Millenarianism and Resistance:
the Xhosa Cattle Killing

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In 1856 many Xhosa-speaking people beyond the eastern boundary of Cape Colony in southern Africa listened to the revelations of a prophet and obeyed his orders to kill all their cattle, consume their stored grain, and not plant new crops. In the destruction of their economic resources, they committed themselves to one of the most extreme of the recorded reactions to culture contact and foreign conquest. The prophet gained support for these and other injunctions by promising that their execution would bring a new age in which the elderly would regain their youth, the ancestors would return to earth, fat cattle would again graze in lush pastures, people would eat from newly-filled granaries, and the present era of troubles would disappear.

Of troubles, the Xhosa had many, most of them stemming from their geographic proximity to the eastern margin of the expanding Cape Colony. Africans and whites had had trading relations since the eighteenth century, and permanent missions had been present in their lands since 1816. In three wars in the early nineteenth century, the colonial government defeated Xhosa warriors, stole large portions of their land, and threatened the political autonomy of their chiefdoms. Military defeat and socio-political innovations did not, however, reduce the Xhosa to a passive acceptance of foreign domination. Their response to a critical situation took another form, belief in the efficacy of millenarian prophecies.

This paper analyzes the cattle killing movement as an extreme example of a millenarian response to a colonizing situation. In the first section I will consider millenarian movements in general, the causal explanations which others have offered for them, and millenarianism as an alternative to military resistance. In the second and third sections I will give a brief ethnographic summary of the societies which participated in the movement and outline the historical
background, especially the wars, land theft, and political threats which make
the movement understandable. The last section will describe the cattle killing
movement _per se_.

**Social Movements, Millenarianism, and Resistance**

There are a plethora of labels with which one can categorize social move-
ments such as the cattle killing. I prefer the millenarian label because millen-
arianism was the predominant characteristic of the cattle killing movement. A
millenarian movement is one in which believers envision a new age, a milleni-
um, which will arrive if people follow certain injunctions; but their vision of
the future is heavily influenced by an idealized picture of the past. Millenarian
movements have been described as reactionary or backward looking because
the golden age is supposedly modeled on ideal notions about the past and be-
cause the techniques for creating a new age seem to be irrational and unlikely
to succeed, at least from the point of view of outside observers. This is too sim-
plistic, however, since millenarian movements are equally an attempt to cope
with the present, to change it, and to create a more promising future. An image
of the future may take certain values from the past but will not completely
duplicate it. Certain practices (witchcraft) will be discarded, and certain in-
novations (western goods) will be incorporated. The cattle killing movement as
a rejection of the present, an ideal image of the past, and a vision for the future
was, therefore, millenarian. Nineteenth century white observers believed that
the Xhosa, by destroying their economic resources, had committed themselves
to belief in a "delusion." Even today, it is hard to understand why people could
have acted in such an extreme way. The Xhosa, by obeying a prophet, were
especially pinning their hopes on a supernatural solution to the very real prob-
lems of their world. To comprehend why they did this, one must look for causal
relationships within the appropriate ethnographic, social, and historical con-
texts.

To label a movement as millenarian does not give us many clues about
causality. What factor or factors cause a people to hold a firm belief in a mil-
enarian prophecy? Historians and social scientists have grappled with this
question repeatedly, either in terms of explaining particular movements or
generalizing to all those lumped within a single category.

Such diverse social movements as the cattle killing, the Melanesian Cargo
cults, the American Indian Ghost Dance, and Alice Lenshina's Lumpa Church
of Zambia (to single out only a few) share many similar features. In comparing
such movements, scholars have tried to isolate the cause or causes which give
rise to their similarities. These movements are usually correlated with the
strains, frustrations, inequities, and injustices of a culture contact situation
(Andersson 1958). David Aberle (in Thrupp 1962: 209 ff.) has refined the
concept of relative deprivation: that a movement arises when there is a gross
disparity between a people's felt needs and the means available for solving
them. Thus, he can correlate such movements with the economic and political