

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN LITERATURE IX: THE TALE OF NONGQAWUSE

DR. A. C. JORDAN

Lecturer in Bantu Languages, University of Cape Town.

NONGQAWUSE is the name of the girl generally held responsible for the "National Suicide of the Xhosa People" in 1856-7. The story of her meeting with the "spirits of warriors long dead", of their enjoining her to tell the chiefs and the people to destroy all their livestock and food-stores, of the carrying out of this injunction, and of the consequent famine and deaths: all this is told in the records of missionaries and colonial officials who were working amongst the Xhosa when these things happened. And all those who are familiar with South African history know it either directly from these records or from ordinary history books. Yet very few people know that there is an account of this incident, written by an African who was living at this time, to be found in Rubusana's anthology, *Zemk' linkomo*, and that the author is no other than William W. Gqoba, the historian-poet who has figured so often already in this series.

Gqoba was born in 1840, so that at the climax of this calamity he was seventeen years old. At that age, a boy in African primitive society has many social responsibilities, and though he may not be a direct participant in tribal councils, he is very well informed as to what takes place there. With its details of people's names, clan- and place-names, Gqoba's account sounds very authentic, and for this reason we propose to give a faithful translation of its Xhosa original, as the finest of the renderings of a story that still lives in the emotions and thoughts of the Xhosa people today. We adhere to his own spelling of the Xhosa names, many of which are well-known surnames at the present time, spelt as they were spelt by him:—

"THE CAUSE OF THE CATTLE-KILLING AT THE NONGQAWUSE PERIOD"¹

(by W. W. G.)

"It so happened that in the Thenjini region of Gcalekaland, in the ward of headman Mnzabele, in the year 1856, two girls went out to the lands to keep the birds away from the corn. One was named Nongqause, daughter of Mhlakaza, and the other the daughter of a sister of Mhlakaza's. Near a river known as the Kamanga two men approached them and said, "*Convey our greetings to your people, and tell them we are So-and-So and So-and-So*" (giving their names). And the names by which they called themselves turned out to be the names of people who were known to have died long ago. They went on to say: "*You are to tell the people that the whole community is about to rise again from*

¹*Zemk' lin komo*, pp. 218-225

the dead. Then go on to say to them that all the cattle living now must be slaughtered, for they are reared with defiled hands, as the people handle witchcraft. Say to them there must be no ploughing of lands, rather must the people dig deep pits (granaries), erect new huts, set up wide, strongly built cattlefolds, make milksacks, and weave doors from buka roots. The people must give up witchcraft on their own, not waiting until they are exposed by the witchdoctors. You are to tell them that these are the words of their chiefs—the words of Napakade (Forever), the son of Sifubasibanzi (the Broad-chested).”

“On reaching home the girls reported this, but no one would listen to them. Everybody ridiculed them instead. On the following day they went again to keep the birds away from the corn, and after some time, these men appeared again and asked if the girls had told the people at home, and what the people had said in reply. The girls reported that their message had simply been a thing of laughter, no one believing them. “The people simply said we were telling stories”. This happened in Gcalekaland, near the mouth of the Gxara.

“The men then said, ‘Say to the elders that they are to call all the chiefs together from Gcaleka’s, Tato’s, Ngqika’s and from the Gqunukhwebe, and they must tell this news to them.’

“On the following morning, Mhlakaza and some other men went to the lands, but these strangers did not reveal themselves. They were heard without being seen. It was only Nongqause and the other girl who heard them, and it was Nongqause who interpreted what was being said by the spirits. They said, ‘Tell those men to go and call the chiefs and bring them here. Only then shall we reveal ourselves.’

“Some men then went to Rili’s royal place at the Hohita, and there the strange news was related by Mhlakaza’s daughter. Then Rili sent out Botomani, a minor chief, to go and verify this thing. Botomani went, but the strangers did not reveal themselves. Then Rili sent messengers to tell the chiefs that there were people who had been heard by Mhlakaza’s daughter to say all the chiefs must be called together to meet the chief Napakade, son of Sifubasibanzi, near the mouth of the Gxara.

“From Tato’s came Maramnco, son of Fadana, accompanied by Shwele, son of Zizi. From the Ndungwanas came Dlulaze, son of Qweshu, related to Ndarala. From the Tshatshus came Mpeke, son of Mfeneni. From the Ngqika section came Namba, great son of Maqoma. From the Gcaleka section came Rili and Lindinxiwa, sons of Hintsa, together with Ngubo, son of

Mlashe, and Nxiti, son of Lutshaba. From the Ndlambes came Nowawe, son of Ndlambe. From the Gqunukhwebe came Dilima, son of Pato. All these men made their way to the home of Mhlakaza near the Gxara.

“On arriving there, they were told that Nongqause desired that the numbers to go to the Gxara be reduced, and that those who were to go must be mostly chiefs. This in truth was done.

“As the people were rather fearful, it happened that as they drew near the River Kamanga, their throats went dry, and they felt thirsty. Meanwhile Nongqause, beautifully painted with red ochre, led the way. Then those who were thirsty were heard to say, ‘Is one who is thirsty allowed to drink?’

“Nongqause replied, ‘He who does not practise witchcraft may drink without fear.’

“Thereupon Dilima, hero-son of Pato, removed his kaross and stooped to drink. Then one by one the other men of *Nomagwayi wase Mbo*² followed suit.”

THE VISION

“Just at this time, there was a tremendous crash of big boulders breaking loose from the cliffs overlooking the headwaters of the River Kamanga, whereupon the men gazed at one another wondering, for they were seized with fear. It seemed as if some unknown thing on the cliffs was going to burst into flame.

“While they stood wondering, the girl was heard saying, ‘Just cast your eyes in the direction of the sea’.

“And when they looked intently at the waters of the sea, it seemed as if there were people there in truth, and there were sounds as if bulls were bellowing, and oxen too. There was a huge, formless black object that came and went, came and went, and finally vanished over the crests of the waves of the sea.

“Then it was that all the people began to believe.

“The army in the sea never came out to meet the chiefs, and even what they said was not heard by any one besides Nongqause. After it had vanished, she said, ‘*The Chiefs yonder say you are to return to your homes and slaughter all your cattle and, in order that the resurrection may hasten, you are not to rear any cattle. You are not to plough your lands, but make big new pits (granaries), and these you will suddenly find full of corn. Erect new huts and make many doors. Shut yourselves in your huts, because on the eighth day, when the*

²The Xhosa people's praise-name.

community returns in the company of Napakade, son of Sifubasibanzi, all the beasts on the land and in the rivers, and all the snakes will be roaming the land. You are also to take all the old corn out of the pits and throw it away. In order to survive, you are to use many doors to close each hut, fasten every door tightly, and abstain from witchcraft.'

"She went on to say that there was another chief, mounted on a grey horse. His name was Grey, otherwise known as Satan. All those who did not slaughter their cattle would become the subjects of the chief named Satan, and such people would not see the glory of our own chief, Napakade, son of Sifubasibanzi.

"That then was the cause of the cattle-killing of 1856 to 1857.

"In the midst of this, there appeared another young girl from the house of Nkwitshi of the Kwemta clan, in the Ndlambe section near the Mpongo. Her name was Nonkosi. The message of this girl was one with Nongqause's. She used to lead the people to a pond there at the Mpongo, and they used to see *abakweta* dancing on the surface of the water, and they thought that they heard the thudding of the ox-hide, accompanied by a song, to which the *bakweta*³ danced. Truly, the people were so deluded that they went as far as to claim that they had seen the horns of cattle, heard the lowing of milk-cows, the barking of dogs, and the songs of the herdsmen at milking-time.

THE ORDERS OF THE CHIEFS

"On reaching their homes, the chiefs assembled their subjects and made known the news of the ancestors who were expected to return to life, fresh and strong, of the promised coming-to-life-again of the cattle they were about to slaughter and of those that they had slaughtered long ago.

"Nongqause had said that anyone who, on slaughtering his ox, decided to dispose of its carcass by barter, should nevertheless engage its soul, in order that on its coming back to life it should be his property. And she had said that all those who did not slaughter their cattle would be carried by a fierce hurricane and thrown into the sea to drown and die.

"The community was split in two. One section believed that the resurrection of the people would come some day, but not that of the cattle. Thereupon, father fell out with son, brother with brother, chief with subjects, relative with relative. Two names emerged to distinguish the two groups. One group was

³Boys at "initiation school", whose bodies are painted with white clay. Their spectacular dance (*umshilo*) is accompanied by a rhythmic beating of dried ox-hides and singing by women.

named *ama Tamba* (the Submissive), that is, Nongqause's converts. The other was called *amaGogotya* (the Unyielding), that is, those who were stubborn and would not kill their cattle. So some slaughtered their cattle, and others did not.

THE EIGHTH DAY

“As the killing of the cattle went on, those who had slaughtered hurriedly for fear of being smelt out began to starve and had to live by stealing the livestock of others. Then everybody looked forward to the eighth day. It was the day on which the sun was expected to rise red, and to set again in the sky. Then there would follow great darkness, during which the people would shut themselves in their huts. Then the dead would rise and return to their homes, and then the light of day would come again.

“On that day the sun rose as usual. Some people had washed their eyes with sea-water at the mouth of the Buffalo. Some peered outside through little apertures in their huts, while those who had never believed went about their daily outdoor tasks. Nothing happened. The sun did not set, no dead person came back to life, and not one of the things that had been predicted came to pass.

“Such then was the Nongqause catastrophe. The people died of hunger and disease in large numbers. Thus it was that whenever thereafter a person said an unbelievable thing, those who heard him said, ‘You are telling a Nongqause tale’.”