



J.B. PEIRES. *The dead will arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*. Ravan Press: Johannesburg, 1989. 348 pp. R26,00 (exclusive). ISBN 0 86975 381 9.

If one was to reflect upon recent South African historiography one would undoubtedly find that the overwhelming focus of scholarship has been on 20th century social history. In the 1970s there were a number of historians undertaking research into the pre-capitalist societies of southern Africa. However, in the 1980s this field of study ceased to grow; if anything, it contracted. The field has been left in the hands

of a few historians like Julian Cobbing, Carolyn Hamilton, Patrick Harries, John Wright and the author of this book, Jeff Peires.

This must be one of the few books on South African history with a pre-1900 focus to have been written in recent years. That makes it a refreshing book. But it is refreshing for many other reasons. Indeed it is a fine book. It is not only good history, written with insight and empathy; it is also a good story, containing a narrative that is often gripping, a range of colourful characters, and a rich array of anecdotes.

At the best of times it would be difficult to comprehend why a whole community should decide to destroy or forego its main sources of subsistence. Inevitably explanations of such a bizarre event as the cattle-killing will tend to rest on conspiracy theories. And this has been the case — until the publication of this book. As Peires shows, the leading colonial actors of the time and the subsequent colonial historiography have explained the cattle-killing as a plot organized by leading Xhosa chiefs, in league with the Basotho king, Moshoeshoe, to foment a war against the Cape Colony. Conversely, generations of Xhosa have grown up in the firm belief that the event was a vile trick played by Sir George Grey to deceive the Xhosa into destroying themselves. Peires demonstrates convincingly how both explanations carry no weight at all.

Most of the first half of the book is taken up with providing a vivid account of the main actors and events. Adopting a largely narrative mode, Peires allows the tragedy to unfold. A vicious logic drove the 'believers' (the supporters of the cattle-killing) on a relentless course of self-destruction. Nongqawuse's prophecy required all cattle to be killed. This would enable both the ancestors and new healthy cattle to rise up. The killing would be a purification process, so that the new order would not be contaminated by the past. Many times the believers expected, with high hopes, the dawning of the day of resurrection. Many times they were disappointed. Disappointment drove some believers to waver and lose faith. But many others blamed the non-fulfilment of the prophecy on the unbelievers who had not killed their cattle, or on believers who had 'hedged their bets' by keeping some cattle alive. Thus each time an expected day passed without fulfilment of the prophecy, more and more cattle were killed. The ultimate consequence was mass starvation. Between January and December 1857 the population of British Kaffraria dropped from 105 000 to 37 500 as a result of death and migration.

Peires's great achievement is to make this event comprehensible. This he does in two important analytical sections (pp. 122-138 and 165-181) and in chapter 10. His interpretation is based upon a careful contextualization of the cattle-killing. He sets the event against a background of debilitating frontier warfare, land deprivation, and the devastating lung sickness epidemic. Given the crumbling material base of Xhosa society it was hardly surprising that a prophecy promising regeneration should have received such wide adherence. Elements in the Xhosa belief system and certain Christian doc-

trines which had gained some currency make the response of the 'believers' to the prophecy even more explicable. Indeed, Peires argues that 'the cattle-killing 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' (p.x). It is a persuasive argument, demonstrated with an empathetic sensitivity to belief systems, with an awareness of the nuances of language, and with due recognition of the material roots.

For this reviewer the second half of the book was less powerful than the first. Much of the later chapters is taken up with a hard-hitting attack on the colonial order, as embodied in the persons of Grey, Maclean, and Gawler. This is a necessary component of the account because, as Peires shows, if Grey did not actually orchestrate the cattle-killing, he certainly exploited it ruthlessly to his own advantage. In these later sections, however, some of the coherence of the account is lost. The narrative thread, in the first half so well sustained and neatly interwoven with the analytical sections, tends to break up.

Trying to situate Peires's book historiographically makes for an interesting exercise. The relatively large narrative component sets it apart from most of the work produced in recent years by South Africanist scholars who can be loosely labelled as revisionist. Although Peires's analysis is sensitive to the material base, the book is almost entirely free of Marxist concepts and jargon. When was a book last written by a radical scholar about a pre-capitalist African society without any mention of the term 'mode of production'? Some critics might be inclined to place the book firmly in an earlier Africanist historiographical tradition, marked by a deep affinity for Africans, and sympathy for African victims of the evils of colonialism.

The dead will arise has ingredients that make it a most readable book. The style is often vivid, never pedestrian. There are touches of satire and humour — necessary, perhaps for light relief? Some readers may leave with the impression that Peires has an undue fascination for the gory and the macabre. Certainly there are detailed accounts of atrocities and torture, and gruesome descriptions of cattle dying from lungsickness and people from starvation. There are the finely drawn portraits of the major actors: Maclean and Gawler. There is Peires's own genuine moral outrage at the horrors of colonialism. Most of all there is the fine historical reconstruction and sensitive, nuanced analysis of a tragic event.

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