

Nongqawuse's Prophecies Revisited: Centring the Religious Experience



**By Joshua Slingers
Student Number: SLNJOS003**

**Supervisor: Professor Lance van Sittert
Historical Studies, University of Cape Town**

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DECLARATION

I, Joshua Liam Slingers declare that the research reported in this minor dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university. All the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Joshua Slingers

Signature

Signed by candidate

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role played by traditional Xhosa religious belief and experience in the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-57. Using a range of primary and secondary historical sources, this study focuses on the period between 1856 and 1857 where many of the amaXhosa slaughtered their cattle and ceased agricultural production. This study centres the work of South African historians in the analysis of the Cattle-Killing Movement and the prophecies of Nongqawuse. The study is framed by the conception of the movement as inherently religious in character and form. As such, certain elements of African and Xhosa religious beliefs form an important part of this study. The role of ancestors within Xhosa religious life, the spirits known as the 'River People', the function of cattle in ritual sacrifice and the role of prophets and diviners in Xhosa life are all important in understanding the events of the Cattle-Killing Movement. Themes of rebirth and renewal are present within the prophecies and the wider movement. This study will argue that the religious aspects of the Cattle-Killing Movement have been given insufficient attention by materialists. This study seeks to address the problem of historians, and other scholars, studying the Cattle-Killing in disciplinary silos, favouring certain contributing factors while dismissing others. The prophecies of Nongqawuse were believed by the numerous participants because its content drew on past religious and mythological narratives that the Xhosa were familiar with and due to the adverse material circumstances of the mid-19th century. It will be shown that the Cattle-Killing Movement was determined by the lungsickness epidemic, other materialist and structuralist causes. However, just as importantly, it was determined by the religious beliefs and experiences of the believers.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study will critically consider the role of religious belief in the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7. It will be argued that the role of religious belief, as a valid contributing factor, has been masked in the historical scholarship by an overemphasis on materialist and structuralist arguments. This study will analyse how religious belief of the Xhosa society at the time contributed to the spread of the prophecies and the belief in the prophecies of Nongqawuse. The understanding of the religious context of Xhosa society is crucial in understanding how the Cattle-Killing unfolded. It will be argued that Xhosa religious belief and religious experience need to be considered alongside the materialist and structuralist factors. This study examines the role played by traditional Xhosa religious belief and religious experience in the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7. Religion and religious belief will therefore be used as units of analysis in this dissertation. The categories of ‘religion’ and ‘religious belief’ in southern Africa are intimately linked with colonisation. These categories have been used to serve the interests of colonial subjugation and are therefore controversial.¹ In this dissertation the concept of ‘religion’ is not considered as ahistorical or universal as has often been the case in southern African historical analyses. A secondary aim of this dissertation is to consider the way historians think about and treat religion when studying historical events. Historians often think and treat religion in specific ways, whether overtly disparagingly or by ignoring the importance of religion and religious belief in favour of some other influencing factors. It will be argued in this dissertation that the study of the Cattle-Killing suffers from the exclusionary nature of respective academic disciplines. Historians and other scholars have studied the Cattle-Killing in disciplinary silos, looking at certain contributing factors and

¹ David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1996), 74.

dismissing others, and the scholarship on the cattle-killing movement is all the worse for it. It is therefore important to understand the Cattle-Killing within the broader context of the history of racism, religion, segregation and the rise of capitalism within southern Africa. This study, however, will primarily focus on the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement itself and not its consequences or the events that followed after the failures of the prophecies in 1857. The time period under focus for this study will be between 1856 and 1857. This is a historical study so it will be necessary, at certain points, to provide some background and context to the events of 1856-7. An outline of the 19th century will be provided. The 19th century was a time of great social and political change as well as religious upheaval for all of South Africa's indigenous social groups, especially the amaXhosa. An understanding of the religious context of the amaXhosa prior to and at the time of the prophecies is crucial in understanding how and why the Cattle-Killing unfolded. While it might be impossible to fully understand why the Cattle-Killing occurred, and all the various dynamics that played a role in its spread, the perspectives provided in this mini dissertation will prove useful in broadening the understanding of how and why the Cattle-Killing occurred.

The prophecies of Nongqawuse will be focused on specifically as there would have been no movement without the visions of Nongqawuse and the interpretation of these visions by her uncle, Mhlakaza. The religious context of the amaXhosa will be critically analysed. The status of Nongqawuse as a prophetess, a seer, will be highlighted as Xhosa chiefs often followed the advice and guidance of diviners during periods of social and religious unrest. This mini dissertation will also draw out the interactions between Xhosa and Christian beliefs. Some have argued that it is futile to engage in the exercise of analysing the ideas contained in Nongqawuse's prophecies as these prophecies were "a macabre and deadly charade of both

Xhosa and Christian religions”.² I disagree with this opinion as it completely disregards the motivations of the believers, who were the majority of the Xhosa population. There were clearly many elements contained within these prophecies that encouraged chiefs and commoners alike to carry out the instructions given to Nongqawuse. This mini dissertation will show that the believers of the Cattle-Killing understood the prophecies through Xhosa religion and that the prophecies were not a plot to undermine Xhosa society. The prophecies were steeped in Xhosa religious symbols and could be traced back to certain Xhosa myths.

Myth is not used as a synonym for religious belief in this dissertation. Myth is used in the sense of foundational stories which inform religious belief. Myth is the foundation upon which religious belief is built. Mythology is therefore one aspect of religious belief. Myth is defined as

“a sensible and dramatic representation of a supposedly recurrent or unique event (in the past, the present, or the future), an event with an important *thema*, which is represented primarily in the mind (imaginal myth), but secondarily in words (narrated myth), in quasi actions (enacted myth), or in some artistic form (portrayed myth)”.³

This mini dissertation will show that to understand the Cattle-Killing properly the religious beliefs and experience of the believers need to be centred. There would have been no killing of cattle and the cessation of cultivation, on such a vast scale, without the prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse.

Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to re-centre the religious belief of the amaXhosa in the analysis of the Cattle-Killing Movement. This study will aim to show that religious beliefs

² Mongameli Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history* (Lit, 2004), 310.

³ Henry A. Murray, “Introduction to the Issue “Myth and Mythmaking”,” *Daedalus* 88, no. 2 (1959): 215.

were the primary influencing factors which caused the Cattle-Killing Movement. In this study the idea that there was something ‘missing’ within Xhosa religious belief will be critiqued and problematised. The claim that there was a spiritual longing among the Xhosa will be shown to be false. These sentiments are colonial in origin and largely ignore Xhosa opinions about their own religious life. The influence of material factors, like the lungsickness epidemic, will be critiqued as well. The lungsickness epidemic has been used by a number of scholars and is often central to their argument as the primary cause of the Cattle-Killing. This mini dissertation will argue that the lungsickness epidemic cannot be considered as the most important cause of the Cattle-Killing without a consideration of the religious belief system of believers. This study, building on the work of modern scholars like Helen Bradford, will also centre Nongqawuse as a fully-fledged historical agent during this period. In too many analyses of this event has Nongqawuse been treated as a mere ventriloquist of the male characters like her uncle Mhlakaza or the Paramount Chief Sarhili. Nongqawuse will be given agency in this study, and it will be shown that she was more influential in the movement than has previously been thought. It will be illustrated that the interactions between Christian and Xhosa religious beliefs was an innovative and dynamic process.

Significance of the study

While conducting this research I have become acutely aware of the politics of domination which come into play when doing any form of historical research. This becomes even more salient when performing historical research on a people who have faced an indescribable amount of colonial violence. I am aware that writing history in a language, English, which has served as an agent of domination itself becomes a form of domination. Who is privileged enough to write? Who is privileged enough to conduct research? These are all questions I have asked myself as I have conducted this research. In my research I have tried my best not to glance over complex and nuanced historical experiences. In my research I have specifically

included accounts by Xhosa historians who have been side-lined, or simply ignored, in mainstream accounts of the Cattle-Killing Movement. As Adam Ashforth has argued, there is an ambiguity in the writing of a history in the language of the victors: “the ambiguity of writing about domination in a context where the power to encode the past in writing is itself both a product of domination and form of domination”.⁴ One way of responding to the myriad of these complex questions would be “to structure historiography in dialogue”.⁵ An attempt has been made in this mini dissertation to structure it in a dialogic fashion. This will be done by prioritising the voices of those that have been purposefully marginalised through South African historiography. I acknowledge that this event is emotively charged and highly politicised in South African history. I do not intend on causing any harm through this study and have been cognisant of the aforementioned challenges that my research raises. This research does not run the risk of any reputational harm to any groups of people. This research is ultimately intended to provide a different perspective, a religious one, on the Cattle-Killing Movement. The various textual sources used will ensure that at the end of my research an accurate, ethical and truthful dissertation will be produced.

Methodology of the study

This study will be using two sources of data. These two sources are primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include the accounts of the prophecies and its believers by using the translated works of Xhosa historian William Wellington Gqoba. The in-depth study of the Xhosa, by Xhosa historian John Henderson Soga and the accounts of the Commissioner Charles Brownlee on the Xhosa have also been used in this dissertation. The secondary sources that deal with the Cattle-Killing directly include the works of Jeff Peires, Helen Bradford, John Zarwan, Noel Mostert, Clifton C. Crais, Christian B. Andreas, and Jack Lewis, among others.

⁴ Adam Ashforth, “The Xhosa Cattle Killing and the Politics of Memory,” *Sociological Forum* 6, no. 3 (1991): 590.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 591.

The secondary sources that deal with African religions and Xhosa religion include the works of David Chidester, Janet Hodgson, John S. Mbiti, Mongameli Mabona and Ezra Tisani.

Scope of the study

This study will primarily focus on the time period between 1855 and 1857. This means the spread of the Cattle-Killing prophecies in 1856-57 as well as the uptake of the prophecies by the believers. A historical background of the first half of the 19th century will be provided as the Cattle-Killing did not occur within a vacuum. As will be detailed below, the influence of preceding Xhosa prophets and diviners had a direct impact on how the Cattle-Killing Movement started and sustained itself. Certain definitions of religion and Xhosa religious belief will also be provided. This study focuses on religious belief and religious experience. Therefore, it does not detail each and every material and structural factor that contributed to the Cattle-Killing, as this was not feasible and was not within the scope of this research.

Chapter division

This mini dissertation will be divided into six chapters. Chapter one, this chapter, is the introduction and details how the dissertation is structured. Chapter two provides a critical literature review of the relevant historical literature on the Cattle-Killing Movement. This literature review will also provide historical background to the event itself and highlight the significant developments within the scholarship. Chapter three provides an analysis of Xhosa religious belief and practices. The chapter will provide a sketch of how the Xhosa understood their worldview through religious symbols. Certain elements of Xhosa religion will be focused on specifically like the veneration of the ancestors, the influence of the spirits known as the 'River People' as well as the institution of divinerhood and the importance of cattle in ritual sacrifice. Included in the chapter will be an evaluation of the influence of Christian theology on the spread of the prophecies and the interactions between Xhosa and Christian religious belief. It has been argued that these prophecies absorbed certain elements from Christianity

and reappropriated them for Xhosa usage. This chapter will seek to draw out the relevant aspects of Xhosa religious life and experience and illustrate how these played a role in the take up of the movement among the vast majority of Xhosa. Chapter four will provide a detailed analysis of the main prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse at the Gxarha River. The central beliefs and symbols present in the prophecies and visions will be drawn out. This chapter will detail the difference between those who were classified as ‘believers’ and those classified as ‘unbelievers’. It will also be shown how some of the experiences of believers mirrored the experiences of candidate diviners undergoing initiation. The homestead, during this period of religious and material upheaval, becomes a site of contestation and conflict with certain family members being believers and others, unbelievers. It will be argued that the Cattle-Killing was a movement in which women, specifically Nongqawuse, played a vital role. Nongqawuse’s prophecies tried to unite the Xhosa nation through promises of renewal and rebirth. Chapter five contains a critical analysis of Nongqawuse’s prophecies in light of Xhosa religious belief. This details the influence of Christian ideas on the prophecies specifically. It also examines the idea of the ‘return to origins’ contained within the prophecies. This chapter discusses the role of myth in Xhosa religion generally as this reveals the religious symbols present within the prophecies. The final chapter is the general conclusion. This will summarise the main arguments and points raised in the dissertation. The Cattle-Killing Movement should not be understood in oversimplistic terms. The religious beliefs of the Xhosa are as an important cause of the Cattle-Killing as any other. It will be argued that religious belief and experience, which has often been side-lined in certain scholarship, were important causes contributing to the Cattle-Killing.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the relevant historical and scholarly literature on the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7. The purpose of this study is to critically consider the role of religious belief in the Cattle-Killing, which it will be argued has been obscured in the recent historical scholarship by an overemphasis on materialist and structuralist arguments. This chapter will trace the evolving trajectory of the historical and scholarly accounts on the Cattle-Killing, with different schools of thought placing emphasis on different contributing factors. This literature review will trace the evolving literature on the topic in a chronological order. The first written accounts of the Cattle-Killing occur during the colonial period. The term ‘colonial period’ is used as these accounts were not only from colonial or settler accounts. Black historians and who were writing during the colonial period will also be included in this literature review. Thereafter, the literature considering the materialist, structuralist and feminist arguments will also be reviewed.

The Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7

The Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement is one of the most controversial moments in South African colonial history. It has garnered much debate and disputes over its causes ever since its occurrence. There have been numerous studies conducted on the movement from a variety of different perspectives. The amount of scholarship and the polarising views regarding this piece of South African history is as a result of the dire and severe consequences of the movement. It is estimated that around 400 000 cattle were sacrificed in accordance with the prophecies. The human death toll as a result of starvation after February 1857 was around 40 000. Many Xhosa were ultimately forced to move and become labourers in the Cape Colony.⁶ The Cattle-Killing

⁶ Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of anticolonial prophecy in South Africa and beyond* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 19.

is a moment in South African history which represents for the Xhosa the “beginning of the end of their autonomy from British colonial power”.⁷

Accounts from the colonial period

The first accounts of the Cattle-Killing Movement come from the colonial period. In the accounts from white settlers, religion was central to the settler explanations as proof of African irrationality, superstition and was used as another example of the need for colonial stewardship. One of the initial accounts of the Cattle-Killing comes from the Commissioner with the Ngqika Xhosa, Charles Brownlee. Published by Lovedale Mission Press towards the end of the nineteenth century, *Reminiscences of Kafir Life and History* details the prophecies of Nongqawuse’s, the influence and popularity of her uncle Mhlakaza and how the message of the resurrection of the dead was spread.⁸ Brownlee describes the prophecies of Nongqawuse.

The dead

“would appear once more in the flesh among their people, but they would not do so unless the (Xhosa) nation would exterminate all cattle both great and small, with the exception of horses and dogs. All grain was to be thrown away, neither was there to be cultivation”.⁹

Brownlee’s account incorrectly identifies Mhlakaza as the only medium who could communicate with the strangers at the river.¹⁰ In this colonial account, Brownlee primarily focuses on Mhlakaza and describes him as one of the most renown Xhosa seers. Brownlee’s account labels Nongqawuse as a ventriloquist.¹¹ This description marginalises the influence of Nongqawuse and does not provide her with the agency as an important, or arguably the most

⁷ Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of anticolonial prophecy in South Africa and beyond*, 19.

⁸ Charles Brownlee, *Reminiscences of Kaffir Life and History: And Other Papers* (Lovedale Mission Press, 1896), 135.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 136. ‘Xhosa’ has been included instead of the pejorative term used in the original text.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹ Brownlee, *Reminiscences of Kaffir Life and History: And Other Papers* (Lovedale Mission Press, 1896), 135.

important, character in the unfolding of the events. Brownlee's initial account also mistakenly believes that the Cattle-Killing was a plot by the chiefs to declare war on the colonial state. Brownlee labels the event pejoratively as the 'Cattle-Killing Delusion'. Even though thirty years later Brownlee changed his opinion on the event and no longer believed that there was a chief's plot to overthrow the colony he still held reservations. In Brownlee's account it is clear that his first priority was protecting the colony from any potential threats and that he considered the Cattle-Killing as a significant threat to settler interests. The subsequent scholarship on Cattle-Killing Movement suffers from a similar androcentric and colonial hangover that originally comes from Brownlee's account. The androcentrism inherent in the study of the Cattle-Killing Movement will be addressed further on in this dissertation.

Another account of the Cattle-Killing Movement from the colonial period that has had significant influence on modern scholarship is the account of the Xhosa historian William Wellington Gqoba. Gqoba was a Christian, poet, missionary, editor and most importantly for this study, a historian. Gqoba's narrative of the movement was based on oral traditions and collected from the believers of the movement.¹² It needs to be acknowledged that Gqoba's account of the Cattle-Killing was written in 1888 and therefore took place 30 years after the event. Gqoba was also a prominent black Christian, and this shapes his account in a particular way. Considering the aforementioned, Gqoba's account is still useful and provides scholars with an impression of what the believers and unbelievers of the movement experienced during the period of the Cattle-Killing. The account of Gqoba is detailed and provides a host of useful information for any historian studying the movement. Gqoba's account provides a Xhosa perspective on the sequence of events. In Gqoba's account he does not refer to the movement and period under consideration as the 'Cattle-Killing Delusion' as colonial accounts were so

¹² Jeff Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2003), 110.

fond of doing, like Brownlee. Instead, Gqoba's account acknowledges the fact that the period was called "the time of Nongqawuse".¹³ All of those interviewed in the writing of Gqoba's account focus on the fact that Nongqawuse was a seer, or prophet, rather than solely focusing on her uncle, Mhlakaza.¹⁴ Nongqawuse is identified as the primary medium through which the spirits conversed. These ancestors would only speak through Nongqawuse. Gqoba's account also highlights the various religious aspect of the movement. The ancestors were sent by "their king Eternal son of Broadbreast".¹⁵ This is one of the first accounts that identifies the aspects of Xhosa religious belief that influenced the Cattle-Killing. Nongqawuse was also quoted as providing a warning to those Xhosa who did not slaughter their cattle. This is an aspect of Gqoba's account that directly highlights the Christian aspects of the movement. Nongqawuse said that there was another chief who rode a grey horse and was also known as Satan. All those who did not kill their cattle belonged to Satan.¹⁶ Subsequent scholarship of the Cattle-Killing Movement has paid close attention to this and have argued that this is an example of Christian elements and themes present within the movement. Gqoba's account certainly does provide evidence that the Cattle-Killing was influenced by elements from both Christian and Xhosa religious beliefs. Gqoba's account was written with the aim of challenging colonial misconceptions about the Cattle-Killing. Gqoba argues that there is no truth to the statement that the killing of cattle was done so that war would break out between the Xhosa and the English. His account is logically structured and is a convincing rebuttal of the incorrect colonial assumptions about the Cattle-Killing. He notes that the Xhosa loved their cattle, believed in the

¹³ Helen Bradford and Msokoli Qotole, "Ingxoxo enkulu ngoNongqawuse" (A Great Debate About Nongqawuse's Era), *Kronos* 34, no. 1 (2008): 67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁵ William W. Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, edited by Jeff Opland, Wandile Kuse and Pamela Maseko (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015), 463.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 467.

resurrection of the dead and that those believers of the movement genuinely believed in the prophecies of Nongqawuse.¹⁷

Modern scholarship

The modern scholarship of the Cattle-Killing Movement, that is historical literature written since the end of the twentieth century onwards, have written from various different perspectives and academic disciplines. This dissertation will critique, highlight and utilise the scholarship of Helen Bradford, Jeff Peires and John Zarwan. The modern scholarship often studied the Cattle-Killing Movement through materialist, structuralist and feminist perspectives. These will all be reviewed.

Materialist and structuralist arguments

In many ways this dissertation owes its shape and skeletal structure as a response to certain claims made by scholars like Jeff Peires. In the article ‘The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing’ Peires lays out the crux of the argument that he would later fully develop in *The Dead Will Arise*, which was published in 1989. Peires posits three propositions in the aforementioned article. Those three propositions are put forward to clear up the popular misconceptions people may have had about the Cattle-Killing. The ultimate purpose of these propositions was to show how the Cattle-Killing was a rational response, on the part of the Xhosa, to the destabilising events of the 1850s and the 19th century more generally. This dissertation will disagree with the first and third proposition put forward by Peires and expand on the second proposition.

The first proposition states that the “form which the movement took, namely the killing of cattle, was suggested and determined by the lungsickness epidemic of 1854”.¹⁸ This position will be critiqued. It will be argued in this dissertation that the form the movement took was

¹⁷ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 483.

¹⁸ Jeff Peires, “The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing,” *The Journal of African History* 28, no. 1 (1987): 45.

suggested and determined by religious belief and religious experience. It was not determined by the lungsickness epidemic. The position taken in this dissertation is similar to that of John Zarwan but with a slight deviation. Zarwan argued that the internal dynamics of the movement should be viewed in the light of traditional culture. For Zarwan, it was essentially the nature of traditional Xhosa religious belief that determined how the Cattle-Killing played out.¹⁹

The third proposition notes that the movement was not a pagan reaction but rather “combined Christian and pre-Christian elements fused under the heroic leadership of the expected redeemer, the son of Sifuba-sibanzi, the Broad-Chested One”.²⁰ This dissertation will reconsider the combined Christian and pre-Christian elements. Xhosa religion will be viewed as not lacking any elements of ‘proper religion’. Peires goes on to claim that the Cattle-Killing “owed its very existence to biblical doctrines”.²¹

The second proposition is important and will be expanded on in this dissertation. Peires says that 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”.²² Christian cosmology supported and reinforced already existing Xhosa ritual practice and Xhosa religious thought. This dissertation will show that Christian theology reinforced already existing Xhosa religious thought. The works of Peires have been instrumental in analyses of the Cattle-Killing Movement. It is acknowledged that Peires does associate the prophecies of Nongqawuse with Xhosa traditional religious beliefs. However, this study will focus in more detail on those traditional religious beliefs and highlight its importance further. This study therefore seeks to build upon the works of scholars like Peires.

¹⁹ John Zarwan, “The Xhosa Cattle Killings, 1856-57 (Le massacre du bétail chez les Xhosa, 1856-1857),” *Cahiers d’etudes africaines* 16, no: 63/64 (1976): 536.

²⁰ Peires, “The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing,” 45

²¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²² *Ibid.*, 57.

The work of John Zarwan on the Cattle-Killing was mentioned earlier. It will be important to develop the arguments made by Zarwan and to review them as they are quite useful for the analysis made in this dissertation. In “The Xhosa Cattle Killings, 1856-57”, Zarwan argues that the movement should be viewed in terms of the traditional Xhosa culture. Even though this study was done in 1976 it is still useful for this dissertation. In Zarwan’s analysis the important factors that need to be prioritised when studying the Cattle-Killing are the cultural patterns of the Xhosa, the religious dynamic of Xhosa society and the impact of Sir George Grey’s programme of ‘civilising’ the Xhosa. Zarwan also notes that the importance of symbols and symbolism in the prophecies and the movement itself. Zarwan states that symbols render the world of a certain group of people graspable.²³ Zarwan believed that the true explanation and meaning of the Cattle-Killing could never be described. Not even by a participant. “It is precisely the non-verbal, non-rational aspects which have the greatest impact”.²⁴ Zarwan’s account on the Cattle-Killing centres the cultural patterns, common elements in the preaching of earlier prophets and traditional Xhosa religion.²⁵ The account also notes the influence of material and structural factors in causing the movement. The question of why the Cattle-Killing occurred in 1856 and not earlier is asked. Zarwan responds that Xhosa society was relatively unchanged and that European elements entered and slightly modified Xhosa culture but did not wholly transform it.²⁶ It was the subsequent years, during the 1850s, of social change and social unrest which eventually led to the Cattle-Killing²⁷. This dissertation will locate itself along the lines of Zarwan’s study. The activities of sacrifice carried out were the same kinds of techniques that worked in the past. That was why, according to Zarwan, the Xhosa believed it would work again in response to a changing socio-political conquest.²⁸ The Cattle-Killing

²³ Zarwan, “The Xhosa Cattle Killings, 1856-57 (Le massacre du bétail chez les Xhosa, 1856-1857),” 520.

²⁴ Ibid.,

²⁵ Ibid.,

²⁶ Ibid., 534.

²⁷ Ibid., 533.

²⁸ Ibid., 538.

Movement needs to be understood within its own specific religious dynamic. That is what this dissertation attempts to do. This article by Zarwan is extremely useful and even though it was written in the 1970s, it is still relevant and can be used to respond and critique later materialist and structuralist arguments.

In recent scholarship on the movement scholars have marginalised these religious and non-secular factors that contributed to the Cattle-Killing in favour of material and structural factors. These material and structural factors include, but are not limited to, the social upheaval caused by colonial expansion and loss of land, the continuous warfare with high mortalities, the impact of the lungsickness epidemic on the Xhosa cattle population and the influence of Christian missionary activity. Some historians have looked at the movement through a Marxist/materialist lens. Jack Lewis argues that the Cattle-Killing should not be explained as a product of the adverse circumstance and the combination of Xhosa and Christian religions. Lewis maintains that the movement should be

“explained through their impact on the dominant class relations of Xhosa society. It is only by comprehending the tensions and struggles within and between the social classes, and their intensification by colonial domination, that a coherent understanding of the Cattle-Killing can be developed”.²⁹

Lewis argues that the Cattle-Killing should be understood through their impact on class relations on Xhosa society. Lewis is considering the Cattle-Killing through the lens of social classes and the social upheaval and pressures caused by colonial expansion. The Cattle-Killing has often been described as a Xhosa response to the “radical intrusion of the colonial state”.³⁰ This mini dissertation, however, will examine the role played by Xhosa religious belief and

²⁹ Jack Lewis, “Materialism and Idealism in the Historiography of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement 1856–7,” *South African Historical Journal* 25, no.1 (1991): 246.

³⁰ James O. Gump, “The Imperialism of Cultural Assimilation: Sir George Grey's Encounter with the Maori and the Xhosa, 1845-1868,” *Journal of World History* 9, no. 1 (1998): 98.

religious experience in the Cattle-Killing Movement. It will be argued that it was the nature of Xhosa religious belief that influenced how the movement played out. Historians have often treated the religious beliefs behind the movement as a secondary effect of the primary material concerns.

The lungsickness epidemic

While this study critically considers the religious aspects of Cattle-Killing Movement, it is necessary to understand the social and environmental context of the Xhosa at the time. It would not be possible to discuss the Cattle-Killing Movement without discussing the lungsickness epidemic that spread throughout the Cape Colony and among the Xhosa Chiefdoms between 1853-57. Lungsickness was a contagious cattle disease that was brought into the Cape by infected animals from Europe in around 1853.³¹ The disease was described as starting off with “a dry, husky cough” and “slowly tightened its grip on the hapless beasts it destroyed, bringing them to a lingering and uniquely horrible death”.³² It has been argued in many historical accounts that the outbreak of lungsickness among the cattle of the amaXhosa created significant social upheaval. Historians have proposed that because of this disease, the Xhosa started viewing their cattle as unclean and afflicted by the malevolent acts of witchcraft. The cattle were viewed as being bewitched and therefore it was necessary to sacrifice them to appease the ancestors.³³ This social upheaval then contributed, significantly, in creating the perfect environment for the cattle-killing movement to begin. Peires most notably believes that the lungsickness epidemic was a significant contributing factor to the Cattle-Killing. Peires argues

³¹ Christian B. Andreas, “The Spread and Impact of the Lungsickness Epizootic of 1853–57 in the Cape Colony and the Xhosa Chiefdoms,” *South African Historical Journal*, 53, no. 1 (2005): 50.

³² Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 93.

³³ Lewis, “Materialism and Idealism in the Historiography of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement 1856–7,” 246.

that the cattle disease was brought to South Africa in September 1853. Peires goes on to state that:

“By February 1856, it was reported that many cattle had died of lungsickness in the lower part of Sarhili's country where Nongqawuse lived. In April, the very month that she began to prophesy, lungsickness broke out among the homestead bordering on Sarhili's Great Place. By August, at the very latest, the king's own herds were affected”.³⁴

In the above account a direct correlation is made between the outbreak of lungsickness and the prophecy of Nongqawuse. In Peires' account the lungsickness was in fact one of the most important causes of the Cattle-Killing. Without the lungsickness epidemic there would have been no Cattle-Killing.³⁵ In Peires' works the devastating effect of the lungsickness epidemic on Xhosa society is stressed. The social upheaval and tension caused by the loss of cattle, which was central to the proper functioning of social relations and institutions among the Xhosa, was immense. The lungsickness encountered a divided Xhosa society that had suffered many military defeats, was experiencing an existential and social crisis due to their expulsion from natal lands and was dealing with the social unrest upheaval caused by migrant labour.³⁶ The events of the movement seem to be understandable once there is accurate knowledge of the context in which they occurred. The events, according to Peires, should be understood in reference to a few structural factors like the lungsickness epidemic, the imposition of colonial rule throughout the region and the dissemination of Christian beliefs.

The presumed correlation between the lungsickness epidemic in causing the slaughter of cattle is brought into question by the research of Christian Andreas. Andreas' research is intended to

³⁴ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 107.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁶ Peires, “The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing,” 45.

provide a more accurate summation of the impact of the lung disease on Xhosa cattle populations. It is argued that certain incorrect assumptions have been made regarding the impact of lungsickness on Xhosa chiefdoms. For example, Andreas notes that there has been inaccuracy with regard to the figures of cattle who succumbed to lungsickness. These inaccurate figures were directly used by Peires in support of his arguments.³⁷ While it needs to be stated firmly that the lungsickness epidemic did ravage the Xhosa cattle population, nuance is needed in understanding the situation.

“Within the Xhosa chiefdoms some households suffered very high losses, while others were only affected by the epizootic to a very small degree or spared altogether. In the colony, this picture of the individual inequality of losses was repeated on a regional level. This was apparently also the case in British Kaffraria, where the remote chiefdom of Anta was almost completely spared the epizootic”.³⁸

Certain regions and chiefdoms were affected more severely than others. Some individuals were impacted heavily while others not. There was no general decimation of Xhosa herds. The colonial estimates of the mortality of the Xhosa cattle are unreliable at best. Andreas’ research concludes that the lungsickness broke out among Xhosa chiefdoms more than a year before the Xhosa started to kill their cattle. This casts doubt on the apparent correlation between the outbreak of the disease and the rise of the Cattle-Killing Movement which has featured prominently in many accounts of the movement.³⁹ It has been argued that because many of the Xhosa chiefs suffered heavy losses of cattle due to the lungsickness that this encouraged them to believe in the prophecies of Nongqawuse and kill their cattle. It is argued that they would kill their cattle in the hopes of There are, however, too many exceptions to this make this sort

³⁷ Andreas, “The Spread and Impact of the Lungsickness Epizootic of 1853–57 in the Cape Colony and the Xhosa Chiefdoms,” 68.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

of generalisation. These exceptions are even present within Peires' own account. For example, Xhosa chiefs like Kama, Dyani Tshatshu, Toyite and the Mfengu chiefs all suffered heavy losses due to the lungsickness epidemic but were all still strong unbelievers.⁴⁰ If the lungsickness epidemic was such an important factor in causing the Cattle-Killing Movement then one would assume that there would not be as many as several exceptions to the generalisation. There is certainly a need to nuance the attribution of cause to recognise the unevenness and lack of one-to-one causality. This can further be supported by considering again Gqoba's account of the movement. In Gqoba's account the participants marginalise the importance of the lungsickness, *imofu*. As has been previously mentioned, modern scholarship has viewed the lungsickness epidemic as one of the primary reasons for the slaughter of cattle.⁴¹ Gqoba focuses on what the participants believed was the cause of the disease and the deaths, *ubuthi* – which is poison.⁴² It appears that the importance of the lungsickness epidemic has often been overemphasised at the expense of religious elements. The actual individuals who participated in the movement clearly did not believe that the lungsickness was as important as some later historians have so strongly believed.

Feminist critique

As aforementioned there has been an androcentric bias within the historical literature on the Cattle-Killing Movement. One example of this is evident in the Noël Mostert's *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*. In Mostert's analysis of the prophecies he ponders whether the visions and prophecies of Nongqawuse were of her own inspiration or if she was just in fact a "medium for what Mhalakaza transferred to her from his own visionary imagination". Even after Mostert explains how Nongqawuse's visions were

⁴⁰ Jeff Peires, "'Soft' Believers and 'Hard' Unbelievers in the Xhosa Cattle-Killing," *The Journal of African History* 27, no. 3 (1986): 449.

⁴¹ Bradford and Qotole, "Ingxoxo enkulu ngoNongqawuse," 69.

⁴² *Ibid.*,

sophisticated and detailed he once again comes to the conclusion that this was because of Mhlakaza who was allegedly Wilhelm Goliath, a former Christian convert and preacher. It is clear that in the scholarship on the Cattle-Killing Movement that Nongqawuse is regarded as a puppet and that the male figures were the ones with the visionary imagination. This is an inherited androcentric approach that emanates from Brownlee's account of the movement. These approaches to studying the Cattle-Killing seem to look past the fact that Nongqawuse was the only person who was able to hear or see the spirits. Nongqawuse was the transmitter of the message to the visitors. Those who visited Nongqawuse at the river needed to have faith in order to believe her visions and follow her instructions.

“Nongqawuse has been portrayed both as a child with 'absurd' instructions - and as a witch *ex machina*. Yet as an intellectual promoting a black political discourse, communicating with an army, she transgressed gender stereotypes. The power to sway 200,000 peasants was not, however, accorded her sex. The movement's non-lunar rhythms, the obscurity surrounding her name, symbolize the centrality of the king, Mhlakaza, male visions, male-only politics, male-only combat”.⁴³

Nongqawuse was communicating with an army of great men, past heroes, ancestors. In Gqoba's account of visitors to the Gxarha River, many visitors became nervous and trembled as they approached the place where the spirits were said to appear. Surely Nongqawuse contributed to the fear and anticipation that the visitors must have felt.

In response to the scholarship on the Cattle-Killing Movement which regarded Nongqawuse as simply a puppet, Bradford challenges the inherited androcentric approach. Bradford builds a feminist critique of the androcentric study of the Cattle-Killing. Bradford argues that the

⁴³ Helen Bradford, “New Country, New Race, New Men: War, Gender, and Millenarianism in Xhosaland, 1855–57,” Paper presented at the 19th International Conference on Historical Sciences: Session on Gender, Race, Xenophobia, and Nationalism (Oslo, August 2000): 47.

movement should be understood from a “longer, broader, less gender-biased perspective”.⁴⁴ There were many female prophets before Nongqawuse and there had been cases of noncultivation as well.⁴⁵ The movement could be understood as being a situation where women were the main prophets and challenged male-only domains. The prophecies glorify not the living manpower but instead the glorification of the dead Xhosa men is seen.⁴⁶ The prophecies of Nongqawuse emerge during a period where many other young women were prophesying and encroaching on a space where men usually held significant power. The preceding wars in the 19th century created a space where women were afforded an opportunity to become more vocal during times of social and religious upheaval. Gendered norms were certainly being challenged. The female-dominated *amagqirha* were being afforded more power during periods in which witchcraft was considered to be spreading among the Xhosa. Those chiefs and men who had lost cattle to lungsickness also lost social influence and power. The cattle-killing movement should be viewed as a movement where “women as the main prophets, challenging men, their male-only domains, suggesting how wars could be better fought”.⁴⁷ Nongqawuse was a historical figure that tried to unite the Xhosa nation, whether consciously or unconsciously. Through the inspiration of the spirits, she reimagined the world of the Xhosa and prophesied a better one. A world where the old regained their youth, the sick were healed, and the dead resurrected. This study aims to address this limiting androcentric and colonial bias that still plagues modern scholarship, as highlighted by scholars like Bradford.

Conclusion

More recently, within the 21st century, scholars like Jennifer Wenzel have described the Cattle-Killing as not only a “devastating event in the history of the amaXhosa but also a seminal

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁵ Bradford, “New Country, New Race, New Men: War, Gender, and Millenarianism in Xhosaland, 1855– 57,” 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁷ Ibid.,

moment in the history of colonialism, segregation, and apartheid in southern Africa”.⁴⁸ The Cattle-Killing therefore can be located within the areas of South African history like colonialism, land confiscation, segregation and even apartheid. Mostert and Clifton Crais argue that the conflicts and wars fought along the Eastern Cape frontier were vitally important in the construction of the racist structure of South African society. The colonial subjugation of the Xhosa shaped the modern racial order of South Africa.⁴⁹ On a macro level then the Cattle-Killing is located within the complex history of colonial subjugation and the construction of South Africa’s racist structure.

The Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement represents a contested and widely divisive part of South Africa’s colonial past. Historians and scholars who have studied the movement have often treated the religious beliefs as a secondary effect of the material and structural causes. These causes are things like the lungsickness epidemic, the imposition of colonial rule, the loss of land and the dissemination of Christian beliefs through missionary activity along the eastern frontier. While it is not always easy to differentiate between the material and the religious causes, the religious needs to be prioritised to fully understand the nature of the movement. The Xhosa religious belief system has also often been neglected as a cause of the movement in favour of material causes. This study seeks to challenge these gaps within the previous scholarship.

This chapter has provided a critical review of the relevant scholarly literature on the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7 as well as the prophecies of Nongqawuse. This chapter has traced the trajectory of the various accounts of the Cattle-Killing. It has highlighted the androcentric colonial approach of Brownlee and how it influenced later scholars. The

⁴⁸ Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of anticolonial prophecy in South Africa and beyond*, 20.

⁴⁹ Martin Legassick, “The State, Racism and the Rise of Capitalism in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony,” *South African Historical Journal* 28, no. 1 (1993): 332.

perspective of the Xhosa historian Gqoba was also highlighted and how his account provides valuable information on the attitudes of some of the believers. The monumental body of work done by Peires was also reviewed as well as the feminist critique of scholars like Bradford. This dissertation seeks to unify the various schools of those who have studied the Cattle-Killing Movement. The religious belief and experience of both believers and unbelievers are worthy of academic study. Why is it that those believers believed in the prophecies is a question that is worth asking. It is not enough to explain the Cattle-Killing through only a materialist or structuralists lens. The proceeding chapters will deal with the prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse in more detail and draw out the meanings and symbols contained within them. Certain religious elements of the Xhosa will also be drawn out. The tensions between Christianity and traditional Xhosa religious belief will be analysed. Is it possible to trace ideas of resurrection of the dead and renewal of the earth before Christian missionary activity? Are the central beliefs of the Cattle-Killing Movement contained wholly within Xhosa religion or was the diffusion of Christian ideas as important as many scholars suggest? These questions will be raised throughout this dissertation and tentative answers will be provided. Commonly held assumptions of the Cattle-Killing should not be simply taken for granted but rather need to be reassessed and re-examined to see if they are still as valid as previously assumed.

CHAPTER THREE

XHOSA RELIGION

Religion

It needs to be categorically stated that no event, especially one of such significance and duration as the Cattle-Killing, can be explained through a single cause. This dissertation is not making the claim that religious belief and religious experience was the only cause. This dissertation seeks to identify religious belief as a central and important cause that shaped the Cattle-Killing. As aforementioned, religious activity does not take place within a vacuum. It is influenced by social upheaval and historically contingent events. A nuanced and complex understanding of religion and religious belief is used in this essay as religion, especially during periods of colonial expansion, is an extremely complex issue. The concepts ‘religion’ and ‘religious belief’ used in this dissertation is informed by the works of David Chidester, W. W. Gqoba, Paul Landau, John S. Mbiti, Mongameli Mabona and J. H. Soga.⁵⁰ In the sphere of religious studies a significant body of work has been written by the likes of Janet Hodgson and Ezra Tisani on the religious change and outlook of the amaXhosa.⁵¹

Historian Paul Landau has highlighted several important problematic practices of historians. One such problem is the fact that historians have inadvertently inherited the evangelical

⁵⁰ See David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa* (Routledge, 2014); W. W. Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015); Paul Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); John S. Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990); Mongameli Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history* (Lit, 2004) and John. H. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁵¹ See Janet Hodgson, “Ntsikana: history and symbol studies in a process of religious change among Xhosa-speaking people,” (Master’s thesis, University of Cape Town, 1985) and Ezra Vuyisile Tisani, “Nxele and Ntsikana: a critical study of the religious outlooks of two nineteenth century Xhosa Prophets and their consequences for Xhosa Christian practice in the Eastern Cape,” (Master's thesis, University of Cape Town, 1987).

missionary ideas with regard to the written words and concepts of colonised peoples. Landau argues that the concept of religion is “an artefact of Christian encounters with non-Christians. Under the rubric of religion, missionaries and their aides put forth tendentious translations for African expressions”.⁵² This is a mistake according to Landau. The very concepts, translations that are being used by historians without acknowledging the fact that the process of translations was fraught with countless mistranslations and was itself a process of meaning making. Religion is not something which is ahistorical or universal. It is something which emerges from the interactions between Christian missionaries and indigenous people. Missionaries had to translate Christian ideas and concepts into local idioms. In this way missionaries tried to find similarities between the Christian world view and the African world view so that Christianity was made relevant for indigenous communities. It was a creative and dynamic process. Landau ultimately argues that ‘religion’ as a concept is an inappropriate unit of analysis since often scholars have expressed everything that is irrational in African society as religious. Or they have described anything that is concerned with the social in African society as religious. For Landau, no religious system of beliefs or spiritual domain can be thought to have existed before the missionaries introduced those ideas themselves.⁵³

Landau’s critique of materialist historical analysis is also relevant to this study of the Cattle-Killing.

“For social scientists of a materialist mindset, ‘religion’ has thus become something of a dumping ground for cultural phenomena they abhor: faith, personal deprivation, affective motivations, disastrous mass movements. They consign actions that they as scholars do not fully understand, and behaviours that they cannot tie to causative or

⁵² Paul Landau, ““Religion” and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model,” *Journal of Religious History* 23, no. 1 (1999): 11.

⁵³ Paul Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 76.

visible phenomena, to ‘ritual’ and ‘belief.’ Such a propensity closely reflects the ‘false religion’ paradigm found in the earliest missionary ethnographies of African peoples. Social scientists do not admit this inheritance, and indeed ascribe useful functions to religion when they have to deal with it directly, by reading materialist interests into it”.⁵⁴

Historians preoccupied with materialist interpretations, like scholars of any specific school of thought, read material interests into the event. This dissertation will not read materialist interests into the event, nor will it classify actions which appear to be irrational as being religious. While it is not within the scope of this essay to determine whether there were religious beliefs or a spiritual domain in southern Africa before the ideas were introduced by missionaries during colonialism, this dissertation will centre the voices and experiences of those believing and unbelieving Xhosa. It will be shown later on in this study that the believers genuinely held certain religious beliefs. Landau’s critique reminds historians to always be cognisant of using terms as loaded as ‘religion’. This dissertation argues that the Xhosa did have religious beliefs and that these religious beliefs were known by the amaXhosa. The fact that the religious beliefs experienced hybridisation with and was influenced by Christianity does not take away from the fact that many people held these religious beliefs. These beliefs and experiences motivated people to believe Nongqawuse’s prophecies and perform specific activities, and that is certainly worthy of academic analysis.

When trying to map out an understanding of the religious factors which caused the spread of the Cattle-Killing Movement, a narrow approach should not be taken. The nature of African religion and Xhosa religious belief is such that it permeated throughout the life of the individual. There were no clear demarcations between the secular and non-secular because all

⁵⁴ Landau, ““Religion” and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model,” 15.

events were ultimately seen through a religious lens including various symbols and beliefs. Therefore, a broad understanding of the term 'religion' is needed when approaching the central beliefs of the Cattle-Killing Movement. Xhosa religious belief should not be understood in the strict Western conception of the term. As aforementioned, it needs to be acknowledged that the nature of Xhosa traditional religious belief was such that it was present throughout the life and being of the individual. Traditional African religion was flexible as all religions across the world are. Thus, the events of everyday life were not necessarily divided into the modern scholarly distinctions of secular and non-secular. The religious belief was the lens through which the Xhosa understood the world around them and the events which occurred in the world. John Mbiti has done extensive research on African religions. Some of the findings he has made will prove useful when analysing Nongqawuse's prophecies. These findings will also provide an understanding as to why those that believed in those prophecies believed in them in the first place. Mbiti's research touches on the point raised earlier about how traditional religious belief was the lens through which Africans understood their world. Mbiti comments on the individual and stated that:

“Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being. It is this that makes Africans so religious: religion is in their whole system of being”.⁵⁵

Understanding religion as constituting the whole system of the human being changes the way the Cattle-Killing should be understood. This also changes the way the believers of the movement should be understood. For the common believer of the movement understanding the world through a religious lens was quite normal. If understood as primarily a religious movement then the beliefs and practices of the Xhosa moves to the centre of study with the material and structural factors all emanating from the religious factors. Mbiti then goes on

⁵⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990), 3.

further to highlight the holistic nature of African religion and where these beliefs come from. An understanding of where religious beliefs come from is important when trying to understand why the Xhosa wanted to slaughter their cattle. Cattle was a critically essential and highly regarded element in Xhosa society, and it was used in a number of important traditional rituals. Why would the Xhosa destroy one of the most vital aspects of their society which influenced almost every aspect of their life? Belief and faith are two ideals which seem to be ignored in recent scholarship of the movement. Belief drove thousands of Xhosa to destroy their cattle and cease agricultural production. The beliefs of the Xhosa should then not be marginalised or ignored as these beliefs were the very things which sustained the movement even in the face of numerous disappointments. Mbiti illustrates this point when he says:

“What people do is motivated by what they believe, and what they believe springs from what they do and experience. So then, belief and action in African traditional society cannot be separated: they belong to a single whole”.⁵⁶

Because religious belief sprung from what was experienced in daily life, there was a flexible and innovative nature to African religious belief. It was not something static or ossified. Each generation accepted traditions and rituals which could be innovated and used as was needed for the context at the time. African religion was dynamic, able to absorb and explain the occurrences of everyday life and the traumatic events which occurred in the everyday.

The Cattle-Killing Movement needs to be looked at through the lens of the entire being of the person being religious, therefore all events were viewed through religious symbolism.

“National crises like warfare, famines, epidemics, locust invasions and major changes in the weather cause a revival of religious activities or innovative new ones. Since

⁵⁶ Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, 4.

people are so intimately bound up with their religious life and outlook, their history constitutes the history of their religion".⁵⁷

Mbiti describes the outlook of this dissertation perfectly. The history of the Xhosa was bound up with the history of their religion. Chiefs, counsellors and commoners all held onto some form of religious belief. Religious activity was a communal activity and not an individual one. Being part of the community meant partaking in communal religious activity. There is therefore no neat divide between the religious and the material.

Xhosa religious belief

In order to understand the prophecies, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of Xhosa religious belief. The prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse only become digestible after an analysis of how religious beliefs operated within Xhosa society. There are many different aspects of Xhosa religion. Firstly, the veneration of the ancestors formed an integral part of Xhosa religion. Then there were the spirits known as the 'River People'. Another element of Xhosa religion was the role played by Cattle during ritual sacrificial. Finally, the diviners and prophets provided advice and guidance to the Xhosa on all religious matters. This chapter will analyse the place of the ancestors within the Xhosa worldview as well as the spirits known as the 'River People'. The function of cattle specifically within the ritual practice of sacrifice will also be elucidated. Diviners and prophets occupied a unique place within Xhosa society, and this will be teased out. The interactions between Xhosa and Christian religious beliefs will also be discussed. Much has been said about the influence of Christianity through missionary activity on Xhosa religious belief. It will be beneficial to reconsider the supposed influence of Christianity on Xhosa religion generally. The exact influence of Christianity on the prophecies will be discussed in the following chapter, as chapter four deals with the prophecies in more

⁵⁷ Ibid., 5.

detail. This chapter seeks to draw out the relevant aspects of Xhosa religious life and show how these factors all played a role in the belief in the prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse. It will not be possible to provide a fully detailed description of Xhosa religious belief because of the limited scope of this dissertation. Many books could be written about African and Xhosa religious belief. This chapter will only be considering the parts of Xhosa religious belief that are relevant to understand the prophecies of Nongqawuse.

Xhosa religion in the homestead

An important part of African, and Xhosa, religion is the concept of space and spatiality. Chidester argues that there is a way of organising the religious elements of African religion into a system. This can be done through a set of symbolic maps. These set of symbolic maps include the domestic sphere of the homestead and the wild, the uncontrollable.⁵⁸

“Within the centered space of the homestead, the ancestors and ancestor spirits maintained order, bestowed blessings, and protected the family from evil. Beyond the boundaries of that centered world, however, the wild forest region held evil spirits, demons, and witch familiars that threatened to unsettle the domestic order anchored in the homestead”.⁵⁹

African religion operates within this spatiality, with each space representing a different part of the religious life. The homestead was the space of the ancestors, and this was necessary because the ancestors provided protection from the wild which was considered an evil space. The wild contained a different set of religious connotations. There were spirits in the wild that were malevolent and the order of the homestead. Between these two spaces, the homestead and the wild forest region, there is a liminal space “associated with the rivers in which spirits lingered, especially the ‘River People,’ who were ambivalent, sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful,

⁵⁸ David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa* (Routledge, 2014), 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

in their interactions with human beings”.⁶⁰ The homestead, which is usually stable, became a site of tension and conflict during the 19th century. The loss of land due to the expansion of the frontier, and of colonial rule in general, meant that the homestead increasingly came under heavy strain. The homestead suffered strain when religious practices associated with it were not followed as had been the status quo. There were certain rituals and practices followed by the Xhosa during the period of mourning and burying of the dead. Part of the traditional funeral practices was for the family of the deceased to go down to the river to wash and cleanse themselves. Death was seen as a form of defilement and going to the river was seen as washing away that defilement. Following on with this concept of defilement, the house of the deceased was also immediately pulled down.⁶¹ Due to the loss of land suffered by the Xhosa, as a result of colonial expansion, this practice of pulling down the house of the deceased could no longer be followed. Furthermore, Xhosa movement was increasingly constricted during the 19th century. The defilement of death would therefore follow the deceased’s family as they continued to live in the same homestead. This is but one example of how the homestead was placed under strain before the prophecies of Nongqawuse. This also as an example of the negative impact of colonialism on the psyche of the Xhosa. The traditional rituals of mourning the dead could no longer be followed properly because of loss of land and colonial encroachment. The external forces of the wild seemed to be encroaching on the homestead more and more. The forces of colonialism could be viewed as belonging to the part of the wild region that was malevolent. As a result of this malevolent colonial encroachment the liminal space, associated with rivers, became more relevant. The liminal space, with the help of the ‘River People’, offered a promise of rebirth and renewal.

⁶⁰ Ibid.,

⁶¹ William Wellington Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, edited by Jeff Opland, Wandile Kuse and Pamela Maseko (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015), 223.

An example of how the homestead gets put under strain during the movement can be seen through the infighting among family members. There were those family members who believed in the prophecies and those who did not. Gqoba notes how families bickered over whether they should kill their cattle or not. Fathers argued with their sons. Brothers argued with each other over the prophecies too.⁶² Widowed mothers also implored their sons to kill their cattle in the hopes that their long-deceased husbands would be resurrected. The mother of Chief Sandile, the Senior Chief of the Ngqika Xhosa and Senior Chief of British Kaffraria, encouraged him to kill his cattle as she was a widow.⁶³ The homestead was a contested space after the prophecies of Nongqawuse started being picked up by believers. This will be discussed further in chapter four.

The role of cattle in ritual sacrifice

Cattle in Xhosa society was a means of subsistence, source of material wealth and played a significant role in ritual and religious sacrifice. Cattle served a host of religious and social functions as well. The sociologist Mongameli Mabona makes the statement that:

“Everybody knows that cattle were a very important factor in Xhosa life. In fact, according to reports in the Stuart archive, the Xhosa lived a semi-nomadic life ‘always following their herd’. But, even among the Xhosa, the cattle belonged to the chief in the first place. The foundation herd...were called ezase bukhosini (the royal heard) among the Xhosa according to Soga”.⁶⁴

The function and role of cattle has often been the focus of intense study with regard to southern African societies and Xhosa society. Notably, there has been a lot of focus on *ukulobola*, or

⁶² Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 469.

⁶³ J. B. Peires, “‘Soft’ Believers and ‘Hard’ Unbelievers in the Xhosa Cattle-Killing,” *The Journal of African History* 27, no. 3 (1986): 453.

⁶⁴ Mongameli Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history* (Lit, 2004), 186.

bridewealth, and its function within Xhosa society. This, however, will not be discussed here. Rather, it is interesting to note some of the sacrificial functions of cattle that is pertinent to the Cattle-Killing Movement. Gqoba provides examples of the various situations in which the sacrifice of cattle was necessary, i.e., during times of trouble. For instance, there were situations where cattle were used to rescue someone who had fallen victim to the river, *umlambo*. The *ingwenya*, or crocodile, was said to have the power to attract people to the river through the use of its eyes. The *ingwenya* was known as the spirit-king of the river. The friends of the drowned individual were supposed to bring a number of cattle to the river for the *ingwenya* to make his choice. Once the sacrifice had been made, and the cattle given, it was said that the body of the individual would be released and come to the surface of the water.⁶⁵ Cattle was also used for the purposes of mourning. Part of the mourning period of the deceased included the breaking of the fast. People from other homesteads would come and sympathise with the family of the deceased. There were specific rituals concerning the breaking of the fast that included consuming all of the meat and scattering the entrails of the slain animal within the cattle kraal.⁶⁶

Cattle was used in warding off calamity and this needs to be stressed. Cattle had the ability to appease the spirit world. *Inkomo yobulunga* was a cow given to a woman with the purpose of warding off a calamity. This was done because of the advice given by a diviner. If the advice was followed properly then all would be well with the afflicted woman. Cattle was therefore used as a means of appeasing the spirit of the ancestors.⁶⁷ Ritual sacrifice was usually made to appease the ancestors. The ancestors were able to communicate with the Xhosa through cattle

⁶⁵ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 220.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

and through the use of diviners.⁶⁸ It is therefore necessary to discuss the ancestors and the role that they played in Xhosa religious belief.

The ancestors

The ancestors hold a revered position within Xhosa religious belief. This dissertation will not be able to provide a full analysis of the role of the ancestors in Xhosa life, but it is hoped that a sufficient explanation will be given for the purposes of this dissertation. Authority and power in Xhosa society was “held and exercised in fealty to the ancestors. Both the chief and the diviner in the exercise of their duties profess allegiance to the ancestors”.⁶⁹ All of Xhosa society operated with reference to the influence of the ancestors on everyday life. The ancestors had immense power. They were able to “trigger or manipulate all the cosmic phenomena and processes like rain, drought, lightning, storm, sickness, healthy, fertility” amongst others.⁷⁰ The events that occurred within the natural world were viewed as having taken place due to the power of the ancestors. If misfortune befell an individual or a family it was either explained in relation to malevolent witchcraft or due to the ancestors being displeased. Often when an individual was ill a diviner would declare that it was caused by one of the individual’s ancestors. For some reason the ancestor was dissatisfied and therefore a sacrifice needed to be made to that ancestor.⁷¹ If there were disruptions in the outside world that influenced the homestead then pleas were made to the ancestors for help. The ancestors protected the homestead, *umzi*. Each homestead was to be protected by the clan ancestors of the head of the homestead. It was also said that the ancestors surrounded the homestead. There was a special abode for the ancestors in the homestead. This was the cattle kraal, *ubuhlanti*, and the space

⁶⁸ Clifton C. Crais, “Shapes in a Land,” in *The making of the colonial order: White supremacy and black resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865* (Witwatersrand University Press, 1992), 22.

⁶⁹ Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history*, 314.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁷¹ John Henderson Soga, *The Ama-Xosa* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 149.

between the cattle kraal and the huts, *inkundla*.⁷² The homestead was therefore the abode of the ancestors. This once again indicates the important position and role the ancestors held within Xhosa society. If the ancestors had the power over the forces of rain, drought and sickness it was not impossible to imagine that they had the power to bring about a renewal of the earth.

In post-colonial interpretation of the function of the ancestors it has been argued that their influence could have been reimagined for anti-colonial purposes. There was a potential for ancestors to provide:

“a frame of reference that could discount the white, colonial presence in South Africa. In that respect, it might be argued, ancestor religion assumed a new, more urgent character in the nineteenth century. Identified with the homestead, the land, and a specific locality, the ancestors might have become even more crucial as a spiritual anchor that tied people to places that were being threatened and destabilized by European colonial encroachment”.⁷³

This account of the ancestors depicts them as being a religious and social anchor during times of distress. The 19th century was a period of extreme stress and conflict for the Xhosa. The ancestors could potentially challenge the destructive and destabilising colonial presence in southern Africa. Supplications to the ancestors take on a more pressing nature for the amaXhosa during this period of history. In this interpretation of the movement the Cattle-Killing was an indirect form of anticolonial response. The Cattle-Killing was not a direct or a necessarily violent anticolonial movement. The Cattle-Killing should be viewed as a religious exercise which sought to bring harmony and peace to the Xhosa through rebirth and renewal. It was a ‘starting over’ as it were. The ancestors were central to this process of rebirth and

⁷² Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history*, 318.

⁷³ Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 13.

renewal. The ancestors were the frame of reference with which to encounter the malevolent external world.

The ‘River People’

Between the homestead and the wild region was the liminal area which was occupied by spirits who usually inhabited bodies of water like rivers. Clifton Crais argues that “the cult of the ancestors and the river people were inextricably linked with power and authority in Xhosa society”.⁷⁴ It is necessary to draw out the influence of the ‘River People’ in Xhosa society and consider whether they share any similarity to the people that Nongqawuse encountered at the Gxarha River. Crais describes the ‘River People’ as a primordial people who were present at the beginning of creation according to Xhosa tradition. The ‘River People’, or *abantu bomlambo*, were connected to the myth of creation. The ‘River People’ “occupied an ambiguous space between the ‘wild’ and the ‘tame’. Water in a sense connected the ‘wild’ forest, from whence water flowed, with the homestead”.⁷⁵

Were the people who approached Nongqawuse at the Gxarha River seen as the same ‘River People’ that were connected to the myth of creation? Did the followers of the movement associate the river people Nongqawuse encountered with this important part of Xhosa creation mythology? While there cannot be a conclusive answer to these above questions it can be inferred that the believers may have made the association. Diviners were known to communicate with the ancestors, but they were also known to communicate with the spirits of the river.⁷⁶ The Xhosa who heard of Nongqawuse’s prophecies could possibly have had made these associations in their mind. The spirits that appeared to Nongqawuse could very well have been the same ‘River People’ who were associated with damp and water spaces. All of the

⁷⁴ Crais, “Shapes in a Land,” 23.

⁷⁵ Ibid.,

⁷⁶ Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 4.

Xhosa had some idea of the people who lived in the water. The creation myth describes how the Xhosa and all animals emerged out of a cave or reeds and spread across the country. The ‘River People’, however, stayed behind. The ‘River People’ had their own chiefs, clans and herds of cattle.⁷⁷

Diviners

This chapter has so far discussed, among other things, the role of cattle in sacrifice, the place of the ancestors within Xhosa society and the liminal space occupied by the ‘River People’. It has not, however, touched on the group of people who were intimately involved with all of these various aspects of Xhosa religious practice, namely the diviners. One of the most important parts of Xhosa religious life was the institution of divinerhood. The likes of Nxele and Mlanjeni were diviners as well as Mhlakaza, with Nongqawuse traditionally being considered as an initiate diviner.

Diviners were considered

“sacred specialists with greater religious knowledge, power, and prestige. The diviner - *igqira* (Xhosa), *isangoma* (Zulu), or *ngaka* (Sotho-Tswana) - was the most important sacred specialist in African traditional religion. The diviner was expert in discerning the cause of any misfortune, whether the cause was the work of witches or the wrath of ancestors. The role of diviner was acquired by means of a special calling, often suggested by the onset of an illness thought to have been sent by the ancestors”.⁷⁸

The diviners held the greatest amount of religious knowledge and were consulted regarding all spiritual matters. Brownlee notes how there were no public teachings regarding religious matters. The religious matters were communicated by the initiated few. Religious knowledge

⁷⁷ Crais, “Shapes in a Land,” 22.

⁷⁸ Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 18.

was passed down from previous diviners.⁷⁹ As has briefly been touched on earlier, the assistance of diviners was of importance in making sense of the world. With the chaotic events that occurred during the 19th century the importance of their vocation grew even more. Diviners offered guidance to common Xhosa during the course of everyday life, with regards to any illnesses or troubles that were faced. Soga describes how when a person was sick a diviner was called. It was then suggested that a sacrifice be made to the ancestral spirits.⁸⁰ As aforementioned, sacrifices made to ancestors was a way of ensuring that the affliction that individuals or communities suffered was relieved. These sacrifices were only done after a consultation with the diviner.

Gqoba details that there are at least twelve types of diviners. The ones of relevance to this essay are the *amacamagu*, diviners or fortune-tellers, the *awamashologu*, charmers or seers, and the *amagogo*, seers. The *amagogo*, seers, were viewed as the worst kind of diviners as they lead to the destruction of whole tribes. Nxele, Mlanjeni, Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza all fall within this category of diviners.⁸¹ These diviners claimed to have communication with the spirit world and the guardian spirits, known as the *iminyama*. The guardian spirits provided them with the knowledge of medicines while they underwent the ceremony of initiation, *ukutwasa*. Gqoba notes that the Xhosa “implicitly believe in guardian-spirits and their invisible presence”.⁸²

There were three domains of power which operated within traditional African religion. These were the homestead, the chiefdom and the disciplines of sacred specialists.⁸³ The sacred specialist, or diviner, is the domain of power that will be focused on as this was the domain within in which Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza operated. The institution of diviners operated between the homestead and the chiefdom. Diviners held a marginal position in Xhosa society

⁷⁹ Charles Brownlee, “A fragment on Xhosa religious beliefs,” *African Studies* 14, no.1 (1955): 38.

⁸⁰ Soga, *The Ama-Xosa*, 148.

⁸¹ Gqoba, “The native tribes, their laws, customs and beliefs (1885),” 225.

⁸² *Ibid.*,

⁸³ Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 4.

and offered their services to both the homestead and the chiefdom. This was because diviners had access to spiritual power that could help in times of distress. These powers

“could heal, protect, and strengthen either the homestead of the chiefdom; but that power belonged to neither domain because it was achieved through the specialized, privileged initiation and discipline of the sacred specialist”.⁸⁴

Mhlakaza was such a specialist, and it is believed that Nongqawuse was a trainee specialist as well and that she was undergoing the initiation process.⁸⁵ It will be discussed in chapter four, where the prophecies are discussed in detail, how the experiences and behaviour of the believers were similar to that of the candidate diviners. There is a remarkable similarity, and this deserves attention.

It is necessary to provide a brief description of the diviner initiation process, *thwasa*. The initiation of Xhosa sacred specialists, i.e., diviners followed the pattern of separation, liminality and then reincorporation into the society.⁸⁶ The candidate would cut themselves off from society and usually refused to eat food cooked in the usual manner. This is similar to refusal of Mlanjeni to eat the food prepared for him by his family. The candidate diviner would reject society and survive off the food provided by nature. In this process of rejecting society, the candidate was supposed to feel an irresistible urge “to enter a deep pool in a river or to penetrate into the depths of a forest”.⁸⁷ In the river the candidate was equipped with the power to heal by the ‘River People’, *abantu bomlambo*. There are notably two classes of diviner associated with the river and forest respectively. The *igqirha lomlambo* was the river diviner.⁸⁸ It would be interesting to consider whether Nongqawuse would have been an *igqirha lomlambo* if the

⁸⁴ Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 5.

⁸⁵ Peires, “‘Soft’ Believers and ‘Hard’ Unbelievers in the Xhosa Cattle-Killing,” 452.

⁸⁶ Jeff Peires, “The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing,” *The Journal of African History* 28, no. 1 (1987): 53.

⁸⁷ Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history*, 322.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*,

Cattle-Killing Movement had turned out differently. The calling to the vocation entailed the push felt by the candidate to go to either the river or the depths of the forest and the pull of the 'River People' or ancestors that the candidate should come and be initiated. This push-pull process is known as *ubiziwe*.⁸⁹ The candidate would then hear voices that were unknown. The conversations held with these voices were about subjects and topics that were incomprehensible for the common person to understand. Finally, if an experienced diviner believed that this was a genuine vocational calling then the candidate would begin training.⁹⁰

Xhosa and Christian religious belief

Xhosa and Christian religious beliefs should not be viewed as competing discourses. Although this has often been the perspective scholars have taken, it is not actually wholly accurate. Through the accounts of African Christians, it is evident that there was no contradiction between wanting to have traditional ceremonies and being a devout Christian.⁹¹ Any African who came into contact with Christian ideas, whether convert or not, had to understand those ideas through "their own African idioms and vocabularies, in a piecemeal fashion".⁹² It is therefore important that Xhosa and Christian beliefs should not be viewed as competing discourses. People were able to hybridise Xhosa and Christian beliefs without it seeming contradictory and without tension.

In many of the accounts of the Cattle-Killing Movement the interactions between Xhosa and Christian religious beliefs have been stressed. The influence of Christian ideas on the amaXhosa have been identified as one of the causes of the Cattle-Killing. One of the ways in which it has been shown that the visions of Nongqawuse incorporated Christian ideas is through previous examples of the Xhosa prophets using Christian ideas. This is evident in the

⁸⁹ Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history*, 322.

⁹⁰ Peires, "The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing," 53.

⁹¹ Landau, "Religion" and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model," 11.

⁹² *Ibid.*,

prophecies given by the diviners Nxele and Mlanjeni. Nxele and Mlanjeni were war-doctors who were directly involved in wars against the colonial government in 1819 and 1850-53 respectively. It has been argued that these prophets “combined elements of Christianity with Xhosa religious ideas producing their own theologies”.⁹³ The Cattle-Killing could therefore be viewed as a continuation of the tradition of combining Christian and Xhosa religious beliefs. It is argued that there was clearly a pattern of this happening and that the visions and prophecies of Nongqawuse fell within this pattern. These sorts of assumptions need to be re-examined and will be problematised. For one there is no clear indication that Nongqawuse was at any time directly influenced by Christianity nor that she had been meaningfully exposed to Christianity.

In relation to the influence of Christianity on Xhosa religious belief, Gqoba notes that the Xhosa had a distinct belief in many of the religious concepts or ideas that were said to have originated from Christianity. According to Gqoba, these religious beliefs were not what the Xhosa may have heard from their contact with Christian missionaries. The Xhosa had a religion “before the missionary was heard of. They acknowledged the existence of a Supreme Being, who created all things, and who dwells in the Heavens, whose power is infinite”.⁹⁴ Landau would argue that Gqoba is reading evangelical ideas into this account. Gqoba is arguing that the Xhosa have always known religion because they have always known God.⁹⁵

This seems to stand in contradiction with many claims from the contemporary studies done on the Cattle-Killing Movement as well as the influence of Christianity on the religious beliefs of the Xhosa. Some scholars, like Peires, have argued strongly for the Christian influence in the prophecies.⁹⁶ The prophecies themselves are argued to emanate from a Christian theological foundation. This will be discussed further in chapter four where the prophecies are discussed

⁹³ Jack Lewis, “Materialism and Idealism in the Historiography of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement 1856–7,” *South African Historical Journal* 25, no.1 (1991): 245.

⁹⁴ Gqoba, “The native tribes, their laws, customs and beliefs (1885),” 227.

⁹⁵ Landau, ““Religion” and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model,” 15.

⁹⁶ Peires, “The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing,” 57.

in detail. This is not to say that Christian religious ideas were not absorbed within Xhosa religious belief. Xhosa religion being flexible and innovative is different from viewing it as missing core beliefs that Christianity could fill. There is no need to assume that there was a religious longing for Christianity among the Xhosa. In relation to the Cattle-Killing there is not a convincing argument to state that the movement 'owed its very existence to biblical doctrines'. The flexible nature of Xhosa religion meant that it could absorb aspects of Christian belief that supported and reinforced Xhosa mythology. The influence of Christianity on Xhosa belief/religion should not be viewed in the sense that it completely overruled Xhosa religion. The flexible nature of Xhosa religion meant that it absorbed Christian ideas that were useful to its continued existence. Instead of Christianity destabilising Xhosa religion it could be argued that it in fact did the opposite. Christian ideas were similar to Xhosa ideas and therefore were incorporated within Xhosa religious belief. This is evident through the example of the unsuccessful missionary activity of Dr Johannes Theodoras Vanderkemp among the amaXhosa in the early 19th century. While his missionary activity predates the Cattle-Killing it provides a useful sketch of the impact of Christian missionary activity among the amaXhosa. Dr Vanderkemp had few converts and struggled translating Christian theological terms into Xhosa.⁹⁷ It was not so much that the amaXhosa wholly adopted Christian teaching which supplanted their beliefs. The Xhosa response to Vanderkemp's preaching was to incorporate his teachings into their own religious beliefs.

The analysis Gqoba makes on Xhosa religion also has direct relevance to the prophecies of Nongqawuse and what those prophecies represented. The Xhosa believed in a future world and that they had immortal souls. There was also the belief in good and bad spirits.⁹⁸ This relates to the nature of the prophecies of Nongqawuse. Clearly there were beliefs within Xhosa religion

⁹⁷ Janet Hodgson, "Do we hear you Nyengana? Dr. JT Vanderkemp and the First Mission to the Xhosa," *Religion in Southern Africa* 5, no. 1 (1984): 17.

⁹⁸ Gqoba, "The native tribes, their laws, customs and beliefs (1885)," 228.

that made them predisposed to believe the visions and prophecies. An example of how the Xhosa believed in the immortality of the human being is through an important ritual practice in the traditional burial ceremony that was discontinued after contact with Western culture. This was the ritual of placing of certain objects of daily use on the grave together with the corpse. The grave goods were meant for the permanent use of the deceased. The articles of daily use that were deposited on the grave “were considered to be always ample, inexhaustible and everlasting”.⁹⁹ This is a clear example that demonstrates that the Xhosa had an understanding of the immortality of the human being and the cosmic order. The physical objects were perishable but they represented imperishable objects and the “immortality of the cosmic order”.¹⁰⁰ It has been argued that the very idea of the resurrection of the dead that was present in the prophecies of Nongqawuse were due to the “Xhosa belief that the dead do not really die or depart from the world of the living”.¹⁰¹ All of the above religious beliefs are connected and find their fruition in the prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse.

Xhosa prophets and religious activity

An aspect of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7 that is widely contested and relates directly to religion is the debate around Nongqawuse’s uncle Mhlakaza. One of the findings Peires makes in *The Dead Will Arise* is that Mhlakaza was also known as Wilhelm Goliath. Mhlakaza, Peires claims, was also the personal servant of Nathaniel James Merriman who was the Archdeacon of Grahamstown. Peires argues that it was this “relationship which was to change Wilhelm’s life, and the whole course of South African history with it”.¹⁰² Scholars like Sheila Boniface Davies have argued that this discovery was significant because it explained the Christian content in the prophecies. Davies argues that this finding has become part of the

⁹⁹ Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history* 317.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.,

¹⁰¹ Peires, “The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing,” 63.

¹⁰² Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 61.

academic and official narrative of the Cattle-Killing.¹⁰³ It was Mhlakaza, formerly Wilhelm Goliath, who introduced into Nongqawuse's prophecies certain Christian themes and elements.¹⁰⁴ While this dissertation is not in a position to make any pronouncements on the Mhlakaza-Goliath debate this debate highlights the importance of religious belief and experience in the study of the Cattle-Killing. Where the Christian elements of Nongqawuse's prophecies actually arose from has been a matter of debate for many years. This dissertation will highlight the similarities between Christian and Xhosa elements in Nongqawuse's prophecies. The interactions of Christian and Xhosa beliefs resulted in creative and hybrid forms of religious belief. The elements present in Nongqawuse's prophecies should not be viewed as simply being borrowings of Christian elements. The situation was far more complex. The elements present in Nongqawuse's prophecies should be viewed as creative combinations between Christian and Xhosa religious elements.

Prior to the prophecies of Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza, the amaXhosa were also captured by the prophecies of other notable prophets, or diviners. The 19th century was a period of great social change for the amaXhosa. It was a period of social, economic and military upheaval. In the 19th century, the Xhosa engaged in a number of conflicts with the expanding colonial government and experienced significant losses of land and of life. As this was occurring religious zeal also gripped the amaXhosa. Prophets, or diviners, had always provided guidance and assistance to chiefs during times of conflict. Therefore, it is certainly important to provide the social context and the spiritual experiences that took place before the prophecies of Nongqawuse's. Two famous diviners will be briefly discussed. These two diviners are Nxele, also known as Makhanda, and Mlanjeni, also known as the Riverman. Nxele and Mlanjeni have

¹⁰³ Sheila Boniface Davies, "Raising the dead: the Xhosa Cattle-Killing and the Mhlakaza-Goliath delusion," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33, no. 1 (2007): 19.

¹⁰⁴ Davies, "Raising the dead: the Xhosa Cattle-Killing and the Mhlakaza-Goliath delusion," 21.

been used as examples of Xhosa prophets combining element of Christian and Xhosa religious beliefs for the purpose of anti-colonial struggles.

Nxele was a wardoctor of the Chief Ndlambe. He gained much fame for being known as an *indoli*, a seer.¹⁰⁵ Nxele was a special type of diviner. In May of 1819, Nxele clashed with colonial forces in the colonial town then known as Grahamstown, now known as Makhanda. Nxele and his forces were defeated, and he was sent as a prisoner to Robben Island.¹⁰⁶ Nxele would later die trying to escape Robben Island. Before his death and imprisonment, however, Nxele did prophesy that a “great day was coming, a day on which the people who passed away would rise again from the dead and the witches would be cast into damnation under the earth”.¹⁰⁷ Nxele had also stated that he would make a reappearance and many of the amaXhosa believed this and were patiently waiting his return.¹⁰⁸ Peires argues that the Xhosa would be captured by another prophet who reminded them of Nxele, many years later. This prophet was the Riverman, or Mlanjeni, whose name would be given to the Xhosa war with the colonial government between 1850-53, the War of Mlanjeni. Hodgson argues that Nxele’s prophecies attempted to manipulate the Xhosa and that his understanding of Christianity closed down on the growth between Xhosa religious belief and Christianity.¹⁰⁹ This dissertation will not pass judgements on the role of diviners nor on their apparent militant nature. It is clear that Nxele was a prophet who arose during a period of acute crisis in Xhosa society.

Focusing on the second prophet Mlanjeni, he was said to have lived in the forests and the wild as a youth. When he was at home he refused to eat the food that his family offered and prepared for him. Mlanjeni considered the food to be unclean not because the food itself was full of sin,

¹⁰⁵ Mongameli Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history* (Lit, 2004), 301.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁰⁷ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 24.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*,

¹⁰⁹ Janet Hodgson, “Ntsikana: history and symbol studies in a process of religious change among Xhosa-speaking people.” (Master’s thesis, University of Cape Town, 1985), iv.

but rather because it had been prepared by unclean or sinful hands.¹¹⁰ The South African anthropologist Mongameli Mabona notes that these practices were common of initiate or candidate diviners.

“Their foremost concern is to avoid or get rid of umlaza (uncleanness). Mlanjeni carried the exercise of this asceticism to extreme limits to the extent of living almost exclusively in the wild, immersed most of the time up to his neck in a river pool. His food consisted only of ants’ eggs and wild spinach and fruits”.¹¹¹

Mlanjeni taught that the evils of sorcery did not consist in individual acts of sorcery but rather was “the result of an inner disposition for which the individual was not accountable”.¹¹² Mlanjeni did not believe in the killing of witches and therefore did not order for the killing of witches. Rather, he ordered that the suspected witches be brought to him so that he could heal them. Mlanjeni healed the afflicted through the erection of two witchcraft poles or ‘poles of power’ which the afflicted were asked to walk through.¹¹³

The messages preached by these two diviners reveal interesting religious beliefs that were circulating among the Xhosa prior to the time of Nongqawuse. Firstly, according to Nxele there would one day be a period of resurrection of the dead. Secondly, according to Mlanjeni there was *ubuthi*, evil substances, that were poisoning the earth. The evil of sorcery was also not the individuals’ fault but was rather to be considered more like a disease. The resurrection of the dead and the cleansing of the pollution of the earth will become important when considering the prophecies of Nongqawuse in detail. Nongqawuse’s vision draws on similar anticolonial prophecies expressed by Nxele and Mlanjeni. Mlanjeni’s promises included “invulnerability to bullets, driving whites into the sea, and the return of fallen warriors, to be achieved by limited

¹¹⁰ Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history*, 305.

¹¹¹ Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history*, 305

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 306.

¹¹³ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 25.

sacrifices of cattle, noncultivation, and the cessation of witchcraft”.¹¹⁴ While Nongqawuse’s prophecies and visions did not include sentiments that were as violent as those of Nxele’s and Mlanjeni’s visions, they did contain anticolonial sentiments. There are certainly many correlations and differences between the messages of Nxele and Mlanjeni and that of Nongqawuse. This brief sketch of the religious activity before the prophecies of Nongqawuse are important in understanding the context the amaXhosa found themselves in. Religious sentiments of uncleanness, the practicing of witchcraft and the rising of the dead were all circulating within the social and religious realms of Xhosa society. It therefore would not come as a surprise to the Xhosa if a new prophet arose that spoke in a similar way and preached a similar message. Thus, the prophecies of Nongqawuse would certainly have resonated with the some of the amaXhosa.

¹¹⁴ Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of anticolonial prophecy in South Africa and beyond*, 19.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROPHECIES OF NONGQAWUSE

A note on the text

Since the account of Gqoba is prominently used in this study it is prudent to analyse how the text has been considered, mediated and translated. How these mediations impact on its legibility and the understanding of the concepts used within the text is also very important. As previously discussed, the article *Isizatu sokuxelwa kwe nkomo ngo Nongqause: The motive for the Nongqawuse cattle-killing (1888)* is a seminal work in the history of the Cattle-Killing Movement. However, translations of Gqoba's account into English have not always been accurate to the writer's intended purposes. Bradford notes how the English version of Gqoba's account was a "savagely edited rendition of the original, which had been chopped in half, rewritten, translated, published in a literary forum, and introduced with the suggestion that a poet was reminiscing about his youth".¹¹⁵ The translated account used in this study is that of Opland Collection of Xhosa Literature. This translation was edited and revised by three editors, Jeff Opland, Wandile Kuse and Pamela Maseko, who sought to adhere to the spelling, grammar and content of the original.¹¹⁶ The aim of the collection is to "celebrate the life and literary achievements of William Wellington Gqoba, respectfully to reclaim and preserve Gqoba's writings, and to make them accessible to the Xhosa reading public and to a wider audience both in South Africa and elsewhere".¹¹⁷ The original text is situated in a revisionist, anti-colonial historiography of the emerging black middle class during the end of the nineteenth century in South Africa. The translated account is situated within the wave of recent publications of previously marginalised or ignored black South African historians. The intended purpose of

¹¹⁵ Helen Bradford, "Akukho Ntaka Inokubhabha Ngephiko Elinye (No Bird Can Fly on One Wing): The 'Cattle-Killing Delusion' and Black Intellectuals, c1840–1910," *African Studies* 67, no. 2 (2008): 219.

¹¹⁶ William Wellington Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, edited by Jeff Opland, Wandile Kuse and Pamela Maseko (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015), 36.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

these publications is to situate these writings within their rightful place in South African history.

It is not necessary here to provide a biography of Gqoba's life, but it is relevant to note that Gqoba belonged to the black middle class who increasingly thought of history as a nationalist issue.¹¹⁸ As any historian is influenced by their political and social environment, so too was Gqoba. Gqoba wrote during a period where his social class increasingly came under attack through colonial legislation. Significant portions of the black elite were disenfranchised in 1887.¹¹⁹ Gqoba's account is not a first-hand account but rather a compilation of accounts given by peasants who were actively involved during the era of Nongqawuse. Due to the political environment of the time, it is quite evident that Gqoba's account of the Cattle-Killing Movement is a rebuttal of colonial historiography's analysis of the so-called 'Cattle-Killing Delusion'. Scholars like Bradford have argued that Gqoba's account should be read as revisionist scholarship.¹²⁰ An argument that runs through Gqoba's account, which is relevant to this dissertation, is the analysis of peasant beliefs and actions "during Nongqawuse's era as a religion, breaking with colonial accounts of 'delusion'".¹²¹ This directly relates to one of the arguments made in this study, that the religious aspects of the Cattle-Killing Movement have been given insufficient attention by materialists. Gqoba's account is influenced by his Africanised Christianity and this is evident through the religious language used in his account. This is evident in concepts such as souls, resurrection and feeding the hungry.

Gqoba's account is a necessary historical text. It prioritises the figure of Nongqawuse as a central figure in the Cattle-Killing Movement. His account contexts the colonial accounts of a

¹¹⁸ Bradford, "Akukho Ntaka Inokubhabha Ngephiko Elinye (No Bird Can Fly on One Wing): The 'Cattle-Killing Delusion' and Black Intellectuals, c1840–1910," 217.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*,

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

‘delusion’. His account also prioritises the views and language of the peasants.¹²² Gqoba’s background as a Christian meant that he was able to intimately understand the language used by believers. Whether he was reinterpreting the accounts of the believers through an Africanised Christian perspective or was accurately capturing the accounts of the believers is an issue that remains unresolved.

At the Gxarha River

In the year 1856 two adolescent girls were driving away birds near a homestead by the Gxarha River in Gcalekaland. Two strangers arrived and spoke to these girls, saying that “the entire *umzi* is about to rise from the place of death, and also that all cattle that are present must be slaughtered, for they have been bred by polluted hands, for people who handle *ubuthi*, poison, are present as well”.¹²³ The account goes on to say that no one listened to these girls when they went home and told the community about what had happened to them. It was only after the involvement of Nongqawuse’s uncle, Mhlakaza, that the prophecies started to be believed and circulate among the amaXhosa and their chiefs. Most importantly, the prophecies were believed by the Senior Chief of the Gcaleka Xhosa and King of all the Xhosa, Sarhili. These prophecies, through the intermediaries of Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza spread throughout the Xhosa nation. The amaXhosa were told to:

“prepare new grain pits, strengthen their houses, refrain from witchcraft and incest, and await the return of the ancestors, who would bring with them herds of new cattle and piles of grain. The world would be renewed, with Europeans and unbelievers driven into the sea”.¹²⁴

¹²² Bradford, “Akukho Ntaka Inokubhabha Ngephiko Elinye (No Bird Can Fly on One Wing): The ‘Cattle-Killing Delusion’ and Black Intellectuals, c1840–1910,” 223.

¹²³ Helen Bradford and Msokoli Qotole, ““Ingxoxo enkulu ngoNongqawuse” (A Great Debate About Nongqawuse’s Era),” *Kronos* 34, no. 1 (2008): 75.

¹²⁴ Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of anticolonial prophecy in South Africa and beyond* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 19.

Nongqawuse was said to be the only one who was able to communicate with and understand these spirits from the water. The spirits from the water later revealed themselves to be ancestors. With the prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse spreading among the Xhosa, both commoners and chiefs, started visiting the Gxarha River. Mhlakaza was dependent on Nongqawuse and translated her communications with the spirits to the people who visited.¹²⁵ In Gqoba's account he provides an example of a delegation who went to visit Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza. In this account Nongqawuse told the visitors to look towards the sea. When the people looked towards the direction Nongqawuse suggested they "seemed to see actual people, with bulls bellowing, and oxen, a shadowy concourse constantly moving in and out of sight, then disappearing under the towering ocean waves, and everyone then began to believe".¹²⁶ To further support the validity of Nongqawuse's visions rumours spread that in certain places "the horns of cattle were seen to appear, cows were heard lowing for their newborn calves, dogs were heard barking, milkers were heard humming to the calves they were milking".¹²⁷ The prophecies of Nongqawuse certainly captured the religious spirit of many Xhosa. The movement gained significant impetus and speed after Sarhili sent messages to the Xhosa chiefs, like Sandile Senior Chief of the Ngqika Xhosa and Phatho Senior Chief of the Gqunukhwebe Xhosa. Sarhili indicated that on a particular visit to the Gxarha River he had seen these new people and that he had been instructed to "kill cattle, refrain from sowing, put away charms and send messages to" the chiefs to follow these instructions.¹²⁸ The supporting of the Cattle-Killing by the Paramount Chief Sarhili in many ways pushed the movement forward. Peires details how Sarhili issued formal commands, *imiyolelo*, ordering the chiefs and amaXhosa to follow the instructions coming from the prophecies. Sarhili publicly slaughtered one of his

¹²⁵ Jeff Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2003), 111.

¹²⁶ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 465.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹²⁸ John Zarwan, "The Xhosa Cattle Killings, 1856-57," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 16, no. 63/64 (1976): 523.

favourite oxen to show his support of the movement.¹²⁹ The chiefs in the area known as British Kaffraria initially hesitated but eventually most complied with the orders. The Cattle-Killing “spread from east of the Kei to the Ndlambe and Ngqika Xhosa”.¹³⁰ The prophecies precipitated a period of miracles and religious phenomena circulating in the country:

“Armies were seen marching on the sea; others were sailing in umbrellas. Cattle were heard knocking horns; some people even saw them peeping out from the marshes. Dead men sent pathetic appeals to their decedents not to delay their coming any longer”.¹³¹

These visions and prophecies made by Nongqawuse clearly captured the imaginations and religious zeal of the amaXhosa. It needs to be noted that there were obviously those who did not believe in the prophecies and did not kill their cattle. These people were certainly in the minority though. This brief sketch of the prophecies and the initial reactions to the prophecies by the amaXhosa reveal that the visions of Nongqawuse resonated with the majority of the Xhosa in a meaningful way. The desire for new herds of cattle, new piles of grain and the promise of the return of the ancestors was an assurance, that was for many, too good to pass up. It is not difficult to imagine the amount of excitement experienced by the believers of the movement at the thought of the predicted renewal of the earth that was supposed to take place. This could be a reason why so many of the believers were ardent supporters of the movement. The rumours that were being spread indicates that there was a strong desire on the part of the believers to see their deceased family members and ancestors resurrected. The religious environment of the amaXhosa in 1856 was conducive for Nongqawuse’s prophecies to disseminate as there had been previous prophets who had professed a message with similar themes and symbols to that of Nongqawuse.

¹²⁹ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 108.

¹³⁰ Zarwan, “The Xhosa Cattle Killings, 1856-57,” 524.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 526.

“Cast Your Eyes Upon The Sea”

The following are the prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse concerning the Cattle-Killing as presented in Gqoba’s account:

“At the river called Kamanga, they saw two men approaching, and when they reached them these men said to these girls, ‘Please give our greetings to those at home, and tell them that we are So-and-So’... They had died a long time before. ‘Tell them that all the dead will arise, and all their cattle must be slaughtered because they have been reared by tainted hands, since there are people who handle enchantments.

‘All cultivation must stop and large new storage pits must be dug, new houses built, extensive areas fenced for kraals, skin bags must be fashioned and many doors woven from creepers. King Eternal son of Broadbreast so commands. Of their own will, people must cast aside enchantments, and leave diviners to seek them out’”.¹³²

The message given by these two men were twofold. The first part of the message describes the resurrection of human beings and cattle that would occur. Reference is also made to the fact that the cattle were being reared by tainted hands because people had handled enchantments. Enchantments in this instance is witchcraft. The latter part of the message is a list of instructions that the Xhosa should follow in order for the resurrection and process of rebirth to occur. These commands were given by King Eternal son of Broadbreast. The son of the Sifuba-sibanzi, the Broad-Breasted One’ was Napakade, the ‘Eternal One’. Sifuba-sibanzi in modern usage is the praise name for Jesus Christ and Peires states that it originates from the Khoi as a name for God.¹³³ Peires argues that the introduction of these two figures in Gqoba’s account represents the Xhosa representation of “the Christian dichotomy between God and Christ”.¹³⁴

¹³² Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 461.

¹³³ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 162.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*,

An example of the ambiguities and difficulties in translating a Christian conception of God into Xhosa is evident through the various Xhosa names used to describe God, in a Christian sense. Hodgson argues that the Xhosa had a “shadowy concept of God” and that there was no “clearly defined system of belief or cult of the supreme being”.¹³⁵ Xhosa names for God included Qamata, although over time the name Thixo became more popular in usage.¹³⁶ The missionary Vanderkemp used the name Thixo for the Christian conception of God. An account of oral history given by a man called Wauchope of Vanderkemp’s preaching highlights the multiple ambiguities and difficulties in translating the Christian concepts of God and Jesus Christ into Xhosa. In Wauchope’s account Sifuba-sibanzi is the saviour of the world who was killed by the enemies of Qamata. Sifuba-sibanzi rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. In this account then Sifuba-sibanzi represents Jesus Christ.¹³⁷ In the prophecies of Nongqawuse, Napakade is the son of Sifuba-sibanzi and is considered the ‘Eternal One’. In this sense then Napakade is more senior than Sifuba-sibanzi even though Sifuba-sibanzi represents the father figure. This is a completely different conception of the power dynamic and relationship, in Christianity, between God, ‘the Father’, and Jesus Christ, ‘the Son’. This indicates that there was no one-to-one relation with regard to Christian conception of God and the Xhosa conception of God. The translating of Christian concepts into Xhosa contained a lot of ambiguity. This translation process was certainly a creative one. Christianity is made compatible with the beliefs of the Cattle-Killing.¹³⁸

The instructions given by Napakade were actions that the Xhosa needed to perform such as new storage pits being dug and the building of new houses. At the end of this message the

¹³⁵ Janet Hodgson, “Do we hear you Nyengana? Dr. JT Vanderkemp and the First Mission to the Xhosa.” *Religion in Southern Africa* 5, no. 1 (1984): 17.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³⁸ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 162.

instruction is again given that the people should cast aside any enchantments. This was another way of saying that the people should not practice witchcraft.

“They continued to speak to Nongqawuse, and were heard only by her and the other girl, and they transmitted this statement: all the chiefs must be summoned before they would appear... And so it was said that all the chiefs must come before they would appear, because they were ancestors, sent by their king Eternal son of Broadbreast. Then Sarhili dispatched people to every hearth”.¹³⁹

This part of the account of the prophecies and visions highlights the fact that those dead who would arise were the ancestors of the living. It should also be noted that the spirits only spoke to Nongqawuse and another girl. These spirits that spread the message of the renewal of the earth only communicated with an adolescent girl. This fact should not be glossed over and will be discussed later on in this chapter.

The decree that all the chiefs should appear that the river indicates that this movement was ‘national’ in scope, meaning that it concerned the entire Xhosa nation and not just one or two groups of Xhosa. The prophecies applied to all of the Xhosa and therefore including the chiefs was of importance.

“Then the girl said, ‘Cast your eyes upon the sea.’ When they gazed intently at the ocean waves, they seemed to see actual people, with bulls bellowing, and oxen, a shadowy concourse constantly moving in and out of sight, then disappearing under the towering ocean waves, and everyone then began to believe”.¹⁴⁰

“When the army made off and disappeared, she said, ‘The chiefs say go home and slaughter all your cattle leaving nothing that you have reared, to hasten the resurrection.

¹³⁹ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 463.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 465.

Do not cultivate, dig large new storage pits, and you will see them filled with fresh food. Retrieve what is left in your cornpits and throw it away. Build new houses and make many doors from creepers, and shut yourselves up in your houses on the resurrection day, because on the eighth day when the resplendent nation emerges with its king Eternal son of Broadbreast, all creatures of forest and stream, and snakes, will roam the entire land. To protect yourselves, you must shut the many doors and bind them tight, and cast aside all enchantments”¹⁴¹.

“She continued: ‘There is another chief, who rides a grey horse, whose name is Grey, otherwise known as Satan. All who have not slaughtered their cattle will belong to Satan, and will not see our sanctifying king Eternal son of Broadbreast”¹⁴².

This part of the prophecies seems to indicate the influence of Christian ideas on the prophecies. In this passage Nongqawuse is implying that Sir George Grey, Governor of the Cape at the time, is Satan. Satan, and by extension Grey, is identified as the enemy in this case. Bradford categorically states that it was Nongqawuse who is stating that Grey was the Antichrist. It was not Gqoba inserting his own opinion into the account. Gqoba, in this extract, is supposed to be reporting the speech of Nongqawuse directly. It is Nongqawuse who called Grey Satan.¹⁴³

The prophecies preached the resurrection of the ancestors as well as the resurrection of all slaughtered cattle:

“Nongqawuse said that even if someone sold his cattle, even if the deal had gone through, he should claim its spirit, so that it would be raised for him on the resurrection

¹⁴¹ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 465.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 467.

¹⁴³ Bradford and Qotole, ““Ingxoxo enkulu ngoNongqawuse” (A Great Debate About Nongqawuse's Era),” 78.

day. And all those who did not slaughter would be blown by a great hurricane into the sea”.¹⁴⁴

Those who would be blown into the sea were all those who did not slaughter their cattle and the settlers.

The prophecies of Nongqawuse obviously entailed that there should be a time period by which the prophecies would come true. Peires argues that it was unlikely Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza set a specific date for “the great day of resurrection. They had rather stressed that the prophecies would come true as soon as all the orders of the new people were complied with”.¹⁴⁵ The two were certainly under pressure for the prophecies to come true. It was expected that by June 1856 that the day of the resurrection would occur.¹⁴⁶ By August 1856, none of the prophesised miracles or resurrection had taken place and the movement did lose some momentum. At the beginning of Jan 1857, around six thousand Xhosa gathered at Butterworth to wait for the day of resurrection. Sarhili and his councillors proceeded to visit Mhlakaza and Nongqawuse who were not to be found. Sarhili was given the message of another postponement, and this increased criticism and pressure onto the Senior Chief.¹⁴⁷ The belief in the Cattle-Killing sustained itself through these disappointments until February 1857. On the 17th of February it was believed that the great day of resurrection would occur. The believers were devastated that prophecies had not come true and the death toll as a result of following the prophecies was devastating.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 467.

¹⁴⁵ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 121.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁴⁸ Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of anticolonial prophecy in South Africa and beyond* *Afterlives*, 19.

Cattle-Killing as a misnomer

The majority of this dissertation has been concerned with the effects of the Cattle-Killing on Xhosa society. One of the things that is almost automatically assumed about the event in question is that the killing of cattle had the most detrimental impact on Xhosa society. This may be due to the fact that the killing of cattle is such a vivid act. The fact is that the prophecies and the events which followed the prophecies were not just about Cattle-Killing. Jeff Guy argues that the term ‘Cattle-Killing’ is in fact a misnomer and that it conflates, distorts and oversimplifies the events to which it refers, thereby excluding a number of the most important elements”.¹⁴⁹ The Xhosa were also instructed to cease cultivation and destroy their grain stocks and the instruments for cultivation.¹⁵⁰ The most materially significant and devastating act was the “termination of the basic productive processes upon which the society depended for its survival. It was the cessation of cultivation which ultimately destroyed the society, not the killing of cattle”.¹⁵¹ The cessation of cultivation then had the most devastating impact on Xhosa society and not the killing of cattle. It should be acknowledged that the killing of cattle does not explain the entirety of this complex and monumental event. Guy argues that the survival of Xhosa society depended on agricultural production and therefore predominately female labour.¹⁵² The preoccupation of scholars with the Cattle-Killing proper and ignoring the impact of the other part of the prophecies, i.e. the cessation of agriculture cultivation, reflects the reduction of the importance of female labour in Xhosa society.¹⁵³ The cessation of cultivation was also an important part of the message delivered by the strangers at the river to Nongqawuse. Nongqawuse had instructed the Xhosa to not cultivate and to dig large new storage pits. They would then see them filled with fresh food. They were also instructed to

¹⁴⁹ Jeff Guy, “A Landmark, not a Breakthrough,” *South African Historical Journal* 25, no. 1 (1991): 229.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*,

retrieve what was left in their cornpits and throw it away.¹⁵⁴ It was the certainly the case that the believers took these commands from Nongqawuse to heart when they refused to partake in any agricultural production.

Believers and Unbelievers

After the prophecies of Nongqawuse start to spread, the homestead and community became a site of contestation between believing and unbelieving family members. With this in mind it seems a good a point as any to discuss the believers and unbelievers. First, the terminology used to label the believers and unbelievers will be discussed. The rift between those who did and did not believe should not be taken lightly. Gqoba, in his account of the movement, describes the dramatic rift in the Xhosa nation. There were those who refused to kill their cattle even though they believed in the resurrection of the dead:

“The Xhosa nation was split in two, some refused to slaughter their cattle, though they knew of and believed in the resurrection of the dead as something that would happen to people, but not to cattle”.¹⁵⁵

The above quote indicates that the Xhosa nation believed in the resurrection of the dead as something within the realm of the possible. However, the idea that cattle which was slaughtered would rise from the dead was not as much of a common belief it seems. Therefore, some of the people who refused to kill their cattle believed in the resurrection of the dead but did not believe in the resurrection of cattle. This indicates that there was a general belief among the Xhosa of the resurrection of the dead. The belief in the resurrection of cattle was something, however, that was not as convincing for some.

¹⁵⁴ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 465

¹⁵⁵ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 469.

As aforementioned, the homestead becomes the site of conflict and disagreement as a result of the prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse.

“Two names arose for the two sides. One was known as *amaTamba*, Believers, those who were convinced by Nongqawuse. The others were *amaGogotya*, Unbelievers. *Ukugogotya* is to resist doing something, to stand to one side, so that it’s said So-and-So doesn’t do as he’s told”.¹⁵⁶

The way Gqoba described those who were labelled as unbelievers, *amagototya*, is in the sense that they were resisters. They resisted doing something. Peires has spent a significant amount of time analysing the difference between the terms *amathamba* and *amagototya*. The *amathamba* were described as being ‘soft’ in the sense that they were willing to submit to communal duty instead of self-interest.¹⁵⁷ The *amagototya* were viewed as the polar opposite. They were seen as putting self-interest over the common good. Peires notes that the unbelievers were not only described as ‘hard’ but also ‘disloyal’ or ‘stingy’.¹⁵⁸ It is not surprising that the unbelievers would be framed in such a light. The unbelievers were considered to be preventing the renewal that was expected after the instructions to kill cattle were followed.

Those who killed their cattle genuinely believed in the prophecies. When asked why they killed their cattle they responded:

“We slaughtered our own cattle, in our own land, and we waited for the resurrection of our relatives and those among the ancestors who died long ago, and we also waited for the resurrection of the cattle we slaughtered, because it was said the chiefs announced

¹⁵⁶ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 469.

¹⁵⁷ Jeff Peires, “‘Soft’ Believers and ‘Hard’ Unbelievers in the Xhosa Cattle-Killing,” *The Journal of African History* 27, no. 3 (1986): 455.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 456.

we must kill them and they would rise again, because we raised them with hands tainted from handling enchantments”.¹⁵⁹

Those who slaughtered their cattle followed the instructions of their chiefs but moreover, believed that their relatives would be resurrected and that the cattle they slaughtered would rise from the dead.

An idea which has not received enough attention in the scholarship on the Cattle-Killing Movement is that the behaviour of some of the believers were actually quite similar to the behaviour of candidate diviners undergoing initiation, *thwasa*. In chapter three it was discussed how candidate diviners often cut themselves off from society refused to eat normal prepared for them by their family. It was also often noted that those who experienced the call to divinerhood would go into trances, hear voices and generally that there would be a significant change in their personality and behaviour. While it is not possible to determine whether there were mass visions in Xhosa society it is important to acknowledge that there were descriptions of Nongqawuse’s believers acting in ways which were similar to that of the candidate diviners undergoing initiation. Part of the ceremonies that were performed once a person became initiated as a diviner were similar to the actions of the believers of the movement. Peires notes that a certain number of “believers refused to eat their usual food and they disposed of their personal ornaments. They sacrificed their cattle as a prelude to a future birth”.¹⁶⁰ Another sense in which some of the believers behaved quite similarly to the candidate diviners was through the common association with the theme of renewal. One of the most interesting things to note is that the word for initiation, *thwasa*, meant renewal.¹⁶¹ This indicates that the candidate diviner experienced a renewal of their being. They were no longer the same person after the

¹⁵⁹ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 477.

¹⁶⁰ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 154.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

initiation process. They became an entirely different person. The believers of the movement were similarly awaiting a renewal, a rebirth. Some of the believers got rid of their old personal ornaments and possessions with the expectation that they would receive new possessions. There was an expectation that they too would experience a transformation when the world underwent transformation, as described by the prophecies. The theme of renewal is a central one in the Cattle-Killing Movement. The movement was not primarily, or even only, about destruction and killing. The destruction was performed in the hopes of a renewal, a new vitality. Believers were expecting the resurrection of their family members and a re-enactment of the act of creation.

CHAPTER FIVE
EXAMINING NONGQAWUSE'S PROPHECIES IN LIGHT OF XHOSA
RELIGIOUS BELIEF

The prophecies in focus

This chapter will critically examine the prophecies of Nongqawuse in light of Xhosa religious belief. This chapter will provide an analysis of the main prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse at the Gxarha River. In order to analyse the content of the prophecies and understand how they were taken up by the believers it will be necessary to look at certain myths that were common among the Xhosa. This chapter will therefore also discuss the role of myth in Xhosa religion generally as this reveals some of the religious symbols present within the prophecies and visions. As discussed in the introduction, myth is a representation of a unique event, in this case, of the past with important themes which is generally represented in the mind, or in words, or through some artistic form.¹⁶² Certain myths like the creation myth and myths around the 'River People' are pertinent in understanding why the believers would believe in these prophecies in the first place. This then flows into the next item of analysis which is the influence of Christian ideas on the prophecies. The supposed influence of Christian ideas on the prophecies themselves will be problematised and critiqued. Peires has argued that the "far from being a retreat into a pre-Christian shell, the cattle-killing owed its very existence to biblical doctrines".¹⁶³ If it can be shown that many aspects of the Cattle-Killing were influenced by Xhosa religious belief and religious mythology then this will illustrate that the Cattle-Killing did not in fact owe its existence only to biblical doctrines. Using the prophecies

¹⁶² Henry A. Murray, "Introduction to the Issue "Myth and Mythmaking"," *Daedalus* 88, no. 2 (1959): 215.

¹⁶³ Jeff Peires, "The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing," *The Journal of African History* 28, no. 1 (1987): 57

this chapter will argue that the Cattle-Killing was informed by traditional religious patterns, like religious mythology. There are a number of themes that arise from an analysis of the content of the prophecies. The most important theme, and the one that is the most recurring, is that of renewal and rebirth. Through the various sections of this chapter the idea of renewal and rebirth presents itself in numerous ways. The idea of renewal is present in the prophecies, is present in relation to candidate initiation, and is present in Xhosa religious life generally. The idea of renewal does not emanate from Christian ideas. It is patently clear that the idea of renewal and rebirth emanates from Xhosa religious belief. The movement was ultimately determined by Xhosa religious belief and experience. That the prophecies and visions were ambiguous in certain respects should not detract from the fact that the majority of Xhosa believed in them. The nature of the prophecies was fluid and could have been interpreted in a number of ways.

Myth

Analysing Xhosa mythology reveals the several religious symbols and themes present in Nongqawuse's prophecies. Myth plays an integral role in the Cattle-Killing Movement. The prophecies would not have been believed and the instructions would not have been followed if there was not some past mythological narrative which the Xhosa could refer back to. The prophecies were only successful in converting people into believers because it drew on certain religious myths which the Xhosa were familiar with. The prophecies of Nongqawuse were ultimately only successful because they drew inspiration from the myth of creation and myths relating to the 'River People', that were discussed in chapter three.

There are three main creation myths which account for human origins in traditional southern African religion. The first was that humans emerged from a hole in the ground. The second was that human beings originated from a bed of reeds, breaking off from the source of life. The

third was that human beings were created by the work of the high god.¹⁶⁴ In the majority of these creation myths the beginning of life is closely associated and connected with water, darkness and dampness.

The 'River People', like the ancestors, inhabited a liminal space in the Xhosa worldview. This liminal space was between the homestead and the wild region. The area where Nongqawuse engaged with the strangers from her prophecies was exactly the sort of liminal space where the 'River People' were thought to have lived. These spirits were often associated with damp spaces and water. All of life emanated from the dark, damp caves and reeds across the country. The 'River People' were those ones who had stayed behind in the caves and places of water. They were said to have beautiful homesteads and have dark-coloured herds of cattle.¹⁶⁵ In the accounts of Gqoba, when Nongqawuse tells the visitors to look at the sea they seemed to have seen actual people. Cattle were also heard bellowing and moving in and out of sight before they disappeared beneath the waves.¹⁶⁶ These were the spirits who Nongqawuse must have been hinting at through her prophecies and visions.

There was also another myth that was widespread among the Xhosa which described the breakdown in communication between the spiritual world and the world of humans. This myth describes the origin of death.¹⁶⁷ The chameleon was sent by the high god to send the message of immortality, or life, to the human beings but the chameleon was very slow and often stopped along the way. This angered the high god, and he sent a second message which was a message of death to human beings. This message was sent by a much quicker lizard.¹⁶⁸ This myth hints at the fact that death was not originally meant to be the fate for human beings but rather

¹⁶⁴ David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa* (Routledge, 2014), 6-7.

¹⁶⁵ Constance Gail Weldon, "The Interaction Between the Missionaries of the Cape Eastern Frontier and the Colonial Authorities In The Era Of Sir George Grey, 1854-1861," MA thesis (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 1984), 129

¹⁶⁶ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 465.

¹⁶⁷ Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 7.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*,

immortality. However, even though death was now the predetermined fate of humans, “communication could be restored with the spiritual dimension of the world through the medium of ancestors and ancestor spirits who continued to live after death”.¹⁶⁹ Religious beliefs of immortality were therefore present within Xhosa religious belief. The leap from immortality to resurrection is not a big one. The belief in the resurrection of the dead, as detailed in Nongqawuse’s prophecies, should therefore not be viewed as a significant break from tradition.

A return to origins

When considering the intent of mythology Mabona states that:

“the epistemological intent in mythology is to present what we ordinarily call reality as a mere limited mirror image of something vaster, more permanent and more vital. In the role of a system of ethical prompting, mythology enjoins a constant return to authentic foundations and beginnings as a fountainhead of wholeness and well-being”.¹⁷⁰

This directly relates to an interpretation of the Cattle-Killing as a form of renewal and rebirth.

"In these narratives the end is always essentially a return to the origins. Death is thus always a rebirth, a reentry at another level into the primordial conditions of the beginning. As such, these returns are spirally cyclical”.¹⁷¹

The Cattle-Killing Movement should be viewed as a return to primordial conditions. It was a cyclical movement because through death would come rebirth and renewal. The Cattle-Killing Movement fits into the description of mythical narrative as put forward by Mabona. The

¹⁶⁹ Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 7.

¹⁷⁰ Mongameli Mabona, *Diviners and prophets among the Xhosa (1593-1856): a study in Xhosa cultural history* (Lit, 2004), 315.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.,

mythology or symbolism central to the Cattle-Killing Movement was essentially cyclical in nature. The rituals of the movement were steeped in religious symbolism. The instructions, like the building of new houses and new milk-sacks all related to the theme of regeneration and this connects to the narrative of a return to the origins. For example, there was a Xhosa custom of a deceased man's son leaving the old homestead and cutting open the old milk-sacks before moving on and building a new homestead somewhere else with new milk-sacks.¹⁷² As previously mentioned, the Xhosa were no longer able to follow all of the traditional burial rituals of leaving the homestead of the deceased and building a new one because of the land constraints as a result of colonial expansion. Peires notes that there is a difference between the English and Xhosa perceptions of 'new'. In English, the word is primarily associated with a discovery, something unfamiliar or something which only started to exist recently. In Xhosa, the meaning behind new is connection with perceptions of cyclical recurrence and the cyclical nature of time.¹⁷³ The prophecies of Nongqawuse then were not only concerned with the negative, i.e., the killing of cattle and cessation of cultivation. The prophecies also contained positive elements. Nongqawuse had instructed the Xhosa to build new houses, new storage pits should be dug, and then fresh food would fill those storage pits.¹⁷⁴ The prophecies detailed the day of resurrection and the day the "resplendent nation" would emerge "with its king Eternal son of Broadbreast".¹⁷⁵ The prophecies therefore contained positive expectations.¹⁷⁶

Nongqawuse's prophecies can certainly be classified as a return to origins. The imagery of Nongqawuse being visited by spirits at the river is reminiscent of the myth of the 'River People'. This imagery supports the argument that Nongqawuse's prophecies were ultimately

¹⁷² Jeff Peires, "The Central Beliefs of the Cattle-Killing," 55.

¹⁷³ Jeff Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2003), 155.

¹⁷⁴ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 465.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.,

¹⁷⁶ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 152.

concerned with renewal and rebirth. These ideas of renewal and rebirth were not Christian in origin but were contained within religious belief of the Xhosa. The prophecies of Nongqawuse can be viewed as a full-scale revolution. A return to the traditions and rituals that the Xhosa understood to be central to their religious life. Nongqawuse's prophecies therefore tapped into beliefs that the Xhosa were familiar with.

There was a religious idea among the Xhosa that the dead did not really die but rather moved to the realm of the spirits. These spirits and ancestors would then have an influence over the living. As discussed in chapter three, the ancestors held a revered position within the Xhosa worldview. The ancestors had the ability to exercise power over natural forces. It was also believed that the ancestors might be displeased if any misfortune was experienced by an individual or family member. The ancestors could be thought of as the most obvious cause for misfortune and if that was the case then they needed to be propitiated.¹⁷⁷ The misfortune in this case was caused by the fact that the Xhosa were rearing their cattle with "tainted hands" and that there were people who were partaking in witchcraft.¹⁷⁸ The acceptable and appropriate sacrifice to the ancestors was often cattle. The prophecies of Nongqawuse indicate that the dead would rise from their graves if the ancestors were appeased with the sacrifice of cattle.¹⁷⁹ These religious beliefs relating to ancestors and the sacrifice of cattle certainly made the prophecies more relatable to the Xhosa and more believable. The belief in the ancestors is an illustration of how when people died they did not really die according to the Xhosa. The ancestors were considered immortal and omnipresent through the lives of their living descendants.¹⁸⁰ The ancestors continued to live on in different means. Another example of how the Xhosa believed

¹⁷⁷ Weldon, "The Interaction Between the Missionaries of the Cape Eastern Frontier and the Colonial Authorities In The Era Of Sir George Grey, 1854-1861," 128.

¹⁷⁸ Gqoba, *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)*, 461.

¹⁷⁹ Weldon, "The Interaction Between the Missionaries of the Cape Eastern Frontier and the Colonial Authorities In The Era Of Sir George Grey, 1854-1861," 129.

¹⁸⁰ James O. Gump, "The Imperialism of Cultural Assimilation: Sir George Grey's Encounter with the Maori and the Xhosa, 1845-1868," *Journal of World History* 9, no. 1 (1998): 99.

in the immortality of the individual is through the tradition of the burial of grave goods as was discussed in chapter three.

“There were many uncertainties and ambiguities in the 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”.¹⁸¹

The bedrock or foundational beliefs which were shared by the Xhosa at the time were enough for them to be convinced of the prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse. The religious elements of the movement should not and can never be wholly side-lined for a materialist interpretation. Understanding the religious elements means understanding the movement in and of itself. As indicated above, the belief in resurrection was not a wholly new one. The fact that Xhosa appealed to the ancestors for appeasement during acute crisis was also not a new idea. The sacrifice of their cattle was also not unusual. One aspect that seems unusual was the extent of the slaughter.¹⁸² The impact of the material and structural factors may explain the extent of the slaughter. However, as has been discussed in chapter four, the most significant aspect of the prophecies was the cessation of cultivation. The cessation of cultivation solely emanates from the prophecies. It is not linked to the lungsickness epidemic nor colonial expansion. This fact cannot be ignored.

¹⁸¹ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 147.

¹⁸² Weldon, “The Interaction Between the Missionaries of the Cape Eastern Frontier and the Colonial Authorities In The Era Of Sir George Grey, 1854-1861,” 130.

Influence of Christian ideas on the prophecies

The influence of Christian ideas on the central prophecies of the movement has often been argued in the analyses of the Cattle-Killing Movement. A thread that has been strung along throughout this chapter is that the influence of Christian ideas on the prophecies themselves should be critiqued. In each section of this chapter, and the dissertation as a whole, examples have been made of how the core beliefs of the movement were related to general themes of Xhosa religion. This chapter has side-lined the influence of Christian ideas on the movement.

Peires acknowledges that among the Xhosa there were “various forms of purification, divination, sacrifice and witchcraft” that were practised in Xhosaland.¹⁸³ In the same breath he conclusively states that these various practices, which were inherently diverse and subject to change, could never have included the suggestion of killing large numbers of cattle or the expectation of the resurrection of the dead. This is a contradiction and one that appears in many of the analyses of the movement. The very fact that Xhosa religious belief was flexible and innovative suggests that the drive to kill large numbers of cattle, cease cultivation and expect the resurrection of the dead could very well be incorporated within traditional religious practice. It is not outside the realm of possibility that through the various patterns of purification, divination and sacrifice that the Xhosa believed killing their cattle would result in the renewal of the world. The direction towards creative and flexible religious beliefs and rituals becomes even more likely during periods of economic, military and social upheaval, as was the case for the Xhosa in the 19th century.

The core beliefs which formed the foundation of the movement related to themes of renewal. The movement contained general rituals that the Xhosa were similar with. The sacrifice of cattle, the idea that the dead do not really die and the cyclical nature of life. Even Peires himself

¹⁸³ Peires, “The Central Beliefs of the Cattle-Killing,” 44.

notes that “the subsidiary rituals of the movement were associated with the general theme of regeneration, and echoed existing Xhosa practices regarding birth and death”.¹⁸⁴ The influences of Christian ideas of the prophecies, and the movement as a whole, has often been overstated.

It certainly seems the case that rather than solely relying on Christian beliefs, or the entire movement being based on biblical doctrines, that the prophecies seem “to have incorporated a good deal more of the traditional Xhosa rituals and to have leaned more heavily on their traditional world view”.¹⁸⁵

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how the message given by the two strangers who approached Nongqawuse were taken up. The message described the resurrection of the dead and cattle that would occur. The latter part of the message was a list of instructions that the Xhosa needed to heed in order for the resurrection and process of rebirth to occur. An analysis of Xhosa mythology revealed several insights into religious symbols and themes present in Nongqawuse’s prophecies. Myth played an integral role in the Cattle-Killing Movement. It has been argued that the prophecies would not have been believed nor the instructions followed if it were not for some past mythological narrative which the Xhosa could refer back to. The prophecies were only successful in converting people into believers because it drew on certain narratives that the Xhosa were familiar with. These past narratives it drew inspiration from were the various creation myths and the myths relating to the ‘River People’. The Cattle-Killing Movement was a call to return to primordial conditions. It was essentially a cyclical movement. It has been shown that the rituals of the movement were steeped in religious symbolism. The religious symbolism of the Xhosa. The instructions, like the building of new houses and new

¹⁸⁴ Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*, 157.

¹⁸⁵ Weldon, “The Interaction Between the Missionaries of the Cape Eastern Frontier and the Colonial Authorities In The Era Of Sir George Grey, 1854-1861,” 130.

milk-sacks all related to the theme of regeneration and this once again connects with the narrative of a return to the origins. As mentioned earlier, there was a bedrock of foundational beliefs which were shared by the Xhosa at the time were enough for them to be convinced of the prophecies and visions of Nongqawuse. The religious elements of the movement can never be wholly ignored for a materialist or structuralist interpretation. Without understanding the religious elements of the movement, it is impossible to fully interpret the events that took place because the movement expressed so many characteristics of Xhosa religious belief.

CHAPTER SIX

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The Cattle-Killing Movement needs to be understood through the lens of the religious factors. Those factors are the most important. The prophecies of Nongqawuse should be focused on because ultimately without them there would have been no prolonged slaughter of cattle and no prolonged cessation of farming. Centring the religious experience and the religious beliefs of the amaXhosa illuminate certain features of the movement that have been side lined in recent scholarship. For too long have the economic and material factors been considered the most important aspects of the movement. The movement was, at its most basic level, religious in character and form.

This study has shown that the materialist perspective does not go far enough in understanding the movement. The argument that the lungsickness epidemic of 1854 was one of the primary causes of the movement has to be problematised. Certain incorrect assumptions have been made regarding how much of an impact the lungsickness epidemic had on Xhosa society as a whole. There has been an inaccuracy with the reporting of the cattle that died due to lungsickness. Certain homesteads and communities were more heavily affected than others. The colonial estimates regarding the mortality of Xhosa cattle were unreliable. Most significantly, there are too many exceptions to the generalisation that because many Xhosa chiefs had lost cattle to the lungsickness that this encouraged them to believe in the prophecies of Nongqawuse. It has been shown that several chiefs who suffered heavy losses of cattle were still strong unbelievers. Taking the Xhosa historian, Gqoba's account into consideration the participants in the movement minimised the importance of the lungsickness.

The prophecies of Nongqawuse only become intelligible after an understanding of African and Xhosa religious belief. Xhosa religious belief, like African religious belief, is flexible and

innovative. It seeks to understand the events and occurrences of everyday life. As a result, it is essentially flexible. It is able to absorb and incorporate many different elements. It has been shown that religious ideas like the belief in ancestors, the role of the spirits of the 'River People' and the function of cattle in ritual sacrifice all coalesced and found their unification in the prophecies of Nongqawuse.

The religious themes of the cyclical nature of life, rebirth and renewal are core to the prophecies. The belief and role of the ancestors provides a clear example of the belief in life after physical death. The dead never really die, nor do they really leave us. The ancestors and the spirits had immense power. It is therefore not difficult to imagine how the prophecies could have been taken up and believed in. The prophecies related to past narratives with which the Xhosa could identify. These were the cultural and religious foundations which the prophecies drew from. For example, during periods of distress pleas were made to the ancestors. Sacrifices of cattle were made to the ancestors during periods of hardship. The ancestors were therefore religious and social anchors during times of distress. A post-colonial interpretation of the role of the ancestors has been to reimagine them as resistors to colonial expansion. The 19th century was a significant period of social and material upheaval, and it was also a period of significant religious upheaval. During times of distress the diviners were called to intercede to the ancestors on the commoners' behalf. In the case of the Cattle-Killing Movement, the ancestors became a crucial spiritual anchor that tied the Xhosa to places that were being threatened by colonial expansion.¹⁸⁶

In this dissertation, the function and role of diviners has been highlighted. While this dissertation has focused primarily on religious belief and the taking up of the prophecies, individuals still had a role to play in the movement. These individuals were diviners and

¹⁸⁶ David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa* (Routledge, 2014), 13.

candidate diviners. Nongqawuse being the most important. The idea that Nongqawuse was simply a ventriloquist for the imaginations of powerful men is simply incorrect and inherently colonial in outlook. This dissertation has sought to address some of the androcentric and colonial biases which still plague modern scholarship. However, the most notable diviners that operated before the time of Nongqawuse, Nxele and Mlanjeni, were also vitally important in preparing the Xhosa for what was going to come after. Sentiments of uncleanness, the malevolent forces of witchcraft and the rising of the dead were circulating within the social and religious domains of the Xhosa. This dissertation has focused on Nongqawuse as a historical figure with her own agency. Nongqawuse was a catalyst for unification. Nongqawuse preached a message of unification of the Xhosa and therefore her message was anticolonial. Nongqawuse in many ways transgressed gender norms in Xhosa society. She controlled the ability of those past heroes and ancestors to rise from the dead. She was the vessel through which the spirits decided to communicate with the Xhosa.

This dissertation has ultimately sought to try and understand the movement in its own terms. Understanding the Cattle-Killing Movement in its own terms and through the lens of Xhosa religious belief, Xhosa mythology and ritual practice leads to only one conclusion. The conclusion being that the nature of the movement was primarily religious. As previously emphasised, themes of the cyclical nature of life and renewal were central in believers following the prophecies. The belief in the ancestors provides an illustration of the belief in life after physical death. The ancestors played an active role in the lives of their descendants. The active influence of the ancestors on “the world of the living implies a concept of social time in which the past is never fully complete”.¹⁸⁷ Scholars have argued that the time between the prophecy and the fulfilment of the prophecy is complex. The notion of cyclical perceptions of

¹⁸⁷ Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of anticolonial prophecy in South Africa and beyond* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 26.

time are connected to complexity. The prophecies of Nongqawuse can therefore be reinterpreted not as a failure but as something incomplete. The past, therefore, should be viewed not as final but rather incomplete.¹⁸⁸ In a similar manner the historiography on the Cattle-Killing, its various causes and various reinterpretations should not be considered as final but rather incomplete.

¹⁸⁸ Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of anticolonial prophecy in South Africa and beyond*, 8.

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