The Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement in History and Literature

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Abstract

In South Africa’s Eastern Cape frontier zone, a millenarian movement known as the Xhosa Cattle-Killing (1856–1857) devastated local populations and stunned observers. How could the messages of its prophetess, Nongqawuse, and the exhortations of her uncle, Mhlakaza, lead to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of cattle, to the death of tens of thousands of people, and to the subjugation of the Xhosa? Historians and authors of literary works have attempted to answer this question, and their explanations have followed the contours of South African history through three general phases. The first (1857–1947) characterized the movement as a failed revolt against British expansion and a necessary step in social and religious Darwinism. The second period (1948–1988) saw the continuation of these interpretations, and, with National Party rule and the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement, an increasingly radical group of historians brought about politicized and alternative interpretations embedded in Xhosa oral history. The third phase (1989–) began with the publication of Jeff Peires’ The Dead Will Arise, which renewed interest in the history and has inspired a new wave of historical critique.

In April 1856, near the Gxarha River along South Africa’s Eastern Cape frontier, a Xhosa girl by the name of Nongqawuse received a message that only she could hear: ‘Tell that the whole community will rise from the dead; and that all cattle now living must be slaughtered, for they have been reared by contaminated hands […]. There should be no cultivation […].’¹ This message would develop into a virulent prophecy, and its tenets would divide the Xhosa nation along the fault line of belief. The governor of the Cape Colony, George Grey, and his primary deputy in the region, John Maclean, did little to defuse its potential for destruction. They claimed instead that the movement was a front for war against the Colony, devised by Xhosa Paramount Chief Sarhili and Moshoeshoe, King of Lesotho. At the same time, lungsickness was destroying the vast majority of herds in the region, which many Xhosa attributed to a broader societal malady. Coming after years of intermittent warfare, the Cattle-Killing thus thrived in a toxic atmosphere of distrust between colonial officials and chiefs, threatened warfare, and environmental collapse. The subsequent unfolding of events was nothing short of disastrous. Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza’s prophecies failed several times, and tens of thousands of Xhosa starved to death. An equal number fled to the Cape Colony. Hundreds of thousands of cattle were killed. Between January 1857 and December 1858, the population of the region decreased by 75%.² The pivotal Cattle-Killing Movement broke the back of the Xhosa nation and ushered in a new era of colonial expansion and domination.

This overview comprises the generally accepted narrative of the movement, one that tends to attribute Xhosa collapse to the power of Nongqawuse’s prophecy. Some historians ask today, however, whether the prophetic movement was merely a smaller detail in a broader context of social and environmental collapse after years of colonial
contact. After all, other prophets with similar messages had arisen in the region before Nongqawuse. The prophetic center of the Cattle-Killing Movement was not unique and, some would say, unnecessary for the inevitable subjugation of the Xhosa. Missionaries had been proselytizing for years and infused Xhosa cosmology with the symbols and teachings of Christianity. In 1856 alone, the Xhosa saw their political institutions weaken with the appointment of magistrates, and the first colonial doctor began operating in the region with the expressed objective of undermining indigenous practices. Lungsickness ravaged herds, droughts were common, and harvests had been failing.

Ultimately, one’s interpretation of the movement depends upon the importance one places on each of these historical components. And like other eras of the South African past, interpretations of the Cattle-Killing have changed along the contours of current events. Authors have bent historical meaning to their needs: colonial officials to imperial designs, Black Consciousness authors to the liberation struggle, and postmodernist authors to literary motifs. Examining the historical and literary writing of the Cattle-Killing reveals the close bond between history, author, time, and text.

For more than a century, the movement appeared marginally in biographies, in literary and dramatic works, or in grand-narrative histories toting colonial interpretation. The literature evolved in three general phases. The first period of Cattle-Killing historiography (1857–1947) exhibited many of the weaknesses inherent in colonial scholarship—the exoticizing and belittlement of native subjects—and posited the movement as a ‘chiefs’ plot’ between Sarhili and Moshoeshoe. Xhosa writers refuted this perspective as early as the 1880s in Xhosa-language newspapers, and the resulting dialog laid the foundation for divergent interpretations of the movement. In the second phase (1948–1988), writers began to question more vocally the interpretations of the past as the National Party ascended to power. Influenced by Marxist and anti-colonial ideologies, South Africans challenged control over the past. In these 40 years, the ‘Grey’s plot’ thesis—that Governor Grey masterminded the entire episode for colonial advancement—gained currency in response to the chiefs’ plot of the previous phase, and South African history came under scrutiny by radicals by the 1970s. Peires’ _The Dead Will Arise_—and the critiques and reviews it elicited—inaugurated a third period of Cattle-Killing historiography (1989–), one that seeks to toss out both the chiefs’ and Grey’s plots to give a more detailed understanding of what historical developments contributed to the millenarian movement. What little innovative work was written for more than a century after the movement has been surpassed in the last 20 years by Peires et al.

**Phase 1: Chiefs, Suicide, and Savagery (1857–1947)**

The Cattle-Killing’s first appearance in historical scholarship came in the work of George McCall Theal, whose ‘strongly pro-colonist, anti-black historical writing’ characterized the movement as ‘an act unparalleled in the world’s history for its folly, a deed of madness such as nowhere else had ever been seen.’ He wrote that Governor George Grey ‘directed a succession of vigorous blows at the very life of the heathenism dominant there, a life made up largely of ignorance, superstition, and indolence.’ Theal attributed the movement to ‘superstition alone’ and adopted Grey and Maclean’s belief that ‘some of the leaders viewed the entire proceeding as calculated solely for purposes of war.’ This would be but the first mention of a causative plot that would shape much of the historiographical debate for years to come.

Theal’s employment—and colonial consensus—of the chiefs’ plot thesis did not pass by Xhosa historians in the late 1800s without notice. William Gqoba’s two-part article in...
Isigidimi SamaXosa (1888) constitutes the first written Xhosa account of the Cattle-Killing. Readers of Gqoba’s article questioned the motives behind the movement and the widening interpretive gulf between Xhosa and colonial versions of the history. But because Isigidimi samaXosa was not printed in English, its superlative representation of the movement went unnoticed—or ignored—by colonial historians.

Subsequent histories corroborated Theal’s interpretation and exacerbated his prejudices. John Chalmers’ *Tiyo Soga* (1877) detailed the life and thoughts of the first ordained African minister of the South African Presbyterian Church. Chalmers placed the blame of the Cattle-Killing on Sarhili and his immediate acceptance of the prophecy. The Soga biography is of note because Chalmers included Soga’s letters upon his return to the Cape Colony in 1857. Soga’s heritage as a Xhosa did little to soften his Western-trained perception of events. In one letter of August 1857, he wrote, ‘My poor infatuated countrymen are now most bitterly reaping the fruits of having been the dupes of designing impostors. The rod by which they are now being chastised has been wielded by their own hand. They have actually committed national suicide.’

Because of Soga’s heritage as a Xhosa and his religious training in Scotland, he would come to symbolize the converted Christian and, as such, make an appearance in H. I. E. Dhlomo’s play, *The Girl Who Killed to Save (Nongqause the Liberator)* (1936). This work has garnered attention in the past 20 years for its author more than its content; the publication of a critical biography on Dhlomo set him within a class of ‘New Africans,’ an emerging elite trained at mission schools. The final scene of *The Girl Who Killed to Save*, with a silent but present Soga, suggested that Nongqawuse was the ‘Liberator from Superstition and from the rule of Ignorance,’ that ‘hunger and destitution drove them into the paths of life, led them to the missionary and his divine message; put them into the hands of God.’ Dhlomo thus relied on religious Darwinism to credit the Cattle-Killing for ‘waking up’ the Xhosa to Christianity. An early review commended the language as ‘remarkably good—sometimes too good,’ but yawned when ‘the author tries to point a moral and not a very sound one at that […]’. Dhlomo’s play adhered to a growing corpus of black ‘apprentice’ literature. The influence of mission schools on the earlier generations of black intellectuals produced works steeped in religious dogma and written ‘alongside European historiography.’

This notion continued ideas from other plays, notably Mary Waters’ *U-Nongqauswe* (1924). Waters, the granddaughter of H. T. Waters, a missionary attached to Sarhili during the Cattle-Killing, wrote the play in isiXhosa. So when Grey, as portrayed in the play, enumerates Xhosa defects, he does so to a Xhosa audience, as well. Orkin suggested that *U-Nongqauswe* was an example of ‘the way in which prevailing discourse worked in educative/literary/theatrical institutions to identify the South African social formation.’ On Dhlomo’s work, Wenzel concluded that he was, ‘like Tiyo Soga, an ambivalent figure, poised at the intersection of orality and literacy, uncritical neither of African tradition nor of colonial modernity,’ and this characterization may be applied equally to Waters’ *The Girl Who Killed to Save.*

Dhlomo made use of other historical figures in the Cattle-Killing on the colonial side by figuring into the plot Ngqika Commissioner Charles Brownlee. Having grown up among the Xhosa and spoken the language fluently, Brownlee earned their respect and did much to lessen the effects of starvation and disease in the aftermath of the Cattle-Killing. A selection of his papers, published posthumously in 1916, provided a perspective of the movement through letters and stories portraying the commissioner’s struggle in negotiating Xhosa beliefs with colonial rule. These papers reiterated fears of a chiefs’ plot and narrated events following the failure of the prophecy: ‘Day after day, day
after day, as these specters came in crowds and crawled along, one might have imagined that the prophet’s prediction had come to pass, and that the dead had indeed risen from their graves.17 Personal thoughts and colonial dispatches form the bulk of Brownlee’s writing on the Cattle-Killing, offering a rare first-person perspective. Brownlee’s Reminiscences is one of the oft-quoted sources in writings on the movement, much of it appearing in Tiyo Soga’s account, Intlalo ka Xosa (1936), contemporaneous with Dhlomo.18

By the 1930s, the heavy missionary presence in the Eastern Cape had further emerged in the movement’s historiography and literature. New works ascribed the movement to Xhosa superstition, ignorance, and savagery. In one of the earliest and most peculiar renditions, Sanni Metelerkamp drew upon sexualized images in her short story, ‘Namjikwa: A Tale of the Cattle-Slaying of 1858’ (1908).19 Metelerkamp was a reporter for the Cape Argus and a collector and ‘reteller’20 of African tales. She eroticized Nongqawuse and her relationship to Sarhili and ‘Umgani,’ a disbelieving chief. When Sarhili asks Nongqawuse how she intends to convert Umgani to her prophecy, she says, ‘I am a woman and young, and therefore, if I choose, I can bend Umgani or any other man to my will.’ Responding to this, Mhlakaza ‘ejaculated […] in amaze, “where has the child learned this witchcraft?”21 By the end of Metelerkamp’s story, Nongqawuse falls in love with Umgani and sacrifices herself for his safety. Warriors then kill the prophetess, and Metelerkamp summarizes, ‘Her purpose was accomplished […] So she laughed Death in the face and fell rejoicing, giving her life freely because her love was great. And to a woman love means sacrifice.’22 This odd moral tale exemplified how authors often used the movement to fit their own artistic interpretations. It is indeed a short distance between Nongqawuse’s prophecy as a gendered moral tale (Metelerkamp), as a useful message for Xhosa uplifting (Dhlomo), and as evidence of spiritual delusion (Waters).

Such interpretations extend of course into historical and anthropological works. The Bantu, Past and Present (1920) by S. Modiri Molema exemplifies the conflict between Xhosa and Christian cosmologies, and between religion and science more broadly. Molema claimed that the ‘scientific era will spurn anything that exalts imagination and credulity over reason and inquiry, anything that cannot be explained by the laws of science and reason […]’.23 Molema cited the Cattle-Killing as a prime example of primitive follies (and Western religious dogma) that would be disproved by scientific supremacy.24

When Molema’s history was published, an amateur historian in Grahamstown was midway through publishing his six-volume series The Rise of South Africa (1910–1930).25 George Cory toed Theal’s line, reiterating the chiefs’ thesis and building a case against Moshoeshoe. Like others before him, Cory did not consider how a more complex variety of stimuli—including those of colonial administrators—shaped the event. And he concluded the first chapter suggesting the Cattle-Killing was ‘something of a blessing in disguise’ because the frontier wars had become things of the past.26 Despite these shortcomings, select passages in his text become historiographically important and will be touched upon later.

The 1920s and 1930s saw the expansion of migrant labor along with the germination of resistance. Historical writing paralleled growing national tensions, with W. M. Macmillan, Cornelis de Kiewiet, and others beginning to depart from the Theal-Cory versions of South African history, which still held sway. Even though Macmillan ‘was the first historian to ask how and why a racist South African society had come into being,’27 his rendering of the Cattle-Killing in Bantu, Boer, and Briton (1929) was infused with a settler viewpoint. Nonetheless, Macmillan began to chip away at the established historiographical trend by acknowledging Grey’s mishandling of Xhosa land rights as ‘one blot on the record of his deservedly popular and even distinguished governorship.’28

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This was further propelled in de Kiewiet’s portrayal of the movement (1936), which suggested ‘an incredible madness’ swept the Xhosa, one that ‘could only attack a community profoundly disturbed [...]’. By ‘disturbed,’ de Kiewiet referred to the devastation wrought by lungsickness. His acknowledgement of how the epidemic made the Cattle-Killing possible picked up similar remarks from John Henderson Soga’s *The South-Eastern Bantu* (1930) and, in an impressive study for its time, an unpublished master’s thesis by Eileen D’Altera Dowsley. Lungsickness was of course mentioned in Theal’s texts, but de Kiewiet, Soga, and Dowsley expanded its significance to the killing of cattle.

Despite this historiographical development, simplified versions of the past would continue well into the twentieth century. Alfred Burton’s *Sparks from the Border Anvil* (1950) put forth a standard social Darwinist interpretation. The Cattle-Killing, Burton wrote, ‘proved the greatest blow witchcraft and heathenism ever received and out of its evils came richer ethical and spiritual values [...] among a people emerging from darkness into light.’ Burton, a doctor at Grey Hospital in King William’s Town, was deeply influenced by the writings of his predecessor, John Patrick FitzGerald, the first Superintendent of Native Hospitals and founder of what would become Grey Hospital in 1859. During the Cattle-Killing, FitzGerald saw himself locked in a battle of medical legitimacy. He tried to ‘expose’ Xhosa doctors as frauds and to further Grey’s policies of labor and enlightenment.

A second development also motivated Burton’s exploration into the past and his modernizing interpretation of the movement: World War II. Facing an ‘anxious, restless world,’ Burton believed that ‘old’ South Africans must recover the past and impart wisdom ‘for the benefit of posterity and our young nationhood.’ Beyond Burton, the war inspired other South Africans to take a look at the Cattle-Killing once again, to shape it to current political needs. Leon Schauder’s short film *Nonquassi* (1939) used the history, as Boniface Davies has deftly shown, as ‘part of a wider project to promote the Union of South Africa’ during the rise of the Third Reich.

By the end of the 1940s, Cattle-Killing historiography had completed a formative stage of development: Theal and Cory conveyed the chiefs’ plot put forth by Grey and Maclean; Dhlomo and Waters viewed it through the lens of Christianity; Metelerkamp, Molema, and Burton saw it in terms of savagery and civilization; and Macmillan and de Kiewiet began to question Grey’s influence and the role of lungsickness. Each of these perspectives would continue into a second period of historiographical development as South African current events became more highly politicized after the rise of the National Party, the birth of the Black Consciousness Movement, and the formation of alternative, radical histories of the late 1970s.


If de Kiewiet and others made important first steps, Edward Roux opened the historiography of the Cattle-Killing to include questions on the nature of the movement, its impetus, and its outcome. Roux’s *Time Longer than Rope* (1948) appeared as the National Party came to power, and his ties to the Communist Party would eventually prompt authorities to ban the book and Roux himself. Nonetheless, *Time Longer than Rope*, the ‘first major Africanist history to emerge in South Africa,’ was distributed locally and internationally. Roux constructed a significant narrative (12 pages) based on historical newspapers of the Eastern Cape in his chapter entitled ‘Black Joan of Arc.’ His history was not entirely transformative, as it still relied heavily on Theal, Cory, and Brownlee and occasionally dipped into the rhetoric of primitivism. But Roux was even-handed in his
criticism and compared it with the Europeans who were ‘not altogether free from superstition.’ Roux’s major contributions included an exploration of the role of the Colony’s need for a labor force, which he concluded was met by the movement and not the cause of it. For the first time in a (white) historical context, he discussed Xhosa viewpoints by saying students at the University of Fort Hare ‘maintain the belief that the whole thing was started by certain astute Europeans as a clever move to solve the labour problems of the developing Colony.’ Granted, Roux’s attribution of Nongqawuse as a ‘black Joan of Arc’ stretched the bounds of plausibility. She was neither ‘the prophet of Xhosa nationalism as Joan was of French,’ nor ‘[l]ike Joan, she heard voices telling her to come forward and save her country.’ Nonetheless, Roux saw room for comparison, and his perspective set the stage for Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson’s claim, in their Oxford History of South Africa (1969), that the Cattle-Killing ‘has been paralleled again and again elsewhere,’ naming the Native-American Ghost Dance, various witch-finding movements, and the Melanesia Cargo Cults.

Following Roux’s Time Longer than Rope, two important works were published in 1952: Three Hundred Years by ‘Mnguni,’ and The Rôle of the Missionaries in Conquest by ‘Nosipho Majekje.’ Both of the works debuted three hundred years after the arrival of Europeans at the Cape, and each carried a pen name for its author: Hosea Jaffe and Dora Taylor, respectively. The two authors were expatriates critical of the apartheid government, and they foreshadowed the work of radical historians to come in the 1970s. In Three Hundred Years, Jaffe labeled the Cattle-Killing one of eleven ‘Anti-Xhosa Wars’ and outlined for the first time the Grey’s plot theory, characterizing Grey as ‘The Man with a Purpose,’ and writing, ‘Grey knew enough of tribal lore to use [Nongqawuse] to achieve his diabolical purpose.’ Taylor, writing under her African pseudonym and using ‘we’ in a collective, African sense, wrote of the chiefs’ plot theory, ‘We totally reject such an explanation of the event,’ and that the Cattle-Killing was ‘directly due to [missionaries’] teachings.’ The writings of Jaffe and Taylor typified the tensions surrounding the central question of Cattle-Killing historiography prior to the late 1980s: what was the cause of the movement, and how could this be represented accurately in a national climate of colonization, subjugation, and racism? Jaffe and Taylor’s work thus articulated an increasing resistance to colonial historiography.

Jaffe and Taylor found receptive audiences because, for the first time, printed histories were coming closer to oral histories suppressed for generations. Yet the divergence of interpretations was still significant and can be seen in three writings between 1959 and 1970. The first of these works, J. J. R. Jolobe’s poem, ‘Ingqawule,’ was published in his Ilitha in 1959 and later translated as ‘The cattle-killing’ in 1989. Its measured representation does not place one theory over another and, penned in such a historically politicized environment, is remarkable for its evenhandedness. The closest Jolobe comes to naming a cause and effect is in his description of the ancestors’ message, ‘She heard him speak in sharp considered words: The chaos had been noted by the spirits. They were upset over the dying of the polity at the hand of foreigners.’ The poem’s value to historians seeking Xhosa perceptions of the movement is marked by its detail. It told of the capsizing of a rowboat in the mouth of the Kei River at the time of Nongqawuse, a detail confirmed in the archives and not explained until Peires’ The Dead Will Arise in 1989.

Jolobe’s narrative appears all the more conservative when compared to Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa’s Africa is My Witness (1966). Mutwa leveled a 27-page barrage against white interpretations of the Cattle-Killing as a suicide, which ‘can probably claim the world record for sheer falsehood!’ Mutwa began by criticizing the portrayal of the Xhosa in history books issued by the Department of Bantu Education, and he claimed to
have waited 30 years to unveil the truth: that the ‘Xhosa fell victims not to their own superstition, but to a vile and grisly practical joke, born in the ingenious minds of intelligent men.’ It was ‘one of the most cold-blooded murders in any age.’ Mutwa unsheathed the sharpest articulation of the Grey’s plot thesis, interspersed by a creative retelling of the events and two Mpondomise songs about Nongqawuse. The most convincing evidence that it was a plan hatched by Grey and his government agents, according to Mutwa, was the existence of the idea of reincarnation in Nongqawuse’s prophecy: ‘The whole episode reeks of Christian mythology.’

Between Jolobe’s poetic restraint and Mutwa’s tome lies a significant oral interpretation rendered by the Thembu imbongi, D. L. P. Yali-Manisi, who recited an improvised work on the movement in 1970. Yali-Manisi apportioned all blame for destroying the innocent people of Phalo’ on Nongqawuse, ‘an innocent dupe,’ and yet the poet still left room to implicate missionaries, George Grey, and the Xhosa kings. By the time of the recitation of Yali-Manisi’s poem, and of its publication, Xhosa perceptions of the Cattle-Killing and the event’s historiography in print had begun to move closer to one another, not necessarily toward a merging history but in the direction of a multivocal past first rendered in Roux’s *Time Longer than Rope*.

By the 1970s, then, previously unvoiced perspectives of the Cattle-Killing and of South African history became audible. The events of the Soweto Uprising instilled a political immediacy in all writing and ‘led to a cultural revival among black artists and writers.’ One of the earliest rising stars of a new group writers, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, used the Cattle-Killing in his short story, ‘Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion,’ to apply history to current events. Visiting Umtata, the capital of the Transkei ‘homeland’ in the 1970s, the narrator of ‘Three Days’ saw Cattle-Killing mentalities repeating themselves in the ‘treachery of Apartheid and its Bantustan policy in no uncertain terms.’ The narrator recounts the creation of the prophecy between Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza as a way to reunite the Xhosa, then equally unaware that no chance remained to sustain autonomy; they were merely fooling themselves with false hopes, much as the Xhosa were collaborating with the State to support the Bantustan system. Matshoba described the Cattle-Killing as ‘the last nail in the coffin of the old way of life for the Xhosa people,’ who continued to languish through apartheid policies and Bantu education.

Michael Vaughan has characterized Matshoba’s application of history in this example as populist realism, ‘an aesthetic movement which reflects the emergence of new social and political forces within the dimension of literary culture.’ This would extend beyond literary culture, of course, and parallel developments of ‘people’s history’ or ‘social history’ of the University of Witwatersrand History Workshop. Founded in 1977, the Workshop started in response to the political immediacy of the Soweto Uprising the previous year and drew upon the intellectual strengths of social historians in the Oxford History Workshop. The Wits Workshop called for a new breed of writing to feature history ‘from below.’ It sought nothing less than the ‘decolonization of South African history.’ How to achieve this in the South African context meant attacking the structural foundations of inequality: the Bantu education system. To teach a new kind of history, the workshop aimed at ‘subverting authority structures in the schools and subverting the syllabus.’ Historically informed citizens were needed to effect change in the politicized climate. Matshoba’s fiction (and Peires’ early articles) was an extension of this radical philosophy, which sparked literary and historical debate in the late 1970s and 1980s.

This era also saw the emergence of various social scientists placing the movement within a comparative, millenarian tradition. This perspective saw similarities between the
Cattle-Killing and the Native-American Ghost Dance, the cargo cults of Melanesia, and other resistance movements in southern Africa. The literature here is both wide and deep and is helpful in de-exoticizing the Cattle-Killing. The growing comparative literature influenced Wilson and Thompson’s portrayal of the movement in the Oxford History of South Africa, both in drawing attention to the “similarities between the ‘cattle-killing’ and happenings elsewhere” to debunk the chiefs’ plot thesis, and in considering Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza as charismatic prophets cut from the same cloth of other movements. Aware of recent comparative studies and, of more significance, influenced by events in South Africa and by social history, Peires sought to write a new history of this most contested event.

Phase 3: The Dead Will Arise and Its Critics (1989–)

While Peires published a number of articles in the early 1980s that added much to the Cattle-Killing historiography, the publication of his The Dead Will Arise in 1989 established a new interpretive framework for the movement. It was the first published academic history of the movement, more than 130 years after its transpiring, and the book debased racist interpretations (e.g., Theal and Cory), conspiracy theories (colonial administrators, Jaffe, and others), evolutionist explanations (Molema), accusations against missionaries (Taylor), and ascription of the entire event to Mhlakaza (Meintjes). Peires was the first to root his scholarship in published primary sources, archives, and oral histories and traditions to construct a more accurate narrative of the movement. Peires discredited both the chiefs’ plot and Grey’s plot theories, emphasized the correlation between lungsickness and the Cattle-Killing, and claimed the movement was “a logical and rational response, perhaps even an inevitable response, by a nation driven to desperation by pressures that people today can barely imagine.”

The Dead Will Arise, of course, inspired a host of critiques and revisions. One scholar labeled the book a ‘landmark, not a breakthrough’—meaning Peires’ analysis covered much of the sources but was not a paradigm-shifting historical work—but its publication and the significant number of alternative interpretations it stimulated constitute an entirely new phase of Cattle-Killing historiography. Rare is a South African history that does not incorporate Peires’ research of Xhosa in the 18th and 19th centuries. Noel Mostert’s popular Frontiers nearly replicated Peires’ interpretation, and, in an extreme example, Zakes Mda’s novel, The Heart of Redness (2000) used troubling amounts of Peires’ text as the historical counterpart to a contemporary narrative. Because of this, The Heart of Redness added little to the historiography of the Cattle-Killing, but it has provoked debates on the nature of history, literature, intertextuality, and plagiarism.

One of the most critical points developed by Peires expands on de Kiewiet’s and Cory’s recognition of how the lungsickness epidemic of 1855 made the Cattle-Killing possible. Peires showed that “those areas hit the hardest by crop failure and lungsickness took up the Cattle-Killing almost immediately,” and he later claimed, “[t]he lungsickness epidemic was a necessary cause of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing. Without it, the movement could never have occurred.” How the Xhosa interpreted the disease (as defilement, as an effect of witchcraft throughout the land) thus determined their response to it.

Why, though, would the decimation of livestock from illness influence the movement as much as it did? In his critique of Peires’ book, Jeff Guy claimed that other prophetic injunctions, environmental distress, and the cessation of cultivation were ‘materially the most significant and the most devastating.” In response, Peires persisted that ‘maize does not have a soul, it does not cry aloud to the ancestors as cattle do [...] The Cattle-Killing
was, after all, a religious movement expressed in religious terms, and it was the destruction of the cattle not of anything else which gave the movement its unique and distinctive character.°

Peires also took aim at the oft-venerated George Grey. The historian’s deservedly unforgiving portrayal of the colonial governor was echoed by Timothy Stapleton, who wrote, ‘Ultimately, it was Sir George Grey and his henchmen, and not chiefs like Maqoma, who were responsible for the Cattle-Killing disaster.’° How far the historiography had turned from the days of Grey’s representation as a benevolent colonial governor!

Another cornerstone of The Dead Will Arise and Peires’ original contribution to Cattle-Killing scholarship identified Mhlakaza (appearing after 1856) as the former Wilhelm Goliat, personal servant of Nathaniel Merriman, Archdeacon of Grahamstow, from 1850 to 1853. The Mhlakaza-Goliat connection stands as one of the most intriguing aspects of the Cattle-Killing, but the link remains tenuous. According to Peires, Mhlakaza personified the prophecy’s mixture of Christian and Xhosa beliefs in the afterlife and resurrection. As Goliat, he was the first Xhosa to receive the Anglican communion, and Christianity deeply interested him until 1853, when he left Merriman’s employ and reverted to traditional Xhosa practices. His name then disappeared from the historical record. Peires posited, through a private letter and corroborating newspaper article, that Goliat changed his name to Mhlakaza and began espousing prophetic visions. Several reviewers questioned the Mhlakaza-Goliat link, and Boniface Davies has uncovered archival evidence of Goliat’s well-being after the reported death of Mhlakaza. Whether the former was indeed the latter remains unsettled.

Aside from these original contributions, The Dead Will Arise provided academics with a solid foundation from which to base further arguments and interpretations. Several alternative analyses—materialist, cosmological, postmodernist, and feminist—in this third phase of Cattle-Killing historiography merit attention.

In a review article on The Dead Will Arise, Jack Lewis offered a materialist critique to argue that the movement ‘[d]epended on the support of the chiefs, some of whom saw the possibilities it suggested for the centralization of authority […] By giving politics its proper place, the logic […] becomes explicable as a consequence of changes in the real material circumstances […]’.° Certainly, the Cattle-Killing exacerbated social divisions in Xhosa society, but these divisions were not indigenous classes, as Lewis argued, but rather, as Peires retorted, ‘contradiction[s] between a moribund pre-capitalist social formation and the nascent pro-capitalist classes.’° Stapleton also criticized Lewis for ‘not explain[ing] adequately how the chiefs thought they could regain power through destroying the herds that had always been central to their control of commoners.’°

In his 1994 biography of Maqoma, Stapleton argued that the Cattle-Killing was a class-based revolt focused on chiefly authority (represented by material control through cattle). He suggested that chiefs supported a ‘reluctant’ slaughter ‘conceived by the aristocracy in the hopes of undermining the movement and bringing the people to their senses.’° Peires criticized Stapleton by claiming ‘the cattle-killing was national in character, driven by Sarhili and the believing chiefs as custodians of the national good, and intended not to destroy the old order but to restore it in all its pristine glory.’° While Lewis and Stapleton appear to be on shakier ground, based on the available evidence, their materialist interpretations call further attention to the importance of cattle and reinforce their centrality to the movement.

A second critique of The Dead Will Arise emphasized how Christian and African cosmologies fused together in the Eastern Cape in the 1850s and affected interpretations of
signs and responses to aggression. Other historians had been aware of this critical component. Cory reported the Xhosa were ‘of [the] opinion that Mhlakaza’s talk was as truthful as and more acceptable than that they heard from the missionaries and not so incredible as some parts of the Gospel.’ More recently, in his critique of The Dead Will Arise, Jeff Guy took issue with Peires’ nominal delineation of Xhosa religious beliefs—and how these might be represented in Western scholarship—to explain the Xhosa reaction to the prophecies. In addition to providing a brief feminist critique of the work, Guy claimed The Dead Will Arise did not take advantage of literature on religion and witchcraft.

The cosmological critique naturally fed into post-modernist interpretations that ask how Western scholarship may accurately represent non-Western beliefs and actions. Adam Ashforth claimed, ‘This is the problem of writing a history of a process of colonial conquest in the terms and languages of the victors, which does not simply replicate in historiographical discourse the imperial encounter by translating the colonized people’s experience into the terms of dominant discourses.’ Debates around postmodernism, and to a similar degree deconstruction, have been particularly engaging with the Cattle-Killing as subject, given its textual, prophetic center, its abundance in literary and historical works, and the importance of recovering a more truthful past to a post-apartheid nation.

The most significant challenge to The Dead Will Arise came from a number of articles by Helen Bradford, who has examined the historical representation of frontier zones through gender-sensitive lenses. Bradford expanded upon Guy’s analysis of female labor, which established that the destruction of grain (a product in the female domain) caused more starvation and death than the act of killing cattle. Bradford was the first historian to expand this into a gendered interpretation, which called for further research into the causes of mass starvation, the role of cattle as bridewealth, and the significance of male identities as bachelors or fathers, topics largely ignored in The Dead Will Arise.

While Bradford’s article in the Journal of African History is perhaps best known among historians, her more recent work constitutes the most significant contribution to Cattle-Killing historiography in the past 20 years. These articles—some unpublished—mark the beginning of new understandings of the movement. In a conference paper, Bradford proposed the ‘catastrophe emerged, above all, from the cauldron of war; [t]he torque, the stress propelling the entire movement, was white male militarism.’ She astutely set the movement within a wartime context—a time when many prophets disbursed messages similar to Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza’s—to portray the episode not as a historical anomaly but rather as part of a progression of wars and a long tradition of millenarian prophecies.

This work added three significant innovations to the Cattle-Killing’s historiographical development. First, Bradford condemned George Grey as a war-hungry imperialist, using the chiefs’ plot theory not as a conclusion but as Grey’s premise to escalate tensions leading to war. Second, Bradford shifted the movement’s transitions from moments based on prophetic disappointment to those of heightened fears of looming war. The power of the threat of war thus played a large part of escalating tensions on the frontier. Third, she downplayed lungsickness as the cause of the killing of cattle, suggesting the Xhosa began to slaughter due to environmental crises and belief in impending war.

This last contribution appears to be the most promising avenue for future historical research. Julian Cobbing first articulated it in a review of The Dead Will Arise, in which he claimed that late rains, failed harvests, and Xhosa relocation to infertile lands accounted for the death of thousands after Nongqawuse’s prophecies. Bradford’s work has expanded Cobbing’s criticism to emphasize the failing environment—that is, placing
environment before prophecy—together with the provocations of colonial officials and the fusion of Christian and Xhosa cosmologies. Whether this would refute, or merely reinforce, the interpretation of Peires remains to be seen: the link between natural disasters, epidemics, and millenarian movements has been proven strong.82

While much historical research remains to be done, particularly in connection with the environment, a number of articles and creative productions have looked at the literary and symbolic aspects of the Cattle-Killing.83 This growing corpus of literary analysis includes Sindziwe Magona’s post-apartheid novel, Mother to Mother, on the death of Amy Biehl.84 Magona utilized the Cattle-Killing to ruminate on the nature of resistance, likening it to the blind faith of school boycotts after the Soweto Uprising and the racial tension in South Africa of the 1980s. She asks rather rhetorically of both time periods: was the sacrifice too great? Written as a letter from the mother of the murderer to the mother of victim Amy Biehl, Magona’s novel wrestles with reason and forgiveness soon after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Magona, like other novelists, playwrights, and historians before her, employed the movement in the context of her own time, its meaning infused with the politics of the present.

Conclusion

More than 150 years after the Cattle-Killing, historians continue to grapple with the event’s causes, its meanings, and its representations. Even the most fundamental characterization of the movement—what it should be called—elicits debate. Bradford, Cobbing, and others maintain that ‘Cattle-Killing’ is a misnomer because, in part, droughts and non-cultivation caused famine and killed more Xhosa than the slaughter of herds. It will be difficult, however, to dislodge historical emphasis from the killing of cattle—and to focus on other environmental factors—due to the narrative force exerted by Nongqawuse’s prophecy. The evidence for this is distributed throughout the novels, plays, and poems, discussed above, that have employed its narrative structure, from prophecy to subjugation. It is a powerful story.

Such dispute over the name of the movement suggests that its history remains understudied. Despite a number of engaging articles and calls for further research, only one book-length historical study of the movement has been published to date. Taken as a whole, the historical research and the literature of the Cattle-Killing reaffirm the inescapable influence of the present on the past.

Short Biography

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Notes

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2 Ibid., 319.
3 The divisions between these phases are porous, but they do outline the general contours of the historiography and are included here as teaching tools.


8 C. Saunders, Reminiscences of Kafir Life and History and Other Papers by the Late Hon. Charles Brownlee, Gaika Commissioner (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1916), 137.

9 T. Soga, Intlalo ka Xosa (Lovedale, Lovedale Press, n.d. [1936]).

10 Metelerkamp’s story was later republished as ‘The Prophetess: A Tale of Cattle-Slaying, 1857,’ African Observer (June 1935), 65–73.


12 See also R. Dhlomo, An African Tragedy (A Novel in English by a Zulu Writer) (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, n.d. [1931]).


15 Ibid., 7.

16 Wenzel, ‘Voices of Spectral and Textual Ancestors,’ 56.

17 C. Brownlee, Reminiscences of Kafir Life and History and Other Papers by the Late Hon. Charles Brownlee, Gaika Commissioner (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1916), 137.

18 T. Soga, Intlalo ka Xosa (Lovedale, Lovedale Press, n.d. [1936]).

19 Metelerkamp’s story was later republished as ‘The Prophetess: A Tale of Cattle-Slaying, 1857,’ African Observer (June 1935), 65–73.


22 Ibid., 488.


24 Ibid., 167–8.


26 Ibid., 42. Cory also erred in reporting that authorities sent Nongqawuse to Robben Island (40).


31 A. Burton, Sparks from the Border Anvil (King William’s Town: Provincial Publishing Company, 1950), x.


33 Burton, Sparks from the Border Anvil, xi–xii.


37 Ibid., 40.

38 Ibid., 36.


40 ‘Mnguni’ (H. Jaffe), Three Hundred Years (Cape Town: s.n., 1952), 87, 89.


Ibid., 291.

Ibid., 312.


Ibid., 184.


Ibid., 980.


Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*, x.


Guy, ‘A Landmark, not a Breakthrough,’ 229.


68. Peires, ‘Afterword,’ 382.


70. Ibid., 179, 192.


72. Quoted in Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, 42.


74. Guy, ‘A Landmark, not a Breakthrough,’ 228.


76. See J. Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); J. Peires, ‘“At the entrance to science, as at the entrance to hell”: Historical Priorities for South Africa in an Age of Deconstruction,’ *African Historical Review* 40, no. 1 (June 2008), 58–76.


Bibliography

Works listed here include significant historical and literary writings on the Cattle-Killing. This list is not comprehensive, and not all works discussed above are included below, due to space constraints. Authors with articles that have formed part of a published book will only have their book listed below. For a more comprehensive bibliography, see http://www.xhosacattlekilling.net.


