

## THE CENTRAL BELIEFS OF THE XHOSA CATTLE-KILLING

By J.B. Peires\*

(Page 43)

THE only reliable and authentic account of the vision of Nongqawuse, prophetess of the great Xhosa cattle-killing of 1856-7, reads like a folk story or a fantastic tale of the imagination:

It happened in one of the minor chiefdoms among the Gealeka Xhosa, that of Mnzabele, in the year 1856. Two girls went out to guard the fields against birds. One was named Nongqawuse, the daughter of Mhlakaza, and the other was very young. At the river known as the place of the *Strelitzia*, they saw two men arriving. These men said to the girls - Give our greetings to your homes. Tell them we are So-and-so... and they told their names, those of people who had died long ago. Tell them that the whole nation will rise from the dead if all the living cattle are slaughtered because these have been reared with defiled hands, since there are people about who have been practising witchcraft.

There should be no cultivation. Great new com pits must be dug and new houses built. Layout great big cattle-folds, cut out new milk-sacks, and weave doors from *buka* roots, many of them. So say the chiefs, Napakade, the son of Sifuba-sibanzi. The people must abandon their witchcraft, for it will soon be revealed by diviners.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the story of Nongqawuse is no folk tale. During the thirteen months of cattle-killing (April 1856-May 1857), about 85 per cent of all Xhosa adult men killed their cattle and destroyed their corn in obedience to Nongqawuse's prophecies. It is estimated that 400,000 cattle were slaughtered and 40,000 Xhosa died of starvation.<sup>2</sup> At least another 40,000 left their homes in search of food. The dogged resistance to colonial expansion which the Xhosa had sustained for nearly eighty bitter years was abruptly broken by their own actions, and almost all their remaining lands were given away to white settlers or black clients of the Cape government.

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<sup>1</sup> W.W. G[qoba], 'Isizatu sokuxelwa kwe nkoma ngo Nongqause', Parts 1 and 2, *Isigdimi sama Xosa*, 1 March, 2 April 1888. I am indebted to Professor J. Opland for first pointing these out to me. The abridged version published in W.B. Rubusana, *Zemk' iinkomo Magwalandini* (London, 1906) has been translated in A.C. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature* (Berkeley, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> For the figure of 85 per cent, see my paper ' "Soft" believers and "hard" unbelievers', *Journal of African History*, xxvii, iii (1986). For the number of cattle slaughtered, GH 8/49 C. Brownlee to J. Maclean 7 Jan. 1857. For the number who died see *Cape Argus*, 3 March 1858, and Bishop R. Gray, quoted by C.C. Saunders, 'The annexation of the Transkeian territories', *Archives Yearbook for South African History* (1976), 11. These figures agree with my own estimates. The number who left Xhosaland is estimated from the fact that 29,142 Xhosa registered for labour in the Cape Colony by the end of 1857. See J.B. Peires, 'Sir George Grey versus the Kaffir Relief Committee', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, x (1983-4), 164. This number excludes those who entered the Colony illegally or found refuge in Thembuland, Mpondoland or elsewhere.

The stunning magnitude and seeming incomprehensibility of the cattle-killing have brought forth explanations as fantastic as the movement itself. Governor Grey and colonial historiography blamed the cattle-killing on a conspiracy by the Xhosa chiefs to foment war. Most Xhosa today blame the cattle-killing on a plot by Grey to fool their simple forefathers.<sup>3</sup> Very few of the insights generated by recent research into millenarian movements have yet been applied to the cattle-killing. The most perceptive accounts thus far, those of Monica Wilson and John Zarwan, have pointed out some of the more obvious components of the cattle-killing belief but fall far short of providing a satisfactory explanation.<sup>4</sup> Wilson, for example, writes that 'the insistence on purification, renouncing witchcraft, and sacrifice was all part of the traditional pattern', while Zarwan thinks that 'the cattle-killings were traditional in form and the leaders were diviners of the traditional pattern'. This emphasis on 'tradition' is wholly misleading. Although various forms of purification, divination, sacrifice and witchcraft were practised in Xhosa-land long before the cattle-killing, these practices were far too diverse and far too liable to change over time to be fossilized conceptually as 'traditional patterns'. Whatever 'traditional patterns' may have existed in Xhosaland before 1856, they certainly did not include mass destruction of basic subsistence needs or the expectation of an imminent resurrection of the dead. In their well-meant attempts to show that the cattle-killing was not entirely devoid of logic, Wilson and Zarwan have missed the crucial element of innovation in the movement. Despite their sympathetic approach, the Wilson-Zarwan view that 'the pagan reaction... was to seek supernatural aid' is not very far removed from the opinion of previous writers that the Xhosa relapsed into 'superstition' and 'delusion' when confronted with repeated military defeats.

One reason why such explanations are so inadequate is that they are based on inadequate information. Historians and anthropologists have contented themselves with the order to kill cattle and with the prediction that the dead would rise, and have thus begged a great many questions. Who were the spirits who appeared to Nongqawuse? Were the cattle to be sacrificed or merely killed? Where did the idea of the resurrection come from? Which dead exactly were going to rise? What was supposed to happen after the resurrection? It is necessary to define the practices and the expectations of the believers in a great deal more detail before one can begin to explain the logic which underlay their actions. In doing so, it is very important to re-create as far as possible the Xhosa-language vocabulary used by the believers. Many of the most relevant concepts of the cattle-killing movement either do not translate directly into English, or are translated by English words which lack the weight and connotations of their Xhosa equivalents and thus hide from the English reader associations and connexions which would be immediately apparent to a Xhosa.

In this paper I advance three propositions which will, I hope, clear up some

beliefs and practices which seem bizarre and irrational to us appeared natural and logical to the Xhosa of the 1850s.

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<sup>3</sup> See J.B. Peires, '“The late, great plot”: the official delusion concerning the Xhosa cattle-killing', *History in Africa*, XII (1985), 253-79.

<sup>4</sup> M. Wilson, 'Co-operation and conflict: the eastern Cape frontier', in *Oxford History of South Africa*, ed. M. Wilson and L.M. Thompson, I (Oxford, 1969); M. Wilson, 'Mhlakaza' in C.-A. Julien *et al.*, *Les Africains*, v (Paris, 1977); J. Zarwan, 'The Xhosa cattle killings, 1856-57', *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines*, XVI, nos. 63-4 (1976).

(1) The form which the movement took, namely the killing of cattle, was suggested and determined by the lungsickness epidemic of 1854.

(2) The resurrection of the dead was only an aspect of a much wider event which the Xhosa believed to be in prospect, namely the regeneration of the earth and the re-enactment of the original Creation.

(3) The movement was by no means a 'pagan reaction', but one which combined Christian and pre-Christian elements fused under the heroic leadership of the expected redeemer, the son of Sifuba-sibanzi, the Broad-Chested One.

Nothing which follows should be interpreted as meaning that the cattle-killing movement was possessed of a fully articulated orthodox ideology. There were many uncertainties and ambiguities in the cattle-killing prophecies and instructions, and there was, in any case, plenty of room in the Xhosa world-view for a variety of not necessarily consistent beliefs. The cattle-killing did, however, have a widespread and spontaneous appeal for the overwhelming majority of Xhosa. It cut right across the spectrum of divergent interests in Xhosa society. Its programme of action seemed necessary, credible and effective. This would not have been the case had it not been compatible with bedrock common beliefs which most Xhosa of the time shared but which are not obvious to us today. This paper is simply an attempt to describe some of the epistemological assumptions which the cattle-killing believers probably took for granted.

### LUNGSICKNESS AND CATTLE-KILLING

Lungsickness (bovine pleuropneumonia) appeared in Europe as early as the seventeenth century. It arrived in the Cape aboard a ship carrying Friesian bulls to Mossel Bay in 1853. Lungsickness was a necessary cause of the Xhosa cattle-killing: without it, the movement could never have occurred. This is not to say that lungsickness was a sufficient cause in itself, for it spread all over Africa without producing the same effect anywhere else. But at its very first stop, in Xhosaland, it encountered an exceptionally battered and divided society, demoralized by the frustration of a long series of military defeats; by the social insecurity of expulsion from natal lands and pastures; by the material sufferings of migrant labour and of resettlement in cramped and ecologically deficient locations; by the new wealth of those who had climbed on the military-commercial bandwagon of settler expansionism. Such conditions fed and sustained a belief which would have starved on the scepticism of those enjoying economic abundance and social opportunity. The movement was further encouraged by contingent factors such as the new policies of Governor Sir George Grey, the drought of the summer of 1855-6, and the hopes raised by rumours of British defeat in the Crimean War. But ultimately it was lungsickness which determined the form of the cattle-killing.

Lungsickness travelled along the ox-wagon routes from the south-western Cape to the eastern Cape and Xhosaland. By July 1854 the local press was writing of its 'fearful ravages' around Grahamstown, and by February 1855 it had penetrated British Kaffraria and broken out in independent Xhosaland east of the Kei river. Even before the beginning of the cattle-killing

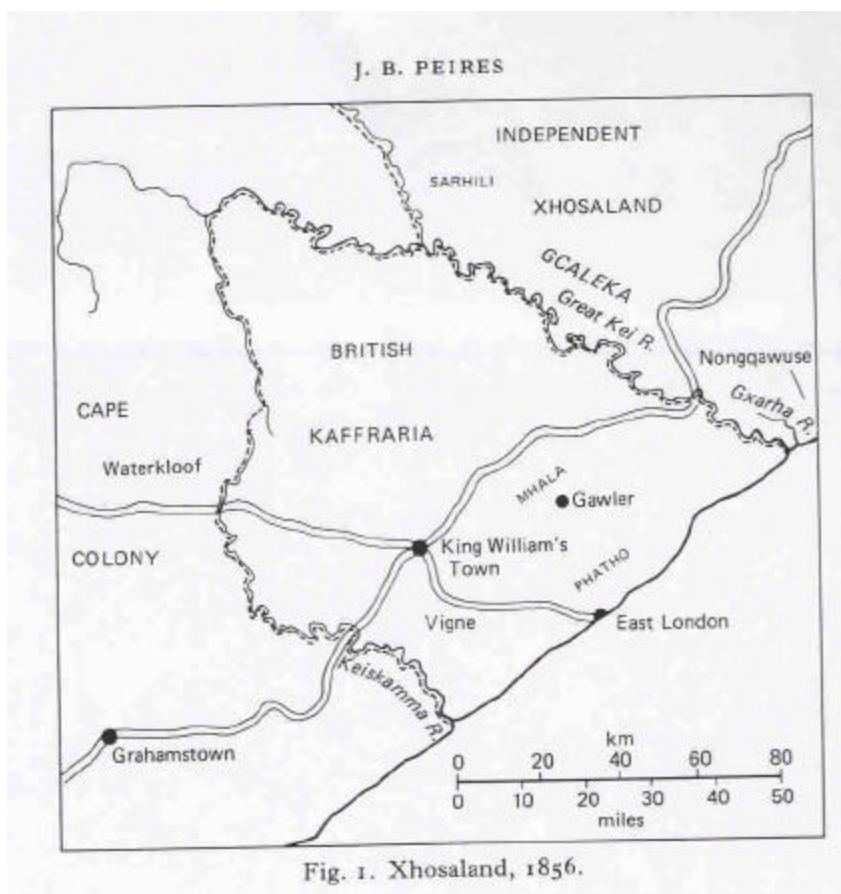


Fig. 1. Xhosaland, 1856.

movement proper, many Xhosa were slaughtering their herds 'rather than run the risk of losing them by lungsickness'. At least five prophets were active in the lungsick areas of Xhosaland during 1855, claiming that the Russians were 'all blacks, and were formerly Kaffir warriors who have died or have been killed in the various wars', that they had defeated the British, and that they were on their way to southern Africa to liberate the Xhosa. People were ordered to kill their cattle, abandon cultivation and 'lay aside their witchcraft that the good time may come'. Across the Kei, the Gcaleka Xhosa believed that Mlanjeni, the war-doctor of the 1850-3 Frontier War, had 'risen from the dead - that the sickness among the cattle was predicted by the prophet and that he can bring all their cattle to life again'.<sup>5</sup>

Nongqawuse's own prophecies were similarly linked with the epidemic. Information reaching Chief Commissioner Maclean indicated that the Xhosa had been ordered to 'kill all their cattle, so as to be stocked with others that

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Dr Stuart Rivell for helpful discussions on lungsickness. For an early account with some historical background see D. Hutcheon, 'Lungsickness of cattle', *Agricultural Journal* (Cape Town), XXVII (1905). For the early spread of lungsickness, see Peires, '“Soft” believers' (note 2 above). For the early prophets and the effects of the Crimean War: BK 70 C, Brownlee to J. Maclean, 11 May 1856; GH 8/31 information communicated to the Chief Commissioner, 14 April 1856; GH 8/27 C. Canham to B. Nicholson, 30 Sept. 1855, enclosed in J. Maclean to J. Jackson, 16 Oct. 1855; GH 8/28 J. Ayliff to J. Maclean, 26 May 1856. (All references are to volumes in the Cape Archives, Cape Town, unless otherwise indicated.)

(Page 47)

are free from the disease', and that 'the cattle at present possessed by the Kaffies are bewitched and that they must sacrifice them for others'. According to the Ndlambe Xhosa, Mhlakaza (Nongqawuse's uncle) ordered them 'to get rid of their cattle. . . and the reason he has assigned is that they have all been wicked and everything belonging to them is therefore bad'. The Xhosa king Sarhili, whose enthusiastic support was crucial to the success of the movement, initially preserved his corn

but is killing his cattle faster than the flesh can be consumed; he says it is because the lungsickness has broken out among his flocks, but from whatever cause it may be, I believe his slaughtering is confined to the flocks in which the disease has shown itself. <sup>6</sup>

Everywhere lungsickness went in Xhosaland, cattle-killing followed. This cannot have been a coincidence.

The Xhosa suffered cattle losses on a massive and unprecedented scale. They had sold over 100,000 hides by August 1856, and even this figure does not reflect the full mortality rate, since the sale of hides from lungsick cattle was illegal and many must have been discarded. In the Gqunukhwebe chiefdom, later a stronghold of the cattle-killing, Chief Phatho lost 2,400 out of 2,500 cattle, his Great Son Dilima lost 60 out of 70, his brother Kobe 130 out of 50 and his brother-in-law Stokwe all of 110. Nothing like this had ever happened before.<sup>7</sup>

Death from lungsickness occurred in a particularly horrible manner. First the affected cattle began to cough, then they gasped for air, breathing faster and more urgently. Yellowish fluid crept over their lungs which stuck to their ribs, and as the disease spread, the cattle putrefied from the inside out, becoming first constipated and then diarrhoeic. In their final agony, the beasts were unable to move or lie down at all. Their nostrils dilated for lack of air and their muzzles frothed with saliva until, unable to eat, they wasted away and died mere skeletons. One can well imagine the emotional impact of this on the Xhosa owner, whose entire social and economic well-being depended on his cattle, and who, moreover, loved each beast individually as no miser ever loved his gold. The Xhosa did what they could to check the dissemination of the disease. They drove their cattle into the mountains, they fenced them off, they burnt all the pasturage round about, and they kept strange cattle away from their own herds. Nevertheless, in spite of their fears and precautions', the epidemic continued to spread.<sup>8</sup> The virtually invisible lungsickness bacteria could lodge for very long periods in the lungs of a beast without manifesting themselves. Secretly infected cattle thus mingled freely with uninfected animals and, in some cases, laid whole herds low some eighteen months after the owners believed the danger to be past. Thus not only was lungsickness impossible to control; it was impossible to know where or when it would strike next.

(Page 48)

When, despite all their efforts, lungsickness broke out everywhere, the 'Xhosa succumbed to 'depression and a sense of great loss'. Their thoughts turned naturally to trying to understand the ultimate source of the disease. They recognized a category of

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<sup>6</sup> BK 70 C. Brownlee to J. Maclean, 25 Aug. 1856; GH 8/29 information communicated to Chief Commissioner, I, 4 July 1856; Acc. 793 J. Gawler to J. Maclean, 25 July 1856.

<sup>7</sup> G. Grey to H. Labouchere, 3 Oct. 1856. *Imperial Blue Book* 2352 of 1857, p. 35. The actual figure given is 130,300, but this would include the first two months of the cattle-killing.

<sup>8</sup> *Grahamstown Journal*, 4 Aug. 1855; BK 415 J. Maclean to G. Clerk, 17 March 1855.

minor illness, *umkuhlane*, but beyond *umkuhlane lay isifo*, or disease proper. 'In those days', wrote the historian E. G. Sihele, 'there was no person who became sick just so. Being sick was caused by a reason'. Xhosa doctors of the time openly boasted of their power to 'raise plagues of all sorts, and inflict sores and different kinds of leprosy'.<sup>9</sup> Major disasters such as drought or smallpox were usually blamed on malevolent sorcery, and there is some evidence that several people were executed as witches in the early attempts of the Xhosa to halt the spread of lungsickness.<sup>10</sup> But since executing witches failed to stop the disease, the Xhosa were forced to look elsewhere for the sort of explanation which could serve as the basis for effective action.

An alternative explanation for misfortune was that it was due to one's own shortcomings and derelictions of duty. The spirit world, as the guardians of the moral order, were responsible for punishing both individual and collective misbehaviour. Sickness in cattle was a common mark of divine displeasure as these texts, more than one hundred years apart, both demonstrate. Andrew Smith, writing in the 1820S, reported:

When many cattle die at a kraal the sorcerers affirm that they see and talk with the *shologoo* (ghost or apparition) of some person deceased, and they affirm that the destruction of the cattle... is the result of the vengeance of the angry *shologoo* for the neglect of some arrangement relative to the cattle or people.<sup>11</sup>

And Chief Ndumiso Bhotomane, the distinguished oral historian, said in 1968:

At times the cattle die. At times you expect to have good maize, but you don't get maize. Yes, sometimes you break a bone. You are being told about something, but you are stubborn. You are repeatedly told to do certain things, but you don't do them. That is why your thing is broken.<sup>12</sup>

This condition was referred to by Chief Bhotomane as *umzi ungalungi* (the homestead is not right), and the process of putting it right again is called *ukulungisa*. '*Lunga*' in Xhosa combines the twin meanings of 'right' in English, namely the concept of order and the concept of justice. The term 'homestead' used by Chief Bhotomane might refer either to the residence of an individual or to the whole Xhosa nation, which was conceptualized in many contexts as one great family. Thus Nxele, the prophet of 1818-19 whom we will discuss in some detail later on, called on the Xhosa to leave evil ways so that the earth might be made 'right' (*-lunga*) again. Nongqawuse herself

(Page 49)

said that the spirits told her that they had come to 'put the country to rights'.<sup>13</sup>

The moral wrong for which the Xhosa had incurred the punishment of lungsickness was expressed in terms of 'witchcraft'. The injunction to give up witchcraft, little noticed in English secondary sources, is emphasized in both the Xhosa texts and the original colonial accounts. According to Gqoba, the spirit who first appeared to Nongqawuse explained his

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<sup>9</sup> E.G. Sihele, 'Ibali laba Thembu', uncatalogued MS, Cory Library, Grahamstown; BK 415 J. Maclean to G. Clerk, 17 March 1855; S. Lakeman, *What I Saw in Kaffir-Land* (London, 1880), 141.

<sup>10</sup> N.J. Merriman, *The Cape Journals of Archdeacon Merriman*, eds. D.H. Varley and H.M. Mathew (Cape Town, 1957), 215-16.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Smith, 'Kaffir Notes' (South African Museum, Cape Town), 373.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Chief Ndumiso Bhotomane, conducted by Professor Harold Scheub, Kentani District, 1968.

<sup>13</sup> MS 172c Grey Collection, South African Library, 'Kafir Legends and History by Wm. Kekale Kaye'; GH 8/33 Schedule 69 of 1858. Examination of the Kafir prophetess Nongqawuse before Major Gawler, 27 April 1858.

order to kill by referring to the 'witchcraft' of the people: 'All those [cattle] now living must be slaughtered for they have been herded by defiled hands, for there are people about who are handling witchcraft.'<sup>14</sup> The spirit repeated his warning against witchcraft just before he disappeared, and Nongqawuse herself mentioned witchcraft on three occasions in Gqoba's relatively short text. Commissioner Brownlee reported that the 'ancestors' had told the Xhosa that 'before anything could be done for them, they were to put away witchcraft', and Chief Commissioner Maclean noted that 'all charms are to be given up'. Chief Mhala, a strong advocate of cattle killing, 'considered a man's killing his cattle a proof that the man either used no witchcraft or that he put it away now altogether'.<sup>15</sup>

Witchcraft, in the narrow sense of malevolent sorcery, was undoubtedly widespread in Xhosaland. Writing in the late 1850S, the Diplomatic Agent, J. C. Warner, claimed that 'there is not the slightest doubt that the Kafirs do frequently attempt to bewitch each other; and for which purpose they practise a great number of villanous [*sic*] tricks', And since all good or bad fortune was attributed to witchcraft, people believed it to be even more prevalent than it actually was. Thus the believing Chief Phatho gave the following order to his upstart younger brother: '*Bulala ubuthi* (Kill your witchcraft) which has made you a great chief though not the Great Son'.<sup>16</sup>

Witchcraft was also associated with any sort of morally wrong behaviour which, being evil, constituted a polluting and harmful force in the naturally good and harmonious universe. This broader, more pervasive sense of witchcraft is apparent in Gqoba's phrase 'herded by defiled (*ezincolileyo*) hands', which he later amplifies as follows: "They [the cattle] were reared by dirty hands that were handling witchcraft and other things such as incests and adulteries'.<sup>17</sup> One of these incests was the remarriage of widows, previously regarded as perfectly legitimate, but now forbidden by the prophetic group. However, by 'incests and adulteries', Gqoba is probably referring less to specific misdeeds than to sexual indiscretions generally - a category of behaviour, like witchcraft, so broad that few Xhosa could have denied its existence.<sup>18</sup>

(Page 50)

Another cause of pollution was defeat in war, and it is easy to believe that the military disasters of the War of Mlanjeni (1850-3) not only filled the Xhosa with thoughts of loved ones recently dead but left them exposed to feelings of self-doubt and vulnerability, a state of mind associated with yet-to-be-cleansed impurity. Though there is no hard evidence of this, it is strongly suggested by the following evocative lines from the Xhosa poet and historian S. E. K. Mqhayi (d. 1945), which explicitly link military defeat and consequent pollution to dreams of heavenly salvation:

But this land is defeated and captured.  
All who live in it are become as prisoners.  
Man is defiled and polluted.

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<sup>14</sup> Gqoba, 'Isizatu', part I.

<sup>15</sup> GH 8/28 J. Maclean to G. Grey, 17 July 1856; GH 8/29 C. Brownlee to J. Maclean, 29 June 1856; BK 81 J. Gawler to J. Maclean, 14 Jan. 1857.

<sup>16</sup> J. Warner in J. Maclean, *Compendium of Kaffir Laws and Customs* (Cape Town, 1869), 89; GH 8/29 F. Reeve to J. Maclean, 11 July 1856. Also W. Shaw. *The Story of my Mission* (London, 1860), 446.

<sup>17</sup> Gqoba, 'Isizatu', part II.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that the failure of the war-doctor Mlanjeni's promise to turn bullets into water was attributed by him to the failure of certain young warriors to heed his ban on sexual intercourse before battle. Interview with W. Nkabi, Bulembu Location, King William's Town District, 24 Aug. 1975; interview with M. Soga, Kobonqaba Location, Kentani District, 25 Aug. 1983.

It is now that the heavens fight and resound with war.<sup>19</sup>

Embracing as it did the admitted evils of sorcery, sexual misconduct and military defeat, the idea of witchcraft thus provided an interpretation of events which all Xhosa could accept and few contradict.

Existing cattle, being polluted by witchcraft, endangered the pure undefiled cattle of the new people, which might 'not mix with those of men'. This made it necessary for the Xhosa to dispose of their cattle before the resurrection took place, and there are indications that in the initial stages Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza attached more importance to getting rid of the tainted cattle than to the method adopted in doing so. There are several reports before September 1856 of believers *selling* their cattle. Magistrate Gawler wrote that the message of the prophet was 'to get rid of their cattle either by slaughtering or by sale'. Bishop Gray, noting the low prices paid for Xhosa cattle, remarked that 'when they cannot sell them they kill them'. Magistrate Vigne described 'large numbers of skeletons lying in the veldt', a clear indication that ritual sacrifice, which entails the burning of the bones, had not taken place.<sup>20</sup>

The initial assumption of the believers that the mere physical disposal of existing cattle would be sufficient to bring about the fulfilment of the prophecies was modified as a result of the failure of the new people to materialize on the day first appointed by the prophets (16 August 1856). Sarhili announced that this failure was due to the cattle being sold rather than sacrificed, and Nongqawuse said that while it was permissible to buy or sell the meat and hide of slaughtered cattle, the 'breath' (*umpefumlo*) of the cattle should be preserved so that they could rise again. This is clearly a reference to the critical moment during the sacrificial ritual when the stabbed beast gives a final bellow, which is held to be the sound of its 'breath' going up to the spirits. From this time onwards, the believers refused to sell their cattle

(Page 51)

for remunerative prices, but sacrificed them first and then sold the hides for a nominal amount.<sup>21</sup>

Xhosa sacrifice has been extensively described in the ethnography I and here it must suffice to refer only to those aspects of it concerned with appeasing the anger of the spirit world and counteracting the evil of pollution. When the stabbed beast gives its usual loud bellow, this cry is believed to go up to the spirits and draw their attention to the people and to the sacrifice they have made. The people then shout 'Camagu!', " a word as untranslatable as 'Amen', but implying 'I be appeased!' and 'be propitious!'. The blood of the slaughtered beast is carefully preserved in a liquid state throughout, and is then buried in the dry dung of the cattle-fold. According to T. B. Soga, 'the spilling of the blood of the beast is the offering and propitiation for expecting fortune and health according to this innocent blood which is spilt'. The blood, through its quality of innocence, absorbs the evil which has occasioned the sacrifice and restores the natural harmony of the world. The relevance of sacrifice to the Xhosa of 1856, preoccupied as they were with the problem of

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<sup>19</sup> S.E.K. Mqhayi, 'A! Sifuba-sibanzi!' in *Imibengo*, ed. W.G. Bennie (Lovedale, 1935), 189-190. I am indebted to Professor Wandile Kuse for drawing this to my attention and helping me with the translation.

<sup>20</sup> MS 9063 Cory Library, N. Falati, 'The story of Ntsikana' (1895); Acc. 793; J. Gawler to J. Maclean, 14 July 1856; BK 109. Vigne to J. Maclean, 20 Aug. 1856; Bishop R. Gray's Journal in 'Missions to the heathen', *The Church Chronicle* (Grahamstown), II (1881), 330; *King Williams' Town Gazete*, 14 Aug. 1856.

<sup>21</sup> Gqoba, 'Isizatu', part I; *Cape Frontier Times*, 10 March 1857; Bishop Gray's Journal, *Church Chronicle*, IV (1883); J. Warner to W.G.B. Shepstone 23 Sept. 1856, *Imperial Blue Book* 2352 of 1857-8, p. 26.



divine affliction, is clear. Chief Bhotomane observed of sacrifices that 'the old ones are made right by them' (*abakhulu kulungiswa bona*), reminding us of the concept of *lungisa* which lies at the heart of the Xhosa theory of disease and its remedy.<sup>22</sup>

A third implication of cattle killing is suggested by J. J. R. Jolobe in his poem on Nongqawuse, where he refers to it as *urumo*. The idea of *ukuruma* is based on the Xhosa concept of reciprocity, that one must give something oneself when one is expecting some gift or privilege. Thus a Xhosa would *ruma* a rainmaker if he wanted rain, or the river people if he wanted to cross a river, or a homestead if he wanted to attend a sacrificial feast. By so doing, the giver established a claim to the benefits he anticipated, and it is in this sense that we should interpret the following phrase from the colonial records: 'in order that this [prophecy] may be carried into effect, they must prove themselves deserving by acting up to their commands'. The millennium was thus not initially meant for all Xhosa indiscriminately, but only for those who showed themselves worthy by paying their dues and thus gaining access to the community of believers and their share of the great feast to come.<sup>23</sup>

The mass killing of cattle stemmed directly from the lungsickness epidemic, but soon acquired wider symbolic significance. Mysterious and unpredictable, lungsickness was far beyond the power of the Xhosa stockowner to control and overwhelmed his natural reluctance to slaughter by the near-certainty that his cattle were going to die anyway. The concept of sacrifice which was naturally suggested by the killing of cattle clothed the act

(Page 52)

in symbolic significance and associated it with the usual religious practices observed during a time of divine affliction. In addition, the killing of cattle was a due, paid to the 'new people' in appreciation of their imminent arrival bearing a 'happy state of things to all'. It is to the nature of these new people and the content of this 'happy state' that we now turn.

## STARTING ALL OVER AGAIN

Although the lungsickness epidemic gave rise to the cattle-killing, it cannot explain all the features and beliefs of the movement. For the cattle-killing was not merely negative, not merely concerned with the elimination of pollution and diseased cattle. It also incorporated positive expectations. The most important of these was, in Gqoba's phrase, 'that the whole nation will rise from the dead'. This was not as abrupt a transition as one might think. For the Xhosa, as for many other African peoples, death was not a definitive and conclusive departure from this earth. The dead lived on, though in a somewhat altered state. As one Xhosa expressed it in 1858, 'Even though dead, he [the departed one] is still alive'. Death does not sever all links 'because, it is said, that although he has today become a Great One, those who remain are [still] his family', William Philip, the son of cattle-killing believers, referred to burial as the 'hiding' rather than the disposal of the body. At the funeral of a chief, the mourners cried out:

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<sup>22</sup> The best descriptions of Xhosa sacrifice are in A. Kropf and R. Godfrey, *A Kafir-English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lovedale, 1915), 55, 77-8. See also T.B. Soga, *Intlalo kaXhosa* (Lovedale, n.d.) 129-30; J.H. Soga, *The AmaXosa: Life and Customs* (Lovedale, n.d.), ch. 8; interview with Chief Bhotomane (see note 12 above); Shaw, *Mission*, 449-50. My own interpretation has been influenced by the interesting discussion in H.S. Ngubane, *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine* (London, 1977).

<sup>23</sup> J.J.R. Jolobe, *Iltiha* (Johannesburg, 1959), 57; Kropf and Godfrey, *Dictionary*, 375; GH 8/27 information communicated to the Chief Commissioner, 4 July 1856.

Look upon us you who have gone to your vantage point.  
Look upon the family of your house."<sup>24</sup>

The image of the vantage point (*imiboniselo*) is especially striking. It implies that the dead have gone off not to a different place but to an elevated position, in the world but not of it, where they can see but not be seen.

The presence of the dead constantly manifested itself in the lives of the living. They were responsible for good health and prosperity as well as for bringing misfortune upon the guilty. 'Our daily life depends on him', said Chief Bhotomane, 'even though he is no longer present'. The dead occasionally communicated directly with the living through the medium of dreams. And if, as Harriet Ngubane has recently maintained, sleep is a kind of miniature death, then death, like sleep, might be regarded as a normal and transient state. The idea that the dead might rise (the Xhosa word for 'rise', *vuka*, being the usual term for 'get up in the morning') was thus not in itself a startling or surprising one. The following comment by William Philip clearly shows that the prophecies of Nongqawuse operated well within established and accepted Xhosa beliefs concerning the powers and capabilities of the ancestors: 'The idea that a person does not die was an original belief of we black people. When, therefore, the girl spoke of the rising up, she was [merely] setting a spark to things that were already known concerning the ancestors'.<sup>25</sup>

Although no Xhosa person then living had ever seen a mass rising of the dead on the scale envisaged by Nongqawuse, all were aware that the diviners whom they regularly consulted had experienced death and rebirth in the

(Page 53)

course of acquiring their special powers of communication with the invisible world:

It is remarkable that the word (*thwasa*) used to express this state of initiation [as a diviner] means 'renewal', and is the same that is used for the first appearance of the new moon, and for the putting forth of the grass and buds at the commencement of spring. By which it is evidently intended to intimate that the man's heart is renewed, that he has become an entirely different person to what he was before, seeing with different eyes and hearing with different ears'.<sup>26</sup>

The initiation of Xhosa diviners followed the classic three-part pattern of separation, liminality and re-incorporation first identified by Van Gennep. There are enough important parallels between the process of *thwasa* and the cattle-killing movement to warrant us examining the former in more detail. The novice diviner began by cutting himself off from normal society. He refused to eat food cooked in the usual manner, cast aside his old garments, and lived off the pure and undefiled fruits of the field. He heard strange voices and seemed 'to converse with invisible and unknown beings on some strange and incomprehensible subjects'. If this behaviour was accepted by qualified diviners as a genuine call from the ancestors, the ceremonies of reincorporation, including cattle-sacrifices, might commence.<sup>27</sup>

During the cattle-killing, the believers refused to eat their usual food, and they disposed of their personal ornaments. They sacrificed their cattle as a prelude to a future rebirth.

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<sup>24</sup> MS 172c and 172d, South African Library, Cape Town, 'Kafir Legends and History by Wm Kekale Kaye'; W. Philip, letter to *Isigidimi samaXosa*, 2 July 1888.

<sup>25</sup> Philip, letter to *Isigidimi*; Bhotomane, interview; Ngubane, *Zulu Medicine*, 115.

<sup>26</sup> Warner, in Maclean, *Compendium*, 77.

<sup>27</sup> A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1909; London, 1960); Warner in Maclean, *Compendium*, 77.

Unfortunately, we do not know if the ordinary believer experienced mystical visions, though Gqoba's account of one group at the Mpongo river is highly suggestive:

[They] used to see *abakweta* [circumcision initiates] dancing on the surface of the water, and they thought they heard the thudding of the oxhide, accompanied by a song to which the *abakweta* danced. Truly, the people were so deluded that they went so far as to claim that they had seen the horns of cattle, heard the lowing of milk cows, the barking of dogs, and the songs of milkmen at milking-time.

Visitors to Nongqawuse's place are reported to have 'heard there at night, in the air, the old Xhosa heroes parading by in wild array'.<sup>28</sup> It would be impossible to assert on the basis of limited evidence that the generality of believers experienced a mass collective *thwasa*, but the turmoil, the frantic activity, and the suspension of usual routines and occupations must certainly have suggested a rite of passage from the old world to the new.

In awaiting the rising of the dead, the Xhosa were dearly expecting the resurrection of their parents, grandparents, spouses and friends. Chief Mhala, for instance, 'believed that he should be restored to youth and see the resurrection of his father and all his dead relations'. Nevertheless, it is curious that the colonial sources seldom use the well-established English equivalents of Xhosa words such as *izinyanya* (ancestors) or *imishologu* (spirits). They almost invariably refer to the expected deliverers as 'the new people', a term which does not correlate directly with any phrase in the surviving Xhosa-language texts. The operative term, however, no matter

(Page 54)

what the expression used, would certainly have been *-tsha*, a common Xhosa word translated in the standard Xhosa dictionary as 'new, young, healthy'. This hypothesis is supported by Gqoba's reference to the reborn ancestors appearing *selematsha* ('all new') and by Chief Bhotomane's narrative of the cattle-killing, in which he refers to the 'new' (*ezintsha*) cattle and 'new' (*ngokutsha*) food.<sup>29</sup>

The word *-tsha* is significant in that it associates the idea of newness with the idea of youth and health. The Xhosa linguist A. C. Jordan translates the phrase *selematsha*, which I have rendered 'all new', as 'fresh and strong', and his translation is equally valid.<sup>30</sup> New in Xhosa does not have its English connotation of novelty or originality, but rather implies freshness and rebirth. The Xhosa idea of newness is rooted in their perception of the cyclical recurrence of natural phenomena and, ultimately, the cyclical nature of time itself.

Without entering into so vast and amorphous a topic as African concepts of time, I wish merely to observe that the following assessment by Benjamin Ray seems to apply to the Xhosa: 'Instead of a linear unitary conception of time, there are a variety of "times" associated with different kinds of natural phenomena and human activities. Time is episodic and discontinuous... There is no absolute "clock" or single time scale'.<sup>31</sup> The Xhosa did have a conception of linear time, expressed through genealogies and the succession of *iziganeko* (significant happenings) which men used to date events in their personal lives. Nevertheless, the annual cycle of stellar constellations, associated as these were with the changing of the seasons and the pattern of agricultural production, accustomed the Xhosa

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<sup>28</sup> Gqoba, 'Isizatu', Part I; *Berlin Missionsberichte*, 1858, 38.

<sup>29</sup> CO 2950 J. Warner to R. Southey, 29 July 1857; GH 8/29 Information communicated to the Chief Commissioner, 4 July 1856. Bhotomane, interview; Gqoba, 'Isizatu', part 1.

<sup>30</sup> Jordan, *Literature*, 74.

<sup>31</sup> B. Ray, *African Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1976), 41.

to expect every year the return of the circumstances of previous years. The rites of passage concerning birth, maturation and death represented human life not as an irreversible ageing process but as a repetitive cycle comparable to the repetitive cycles of seasonal and agricultural change. One example of this, already mentioned, was thwasa, the association perceived between the rebirth of a person as a diviner and the re-emergence of the new moon and the spring buds. Similarly, chiefs were buried standing or sitting upright, surrounded by their spears, their pipes and all the other personal possessions they would require in their new life.<sup>32</sup>

Nongqawuse did not, however, confine herself to prophesying the rebirth of the past and the regeneration of the present. She promised nothing less than the re-enactment of the act of Creation itself as expressed in the concept of *uHlanga*, by which the Xhosa meant both the Creator god and the source of creation. King Sarhili informed his people that uHlanga had appeared at the Gxarha River. Fadana, the leader of the Thembu believers, was said to be a man favoured by uHlanga. The believers thought that the settlers and the Christian Xhosa would return to the uHlanga when the prophecies were fulfilled. UHlanga was even confused on occasion with the biblical story of Creation, as when it was rumoured that 'Adam our first father has come

(Page 55)

upon the earth accompanied by God and two sons of God, together with a numerous new people'.<sup>33</sup>

UHlanga was believed to be the very place where God brought forth man and cattle upon the earth. It was pictured as a marsh (which appears to be solid but yet is not) overgrown with reeds which hid the entrance to a huge cavern in the centre of the earth from which the uHlanga sent forth all living things. Almost any river or deep pool potentially harboured an opening to the uHlanga. It was well known that spirits dimly connected with the ancestors and called 'river people' lived on the dry land which was to be found under the water in most rivers and pools.

The Xhosa did not regard the Creation as a unique, never to be repeated, event. According to Lichtenstein, who travelled in Xhosaland in 1805:

It is a current belief among them, that far to the north of their country, there is a vast subterraneous cavern, from which their horned cattle originally came, and that cows and oxen might still be procured from it in great abundance, if the entrance of the cavern could again be found, and a proper bait silently laid there. The cattle would then come forth, when they might be taken, and they would bring a blessing upon the possessor.<sup>34</sup>

Nxele, the prophet and war-doctor of 1818-19. claimed to originate in the uHlanga, and he predicted on one occasion that the Xhosa 'would see all who had long been dead come forth alive from beneath the rock, and then all the people who possessed powers of witchcraft would be seized and placed in a cavern under the rock'.<sup>35</sup>

Nongqawuse's followers believed that these long-promised expectations would be

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<sup>32</sup> S. Kay, *Travels and Researches in Caffraria* (London, 1833), 194.

<sup>33</sup> CO 2950 J. Warner to R. Southey, 29 July 1857; LG 410 J. Warner to R. Southey, 14 July 1857; GH 8/29 F. Reeve to J. Maclean, 2 Aug. 1856; BK 89 information communicated by Jan Tshatshu, 15 Oct. 1856; GH 8/29 C. Brownlee to J. Maclean, 22 Oct. 1856.

<sup>34</sup> H. Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa*, translated by A. Plumtre (1812-15; reprinted Cape Town, 1928-30), I, 314.

<sup>35</sup> W. Shaw, *The Journal of William Shaw*, edited by W.D. Hammond-Tooke (Cape Town, 1972), 103.

fulfilled. 'The horns of oxen were said to be seen peeping from beneath the rushes which grew around a swampy pool near the village of the seer; and from a subterranean cave were heard the bellowing and knocking of the horns of cattle impatient to rise'.<sup>36</sup> The prophetess's residence on the Gxarha river was thus invested with all the attributes of the long-lost cavern of the uHlanga. The source of all life seemed once more ready to disgorge its riches upon the earth.

Most of the subsidiary rituals of the movement were associated with the general theme of regeneration, and echoed existing Xhosa practices regarding birth and death. The new houses and new milk-sacks ordered by Nongqawuse followed the custom whereby a dead man's sons abandoned his old homestead and cut open his old milk-sacks before starting afresh elsewhere in a new homestead with new milk-sacks. The sale of old ornaments and the purchase of new ones followed customs relating to mourning and celebration. The *buka* roots, with which Nongqawuse bade the believers weave their new doors,

(Page 56)

were normally administered to young women to make them pregnant and prevent miscarriages.<sup>37</sup> The new houses, new grainpits and new cattle enclosures, untainted by the sins and failures of the past, were a representation in miniature for each homestead of the bright new order about to be reborn on earth.

The ban on cultivation was naturally associated with the destruction of old food-stocks and the expected dawning of a wholly new era. Drought and blight had devastated the Xhosa sorghum just as the lungsickness had devastated their cattle. Just as the new cattle might not mix with those of men, so too the new people 'cannot eat the food of men',<sup>38</sup> Phatho's men refused to cultivate that spring, but they bought new spades and hoes to till the ground in the new time coming. Cultivation had long been considered a human interference with the earth and the believers felt that it would disturb the ground. Long before the cattle-killing, it was forbidden to cultivate the day after uHlanga had shown his displeasure by striking a homestead with lightning. When rainmakers asked uHlanga for rain, they forbade the people (to take either pick-axe or seed-bag, to dig or plant during the day; lest the lowering clouds should be thereby driven away'. Xhosa labouring on the roads during the cattle-killing abandoned their jobs lest the noise of the picks disturb the cattle and delay their appearance.

There was little room in the cattle-killing movement for whites and other peoples who lacked a place in the Xhosa cosmology. The movement owed part of its momentum to hatred of the colonial intruders and the expectations raised by rumours of the Crimean War, but it is unlikely that the initial talk of whites and Mfengu swept into the sea was anything more than a convenient way of disposing of an anomalous element which had no place in the indigenous Xhosa scheme of things. However, after the first failure of the prophecies, in August 1856, the believers seem to have reached the conclusion that they had erred in excluding the whites and the Christians. Orders went out that the whites should also kill their cattle, and the believers initiated dialogues with the mission converts in an attempt to persuade them that Nongqawuse's message was the fulfilment of biblical prophecy. Henry

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<sup>36</sup> C. Brownlee, *Reminiscences of Kafir Life and History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lovedale, 1916), 126-7. A Report in the *Grahamstown Journal*, 9 Aug. 1856, stated that the new people were expected to rise 'out of a pit or cave in the mouth of the Kei river'.

<sup>37</sup> J.H. Soga, *Ama-Xosa*, 324; Kropf and Godfrey, 46.

<sup>38</sup> MS 15,413, Cory Library, R.F. Hornabrook, 'Cattle killing mania'; Kay, *Caffraria*, 208; C. Rose quoted in J.W.D. Moodie, *Ten Years in South Africa* (London, 1835), II, 331; GH 28/71 J. Maclean to G. Grey, 11 Aug. 1856; GH 8/71 H. Vigne to J. Maclean, 9 Aug. 1856.

Kayser, a white missionary, was exhorted to abandon witchcraft. The new offensive was short-lived and half-hearted, and soon faded in the light of colonial antagonism and the need to find fresh scapegoats for continued failure. The whites, having killed the Son of God, were declared ineligible for salvation. Nevertheless the brief Christian offensive is significant inasmuch as it demonstrates that the main concern of the believers was not the expulsion of the settlers but the advent of a 'happy state of things to all'.<sup>39</sup>

The millennium was to be absolute and total. The future was seen through

(Page 57)

a haze of white, the colour of purity.<sup>40</sup> Not only were there to be new people, new cattle and eternal youth for all, there were to be no unfulfilled wants and desires of any kind. 'Nongqawuse said that nobody would ever lead a troubled life', said one oral historian. 'People would get whatever they wanted. Everything would be totally in abundance'. A cripple was told that 'all the people who have not legs and arms will have them restored, the Blind People will also see, and the old people will become young'. 'There would rise Cattle, Horses, Sheep, Goats, Dogs, Fowles, and every other animal that was wanted', wrote one semi-literate settler, 'and all kinds of clothing and everything they could wish for to eat the same as English people eat and all kinds of things for their Houses should all come out of the ground'.<sup>41</sup> The new people would come ashore at designated places, mostly at the mouths of rivers. Their leader, according to Gqoba, was named Napakade, son of Sifuba-sibanzi. It was in the person of this figure that the strands of pre-Christian thought discussed in this section merged with the new teachings of the Christian missionaries.

#### THE BROAD-CHESTED ONE

Monica Wilson called the cattle-killing movement a 'pagan reaction' to the pressures of colonial and Christian influence. But far from being a retreat into a pre-Christian shell, the cattle-killing owed its very existence to biblical doctrines. Mission propagation of Christianity had been proceeding continuously in Xhosaland since the establishment of the London Missionary Society's first station in 1817 and, despite the small number of formal conversions, elements of Christian teaching had spread far and wide. In particular, the doctrine of the resurrection had gained ready acceptance, albeit in a form not anticipated by the missionaries, as this account of Read's tour of 1816 demonstrates:

When he told them that woman and all mankind would rise again from the dead, it caused uncommon joy among the Caffres. They said they should like to see their grandfathers, and others whom they mentioned. Congo enquired when it would happen, and if it would be soon, but Mr Read could not gratify his wishes on that point.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> BK 81 J. Gawler to J. Maclean, 25 Sept. 1856; MS 3328, Cory Library, C. Brownlee to n.a. 18 Oct. 1856; MS 8295, Cory Library, J. Ross to J. Laing, 11 Oct. 1856; London Missionary Society Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, Box 30, F.G. Kayser to L.M.S., Oct. 1856.

<sup>40</sup> It was rumoured among the believers that Chief Kama had seen a vision of 'white tents', MS 3328 Cory Library, J. Ross to J. Laing, 11 Oct. 1856; GH 28/71 memo by J. MacLean. The 'great man' rumoured to have appeared to believers was dressed in a white blanket. On colour symbolism among the Nguni, see Ngubane, *Zulu Medicine*, ch. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Masiphula Ngovane, Mahlahlane Location, Willowvale District, Oct. 1975; MSS African, Uncatalogued, South African Library, Cape Town, 'The Frontier', anonymous, but clearly written by Dr J. Fitzgerald; J. Goldswain, *The Reminiscences of Jeremiah Goldswain*, ed. U. Long (Cape Town, 1946-9), 11, 191.

<sup>42</sup> J. Campbell, *Travels in South Africa* (London, 1815), 366.

The extraordinary receptiveness of the Xhosa to the idea of the resurrection can be traced back to a violent smallpox epidemic which ravaged Xhosaland about 1770. Before that, the Xhosa had buried their dead, but from the time of the epidemic, they shrank from touching dead bodies and as a result the dying were carried outside and left to die in the bush. People fled from the

(Page 58)

very sight or sound of death, and in most cases the bodies were not recovered but left to the dogs and hyenas. If, as Bloch and Parry have recently argued, properly performed mortuary rituals create the illusion of control over physical death by making it seem a necessary part of the 'repetitive cyclical order' by which life is reproduced, then the Xhosa through the loss of their burial customs had become abandoned to the uncontrolled forces of nature.<sup>43</sup>

Mourning rituals were further disrupted by the land pressures of the colonial conquest, which made it difficult for the Xhosa to find new homestead sites when the old ones were polluted by death. Despite the attempts of Nxele (see below) to reintroduce the old custom of burial, the majority of Xhosa continued to drive out their dying relatives in order to evade the necessity of moving their homesteads.

On the death of the headman, there is seldom a removal. A new cattle-kraal only is made, so that its back occupies the gate of the old one, and all huts remain occupied except the one in which the deceased lived. There is a complete removal only when the old kraal is considered unhealthy and cornfields become unproductive through being many years cropped without manure.<sup>44</sup>

By 1850 some homesteads had been in the same locality for two or three generations. The picture is one of an increasingly overcrowded population unhealthily squeezed together in a rapidly deteriorating environment. The spiritual effect of such material conditions may easily be imagined. Overcrowding collapsed the spatial distinctions which separated the world of the dead from that of the living. No longer were the dead safely 'sent home' to a distant place of the ancestors. No longer were their deserted homestead-sites clearly distinguishable from the occupied homesteads of their descendants. Instead, the living residents of a site must have been constantly disturbed by thoughts of their ancestors roaming the homestead that was once their own. Perhaps in no other respect did colonial dispossession contribute more directly to the cattle-killing movement.

Nxele, who prophesied between 1816 and 1819, attempted to resolve this conceptual crisis. He had initially accepted Christianity, but when the missionaries refused to accept the truth of his own visions, he fused the new Christian doctrines with established Xhosa ideas to create a new religious synthesis which was to exert a powerful influence on the cattle-killing movement. He taught of a white God and a black God, and of God's son, who had been murdered by the whites. Nxele, who referred to himself at one stage as the 'younger brother' of Christ, maintained that he had been sent from the uHlanga to *lungisa* (put right) the world. He denied the finality of death. 'People do not die', he said, 'they go to

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<sup>43</sup> M. Bloch and J. Parry, *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, 1982), 17-18. Among many references to the Xhosa treatment of their dead see Lichtenstein, *Travels*, 1, 319; Kay, *Caffraria*, 192-8; L. Alberti, *Alberti's Account of the Xhosa* (1810; translated by W. Fehr, Cape Town, 1968), 21; H. Dugmore in Maclean, *Compendium*, 157-8. For the link between the smallpox epidemic and the Xhosa refusal to bury the dead, see Moodie, *Ten Years*, 11, 271.

<sup>44</sup> Maclean, *Compendium*, 146. See also A. Smith, 'Kafir Notes', 372, South African Museum, Cape Town.

that chief [of Heaven and Earth]'.<sup>45</sup> He ordered people to abandon witchcraft, to slaughter all red cattle and to destroy stores of corn. He predicted that the ancestors and new herds

(Page 59)

of cattle would rise from the dead, and he attempted to resurrect them out of a cavern below Gompo rock.

After the defeat of the Xhosa in the Fifth Frontier War (1818-9), Nxele was imprisoned on Robben Island. He was drowned in an attempt to escape, but right up to the cattle-killing the Xhosa never abandoned the expectation of his return and he was repeatedly seen in dreams and visions. It was believed that he was the leader of the Russian army which was defeating the British in the Crimea, and when the new people appeared to Nongqawuse they said that they were the people often spoken of in former days by Lynx [Nxele] and Umlanjeni'.<sup>46</sup> The figure of Nxele would doubtless have played a leading part in the prophecies but for the vigorous rejection of Nongqawuse by Mjuza, his son and heir. Nevertheless, it was to Nxele that the cattle-killing owed many of its beliefs concerning uHlanga, sacrifice, the *lungisa* of the earth and the resurrection of the dead.

Mlanjeni, the war-doctor and witchfinder who initiated the Frontier War of 1850-3, told the Xhosa that Nxele was still living and was regarded by them as his successor. Like Nxele, Mlanjeni ordered the purification of the world through the destruction of witchcraft, demanding the sacrifice of all yellow and dun-coloured cattle 'to beat the spells by which the country is bewitched'.<sup>47</sup> Mlanjeni prayed to the sun which, it was believed, descended from the heavens at his command, and he spoke of a great day about to dawn, though he did so in such enigmatic terms that his meaning was not clearly understood. Though Mlanjeni's teachings with regard to the sun did not survive him, they do seem to reflect a generalized Xhosa yearning after a High God, and his emphasis on witchcraft, sacrifice and the dawning of a new era all prefigure the central ideas of the cattle-killing movement.

The Khoi rebels who fought alongside the Xhosa during the War of Mlanjeni introduced them to a new and revolutionary brand of Christianity. Mission products all, they read their Bibles regularly and they prepared themselves for battle by the devout singing of hymns. A commissariat messenger by the name of David Lavelot incited mutiny among the Cape Mounted Rifles in the course of daily prayer meetings, and the mutineers were characterized as men 'of a peculiarly religious turn of mind, or...under the influence of a species of fanaticism'. The following letter by Willem Uithaalder, the leader of the Khoi rebels, displays an unmistakably millenarian turn of phrase: 'Trust, therefore, in the Lord (whose character is known to be unfriendly to injustice), and undertake your work, and he will give us prosperity - a work for your motherland and freedom, for it is now the time, yea, the appointed time, and no other'.<sup>48</sup> This was a version of Christianity

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<sup>45</sup> MS 172c, S.A. Library, 'Kaffir legends and history by Wm Kekale Kaye'. For more on Nxele, see J.B. Peires, *The House of Phalo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), ch. V; see also MS 157 f., S.A. Library, G. Cyrus to R. Graham, 10 Jan 1857.

<sup>46</sup> GH 8/29 Information communicated to the Chief Commissioner, 4 July 1856; BK 14 statement made . . by Umjuza, 24 Feb. 1858.

<sup>47</sup> Letter of C. Schrupf, 13 Feb. 1851, *Journal des Missions Evangéliques*, xxvi (1851); 170; BK 428 statement of Momile, 27 Sept. 1850. On Mlanjeni see 'Nzulu Lwazi' (S.E.K. Mqhayi) 'Urev. Tiyo Soga, Utshaka, noMlanjeni', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 17 Dec. 1927; B. Ross in *Home and Foreign Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, II (1851-2), 267; A. Kropf, 'Die Lügenpropheten des Kaffernlandes,' *Neue Missionsschriften*, 11 (1891), 5-7.

<sup>48</sup> For the Khoi rebellion see T. Kirk, 'Progress and decline in the Kat River Settlement, 1829-54', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xiv, iii (1973). For the quotations, see Imperial *Blue Books* 1428 of 1852, W. Uithaalder-A. Kok, 11 June 1851, p. 152, and 1380 of 1851, H. Smith to Earl Grey, 17 March 1851, p. 21. See also Lakeman, *What I Saw in Kaffir-land*, 60.



(Page 60)

very different from that taught by the missionaries, and in places like the Waterkloof, where Maqoma's Xhosa lived cooped up with Khoi rebels for more than eighteen months, it could hardly have failed to make some impact on Xhosa beliefs.

Mhlakaza, the uncle of Nongqawuse and a key instigator of the cattle-killing, was no heathen witch-doctor but a Christian convert who had lived in the Colony and spoke Dutch and English. Under the name of Wilhelm Goliath, he acted as personal servant to Archdeacon Merriman of Grahamstown between 1849 and 1852. He could recite the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and most of the Anglican liturgy in Xhosa, and was fairly well acquainted with the Bible. He fell out of favour with the Merrimans for troubling them with his dreams and visions and being 'too lazy' to work. They cut down his pay, and some time in 1853 he left for independent Xhosaland, longing still to be a Gospel Man'.<sup>49</sup> The Gospel that he eventually taught was by no means the one he learned from Merriman, but nor was it devoid of important elements of Christianity.

The experiences of the first Christian missions to be established with King Sarhili and Chief Mhala, the two foremost supporters of the cattle-killing, show that these notoriously heathen rulers were surprisingly interested in certain aspects of Christianity. Sarhili visited the missionary H.T. Waters in November 1855, and was much struck by a picture of the crucifixion: 'He enquired minutely into a history of Our Lord, which I gave him through the Interpreter and a large pictorial Bible. He was most taken with the Crucifixion, Christ walking on the sea, and St Thomas' unbelief'. The king must surely have thought of these pictures some six months later, when Nongqawuse showed him the new people dancing in the sea and asked him to believe. More than a year later, in the midst of disappointment and starvation, Sarhili visited Waters again and impressed him by his knowledge of the story of Lazarus, who rose from the dead. Ten years after the cattle-killing, the embittered and fiercely anti-Christian Sarhili could still be 'electrified' by a discussion on the immortality of the soul, and raise pertinent questions concerning the death of the son of God.<sup>50</sup>

Greenstock, a missionary who worked among Mhala's people and spoke Xhosa fluently, found that they were constantly asking questions on religious subjects. The origin of evil was a great favourite, and they wondered what people ate in heaven. Mhala felt that the cattle-killing doctrines were quite compatible with Christianity. 'Why should not cattle rise as well as human beings?' he asked, 'They have spirits and were created on the same day with man.' Many Xhosa thought that parts of the Bible were far more improbable than the ideas of Nongqawuse. They doubted that God had exhausted all His Wisdom when he gave 'His Book' to man. 'Might he not still have another

(Page 61)

revelation to make?' they asked. Mhala's Great Son felt that it was only out of prejudice that the whites refused to accept the cattle-killing prophecies. 'Why should you English set

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<sup>49</sup> See, for the identification of Mhlakaza with Wilhelm Goliath, *Graaff-Reinet Herald*, 9 Aug. 1856, and LG 396 G, Cyrus to R. Southey, 4 Aug. 1856. For Mhlakaza's travels with Archdeacon Merriman, *The Cape Journals of Archdeacon Merriman*, ed. D.H. Varley and H.M. Matthew (Cape Town, 1957), especially 106, 127. For his ambition to become a 'Gospel Man', Mrs J. Merriman to J. Baker, 20, 30 Oct. 1896, MS 16,690, Cory Library, Grahamstown. I am indebted to Dr M. Goedhals and Mr. M. Berning for this reference.

<sup>50</sup> United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Cory Library Microfilm 172/2, Journal of H.T. Waters, 15 Nov. 1855, 1 Jan. 1856, 7 July 1857; T. Soga in *Monthly Records of the United Presbyterian Church*, 1 March 1867, n.s., vol. I part xv.

down the Kaffirs as fools?’ he asked. ‘You certainly have great skill in arts and manufactures but may not we surpass you in our knowledge of other things?’<sup>51</sup> The believers felt not only that Christianity was compatible with cattle-killing beliefs, but even that Christianity positively corroborated Nongqawuse. According to the missionary J. Ross: The doctrines of the atonement and that of sanctification were represented [by the believers] as justifying standing in the smoke of burning fat [part of Xhosa ritual sacrifice]. All that was said and done [by the believers] was in the name of God, or that His Word says so. It was as profusely as it was vainly used.<sup>52</sup>

Chief Commissioner Maclean attributed the following Xhosa conception of the day of resurrection to ‘remembrances of Scripture statements’: ‘The sun will rise in the west, the sea dry up or recede, the sky descend till it may be touched by the head, and...then will occur an earthquake during which the cattle will make their appearance’.<sup>53</sup>

The Christian element was an essential component of the identity of the spirits who appeared to Nongqawuse and promised to send forth new people and new cattle upon the earth. William Gqoba rendered the name of the first spirit as ‘Napakade, son of Sifuba-sibanzi’ and the same two names occur, together with uHlanga, in the colonial records, although ‘Napakade’ or ‘UnguNapakade’ (‘Eternal One’) is usually given precedence over ‘Sifubasibanzi’ (‘Broad-breasted One’). The introduction of two new figures rather than one probably reflects the Christian dichotomy between God and Christ, and Xhosa uncertainty regarding the relative status of the two probably reflects the problems they had in defining a relationship in which God/Napakade is senior but Christ/Sifuba-sibanzi is more active. The following quotation, describing the attempts of a cattle-killing prophetic to account for the failure of her prophecies, demonstrates this confusion:

She [Nonkosi, a prophetic in Mhala’s country] talked of Sifuba-sibazi, that is the broad-breasted one...and Ungunapakade, the eternal one. The Broad-Breasted One will manifest himself to the Eternal One, and the Eternal One will invite the Broad-Breasted One to rise from death and he will do the same. And the latter [Napakade] will make it known to the other [Sifuba-sibanzi] that he must wait for his arising so that he [Sifuba-sibanzi] can follow him [Napakade]. But Sifuba-Sibanzi said that he had spoken of a rising first so he wanted to arise first.<sup>54</sup>

It is difficult to be sure when these two names originated.<sup>55</sup> It has been argued that Sifuba-sibanzi’, which is today a universally recognized praise-

(Page 62)

name for Jesus Christ, was originally a Khoi name for God, and certainly it fits in well with

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<sup>51</sup> U.S.P.G. Microfilm 172/2, Cory Library, Journal of W. Greenstock, Nov. 1856; BK 81 J. Gawler to J. Maclean, 7 Sept. 1856.

<sup>52</sup> MS 3236, Cory Library, J. Ross to A. Thomson, 24 Nov. 1856.

<sup>53</sup> BK 89 Substance of Statements made to the Chief Commissioner, 5 Feb. 1857.

<sup>54</sup> Berlin Missionary Archives, East Berlin, J. Rein to Berlin Missionary Society, Report for second half-year, 1857.

<sup>55</sup> Nzulu Lwazi, ‘URev Tiyo Soga’; Kropf and Godfrey, *Dictionary*, 106; J. Hodgson, *Ntsikana’s Great Hymn* (Cape Town, 1980), 37-9. Berlin Missionary Archives, Abt. III, Report of Kropf and Liefeldt for first half-year, 1856, and BK 71 C. Brownlee to J. Maclean, 12 Dec. 1856, both specifically link the name Sifuba-sibanzi with the Russians. The suggestion that the term ‘Sifuba-sibanzi’ may be of Khoi origin comes from M. Mabona, ‘The interaction and development of different religions in the eastern Cape’, unpublished Ms., 107. Although I find Mabona’s general argument convincing, I consider that the particular text he cites as evidence (a Khoi description of their God, in a Latin source of 1691, as ‘grandi eundem esse et deducto in latitudinem corpore’) too general to refer specifically to a ‘Broad-Chested One’.

the more anthropomorphized Khoi view of the Deity. Most Xhosa, however, associate the name with the teachings of the Xhosa Christian prophet Ntsikana (d.1822), who was a contemporary of Nxele. The Xhosa historian S. E. K. Mqhayi, writing in the 1920s, said that Mlanjeni predicted just before he died that he was going across the sea to meet Sifuba-sibanzi. Yet Chief Commissioner Maclean, who was usually well informed, referred to the name as a 'new creation', and several contemporary reports link the words Sifuba-sibanzi to the Russians, whose supposed victory in the Crimea produced the first spate of millenarian prophecies just before Nongqawuse's.

The origin of the name 'Napakade' (Eternal One) is even more obscure. However, it is clear that both 'Broad-Chested One' and 'Eternal One' are typical of the sort of heroic apostrophe which fits in equally well with Xhosa praise-poetry and with Christian moral tales such as *Pilgrim's Progress*, which have been immensely popular in Xhosaland. The fusion of Xhosa and Christian prophecies, united in the figure of Sifuba-sibanzi, created an apocalyptic tradition which outlasted the cattle-killing and remained potent well into the twentieth century:

Then at last there will be a general rising in which a mother will quarrel with her own daughter-in-law; the son will rise against his father, and friend against friend. Men will stab each other's shoulders, and there will be such a crossing and recrossing as can only be likened to ants gathering stalks of dried grass. But these things are only as travail pains of childbirth. Then the end will come - the beginning of peace for which there had been no pre-concerted councilor arrangement of man. The reign of Broad-breast (Sifuba-sibanzi) will commence and continue in the lasting peace of the Son of Man.<sup>56</sup>

These late nineteenth-century prophecies relating to migrant labour (the ants crossing and recrossing, bearing heavy loads) and the collapse of social ties and family life aptly epitomize more than a century of Xhosa history - and help to explain the millenarian thread which preceded and actually survived the disaster of the great cattle-killing.

## CONCLUSION

The Xhosa cattle-killing movement, suggested in the first instance by the lungsickness epidemic of 1854, tapped a deep-seated emotional and spiritual malaise resulting from material deprivation and military defeat. By blaming the epidemic on witchcraft and proposing to cleanse the earth of its taint, Nongqawuse's prophecies provided an explanation for current circumstances and a rationale for future action. The ideology of the cattle-killing movement combined old and new ideas, both of which were equally necessary to its

(Page 63)

credibility. Familiar beliefs concerning sacrifice, creation and the ancestors rooted the cattle-killing movement in a conceptual world which the Xhosa understood and trusted. As the Rev. William Philip said, 'When... the girl spoke of the rising up, she was merely setting a spark to things that were already known'.<sup>57</sup> The new concepts of an expected redeemer, an earthly resurrection, unwittingly disseminated by the missions via the prophet Nxele, seemed to provide a possible means of escape from the hopeless and desolate situation in

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<sup>56</sup> J.K. Bokwe, *The Story of Ntsikana* (Lovedale, 1914), 23-4. Similar prophecies may be found in MS 9063, N. Falati, 'The Story of Ntsikana' (1895), and in contemporary oral tradition.

<sup>57</sup> *Isigidimi*, 2 July 1888.

which the Xhosa found themselves. Even the Bible, a book which the colonial intruders themselves claimed to be the truth, appeared to confirm Nongqawuse's prophecies. The central beliefs of the Xhosa cattle-killing were neither irrational nor atavistic. Ironically, it was probably because they were so rational and so appropriate that they ultimately proved to be so fatal.

## SUMMARY

The Xhosa cattle-killing movement of 1856-7 cannot be explained as a superstitious 'pagan reaction' to the intrusion of colonial rule and Christian civilization. It owes its peculiar form to the lungsickness epidemic of 1854, which carried off over 100,000 Xhosa cattle. The Xhosa theory of disease indicated that the sick cattle had been contaminated by the witchcraft practices of the people, and that these tainted cattle would have to be slaughtered lest they infect the pure new cattle which were about to rise.

The idea of the resurrection of the dead was partly due to the Xhosa belief that the dead do not really die or depart from the world of the living, and partly to the Xhosa myth of creation, which held that all life originated in a certain cavern in the ground which might yet again pour forth its blessings on the earth. Christian doctrines, transmitted through the prophets Nxele and Mhlakaza, supplemented and elaborated these indigenous Xhosa beliefs. The Xhosa and the Christian elements united together in the person of the expected redeemer Sifuba-sibanzi (the broad-chested one). The central beliefs of the Xhosa cattle-killing were neither irrational nor atavistic. Ironically, it was probably because they were so rational and so appropriate that they ultimately proved to be so deadly.