on to fight more fiercely than ever before.

The "chiefs plot" hypothesis implicitly depends on three general premises, none of which can be sustained: that men fight better if they are starving; that the chiefs were immune from the beliefs which they manipulated in their followers; and that the sole motivation of the cattle-killing was the desire of the Xhosa to rid themselves of the Colonial presence.

*"Hungry bellies won't fight."*<sup>4</sup>

Hunger had never before driven the Xhosa to greater fighting efforts, as Sarhili well knew. They had fought three major frontier wars in his adult lifetime, and experienced starvation in each one. This had not roused them to greater fighting fury. On the contrary, it was directly responsible for their surrender on two occasions,<sup>5</sup> and had severely debilitated them on the third.

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The Gaika Commissioner reported that the Xhosa themselves said that

Famine always did more to conquer them than the forces brought against them, and wars have never been begun in a season of scarcity, but the Kaffirs have always been most unruly and unmanageable in the years of their greatest plenty.<sup>6</sup>

The Chief Commissioner himself admitted that thefts usually completely ceased on the eve of a frontier war.<sup>7</sup> Nor is there any reason to believe that the Xhosa chiefs felt that their earlier defeats had been owing to a lack of manpower. The Xhosa had always vastly outnumbered the Colonial forces. Their greatest losses had occurred when they concentrated large numbers of warriors,<sup>8</sup> and their greatest successes had occurred in guerrilla warfare fought by small bands. Throughout the major Xhosa military difficulty had been the problem of supplies, not the problem of numbers and it is hard to believe that they would have destroyed their supplies simply in order to boost their numbers.

*"Chiefs are firm believers in the national superstitions."*

Whereas it was well-known to all--Xhosa commoner as well as Colonial official--that the diviners often used their influence in the economic and political interests of the chiefs, this does not mean that they were mere tools of the chiefs or that the chiefs were cynical about magical power. Commissioner Maclean put the point very forcefully early in the delusion:

A Kaffir chief is not a whit more civilised and not a whit less ignorant and superstitious than any other Kaffir, in most instances he is less intelligent than many under him. Because he or some of his councillors make in some instances use of superstition to "eat up" some obnoxious person. and [sic] it does not follow that he or they disbelieve in these superstitions; many a monk doubtless believed in the efficacy of certain shrines, and in the dead saints relics preserved in their own and other churches, though they may have been engaged at the time in pulling the strings of some miraculous image, or making a picture wink. We also know that Kaffir chiefs are firm believers in the national superstitions. and are as readily influenced as anyone of the Kaffir herd.<sup>9</sup>

Even Attorney-General Barrington was implicitly aware of the sincerity of the Xhosa chiefs whom he brought to trial for their actions during the period of the cattle-killing:

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I think the chiefs must have a sort of belief in the prophet though they know it is a got up affair – their uneducated minds are too weak to reject the imposture though they are aware it is one; and of their own getting up.<sup>10</sup>

*"Now very civil, high spirited and witty"<sup>11</sup>*

The cattle-killing did not emphasize hostility to Colony or to the settler presence in southern Africa. There were occasional references to great natural disasters which would sweep away whites and unbelievers, but on the whole the expectations of the believers were positive rather than negative. They looked forward to a millennium in which their dead ancestors would return and new healthy cattle, free from lungsickness, would arise. Maqoma told his followers that there would be no need to attack the settlers because "all necessary things would be furnished to them."<sup>12</sup>

Colonial observers found the Xhosa very friendly whenever such expectations were at their height:

I never saw such a deplorable sight as the neglected fields in Umhala's location. Everywhere, I found the people cheerful although the neglected fields spoke of future starvation and death. I spoke to several but they merely smiled.<sup>13</sup>

Even if our examination does not remove every doubt con every detail of the "Chiefs' plot," the remaining evidence needs to be weighed against the evidence for a genuine spontaneous movement. It is impossible to consider all of this here, and it should be sufficient to outline two features of the cattle-killing which are not compatible with the notion of the "chiefs' plot."

### *The ban on Cultivation*

Unlike cattle, maize and sorghum were not usually guarded in wartime. Maclean argued that the Xhosa did not bother to sow because they knew the troops would destroy their crops when the war broke out. But the refusal of the believers to cultivate despite intense pressure from the Colonial authorities indicates that more was at stake than the casual neglect implied by Maclean. Chiefs such as Mhala and Phato resorted to endless subterfuges—to the extent of simulating cultivation without actually planting anything—and eventually lost their salaries because they refused to allow cultivation.<sup>14</sup> Believers actively prevented unbelievers from working in their gardens.

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### *The persistence of Belief*

Maclean explained the failure of the plot as due to lack of speed and coordination in slaughtering. Surely then, the chiefs should have abandoned their scheme when its failure became manifest in the devastation which followed the Great Disappointment of 18 February 1857. While their followers trooped into the Colony accepting work on any terms or lay apathetically in their houses waiting for death, the responsible chiefs clutched vainly at fresh straws of prophecy with the desperation of men who had left themselves no alternative. Chief Feni, who opposed the cattle-killing for almost its entire duration, finally succumbed to belief in June 1857, when lung-sickness broke out among his herds.<sup>15</sup>

Having established that the balance of probabilities is against the “chiefs plot,” the onus falls on its proponents to make a case in its favor. But the two lengthy official dispatches by Chief Commissioner Maclean, which constitute the most detailed and coherent exposition of the “chiefs’ plot” interpretation, signally fail to produce anything very convincing.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Maclean himself seems to have recognized this when he concluded his dispatch against Sarhili as follows:

While aware that many of the points adduced carry little weight when taken singly, yet it appears on a general view that some are not to be explained on the supposition of a mere political delusion, while all agree with the view that the superstition was made use of to attain a political result.<sup>17</sup>

This is merely another way of saying that his case makes up in volume what it lacks in depth. Most of Maclean's dispatches were taken up with a recitation of information which was perfectly correct, but quite consistent with the 'sincere belief' interpretation—for example, that many of the chiefs involved were hostile to the Colony or that Sarhili had ordered his subordinates to kill their cattle. Maclean also retailed a number of quite unfounded rumors (for example, that Sarhili and Mhlakaza had secretly preserved their own cattle).<sup>18</sup> Only two items in Maclean's indictment need to be considered at all seriously. The first is the alleged involvement of Moshoeshoe, to which Maclean devoted an entire dispatch.<sup>19</sup> Second are the statements of those who claimed to have heard personal declarations from Sarhili himself that his object was war.

Moshoeshoe had enormous prestige among the Xhosa after the Battle of Berea in 1852. As early as 1854, Sarhili's brother Ihoxho had sent to him for the charms which had

enabled him to defeat the English. Moshoeshoe had been in communication with Sarhili since the beginning of the cattle-killing, and he had lied about this when reprimanded by Governor Grey. Thus far, Maclean's argument was sound enough, but he did not stop there. He deduced, from Moshoeshoe's untruth and from the apparent coincidence of phases in the cattle-killing with phases in Sotho-Free State negotiations that Moshoeshoe had helped Sarhili engineer

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the cattle-killing so that the ensuing frontier war would prevent Cape Boers volunteering for the Orange Free State campaign.

That Moshoeshoe lied to Grey about his communication with Sarhili seems incontrovertible, but it is difficult to believe that he had any motive beyond the understandable if misconceived object of not wanting to antagonize so powerful an enemy. That he should have instigated so complicated a plot to achieve so insignificant an objective--the Cape Boers not being a major fighting force, and not being known for their eagerness to volunteer anyway--is unlikely. That Sarhili should have lent himself to such a scheme--Moshoeshoe, after all, was taking no risks and killing no cattle--is unthinkable. The most detailed report of what passed between Moshoeshoe and Sarhili shows clearly that, far from directing the deception, Moshoeshoe was only trying to find out what was going on.

When they left home they left six Basutos at Kreli's kraal, who had been sent by Moshesh to their chief to ask the news, and also to see if it was true that the Kaffirs were killing their cattle, and if it was true what Umhalakaza had been telling their people. They also told me that Moshesh was very anxious to know what it all meant, as he (Moshesh) wished to make himself ready for anything that may happen. Kreli's men also told me that their chief said to Moshesh's men that all was true.<sup>20</sup>

Senior Cape officials dismissed the Moshoeshoe dispatch with expressions such as "little more than hearsay" and "no adequate proof."<sup>21</sup>

It was very much in Grey's interests to quarrel with Moshoeshoe. He was determined to return the recently independent Orange Free State to British rule.<sup>22</sup> The embattled President Boshoff, whose state was on the brink of collapse, was only too willing to acquiesce. The major obstacle to reunification was the British government, which had no taste for any more expensive wars fought for the benefit of land speculators and military contractors.<sup>23</sup> It was not prepared to fight Moshoeshoe to please the Free State--indeed it had granted Free State independence precisely in order to avoid fighting Moshoeshoe. To a convinced imperialist like Grey, the evidence against Moshoeshoe, such as it was, was a godsend, and he used it extensively in order to enlarge the scope of his High Commissionership and justify his intervention in the affairs of the Free State.<sup>24</sup>

On three occasions only did Maclean produce any evidence that directly linked Sarhili's cattle-killing with the intention of making war on the Colony.

- (1) Sarhili is supposed to have boasted to Nonesi, the Thembu regent, that he was "prepared for war with the English at any moment." But Nonesi's Agent J.C. Warner, a fierce enemy of Sarhili, dismissed this news, saying that "it is not Kaffir policy to make such statements except to

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those in whom they have the utmost confidence, and who they are quite certain are heart and hand with them.”<sup>25</sup> The report originated with the unbelieving chief Anta, who was anxious for the Colonial authorities to establish a military post in his distant and exposed chiefdom.

- (2) Major Gawler, the special Magistrate with Mhala, heard that Moshoeshoe had sent the following message to Sarhili:

My new cattle and people have been given out; are you ready? On the return of this messenger I will move down and join you.” Kreli answers "I am ready," and forwards this news to Sandili, Macomo and Umhala.

Yet it is curious that Charles Brownless, the Xhosa-speaking agent with the Ngqika, in reporting the same rumor that inspired Gawler's letter, made no mention of this interesting message.<sup>26</sup> It is even more curious that, although both Moshoeshoe and Sarhili allegedly said they were “ready,” neither of them made any aggressive move whatsoever at the time. We shall hear more about Major Gawler later.

- (3) A “trustworthy native” informed Maclean on 8 December 1856 that Sarhili told him that “it was his intention to make war with the English; that he killed his cattle so as to have not to guard, and therefore have more men available to fight.” Maclean neglected to mention that when he first received this ‘information’ he dismissed it out of hand because the “trustworthy native” was a Thembu mission Christian who wore European clothes, and he knew that Sarhili would never confide in such a man.”<sup>27</sup>

## II

It might be argued that, in the very nature of the case, it is unreasonable to expect tangible proof of so deep a conspiracy. Surely Grey and Maclean, the men on the spot, were better placed to judge the evidence than a historian writing more than 125 years after the event. Many of Grey's own contemporaries, however, including Cape Attorney-General William Porter, were sceptical all along of the notion of a "chiefs' plot.”<sup>28</sup> Charles Brownlee, the Ngquika agent, was an experienced frontiersman and fluent in Xhosa, and was prominent in supplying the information on which the "chiefs' plot” hypothesis was based. And yet, in his later years he rejected the "chiefs' plot” as an explanation of the tattle-killing.<sup>29</sup>

More significantly, it is possible to show that there was more to the “chiefs' plot” than a mistake, more than the simple error of drawing the wrong conclusions from the evidence. The evidence itself is suspect. In assessing the evidence for the

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"chiefs' plot,” we need to examine the medium through which it was articulated, and the motivations of the men who arranged and presented it. Our examination begins with a

consideration of the official dispatch as a means of communication, and follows up with a closer look at Sir George Grey and Colonel John Maclean.

Initially perhaps, Colonial Governors and their subordinates had used official dispatches to convey information and explain their actions. But because many of these dispatches were eventually published, official dispatches came to contain not so much the whole truth, but rather as much of the good news as the responsible official wanted to send and as little of the bad news as he thought he could get away with. Along with the official dispatches, which were intended for public consumption, there arose a parallel correspondence of private letters, euphemistically referred to as "demi-officials." No historian who has seen the private correspondence of a pair of friendly officials wastes too much time with their official correspondence.<sup>30</sup>

Several of the surviving private letters of Grey's officials at the Cape clearly demonstrate the light in which they viewed their official correspondence.

Grey's private secretary, Major Travers, went so far as to ask Maclean not to bother him with official correspondence:

Do not blame me if you do not get your schedules, for since I was knocked off my interest has declined and I never open the officials though they are sometimes Given to me by Sir George.<sup>31</sup>

Maclean himself was not above using the official format as a means of playing an ironical joke on his friends, as this response shows:

Thank you for your note and official which occasioned me a good laugh. Only don't think you have taken the rib out of me as you may imagine--I enclose an answer to the official which you will be pleased to consider written from the Military Chaplain to the High Commissioner and not from George Dacres to his old friend of the 27th, and therefore can be interpreted in a Pickwickian sense even as your official has been interpreted by me.<sup>32</sup>

The private/official distinction was employed more often for sinister than for humorous purposes. Sir Walter Currie who commanded Grey's Thembu filibuster in 1858, preferred to keep his account private, "believing that I can convey more information in this way than would be expedient or necessary to put in an official shape."<sup>33</sup> When the pro-Government chief Siwani committed a particularly brutal double murder, his magistrate wrote privately to Maclean that "I have not entered my letter in the letterbook nor shall I till I hear from you whether it is necessary to put it on record."<sup>34</sup>

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A determined Colonial Governor, sheltered by time and distance from his superiors in London, found it easy to manipulate official dispatches. Sir Benjamin O'Urban destroyed the arrangements of his hated subordinate Stockenstrom by the simple expedient of delaying to forward his dispatches. Sir Harry Smith won Colonial Office approval for many of his acts by writing hopelessly optimistic accounts of his victories. The nineteenth-century Colonial Office had very little control over a Governor once his ship had sailed. There were no effective sanctions short of total recall. In unpredictable circumstances, where Governors who went by the book often came to grief. it is not surprising that the Colonial

Office put something of a premium on success. A governor who delivered the goods was forgiven any number of detectable misrepresentations, and even the occasional downright lie.

As a writer of misleading dispatches, Grey stands in a class of his own. This assertion may shock readers who know him only by his South African reputation as a great and clear-sighted liberal, but the judgment of New Zealand historians is damning and unequivocal. Ian Wards, the military historian, found it difficult "to find one important subject about which Grey did not lie or, the more favorable view, which he did not misrepresent."<sup>35</sup> Dalton refers to Grey's "ruthless egotism, to which he would sacrifice anything and anybody, his contempt for truth."<sup>36</sup> Even Rutherford, the most sympathetic biographer any Colonial Governor could hope to have, is constrained to remark on one occasion that Grey "did not stop short of defamation and untruth in his ruthless determination to have his way."<sup>37</sup>

The New Zealand evidence shows conclusively that Grey was a great liar, great not only in the magnitude of his lies but also in his ability to get his lies believed, or at least tolerated, by the people who mattered. Grey's vices were not peculiar to himself, but in him they appeared so consistently and in such set combinations that they virtually constituted a unique style of colonial government. His great virtues were nervous energy and rhetorical idealism, the main functions of which were to mask his egotism, his vindictiveness, his extravagance and, what was probably the greatest defect of all in a civil servant, his total inability to follow through with anything he started. Grey had many grand schemes but few specific plans. He contented himself with enunciating the great vision, and he left it to lesser mortals to supply the details and pick up the pieces. If something went wrong, and it inevitably did, this was owing not to any fault of his own but to the stupidity of his subordinates and the malevolence of his enemies.

Conspiracy theory was the natural refuge of Grey's deeply insecure, highly self-righteous, personality when faced with the consequences of his own wilder impulses. This is very evident in his dealings with his fellow Britons. When he was recalled from South Africa in 1859, it was not because he had defied the Colonial Office over German immigration, over troops for India, over the British Kaffrarian constitution, and over federation with the Orange Free State. It was because he had heroically

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refused to appoint a relative of Lord Derby to a vacant post.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, when he was recalled from New Zealand in 1867, this not because he had twice reversed himself on the vital questions of land confiscation, or because he had quarrelled pointlessly and provocatively with two successive military commanders, or because he had delayed the embarkation of troops for more than two years, but because his army Commander had poisoned the mind of the British Government by a series of malicious secret reports.<sup>39</sup> In several of the official dispatches, there can be no mistaking the note of genuine hysteria which underlay Grey's habitual pose of injured innocence.

I may be wrong, but I ought to state my belief that it is impossible to read these communications without coming to the conclusion that a feeling of personal ill-will towards myself is manifested in them. I am beset by cares and difficulties, which occupy my mind incessantly and wear out my health ... I certainly feel it hard that the reward I should receive should be to have my spirit broken.<sup>40</sup>



I can assure you, that under present arrangements, there is but little use in my being here, and I can not help suffering under the depressing feeling that the means necessary to give me any fair chance of success are denied to me.<sup>41</sup>

Whereas Grey's fits of paranoia were certainly dysfunctional in dealing with his fellows--after all, most wished very ardently for his success--they were positively helpful in dealing with non-European peoples. Grey was certainly not imagining the hostility which they felt towards him, as the representative of the British Empire which sought to subjugate them. But. Whereas other governors bogged down in a morass of contradictory responsibilities, Grey was supremely indifferent to all practical and moral difficulties. Once he had prescribed his grand panaceas, he went straight for the jugular, never hesitating to lie and cheat his way out of a corner. In Grey's hands, conspiracy theory was an ax with which to sever the Gordian knot which resulted whenever Britain's obligations towards settlers and indigenes became inextricably tangled.

In New Zealand, these contradictions were particularly acute since Great Britain had, on the one hand, guaranteed Maori land by the Treaty of Waitangi while on the other, the British government had chartered land companies whose chief objective was to take it away. Other governors of New Zealand fell between two stools. Grey took his stand with the settlers and legitimated his actions in terms of convenient Maori conspiracies. In the Maori War of 1846, for example, Grey was frustrated by his inability to capture his principal opponent, Te Rangihāeta. Desperate for a decisive victory, he seized Te Rangihāeta's unsuspecting uncle, Te Rauparaha, instead, and denounced him—without any hard evidence—as the “head of a very dangerous and extensive

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conspiracy.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, when Grey decided to clear the Waikato district for European settlement (in his second New Zealand governorship, 1863), he justified himself by claiming that the Waikato Maori intended to attack Auckland. Of the eighteen letters he cited as evidence, only three had been written before he took the decision to invade the Waikato, and of these three only one *might* have been received.<sup>43</sup> The hallmark of Grey's political style--disguising his victims as evil conspirators by means of dubious and often fabricated evidence--was not missing from his South African governorship, as we shall see.

Comparatively little needs to be said about Colonel John Mclean, the man chiefly responsible for executing Grey's policy in British Kaffraria. His entire administrative career was spent on the Cape Eastern Frontier and the official correspondence, all of which passed through his hands, does not provide us with a disinterested vantage point from which to examine him. Mclean's moderation in the frontier context derived not from any sympathy with liberal principles but from a healthy respect for the power of the chiefs, which led him to oppose the wilder schemes of the extremist settler party. Even so, Maclean remained a strong advocate of colonial expansion and was reproved by Governor Cathcart for advocating settler colonization of the Keiskammahoek Crown Reserve.<sup>44</sup> Like Grey, Maclean had a strong sense of his own dignity and resented advice from other officials, particularly those who, unlike himself, spoke the Xhosa language. He viewed a man such as Charles Brownlee as unduly sympathetic to the Xhosa and therefore liable to be misled by them.<sup>45</sup> Maclean also resembled Grey in his inclination towards conspiracy theories. In 1854, before Grey's arrival, he became convinced that the Mfengu were conspiring with the Xhosa against the Colony--a ludicrous suggestion, considering that the British had recently settled the Mfengu on land confiscated from the Xhosa, and one which

was conclusively refuted by an official enquiry.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, in later years, Maclean and Grey were in the habit of referring to the "Fingo alliance" as an established fact.<sup>47</sup>

The views of Grey and Maclean on the future of British Kaffraria were consistent and identical. Both wanted to turn a Crown Colony inhabited almost exclusively by its indigenous population into a colony of white settlement modelled on Grey's beloved New Zealand. Grey was the more visionary of the two and saw more readily the opportunities opened up by the cattle-killing. Maclean was initially more hesitant, but when he saw that the power of the Xhosa was indeed broken, he joined in the pursuit with a vengeance. The "chiefs' plot" was their rationalization for the ruthlessness with which they treated a shattered people.

### III

In Section I I showed that the evidence for the "chief's plot" was very thin and in section II I showed that its main proponents Grey and Maclean cannot be regarded as reliable and impar-

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tial observers. In Sections III and IV, I attempt to demonstrate that they were guilty of deliberate bad faith in their manipulations of the "chiefs' plot" syndrome to bring about the destruction of the Xhosa chiefs Mhala and Sarhili.

Mhala, the second-ranking chief in British Kaffraria, ruled the amaNdlambe, whose territory stretched along the seacoast all the way from west of modern East London to the Kei River. He had the reputation for being the shrewdest chief in Xhosaland and, if we measure shrewdness in terms of greed and evasiveness, then he was shrewd indeed. But during the time of cattle-killing he displayed less circumspection than any of his fellow chiefs. Mhala was growing old and rheumatic. He longed to see his dead father and brothers, and to be made young again. From the beginning, he rushed headlong into the delusion, steadily ignoring sceptical reports about the sacred pool and repeatedly sending fresh delegations to bring back better news.<sup>49</sup>

In January 1857, the last desperate month before the Great Disappointment, an eleven-year old girl named Nonkosi began to prophesy at the Mpongo river in Mhala's country.<sup>50</sup> There was nothing original in Nonkosi's prophecies--they derived from those of Nongqawuse and simply confirmed that the new people would rise when the cattle were all slaughtered--but they did much to comfort and reassure Mhala, who took to visiting Nonkosi and listening to her tales of the new cattle she had seen and the old chiefs she had spoken with.

On 22 September 1857, Major Gawler's police, "in a playful humour, "visited Nonkosi's place. They found one woman and three children dead, and Nonkosi's crippled father in the last stages of starvation. "He died apparently of fright, when they brought him outside the hut."<sup>51</sup> Maclean wrote to Grey that Nonkosi would be examined, and that "if nothing could be made of her," she would be kept under surveillance at the Native Hospital in King Williams Town.<sup>52</sup>

Gawler's initial investigations must have failed to produce the desired results for, two weeks after her capture. Maclean wrote to the medical superintendent and asked him to take charge of the prophetess, "as she is reported to be of weak intellect."<sup>53</sup> But Gawler was not yet ready to quit and by 15 October he had extracted a coherent statement from Nonkosi, in which she described her interviews with the spirit of the war doctor Mlanjeni, in

the occasional presence of six departed chiefs, who sat silently on the water "as we sit on the ground."<sup>54</sup> This was not very promising from the point of view of the "chiefs' plot" and so Gawler was forced to conclude that Nonkosi had been "imposed upon by the half-dozen fellows chosen for their general resemblance to the old chiefs they represented." Such "juggleries" must have been known to Mhala, and to Nonkosi's uncle Kwitshi, a leading believer who was councillor in charge of the Mpongo river area. The authorities now had another name to play with, and when Nonkosi was given over to Maclean, she suddenly and mysteriously broke down and confessed that she had acted on the instructions of Kwitshi.<sup>55</sup> In his dispatch Maclean remarked that he had asked no further questions "as all necessary information had been obtained, and I

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was unwilling to continue ... lest ... she should begin to conceal further particulars, or suspected [*sic*] of inventing them."<sup>56</sup> This was disingenuous to say the least, since Nonkosi had "persisted in her misrepresentations"<sup>57</sup> for an entire month, and had only changed her story when placed personally in his hands.

Gawler, who had got nothing out of Nonkosi, sought to make amends with his successful interrogation of Kwitshi. Kwitshi was made to confess that

Nonkosi said nothing of herself; all that she said was from Umhala through me... The object was a war... the cattle-killing was got up to deprive the people of property that required so many to look after, the people would go more free to fight, and the English would have nothing to take. It failed because it was riot done quick enough; half were starved before the other had killed.<sup>58</sup>

By the time Kwitshi got as far as Maclean, his story had become further embellished. He described how he had impersonated cattle bellowing in the water, and (this gem is an interpolation in the original script),

Whenever I was alone. I could not refrain from laughing when I thought of the deceptions I practiced at vley, and I often roared out "Are Kaffirs fools to be thus deceived?"<sup>59</sup>

Grey was delighted with Kwitshi's statements and urged that Mhala be brought to trial for levying war against the Queen if evidence could be found to convict him. Gawler obligingly persuaded Mhala to visit Maclean and beg for forgiveness so that the Chief Commissioner could arrest him without too much trouble.<sup>60</sup> Attorney-General Barrington warned that the evidence was yet inadequate and Mhala was allowed to depart in peace. Barrington personally solved the evidence problem by threatening Kwitshi with a prosecution for robbery, which carried a sentence of twenty years transportation.<sup>61</sup> Kwitshi suddenly remembered several warlike conversations between various chiefs and councillors. He also attempted to break out of prison (presumably he had stopped roaring with laughter), but there was no escape for him.

The prosecution of Mhala which followed in October 1858 was led by Major John Cox Gawler, the man responsible for the capture of Nonkesi, Kwitshi, and Mhala himself. Formerly Mhala's Special Magistrate, Gawler had been three times publicly humiliated by the old chief and finally forced to leave his Great Place.<sup>62</sup> He had then formed a special police force of unbelievers which rampaged through the coastal district, searching out

property stolen by the starving believers and revenging themselves for earlier sufferings during the height of the delusion. Gawler's reign of terror led Vigne, the neighboring magistrate, to complain to Maclean:

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If you approve of all these acts, which are in my opinion defeating justice and degrading the office of magistrate into one I have no wish to fulfil the duties of, I trust you will inform me. Things are daily happening that I neither have conscience nor inclination for.<sup>63</sup>

Gawler was a great lover of the sjambok and the whip, so much so that his colleagues joked that one could recognize his men by the welts on their back.<sup>64</sup> His methods of interrogation were described as follows by a mission resident whom Gawler wrongly believed to be a witness to a murder:

Major Gawler then said, the Missionary has bribed you to deny any knowledge of the case, say what he has given you. I denied the charge when Major Gawler jumped up and struck me thrice with his hand on my face and called for a stick. He ordered a riem to be put around my neck, and taken away a prisoner and tied to a pillar of a hut. Some days after I was taken down to the river, and met some police there who stated they were ordered to take me aside and interrogate me. They then added 'What did the missionary do at your place. He must have gone to warn you what to say.' I held to my former statement. I was then taken to the kraal and the two police went in the direction of Major Gawler's house. At the kraal, all the police surrounded me saying Why will you die by hiding what the Missionary said to you. You will be transported with Sibunu. Say did he give you a cow or money.<sup>65</sup>

It remains to be added that Gawler's action was precipitated by the casual evidence of a nine-year-old boy, and that the case was solved when the alleged murder victim was found to be still alive. If Gawler's examinations were so harsh in a case of little importance, one can only imagine how brutal they must have been in the case of Kwitshi, which had such great political significance. Gawler's interrogations were clearly not motivated by a desire to search for the truth; they started with the assumption that the truth was already known and proceeded to extract a statement to that effect by a series of leading questions.

It follows that any statement made by Kwitshi while in the care of Gawler should be treated with suspicion. Nevertheless, even as it stands, Kwitshi's confession conflicts with that of Nonkosi in respect of the all-important issue of Mhala's complicity in the alleged deception. In his initial statements of October and November 1857, and again in January 1858, Kwitshi stated that he had instructed Nonkosi on Mhala's orders. In this early version Mhala had never himself given Nonkosi instructions. By the trial (October 1858), Kwitshi was saying that Mhala had personally described to Nonkosi the appearance of his dead relatives, and that he had told her he approved of Kwitshi's actions.<sup>66</sup> But in Nonkosi's evidence, which is consistent throughout, Mhala

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is nowhere implicated in the deception. He often came to see her, he gave her presents, but his part is entirely that of the innocent dupe. Indeed in one (unpublished) examination,

Nonkesi maintained that Kwitshi deliberately misled Mhala into thinking that he was away precisely so that Mhala would not guess that he was manipulating Nonkosi from the bushes.<sup>67</sup>

This discrepancy was not questioned by the court during Mhala's trial. British Kaffraria had been under martial law since its inception, and Grey had set up special tribunals to try chiefs and other offenders for the purpose of transporting them. The court was composed entirely of officers and officials. There was no jury and no defense counsel. Of the six witnesses Mhala had wished to call, only two, namely Gawler and Mhala's renegade son Smith, actually appeared. Although he was not familiar with British legal procedure, Mhala was able to make one telling point in cross-examining Nonkosi--that the alleged deceptions were instigated not by himself but by Kwitshi.

William Porter, the Cape Attorney-General, commented that the verdict was a foregone conclusion:

I cannot, however, say that the evidence appears to me to be such as would satisfy a Jury composed of strangers to the country. I mean no disrespect to Members of the court when I say that, in all probability, they were perfectly satisfied before the trial began that plots had been hatching, and that, where plots were hatching, the old Kaffrarian Fox was sure to be at work. They had no need of witnesses. But had they brought sceptical doubts, instead of formed convictions, to the trial of the case, I lean to the conclusion that much more evidence would have been obtained, and that the evidence actually given, would scarcely have been deemed conclusive.

Porter attacked the court for failing to ask Nonkosi whether she had ever been personally instructed by Mhala, and added that the evidence of the child Nonkosi should have been preferred to that of Kwitshi in the event of any discrepancy. On the broader legal front, Porter pointed out that Mhala was being tried under laws passed after the creation of British Kaffraria, and therefore inapplicable to it. There was considerable doubt that Mhala was a "subject of our lady the Queen" in the legal sense, which meant that he could not be charged with treason. Porter concluded his comment by pointing out that if Mhala was indeed a threat to the peace of the country, it would be far better for the integrity of British justice that he be detained under martial law than convicted "under an inapplicable statute, supported by what strikes me as a somewhat defective evidence."

Grey could have called a mistrial and started all over again, as he had done when his kangaroo court had foolishly found chief Phato innocent of the charges against him.<sup>68</sup> Instead, "so that Umhala might have the benefit of the Attorney-General's opinion," Grey sentenced the old chief to only five years' transport-

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tation, with provision for remission of sentence, "if it should subsequently be thought that the Attorney-General is right and I am wrong." It is hard to overstate the significance of this concession. Whereas the other chiefs had been convicted for ordinary crimes committed after the Great Disappointment, Mhala alone was charged with treason. Not only he, but the whole cattle-killing movement, was in the dock for levying war against the Queen. Had the trial been successful, Mhala would have been transported for life and the cattle-killing exposed as a treacherous plot. By retreating in the face of Porter's carefully reasoned arguments, Grey tacitly admitted that he was wrong, that Mhala was innocent, and that the "chiefs' ploe' remained, at most, an unproven assumption.

It is not now possible to be certain about what actually happened at the pool on the Mpongo river. It is probable that Nonkosi prophesied unaided, and that the entire Kwitshi story was fabricated under pressure of threats and interrogation. It is plausible that Kwitshi suggested certain themes to the young prophetess and helped her elaborate her performance. But what is not at all likely is that Mhala engineered the whole deception in order to bring about a war. Having already destroyed all his cattle and all his corn, having already driven his subjects into a state of utter want and desperation, having already defied and antagonized the terrible Gawler and Maclean, Mhala had done more than enough to provoke a war, had such been his intention. There was no need to waste time listening to the stories of a nine-year-old girl, or to slaughter his last surviving beast, the great ox of his revered father. As Mhala told his judges, he had slaughtered on account of Nongwawuse, not on account of a war. They would have done well to heed his final appeal.

I have nothing further to say but I wish this recorded and await what is in the heart of the court and beg them to remember that words do not perish, that though I may die, (you had better judge me truly) that nothing hereafter may arise to disturb you. People die of sickness, and are killed in war; my words seem few but they are long enough.

Long enough indeed. Grey had intended the trial of Mhala to be the final proof that the cattle-killing was a plot of the chiefs. But it proved instead that if any plots were afoot, they were the plots not of the chiefs but of Sir George Grey himself.

#### IV

Having examined and rejected Grey's analysis of Sarhili's conduct during the cattle-killing, it is now time to compare Sarhili's behaviour after the cattle-killing with Grey's interpretation of it. We will find that Grey's analysis was so far at variance with the facts as he himself knew them that his interpretation

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cannot be seen as anything other than self-serving and dishonest.

The Great Disappointment of February 1857 weakened Sarhili's confidence in Mhlakaza and Nongqawuse, but he was so far committed to their prophecies and so devoid of any alternative that he did not altogether give up hope of an eventual resurrection. Mhlakaza attempted to blame his failures on the unbelievers who had not slaughtered, and this led to interminable fighting and disorder within Xhosaland itself. Many left their homes to seek new cattle or to preserve whatever they still possessed. Others attempted to keep themselves alive until the next season by digging roots and stripping the trees of their bark. Their mood was anything but aggressive. One observer described them in April 1857 as "very quiet and downcast, fearing rather an attack from us than inclined to attack us."<sup>69</sup> By the end of June, all hope was finally gone and Sarhili's subjects, including his own mother and brothers, were streaming out of the country in search of food. The trader John Crouch, who provided the Colonial authorities with most of their information on trans-Keian matters, reported that the king himself had nothing to eat.<sup>70</sup>

By July 1857, Sarhili was a beggar indeed and repeatedly approached the Colonial Government for help. His words might have moved a heart of stone, but they did not move Grey.

The chief Krili has been here today and with tears begged me to write to your Excellency for assistance in his present great need. He remembers your letter to him advising him not to kill his cattle and not to throwaway his corn - he is sorrowful for having neglected that advice and for having followed that of Umhlakaza. He hopes Your Excellency will deal kindly by him, as you have by the Hottentot Rebels - that you will make him your friend again, and not leave him to perish on the mountains. He has offended you in destroying his own, he has not thrown as assegai at the Governor. He looks to Your Excellency for a few milch cows, and seed for his gardens, so that he may keep life in his children: for himself, he wishes the dead to call for him, for he has sinned greatly.<sup>71</sup>

Crouch painted a graphic picture of Sarhili's utter helplessness in November 1857:

My opinion is that Kreli cannot recover his power, and although he is reconciled with unbelievers, not able to do mischief. . . You have him in your power to do as you like with him. . . You could take his whole country with a force of 100 men - for the whole of his country is nearly desolate. 100 cows would buy all their guns - they even offer powder for corn. You can dictate any terms to him. . . He will be beat if he crosses the Bashee, for I am quite sure he can't muster more than 500 men. They can't mount more than 200.<sup>72</sup>

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This view of Sarhili's helplessness was endorsed by Maclean himself.<sup>73</sup> And yet in February 1858, Grey sent a massive punitive expedition against Sarhili, pleading urgent military necessity to the Colonial Secretary:

No sooner does [Sarhili] find out we are pressed for troops in India than he again begins the same system... I cannot send enough troops to India with such a thorn in my flesh.<sup>74</sup>

Major Gawler was given instructions to capture Sarhili, or to drive him so far away that he would not be heard of again.

We cannot locate the source of Grey's apprehensions in Sarhili's plotting, for all of Grey's own informants agreed that, militarily speaking, the Xhosa king was a broken reed. Rather we must seek it in Grey's plans for the future of the trans-Keian region. He was an ardent annexationist and supported the longstanding settler call for the colonization of the independent Nguni lands between the Cape and Natal. He first announced his intention of settling Europeans in the transKei in April of 1857, well before the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny.<sup>75</sup> In November of 1857 he plotted with Crouch to seize Sarhili's person.<sup>76</sup> Clearly, it was Grey who was scheming against Sarhili, and not the other way round. Grey justified his action against Sarhili in a memorandum entitled "Kreli's conduct."<sup>77</sup> It is instructive to examine this document in some detail since it clearly demonstrates the manner in which Grey deliberately twisted information to suit his own purposes.

Grey borrowed many of his points from Maclean's dispatches, which we have already discussed. Great weight was laid on the 8 December statement of the Christian Thembu, which, as we have seen, Maclean had initially rejected. Another important piece of "evidence" was that of Possi, an official messenger sent by Sarhili's to Maclean to inform him that the Thembu had killed Sarhili's brother, and to ask his permission to launch a

retaliatory attack against them.<sup>78</sup> Possi repeated Sarhili's request for help and forgiveness painting a picture of starvation and depopulation. He also spoke rather freely about matters that can have formed no part of his official message--that Sarhili was frightened by the transportation of the other chiefs, that rumors about the Indian Mutiny were rife, and finally, that

Kreli has not abandoned plans for war. In his house, he states that at present there can be no war on account of the destitution, but he still looks forward to a time when the people will have plenty and be in a position to renew hostilities against the English.

It is unlikely that this was a total fabrication, and yet it is even more unlikely that an official messenger would thus casually divulge an important secret which utterly contradicted the message with which he was sent. The most probable explanation is that Maclean, by means of leading questions and lavish presents,

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elicited some of Sarhili's reminiscences about past glories. Taken as a whole, Possi's information shows clearly that Sarhili was militarily very weak and so frightened of the power of the Colony that he was unwilling even to avenge his brother without asking Maclean's permission first. But even if the damning quotation is taken at face value, it does not justify Grey's writing to the Colonial Secretary that "Kreili was openly proclaiming. . . that . . . he looked forward to a speedy time when his people would be able to renew hostilities with the English."<sup>79</sup> Possi had, after all, said that Sarhili's alleged comments were made "in his house" and he had said nothing about a "speedy" time. Even more ludicrous was Grey's memorandum to the Cape Assembly that, in the light of Possi's information "the matter [Sarhili's expulsion] now became one of life and death to the Colony." As we have seen, Possi had confirmed Sarhili's weakness, and Grey had decided to settle Europeans in his country more than nine months previously.

For the rest, Grey's memorandum amply confirms the judgment of one Colonial official who had personal dealings with Grey:

He throws out such a cloud of words that it is difficult to know what he does assert and what he does not.<sup>80</sup>

In this particular memorandum, Grey demonstrated his mastery of the art of insinuation, as the following extracts show:

. . . whilst professing the greatest friendship, with extraordinary secrecy and cunning, Kreili formed a plot, which soon assumed a formidable aspect. To encourage those who embarked on it, allegations were made that the English had been worsted in the Russian War.

The casual reader would infer that Sarhili himself had made these allegations, and it is clearly Grey's intention that he should do so. But if Grey was challenged by someone who knew that this was nonsense, he could excuse himself on the grounds that he had not actually named Sarhili.



Into this plot Kreili drew nearly all the Kaffir Chiefs, had several of those robbed and murdered who did not fall in with it.

The positioning of this passage near the beginning of the memorandum suggests that the murders and robberies occurred during the organization of the cattle-killing. In fact the robberies began only after the Great Disappointment and there was only one political murder. Grey did not have any direct evidence linking Sarhili to any of these crimes, and named no examples.

On our North Eastern border, close to Kreili's residence, hostile movements were made against us, who had in no way offended him, who had done him no wrong. People were attacked, plundered, slain; our farmers

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were robbed by hostile bands made up in part of his people, and booty was swept off into his Territory, himself and his followers took their share of it.

Grey did not mention that the "hostile movements" were organized by the Thembu chief Fadana, or that he knew from Fadana's own confession that Sarhili was implicated only in a single raid, which had been directed against Thembu unbelievers and not against the Colony and had yielded no more than eleven cattle.<sup>81</sup>

But the most astonishing crime of all that Grey laid at Sarhili's door was the following:

By his intrigues compelled the Government to receive a large number of people within the Colony in rear of our lines where they were so scattered throughout it, that in many parts, every farm house was garrisoned by Kreili. . .His scouts may be said to have been everywhere.

So this was it, the true explanation of the cattle-killing! Sarhili's grand design had not therefore been to send desperate hordes rushing into a determined attack, as Maclean and Grey himself had always maintained. Nor was the cattle-killing movement itself a dreadful failure, as Grey had asserted whenever he wanted to prove his worth at the Colonial Office. On this new interpretation, the misery and degradation of the cattle-killing was a resounding success, precisely what the crafty Xhosa king had aimed at from the very beginning. 30,000 warriors had cleverly infiltrated the Colony on the pretence of starving to death! Only the foresight of Sir George Grey had prevented them striking a mortal blow.

With this final rhetorical flourish, Grey achieved the *reductio ad absurdum* of his interpretation of the "chiefs' plot," contradicting, as if incidentally, everything that he and his officers had ever said about it. It only goes to show how far Grey was prepared to push an argument that had, from the first, lacked any basis in fact.

V

It is clear that Grey and Maclean deliberately twisted the evidence on which their allegations of a "chiefs' plot" were based, and that the "chiefs' plot" was used as a justification for removing Mhala and Sarhili from their lands in order to hand these over to European settlers. But it does not necessarily follow that they had consciously invented the idea themselves. Paradoxically, the idea of the "chiefs' plot" flourished in inverse proportion

to the evidence available for its support. To conclude, we need to look at the manner in which the idea of a "chiefs' plot" took root, and how it grew and flourished as its utility became increasingly apparent.

The notion that the cattle-killing originated in a plot by

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the Xhosa chiefs to bring about war was not an unreasonable one for a Colonial official to hold during the early days of the movement. All were aware that the prophecies of Mlanjeni had done much to bring about the Eighth Frontier War, which was palely three years over, that Sarhili was sending secret messages to his subordinate chiefs, and that a frenzy of religious excitement was sweeping through Xhosaland. It was known that Nongqawuse had predicted the imminent destruction of the white man, and that there was some talk of recouping cattle from the settlers if the prophecies failed. It seemed logical that starving people would rob and even kill to get at food. Small wonder that every Colonial administrator from the authoritarian Maclean to the sympathetic Brownlee initially suspected that the prophecies were put out by the chiefs to foment war. Grey was informed accordingly, and he made every effort from promises to threats to stop the people going ahead with the destruction of their cattle and corn.

From the beginning, however, there were clear signals that the cattle-killing was the result of a sincere belief and, as the movement progressed, these signals grew louder and louder. It became increasingly clear, for instance, that many of the initial reports were exaggerated, that the ordinary believers were well-disposed towards the whites and had no thought of war, and above all, that starvation and destruction were wreaking such havoc among the Xhosa that they were incapable of fighting or doing anything at all. As late as September 1856, Grey could still write:

The most vigilant exertions on the part of the authorities in British Kaffraria have failed to elicit any proofs of combination for evil purposes amongst the chiefs, whilst conclusive proof has been obtained of the entire erroneousness of several reports of an unfavourable nature.<sup>82</sup>

Even later, in December 1856, in rejecting the statement of the Christian Thembu which he was to put to such great use afterwards, Maclean considered that "it is too suicidal for a mere political move."<sup>83</sup>

It was only after the Great Disappointment that Grey requested Maclean to write up the proofs of the "chiefs' plot." By that time, the failure of the movement had become apparent, and all disturbances had been put down by Gawler's police and Grey's Proclamation of 3 March 1857 that all robbers might be shot on sight. Whatever the truth of the "chiefs' plot" theory, whatever the chiefs may not have intended, it was incontrovertibly true that the crisis was over and that not one chief had actually done anything that could be construed as an attack on the Colony. As Sarhili said, "he has offended in destroying his own. He has not thrown an assegai at the Governor."<sup>84</sup> But Grey could not leave it at that. The pursuit of the "chiefs' plot" was more than an act of retributive justice, it was an integral part of future policy. From the very beginning of his

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Governorship in 1855, Grey had wanted to fill up British Kaffraria "with a considerable

number of Europeans of a class fitted to increase our strength in that country."<sup>85</sup> Just before the commencement of the cattle-killing, he had begun to implement this scheme by concentrating the normally dispersed Mfengu homesteads of the Crown Reserve into villages with strictly demarcated plots, thus clearing the way for extensive European settlements on their vacated land. The death and exile of tens of thousands of Xhosa during the cattle-killing opened the way for an extension of this scheme to the remainder of British Kaffraria and even beyond. In April 1857 Grey announced to the Colonial Parliament:

I hope. . .that I may be able to devise means which will not only enable the Government to fill up the vacant portions of British Kaffraria with a European population sufficiently large to maintain itself. . . but which will also enable it to establish a European settlement in Kaffraria Proper, sufficiently strong to control and keep in check those tribes beyond the Kei.<sup>86</sup>

The arrest and conviction of Chief Maqoma, the greatest of the Xhosa fighting leaders, on a charge of instigating the murder of an informer prompted the notion of a clean sweep of all the chiefs, many of whom were transported for receiving stolen property.<sup>87</sup> Mhala's trial and conviction opened up the whole of the coastal district to white settlement. The expulsion of Sarhili more than doubled the size of British Kaffraria, and was also intended for European settlement. Only the financial reticence of the Colonial Office balked this particular design of Grey and Maclean.

The "chiefs' plot" was thus imperceptibly converted from an honest mistake to a specious rationalization. Thereafter it became, for Grey, a weapon with which to save his reputation. Through sheer luck and brilliant opportunism. Grey's Xhosa policy that turned out a resounding success. Not so his other ventures. By the time of his recall. Grey had disregarded direct instructions from London on no fewer than five occasions, each sufficient in itself to warrant his recall. He had failed to promulgate the Letters Patent for British Kaffraria, preferring to keep the territory under his unchallenged control; he had failed to render accounts for the £40,000 per annum subsidy spent there; he had refused to send the troops which the War Office demanded for the Indian Mutiny; he had ordered more German settlers after being refused permission to do so; and he had kept the German Legion on full pay when they were supposed to be pensioners.<sup>88</sup>

As usual, Grey had many explanations for his strange behavior, each compounded of the distinctive Grey blend of half-truth, exaggeration, and self-righteousness.<sup>89</sup> Through all these explanations ran a single thread--whatever Grey had done, he had done in the best interests of the Colony. His expenses and indiscretions were born from necessity and were cheap by comparison with

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the cost of another Frontier War. Almost singlehandedly, he had saved the Cape from the monstrous conspiracy hatched by Sarhili and his cohorts. Any interference with his wise measures would only bring ruin and chaos on southern Africa.

It is very hopeless when we have successfully carried the country through so terrible a crisis to be told that no less than ten regiments were kept here, in fact not only (needlessly) but upon untrue representations; undiscouraged by this, we must however continue to do our duty, which we give to the Queen and the Empire and

not to the under Secretaries of State.<sup>90</sup>

It is very trying to have my acts so repeatedly disallowed, but it is worse to have this done in a tone of severe censure. It will be felt by all who take an interest in such a subject, that a man who has, under Providence, been the means of saving Great Britain from a Kaffir Wart which would have entailed upon it an expenditure of considerably upwards of a million, besides great losses to this Colony, deserved more generous treatment.<sup>91</sup>

Nearly every Tribe in the Interior of Kaffraria, from the Bashee to the Umzimvubu. has its prophet, who almost daily harangues the people and tells them that the black nations of the East have nearly extirpated the English; that Moshesh has settled the Boers; and that we are a doomed people.<sup>92</sup>

Almost incredibly, this last extract was written in September 1858, eighteen months after the Great Disappointment, and six months after Sarhili had been driven out of the country. The song remains the same but the geographical location has changed. The chiefs are still plotting, but now the guilty chiefs are those who live between the Mbashe and the Mzimvubu, the next slice of independent black territory alongside the swollen boundaries of British Kaffraria. The following month, Grey returned to another familiar theme. Efforts were being made "to form a general combination of the coloured races against the European population of this country"<sup>93</sup> It is tempting to conclude that only Grey's greed for the Orange Free State (which led to his recall in June 1859) prevented the discovery of more chiefs' plots which would have 'necessitated' the annexation of all the black-ruled territory between the Cape and Natal. Certainly, Grey did all he could during his brief second Governorship (1860-61) to further this objective.

The Xhosa tale, that it was Sir George Grey, hiding in the reeds, who deceived Nongqawuse into persuading the Xhosa to kill their cattle has long been regarded as proving the defects of oral tradition as a historical source. The tale of the "chiefs' plot," on the other hand, demonstrates that written documents are not necessarily more reliable than the oral ones. It also under-

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lines the need for a complete reconsideration of the role of Sir George Grey in South African history. And when that reconsideration is achieved, we may well find that there is more truth in the myth that "Sir George Grey killed the Xhosa by Nongqawuse" than there was in the myth that Grey himself so assiduously fostered.

## NOTES

1. For instance, Eric Walker. *A History of Southern Africa* (3rd ed., London. 1957), 289; Monica Wilson and Leonard M. Thompson, eds., *The Oxford History of South Africa*, Vol. 1, (Oxford, 1968). 259; T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History* (London, 1977), 101; A.E. Du Toit, "The Cape Frontier: A Study of Native Policy with Special Reference to the Years 1847-1856," *Archives Year Book for South African History* (1954), 100.
2. W.W.G. in W.B. Rubusana, *Zemk' linkomo Magwalandini* (abr. ed., Lovedale, 1966), 73.
3. Cape Archives, BK 373. The dispatch of 20 March, implicating Koshoeshoe, was published in Blue Book 2352 of 1857, pp. 72, 84. The second dispatch, which is much less

plausible, was not, to my knowledge, ever forwarded to London.

4. BK 81, Gawler to Maclean, 21 December 1856.
5. J. Peires, *The House of Phalo* (Johannesburg. 1981), 152-54.
6. Cape Archives, GH 28/71, Brownlee to Maclean, 2 August 1856.
7. BK 373, Maclean to Grey, 25 March 1857.
8. For instance, the battles of Grahamstown (1819), Gwangqa (1846), and Imvani (1851).
9. GH 8/49, Maclean to Grey, 25 August 1856.
10. BK 14, Barrington to Maclean, 20 June 1857.
11. BK 81, Cawler to Maclean, 14 October 1856, describing Mahala at his most confident.
12. BK 70, Brownlee to Maclean, 19 December 1856.
13. GH 8/49, Maclean to Grey, 3 November 1856.
14. BK 140, H. Vigue to Maclean, 10 November 1856; BK 81, Gawler to Maclean, 23 December 1856.
15. BK 71, Brownlee to Maclean, 1 May 1857.
16. BK 373, Maclean to Grey, 20 and 25 March 1857.
17. BK 373, Maclean to Grey, 25 March 1857.
18. For Mhlakaza, BK 14, Examination before the Chief Commissioner of Nombanda the prophetess, 28 February 1858; for Sarhili, GH 8/33, Crouch to Maclean, 9 November 1857.
19. BK 373, Maclean to Grey, 20 March 1857.
20. Office of the Justice of the Peace, Wittebergen, 28 October 1856, Annexure in 2352 of 1857, p. 80.
21. GH 20/2/1, H. Rivers, 1 April 1857; W. Field, 31 March 1857.
22. George E. Cory, *The Rise of South Africa*, (6 vols.: Cape Town, 1910-40), 6:12.
23. 139 speculators held 2,500,000 acres. *Ibid.*, II.4.
24. My interpretation here reverses that traditionally held,

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namely, that Moshoeshoe's plotting drove Grey to seek greater powers for the High Commissionership. See, for example, C.W. De Kiewiet, *British Colonial Policy and the South African Republics* (London, 1929), chapters 7 and 8.

25. GH 8/49, J. Warner to Maclean, 29 Nov. 1856. Warner was not himself averse on other occasions to spreading false rumors about Sarhili. See GH 8/48, W.G.B. Shepstone to Maclean, 15 June 1860.
26. Both versions enclosed in 2352 of 1857, p. 82.
27. GH 8/30, "Information communicated to the Chief Commissioner," 8 Dec. 1856.
28. GH 8/36, Memorandum by William Porter, 6 November 1858, enclosed in Schedule 129, 5 October 1858.
29. Brownlee *loc cit* 142. W.R.D. Fynn, Gawler's interpreter, however reaffirmed his belief in the "chiefs' plot" many years later; see Cape Parliamentary Paper G4 of 1883, 26970.
30. For example, the private correspondence of Sir Benjamin D'Urban and Colonel Harry Smith. MS 2033, Cory Library. Rhodes University, Grahamstown.
31. BK 2, F. Travers to Maclean, 27 November 1858.
32. BK 90, G. Dacres to Maclean, 22 September 1854.
33. CH 20/2/1, W. Currie to Grey, 12 March 1858.
34. GH 8/50, R. Hawkes to Maclean, 14 March 1857.
35. Ian Wards. *The Shadow of the Land* (Wellington, 1968). 391.
36. B.J. Dalton, *War and Politics in New Zealand, 1855-1870* (Sydney, 1967), 259.
37. James Rutherford, *Sir George Grey K.C.B.* (London. 1961). 141.

38. Ibid., 425.
39. Dalton, *War and Politics*, 212-17, 258.
40. Quoted in Rutherford, *George Grey*, 399.
41. Quoted in Dalton, *War and Politics*, 160.
42. Wards, *Shadow*, 276-81; Rutherford, *George Grey*, 110-14.
43. Rutherford, *George Grey*, 489; Dalton, *War and Society*, 176-79. I would like to thank Professor Dalton for his helpful comments on Grey's career in New Zealand.
44. G. Cathcart to Maclean, 19 January 1854, #1969 of 1855, 17-18.
45. Cape Archives, Acc 611/7 Maclean to J. Bissett, 19 March, 4 June 1860.
46. Report of Special Commissioner appointed to inquire into the present state of the Fingoe Locations. 22 January 1855, #1969 of 1855, 42-51.
47. For example, in BK 373, Maclean to Grey, 20 March 1857.
48. GH 8/35, "Native information received," 7 June 1858.
49. BK 81, J. Gawler to Maclean, 7 November 1856.
50. The first report on Nonkosi is BK 81. Gawler to Maclean, 26 January 1857. She continued to prophesy after the Great Disappointment of 18 February almost up to the day she was captured.
51. Acc 793, Gawler letterbook. Gawler to Maclean. 22 September 1857.
52. GH 8/50. Maclean to Grey, 24 September 1857.