

The Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement (1856-1857)

Background

The Xhosa were (and are) a major cultural group from the Eastern Cape region of South Africa. The land was fertile with plenty of fresh water sources for their cattle—which were extremely important to them. Like the Zulu, they descended from the Bantu people who had migrated from the northwest centuries earlier. Xhosa is still one of the most-spoken languages in Africa and was the native tongue of Nelson Mandela, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and the (possibly fictional) Black Panther.

Xhosa society was organized into “districts” made up of extended family “homesteads.” Each district had a chief whose power depended on successfully guiding and protecting his people. The chiefs answered to a Xhosa king, usually a relative, whose authority also depended on his perceived success.

The Xhosa believed that evil spirits caused all kinds of trouble—illness, poor crops, natural disasters. They suspected witchcraft was often to blame, and even tolerating such practices could lead to disaster. Fortunately, properly honored family ancestors acted as good spirits, offering guidance on how to fight evil. One of the most common ways was through animal sacrifice, especially cattle.

Cattle were everything to the Xhosa. They provided milk, meat, hides, tools, fuel, and fertilizer. They were also currency—the basic unit of value everyone understood. Cattle indicated social status and were used to purchase wives. Even minor crimes could be forgiven with a “fine” paid to the chief in cattle.

Conflict and Crisis

Since the mid-17th century, the Xhosa had been forced to deal with European settlers on the Cape—first the Dutch, then the British. The Dutch Boers were especially problematic. As strict Calvinists, they believed God had chosen them and rarely hesitated to take Xhosa territory. In response, the Xhosa raided Boer settlements for cattle, and fighting broke out regularly.

From 1779 onward, the Xhosa fought nine separate wars against the Boers and British. The eighth war (1850-1853) was the most devastating. During this conflict, a Xhosa prophet predicted that British bullets couldn't harm the tribe. He was wrong, and the Xhosa suffered their worst defeat of the century.

These military defeats created a profound crisis within traditional Xhosa political structures. The authority of chiefs and kings had always rested on their ability to protect their people and maintain prosperity. When conventional warfare failed repeatedly against European military technology, the very foundation of Xhosa governance came under question. Chiefs who had led their people to devastating losses found their legitimacy challenged, while the king's authority to coordinate resistance appeared increasingly hollow.

In 1854, “lung sickness” began spreading through Xhosa cattle herds. European settlers had brought the disease with imported livestock intended to improve their own herds. The disease destroyed Xhosa cattle, leaving the community hungry, desperate, and looking for answers. They were certain their physical suffering reflected spiritual corruption.

External Pressures and Internal Fractures

The convergence of external and internal factors created perfect conditions for radical action. External pressures included not only military defeats and cattle disease, but also systematic land seizures that reduced Xhosa territory and disrupted traditional grazing patterns. British colonial policy increasingly restricted Xhosa movement and trade, while settler expansion continued regardless of treaties or agreements.

These external threats combined with internal vulnerabilities within Xhosa society. The traditional political system, based on consensus among chiefs and the king's spiritual authority, struggled to respond effectively to unprecedented challenges. Some chiefs favored accommodation with colonial authorities, others pushed for continued resistance, and still others sought spiritual solutions. This division within the leadership created space for alternative sources of authority to emerge—including, in at least one case, teenage prophets claiming direct communication with ancestor spirits.

In addition to the people's reliance on their animals to survive, Xhosa chiefs maintained power partly through their ability to redistribute cattle and organize communal grazing. When disease decimated herds, chiefs lost both their primary tool of governance and their perceived spiritual connection to prosperity. The crisis demanded explanations and solutions that existing political structures seemed unable to provide.

The Prophecy

Nongqawuse was a 15-year-old Xhosa girl whose uncle, Mhlakaza, was a respected spiritual advisor to King Sarhili. In April 1856, Nongqawuse and a friend went to the banks of the Gxarha River near the Indian Ocean to scare away birds threatening their family's crops. The area was incredibly beautiful—with river, ocean, farmland, and cliffs creating an Eden-like setting during otherwise dark times for the Xhosa.

There, the girls met two strangers who claimed to be ancestor-spirits. The strangers explained that the Xhosa dead would soon rise and a new era of supernatural prosperity would begin. The people should abandon witchcraft, incest, and adultery, and prepare enclosures for many new cattle and fields for abundant crops.

First, however, they would have to destroy all existing crops and cattle to make way for renewal. These were contaminated anyway—corrupted both literally and spiritually. For things to become new, the old had to pass away. All the Xhosa had to do was *kill all of their cattle*.

To be fair, in the twelve months leading up to Nongqawuse's revelation, there had been multiple prophecies about a “black nation across the sea” coming to help the Xhosa. These prophecies also called for destroying fields and killing cattle to prepare for better crops and livestock. Presumably Nongqawuse would have been familiar with at least a few of these revelations, and it certainly changed the reception of her own supernatural claims upon returning to her village. Still, her family was understandably hesitant to commit to such a message, so Mhlakaza returned with the girls to the site. The strangers would only communicate through Nongqawuse, but Mhlakaza became convinced one spirit was his deceased brother and embraced the prophecy completely. He sent word to other chiefs, and soon the entire nation was talking about it. Even King Sarhili sent trusted family members to investigate and eventually became a believer.

*****END SECTION ONE*****

A Crisis of Political Authority

The prophecy's spread revealed deep cracks in traditional Xhosa political authority. Rather than flowing through established channels from king to chiefs to people, the spiritual message moved independently through family networks and personal conviction. This bypassed the traditional hierarchy and challenged the king's role as primary intermediary between the living and ancestral spirits—as if the message itself weren't alarming and disruptive enough.

King Sarhili faced an impossible choice. Rejecting the prophecy might alienate believers and further undermine his spiritual authority, but endorsing it meant gambling the entire kingdom's survival on a teenage girl's visions. His eventual support reflected not just personal belief, but political calculation—the movement had gained such momentum that opposing it might have sparked civil war or complete loss of royal authority.

The crisis exposed fundamental tensions within Xhosa governance. Traditional authority depended on success, but decades of defeat had eroded confidence in conventional leadership. The prophecy offered an alternative path that promised to restore Xhosa sovereignty through spiritual rather than political means—a form of resistance that didn't require chiefs or kings to lead armies to certain defeat.

Spiritual Resistance to Imperial Control

Reactions across the kingdom were mixed. Some embraced the prophecy immediately, eager for a newer, better world. Others rejected it entirely, calling it foolish to destroy their already inadequate food supply. Most fell somewhere in between, not wanting to commit to such extreme action but afraid to anger the ancestors or face community disapproval. Districts hit hardest by lung sickness or recent land loss to white settlers were more likely to embrace the radical call to action. The prophecy didn't specify what effect sporadic half-measures would have, but apparently the answer was “not much.”

Whatever its spiritual impact, the cattle-killing movement represented a distinctly anti-imperial form of resistance. Unlike previous military campaigns that had failed against European weapons, this spiritual backlash promised to remove colonial threats through supernatural intervention. The prophecy explicitly stated that colonizers would “return to the sea,” envisioning complete restoration of Xhosa independence without the compromises that accommodation might require.

This spiritual resistance offered several advantages over military action. It didn't require weapons the Xhosa lacked or risk further devastating defeats. It unified action around shared spiritual beliefs rather than potentially divisive political decisions. Most importantly, it promised not just survival but renewal—a complete restoration of Xhosa prosperity and power that purely defensive measures could never achieve.

Growing Confusion and Collapse

As months passed without the dead rising or cattle returning, believers began blaming non-believers for the prophecy's failure. Some secretly killed other people's cattle and destroyed their crops to speed up the renewal. Other Xhosa had sold their cattle to avoid looking like non-believers, but this was also considered betrayal since proper sacrificial rituals were essential.

The more obvious it became that renewal wasn't coming, the more committed and extreme the faithful became—a tragic pattern in these situations. Even if the entire community had changed course, it was too late for real recovery. They had destroyed too much of the foundation of their way of life. Nevertheless, in February 1857, King Sarhili announced that the promised New World would begin in exactly eight days, starting with a blood-red sunrise and massive storm. Only the homes of true believers would survive, the colonizers would return to the sea, the dead would rise, crops would grow, and new, improved cattle would appear.

Sarhili's announcement prompted a final week of crop destruction and cattle slaughter. The eighth day arrived with a normal sunrise and mild weather.

Aftermath

The cattle-killing prophecy divided not only districts but individual families. In its aftermath, approximately 40,000 Xhosa died from hunger, illness, and related violence. The British-controlled Cape began offering help to Xhosa willing to move to the colony under special labor contracts. They had to agree to work anywhere in the colony for whatever wages were offered to receive food, medical care, or other relief. The Boers had little use for such arrangements and simply continued enslaving or killing the Xhosa as opportunities arose.

The movement's failure completed the destruction of traditional Xhosa political independence. Survivors found themselves dependent on colonial authorities for basic survival, accepting labor contracts that amounted to a new form of political subjugation. The chief system continued but with drastically reduced authority, while kingship became largely ceremonial under colonial oversight.

The Eastern Cape never fully recovered. Today, "Nongqawuse" is used as an insult—brought up when someone's ideas are considered especially foolish or destructive. The destruction that the Xhosa blamed on the white man's God convinced many they should try to get on his good side instead. In 1850, almost no Xhosa identified as Christians; a century later, Christianity was the area's majority faith.

Understanding the Movement

It's easy to see the Cattle-Killing Movement as purely self-destructive, but this oversimplifies the desperation involved. Many belief systems promote stories where sacrifice and apparent foolishness lead to spiritual victory. Jesus chose death on a cross over an earthly kingdom. Gandhi protested British rule with a Salt March that ended with him and his followers being severely beaten—but which changed British policy.

The whole nature of faith is that you don't actually know your actions will work. Similar movements happened around the same time: Chinese "God-Worshippers" participated in the Taiping Rebellion, and later came the Plains Indians' "Ghost Dance" Movement and the Boxer Rebellion. Even today, some groups believe that hastening destruction will bring about a better world for the chosen few.

Right or wrong, the radical faith of the cattle-killing Xhosa was an act of defiance and hope when less extreme measures had failed. That it didn't work—at least by our standards—makes it no less meaningful to those who believed.

Teacher Notes:

Most of you are familiar with the “jigsaw” approach - split up the content among students, then they ‘teach’ each other in some organized fashion. I haven’t loved most of the variations on this theme I’ve come across in teacher books or workshops, and my best students hate relying on their less-motivated classmates for critical content. (“Can I just read it all myself and take the quiz?”)

I call this strategy DYRWIR? (“Did You Read What I Read?”) - a terrible name, but one which seems to be stuck in my brain, so that’s where I always end up when naming the files. As with so many things, the actual process tends to vary from use to use, and often gets altered on the fly, but here’s the basic idea:

- Students are randomly assigned into pairs as they enter class.
- Some odd method is determined for choosing the ‘A’ Partner and the ‘B’ Partner - whoever’s birthday is coming up next, or alphabetizing the last letters of their first names, or whatever - as long as it doesn’t take too long.
- The articles are distributed, one per student.
- “Please take a look at the handout you’ve just received. You’ll notice it begins with a title and goes all the way down the front page. If you turn that first page over, you’ll see that at the bottom of the second page is a note reading “END OF SECTION ONE.” That’s a special code phrase I use to indicate the End of Section One. Now, in just a moment, we’ll ALL be doing the same thing. We’ll ALL have FIVE MINUTES to read JUST SECTION ONE silently and individually. Some of you are very fast readers, and you may reach the end of SECTION ONE before time is called. That’s great - if that happens, just go back to the top and start reading SECTION ONE again. You’ll be surprised how many things you notice the second time through. Some of us, on the other hand, are very methodical readers. You may not reach the end of SECTION ONE before time is called. That’s OK - just read as far as you can. Please notice that there is NO situation in which you’ll read on to Section Two, or have time to check your phone, talk to your partner or anyone else, or stare off into eternity with a bewildered gaze. We’ll all be reading SECTION ONE for FIVE MINUTES. Are there any questions?”
- Begin. (I like to read along with them every time by way of modeling, but obviously you may need to monitor a bit to keep everyone on track.) When 5 minutes is up...
- “STOP. Turn your articles over and set them aside - you won’t need them for this next step. In just a moment, when I say ‘Begin’, the ‘A’ Partner in each group will have ONE MINUTE to tell their ‘B’ Partner everything they remember about SECTION ONE. The ‘A’ Partner must keep talking the entire minute. If you run out of things to say, repeat what you’ve already told them. During this minute, the ‘B’ Partner will not interrupt, even with questions or corrections. You, ‘B’ Partners, will look directly at your ‘A’

Partner and listen intently, nodding periodically as if this is the most fascinating stuff you've ever heard in your life. Are there any questions?"

- Begin. (I usually have to prod some "partners" to speak the entire minute.)
- "STOP. Now, 'B' Partners, you'll have ONE MINUTE to tell your 'A' Partner everything YOU remember from the article, starting with anything they left out, correcting any errors they may have made, or - if you have nothing else - simply repeating back to them everything they told you just now. 'A' Partners, you will look directly at your 'B' Partners the entire time without interrupting, even with questions or corrections, and offering encouraging facial clues that they're doing great, no matter how confused they might feel. Are there any questions?"
- Begin.
- "STOP. You now have TWO FULL MINUTES with your partner to go back to the article (which you can look at now) to look through SECTION ONE and see if there's anything you left out or messed up before we do Section Two then take the quiz. *pause* Oh, did I not mention the quiz? Sorry - when we're finished here, we're going to take a short quiz over this content. We'll all take the quiz silently and individually, but in each pair, you'll both receive the lower score of the two of you - so make sure your partner knows their stuff so they don't ruin your GPA and prevent any chance you have of getting into a good college someday. OK, TWO MINUTES..."
- "STOP. Some of you may have noticed that the article does not actually end at the bottom of the second page. There is, in fact, an entire other section which I've chosen to call 'SECTION TWO.' In just a moment, we're all going to be doing the same thing. We're all going to read SECTION TWO silently and individually. Some of you are very fast readers, and you may reach the end of SECTION TWO before time is called. That's great - if that happens, just go back to the top and start reading SECTION TWO again..." (You get the idea.)
- I don't actually give a 'quiz' at the end of this activity (usually). I've transitioned into summarizing activities ("Now, summarize this article in exactly 37 words without leaving out anything important...") or writing prompts or comparing/contrasting with other content, or whatever. Mostly I just find the idea of mutual accountability amusing - probably because I'm a terrible person.