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Review Essays

The Xhosa Cattle Killing and the Politics of Memory

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Nongawuse was a young Xhosa girl who in 1856 had a vision in which a "new people" from overseas announced to her that the ancestors were preparing themselves to return to life with new cattle. In order to prepare for their arrival, Nongqawuse was told, all the Xhosa must burn their crops and slaughter their cattle. Despite reluctance in some quarters, and initial disappointments when the ancestors failed to arrive by the prescribed date, most Xhosas did destroy their livelihood. The ancestors failed to appear. A direful spectacle ensued.

Tens of thousands of people starved to death (probably about 40,000 [Peires, 1989:319]). The survivors, forced to seek assistance in the British Cape Colony, were driven into the service of the colonists. The colonial administration, under the leadership of Governor Sir George Grey (long reputed in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa for his humane treatment of "Native races"), brutally exploited the situation. The power of the Chiefs was broken and their lands seized for European settlement. In sum, the Cattle-Killing achieved clear domination for the British over a powerful African kingdom when eight costly frontier wars had been unable to.

Explaining the Cattle-Killing is an historian's nightmare and an hermeneutician's dream. Everyone who knows the story it seems has a way of telling it to further some more or less political objective. The initial version of the story propagated by the colonial authorities spoke of a "Chiefs' Plot" in which the events of the Cattle-Killing were part of a scheme to attack the British. The current apartheid version of the story speaks of the "National Suicide of the Xhosa." Xhosa-speaking people in South Africa

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today tend to see the events in terms of a conspiracy by the colonial authorities to annihilate the Xhosas.

The story of Nongqawuse is well known in South Africa. Jeff Peires (1990) has pointed out how stories about Nongqawuse's role differ according to the political moral being exemplified. Young black activists, for instance, have a way of telling the story that makes Nongqawuse a willing tool of the devious Governor Grey. A lesson for all collaborators who would treat with unjust power. More conservative older leaders often tell the tale to point to the dangers of listening to impassioned youths. A third variation stresses the role of missionaries to press home the point that black misfortunes are produced by whites. There are many other uses of the story, too. An officer of the Council of Churches for the region where the Cattle-Killing took place told me recently that he uses the story of Nongqawuse in combating the use of witchcraft.

Yet for the historian trying to fathom what really happened in this clash of divine inspiration and material reality, and why so many people followed the young girl's prophecy to their perdition, life is tough. The survivors left few records, although in 1888 a Xhosa historian, W. W. Gqoba, wrote two articles based on interviews with survivors. Xhosa memories of the Cattle-Killing, embodied in oral narratives, are subject to interpretive strategies along the lines mentioned above. Official records of the period are biased with their "Chiefs' Plot" and were written both with the intention of securing dominance in the Eastern Cape and justifying the actions of officials. Newspapers of the time can serve to locate some of the events and situate them in a wider context, but they are not much help in penetrating the "hidden history" of the happenings. All that is left is the private correspondence between the governor in Cape Town and his lieutenants in the field. And this, although apparently frank and honest, is structured in its own way to reveal and obscure the pattern of events.

Jeff Peires's *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–7* is the first full-length scholarly study of the extraordinary series of events that led to the self-destruction of the Xhosa and their final subordination to British colonialism. This is a remarkable book, and deserves a much wider readership than merely scholars of 19th-century South Africa. Because it is in so many ways exemplary of the best in historical scholarship, it can also serve as a useful springboard from which to launch some general questions about the writing of history in a context such as South Africa.

The Dead Will Arise adheres to the standard rhetorical strategy of modern historiography: revision and correction. A "myth," or commonly accepted story or explanation, is subjected to scrutiny, and revision, by

reference to rigorous and objective consideration of evidence. This "evidence" has an objective existence, independent of any subjective standpoint the historian might bring to it. Moreover, this evidence exists out of time; it bears the traces of causation. (And causation works in one direction through time; while interpretations of causation may differ, hence the need for evidence, the underlying, *real* causes do not change.)

In the Preface to *The Dead Will Arise*, Peires narrates the story of his odyssey through the evidence:

> I started this book in 1981, feeling somewhat skeptical about both "Grey's Plot" and the "Chiefs' Plot." Six years later, having examined all the evidence on the Cattle-Killing that I can find, I am more than ever convinced that there was no plot on either side. Moreover, I am convinced that we do not need a plot or a conspiracy to explain the Cattle-Killing movement. I believe, and I trust that this book will demonstrate, 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. I further believe, and I trust that the book will demonstrate this too, that the Cattle-Killing would not have been so fatal an error had it not been for the measures of Governor Grey, which first encouraged and then capitalized on the movement. (Peires, 1989:ix–x)

Peires's aim in this work, then, is no less than one of disproving the established ways in which Xhosa-speaking people represent their past: "Almost all Xhosa today hold Sir George Grey personally responsible for the Cattle-Killing" (Peires, 1989:316). Peires goes on to say that "this interpretation is very old and probably goes back as far as the Cattle-Killing period itself" (Peires, 1989:317). Moreover, he adds, it was believed by the greatest of all Xhosa historians, S. E. K. Mqhayi, and was repeated to Peires in 1975 by the leading Xhosa oral historian. So what kind of political act is it for Peires to place his interpretation in their way?

One way of approaching this question is to ask, Who are the "I" and the "we" this preface speaks of when it is written that "I am convinced that we do not need . . ."? The "I" is the disinterested, "skeptical" researcher who in pursuit of truth seeks out all sources of evidence; the Jeff behind J. B. Peires, Author. "We" are a similarly truth-oriented group committed to objective knowledge. We must be, for it is plainly apparent that some people definitely did, and apparently still do, need a conspiracy to make their stories work. Governor Grey was one. Young comrades making the story today seem to also. "We" are also "logical and rational," like the 19th-century Xhosas. But can "we" include the Xhosa-speaking South Africans of today? What if they continue to tell their stories of official villainy now unsupported by evidence? Can the comrades be refuted by reference to ISBN 0-85255-048-0?

Jeff Peires has himself addressed questions like these in a short article published subsequent to *The Dead Shall Arise* entitled "Suicide

or Genocide? Xhosa Perceptions of the Nongqawuse Catastrophe." His reflections in this article indicate a sense of unease about the practice of academic historiography. He describes his naivete while researching the book: "At the time when I was discovering all these things ["answers to many problems which had puzzled many previous historians"], it seemed to me that the root of the Xhosa problem was a lack of credible information" (1990:55). But when he shared his discoveries with Xhosa friends, he found them interested in little else than the role of Sir George Grey. Eventually, presumably after the book was completed, Peires came to the conclusion that "The Xhosa don't need white academics to give them a usable past . . .. The Xhosa already have a usable past, and they don't need an accumulation of detail to understand it better. Too much detail might in fact distract attention from the major issues" (1990:56).

It seems almost as if Peires is driven by his Xhosa friends to an acceptance of Nietzsche's (1983:63) apothegm that "the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people, and of a culture." Peires concludes that "South Africa cannot afford the luxury of an irrelevant history" (1990:56). The writing of history, in his view, is not "so much a matter of simplification as a matter of relevance." Relevance he understands as "the needs of the moment" (1990:56). But is this all there is to the dialogue that must ensue from the writing of other people's history? This sounds somewhat understated to me, coming as it does from someone who has searched the documentary records and comprehensively contradicted a central tenet of Xhosa popular memory.

In the above-quoted passage from the Preface to *The Dead Will Arise*, Peires contradicts himself in a way that, although seeming trivial, is significant for the whole argument of the book. Actions in the Xhosa Cattle-Killing, he tells us, were a "logical and rational, perhaps even an inevitable response" (1989:x). They were also a "fatal error" (1990:x). (In his subsequent article, he describes the belief in the prophecy as a "foolish mistake" [1990:55].) In some ways this contradiction sums up the predicament of writing such as this. On the one hand, we want to write history in a way that casts its subjects as agents. Thus they are also responsible for errors as well as successes. On the other hand, we want to demonstrate that the people about whom we write are subject to structures and forces that constrain the possibilities of their action. But in the case of the Cattle-Killing it strikes me as somewhat farfetched to claim that the event was in some sense a "logical and rational . . . response" to an underlying cause. As *The Dead Shall Arise* amply demonstrates, the Cattle-Killing was caused by a large number of people believing in a prophecy that did not

come to pass. Does this, however, mean that Nongqawuse's story was not true?

There is a strange page in this book. Preceding page 1, and following page xv, is a numberless leaf upon which is printed a two-stanza song in Xhosa with what we must presume is an English translation below it. This song is not referred to in the text of the book whose name it speaks. We are told nothing about this song: about who made it, when and why, or who knows it and sings it, how and why. All we are offered is an acknowledgment in the preface to Mrs. Beryl Woods, who "introduced" the song to the author. The lyrics printed in English run thus:

> Oh! Nongqawuse!
>
> The girl of Mhlakaza
> She killed our nation
> She told the people, she told them all
> That the dead will arise from their graves
> Bringing joy and bringing wealth
> But she was telling a lie

The numberless status of this page is aptly symbolic of the hole into which the voice that speaks this history of Nongqawuse has fallen in this text. What does this term "lie" really mean here? A modernist reading of the English text of the poem is simple: anyone who claims that ancestors can come back to life is a liar and should not be believed. I doubt very strongly, however, that this is what the composer of the song had in mind. And while Peires uses this song to open his book, its ambiguity is telling. For throughout the book he seems torn between the position that Nongqawuse's tale was a lie, or mistake, and the position that reveals a deep truth. This ambiguity is all the more telling given that many people in South Africa today share many of the beliefs that made Nongqawuse's tale credible in the first place.

According to Peires's account, the decision of the Xhosas to destroy their means of sustenance was part of an attempt to achieve salvation. Viewed in terms of instrumental, or means–ends, rationality, this was not very sensible (logical?). But the question remains as to whether the superimposition of this kind of means–ends reading of that history does justice to the ways in which those people understood their lives. For while there may be an internal logic to these events, it is precisely because the schemes of "rationality" of the Xhosas were different from ours, different from those of the European colonists, and the British state, that the catastrophe occurred at all. (For a survey of thinking on questions of culture and rationality, see Tambiah, 1990.)

The key to this difference, it seems to me, concerns the ways in which the Xhosa interpreted signs, both in nature and in social discourse

(cf. Todorov, 1987). One of the critical issues concerns ways of signifying the meaning of time, particularly the future and the domains of the not-yet-in-being. Nongqawuse's prophecy was a vision of the future as a return of the past embodied in the ancestors. Interpretation of this vision by historians, and interpretation of the contemporary interpretations, would require careful treatment of the question of social time. Peires's book is constantly concerned with this issue of signs, although it is never addressed explicitly. He constantly asks why people believed the prophecy of the girl Nongqawuse, particularly when signs that we would take as clear evidence (such as the prophesied events not happening when scheduled) failed to persuade people of the falsity of their faith. And the writer excels in making understandable actions that would otherwise strike us as clearly irrational.

Peires is making two different kinds of claims in his argument, reiterated throughout the book, regarding the rationality of Cattle-Killing. First is the claim that the events are understandable in our own terms, given some accurate knowledge of the context of their occurrence. That is to say that they can be explained by reference to structural factors. In this case the relevant structural and contextual factors seem to be the epidemic of lung sickness among cattle that had killed, or would have killed, up to 90% of the beasts regardless of Nongqawuse, the steady and increasing imposition of colonial rule throughout the region, and the dissemination of Christian beliefs. The second is that actions of the 19th-century Xhosas should be interpreted in the same terms that we would use to understand our own actions. This strategy of translation is a standard move in classic ethnographies. Evans-Pritchard (1976), for example, constantly reminds us that the peculiar witchcraft and oracular practices of the Zande people in the Sudan, when reframed in the language of an Oxford senior common room, can seem quite reasonable. (Note also that in this rhetorical strategy, the practice of estrangement, of exoticizing the "Natives," is essential to the translation.)

Underlying both of these claims is the rhetorical strategy of leading the reader to ask, if only implicitly, "would I have acted any differently under the circumstances?" That is to say, we are enjoined not to view the Cattle-Killing in the way of the colonialists and subsequent racists: as evidence of the stupidity and irrationality of a people that both explains and justifies their subordination by colonial power.[2] This is an undeniably important enterprise, and Peires pulls it off most skillfully. But it is an exercise

[2]For discussion of the ways in which notions of primitivity have served in legitimating domination in South Africa, particularly Levy-Bruhl's notion of "primitive mentality," see Ashforth (1990).

of translation only—of making understandable for us, in our terms, of an otherwise mysterious or absurd event. Peires, moreover, seeks to disprove established Xhosa accounts of the event. What would the story look like if Peires had gone one step further and constructed a text in which Xhosa ways of speaking of their past were placed in dialogue with the account produced according to Western academic conventions of research and writing premised upon equality rather than subordinating one kind of storying of the past to the truth of another?

Peires's book is a decidedly political intervention in discourse on the Cattle-Killing. It sets out to disprove both the "Chiefs' Plot" and the "Grey's Plot" interpretations of the event. By the most rigorous scholarly standards, his endeavor must be adjudged a success. But although this endeavor follows a perfectly standard procedure in Western historiography, that of disproving a "myth," in this case it is more problematic. I find myself somewhat uncomfortable with the notion that a good academic training and a period of archival research is enough to authorize a refutation of a whole people's understanding of their past.

As in all retellings of Nongqawuse's story, a political parable can be found in Peires's tale. In his version, a people is pressured by forces they little understand to believe a decisive solution to their problems is possible. Under the circumstance this is entirely understandable. A prophet then emerges who by skill or luck forges a remedy that meshes with most people's understandings. Waverers and disbelievers are pressured into conformity. Calamity ensues. Read in the context of apartheid (and even more strongly in what is coming to be called "postapartheid") South Africa, the message is clear: beware of bearers of simple solutions. The world is a complex and contradictory place: careful reasoning and testing of the evidence is required before acting on grand schemes of salvation.

There is no good reason, it seems to me, why any social past should be immune from scrutiny, by any person using any method. But the politics of representing that past in the present is a different matter. For representations of the past are inextricably linked to the politics of identity among social groups in the present, especially when pasts previously accessible only through oral traditions and memory are inscribed in authoritative written texts. In the case of South Africa the meaning of words such as "Xhosa" are subject to intense political struggle on all levels. No answer to the question "who are the . . . people?" (whether the missing qualifier by "Xhosa," "Zulu," "Jewish," or "we, the people of South Africa") can be answered without representation of a putative collective past. This is especially so when people are still oppressed as a result of the events at issue, and when a writer, despite admirable political sympathies, is

producing texts in the language and according to the epistemological rules and narrative traditions of the oppressors.

It seems to me that the very character of the Cattle-Killing as an event, a piece of the Past, might be very different from the perspective of the descendants of the cattle-killing Xhosa. Peires, along with most other historians heir to Western traditions of analytical civil history, has little difficulty putting temporal boundaries upon this event he names "the great cattle killing." It is unmistakably a thing of the past, an occurrence of the decade of the 1850s. Indeed, for the purposes of writing a book, the years that as a result of the inspiration of a 6th-century abbot we reckon on being one thousand eight hundred and fifty, and one thousand eight hundred and sixty years after the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ are very handy for organizing the material on a South African tragedy. And the dead are dead.

It is possible, however, to imagine that for people whose ancestors are always with them, and whose present lives are not only shaped by the burden of their ancestors' doings but are lived in a continuing dialogue with preceding generations, the nature of happenings four or five generations previous might not just be things of the disembodied past. Further, it might be the case that stories about those acts of the ancestors do not follow the same sorts of evidentiary rules as the professional historian's texts. It might even be that the different stories of popular memory and historian's text are about things, identities in the present as opposed to events in the past for instance. Thus, the "opportunity of learning from the mistakes of the past," which Peires acclaims as "history's greatest gift," may not be an unmixed blessing (317).

The writing of history effects a rupture of the present from the past. Encoding the past in a written narrative also serves to create an ordered patterning of events linked through a presumed flow of time. (For discussion of issues concerning historical narrative and narrativity, see White, 1978 and 1987, and de Certeau, 1988). Yet what happens when such an encoding is applied to, or imposed upon, the experiences of people who inhabit a different ontological space, a different way of being in time (Mbiti, 1989)? What happens when the experiences of people with radically different ways of understanding their relationship with the past, the relationship of "their" past to "our" present, and radically different ways of speaking of causation, are translated (and transcribed) into the frameworks of Western modern understandings of being and doing (see Geertz, 1973; Block, 1977; Peel, 1984)? It seems to me that these are fundamental questions connecting the writing of history with the politics of memory constitutive of social identities, and we need to find ways of writing the past that do not subordinate one form of being to another. At the same time,

however, it is essential, both from the point of view of intellectual rigor as well as commitment to liberatory projects, to analyze the cultural forms and differences in schemes of rationality that make domination and state formation possible.

Writers of South African social history have generally not agonized over questions of writing and otherness in the ways Western anthropologists have in recent decades. (See, for examples, Cohn, 1980, 1981; Fabian, 1983; Clifford and Marcus, 1986.) Yet the work of these scholars has been very much about writing the history of "people without history," and their politics both in writing and other action have been strongly committed to empowering the disenfranchised in the present through representing their past as a history of rational agency. This history has been written both against structuralist representations of Africans as passive bearers of structures of exploitation and racist versions of a history of progress premised upon notions of African backwardness.

Over the past two decades South African historiography has taken on a distinctive new image. This historiography, emanating in large part from the work of scholars associated with the History Workshop Group at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, with which Jeff Peires is associated, has justifiably come to occupy a dominant place in the writing of South African social history. The Johannesburg History Workshop developed out of the debates in Western Marxism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and has been strongly influenced by work in both English and American social history. The writers in this radical tradition — and their work is sufficiently established now to be named a "tradition" — have produced a great deal of work that has both revised previous conventional views of South Africa's history and provided a rich empirical counter to the tendency to easy theoretical generalization (e.g., Bozzoli, 1987; Bonner *et al.*, 1989).

An excellent introduction to, and road map through, this burgeoning literature in South African historical studies can be found in the Winter 1990 special issue of the *Radical History Review* (Bozzoli and Delius, 1990) entitled "History from South Africa."[3] Although the volume is largely devoted to discussion of recent South African historiography, it has a significance reaching beyond the confines of those interested solely in the details of South African history. For the case of South Africa provides fertile ground for investigation of the complex interactions between intellectuals and political movements, and the struggles over representations of the past in relation to the struggles over the legitimacy of power in the present. The volume thus provides excellent material for

[3]This volume will be republished as a book in 1991.

consideration by those interested in questions of historiography and the politics of memory.

The context in which South African writing takes place is far from neutral. Since the 1950s, through the system of Bantu Education, a pernicious brew has been served to young black South Africans in the guise of history. The representations of the past embodied in Bantu Education, to say nothing of other official and semiofficial histories, were designed to buttress white domination and undoubtedly served to entrench ignorance (see the speech on the Bantu Education Bill of 1954 in Verwoerd, 1966). In more recent years this situation has been changing somewhat as some educationalists have struggled to develop new curricula and as some of the work of the revisionist historians has filtered through to the schools (Walker, 1990:193–308).[4] The production of stories about the past, then, that can empower people in changing the structure of domination in their present is of the utmost importance in the struggle against apartheid. And the History Workshop has been at the forefront of this work, both in scholarly research and in projects concerned with popularizing that research and working with political and trade union organizations.

In the above discussion of Peires's work, I have tried to raise questions that trouble my own research on matters South African and that might be of more general concern in the writing of social history. Principal among these is the problem of writing a history of, and presumably for, people whose past lies in the domains of orality (Ong, 1982; Goody, 1986, 1987). This is the problem of writing a history of a process of colonial conquest in the terms and languages of the victors, which does not simply replicate in historiographical discourse the imperial encounter by translating the colonized people's experience into the terms of dominant discourses.

This poses a very difficult problem for historians who remain wedded to the idea that scholarly standards of truth and established evidentiary procedures alone determine the form, narrative or otherwise, of the written product of their labors. For it requires centering the text around the subjectivity of the author and the dialogue with the people who are being written of. Such a centering might be one way of embracing the essential ambiguity of the encounter that lies at the heart of the writing: the ambiguity of writing about domination in a context where the power to encode the past in writing is itself both a product of domination and form of domination.

[4]For general discussion of history teaching in South Africa, see Walker (1990:198–308).

The only way out of this dilemma of writing the people into history, it seems to me, is to structure historiography in dialogue. By this I do not mean a renewal of a neo-Platonism, but a recognition that writing other people's history in our terms alone is an act of unequal exchange, or exploitation. The dialogue I have in mind, then, is one in which other ways of storying the past are not just treated as sources of data and clues for a true (dissertation style?) written history, but are presumed to have an authority that needs to be interpreted in its own terms and from which we might have much to learn. This in turn would require rupturing the calm authority bestowed upon historical writing by documentary sources.

In other words, such a historical project would not be one of "giving a voice," but rather of listening to the voices that are there and upon which social history depends, and learning from them, not just about them. And rather than orchestrate these voices into symphony, such writing would situate itself amid the cacophony of voices speaking of difference and revel in the myriad performances of ways of being different from the Western figure of the Rational Man.

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