

Towards an African Literature

The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa

by

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The Tale of Nongqawuse

NONGQAWUSE is the name of the girl generally held responsible for the "National Suicide of the Xhosa People" in 1856-1857. The story of her meeting with the "spirits of warriors long dead", of their enjoining her to tell chiefs and the people to destroy all their livestock and food stores, of the carrying out of this injunction, and of the subsequent famine and deaths, all this is told in records of missionaries and colonial officials, who were working amongst the Xhosa when these things happened. And all those who are familiar with South African history know it either directly from these records or from ordinary history books. Yet very few people know that there is an account of this incident, written by an African who was living at the time, to be found in Rubusana's Anthology, "Zemk' linkomo Magwala ndini", and that the author is no other than William W. Gqoba, the historian-poet who has figured so often already in this series.

Gqoba was born in 1840, so that at the climax of this calamity he was seventeen years old. At that age, a boy in African primitive society has many social obligations and responsibilities, and though he may not be a direct participant in tribal councils, he is very well informed as to what takes place there. With its details of people's names, clan and place-names, Gqoba's account sounds very authentic, and for this reason we propose to give a faithful translation of its Xhosa original, as the finest of the renderings of a story that still lives in the emotions and thoughts of the Xhosa people today. We adhere to his own spelling of the Xhosa names, many of which are well-known surnames at the present time, spelt as they were spelt by him.

*The Cause of the Cattle-Killing at the
Nongqawuse Period*

By: W. W. G.

It so happened that in the Thenjini region of Gcalekaland, in the ward of headman Mnzabele, in the year 1856, two girls went out to the lands to keep the birds away from the corn. One was named Nongqawuse, daughter of Mhlakaza, and the other the daughter of a sister of Mhlakaza's. Near a river known as the Kamanga two men approached them and said, "Convey our greetings to your people, and tell them we are So-and-So and So-and-So" (giving their names). And the names by which they called themselves turned out to be the names of people who were known to have died long ago. They went on to say: "You are to tell the people that the whole community is about to rise again from the dead. Then go on to say to them all the cattle living now must be slaughtered, for they are reared with defiled hands, as the people handle witchcraft. Say to them there must be no ploughing of lands, rather

corn was
alien

must the people dig deep pits (granaries), erect new huts, set up wide, strongly built cattlefolds, make milk-sacks, and weave doors from buka roots. The people must give up witchcraft on their own, not waiting until they are exposed by the witchdoctors. You are to tell them that these are the words of their chiefs, —the words of Napakade (Forever), the son of Sifubasibanzi (the Broad-chested).

On reaching home the girls reported this, but no one would listen to them. Everybody ridiculed them instead. On the following day, they went again to keep the birds away from the corn, and after some time, these men appeared again and asked if the girls had told the people at home, and what the people had said in reply. The girls reported that their message had simply been a thing of laughter, no one believing them. "The people simply said we were telling stories". This happened in Gcalekaland near the mouth of the Gxara.

The men then said: "Say to the elders that they are to call all the chiefs together from Gcaleka's, Tato's, Ngqika's and from the Gqunukhwebe, and they must tell the news to them".

On the following morning, Mhlakaza and some other men went to the lands, but these strangers did not reveal themselves. They were heard without being seen. It was only Nongqawuse and the other girl who heard them, and it was Nongqawuse who interpreted what was being said by the spirits. They said: "Tell those men to go and call the chiefs and bring them here. Only then shall we reveal ourselves".

Some men then went to Rili's royal place at Hohita, and there the strange news was related by Mhlakaza's daughter. Then Rili sent out Botomani, a minor chief, to go and verify this thing. Botomani went, but the strangers did not reveal themselves. Then Rili sent messengers to tell the chiefs that there were people who had been heard by Mhlakaza's daughter to say all the chiefs must be called together to meet the chief Napakade, son of Sifubasibanzi, near the mouth of the Gxara.

From Tato's came Maramnco, son of Fadana, accompanied by Shele, son of Zizi. From the Ndongwane

Napakade also a
nick name for
C. Brownlee

Thompson and
more

see
definition

came Dulaze, son of Qwesha, related to Ndarala. From the Tshatshus came Mpeke, son of Mfeneni. From the Ngqika came Namba, great son of Maqoma. From the Gcaleka section came Rili and Lindinxiwa, sons of Hintsu, together with Ngubo, son of Mlashe, and Nxiti, son of Lutshaba. From the Ndlambes came Nowawe, son of Ndlambe. From the Gqunukwebe came Dilima, son of Pato. All these men made their way to the home of Mhlakaza near the Gxara.

On arriving there, they were told that Nongqawuse desired that the numbers to go to the Gxara be reduced, and that those who were to go must be mostly chiefs. This in truth was done.

As the people were rather fearful, it happened that as they drew near the River Kamango, their throats went dry, and they felt thirsty. Meanwhile Nongqawuse, beautifully painted with red ochre, led the way. Then those who were thirsty were heard to say: "Is one who is thirsty allowed to drink?"

Nongqawuse replied, "He who does not practice witchcraft may drink without fear".

Thereupon Dilima, hero son of Pato, removed his kaross and stooped to drink. Then one by one the other men of Nomagwayi wase Mbo followed suit.

The Vision

Just at this time, there was a tremendous crash of big boulders breaking loose from the cliffs overlooking the headwaters of the River Kamanga, whereupon, the men gazed at one another wondering, for they were seized with fear. It seemed that some unknown thing on the cliffs was going to burst into flames.

While they stood wondering, the girl was heard saying, "Just cast your eyes in the direction of the sea".

And when they looked intently at the waters of the sea, it seemed as if there were people there in truth, and there were sounds of bulls bellowing, and oxen too. There was a huge formless black object that came and went, came and went and finally vanished over the crests of the waves of the sea.

Then it was that all the people began to believe.

The army in the sea never came out to meet the chiefs, and even what they said was not heard by any besides Nongqawuse. After it had vanished, she said: "The Chiefs yonder say you are to return to your homes and slaughter all your cattle and, in order that the resurrection may hasten, you are not to rear any cattle. You are not to plough the fields, but make big new pits (granaries), and these you will suddenly find full of corn. Erect new huts and make many doors. Shut yourselves in your huts, because on the eight day, when the community returns in the company of Napakade, son of Sifubasibanzi, all the beasts on the land and in the rivers, and all the snakes will be roaming the land. You are also to take out all the old corn in the pits and throw it away. In order to survive, you are to use many doors to close each hut, fasten every door tightly, and abstain from witchcraft".

She went on to say that there was another chief, mounted on a grey horse. His name was Grey, eitherwise known as Satan. All those who did not slaughter their cattle would become the subjects of the chief named Satan, and such people would not see the glory of our own chief, Napakade, son of Sifubasibanzi.

That then was the cause of the cattle-killing of 1856 to 1857.

In the midst of this there appeared another young girl from the house of Nkwitshi of the Kwemta clan, in the Ndlambe section near the Mpongo. Her name was Nonkosi. The message of this girl was one with Nongqawuse's. She used to lead the people to a pond there at the Mpongo, and there used to see abakweta dancing on the surface of the water, and they thought that they heard the thudding of the oxhide, accompanied by a song, to which the abakweta danced. Truly, the people were so deluded that they went so far as to claim that they had seen the horns of cattle, heard the lowing of milk-cows, the barking of dogs, and the songs of milkmen at milking time.

The Orders of the Chiefs

On reaching their homes, the chiefs assembled their subjects and made known the news of the ancestors

who were expected to return to life, fresh and strong, of the promised coming-to-life again of the cattle they were about to slaughter and of those that they had slaughtered long ago.

Nongqawuse had said that anyone who, on slaughtering his ox, decided to dispose of its carcass by barter, should nevertheless engage its soul, in order that on its coming back to life it should be his property. And she had said that all those who did not slaughter their cattle would be carried by a fierce hurricane and thrown into the sea to drown and die.

The community was split in two. One section believed that the resurrection of the people would come some day, but not that of the cattle. Thereupon, father fell out with son, brother with brother, chief with subjects, relative with relative. Two names emerged to distinguish the two groups. One group was named amaTamba (the Submissive), that is, Nongqawuse's converts. The other was called amaGogotya (the Unyielding), that is, those who were stubborn and would not kill their cattle. So some slaughtered their cattle, and others did not.

The Eighth Day

As the killing of the cattle went on, those who had slaughtered hurriedly for fear of being smelt out began to starve and had to live by stealing the livestock of others. Then everybody looked forward to the eighth day. It was the day on which the sun was expected to rise red, and to set again in the sky. Then there would follow great darkness, during which the people would shut themselves in their huts. Then the dead would rise and return to their homes, and then the light of day would come again.

On that day the sun rose as usual. Some people washed their eyes with sea-water at the mouth of the Buffalo. Some peered outside through little apertures in their huts, while those who had never believed went about their daily outdoor tasks. Nothing happened. The sun did not set, no dead person came back to life,

and not one of the things that had been predicted came to pass.

Such then was the Nongqawuse catastrophe. The people died of hunger and disease in large numbers. Thus it was that whenever thereafter a person said an unbelievable thing, those who heard him, said: "You are telling a Nongqawuse tale".

Went
- pity
moral
1850-1851