

## African Responses to European Intrusion

Wallace G. Mills Hist. 316 20 African Responses

- the readings in *Historical Problems of Imperial Africa* Problem II, pp. 57-100 discuss issues of resistance and collaboration.

- with white intrusion, Africans were faced with the necessity of choosing how to respond. The Xhosa and then the other peoples of South Africa faced these dilemmas first beginning late in the 18th C. Most Africans outside of South Africa were confronted only late in the 19th C; however, in this later period because of the frenzy of the Scramble, intrusion was often sudden, unexpected and overwhelming. In many cases, it must have been difficult for Africans to understand what was happening. With little knowledge of the outside world or of the forces with whom they were contending, they were at a severe disadvantage. As a result, some African responses were undoubtedly naive.

- e.g., one thinks of Africans who were approached by someone with a treaty of 'friendship' and agreeing to sign (being illiterate and not knowing what was going on in the scramble, what meaning could these pieces of paper have?).

- however, this depiction of the 'primitive, simple savages' is frequently overdone. Many Africans were shrewd and news of what had happened to other African peoples often reached Africans before the white intruders did. To a considerable extent, the power disparities, plus the mania and obsessions of European states to acquire territories meant that on some levels African responses were largely irrelevant because subjugation took place regardless of what Africans did or did not do. It can be argued that the problem faced by Africans was analogous to that faced by Neville Chamberlain and others in the confrontation with Hitler and the fascist leaders. In the face of madness, how does one realise that reasonableness and logical approaches may make things worse?

- of course, Africans did not know that before hand and many obviously had hopes of staving off conquest.

**One warning:** during the 1960s there was a vogue among many graduate students to simplify the reactions; in crude terms, they talked about 'resistors' and 'collaborators'. 'Resistors' were heroic while 'collaborators' were pusillanimous, craven or worse, traitors. This is bringing World War 2 categories into Africa; even in Europe, the categories over-simplify. The categories are even less appropriate in Africa; in addition to over-simplifying, their use is arrogant, judgmental and supercilious; people making such judgments believe that they are superior.

## Possible Responses

- we can categorise responses under 3 headings:

1. **Resistance** (i.e., war and military resistance); sometimes this included attempts to draw upon supernatural solutions to avoid or to undo conquest.
2. **Acquiescence**—often this meant trying to negotiate the best terms possible;
3. **Alliance**—sometimes it was possible to join with the Europeans in conquest of neighbours (often traditional enemies with whom they had long been in conflict anyway).

- in practice, there was a 4th situation in which boundaries were drawn in Europe which made Africans part of a colony or protectorate without Africans being informed or involved in any way. In some of these cases, it was many years (even decades) before the local population felt any significant impact. It was at that time that they would confront the decisions involved in the 3 responses noted; that is why resistance sometimes emerged as 'rebellion' many years after.

- e.g., parts of the southern Sudan were not significantly affected by colonial government until the 1920s and 30s.

- circumstances could vary considerably and these could affect the choices Africans had or determine whether or not they had any real choices:

- Were there white settlers involved? White settlers wanted land, and once they got that, they wanted labour. They expected and were determined to take both from Africans. Choices were very limited when white settlers were moving in.
- Was there large scale intrusion and disruption immediately? Most of the partition of Africa was carried out in conference halls and foreign offices of Europe; only later did control become effective and Africans begin to feel direct impacts. As noted above, this could delay responses for a long time.
- What were the internal conditions and relations in African society? A number of conquest states were not strongly unified; if there were strong divisions in society, one side might welcome the intruders. Alternately, if two African societies had been in long term conflict, the one might attempt to get the intruders as allies against their enemies. Other African societies might not have a centralised government or only be organised on a small scale; in these cases, there might not be anyone initially to organise resistance.

- Were there advisors from outside who might influence the response? Most usually, these would be missionaries, but traders and adventurers increasingly made their way into Africa during the scramble. These outside advisers could have a significant influence on how African polities reacted.

- also, groups could change from one category to another. A group might acquiesce or even join an alliance with Europeans; then, when the reality of white domination began to be felt, it might turn to resistance.

### **The Xhosa**

- the Xhosa were interacting with and responding to white intrusion for over 100 years; the annexation and subordination of the southern Nguni was not completed until 1894 with the annexation of the Mpondo and Pondoland in the eastern Transkei. [Rhodes called the paramount chief, Sigcawu, and all his leading indunas to a big meeting. He took them out to a corn field where a machine gun had been set up. After the machine gun had mowed down the corn, Rhodes turned to the Mpondo and said, "That's what will happen to you if you make any trouble."] Examining the Xhosa can give a good indication of the range of responses and of the complexities involved.

- initially, the Xhosa did not think whites (to their eyes, the skins of Europeans were pink or reddish) as significantly different from themselves and reacted that way; they would trade, skirmish and fight, make alliances and so on. It is important to note that internal and local politics often had a big influence on African reactions. In local disputes and rivalries, the appearance of whites offered the prospect of allies and the opportunity to achieve perhaps a decisive advantage in their local rivalries. For example, Ngqika, the paramount chief of the Rharhabe clans west of the Kei River, was in sharp conflict with his uncle, Ndlambe, who had been regent during Ngqika's minority; Ndlambe had refused to give up power when Ngqika came of age. The society had split and fought a sharp war in which Ngqika's forces had been defeated. Hoping to recover his authority over Ndlambe and the other clans, Ngqika allied himself with the British in 1812 in a war against his uncle and the other clans who were defying his authority.

- for Europeans, these rivalries were useful and provided opportunities for so-called 'divide and conquer' techniques; however, it is well to keep in mind that usually Europeans did not create the divisions, even if they did frequently exploit and use them.

- but this throws light on some of the African responses. If one's traditional rival or enemy did enter some alliance which resulted in whites giving their assistance, an African group might have no choice but to fight the whites; on their own, they might have been just as willing to ally with the whites. Thus, those who resisted and those who cooperated with the whites may have been determined by accident of which side the whites allied with on their arrival.

- never, in the 100 years of wars, were the Xhosa united. However, with the coming of the British, the Xhosa slowly awakened to the danger. They began to be aware that military resistance needed to be more coordinated; in the 5th war (1819-20) the clans west of the Kei River were pretty well united. In the next 3 wars (6th—1835-36, 7th—1846-48, and 8th—1852-54) the Xhosa east of the Kei (the Gcaleka) increasingly joined or were drawn in.

- also, the attempts to get supernatural assistance became more urgent with successive defeats and as desperation grew.

### **Ntsikana**

- 2 prophets emerged among the Xhosa in the 2nd decade of the 19th C; these prophets articulated the choices open to the Xhosa. Even though his contact with missionaries was very limited, Ntsikana became a Christian, and especially through his hymns, adapted Christianity to the cosmology and thought patterns of the Xhosa. He firmly rejected military resistance, but his following was very small. Moreover, his son as well as his most important follower, Soga, eventually joined in one of the later wars.

### **Nxele**

- the 2nd prophet was Nxele (usually named Makanda in the older histories). He too had an early interest in Christianity and pursued this extensively. At one time, he seems to have wanted to become a preacher, but he was turned down. Perhaps he was already showing deviations in his interpretation of Christianity. Soon, he started down the road of the igqira (diviner) and later war doctor but still hoping to incorporate elements and power of Christianity.

- he began to claim visions and a relationship (brother) to Christ. Finally, he announced a resurrection on the beach near East London on a specific day; a large crowd gathered and nothing happened. This did not unduly diminish his rising career. He claimed that some people had not done what he had decreed and had failed to believe; that was why nothing had happened. The idea of a resurrection was totally new to Xhosa cosmology and religion; many missionaries reported intense interest from Africans when preaching on this subject. Ever pragmatic, Africans usually wanted to know when this was going to happen because they wanted to see some of their dead relatives. This was an idea to which they returned subsequently.

- after that point, Nxele went into reaction against Christianity and began preaching about the dangers posed by whites and the need to drive them out.

- he called for and became the main military leader in the attack on Grahamstown in 1819, an attack that came very close to succeeding. As a war doctor, he claimed to have supernatural powers to doctor the warriors so that the white man's bullets would

turn into water. This was not a big step from claiming to be able to deflect spears, to make warriors hard to see or even invisible etc. as war doctors traditionally did. Nevertheless, in the war, the Xhosa were defeated and Nxele surrendered in hopes that this would lessen the harshness with which the Xhosa were treated by the British.

- the main point is that the Xhosa were beginning to recognise the scope of the threat and to recognise that they would need much more extensive 'power' and 'magic' than ever before. Mlanjeni, another war doctor, in the 1846-48 war claimed to possess similar powers to those of Nxele.

- by the end of the 8th war in 1850-53, these successive defeats and disasters had greatly increased the desperation and set the stage for another alternative; what the Xhosa turned to was a spectacular supernatural solution—specifically, the Cattle-killing of 1856-57.

### **XHOSA CATTLE-KILLING**

This 'national suicide' was largely a consequence of the Xhosa (Kaffir) wars. The wars in 1846-7 and 1850-53 had been devastating: cattle losses were enormous, substantial amounts of land were taken and starvation had been widespread as a result of British tactics of destroying all food. News of the Crimean War and of the death of former Governor Cathcart led to the rumour that the Russians, who were said to be Black people, were coming to drive out the whites. In 1856, lung sickness in cattle arrived to kill high proportions of remaining Xhosa cattle. It was in this milieu in April 1856 in the territory of the Gcaleka paramount Sarhili ('Kreli') just east of the Kei River that fifteen year old Nongqawuse claimed that she spoke with strangers believed to be messengers from the ancestors. The messages were interpreted and supplemented by her uncle, a famous diviner ('witch doctor') Mhlakaza. Because they were polluted, the strangers ordered that all cattle be killed, that all stored grain should be destroyed, that no grain should be planted and that everyone should purge themselves of all charms and witchcraft. On the other hand, the Xhosa were to build new huts, new grain storage pits and new larger cattle enclosures. If all this were done, then at a specific date in the future, there would be a great resurrection. Not only would the dead arise, but also numberless, fat cattle would appear, the grain pits would be filled, old people and infirm people would become young and well. An entirely new existence of abundance—a millennium—would replace the impoverishment. Whites would disappear or at least the former Xhosa political and social system would be restored.

Similar prophecies had become more common in the despair being experienced by the Xhosa. However, this movement gained importance when Sarhili, who was also paramount chief of all Xhosa, accepted it as genuine. The movement spread rapidly although in the initial stages, some Xhosa sold rather than killed their cattle; however, it divided Xhosa society into believers and unbelievers. Beginning in 1856, a number of dates were set, being postponed when nothing happened. The failures were attributed

to selling rather than killing of the cattle or to the lack of participation of the unbelievers. Enormous pressure, even violence to the point of civil war, began to be exerted on the unbelievers (to the believers, non-participation was an act of treason against Xhosa society). In spite of the pressure, many Xhosa never joined. The continued spread of the cattle sickness seemed confirmation of the diagnosis and left many feeling that they had little to lose. Failures drove the frenzy for slaughtering as a necessary prerequisite for the resurrection.

The final date set—'the great disappointment'—was 16 February 1857 by which time little food was left in Xhosaland. Within days, starvation became widespread. During the next weeks and months, starvation and disease ravaged the population. An estimated 40,000 people (i.e., about 38%) died in British Kaffraria alone and about as many made their way into the Cape Colony, begging for food and willing to work for food only. Losses among the Xhosa and Thembu in the Transkei were probably of a similar magnitude. Some whites, including a few officials, tried to help, but for other whites it was a welcome destruction of an enemy. The governor, Sir George Grey, forced additional people into the migration and seized large amounts of Xhosa land for white settlers. Also, his assimilation policies involved destroying the power of the chiefs; the disaster largely accomplished that and Grey moved ruthlessly to complete the task. In fact, Xhosa social and political institutions as well as faith in traditional religion and society were damaged beyond repair, even though, after some recovery, the Xhosa did fight another war in 1877-78. Another significant effect emerged. Christian mission work had only modest success to that point; in its wake, mass conversion to Christianity began in the 1860s.

Some whites, especially Grey, argued that the movement was a plot of the chiefs who wanted to make their people desperate in order to launch a war to the finish against the whites. Many whites were paranoid, including Grey, but the idea of a great conspiracy was also very useful to Grey in justifying the harsh and drastic measures he was implementing. In fact, no shred of evidence supports the conspiracy theory. The chiefs were as much believers as the people.

The above is my article in James S Olson and Robert Shadle, eds. ***Historical Dictionary of the British Empire***, vol. 2 (1996), pp.1172-3.

- there was a mixture of Christian and Xhosan religious ideas although it should be emphasised that the movement was rooted in Xhosa culture with Christian ideas being brought in to reinforce and extend the Xhosa foundation.

- e.g., the idea of purification to end ritual impurity and of sacrifice to please the ancestors were at the heart of Xhosa religion and beliefs; similar beliefs are very

prominent in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament referring to ancient Hebrew beliefs.

- the idea of sacrificing all cattle and indeed the irremediable pollution of the cattle was unprecedented and a very great expansion of Xhosa religious notions. Thus, while Christianity perhaps reinforced some Xhosa ideas, it was more likely the extreme desperation of the Xhosa that drove them to this length. Moreover, the lung sickness undoubtedly reinforced the idea that the cattle were irrevocably polluted. Districts with the earliest and/or most severe incidence of the disease tended to have higher rates of 'believers' than less affected areas.

- on the other hand, the idea of a resurrection of the dead was completely outside Xhosa religious beliefs, but it was an idea with great appeal. Nxele had tried to appropriate the idea in 1817.

- recall that Xhosa generally tended to see the outcome of political and military events as determined by supernatural forces; thus, it is not surprising that they should develop such a diagnosis.

- also, although the remedy they sought (the killing of all the cattle, etc.) is extreme, it is not the only response of this kind by peoples being threatened and displaced by invading people and culture. Among Amerindian plains peoples in the late 19th C in North America, there was the Ghost Dance. The so-called Cargo Cults in south-east Asia in the wake of World War 2 are also cited as examples.

- the belief that the Russians would come to help drive out the British, which was also current during the time of the cattle-killing, is especially similar to the Cargo Cults. Also, just after World War 1, there were similar rumours in parts of the Transkei that African Americans were coming to liberate the Africans; this seems to have been what filtered to South Africa about Marcus Garvey's 'Back to Africa' movement and its slogan of 'Africa for the Africans'. (We shall be discussing Garvey and his movement in History 2317.)

### Religion in other cases

- religion was used in other ways as well; in at least 2 cases, religion was used to bridge traditional rivalries in a concerted effort to rebel against European domination. Military resistance was not always immediate or it could be revived a bit later.

- in Southern Rhodesia, [Leander Starr Jameson](#), as Administrator of Rhodes' BSA Company government, in starting a war against the Ndebele in 1893, had claimed to be freeing the Shona from the domination and harassment of the Ndebele. Nevertheless, in 1896 there was a concerted uprising by both the Ndebele and the Shona.

- much of this coordinated action was made possible by a small local cult whose leaders (some of them women) were able to bring about cooperation between the two traditional enemies.

- in German East Africa, [the Maji-Maji rebellion](#) in 1905-07 was also made possible by another cult in that area. That cult enabled several traditional enemies to cooperate. This rebellion was not only costly but also very embarrassing to the German government following in the wake of the international uproar about administration and atrocities in the Leopold's Congo Free State.

### **Accommodation and Cooperation**

- some societies or groups within society tried to reach accommodation with the intruders; the British were more open to this than any other European colonialists.

1. sometimes, subordinate groups tried to take advantage of white intrusion to get some advantages.

### **Mfengu**

- these were Nguni refugees from Shaka who had migrated to the Transkei and eastern Cape Colony; they had settled among the Xhosa as subordinate clients (not slaves as was charged by some missionaries). In the Anglo-Xhosa Wars, most of them became allies of the British. In that role, they were very useful to the British. The Xhosa soon learned that in the wooded areas with steep ravines, etc., the advantages of guns and horses were greatly reduced. Whites caught in these areas suffered significant casualties. Whites, especially the local white settler forces, were not eager to go in to root out the Xhosa warriors. It was the Mfengu who often bore the brunt of this fighting.

- for the Mfengu, the alliance brought rewards. They were given some of the land and the cattle taken from the Xhosa. However, the hostilities between Xhosa and Mfengu which these actions engendered were also long lived, even to the present.

2. sometimes, it was the dominant minority which tried to ally with the intruding whites:
  - in Barotseland (in western Zambia on the upper Zambesi River), the king Lewanika, who was advised by a French missionary named Coillard, welcomed Rhodes' agents when they arrived in the area. Lewanika hoped to get protection from Ndebele raids, but also sought, with some success,

recognition of claims to overlordship of other peoples in the area.

- in northern Nigeria, this approach was adopted with many of the emirates and sultanates. In these states, there were Islamic minorities dominating and ruling the majorities of traditionalists and different peoples.

- accommodation had advantages for both the British and for the minority classes.

- for the British, it minimised resistance and it also minimised administrative responsibilities in the early stages because the existing social and political structures were maintained; except for a couple of British 'advisors', the existing emirs, sultans and officials were maintained in office. The existing legal and taxation systems were retained. It just involved superimposing the Queen on the top of the feudal-like structure that already existed; conceptually, the change was not very significant. Moreover, many of the conservative, military officers involved in the early administration preferred hierarchical social and political structures such as these states had.
- the ruling elites avoided being conquered and deposed. Also, their position and power were in fact confirmed and guaranteed. In many polities there had been continual tension trying to maintain power and control against efforts on the other side to reduce that control. Now, the British supported and maintained the elite in power.
- this kind of arrangement was the ideal for 'indirect rule' which became the British model for colonial government in Africa in the 20th C. As time went on, the system produced many strains; the British wanted to facilitate 'development' and introduce more modern approaches to administration and taxation. These required western educated people; the traditional elites, especially Islamic ones, were sometimes slow to respond to western education (especially when the latter was often provided by Christian missionaries). Thus, the British began to bring outsiders into government, often from the subordinate majority group and to introduce significant change. We shall examine this in Hist. 2317, but it should be noted here; however, accommodation did have attractions and advantages initially.

[However, if the ruling elites were not receptive or there were other complications, the British did help to overthrow the elite in some cases.]

### 3. Accommodation for protection

- the dispersion of Trekboers into the high veld areas posed serious threats to all

the African peoples in area and most were crushed sooner or later. Thus, some peoples on the periphery of the Trekboer tide had a rather stark set of options as continued independence was more or less eliminated as an option.

- if they wanted to avoid being subject to whatever treatment the Boers would mete out or even if they wished to avoid control by the Cape Colony, then coming under direct British control was the only possibility. The British were very reluctant to assume direct control and this status was difficult to achieve, as we saw with Moshoeshoe and the Basotho.

- the advantage was that British governments wanted to avoid spending money so that they agreed only if there was to be no cost; this meant limiting the colonial administration to a handful of white officials (initially in Basutoland in 1884, there were only four). This meant that most of the administration and governing had to be done by Africans with the handful of white officials acting as advisors and using the African system of government and law. This was how things were organised in Bechuanaland as well as Basutoland.

#### 4. Accommodation and sub-imperialism

##### Buganda

- a complex situation developed in Buganda in the late 19th C. The Ganda were quick to recognise the benefits of trade and welcomed Swahili traders from the Islamic towns on the Indian Ocean coast. As a result, Islam arrived, and some Ganda converted to Islam. The Ganda were in fact very open to outside elements, especially religion. One kabaka converted to Islam, although he later renounced it in favour of Christianity.

- later, Christian missionaries also appeared; in fact, both Catholic and Protestant missions (quite antagonistic to each other) arrived and began to make converts. What emerged was a very complex domestic political situation with 3 external religious groups making converts, plus the traditional religion, making 4 political groupings, all struggling to dominate Ganda society. There was always a civil war on the death of a kabaka, and the religious differences exacerbated that. (Some of the groups appealed to outsiders for help, but eventually, the British excluded foreign rivals.) However, the various groups managed to reach a power-sharing compromise agreement which gave them a united front. Buganda achieved a good deal of success in directing trade to itself and shutting out Nyoro, its bigger and stronger rival.

- when the British appeared on the scene in the 1890s ([see Low and Pratt's evaluation](#)), the Ganda became very important allies and assistants to the British in establishing the Uganda Protectorate and subordinating the other kingdoms in

what became the Protectorate. Some historians have labeled the Ganda participation 'sub-imperialism'. With the Ganda assistance, the British conquest of Uganda was much easier and less expensive.

### What did the Ganda get?

- a. One entire province of the larger Nyoro was joined to Buganda.
- b. The Ganda also negotiated a special arrangement—The Uganda Agreement of 1901—for itself inside the Uganda Protectorate. This gave the Ganda a great deal of self-government and special status. The kabaka and his government continued in place with only limited direction by the British on general policy.
  - later, after World War 1 when the colonial government of the Protectorate pursued development policies and rationalised administration, it tried to whittle this autonomy away. While the Protectorate did have some success, the Ganda were tenacious in defending their status and rights; Buganda still had a unique position in Uganda at the time of independence. (This was a source of conflict after independence and helped to lead to instability.)
- c. Individual Ganda also benefited with jobs; the number of British officials in the Protectorate colonial administration was always low; as the colonial administration and bureaucracy was built in the Protectorate, the Ganda (because many had adopted Christianity and got access to education) came to play a disproportionate role and to fill many jobs in the bureaucracy in other kingdoms. [This also came to be a source of hostility against the Ganda by other peoples of Uganda as one of the most disliked roles of the colonial administration was the levying and collection of taxes.]

### Resistance or Acquiescence and accommodation?

- often, African societies did not have much choice. As shows in the case of Uganda, the Nyoro had little choice. Once the Ganda allied with the British, the Nyoro were being subjected to aggression so felt compelled to resist.

- in other cases, even when they tried to acquiesce, Africans might find that they had violence forced upon them.

- e.g., Lobengula and the Ndebele tried to avoid conflict; when Rhodes invaded with the Pioneer Column of white settlers, the Ndebele acquiesced. However, the

settlers and the BSA Company were not satisfied with what they had gained in Shona territory, especially when they suspected (incorrectly) that there was gold waiting to be discovered in Ndebele territory. Whites provoked incidents and were continually pushing further until a minor clash with the Ndebele was used by Leander Starr Jameson as an excuse to launch a war.

- it was not an easy choice; news did travel and Africans soon came to know that they could not successfully resist European military power. This was shown whenever powerful states, such as the Zulu or Ashanti, were defeated. Some decided that they would rather die fighting; others simply could not imagine accepting the end to their way of life.

### **Delayed Reactions**

- some groups made deals, hoping to avoid a destructive war; Europeans often offered 'friendship'. Both sides were likely to misunderstand.

- in the past, Africans had often had to submit to stronger outsiders, but that usually meant only giving annual tribute and acknowledging subordination. Both sides would know that the subordinates would try whenever possible to throw off the subordinate status. European control was different and was intended to be permanent.

- Europeans did not recognise the African expectation that outside control was seen as temporary and something to be opposed and undermined. Also, many of the Europeans who came out to govern were not only absolutely ignorant of Africa and Africans (actually worse than ignorant because many had absorbed distorted, racist stereotypes about Africans) but were also incredibly arrogant. As a result, they often quickly alienated Africans. These last problems were much worse wherever there were white settlers.

- as a result, after experiencing colonialism for a number of years, some peoples, who had acquiesced initially, later rose in resistance.