

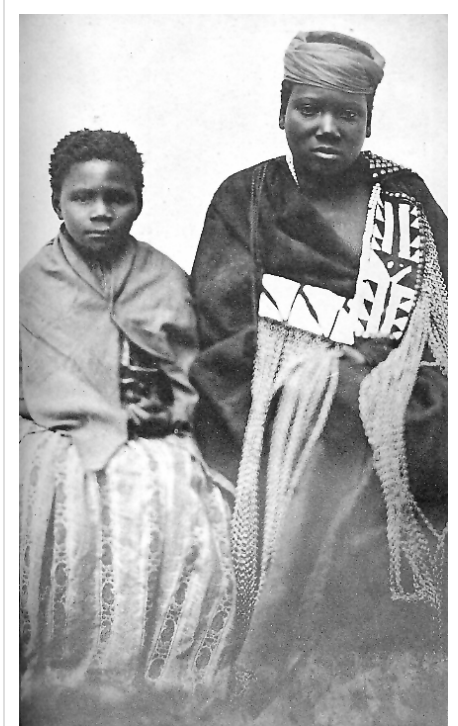
Nongqawuse

Nongqawuse (Xhosa pronunciation: [noŋq̣awuːse]; c. 1840s – 1898) was the Xhosa prophetess whose prophecies led to a millennialist movement that culminated in the Xhosa cattle-killing crisis of 1856–1857, in what is now the Eastern Cape Province of the Republic of South Africa.

Spiritual experience

In April or May 1856, the teenaged Nongqawuse and her friend Nombanda went to fetch water from a pool near the mouth of the Gxarha River. When she returned, Nongqawuse told her uncle and guardian Mhlakaza, a Xhosa spiritualist, that she had met the spirits of three of her ancestors.

She claimed that the spirits had told her that the Xhosa people should destroy their crops and kill their cattle, the source of their wealth as well as food. In return the spirits would sweep the British settlers into the sea.^[1] The Xhosa would be able to replenish the granaries, and fill the kraals with more beautiful and healthier cattle. During this time many Xhosa herds were plagued with "lung sickness", possibly introduced by European cattle. By 1856, many cattle had died, and the Xhosa believed that the deaths were caused by *ubuthi* - witchcraft.



Nongqawuse (right) with fellow prophetess, Nonkosi

Obeying the prophecy

Mhlakaza repeated the prophecy to Paramount Chief Sarhili. Sarhili ordered his followers to obey the prophecy, causing the cattle-killing movement to spread to an unstoppable point. The cattle-killing frenzy affected not only the Gcaleka, Sarhili's clan, but the whole of the Xhosa nation. Historians estimate that the Gcaleka killed between 300,000 and 400,000 head of cattle.

Aftermath

Nongqawuse predicted that the ancestors' promise would be fulfilled on February 18, 1857, when the sun would turn red. On that day the sun rose the same colour as every other day, and the prophecy was not realised. Initially, Nongqawuse's followers blamed those who had not obeyed her instructions, but they later turned against her.

In the aftermath of the crisis, the population of British Kaffraria dropped from 105,000 to fewer than 27,000 due to the resulting famine. Nongqawuse was arrested by the British authorities and imprisoned on Robben Island. After her release, she lived on a farm in the Alexandria district of the eastern Cape. She died in 1898.

Today, the valley where Nongqawuse met the spirits is still called *Intlambo kaNongqawuse* (Xhosa for *Valley of Nongqawuse*).

References

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