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MILLENARIANISM IN KHOIKHOI SOCIETY

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MAKING SENSE OF THE KHOIKHOI CATTLE-KILLING OF 1788: AN EPISODE OF MILLENARIANISM IN KHOIKHOI SOCIETY¹

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Past and present preoccupation with the Xhosa cattle-killing of 1856-7 and its aftermath² suggests it was the earliest millenarian activity in colonial South Africa. This was not the case, since it was preceded by a similar movement which erupted among the Overberg Khoikhoi in the late 1780s.³ Reconstructing and making sense of revitalization movements that exhibited religious and resistance overtones from fragmented sources, compounded by limited knowledge of a society's world-view, is no easy task. Despite these complexities, unravelling the cattle-killing episode in Khoikhoi society remains an interesting historical problem which casts light on hitherto hidden aspects of Khoi religious beliefs and colonial settlement in Swellendam.

Origins of the Khoikhoi Cattle-killing

Rumours of a cattle-killing surfaced for the first time in Swellendam in August 1788 when Jan Parel, a Khoikhoi born and raised on a colonial farm, predicted the world would be destroyed on 25 October 1788. Before the destruction of the "world" (the Cape Colony in Parel's opinion) all believers were asked to slaughter their white cattle, build new straw huts with two doors, burn their European clothes and attack the Swellendam *Drostdy*.⁴

The immediate origins of the Khoikhoi cattle-killing lie in the marginalisation and subjugation of the Khoikhoi in colonial society. These issues touched the core of Khoi identity, inciting individuals to embrace millenarian ideas in the belief that settlers would be expelled from the Cape by supernatural forces. By the 1780s, Khoi society was seemingly in need of celestial intervention to spark the revival of a culture in decline. M. Barkun argues that 'millenarian movements do not flourish during periods that are otherwise stable; a catalyst is

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1. Thanks to my colleagues Greg Cuthbertson and Johannes du Bruyn for commenting on earlier drafts.
 2. M. Wilson, 'Co-operation and Conflict: The Eastern Cape Frontier' in M. Wilson and L. Thompson, eds., *The Oxford History of South Africa, Vol 1*, (Oxford, 1969), 256; B. Keller, 'Millenarianism and Resistance: The Xhosa Cattle-Killing', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 13, 1-2 (1978), 95-111; T. Stapleton, 'Reluctant Slaughter: Rethinking Maqoma's role in the Xhosa Cattle-Killing (1853-1857)', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26, 2 (1993), 345-69; J. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise, Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg, 1989); C. Crais, *The Making of the Colonial Frontier Order: White Supremacy and black resistance in the eastern Cape, 1770-1865* (Johannesburg, 1992); N. Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London, 1992); J. Gump, 'A Spirit of Resistance: Sioux, Xhosa and Maori Responses to Western Domination, 1840-1920', *Pacific Historical Review*, LXVI, 1, (Feb. 1997), 21-52.
 3. R. Viljoen, 'Revelation of a Revolution: The Pro-phies of Jan Parel, Alias Onse Liewe Heer', *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, 21 (Nov. 1994), 3-15.
 4. Viljoen, 'Revelation of a Revolution', 3ff.

required'.⁵ What then, were the catalysts that prompted the Overberg Khoikhoi to espouse millenarian hopes as outlet for their pent-up social crisis? Dispossession of land was a major factor sparking the cattle-killing episode. At the beginning the 18th century, the Overberg Khoikhoi began losing their land to trekboers. Geographically, the Overberg was a region well-suited to stockfarming that it was well-endowed with water resources and grazing. The Hessequa Khoikhoi, described in contemporary narratives as 'wealthy in cattle', occupied this region for centuries. As the process of colonisation intensified in the mid-1740s when trekboers began asserting themselves in the south-western Cape, Khoi pastoralists were ousted from this natural habitat. Unlawful seizure of land and the unscrupulous issue of loan farms by Cape authorities led to numerous land disputes which continued well into the 1770s. Although displaced Khoikhoi lodged formal complaints against blatant dispossession, it remained an unresolved issue. In 1770, a colonial observer, Anders Sparrman, chronicled the grievances of Rundganger, a Khoi captain who complained about the encroachment of trekboers. He recorded that:

... these [Khoikhoi] were now no longer in a condition to withstand their [colonist] encroachments; almost everyday some Hottentot or other being obliged to remove with his cattle, whenever the pasture he was in possession of, happened to suit a colonist ...⁶

Alienation from ancestral land proved central to the emergence of millenarianism among the Overberg Khoikhoi. A key incident occurred in 1787, when land belonging to Cobus Valentijn, a contemporary and close friend of Jan Parel, was granted to J.N. Swart. Valentijn argued that the land in question was ancestral and sacred.⁷ Parel's response is not recorded, but a year later he emerged as a prophet, predicting how the world would be destroyed and urging fellow Khoikhoi to slaughter their cattle, construct huts with two doors and kill all whites.⁸

Land dispossession coincided with the loss of livestock. Raiding of defenceless kraals by armed colonists was common by the 1750s. In 1757, a group of Swellendam Khoi herders complained that armed trekboers had raided their kraals and described how their '*vee was ontnomen en afgeperst worden*' (cattle were stolen and raided).⁹ The situation worsened. In 1785, Khoikhoi captain Moses visited the Landdrost of Swellendam to complain about his people's stock losses. He explained how their existence was threatened by these losses.¹⁰ The expanding Cape frontier and influx of settlers into the Overberg took its toll by exposing Khoikhoi to previously unknown economic pressures and cultural influences.

5. M. Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium* (New Haven and London, 1974), 45.

6. A. Sparrmann, *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope 1772-1776*, vol 1. Van Riebeeck Society, Second Series, No. 6 (1975), 230.

7. Cape Archives (hereafter CA) Verbatim Copies (hereafter VC) 62 Letters Despatched, 3 August 1787, 474-5.

8. CA C 570 Letters Received 23 October 1788, 65. Deposition of Piet Hans. See also the deposition of Cobus Caffer, 68.

9. CA C 498 Letters Received, 21 November 1757, 117-9.

10. CA 1/SWM 3/15 Sworn Statements, 9 July 1785.

Culturally, Khoi society was under enormous stress. The systematic loss of the Khoi language was a prime example of cultural decline. Richard Elphick describes the spread of pidgin Dutch during the early years of conquest.¹¹ Recently, Tony Traill pointed out how the need for Khoi interpreters diminished ‘and eventually disappeared as the Khoekhoe shifted to Dutch’.¹² As master-servant interaction on farms became more personalized, language became a powerful tool of communication and control. By the mid-eighteenth century, it appears that only the older generation could still speak fluently in original ‘*Hottentots taal*’ (Khoikhoi language),¹³ while those born and raised on farms spoke a mixture of Khoi-Dutch.

As the Comoraffs have argued, ‘the colonization of language became an ever more important feature of symbolic domination’.¹⁴ Conversing in indigenous languages and not Dutch or German, was viewed as “primitive” by white society. Settlers thought very little of the Khoi language. As one colonial observer commented: ‘in sober truth, it is noise, not speech’.¹⁵ Defending their language and tradition meant keeping their Khoi identity and culture alive in a rapidly changing colonial society.

Control over movement and the introduction of pass laws dealt severe blows to the Khoi’s status as previously “free people”. By 1780, pass laws were applied to most colonial Khoikhoi employed on settler farms.¹⁶ When one Khoi servant was asked about his status on the farm, he answered ‘ik het boerenwerk gedaan’ (I did farmwork), underlining his labourer status.¹⁷ In other words, his precolonial herder-hunter-gatherer identity was completely lost. By the 1780s, the Overberg Khoikhoi were under severe cultural stress. They found living with Dutch settlers unbearable and could not cope with the pressures of colonial encroachment.

For the Khoikhoi, it became a matter of preserving and retaining their own cultural identity as Khoikhoi and not as colonial “Hottentots” and farm labourers. Confronted by unprecedented land loss, cultural deprivation and social oppression, the Khoikhoi of the Overberg region turned to millenarian activities as a means of escape. A crisis, says Sam Gill, needs crisis cults.¹⁸ By embracing millenial thoughts the Khoikhoi showed an awareness that colonization was not only about land appropriation and dispossession, but involved colonizing the body, mind, culture and spirit. These subtler forms of colonization propelled the Khoikhoi to embrace millenarianism which signified an intense struggle between confronting and affirming modernity. Gill summarises this inner struggle as follows:

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11. R. Elphick, *Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1985), 211.
 12. A. Trail, ‘The Khoesan Languages of South Africa’ in Mesthrie, R, ed., *Language and Social History, Studies in South Africa Sociolinguistics* (Cape Town, 1995), 6.
 13. CA CJ 392 Documents in Criminal Cases, 6 Nov. 1767, 574.
 14. J. and J. Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, 1992), 252.
 15. W. Ten Rhyne, ‘A Short Account of the Cape of Good Hope on the Hottentots who inhabit that region’ in B. Farrington and I. Schapera, eds., *The Early Cape Hottentots* (Van Riebeeck Society, 1933), 153.
 16. CA C 535 Letters Received, 25 October 1774, 66ff; I/STB 1/18 Minutes of Landdrost and Heemrade, 7 Aug. 1780, 201.
 17. CA CJ 403 Documents in Criminal Cases, 24 June 1772, 275ff. See also CA CJ 414 Documents in Criminal Cases, 22 April 1780, 445ff for another example.
 18. S. Gill, *Beyond the ‘Primitive’: The religions of nonliterate peoples* (Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1982), 99.

it was not simply the confrontation of modernity which precipitated the crisis, the millennial expectation; it was the realization of the impossibility of entering modernity while at the same time finding it completely impossible to continue in the old way of life. The crisis cult arose to meet the need for a complete renewal of life and culture.¹⁹

This briefly was the background to the Khoi cattle-killing which unfolded in October 1788.

Successful millenarian movements depend on powerful prophetic or messianic messages. Prophets, says Kenelm Burridge, 'are the key to millenarian movements'.²⁰ Michael Adas agrees, recognising prophetic leaders as 'important vehicles for the articulation of the grievances of displaced leaders and peasant groups who had little access to the wielders of power and little experience in popular agitation'.²¹ Annemarie Malefijt regards prophets as "antagonists" and "agents of change".²² Jan Parel's role was essentially two-fold, namely prophet and rebel leader. He wasted little time appearing and appealing to as many Khoikhoi and slaves as possible, reminding them of the forthcoming cattle-killing in which '*alle witte beesten moes den slagten*' (all white cattle must be slaughtered).²³ As prophet and preacher, Jan Parel introduced himself as *Onse Liewen Heer*, the one who possessed miraculous powers of immortality.²⁴

The Sociology and Psychology of the Cattle-killing

Understanding the sociology and psychology of the Khoi cattle-killing movement requires delving into the religious and spiritual world of Khoi society to appreciate why some resorted to millenarianism. Was it primarily a religious sacrifice or a resistance movement advocating the killing of cattle? Discussing the central beliefs of the Xhosa cattle-killing, Jeff Peires argues that the two concepts are intertwined; the cattle had to be killed in a ritual manner to comply with Xhosa religious beliefs.²⁵ 'Sacrifice', according to E.B Tylor, 'was a kind of gift to the gods for purposes of self-denial or homage'.²⁶ Understood correctly, sacrifice implied honouring and communicating with the spiritual world. Killing, on the other hand, implied something entirely different.

In societies exhibiting a pastoral economy, notably among Indo-Iranian and African peoples, animal sacrifice is fairly common.²⁷ Even in Khoi society sacrifice was a key element of their religion.²⁸ Gift-giving as sacrifice usually enables the sacrificer to request rewards as compensation. The followers of Jan

19. Gill, *Beyond the 'Primitive'*, 106.

20. K. Burridge, *New Heaven New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (Oxford, 1969), 154.

21. M. Adas, M, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Cambridge, 1987), 112.

22. A. Malefijt, *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion* (New York, 1968), 242.

23. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 October 1788, 67. Deposition of Meitjie.

24. For a complete analysis of Jan Parel as *Onse Liewen Heer*, see Viljoen, 'Revelation of a Revolution', 3-15.

25. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*, 104-5.

26. Cited in Gill, *Beyond the 'Primitive'*, 87.

27. B. Lincoln, *Priests, Warriors and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions* (Los Angeles, 1981), 7-8.

28. Carstens, P, 'Some implications of change in Khoikhoi Supernatural Beliefs', in Whisson, M and West, M, (eds) *Religion and Social Change in Southern Africa* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1975), 80.

Parel, for example, were told the benefits of sacrifice when *'al het Goed en Vee van de Christenen zouden Krijgen'* (all their belongings and cattle seized by the Christians would be restored).²⁹ The anthropologist, M.F. Bourdillon, calls these 'calculated sacrifices' which promise economic benefits.³⁰

Killing implies a more violent and aggressive response. In the context of the Khoi uprising, cattle-killing was unquestionably an act of violence that propagated the killing of whites. It appears, however, that Khoi individuals hardly distinguished between sacrifice and killing their cattle. The cattle-killing served as a sacrifice to be rewarded in a "new world", but was also perceived as an act of resistance to accelerate the process of change.

The operation was not haphazard but was carefully planned and organised. Parel gave specific instructions about timing and whose cattle should be slaughtered. Khoi rebels, who congregated at kraals, awaiting instructions, were told to raid neighbouring farms. In pastoral communities raiding is often not seen as theft, but as a means to accumulate cattle. Emile Boonzaier *et al* notes that 'raiding was an integral part of the social reproductive process of all pastoral people in Africa'.³¹ The anthropologist, Bruce Lincoln, asserts that 'raiding is, in a sense, a sacred activity'.³² If raiding is interpreted as 'a sacred activity' which is permissible under special circumstances, for example on occasions of religious sacrifice, it underscores the view that the Khoi cattle-killing was also a religious movement.

Colour appears to take on significance in relation to millenarian activities. During the Xhosa cattle-killing of 1856, 'the future was seen through a haze of white, the colour of purity'.³³ Albert Grundlingh has pointed out how red, blue and white featured prominently in Afrikaner millenarian circles.³⁴ The directive to butcher only white cattle, 'witte beesten slagten',³⁵ is worth exploring. According to Willem Ten Rhyne, a seventeenth-century traveller at the Cape, white cattle were valued and were rarely traded. White cows were regarded as 'an invaluable leader of the herd'.³⁶ In Xhosa society also, the type and colour of cattle were important. The Xhosa prophet Nxele, for example, ordered his people to abandon witchcraft and to 'slaughter all red cattle'.³⁷

Perhaps colour and symbols in millenarian movements need to be reappraised. Did "white" symbolize colonial rule and oppression? At this stage we can only speculate. In his powerful essay on symbols and social change, J.Z. Smith argues that symbols are not static, but change all the time. Old symbolic connotations may therefore acquire new meaning.³⁸ He elaborates that,

29. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 October 1788, 65. Deposition of Anna.

30. M.F. Bourdillon, 'Introduction' in M. Bourdillon and M Fortes, eds., *Sacrifice* (London, 1980), 11.

31. E. Boonzaier, et al., *The Cape Herders: A history of the Khoikhoi of southern Africa* (Cape Town, 1996), 50.

32. Lincoln, *Priests, Warriors and Cattle*, 28.

33. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*, 133.

34. A. Grundlingh, 'Probing the Prophet: The Psychology and Politics of the Siener van Rensburg Phenomenon', *South African Historical Journal* 34 (May 1996), 225.

35. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 October 1788, 69. See also the depositions of Meitjie, 67 and Cobus Caffer, 68.

36. Ten Rhyne, 'A Short Account of the Cape of Good Hope on the Hottentots', 137.

37. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*, 135.

38. J. Smith, 'The Influence of Symbols upon Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand', in J. Shaughnessy, ed, *The Roots of Ritual* (Michigan, 1973), 140.

society or culture is pre-eminently the construction of significance and order through symbolic activity. Social change may then be specified as the discovery or the creation of new modes of significance and order.³⁹

In other words, 'social change is symbolic change'.⁴⁰

Although white cattle were revered prior to conquest, they lost their symbolic significance as Khoikhoi found themselves in a world which they did not recognize. This, says Victor Turner, is not unusual, since each society experiences moments of societal disjuncture which are soon remedied by the creation of a new world, a new identity and community.⁴¹ Thus, possessing white cattle during the height of colonial repression may well have symbolized white rule and supremacy. Killing white cattle at that moment suggests a break with white dominance in the hope that it would lead to the restoration of former political institutions and a new society.⁴²

Cattle-killing as Resistance

In 1969, Monica Wilson described the Xhosa cattle-killing as a "pagan reaction" to colonial oppression.⁴³ This view enjoyed little support among academics and was challenged successfully by Jeff Peires who described it 'as a popular mass movement of a truly national character, uniting...the major social classes of the precolonial social order, in...defence of their way of life'.⁴⁴ Proponents of the "resistance" paradigm view cultural movements, such as the cattle-killing, as important agencies through which social oppression and colonialism are challenged.⁴⁵

In his review of *The Dead Will Arise*, Lupenga Mphande highlights resistance as the main theme.⁴⁶ Major studies on the eastern Cape by Clifton Crais and Noël Mostert, published in the early 1990s, offer similar viewpoints. For Crais, cattle-killing is 'a novel form of resistance that addressed the dislocation of capitalism and colonialism'.⁴⁷ Khoi millennialists were convinced that violence would resolve their predicament of dispossession and cultural oppression. Resorting to violence was not, however, a reflection of Khoi incivility. On the contrary, they were simply perpetuating the norm which settler society had set. The Cape was not a civil society during the eighteenth century. Violence manifested itself in many forms. Swellendam settlers often sought biblical justification for violence. Even Cape officials made connections between violence and

39. *Ibid.*, 141.

40. *Ibid.*

41. V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, 1967), 93-111.

42. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 Oct. 1788, 63-9ff. Depositions of Anna, Meitjie, Cobus Kaffer and Cupido Mooybooy.

43. M. Wilson, 'Co-operation and Conflict: The Eastern Cape Frontier', 256.

44. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*, 176. See also 123.

45. See Keller, 'Millenarianism and Resistance', 95-111; Stapleton, 'Reluctant Slaughter' 345-369; Crais, *The Making of a Colonial Order*.

46. L. Mphande, 'Cattle-killing as Resistance: The Dead Will Arise Reconsidered', *Research in African Literatures* 22, 3 (1991 (fall)), 171-181. See also several review articles published in the *South African Historical Journal* 25 (1991).

47. Crais, *The Making of a Colonial Order*, 206. For a review of these publications see N. Southey, 'The Formative Region: The eastern Cape Frontier Revisited', *Kleio* XXV (1993), 129-138. For a critique of Crais and Mostert see *South African Historical Journal* review feature 28 (May 1993), 309-68.

religious beliefs. In 1783, Hendrik Swellengrebel jnr. wrote, in a personal letter, how perceptions of 'we white Christians' and 'they black heathens' were used 'as a cloak for violence' between Khoikhoi and settlers.⁴⁸ The Khoikhoi were simply countering violence with violence. For many adherents, the cattle-killing became an act of personal and community resistance. Statements advocating violence, such as 'we want to make war' and 'Khoikhoi should murder all Christians', epitomize the nature of Khoi resistance and violence.⁴⁹

It seems, then, that millenarian movements are intrinsically violent. But violence should not be seen as necessarily mindless violence, but rather as action serving a specific purpose. For example, the Khoikhoi resorted to violence '*omme een tijd eens wederom meesters van het Land te worden*' (once again to become rulers of their land).⁵⁰ Regaining control of their land justified their violent behaviour. In other words, violence became the partner of a sense of duty which enjoyed moral acceptance among the Khoikhoi.⁵¹

But violence was not Parel's only aim. Because social cohesion and unity were lacking, reasserting and consolidating a common Khoi identity were equally important goals. By the 1780s, the Khoikhoi were no longer a cohesive society, sharing the same culture and lifestyle. The collapse of Khoi society left many scattered over the south-western Cape to eke out a living as labourers on settler farms, some permanently employed, others on a seasonal contract basis. On the political front, once powerful chiefs and captains had been disempowered by the Cape authorities. Reuniting the Khoikhoi under such circumstances required more than mere killing of livestock. This is evidenced in Parel's emotive plea '*dat de Hottentotten alle by malkanderen moesten blijven*' (that all Hottentots remain united).⁵²

The rejection of European culture, particularly the burning of western clothing constituted an important component of the cattle-killing.⁵³ Despite the general scarcity of clothes on the frontier, indigenous people wearing western dress symbolised cultural colonisation. Eighteenth-century Khoi men are often depicted wearing western trousers, a shirt and hat, while women wear dresses.⁵⁴ Fighting over clothes was also quite common on farms.⁵⁵ One Khoi servant refused to look after cattle at night because his master did not provide him with clothes.⁵⁶ In 1767, a servant said he worked for nothing but '*kost en kleren*' (food and clothes).⁵⁷ Does this suggest approval of western culture and traditions? To an extent, yes, but since the burning of European clothes coincided with the

48. Cited in Viljoen, 'Khoisan Labour Relations in the Overberg Districts during the Latter half of the 18th century, c.1755-1795' (Unpublished MA thesis, University of the Western Cape, 1993), 141-2.

49. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 October 1788. Depositions of Frederik Hans. 'oorlog wilde maaken', 68 and Piet Hans 'Hottentotten alle de Christene wilde vermoor', 65.

50. CA C 570 Letters Received, 26 Oct. 1788, 52.

51. For more information on ethics of violence, see J. Keane, *Reflections of Violence* (London, 1996), 92-6. See also C. Gilligan, et al. eds., *Mapping the Moral Domain*, (Cambridge, Mass. 1988), 175-200.

52. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 Oct. 1788, 67.

53. CA 1/STB 10/17 Letters Received from Court of Justice, 29 April 1790.

54. See N. Penn, 'Droster Gangs of the Bokkeveld and Roggeveld' in E. Eldredge and F. Morton, eds., *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labour on the Dutch Frontier* (Pietermaritzburg, 1993?), 53.

55. CA 1/STB 3/13 Criminele Verklaaringen, no 52, 19 June 1794; CA 1/SWM 1/15 Attestatien, 18 Aug. 1785.

56. CA 1/STB 3/13 Criminele Verklaaringen, no 52, 19 June 1794.

57. CA 1/STB 3/11 Criminele Verklaaringen, 11 Dec. 1767.

cattle-killing, it demonstrates Khoi opposition to what D.M. Schreuder describes as the 'imperialism of cultural assimilation'.⁵⁸ Moreover, burning clothes as a ritual symbolised a new beginning, once whites had been expelled from the Cape.

Scholars often maintain that millenarian movements emerge in response to colonisation, dispossession, displacement and deprivation. Viewed differently, however, cattle-killing could have been rather an act of control by Khoikhoi over their own scarce economic resources. Killing cattle on a large scale could be viewed as resistance to trade by Khoikhoi who possessed livestock. By slaughtering their remaining cattle in significant numbers, trade relations were effectively ended. Although the slaughter of livestock would almost certainly lead to self-destruction, many Khoikhoi clung to the belief that earthly possessions would be restored, to them in greater abundance once the millenium dawned.⁵⁹

Khoikhoi employed as clients, not servants, also viewed the cattle-killing as a form of personal resistance. It granted aggrieved clients a unique opportunity to settle old scores with their masters. As clients, Khoi herders were often deprived of the rightful share which clientship promised. Many were victims of fraud and relished the chance of redressing the situation, especially since Parel legitimised their actions by authorising the cattle-killing.⁶⁰

Parel's prophecies were received with great excitement and adulation. Within days, he secured a substantial following consisting of about 300 people, of whom more than half were women.

Khoikhoi Women and Cattle-killing

Feminist historians have questioned the way male historians have treated indigenous and slave women in the historiography of resistance movements in the Cape Colony.⁶¹ They argued, amongst other things that the role of women is often downplayed. Helen Bradford has extensively criticised male historians for ignoring the role played by women in resistance movements in frontier historiography.⁶²

A major characteristic of the cattle-killing was the participation of Khoi and slave women. Jan Parel ensured that they were not alienated, but regarded instead as co-liberators. Khoi and slave women were attracted to Parel's ideas because they offered liberation which was worth supporting. Recent work by feminists has analysed the responses of indigenous women to colonisation most sensitively.⁶³ Like many indigenous women, notably native American women,

58. D. M. Schreuder, 'The Cultural Factor in Victorian Imperialism: A case study of the British "civilising Mission"', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* IV (1976), 290.

59. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 Oct. 1788, 65ff.

60. CA 1/SWM 3/14 Attestation, 22 Feb. 1783; 1/SWM 3/11 Sworn Statements, 20 Nov. 1763.

61. See P. Van der Spuy, 'What, Then, was the Sexual outlet for Black Males?: A Feminist Critique of Quantitative Representations of Women Slaves at the Cape of Good Hope in the Eighteenth Century' *Kronos* 23 (Nov. 1996), 43-56. H. Bradford, 'Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and its Frontier Zones, c.1806-70' *Journal of African History*, 37, 3 (1996), 351-370.

62. Bradford, 'Women, Gender and Colonialism', 351-370.

63. See E. Mona and E. Leacock, eds., *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York, 1980); C. Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and the Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900* (Berkeley, 1992); P. Strong, 'Feminist Theory and the "Invasion of the Heart" in North America' *Ethnohistory* 43, 4 (1996), 683-712.

Khoi women began contesting colonisation in their own way because it disrupted their lives. In precolonial Khoi society, women wielded considerable power within the family and household. In colonial society, the situation was completely reversed. As female servants on settler farms, Khoi women were maids to white women and sexual “slaves” to white masters.⁶⁴ Khoikhoi women felt disempowered within the trekboer household. Embracing millenarianism and sharing Parel’s vision of a freed Swellendam therefore paved the way to possible re-empowerment once all settlers had been killed.

Days before the commencement of the killing, Parel had personal conversations with several women, telling them about the cattle-killing and how crucial their support was to its success. A Khoi woman, Anna, was told how and when ‘Christene’ (Christians) would be killed.⁶⁵ Another, named Mietjie, was instructed to slaughter white cattle and build new straw huts with two doors.⁶⁶ Involving women in the movement boosted it considerably. Women did not disappoint Parel. Based on figures cited in the colonial records, women were by far the most ardent supporters. One report stated that as many as 175 women were seen gathering at a certain Khoi kraal.⁶⁷ Another report recorded that 120 women and men were seen congregating at a kraal near the Breede River.⁶⁸ Moreover, days before the actual killing started, women were seen manufacturing assegais and other weapons to be used in battle. As I have argued elsewhere, Khoi women ‘were not only supportive in terms of numbers, but also demonstrated their intentions by willingly taking up traditional weaponry’.⁶⁹

Eric Hobsbawm noted how women in early European societies became involved in millenarian activities because men cast them in this spiritual role.⁷⁰ Even then, their role was confined to giving moral support to husbands, lovers and sons. The opposite occurred in aboriginal societies. It seems that different norms applied among African and many other indigenous societies in times of crisis. Women emerged as central figures of many uprisings. For example, during the Mau Mau rebellion Kikuyu women proved their worth as rebels.⁷¹ More recently, Helen Bradford has meticulously outlined the role played by women in the Xhosa cattle-killing.⁷²

Khoi women were fully-fledged members of the movement in all aspects. Both men and women carried bows, arrows and assegais. Khoi and slave women were not marginalised from positions of power during the cattle-killing because they were women. Jan Parel saw women and feminine power in a completely different light. It was used most effectively to out-manoeuvre settlers, particularly since the role of servile women in countering colonisation was

64. Viljoen, ‘Khoisan Labour Relations’, 48, 125-130.

65. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 Oct. 1788, 65ff. Deposition of Anna.

66. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 Oct. 1788, 67. Deposition of Mietjie.

67. CA C 570 Letters Received, 26 Oct. 1788, 54-6.

68. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 Oct. 1788, 60ff.

69. Viljoen, ‘Revelation of a Revolution’, 8.

70. E. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Manchester, 1959), 57ff.

71. C. Presley, ‘Kikuyu Women in the “Mau Mau” Rebellion’, in G. Y. Okihiro ed., *Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean and Afro-American History* (Amherst, 1986), 53-70.

72. Bradford, ‘Women, Gender and Colonialism’, 351-370.

underestimated within male-dominated colonial society. Military commandos raised to attack and raid Khoisan kraals consisted of men only. Involving Khoi and slave women caught many unsuspecting settlers by surprise. Gerrit Beukes, a farmer in the vicinity of Swellendam, testified with 'great astonishment and disappointment' to a great gathering of women that took place at a nearby kraal.⁷³ He had obviously underestimated women as rebels and was therefore surprised by their support.

What, then, propelled Khoi and slave women to support the cattle-killing movement in the way they did? Kenelm Burridge cites examples which highlight the 'sexual attractiveness of male prophets'⁷⁴. One prophet, 'Mahdi was found to be extremely attractive to women'.⁷⁵ It appears that Parel was well-liked. Yet, it remains debatable whether or not he exploited his position as 'messiah', demanding sexual favours from Khoi or slave women. No claims of seduction were brought against him. One assumes that women were not swayed by Parel's manhood, nor his sexuality. In fact, Khoi and slave women supported Parel in the hope that their presence would expedite their liberation. The quest for community liberation in this instance exceeded personal liberation and sexual desire. In other words, the participation of Khoi and slave women in the cattle-killing movement was not about the emancipation of women as such, nor were they influenced by male sexuality, but rather it centred on liberation of the community.

Khoi women were not strangers to cattle-keeping. In precolonial times, women milked the cows and often assisted men in herding cattle.⁷⁶ As servants on colonial farms, their association with livestock simply continued. Some worked as part-time herders, while others performed such duties on a full-time basis.⁷⁷ Some even owned cattle which were herded with those of the master.⁷⁸ As mentioned earlier, clientship proved not only unreliable but also unfair since the mutual benefits it promised rarely materialised. Khoi women soon discovered its disadvantages. Many were cheated of their herds by ruthless masters. In 1780, for example, a Khoi woman named Anna was highly upset when her master, Gideon Joubert, withheld her earned wages and expropriated her cattle. At one stage she even contemplated poisoning him.⁷⁹ Seen in this light, the prospect of cattle-killing presented many wronged women with an opportunity to redress the injustices suffered at the hands of settlers.

Cattle-killing and Slaves

The participation of slaves, albeit on a small scale, remains an intriguing aspect of the Khoi-dominated millenarian movement. A review of the literature on slavery shows that millenarian resistance was uncommon within slave societies. The

73. CA C 570 Letters Received, 26 October 1788, 54-56. Deposition of Gerrit Beukes.

74. Burridge, *New Heaven New Earth*, 161.

75. Burridge, *New Heaven New Earth*, 160.

76. P. Kolbe, *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope, vol 1*, (New York, reprint, 1968), 170-171.

77. CA 1/SWM 3/13 Sworn Statements, 25 Feb. 1775; See also CA 1/SWM 3/16 Sworn Statements, 28 Oct. 1792.

78. CA CJ 414 Documents in Criminal Cases, 22 April 1780, 335-40.

79. CA CJ 414 Documents in Criminal Cases, 22 April 1780, 335-40.

two major slave uprisings at the Cape, in 1808 and 1825, lacked genuine millenarian tendencies. It appears that of the few slaves who embraced millenarianism in countries of bondage most were of African origin and worked on plantations in the Americas, particularly Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, in 1798, a few Afro-Latin-American slaves embraced voodooism which exhibited strong African religious beliefs. Two African-born slaves, Jean Francois and Biassou seized control of a voodoo cult started by another slave, named Boukman.⁸⁰ Although the uprising excluded the killing of cattle, it still proved successful. A reason why Latin-American slaves did not embrace animal killing is that many had little or no contact with livestock. Of North American slave leaders, the one who came closest to assuming messianic and apocalyptic stature was Nat Turner, an educated slave from colonial Virginia. He won fame in 1829, when he and seventy slaves killed a considerable number of whites during a slave uprising.⁸¹

Yet it appears that some Swellendam slaves might well have been the exception to the rule. Preaching about the forthcoming cattle-killing, Parel urged slaves and free blacks to align themselves to the movement. Exactly how many joined is not known, but we do know that some slaves showed an interest. Taking the message of resistance to people bearing the brunt of colonial oppression - slaves - had its advantages, but also its disadvantages.

Although most rural slaves were either field or domestic slaves, some were employed as herders and shepherds. Butchering cattle was not an unfamiliar task to slaves. Apart from slaughtering cattle for the settler household, slaves often killed cattle as act of personal resistance. Nigel Worden writes that some 'attempted to set fire to their master's property or to kill his livestock'.⁸² In trekboer society, livestock symbolised wealth and status. Thus, killing cattle was seen by slaves and Khoi servants as depriving settlers of their livelihood and wealth.

The participation of slaves and free blacks in the Khoi-dominated uprising was also indicative of how existing ties between them were strengthened, while new ones were being forged. Historians of Cape slavery keep reminding us of the strong social ties between slaves and Khoi labourers on farms.⁸³ Worden describes in great detail how Khoikhoi and slaves often planned and assisted one another in absconding. Robert Ross reminds us that by the 1780s 'slaves and Khoisan began increasingly to act together against their common masters'.⁸⁵

Although the success of the Khoi cattle-killing movement did not hinge entirely on the participation of slaves, their presence did offer many advantages. Even though the Khoikhoi entered the Cape labour market as labourers in significant numbers at the beginning of the eighteenth century, economic power still

80. H. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Oxford, 1986), 208, 209.

81. E. Genovese, 'Slave Revolts' in Goodheart, L., *et al.*, *Slavery in American Society* (Lexington 1993, third edition), 252-254.

82. N. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (London, 1985), 132.

83. See R. Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (Routledge, London, 1983), 38-53; J. Armstrong and N. Worden, 'The Slaves, 1652-1834' in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840* (London, 1989), 158-9.

84. See N. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, 90, 124-125.

85. R. Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 47.

centred on slaves. Involving slaves drawn from various sectors of a slave-based economy would ultimately affect day-to-day farming operations in Swellendam.

But above all, there is the question of legitimacy. In most colonial slave societies, of which the Cape was one, it appears that masters listened to the demands of their slaves more than to the grievances raised by indigenous labourers, in this case the Khoikhoi. Moreover, slaveholders are said to have been uneasy about potential slave revolts or slave involvement in other rebellions. The historian of American slavery, Eugene Genovese, for example, refers to 'the panic of slaveholders at the slightest hint of slave insurrection'.⁸⁶ In essence, participation by Swellendam slaves in the Khoi uprising demonstrated that it attracted support from most servile people, cutting across ethnic and other social barriers.

Not all slaves were enthusiastic about joining Parel's movement, however. Many remained sceptical about millenarian promises, while others feared greater repression in the event of failure. Non-participation of slaves, however, was not tolerated by Parel. Slave non-believers were branded as traitors and were threatened with violence.⁸⁷

Another factor which counted against Parel was that slaves were not generally receptive to apocalyptic teachings. Aversion, or perhaps complete ignorance, compounded slave scepticism. This raises the question of whether or not slaves understood the spiritual significance attached to such beliefs. Peires asserts that the Xhosa cattle-killing was exclusively a Xhosa phenomenon 'with little room...for peoples who lacked a place in the Xhosa cosmology'. Did Cape slaves 'lack a place' in Khoi cosmology?⁸⁸ Judging by court depositions submitted later, there is little indication that slaves understood the significance of millenarianism. Yet, despite the inconclusiveness of the evidence, the possibility exists that some slaves viewed the cattle-killing and its millenarian ideas as spiritual. Hans Zoek, an ex-slave, displayed great interest in what Parel had to say and became a faithful follower.⁸⁹ Other slaves perhaps had the impression that a new religion had arrived, in opposition to Christianity. As yet there is no evidence to verify this, but since Christianity attracted a moderate following among slaves in general, and Islam was the only other growing religion among Cape Town slaves, it remains an interesting proposition, especially in respect of Swellendam slaves.

Colonists, Colonial Authorities and the Cattle-killing.

On 15 October 1788, days after he heard about the uprising, Landdrost Onkruid van Huld wrote to Governor Van de Graaff informing him that '*een Conspiratie onder de Hottentots ontdekt was*' (they uncovered a conspiracy among the Khoikhoi).⁹⁰ Agitated by the threat that all whites would be killed,⁹¹ Van Huld

86. Genovese, 'Slave Revolts', 256.

87. CA C Letters Received, 15 Oct. 1788, 19.

88. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*, 133.

89. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 Oct. 1788, 67ff.

90. CA C 570 Letters Received, 15 Oct. 1788, 19.

immediately appealed for military assistance against what he called ‘*gedreijgt onheijl*’ (threatening disaster).⁹² In an effort to obtain as much information as possible, Van de Graaff demanded to know what had caused the disturbances among the Overberg Khoikhoi.⁹³ He appealed to farmers to remain calm, promising them military aid. A few days later, assistance arrived in the form of horses, firearms and ammunition, which were distributed among Boer Commandos in order to crush the rebellion. By then, farmers in the vicinity of Swellendam had become ‘*alle bevrees*t’ (afraid), fearing for their own lives and children.⁹⁴

Colonists were angered by the prospect that farms might be attacked and destroyed. Some farmers did indeed suffer severe cattle losses, especially those in the vicinity of the Hex River Valley, not far from Swellendam. Four days before, the Khoi were due to launch their assault on the *Drostdy*, at least four farmers, Jan Mouton, Johannes Lubbe, Barend Vorster and Johannes du Toit reported cattle losses.⁹⁵

Armed with Company-sponsored weapons, Swellendam settlers formed commandos to put down the uprising. But no face-to-face battle followed, as the attack on the Swellendam *Drostdy* was called off. Aborting the cattle-killing came as a major blow to Parel’s followers. It perplexed many adherents, particularly those Khoikhoi, who had already erected new huts, burnt their European clothes and slaughtered some of their cattle, as instructed by Parel.⁹⁶ Parel himself fled, but was arrested a few days later, allowing the Landdrost to report that everything in Swellendam was ‘*in Rust*’ (calm).⁹⁷ The colonial world prevailed and their position as colonial subjects remained intact. In fact, things worsened for the Khoikhoi. In 1795, certain members of the Swellendam gentry demanded that all Swellendam Khoikhoi be enslaved and stripped of their ‘free’ status. Appearing before the Court of Justice in April 1790, Parel was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment, a light punishment considering that he had incited the overthrow of Dutch rule. After serving his sentence, he was released from prison in 1792.⁹⁸ A free man, he married a Khoi woman, named Catryn, and found employment on a farm owned by Jan Albertyn.⁹⁹

Conclusion

Cattle-killing as a social movement cannot be seen in isolation from colonial rule in South Africa. Colonised in 1652 by Dutch settlers, the Khoikhoi had a long history of conquest, displacement and dispossession. Yet millenarianism only surfaced in the 1780s when Khoi society was in crisis as white settlement began to make inroads in the Overberg region. Haunted by unprecedented disposses-

91. CA C 570 Letters Received, 23 Oct. 1788, 63ff.

92. CA C 570 Letters Received, 15 Oct. 1788, 21.

93. CA VC 63 Letters Despatched, 19 Oct. 1788, 705-7.

94. CA C 570 Letters Received, 15 Oct. 1788, 20.

95. CA 1\STB 10\162 Veldwagmeesters Rapporten over Rooven, 1783-1793, 21 Oct. 1788.

96. Viljoen, ‘Revelation of a Revolution’, 11.

97. CA C 570 Letters Received, 25 November 1788, 98; CA CJ 72 Original Rolls and Minutes (Criminal Only), 29 April 1790, 168ff.

98. CA CJ 72 Original Rolls and Minutes (Criminal only), 29 April 1790, 168ff.

99. CA 1/STB 10/165 Letters Received from Veldwagt-meesters and Private Individuals (1795-1798), 26 July 1796.

sion of land and livestock and faced with possible cultural extinction, many landless Khoikhoi were forced to explore new avenues of spiritual relief which culminated in adopting messianic beliefs. As the “prophet of rebellion”, articulating the grievances of the oppressed, Parel began preaching a message which his contemporaries wanted to hear. With hope and reward constituting the core of Parel’s messianic prophecies, he soon attracted a large following.

Embracing millenarianism implied much more than killing cattle. At the very least, it symbolised hope to a community in crisis. The followers of Parel were made to believe that all whites would be killed and expelled from the Cape for good. This did not materialise, nor was their position in Cape society changed for the better. In fact, their position in colonial Swellendam deteriorated, where they remained landless menials on settler farms, with the exception of those who settled at Baviaanskloof, a Moravian missionary settlement founded in 1738. Slaves, too, were naturally disappointed by the outcome of events, which meant that emancipation remained a dream. Yet, as Parelites, many remained hopeful that one day, they or their descendants would become ‘wederom meesters van het land’ (rulers of their land).¹⁰⁰ That day is yet to dawn as whites continue to rule and dominate present-day politics in the Overberg and Western Cape.

Although the colonial world persisted, thus proving many prophecies to be false, several positive aspects surfaced. It showed Khoi resilience in testing the powers that be. Yet, as marginalised communities scattered all over the colony, the challenge which confronted Khoi society in the next centuries was to accommodate and deal with transformation in a way best suited to their worldview, without compromising their Khoi identity and cultural heritage. This remains a daunting task.

Still, millenarianism had many spin-offs. As a protest movement, and a ‘weapon of the weak’, it introduced a body of untested ideas of resistance politics which aimed to counter colonialism in South Africa. It also introduced a new and unexplored form of resistance. Since then, particularly throughout the nineteenth century, aggrieved African people have embraced millenarianism on a regular basis either as an expression of resistance, or tenet of religion, or perhaps a combination of both. An example occurred in 1856-7 when the Xhosa people of the eastern Cape embarked on a similar venture. Only recently, Tilman Dederling has shown how millenarianism among Namibian Khoikhoi surfaced in the 1880s when Hendrik Witbooi, became the leader of a Christian inspired prophetic movement. This millenarian enthusiasm continued to play an important role in the war of the Nama against the Germans at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰¹

Among African societies, millenarian movements mushroomed in the twentieth century. The Guissi people of Kenya resorted to millenarian activities

100. CA C 570 Letters Received, 26 October 1788, 52.

101. T. Dederling, ‘Hendrik Witbooi, the prophet’, *Kleio*, 25, 1993, 54-78. See also Dederling, ‘“War Against Whites”: The Prophet Shepherd Stuurman/ Hendrik Bekeer in Namibia and South Africa, 1904-7’ (Paper presented at the *Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference*, South African Museum, Cape Town, 12-16 July 1997).

in their protest against British colonialism. By slaughtering their cattle and destroying their crops many believed their god, Mumbo, would restore all things at the right moment.¹⁰² Similarly, the Maji Maji movement in southern Tanzania, known then as German East Africa, protested against German occupation.¹⁰³ Millenarianism and cattle-killing were not confined to 'primitive' or illiterate societies, nor were they unique to pastoral societies. In fact, millenarianism became a global phenomenon, flourishing among oppressed communities who sought social justice and liberation. As Hobsbawm¹⁰⁴ and Grundlingh¹⁰⁵ have noted, whites too have resorted to millenarian activities in times of social strife and crisis.

It is difficult to determine how many cattle were slaughtered. Colonial records refer to '*verslagte vee*' (slaughtered cattle), yet there is no evidence of any immediate shortages which might have crippled the Swellendam economy although a few farmers suffered cattle losses. Archival records are silent about the aftermath of the Khoikhoi cattle-killing. Its effects were not as catastrophic as the events of 1856-7. The Xhosa cattle-killing had disastrous consequences, severely damaging the social fabric of nineteenth-century Xhosa society.

Cattle-killing among the Khoikhoi was never repeated. Many including Jan Parel, found solace in mission Christianity after Moravian missionaries returned in 1792.¹⁰⁶ This suggests that there could have been a strong connection between millenarianism and Khoi receptiveness to mission Christianity.

102. B. A. Ogot, and W. R. Ochieng, W.R, 'Mumboism - An Anti-colonial Movement' in Ogot, ed., *War and Society in Africa* (London, 1972), 149-177.

103. G. Gwassa, 'African Methods of Warfare during the Maji Maji War 1905-1907', Ogot, B. A. ed., *War and Society in Africa*, 122-148.

104. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 57-107.

105. Grundlingh, 'Probing the Prophet', 225.

106. CA 1/STB 10/165 Letters Received from Veldwagt-meesters and Private Individuals (1795-1798), 26 July 1796. See also Viljoen, 'Moravian Missionaries, Khoisan Labour and the Overberg Colonists at the end of the VOC era, 1792-5' in H. Bredekamp and R. Ross, eds., *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Johannesburg, 1995), 50-61.