

## NXELE, NTSIKANA AND THE ORIGINS OF THE XHOSA RELIGIOUS REACTION

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THE Hundred Years War (1779-1880)<sup>1</sup> of the Xhosa people against the white colonists of the Cape of Good Hope produced not one but two historical traditions. One, originating with Nxele, was war-like and nationalist, embodying African beliefs and African culture. The other, originating with Ntsikana, was pacifist and Christian, enjoining salvation through obedience to the will of God. The two men were contemporaries, emerging from obscurity during the brief lull between the Fourth (1811-12) and Fifth (1818-19) Frontier Wars and pursuing brief careers of under ten years each. Prophets do not always spring fully fledged into the world, however, and the revelations of Nxele and Ntsikana were the culminations rather than the starting-points of careers which followed very different trajectories.

### I

In 1778, Governor Van Plettenburg, travelling along the upper reaches of the Great Fish River, concluded a boundary agreement of doubtful validity with two minor Xhosa chiefs. This was subsequently regarded by the government of the Cape Colony as binding on *all* the Xhosa along the *entire* length of the Fish. Xhosa had however already penetrated beyond the Bushmans River, west of the Fish, and did not recognise these claims.<sup>2</sup> As both parties pressed forward, the area between the Bushmans and the lower Fish (the present-day district of Grahamstown) became a patchwork of Xhosa homesteads interspersed with Boer farms, where the two peoples learned to live together on terms approaching equality, if not harmony. The Xhosa were certainly not overawed by the Boers, who were hunters and cattlemen like themselves and whose material culture, apart from horses and firearms, did not seem vastly superior to their own. Some Xhosa even got as far as Cape Town, and 'expressed surprise at many things which they saw, but never think the white men are more wise or skilful, for they suppose they could do all the white men do if they chose'.<sup>3</sup> The Xhosa certainly never envied the Caucasoid features and Christian beliefs of which the Boers were so proud. Far from wanting the Boers to keep their distance, the Xhosa chiefs attempted to incorporate them into their social network. Ngqika hoped for a marriage alliance, Ndlambe expected the Boer farmers to pay him tribute, and Chungwa tried to lease the land he occupied from the Landdrost of Uitenhage.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Dr C. C. Saunders for this term. For general background on the Xhosa and the Frontier see M. Wilson and L. M. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford History of South Africa*, 1 (Oxford, 1969), chs. iii, vi; S. Marks and R. Gray in R. Gray (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, 111 (Cambridge, 1975), 454-8; J. B. Peires, 'A History of the Xhosa c. 1700-1835' (M. A. Rhodes University, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> J. S. Marais, *Maynier and the First Boer Republic* (Cape Town, 1944), 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> J. Campbell, *Travels in South Africa* (3rd ed., London, 1815), 367.

<sup>4</sup> D. Moodie, *The Record* (Cape Town, 1838-41; reprinted Cape Town, 1960), v, 48, 51; Cape Archives, C.O. 2566, J. Cuyler to Colonial Secretary, 9 Dec. 1809.

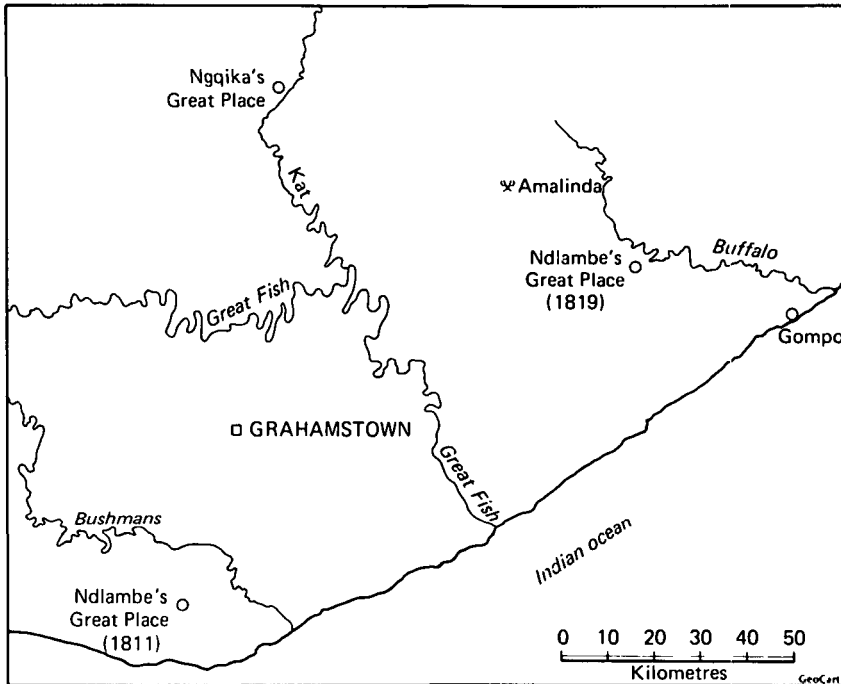


Fig. 1

There was, of course, a great deal of conflict too. The Boers and the Xhosa raided each others' cattle and coveted each others' land. The Boers feared the weight of Xhosa numbers, and resented being pestered for presents and seeing their favourite pastures occupied by Xhosa herds. The Xhosa had reason to complain of Boers who abducted their children to be servants, forced them to barter cattle for goods they did not want, and at times severely manhandled them. But on the whole the authorities exerted themselves to keep the peace. Xhosa chiefs returned stolen cattle and Boer field-cornets tried to check their more unruly countrymen. The cattle trade flourished, gifts were exchanged and local understandings developed. Poorer Xhosa became labour-clients of rich Boers, and Boer criminals and political dissenters became the subjects of Xhosa chiefs. This *modus vivendi* was occasionally disrupted by political factors. On the one hand, the ineffectual governments of the Dutch East India Company (up to 1795), the First British Occupation (1795–1803) and the Batavian Republic (1803–6) attempted to propel the Xhosa across the Fish River. On the other, the war between Chiefs Ndlambe and Chungwa who lived west of the Fish and Ngqika, Ndlambe's nephew, who lived east of it, drove the former ever deeper into colonial territory. European concern for the Fish boundary and Xhosa political divisions combined on three occasions (1779–81, 1793, 1799–1803) to ignite frontier wars. Armed as they were with guns and horses, the Boers succeeded in winning the first of these clashes, but as time progressed the Xhosa lost their fear of weapons which were, in any case, rather ineffective in the dense bush. Their overwhelming numerical strength gave them the advantage during periods of attrition, and they were even able to hold their own in more conventional warfare. The Second and Third Frontier Wars must be counted as Xhosa victories; in the latter a joint Xhosa–Khoi force of 150 men succeeded in defeating a Boer force

twice its own strength in a night attack near the Sundays river.<sup>5</sup> The Colonial authorities allied with Ngqika, but Ndlambe crushed him in battle (War of Thuthula 1807–8), and steadfastly refused to withdraw from his territory west of the Fish.

Xhosa ascendancy on the frontier was suddenly broken as a result of the British decision to retain the Cape after 1806. It was clearly impossible for the new colonial government to regularise the position in the eastern districts of the Colony so long as people not recognising British sovereignty remained in what was conceived to be British territory. In 1811, Governor Sir John Cradock ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Graham to expel all Xhosa living west of the Fish, urging 'the expediency of destroying the Kaffer kraals, laying waste their gardens and fields and in fact totally removing any object that could hold out to their chiefs an inducement to revisit the regained territory'.<sup>6</sup> Nothing loath, Graham determined 'to attack the savages in a way which I hope will leave a lasting impression on their memories'.<sup>7</sup> The war which followed (Fourth Frontier War 1811–12) was brief, but of unprecedented ferocity. The Xhosa chiefs' request to stay on until the summer crops were fully harvested was deliberately turned down. 'We chose the season of corn being on the ground,' Graham informed his ally Ngqika, 'in order . . . that we might the more severely punish them for their many crimes by destroying it.'<sup>8</sup> Graham's adjutant recorded entries such as these in his journal: 'Friday 17th, two parties of 100 men each were sent to destroy gardens and burn huts and villages. . . Saturday 18th, 300 men went early to destroy gardens and huts, taking with them 600 oxen to trample down the covered vegetables in the gardens.'<sup>9</sup> After one particularly successful operation, Graham exulted 'Hardly a trace of a Kaffir now remains. Almost all they saw were killed or wounded. . .'.<sup>10</sup> The war was marked by atrocities on both sides, the Xhosa murdering Landdrost Stockenstrom during a parley, and British troops shooting the elderly Chungwa as he lay dying on his sickbed unable to move. When the expelled Xhosa attempted to re-enter the Colony, Cradock simply reiterated his previous orders. 'It is painful to express,' he wrote to the Commandant of the Frontier, 'that the Order must be to destroy and lay waste.'<sup>11</sup>

Total war was a new and shattering experience for the Xhosa. Wars between Xhosa chiefs or with their African and Khoi neighbours were hardly very bloody.<sup>12</sup> The throwing assegai was not a very effective weapon and was not usually used with intent to kill; the warriors concentrated their attention on trying to abduct the enemy's cattle and women. The purpose of war was not the destruction of productive resources, but their acquisition and absorption. The havoc wrought by the colonial forces was not only cruel but incomprehensible. Instead of being subjected to the victors and incorporated into their society –

<sup>5</sup> Marais, *Maynier*, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Cradock–Graham, n.d., G. M. Theal (ed.), *Records of the Cape Colony* (London, 1897–1905), VIII, 160.

<sup>7</sup> Private communication from Graham, no addressee, 2 Jan. 1812, Theal, *Records*, VIII, 237.

<sup>8</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Graham's answer to Gaika, n.d., Theal, *Records*, XXI, 350.

<sup>9</sup> 'Justus' (R. M. Beverley), *The Wrongs of the Caffre Nation* (London, 1837), 43 n.

<sup>10</sup> J. Graham, no addressee, 26 Feb. 1812, Theal, *Records*, VIII, 286.

<sup>11</sup> Cradock–Col. Vicars, 27 Nov. 1813, reprinted in *Report of the Trial Stockenstrom v. Campbell for Libel* (2nd ed., Cape Town, 1838), 21.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, L. Alberti, *Account of the Xhosa in 1807* (Amsterdam, 1810; English translation, Cape Town, 1968), 87–93; Campbell, pp. 374–5; H. Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa* (Berlin, 1811; Eng. trans. reprinted Cape Town, 1928), 1, 341–4.

a painful process, but one which they would have understood – the Xhosa were rejected and expelled, the already blurring division between the two cultures was revived and their alienness was re-emphasised. Old fears must have been reawakened; the whites were not people like other people, they were *abantu abasemanzini*, the people from the water, associated with all the mystical power of the sea. For the first time the full power of the Colony's immense technical and material resources was revealed. Moreover, the situation was not regarded as stable. Now that this foreign entity had crystallised as a threat there was no telling where it would all end. This feeling is well demonstrated in one of Nxele's harangues:

There they come! They have crossed the Qagqiwa (Zwartkops) and they have crossed the Nqweba (Sundays); only one river more, the Nxuba (Fish) and then they will be in our land. What will become of you then?<sup>13</sup>

The Xhosa knew what had happened to the Khoi and feared a similar fate.

## II

The expulsion created a set of problems which the chiefs were unable to solve. Thus in the years immediately following 1812, political leadership passed from the hands of chiefs into the hands of prophet-figures. This should not however be seen simply as a switch from the secular to the sacred or as a flight from reality. Historians have made much of Nxele's promise to turn bullets into water, but such a promise – if he made it at all – is unremarkable. Every wardoctor was credited with the ability to 'tie up' the enemy and nullify his weapons,<sup>14</sup> and if one believes that spears can be rendered harmless it requires no great leap of faith to believe the same of bullets. The peculiar attraction which Nxele and Ntsikana had for the Xhosa stemmed not from any unfathomable magical powers but from their capacity to provide rational answers to pressing and very real questions: Who were these white people? What did they want? What should be done about them?

Like most other African religions, Xhosa religion was logical enough, given the assumption that the unseen world was active in this one and exercised an important causal influence.<sup>15</sup> Health and fertility were accepted as the natural condition of things, and any deficiency was attributed to dereliction of duty or to the influence of malevolent persons. It was further assumed that the unseen world was comprehensible, that its forces behaved according to set patterns, and

<sup>13</sup> 'A Native Minister' (I. Wauchope), *The Natives and their Missionaries* (Lovedale, 1908), 34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ukukafula*: see A. Kropf and R. Godfrey, *A Kafir-English Dictionary* (Lovedale, 1915), 177. For a description of the ceremony, see J. H. Soga, *The South-Eastern Bantu* (Johannesburg, 1930), 90-91.

<sup>15</sup> The fullest accounts of Xhosa religion are J. H. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs* (Lovedale, n.d.), chs. viii-x, and A. Kropf, *Das Volk der Xosa-Kaffern* (Berlin, 1889), 186-209. Most of the early travellers and missionaries have useful descriptions. See, for example, Alberti, ch. xi; Lichtenstein, *Travels*, I, 311-21; W. Shaw, *The Story of My Mission* (London, 1860), 444-66. M. Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, (London, 1936; 2nd ed. 1961), chs. v-vii, which deals with the culturally very similar Mpondo, and H. Callaway, *The Religious System of the AmaZulu* (reprinted Cape Town, 1970) should also be read by anybody seriously interested in the subject. The perspective adopted in this section owes much to R. Horton, 'African traditional thought and Western science', *Africa*, xxxvii (1967), and P. Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (2nd ed., London, 1970).

that it was therefore open to manipulation and control. This made religious practice an inseparable part of secular activity. On one level, it was a technique of getting things done and its practitioners, the diviners, were not metaphysicians but technicians who understood the mechanics of the unseen world. Rain magic and field magic were as essential to a good harvest as sowing and weeding. Similarly, correct observance of rituals was a prerequisite of success and happiness in everyday life.

It is important to note that this world-view did not rule out experimentation and hypothesis. For instance, in their persistent attempts to procure a secure supply of rain the Xhosa turned at different times to the Khoi and the missionaries to see if their cosmologies were more effective. Later there was also a school of thought that favoured the San and Mfengu because they came from the 'north' where the rain came from.<sup>16</sup> However, speculation was necessarily limited by the bounds of the world-view itself. Chief Gcaleka, for instance, has been described as a sickly man, who was always killing people in the hope of making himself better.<sup>17</sup> The fact that his health did not improve did not show that disease is not caused by witches; it simply showed that the witch had not yet been caught.

Nxele and Ntsikana commenced their careers as diviners ('witch-doctors'). All diviners were (and still are) called to their office through a mystical experience characterised by what many Western psychologists would call hysterical symptoms, but which the Xhosa regard as marks of divine attention.<sup>18</sup> The signs of possession varied and might include nervous paroxysms, dreams, visions, association with familiars, and so on. Often these signs were ambivalent, so that it was not always clear whether the possessing spirits were good or evil, and a qualified diviner would be called in to decide what should be done. If the symptoms were acceptable and if the initiate could keep them under control, he would probably be admitted as a diviner; if not, the offending spirits would be cast out. Relatively few initiated persons actually practised as diviners, and it would appear that the successful diviners were those who told their clients what the latter wanted to hear. The implications of this are important. It was not spiritual experience alone which qualified a person as a diviner. The initiate had to be recognised as such by established diviners, and his subsequent performances had to conform with the expectations of his public. The process of divination was not a one-way street through which the charismatic diviner led his passive flock, but a dialogue between diviner and clients where the course of action prescribed by the former was circumscribed by what the latter were prepared to accept.

Obviously, the traditional cosmology had no place for white men and no formula for dealing with the threat they posed. If a solution was to be found, it was surely somewhere among the new stock of concepts introduced by the Europeans. The Christian ideas most readily absorbed by the Xhosa were those concerning God, the Devil, the Creation and the resurrection. Of these, the first two were familiar from Khoi religion. The third had a Xhosa equivalent, which had man created from a bed of reeds and proceeding from a hole in the ground. But it was the idea of the Last Judgement and Resurrection which had the greatest

<sup>16</sup> H. A. Reyburn, 'The missionary as rainmaker', *The Critic* (Cape Town), (1933); anonymous, undated manuscript (probably by William Shrewsbury), Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives, MS. 15,429, Cory Library, Grahamstown.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Mdandala, 26 Jan. 1910, Kentani. Sir George Cory interviews, Cory Library, Grahamstown.

<sup>18</sup> I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (Harmondsworth, 1971), ch. vii.

impact, as it filled a gap in Xhosa belief. There had been no satisfactory explanation for death: it was regarded as a product of witchcraft and as the ultimate impurity. So great was the horror of death among the Xhosa that the fatally ill were not allowed to die in their homes, but chased out into the bush, while the relatives of the deceased had to undergo elaborate rites of purification before being allowed to re-enter the community.<sup>19</sup> The missionary message that the dead did not really die but would rise up again was received with joyful misunderstanding:

When . . . [the missionary, James Read] told them that woman and all mankind would rise again from the dead, it caused uncommon joy among the Caffres. They said they should like to see their grandfathers, and others whom they mentioned. Congo inquired when it would happen, and if it would be soon, but Mr Read could not gratify his wishes on that point.<sup>20</sup>

Some sort of religious synthesis was needed: a synthesis which was firmly rooted in the traditional world-view (which was still seen to work from day to day), but which was capable of explaining the presence of these strange people and suggesting a means of controlling them.

### III

Nxele grew up in the Cape Colony, son of a commoner who worked for a Boer farmer.<sup>21</sup> Here he picked up Dutch and, perhaps, that knowledge of Christianity and European ways which enabled him to mediate between two cultures. While still a young man he began to exhibit the hysterical symptoms associated with the initial calling of a diviner, but to an exaggerated degree. He lived in the woods and fields, refusing to eat any prepared food, because it had become unclean through the sins of the people.<sup>22</sup> After his circumcision he began to preach, saying 'Forsake witchcraft! Forsake blood!' This was unusual behaviour even for a diviner. Nxele was bound and a rope was tied round his neck, but a man named Qalanga, recognising that this was no ordinary madness, said, 'Take that rope off his neck, and say *Camagu!*'<sup>23</sup> Nxele subsequently attributed this deliverance to the intervention of Christ.<sup>24</sup> He was taken to Ndlambe. Whether that chief was genuinely impressed or whether he simply felt that the madman might prove

<sup>19</sup> Alberti, *Account*, 93-4; Lichtenstein, *Travels*, 1, 319.

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, *Travels*, 366.

<sup>21</sup> The best accounts of Nxele are those by 'A native minister' (see n. 13); an untitled, undated manuscript by William Kekale Kaye, 'a Native Interpreter', No. 172C, Grey Collection, South African Public Library, Cape Town; J. L. Döhne, *Das Kafferland und seine Bewohner* (Berlin, 1862), which is the basis for A. Kropf, *Der Lugenprofeten Kafferlands* (Berlin, 1891); J. Read, 'Narrative of the journey of Mr Read and others to Caffraria', *Transactions of the London Missionary Society*, IV (1818). Other accounts include J. Brownlee, 'On the origins and rise of the prophet Nxele', No. 172C, Grey Collection, S.A. Public Library, Cape Town; extract from the diary of C. L. Stretch, copied by G. M. Theal, Accession 378c, Cape Archives; and T. Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* (London, 1835; reprinted Cape Town, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> Döhne, *Kafferland*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Kaye MS, 'Camagu' means 'Forgive and be pacified', and is usually addressed to an ancestor or a diviner.

<sup>24</sup> Nxele subsequently told the missionary James Read that 'a large fire was presented before him, and that there were persons who had got hold of him to throw him into it, but that Taay came and delivered him' (Read, 'Narrative', 284).

useful is difficult to say, but he allowed Nxele to set up his own Great Place and offered him cattle, which were refused.

These occurrences seem to have taken place shortly after the Xhosa were expelled across the Fish. This disaster did not cause Nxele to turn against the whites; if anything, it inspired him to seek the sources of their power. He spent much of his time in the new frontier outpost of Grahamstown, carefully observing the military and technical side of the behemoth, but evidently more interested in its magical underpinnings, represented in Grahamstown by Chaplain Vanderlingen whom Nxele puzzled 'with metaphysical subtleties or mystical ravings'.<sup>25</sup> During this early phase his views seem to have been fairly orthodox. He preached against witchcraft, polygamy, adultery, incest, warfare and the racing of oxen. He spoke of God (*Mdalidiphu* – creator of the deep), his son Tayi, the Creation, the Fall, the Flood, the Passion and the Resurrection. His personal following increased slowly, but he had little impact on Xhosa society as a whole, and he complained to the missionary Read that the Xhosa would not listen to him. At this point in his career (1816) he viewed the missionaries as brothers in a common pursuit, and urged them to establish themselves in Xhosaland under his protection.<sup>26</sup>

The dynamic of Nxele's personal development and the dynamic of the historical situation in which he was placed made it impossible for him to co-operate with the European missionaries for very long. It was but a short step from proclaiming divine truth to associating himself with the divinity, particularly since Nxele knew how unique he was among the Xhosa. Already by 1816 he was calling himself the younger brother of Christ, although this should be interpreted in the classificatory rather than the literal sense. It became increasingly clear to him that orthodox Christianity as embodied by the missionaries would not accept him as an equal partner in the evangelisation of the Xhosa, much less believe in the divinity of his origins or the authenticity of his visions. In any event, his inclination was not to piecemeal conversion through individual persuasion, but rather to mass conversion through dramatic demonstration of his divine power. To this end, he levied a large number of cattle and summoned the people to Gompo Rock (near modern East London) to witness the resurrection of the dead from beneath the rock, and the damnation of the witches thither. Although the expected event did not materialise, Nxele's reputation was not substantially affected.<sup>27</sup> He now began to move away from Christianity with increasing rapidity. He began to use red ochre and to dance (*xhentsa*) in the manner of diviners. Previously a staunch adherent of monogamy, he now married two young San women. Whereas he had at first rejected gifts, he started to demand (*ruma*) the diviner's due of cattle.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Pringle, *Narrative*, 279.

<sup>26</sup> We are indebted to Read's account for our knowledge of Nxele's early beliefs.

<sup>27</sup> The most satisfactory account of how Nxele extricated himself from this difficulty is in W. Shaw, *Journal of William Shaw* (Cape Town, 1972), 103. 'Makanna ordered them all to enter the water and wash, with which the people complied, but as they entered the water en masse they could not refrain from bellowing forth the usual war yell. Makanna now informed them they ought not to have done so, and since they had thought proper to follow their own headstrong will, and not listened to his directions, all was now over, and every man might return to his own home.'

<sup>28</sup> There is something of a problem in establishing the chronology of Nxele's actions and attitudes, as most accounts of Nxele were written after his death, and none of them traces the changes in his behaviour. The very exact account left by Read of Nxele's Christian phase enables us to infer such changes.

The political events of a wider world were also inexorably drawing Nxele into conflict with the Europeans. Desperate to end the cattle-reiving which the expulsion of the Xhosa had only aggravated, the Colonial Government concluded an agreement with their old ally, Ngqika (April 1817). The substance of this was that the Colonial government would recognise Ngqika as king of the Xhosa and support him militarily against his domestic rivals in exchange for his assistance in suppressing the raids. Ngqika accepted most reluctantly since his followers were responsible for many of the losses, but he nevertheless utilised his new-found strength to bully the other chiefs into recognising his ill-gotten eminence. This provoked the other chiefs into uniting against his pretensions. Nxele was a moving spirit in the coalition. Ndlambe was the old patron who had saved him from death, whereas Ngqika had sponsored a rival named Ntsikana. Ngqika was moreover an adulterous and incestuous sinner, through his marriage to Ndlambe's ex-wife, Thuthula. Ngqika was overwhelmed at the great battle of Amalinde (October 1818), but with characteristic slyness he appealed to the Colonial authorities on the grounds that he was being punished for his attempts to halt thieving.<sup>29</sup> Colonel Brereton, later famous for shooting down rioters in Bristol, swept into Xhosaland and took off 23,000 cattle. For the Xhosa, it was a repetition of the expulsions of 1812. As a councillor of Nxele put it:

You sent a commando – you took our last cow – you left only a few calves which died for want, along with our children. You gave half the spoil to Gaika; half you kept yourselves. Without milk – our corn destroyed – we saw our wives and children perish – we saw that we must ourselves perish; we followed, therefore, the tracks of our cattle into the colony.<sup>30</sup>

These internal and external pressures fused the Christian, traditional and personal elements in Nxele's religious thinking into a comprehensive cosmological synthesis. He now saw the world as a battleground between Thixo, the God of the whites, and Mdalidiphu, the God of the blacks. The whites had killed the son of their God, who had punished them by expelling them from their own country into the sea whence they had now emerged in search of land. But Mdalidiphu was more powerful and would push the whites back. The correct way to worship God was not 'to sit and sing M'De-e, M'de-e all day and pray with their faces to the ground and their backs to the Almighty', as the missionaries taught, but to dance and to enjoy life and to make love, so that the black people would multiply and fill the earth.<sup>31</sup>

Nxele was now at the height of his power. Acting as the supreme war-doctor, he led the Xhosa armies in ravaging the Colony. In May 1819 he attacked Grahamstown in broad daylight, a fatal error which almost certainly cost him success. Three months later, he surrendered himself in the vain hope that this would end the British counter-offensive, and was imprisoned on Robben Island. In 1820 he and some companions overpowered the crew of a small boat and attempted to escape, but the overloaded craft capsized and he was drowned.

<sup>29</sup> For a fuller account of these events, see J. B. Peires, 'Ngqika' in C. C. Saunders (ed), *Black Leaders in Nineteenth Century South Africa* (London, forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> Pringle, *Narrative*, 286.

<sup>31</sup> 'A Native Minister' (as cited in n. 13), 34. Wauchope's evidence may be regarded as particularly interesting. His grandfather fought on the Ndlambe side at Amalinde and he knew several of Nxele's descendants.



## IV

The revelation of Ntsikana, like that of Nxele, gradually emerged through a combination of personal evolution and external pressure.<sup>32</sup> But Ntsikana's thought developed in the reverse direction from Nxele's, towards Christianity rather than away from it. Until his religious visitation, Ntsikana was a locally respected but quite unremarkable homestead-head in Ndlambe's country. His initial experience was a hallucination at the gate of his cattle enclosure, where he saw a strange ray of light shining on his favourite ox, an animal with which he had a mystical and quite unChristian relationship.<sup>33</sup> Shortly thereafter he attended a dance, and a whirlwind sprang up whenever he tried to join in. Be that as it may, he certainly seems to have experienced a revulsion at traditional dancing. As he was returning home he felt an irresistible impulse directing him to plunge into a stream and wash off his red ochre. An insistent voice within him cried 'This thing which has entered me, it says "Let there be prayer! Let every thing bow the knee!"'<sup>34</sup> It should be emphasised that there was nothing Christian in this: Ntsikana had experienced a mystical vision and an urge to rid himself of impurity, all completely comprehensible in Xhosa religious terms. Ntsikana took himself and his vision to Ndlambe, but the latter politely declined his services in favour of the already established Nxele.<sup>35</sup>

Rejected by Ndlambe, Ntsikana turned to Ngqika and with his backing set up as Nxele's rival. Tradition recalls that his constant cry was 'Nxele has turned upside down! Why does he mislead the people?'<sup>36</sup> Directly or indirectly, he learnt something of Christianity from Joseph Williams, the missionary at Ngqika's Great Place, and this gave him the conceptual ammunition to attack his enemy:

Nxele is wrong in saying that God is on earth: God is in the heavens. He is right in saying that there are two Gods, but they are not Tayi and Mdalidiphu, but Thixo and his son. . . He lies in saying the people must put away witchcraft, for what is witchcraft but (the badness of) the heart of man?<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> There are very few contemporary European references to Ntsikana, and these are very brief. C. Rose, *Four Years in Southern Africa* (London, 1829), 135-7, is a typical example. Fortunately, there are several detailed accounts in Xhosa. J. K. Bokwe's hagiographical *Ntsikana* (Lovedale, 1914), the only substantial description in English, purports to be a distillation of these, but he omits occurrences detrimental to Ntsikana's image. See note 35 below. The Xhosa accounts by W. K. Ntsikana (Ntsikana's son), M. N. Balfour (one of his converts) and Zaze Soga, which appeared in various nineteenth-century missionary publications, have been reprinted in W. G. Bennie (ed.), *Imibengo* (Lovedale, 1935). Kaye, MS (cited in n. 21), contributes a valuable secular viewpoint.

<sup>33</sup> 'Ntsikana rose up from his bed, and went to the door, and just as he came out, the ox walked on towards the gate of the kraal. Ntsikana followed and as he himself reached the gate, Hulushe (the ox) . . . was already standing looking at him, as if wondering and in sorrow . . . Ntsikana approached and, stretching forward his arms, Hulushe bent his neck. For a while Ntsikana leaned his body with outstretched arms between the horns and on the neck of the favourite ox.' Bokwe, *Ntsikana*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> 'Le nto indingeneyo, ithi makuthandazwe, makuguqe yonke into.' Ntsikana in Bennie, *Imibengo*, 10. The crucial verb here is '-guqa', 'To stoop, bend on or upon; to bend the knee, to kneel down' (Kropf and Godfrey, *Kafir-English Dictionary*, 137).

<sup>35</sup> This absolutely critical stage in Ntsikana's development is ignored by Bokwe, although he reprints Zaze Soga's Xhosa account, which mentions it (p. 53). There is also a reference to Ntsikana's rejection by Ndlambe in N. Falati, 'The Story of Ntsikana', MS. 9063, Cory Library, Grahamstown, dated St Marks, 1895.

<sup>36</sup> Bokwe, *Ntsikana*, 12. I prefer my own translation.

<sup>37</sup> Kaye MS.

'You only go to wash yourselves with sea-water at Gompol!'<sup>38</sup> he warned those who were hurrying off to the expected resurrection. He appealed to the chiefs, all members of the Tshawe royal clan, by pointing out the dangers of extending recognition to a commoner like Nxele:

I am only like a candle. Those who are chiefs will remain chiefs because they were given (the chiefship) by Him and only He can take it away; I have not added anything to myself; I am just as I was. Nxele is wrong in saying he should be saluted; he is not a chief.<sup>39</sup>

Ntsikana even went so far as to deny the impurity of incest, which Ngqika had clearly committed through his liaison with Thuthula.

It is thus evident that Ntsikana's theology developed as a reaction to Nxele. But he should not be dismissed as a mere political opportunist. The basic idea expressed in his original vision, 'Let every thing submit!', is also the central theme of his magnificent hymn, which is still sung today. The image of God as a shield of defence is repeated three times in the original version, and the hymn continues:

He is the one who brings together herds which oppose each other.  
He is the leader who has led us.  
He is the great blanket which we put on.<sup>40</sup>

The essence of Ntsikana's message, his answer to the problem of stress, was complete submission to the will of God, where alone peace and protection were to be found. Peace was a part of Ntsikana's politics too. Just before the disaster of Amalinde he warned the amaNgqika that he saw their heads 'devoured by ants'<sup>41</sup> and tried unsuccessfully to restrain them from battle. This was in direct contrast to Nxele who threatened that they would become 'firewood and ants'. Nxele was a war-doctor and his cosmology was one of a battle between good and evil. Ntsikana was a man of peace and submission, and his cosmology was one of peace and submission.

Amalinde dates Ntsikana's emergence to before 1818. Thereafter he preached and composed hymns at home. Tradition has it that when he felt death approaching (1821) he asked his family to bury him in the ground in the Christian manner. When they hesitated, he picked up a wooden spade, and turned the first sods.

## v

The more obvious contrasts between Nxele and Ntsikana should not obscure the essential similarity of their social functions. Although adjectives like 'prophetic' come readily to the pens of historians and Nxele has even been claimed for the millennium,<sup>42</sup> they represent an adaptation within the traditional religious framework of innovation and experimentation rather than a radical break away from it. Their different revelations were simply alternative permutations of the

<sup>38</sup> Bowke, *Ntsikana*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Kaye MS.

<sup>40</sup> The official version from which this is taken is printed in Bokwe, *Ntsikana*, 26. I prefer my own translation. The earliest printed version of this hymn is in Rose, *Four Years*, 136-7. It is noteworthy that the specifically Christian lines of the official version do not appear in Rose's rendering, and are attributed (in another context) by Wauchope (whose grandmother was converted by missionary Van der Kemp) to Van der Kemp. 'A native minister', 21.

<sup>41</sup> Bokwe, *Ntsikana*, 20.

<sup>42</sup> B. Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium* (St Albans, 1975), 236-7.

same stock of concepts, deriving from the necessity of fusing Xhosa religion with Christianity in order to formulate a new world-view capable of comprehending the irruption of the Europeans. Their ultimate conclusions evolved slowly, and they were elicited by the outside world rather than dictated to it. Nxele's nationalist theology emerged as a result of white hostility to his version of Christianity and to his patron, Ndlambe, whereas Ntsikana's pacifism was due to the political circumstances of his sponsor, Ngqika. Their popular impact depended less on their personal charisma than on the popular acceptability of their respective messages. Nxele's following among the Xhosa increased as he moved away from Christianity towards more comprehensible patterns of magical behaviour. Ntsikana's position was understood by very few, and he made very little impression even on Ngqika's people.

Nxele is supposed to have led 10,000 warriors against Grahamstown. Ntsikana's immediate influence was confined to his immediate circle. The spiritual heirs of Nxele from Mngqatsi the rainmaker, through Mlanjeni to Nongqawuse, prophetess of the cattle-killing disaster, and beyond, found traditional techniques increasingly helpless against European power. By the turn of the century 'Kukuza kukaNxele' (the return of Nxele) was the byword for a vain hope. At the same time the seed Ntsikana planted had, through the efforts of men like Tiyo Soga, son of one of Ntsikana's converts, flourished, and Christianity was well and truly planted among the Xhosa as an African religion brought not by missionaries but by Ntsikana. Today the wheel has come full circle as young Xhosa turn towards the nationalism of Nxele rather than the humility of Ntsikana.

That the relative appeal of Nxele and Ntsikana has fluctuated over time should surprise no one. In their own day their attraction depended not on their charisma or their supernatural abilities but on their power to reinterpret a world which had suddenly become incomprehensible. They are giants because they transcend specifics to symbolise the opposite poles of Xhosa response to Christianity and the West: Nxele representing struggle and Ntsikana submission. Nxele died defiant to the end; Ntsikana dug his own grave. So exactly does their rivalry foreshadow the struggle for the Xhosa mind that the contest between the two would surely be taken for a myth if it were not known to be a reality.

#### SUMMARY

The sudden expulsion of the Xhosa across the Fish River in 1811-12 created a practical and conceptual crisis which the traditional political authorities were unable to resolve. Two commoners, Nxele and Ntsikana, emerged in this vacuum, each proposing his own solution to the problems posed by the white irruption. Although these responses were religious responses, they were neither irrational nor incomprehensible. Xhosa religion had long functioned as an instrument for the control of the material world. By incorporating selected Christian concepts with the Xhosa world-view, Nxele and Ntsikana were able to provide the Xhosa with acceptable explanations of past events and prescriptions for future action.

Nxele urged resistance and Ntsikana preached submission, but an examination of their personal histories shows that these final conclusions were more the product of exterior pressure than interior revelation. It may be suggested that the future reputations of the two men, like their past actions, will be determined more by the popular mood than by anything they themselves did or said.