Résumé

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The Xhosa Cattle Killings, 1856-57

Perhaps one of the strangest and least comprehensible events of South African history is the Xhosa cattle killings of 1856-57 (also known as the 'cattle killing delusion' and the 'Xhosa national suicide'). The Xhosa peoples were told by a prophet-diviner to kill all their cattle, destroy their grain, and refrain from sowing crops. If they did so, the ancestors would rise and the living be restored to youth, herds of beautiful cattle, free from disease, would fill the land, grain pits would overflow, and the Whites would be swept into the sea. Xhosa tribesmen killed thousands of heads of cattle. The resulting starvation and disruption broke the power of the Xhosa, who had fought numerous wars with encroaching White settlers.

The most immediate problem in dealing with the cattle killing among the Xhosa is that of sources. I have principally used official accounts and the writings of the administrators most immediately involved, John Maclean and Charles Brownlee. The problems involved here are obvious. While an overview of the progress of the cattle killings can be obtained, it is difficult to get at the internal dynamics. Although there are no accounts by those who participated in the movement, there is one supposedly first-hand story related by A.C. Jordan. Second-hand sources, including contemporary documents as well as historical accounts, usually deal with the cattle killings as a plot to force the Xhosa to war. Of all writers who have dealt in some detail with the cattle killings, only Monica Wilson has understood that it was not a unique event and has parallels throughout the world, as has been recognized by scholars dealing with these other, similar movements.

There are a number of questions that one would like to raise but that remain unanswered. Of paramount importance is the symbolism involved in the prophecy and the movement as a whole. Symbols


Cahiers d'Études africaines, 63-64, XVI (3-4), pp. 519-539.
synthesize a people's ethos and world view. The tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and esthetic style and mood, and ideas of order are given expression and meaning by symbols. Symbols render the world graspable. The true meaning of the cattle killing to a Xhosa can never be described, even by a participant. It is precisely the non-verbal, non-rational aspects which have the greatest impact.

One would also like to know the traditions of prophecy and any relevant resurrection myths. Two earlier prophets played important roles in Xhosa resistance to White expansion. The actual extent of disruption of Xhosa society by 1856 would also seem to be an important factor. The long series of wars with the advancing White population can be taken as an index of both social disruption and of Xhosa ability to resist the European advance. The extent and success of Christian influence on Xhosa society, on the prophet Mhlakaza, and on the opposition to him, is a problem my research has not solved. While it certainly existed, I do not believe it was decisive. The opposition to the cattle killings, the cleavages it caused within Xhosa society, is yet another unanswered question. Did opposition fall along traditional lines of power? Does it fit a pattern of resistance to European culture? Finally, one would like to explain why this type of movement developed in 1856, not earlier.

I see the Xhosa cattle killings of 1856-57 as a response to White contact and intrusion. A long series of hostilities, loss of land and power, and culture clash, all contributed to the dislocation and disruption, if not disintegration, of Xhosa society. Population pressure and drought accentuated this process. The Xhosa response was firmly rooted in cultural patterns. The cattle killings had basic elements in common with the preachings of earlier prophets. Purification from witchcraft and sacrifice, especially of cattle to the shades are strictly in accordance with, and play a major role in, traditional Xhosa culture.

In March of 1856, Nongqause, a thirteen-year old girl of Sarili's chiefdom had a vision and made a number of startling prophecies.}

4. Makana from 1815-1819 and Mlanjeni during the early 1830's.
6. George Theal, History of South Africa, London, 1889-1919, 11 vol. (reprint, Capetown, 1964), see vol. VII, p. 198. Most writers say she was sixteen, but W.F.D. Fynn (in Cape of Good Hope, Report and Proceedings of the Government Commission on Native Laws and Customs, Capetown, 1883, [G. 4-183], No. 4968) claims she was fifteen at the time of her arrest in 1858. The important points are that she was young and female.
7. Sarili (Kreli) was senior chief of the Xhosa peoples, the southernmost group of Nguni-speakers. He cannot be considered as a 'paramount chief', however; his direct political authority extended only to his own immediate followers. The
One day, Nongqause was out in the fields. Near a river, some men approached her and conveyed their greetings and their names, which were of people known to have died long ago. These strangers reported that the community of ancestors was about to be resurrected, but ‘all cattle must be slaughtered, for they are reared with defiled hands, as the people handle witchcraft’. There was to be no ploughing of land, but new granaries and cattle folds were to be erected. Most important was that witchcraft should be given up by all, immediately, without waiting for exposure by witch-finders. Nongqause reported this incident but was ridiculed by her friends. The next day she went out again and, once more, saw the strangers, who directed her to call the chiefs together from the various Xhosa groups. The young girl reported this second vision to her uncle Mhlakaza, who was an established diviner.

Mhlakaza went to investigate Nongqause’s tale. Brownlee states the diviner was directed by the mysterious strangers to go back to his home, purify himself for three days, and to return on the fourth, after offering an ox as sacrifice. Mhlakaza did as instructed. On his return he ‘saw a number of black people among whom he recognized his brother some years dead. He was told by these people that they had come


9. Ibid., p. 112. I have accepted Jordan’s tale as it is from oral tradition. All ‘facts’ are doubtful and, again, are more important from symbolic than historical point of view.

10. There seems to be some question concerning Nongqause’s relationship to Mhlakaza and his position within Sarili’s chiefdom. Although some writers feel Nongqause was Mhlakaza’s daughter (Jordan 1959: 111), the consensus appears to be that she was a daughter of Mhlania, a younger brother of Mhlakaza (Soga 1930: 246) and a counsellor of Sarili (Theal, VII, 1964: 198). M. Wilson and L. Thompson (1969: 257) imply that Nongqause was a novice diviner supervised by her uncle Mhlakaza, and it appears that the latter was a well-known diviner in his own right (Brownlee 1896: 126; Chalmers 1877: 103; Theal, VII, 1964: 198; PP 1857-58: 4 [Grey, 16 August, 1856]). It seems that Mhlakaza may also have been one of Sarili’s counsellors, but Brownlee believes he was a private person (PP 1857-58: 13 [2 August, 1856]; Sarili denied knowledge of the diviner (Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office [hereafter CO], 48/377, Gawler to Maclean, 25 September, 1856); it seems, however, that the brother of a counsellor and a famous witch-finder would certainly have been known to him.
from across the water; that they were the people—the Russians—who had been fighting against the English with whom they would wage perpetual warfare; and they had come to aid the Kafirs [Xhosa], but before anything could be done for them they were to put away witchcraft . . . and destroy their cattle. If these instructions were followed, the old heroes would return from the dead with herds of beautiful cattle. The aged would resume the bloom of youth, grain pits would overflow, material goods of all kinds would appear. All Whites would disappear, and unbelievers would be turned into frogs, mice, and ants. If these instructions were followed, the old heroes would return from the dead with herds of beautiful cattle. The aged would resume the bloom of youth, grain pits would overflow, material goods of all kinds would appear. All Whites would disappear, and unbelievers would be turned into frogs, mice, and ants.13 It is interesting to note that the first order from the prophet was that people should kill cattle, and that those that did not would be swept away. Afterwards, the instructions were to kill all cattle, without exception.15

In Xhosa belief, ancestors often communicated with diviners through dreams and visions. These dreams were especially important when received by a young, often female, novice under the supervision of a well-known diviner, as Nongqause was to Mhlakaza.17 Nongqause’s vision itself conformed to a familiar pattern. She saw ‘horns of beautiful oxen peeping from beneath the rushes’.18 In Xhosa myth, cattle and men were said to have emerged from a bed of rushes.16 Ancestral spirits were often said to reside in water, and diviners spoke of meeting the ancestors in a world ‘under the river bank, where there are herds and homesteads’20. The Xhosa prophet Mlanjeni’s vision (c. 1850) was associated with water; the chief Gcaleka was initiated as a diviner after he descended into a pool and conversed with ancestral spirits. Water and descent into a pool are common to initiation of diviners not only in Xhosa society but in many other areas of the world. While

there were no formal beliefs concerning the nature of the after-life, it was supposed to be much like this earth, with herds of cattle and other livestock, although these did not die and there was no need of ploughing or gathering the harvest. There is also some indication that the Xhosa believed in resurrection of the body, and many diviners were alleged to have the power of calling forth the dead from their graves. The insistence on purification, sacrifice, and renunciation of witchcraft also followed traditional patterns. Once witchcraft, the cause of death, was destroyed, men would be immortal.

The place of the Crimean War in the prophecies is interesting. The Xhosa knew of the war; their interest was ‘founded on the hope that the English would get well beaten’. In an 1855 meeting with Umhala and fifty of his counsellors, N. J. Merriman was closely questioned on the progress of the war: ‘[they] enquired what colour the Englishmen’s enemy were of, and seemed surprised to learn that they were white men like ourselves.’ Rumors circulated that Makana, Ngqika, Mlanjeni, and other historical figures were fighting the English over the water (i.e. in the Crimea) and that it was a lie that the Russians were white. The common opinion was that they were black and formerly Xhosa warriors who were killed in wars against the Cape Colony.

Brownlee’s prediction in June of 1856 that the Xhosa ‘will most likely obey [Mhlakaza’s instructions] in every respect’, proved to be accurate. Few were strong enough to resist the teaching, and many were anxious to follow it. The immediacy of the expected advent fostered the rapid diffusion of the prophecy. The support of key chiefs gave the movement great impetus. But the cattle killing movement was not one sustained orgy of slaughter. It lasted longer than ten months; there were many lulls in its intensity, and it saw both disappointment and opposition.

After the initial order to kill all cattle, ‘the Kaffir nation was stunned. The sacrifice seemed too great’. The immediate local area was indifferent to Mhlakaza’s message until Sarili became convinced and began slaughtering his own cattle. The great chief was slow to accept Mhlakaza’s views and sent his brother with a number of counsellors investigate fully before any action was taken. Sarili himself went

28. Ibid., p. 136.
to query the prophet and was reputedly shown his dead son (alive and well), a favorite horse, a fresh ear of corn, and a pot of beer. Sarili told Mhlakaza he would need at least three months to sacrifice all of his cattle, which was conceded. Brownlee writes in June 1856, ‘Mhlakaza’s statements are generally believed by the Gcalekas [Sarili’s followers] who are slaughtering their cattle.”

The cattle killing spread from east of the Kei to the Ndlambe and Ngqika Xhosa. Sarili sent messages to all Xhosa chiefs saying that he had seen the new men who had ordered him to kill cattle, refrain from sowing, put away charms, and send messages to Sandile, Pato, Umhala (Xhosa chiefs), Moshoeshoe (the great Sotho leader) and the Colonial Government (!). The chiefs in British Kafiraria hesitated, but most eventually complied. At first, the killings were ‘wholly confined to the tribes that had least reason for war, and among the people, against the expressed wishes of their chiefs’. The greatest excitement was where the lung sickness, a cattle disease, had hit hardest.

The Ndlambe chiefs (who generally did not take part in the 1851 war with the Cape Colony) were among the first to obey the prophet. Umhala convened his chiefs and council to discuss Sarili’s message. Although J. C. Gawler claims Umhala opposed the killings, other sources indicate the chief was in favor of killing cattle and the prophecies were popular among his people. Maqoma also supported Sarili’s position. Pato and Toise, two chiefs who were especially loyal to the British, both opposed the cattle killing, although many of their people killed cattle. Chief Anta, half-brother of Sandile and Maqoma, opposed the movement; there was, however, some killing in this area in late December and early January.

Sandile vacillated. He had initially killed a portion of his cattle, but held back largely because of the efforts of Charles Brownlee and the influence of Anta. The second order to kill all cattle seems to have

33. CO, 48/377 (Brownlee — paraphrasing chief Xoxo — to Maclean, 26 September, 1856).
34. CO, 48/376 (Brownlee, 2 August, 1856).
35. PP, 1857-58, Maclean, 4 August, 1856. In the early 1850’s the Xhosa experienced a series of disasters, following their defeat in war (1850-53), which coincided with a severe drought, a plague of locusts devastated their crops. In 1854, a lung sickness epidemic killed hundreds of thousands of cattle; see PP, 1857-58, xl. 387, pp. 4-5. 11; Cape of Good Hope, Governor, Correspondence between His Excellency Sir George Grey, K. C. B. and Her Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies, Capetown, 1857 : 149; Merriman 1957 : 204-205, 220; George Theal, Compendium on South African History, Lovedale, part II, 1876 : 65; London Missionary Society, Report, 03, 1857 : 59; CO, 48/377 (Grey to Labouchere, 20 September, 1856); CO, 48/376 (Brownlee, 26 August, 1856).
36. PP, 1857-58 : 9 (Gawler, 2 August, 1856, and H. Vigne, 2 August, 1856), 7 (Brownlee, 30 July, 1856); Brownlee 1866 : 158.
perplexed him. Most of the other Ngqika chiefs were destroying their own cattle and corn. Sandile finally seems to have been swayed by pressure from his mother and his brother, Maqoma. 37

People visited the prophet in great numbers and, after seeing him, began to kill their cattle. Deputations from the neighbouring Thembu went to see Mhlakaza and Sarili, resulting in some cattle killing. 38 Even a number of Mfengu 39 consulted the prophet. They were told that there was no message for them; they, therefore, were like the Whites and were to be swept away on the last day. 40 Moshoeshoe, the Sotho leader, also was in contact with Sarili, the implications of which will be discussed later.

There were some who did not believe the predictions of Mhlakaza and who did not hope for war, and yet participated in the cattle killing. Sandili’s uncle and his chief counsellor are two examples of those who opposed the movement but still gave the order to kill. 41

Clans and chiefdoms split according to belief. Those opposed to the cattle killing fled to mission stations. There were disputes at almost every homestead between the believers and others, the believers trying to take cattle to kill. The feeling on both sides was violent. Brownlee writes, ‘The most remarkable circumstance connected with the delusion was the earnestness with which most entered into it, regarding those opposed to the movement with the most deadly animosity.’ 42 Kama, a chief always loyal to the Cape Government, started expelling believers from his lands. His people turned against him. Abandoned by his tribe, he took his remaining followers north, under police protection, where he was joined by other refugees and became head of a new chiefdom. 43 Bitterness was understandable. After all, all cattle had to be killed to bring about the resurrection of the ancestors; unbelievers were delaying the blissful era.

Rumors of miracles swept 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

39. The Mfengu, or ‘Fingoies’, were not a traditional community but an agglomeration of persons displaced from Natal by the Zulu wars from 1816 on. They were associated with and ‘protected’ by the Cape Government and Christian missions.
40. Brownlee 1896 : 151-152. But see also Sarili’s statement above and CO, 48/377 (Gawler to Maclean, 25 September, 1856 : ‘I understand the word to kill is for all people, Kaffirs, English, and Dutch’).
41. Theal 1876 : 53.
men sent pathetic appeals to their descendants not to delay their coming any longer. Reports circulated, and were believed, that Moshoeshoe’s people in Lesotho, having complied with the injunctions of Mhlakaza, had already received the promised cattle and grain. The new age was ushered in by thunder and lightning, while the unbelievers and their cattle were swept into the sea.\textsuperscript{44}

Others prophesied similarly. Two years before Nongqause, Xoxo, Sarili’s brother, is reputed to have become a prophet. In April of 1856, a woman in Kama’s chiefdom spread stories of a Russian invasion. In Lesotho, a female prophet named Mantsonupa predicted war, and cattle and sheep were sacrificed for success. The most noteworthy of the other Xhosa prophets was the nine-year old daughter of a witch-finder of Umhala’s chiefdom, whose story is strikingly similar to Nongqause’s. After the eclipse of Nongqause and Mhlakaza, prophets continued to arise (from May to October 1857: Tsimbe and Umbombo among the Thembu; Telletelle, who had a ‘cow in his belly which bellowed’; Nobanda, a companion of Nongqause, who used to accompany her to ‘hear the voices’).\textsuperscript{45}

The prophecies were to come to pass first in July, then on the full moon of August, at which time wonders were to occur—two suns would rise, people in white blankets would appear wearing brass wire rings.\textsuperscript{46} The excitement increased to early August, when it declined. Sarili’s doubts began toward the end of July and by mid-August cattle killing and destruction of grain had in large measure ceased, both in Kaffraria and the Transkei.\textsuperscript{47} Sarili sent a message to Mhlakaza asking if what had been predicted could not be brought about without the destruction of all the cattle.

After this first failure of the prophecy, the blame was placed on those who had not killed their cattle, and the slaughter continued anew. Sandile began killing his cattle and destroying corn. From September onward the excitement was kept up by the predictions of the prophet and the orders of the chiefs. Sarili ‘always revived it when the delusion flagged’, stirring up enthusiasm and sending messages.\textsuperscript{48} Mhlakaza ordered Moshoeshoe informed. As November closed, the cattle killing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} PP, 1857-58 : 82-83 (Gawler, 25 December, 1856, and Warner, 9 January, 1857). It is interesting that there were reports of numerous earth tremors in Lesotho in the preceding years (see Journal des Missions évangéliques, 1852-1856).
\item \textsuperscript{46} PP, 1857-58 : 7 (Brownlee to Maclean, 15 August, 1856), 10 (Maclean, 4 August, 1856).
\item \textsuperscript{47} PP, 1857-58 : 75 (Maclean, 20 March, 1857), 16-19 (Maclean) ; CO, 48/376 (Maclean, 18 August, 1856, and 21 August, 1856; and Brownlee, 15 August, 1856).
\item \textsuperscript{48} Brownlee 1896 : 112; PP, 1857-58 : 75 (Maclean, 20 March, 1857), 26 (Grey to Labouchere, 26 September, 1856).
\end{itemize}
increased over the entire region. By the first week in December, the belief and confidence in Mhlakaza had increased and spread even further. Towards mid-December there was a partial lull in the movement, but by the close of the month the killings had resumed. Sarili assembled more than 6,000 people at Butterworth to hear Mhlakaza. Excitement arose with the spread of a report that Moshoeshoe had already received his cattle. At this meeting, delays again were sought, Mhlakaza stating on the 4th of January, 1857, that the moon of December had been the appointed time, but non-obedience once again had delayed the resurrection. There were, however, still some misgivings. 'Even Kreli himself, on January 11th, was cast down and gave vent to his mortification in loud and violent lamentation that nothing miraculous had so far happened.' Shooter believes Sarili attempted suicide.

Although some people had become somewhat disheartened at the repeated delays, the excitement kept up. Mhlakaza predicted the next full moon would be blood red; then he would give his final instructions. The full moon did indeed rise blood red and on the 8th of February Sarili met with Mhlakaza. All cattle were to be killed; one cow and one goat per family only were to be spared. If these injunctions were obeyed, on the eighth day after the chief returned to his home, all the other predictions would be fulfilled. The sun would rise, wander in the heavens and set again, in the east. A hurricane would sweep the unbelievers away. The ancestors would rise with the cattle, grain pits would be filled, and all would be restored to youth.

During the few days preceding the 18th February there was great activity throughout the country. Believers slaughtered all their remaining stock and destroyed any remaining means of subsistence. Great kraals were built to receive the herds that would accompany the ancestors. Enormous skin sacks were manufactured to hold their milk. Corn pits were cleaned and enlarged. Huts were strengthened to withstand the coming wind. At the dawning of the great day, people decorated themselves with paint, chains, rings to welcome their friends and relatives.

The result was confusion, dislocation, starvation. As the destitution spread, believers began to pillage the unbelievers. There was much robbery and some fighting. (Although this, noticeably, did not involve Whites.) One gets a picture of crowds of people digging roots and eating the dead carcasses along the road as the only available sustenance. Brownlee estimated that between 20,000 and 25,000 people died and

49. PP, 1857-58: 82 (statement of Rona, Maqoma's 'right hand' son, 8 December, 1856).
52. Cory 1940: 34.
from 150,000 to 200,000 cattle were killed.\textsuperscript{55} Tens of thousands of people went to the Cape Colony looking for food and work. The Ndlambe chiefdoms had ‘become defunct in 1857’.\textsuperscript{56} Sandile’s Ngqika were devastated. Of 31,000 people at the close of 1856, less than 4,000 remained with him one year later. East of the Kei River, the center of the movement, the toll was at least as great. The Gcaleka dispersed as Sarili fled across the Bashee River with less than 500 followers.\textsuperscript{57} Even those rulers who opposed the cattle killings were seriously affected. Anta’s following was reduced by half. The Amatinde, a small group, were greatly reduced, even though their chief, Dyani, had been a protégé of the missionary Van Der Kemp. Even the Christian Kama, opposed to the cattle killings and a staunch government supporter, lost one-third of his people.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{Population of British Kaffraria, 1857}

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\textit{Source: J. Maclean, Compendium of Kafir Laws and Customs, Grahamstown, 1906 [1858].}

Mhlakaza himself and seventeen others of his homestead of twenty died of starvation. Nongquase survived and was taken to Capetown.

\textsuperscript{55} Brownlee 1866 : 150, 182; William Holden (\textit{The Past and Future of the Kaffir Races}, London, 1866 : 295) says between 50,000 and 70,000 died of starvation.
\textsuperscript{56} Gawler, quoted by De Toit 1954 : 210.
\textsuperscript{57} Theal 1876 : 59.
Although Soga believes she died in 1897 at King William’s Town, Stanford claims she was still alive in Alexandria in 1905.59

The government did what it could to relieve the famine. Brownlee had purchased as much grain as possible during the cattle killing and he distributed it. Missions helped; a Kaffir Assistance Society was formed to provide aid. The authorities encouraged people to take service with colonists and large numbers were engaged on public works projects in Kaffraria.

The Xhosa chiefs never fully recovered their power. Governor Grey took advantage of the collapse of chiefly authority to advance his own frontier policy. Grey, Maclean and Brownlee all realized the catastrophe that would follow the killing of cattle and the destruction of grain, and tried to divert the Xhosa. Grey contacted the principal chiefs personally and by letter. Brownlee did his best to sway Sandile against the movement and ‘went round among the Gaikas to strengthen by his presence and advice those who resisted the delusion, and to hold back the timid and wavering’. 60 As previously mentioned, cattle and corn were purchased to forestall the forthcoming famine.

Possibly the admonitions of government officials exercised some influence at a time when the tribes were in a state of bewilderment and the chiefs were receiving conflicting advice from their counsellors. Yet, all three administrators also realized the potential benefits to the Colony. Brownlee recommended doing nothing to stop the killing. (But in all fairness to Brownlee, he felt suppression would lead to crisis and conflict between the Colony and Xhosa.) The two magistrates told chiefs to buy cattle and corn, which had a tendency further to divide believers from unbelievers. Indeed, the advice and encouragement of the government and their promises of protection and favors gave unbelievers strength to resist. Grey and Maclean openly approved the policy of fostering tribal divisions. Brownlee’s own account clearly shows his attempt to encourage division within the Ngqika chiefdom, albeit for humanitarian reasons. Maclean writes: ‘The feud between the duped and the unduped [sic] is healing up every day, do what we will to keep it open and whatever we do must be done quickly as it will not be easy to catch the chiefs in a couple of months.’ 61

Following the cattle killings, Grey seized the opportunity to institute a full-fledged system of direct rule through magistrates and native assistants, pensioning friendly chiefs with farms and stipends, seizing territory and moving the population to smaller areas of land in village

59. Tiyo Soga, quoted by Chalmers 1877 : 146 ; Cory 1940 : 40, n. (Interview with Umjaza, son of Makana, who helped arrest Nongqause); Stanford 1956 : 5 ; Soga 1930 : 247.
60. Brownlee 1896 : 143.

61. Maclean to Grey, in Du Toit 1954 : 103 ; PP, 1857-58 : 89 (Grey, 7 April, 1857. and Grey to Labouchere, 20 September, 1856); CO, 48/376 (Brownlee, 2 August, 1856); Chalmers 1877 : 109-110 (Brownlee to Maclean, 28 June, 1856); Rutherford 1961 : 358 ; Brownlee 1896 : 155 sq.
units. Although Xhosa resistance was broken, Grey's program involved coercion, humiliation, confiscation of land, and military raids. Between 1857 and 1859, almost all the important Xhosa chiefs were convicted of some crime and deported. Sarili escaped; Sandile saved himself with a timely submission, and he, Anta, Oba and Fynn were resettled on small locations.  

II

From the beginning of the cattle killings, most Europeans, including Grey, Brownlee and Maclean, believed the entire phenomenon to be a plot to bring about war. This is quite understandable. Given European assumptions concerning witch doctors, divination and prophecy, it seemed entirely plausible that Mhlakaza was a tool used by Sarili to unite the various Xhosa chiefdoms in war against the Colony in one last effort to free themselves. By destroying their means of subsistence, the chiefs supposedly hoped to make their countrymen so desperate that they would attack the Colony. The evidence obtained from native informants pointed to this conclusion. Anta, Sandile's brother, claimed that Sarili was preparing for war, waiting for the expected European attack. Jyoti and Umgangeni, Thembu chiefs, believed the Xhosa chiefs had agreed upon a general combination, the objective of which was war, and that the cattle killings were designed to stir up the Xhosa. Sarili himself is quoted as having stated it was his intention to make war. With the cattle dead, they would have none to guard; there was no point in cultivating as the crops would be burned anyway.

Most serious from government's point of view was the supposed involvement of the Sotho chief, Moshoeshoe. Many contemporaries, as well as a number of modern historians, thought the killing was instigated by Moshoeshoe, or that he, at least, intrigued with Sarili. Grey felt Moshoeshoe's motive was self-preservation. The great Sotho leader believed he was going to be attacked by the Orange Free State; war between the Xhosa and the Colony would prevent the Boers from receiving assistance from their fellow Europeans. Grey saw an uncanny coincidence between events in the north and the intensity of the cattle killing. 'There can be no doubt,' he wrote, 'that Kreli is acting in concert with Moshesh.' Moshoeshoe replied to a letter from Grey denying

64. Ibid., pp. 20-21 (J. C. Warner, 16 August, 1856), p. 77 (M. B. Shaw, 16 October, 1854).
65. Ibid., p. 81 (Information to Maclean, 8 December, 1856).
67. See CO, 48/377 (Grey to Labouchere, 27 September, 1856); also PP, 1857-58 (Grey to Moshoesh, 27 August, 1856).
that he was the cause of any trouble among the Xhosa. Maclean marshaled evidence against the truth of Moshoeshoe's claims. While I feel British administrators misinterpreted the meaning of Moshoeshoe's response, it seems much of it was, in fact, untrue. There are repeated references to contact between Sarili and Moshoeshoe. Xhosa and Mfengu informants claimed both that Sarili sent messages to Moshoeshoe to inform him of Mhlakaza's prophecies and that Moshoeshoe sent embassies to the Gcaleka chief inquiring about the rumors of cattle killing he heard. Further evidence of the complicity of Moshoeshoe may be found in the rumors that circulated among the Xhosa concerning miracles in Basutoland.

There is no evidence, however, that Moshoeshoe was involved in the cattle killings among the Xhosa. It is certainly not surprising that he was in contact with Sarili concerning such a major and, if legitimate, ultimate event. Communication must be considered as normal. Concerning the question of the instigation of the cattle killing by Moshoeshoe, again the answer must be negative. Moshoeshoe was an able and usually humanitarian ruler; other means could have been found to achieve his presumed objectives. Furthermore, the Xhosa tribes traditionally reacted to the colonial threat individually and situationally. While Moshoeshoe was undoubtedly in contact with the Xhosa in 1856-57, he cannot be considered responsible for their decisions; even the chiefs themselves rarely made decisions.

Moreover, there is no reason to believe that most of the participants, including the principals, were anything other than sincere in their actions. The evidence of Sarili's guilt is not convincing. He wrote Grey: 'There is a thing which speaks in my country, and orders me and my people to kill our Cattle, eat our Corn, and throw away all our witchcraft wood, and not to plant, and to report it to all the chiefs in the country.' We have seen his dismay and concern over the failure of the prophecy. He, apparently, accepted the judgement that this was because all the cattle were not killed. No attempt was made to prepare for war. Tiyo Soga writes that the Xhosa sold their guns and assegais. Sarili is reported to have said in December of 1856, 'Umhlakaza and Nongqause were not in any way to blame; they spoke the truth.'

Even those who were convinced of ulterior motives behind the prophecies had doubts. Brownlee 'can not understand the cattle killings, as starvation is the worst preparation for war'. Although

69. CO, 48/376 (Maclean, 18 August, 1856; Grey to Labouchere, 16 August, 1856 and 20 September, 1856); PP, 1857-58: 79 (information to Maclean, 26 November, 1856), 80 (information to Mr. Witteberger, 28 October, 1856).
72. Quoted by Chalmers 1877: 142.
73. PP, 1857-58: 80 (native informant to Maclean, 8 December, 1856).
74. CO, 48/376 (Grey to Labouchere, 16 August, 1856).
he at first thought the cattle killing was initiated by the chiefs to force their people to invade the Colony, he changed his mind and leaned to the view that both chiefs and people had been equally deluded by superstitious beliefs. 'I do not feel quite so certain there was a plot. Had there been a plot it must have been known to at least eight or ten persons, and already the lips of most of those who took a leading part in it have been sealed in death... All assert that the cattle killing was made in a full belief in the predictions of Umhlakaza... Brownlee also discounts a story that has Mhlakaza accusing Sarili of having led him to make these predictions. Grey himself wrote in September 1856, 'The authorities in British Kaffraria have failed to elicit any proofs of combination for evil purposes amongst the chiefs, whilst conclusive proof has been obtained of the entire erroneousness of several reports of an unfavourable nature which were in circulation.'

Other contemporaries offer a similar opinion. The missionary Henry Waters testified in 1883 that he did not believe the cattle killing originated with Sarili or that Nongqause was his agent. Stanford, a missionary and administrator, had 'not found amongst the natives proof that the cattle killing was instituted to compel an invasion en masse of the Cape Colony'. Even G. E. Cory, an historian who emphasizes the political implications of the movement, writes concerning Sarili's distress at the failure of Mhlakaza's predictions: 'This is curious and tends to show whatever schemes he had in view, the prophecy of the resurrection could not have originated with him; he, in fact, seemed to believe it'.

Observers further remarked on the surprising lack of hostility to Europeans throughout Kaffraria and Gcalekaland during and after the cattle killing.

Nevertheless, Brownlee is quite correct that the predictions contained an explicit, if indirect, anti-European element. The spirits had fought the British in the Crimea and they would come to finish the English in Xhosa territory. The Whites would be swept into the sea. Yet how was this to be accomplished? Certainly not by a war but rather by an overruling spiritual power that needed no assistance from human creatures. Cattle were to be killed to propitiate the ancestors, to be sure, but this was the extent of active participation that would lead to the removal of the Europeans. Indeed, I would contend that one should not overstate the anti-European elements of the movement. It seems only natural that the resurrection of the ancestors would be accompanied by the removal of all Whites. The White race, being alien and secondary to the traditional cosmos, and thus hardly real at all, had no part in the scheme of regeneration.

76. CO, 48/377 (Grey to Labouchere, 20 September, 1856).
78. Stanford 1956: 5.
79. Cory 1940: 34.
We now come to the crux of the issue. If the cattle killing episode was not a callous hoax and was not overtly anti-European, how is one to view it? It would seem there are two major aspects to be analyzed. The first is the state of Xhosa society at the time, the second, the internal dynamics of the movement itself as seen in the light of traditional culture.

There had been a long and, at times, bitter history of contact between Europeans and Xhosa. A century of stock theft, war, and White encroachment on Xhosa land would certainly have caused some disruption. Governor George Grey's program of 'civilizing' the Xhosa, interfering radically with chiefly control and undermining the authority of chiefs, was introduced in the 1850's. It accelerated the general process of defeat and loss of land and represented an abandoning of the policy of maintaining a boundary line. Grey himself seems to have had an uncomfortable feeling that there might be some connection between his policy and the cattle killings. Their impact as a catalytic agent in the eruption of Messianic sentiments will be discussed later. Yet surely their growing activity and success was both a cause and a symptom of social breakdown. At about the same time, the Xhosa herds were devastated by a lung sickness epidemic, which, added to a prolonged drought and other natural disasters, had a major impact on the economy and was an indication that the ancestral shades were displeased with the people. A good indication of the societal tension and breakdown among the Xhosa is that there were more than twenty killings for witchcraft in Sarili's territory alone during the first half of 1855.

A number of scholars believe that profound and widespread disorientation provides the stimulus to eschatological excitement. An awakening of religious activity is a frequent characteristic of periods of social unrest. There is a tendency to interpret these movements, especially millennial movements, as cultural devices for relieving the paininess of social changes that degrade or seriously jeopardize the status of a group. These movements are regarded as a contact and reaction phenomenon arising from the shock of the meeting of two cultures on different

81 PP, 1857-58: 86-87 (Grey to Labouchere, 8 April, 1857, enclosure).
82 By the 1830's, there was a chain of mission stations and trader stores deep into Xhosa country. On their growth, see Heinrich LICHTENSTEIN, Travels in Southern Africa, Capetown, 1928; Du TOIT 1954: 37, n.; William SHAW, The Story of my Mission in South-Eastern Africa, London, 1860; MERRIMAN 1957; WALLACE and THOMPSON 1969.
84 MERRIMAN 1957: 221.
Prophets are seldom honoured among a people who feel they are masters of their own destiny. A social atmosphere which stimulates a spirit of self-confidence is not one to encourage reliance upon superhuman forces. It is when the shocks and perils of existence are overwhelming that the individual is especially prone to feel the need for spiritual support. Prolonged frictions and failures can accelerate this demoralization. The effects are magnified when a whole society is affected. Deprivation, anomie, conflict, a sense of blockage are all seen as favouring these types of movements.

Some scholars, notably A. F. C. Wallace, Peter Worsley and Norman Cohn, emphasize the emotional importance and the therapeutic effects of religious movements. As social tensions of any kind build up, any action is a relief. This discharge of emotional tension gives energy to the resulting movement. Indeed, it is because of this intensity that the millenarian movement dies or ceases to remain millennial: the energy level cannot be sustained. This phenomenon of hysteria may have been decisive in the rapid spread of the cattle killing and certainly should not be underestimated. Without first-hand accounts it is impossible to tell. But it would seem that the immediacy of the expected resurrection and the emotionalism associated with the mass slaughter of cattle may have fostered rapid diffusion.

It is important to remember, however, that acute crisis does not necessarily produce religious movements of this nature; they are one response out of many. Neither do they emerge at any special stage of contact, as has been shown by Berndt for the Cargo Cults of Melanesia. One Cargo Cult discussed did not arise out of immediate, severe tension but rather emerged from a gradual awareness of extraordinary circumstances which demanded a special approach.

The question then arises why did the cattle killing episode occur in 1856 and not earlier? Xhosa culture was fundamentally unchanged. European elements had entered and modified but not transformed the old culture. In spite of defeats and dislocations, it seems the basic structure of Xhosa society remained intact. Indeed, a decade after the cattle killings, Xhosa were once again engaged in a military conflict with the Colony. It appears, however, that Xhosa society was sufficiently disrupted to call forth movements of this type—Makana, Manjeni, Mhlakaza. Peter Worsley sees the Xhosa cattle killings as one of

86. For example, Ralph Linton, ‘Nativistic Movements’, American Anthropologist 45, 1943: 230-249.
89. Makana (Makanda, Nxele, Lynx) was a prophet-figure who rose to prominence shortly before the 1819 war between some Xhosa chieftoms and the Colony.
three) types of social situations where activist millenarian ideas are likely to flourish: 'This is when a society with differentiated political institutions is fighting for its existence by quite secular military-political means, but is met with defeat after defeat [. . . ] The rise of the prophet Nongqause [came] at a time when the Xhosa people were beginning to realise that they were losing the long drawn out Kaffir wars.\textsuperscript{90}

The pattern of millenarian expectations can be understood only in terms of the distinct cultural characteristics of the Xhosa. The first point that comes to mind is, of course, the existence of a tradition of prophecy. There was a strong tradition among the Xhosa. Diviners played a major role in socio-religious life.\textsuperscript{91} The cattle killing was not entirely a unique phenomenon in Xhosa history. On the contrary, it was, I would suggest, foreshadowed by Makana's predictions in 1819 and Mlanjeni's sacrifices years later. Furthermore, it was followed by similar movements, most notably the 'Wellington' movement of 1921 when men were ordered to destroy pigs and fowls, and the 'Israelite' sect (1928) under Enoch Mgijima.\textsuperscript{92} Indeed, the entire phenomenon of Christian separatist churches has been considered part of the same tradition.

The cattle killings were traditional in form and the leaders were diviners of the traditional pattern. The entire symbolism of the cattle killings was rooted in traditional ideas of the shades and revelation through diviners. Monica Wilson writes: 'Revival movements in which pagan prophets pressed their followers to renounce witchcraft and cast away dangerous medicines [. . . ] existed before contact with Whites, for purification from witchcraft is one of the fundamental themes of traditional religion. But revival movements proliferated during periods of acute tension. . .'\textsuperscript{93}

If the role of prophet-diviner and witch-finding movements were traditional and acceptable, one cannot be sure that the idea of resurrection was just as traditional. Brownlee believes it was opposed to all indigenous doctrines and theories; Grey feels resurrection was an ancient

\textsuperscript{90} Worsley 1968 : 230. Worsley is not quite accurate. Although the trend was defeat, some Xhosa chiefdoms had defeated colonists on a number of occasions and millennial-type prophets were involved in two major wars.


\textsuperscript{92} Hunter 1936 : 565-572. There also were millenary ingredients in the Natal disturbances of 1906-08 (S. Marks, \textit{Reluctant Rebellion}, Oxford, 1971).

\textsuperscript{93} Wilson 1971 : 43.
prediction. If there was a general belief in return of the dead, Mhlakaza’s revelation would thus have been even more locally plausible. One must, of course, wonder about the possible millennial influence of Christianity. Margull, Cohn, Eliade, Martin and others strongly believe that an end of history tradition is pre-eminently Judeo-Christian and that eschatological ideas were introduced into primitive societies by missionaries. The Christian influence on the Xhosa is undeniable; there were, for example, direct influences on the early prophet Makana.

Yet to say that Christian influence was of major importance in determining the millennial nature of the cattle killings is too sweeping a judgement. The Ghost Dance among the American Indians is usually considered to have originated both positively and negatively from White contact. Yet Cora DuBois clearly shows that in almost every generation people preached the imminent return of the dead; Leslie Spier’s thesis is that the 1870 and 1890 Ghost Dances did not spring full blown from conditions of distress, but rather had a firm foundation in what he calls the older Prophet Dance complex. Christian chiliastic expectations may have been important among the Xhosa; it would seem, however, that indigenous prophetic traditions were more so.

Moreover, one need not take the prediction of a resurrection too literally. The eradication of evil, the end of witchcraft, means the end of death. If this cannot properly be considered as a millennial idea, it comes very close. One must remember, also, that the ancestors affected, intimately, everyone’s life. The shades perhaps may not reappear in physical body, but surely they could take a more active, even decisive, role in this new situation.

The traditional means of propitiating the ancestral shades was through cattle sacrifice. Thus, even the method of bringing about the predictions of Mhlakaza was by no means alien to the Xhosa. There is a special way to kill/sacrifice cattle in Xhosa society. Were cattle sacrificed in this manner? I have not found any reference to this, but a positive answer would tend to support my arguments.

But the sacrifice was different in 1857. All cattle were to be killed, all corn was to be destroyed. This destruction of wealth to bring about the new Golden Age may appear to be insanity but is, in fact, eminently sensible. First, such a total transformation of the entire cosmos, as is implied by the resurrection of the ancestors and the abundance of corn and cattle that would accompany it, requires total commitment,

96. Makana allegedly was influenced by Van Der Kemp and in contact with an army chaplain, a Mr. Vanderlinger.
total faith. The radical destruction of a people’s means of survival is the prerequisite for the dawning of the new era. Cattle were sacrificed not only because they were the traditional means of propitiation but also because of their crucial importance in the economic, social and religious outlook of the Xhosa. It is not much of a loss to sacrifice something without value. Moreover, what was lost was trifling, minimal, compared to the future glory. It did not matter that all wealth was destroyed; after the fulfillment of the prophecy, there would be an abundance of cattle and corn for all. There would be no need to retain this world’s possessions.98

The idea that the ancestors would usher in the New Age and the destruction of wealth are common to many other religious movements, especially the Cargo Cults of Oceania. In a number of Cargo movements, pigs were killed, gardens were not cultivated, roads and airstrips were built. The similarity is striking. In most of the Cargo Cults, with notable exceptions, the expectation of the millennium led to destruction, while in the Xhosa movement, the cattle killing was a prerequisite for the new era.

Before concluding, there are two more points to mention. In spite of the repeated failure of the prophecies, the cattle killing continued. In the short run, failure presented no problem. The reasons attributed for failure were consonant with the basic ideological assumptions of the movement. Failures were explained in terms of human deficiencies. The spirits themselves were not to be blamed, nor was belief in the truth of the predictions seriously weakened. The prophesied arrival of ancestors and cattle did not take place because, simply enough, all cattle were not killed. Thus the slaughtering continued. By February 1857, however, most of the cattle had been killed. People were dying, the energy had played itself out. With the disconfirmation of Mhlakaza’s most precise prediction, the movement, of necessity, ended.

The second question, also implied in earlier discussion, is that of the internal opposition to the prophecies. Lack of evidence makes it difficult to speculate, let alone make precise statements. It is important to recognize that societies do not, and Xhosa society did not, react as wholes. There were those, including chiefs and important counsellors, who did not believe the prophecies and who did not kill their cattle. As the movement was basically opposed to British rule and to Christianity, it would seem that those tribes loyal to the British, and the ‘school people’ in those that were not, would not have participated in the cattle killing. This, by and large, appears to be the case. A number of Xhosa chiefs with a record of loyalty and non-opposition to the British seem to have been spared disaster, notably Toise and Siwani. Yet there were Chris-

98. See the demand of the original Church and of later Christian groups, such as Father Divine, that a person give up all earthly goods in entering the millennial community (Charles Forman, Yale Divinity School, personal communication). See also COHN 1957.
tians opposed to the movement who could not hold their people: Kama and Pato. There were also Christians who did participate in the cattle killing. And there were those chiefs who had clashed with the authorities yet did not give the order to kill: Anta. Without further information, no conclusions can be drawn.

The Xhosa cattle killings can only be understood with reference to their history, the nature of White-Xhosa contact, and the character and state of Xhosa culture and society. Xhosa society had undergone a series of shocks and was, to some degree, disrupted. But deprivation, rapid transformation, indeterminancy, military defeat, and discrepancy between wants and means are not adequate explanations of the cattle killing phenomenon. One needs to know the indigenous horizon of expectations.

I have suggested that there was a close link between the ideology of the movement and traditional concepts. The Xhosa activities of 1856-57 were an attempt to control a relatively new and increasingly threatening situation by the same kinds of techniques—divination, sacrifice—as they always had good cause to assume were effective in the old situation. Their conceptions about the nature and dynamics of the universe remained essentially unchanged. We can see a persistence of traditional modes of thought combined with the idea of a world (Xhosa) renewal. The Xhosa cattle killings were thus a response to, if not a reaction against, contact in terms of traditional social values. If the promised restoration of old conditions through supernatural assistance was without foundation, the Xhosa had no future; their day was forever past.

It is my opinion that the cattle killings were not an irrational flight from reality but an attempt to re-establish contact with reality, to meet new demands, to withstand new pressures. Furthermore, I would agree with René Ribeiro’s emphasis on the normality of millennial and other similar movements. They are too common, too widespread in space and time to be considered abnormal.

The cattle killing movement was not only concerned with deliverance from European oppression but had its own specific religious dynamic. ‘A millennial dream [. . .] has a logic of its own that is not an automatic reflection of social situations.’ As Spier, Suttles and Herskovits rightly point out, there is no reason why, without deprivation, a cult may

not originate and flourish for the sake of realizing the desire for the return of the beloved dead.

One, especially if unfamiliar with the world view and symbols of the Xhosa, cannot possibly comprehend the Xhosa cattle killings with the rational mind. But, given these symbols, given the failure of resistance, the continued, increasing, confiscation of cattle and land by Whites, one can understand. And those Xhosa who killed their cattle and starved did, in a way, meet their ancestors and those promised herds of cattle to live, perhaps forever, in a land of supreme bliss, without death.

J. Zarwan — *Le massacre du bétail chez les Xhosa, 1856-1857.* Pendant la guerre de Crimée, les révélations du prophète Mhlakaza convainquirent les Xhosa de massacrer leur bétail et de détruire leurs réserves de grains, ce qui devait permettre la résurrection des ancêtres et l'élimination des Blancs. Il en résulta en fait une famine qui diminua considérablement la capacité de résistance des Xhosa à la colonisation. Une fois écartée l'hypothèse, formulée par les observateurs contemporains, d'un complot politique destiné à pousser à la guerre contre les Anglais, l'explication du mouvement doit être recherchée dans la situation sociale des Xhosa à l'époque : bouleversement résultant des empiétements coloniaux, épizootie grave, action des missionnaires créant une dysphorie manifestée par la multiplication des accusations de sorcellerie et propre à faciliter l'apparition de mouvements prophétiques et de revitalisation. Les sacrifices de bétail jouent un rôle essentiel dans la culture xhosa, d'où la signification d'une hécatombe générale qui trouve sa rationalité dans la perspective d'un retour à l'âge d'or — ou plutôt d'une accession à l'univers ancestral actualisé.