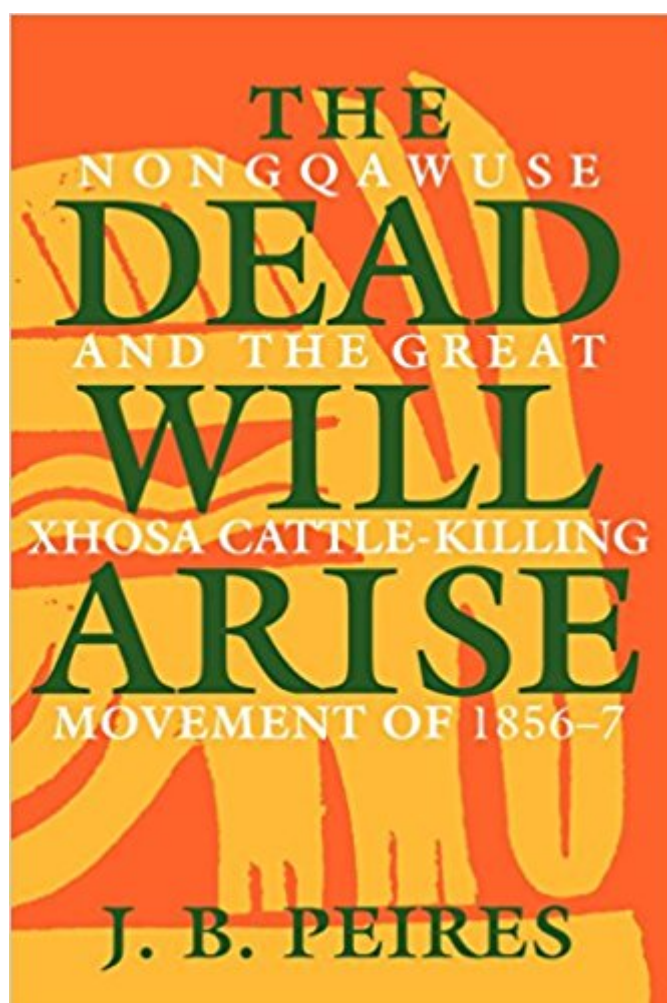


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# The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse And The Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement Of 1856-7



## Synopsis

"Anyone who thinks that South Africa's problems began with the Afrikaners and apartheid should read this book." — Richard Dowden, *The Independent* "... should remain the last word for the foreseeable future." — Choice "Peires is the premier historian of the Xhosa people. He speaks the language, knows the terrain, has collected oral traditions and has made an exhaustive study of the documented sources. The result is a fascinating and authoritative account of this astonishing catastrophe... *The Dead Will Arise* is fine scholarship and a good read." — *The Washington Post, Book World* "[Peires] has done a splendid job, combining a narrative of epic tragic sweep with a deep grasp of the Xhosa language and society... this is a powerfully wrought work, one of the best in recent years on a precolonial South African people..." — *African Studies Review* "... *The Dead Will Arise* is remarkable for its clarity and accessibility.... It is bold, imaginative challenge to an orthodoxy which has persisted for one hundred and thirty years. The sophistication and scope of its analysis and its breath-taking literary style qualify *The Dead Will Arise* for the accolade — brilliant." — *International Journal of African Historical Studies* "... gripping reading. It is now one hundred and thirty years since the tragic events of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing and yet this book is the very first thoroughly researched and authoritative account ever to be written on the subject." — *Journal of Religion in Africa* "One of the great strengths of this study is the rich biographical material that Peires provides on the various personalities involved in the incident." — *American Historical Review* Drawing on private letters, spy reports, oral traditions, and obscure Xhosa texts, Peires explains for the first time the motivations which drove 100,000 Xhosa to kill their cattle, destroy their crops, and slowly starve to death — an extraordinary event that has defied historical explanation for over 130 years.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1856 the Xhosa tribe of South Africa slaughtered all their cattle, cut down their crops and sat back to wait for their ancestors to rise from the dead. By the end of the following year they themselves were dead, mostly from starvation... . This must be the only case in human history of mass suicide on such a scale for the sake of a religious fantasy. It seems incredible that there has never been a book on the subject before. In an attempt to disprove the thesis that this was just an inexplicable reaction of a primitive people, Mr Peires sets out to prove that the cattle killing was a logical response to the Xhosa predicament ... . In the face of such evil Mr Peires turns to the only identifiable devil - the British and in particular Governor George Grey ... .The phenomenon defies logic. It is simply one of those eruptions from hell which Africa sometimes experiences .... Anyone who thinks that South Africa's problems began with the Afrikaners and apartheid should read this book - Richard Dowden in THE INDEPENDENT The reading of history - especially South African history - has been all but ruined in our school system. Peires restores it by combining a magical mystery tour with the elegant baroque of the Victorian novel. At weighty moments he breaks the text, offering the impatient mind a quick route to a new section, or with a considered pause to reflect on the wider issues at work in the mid-19th century. It is an especially liberating style and a fine example of the imaginative, thoughtful historian's craft. ...The genre heightens the pathos of this gory and desperately sad tale; a tale which changed the balance of power in South Africa. - Peter Vale in THE WEEKLY MAIL --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The Dead Will Arise is a book written at two levels. It is both an exciting and gripping narrative and an extended analysis of the relation between religion and logic, the impact of extreme situations on human behavior. Anybody interested in Africa, in religion, or in the process of colonial domination will want to read and reread it.

The author J.B Peires was a Senior Lecturer in History at Rhodes University. He possessed a knack for turning historical data into emotionally stirring and controversial reading. This book proved to be a challenging read, taking me several years to research. There are indeed omissions, inconsistencies, conflicting versions and biased narratives. The year of 1856 was a disparaging time

for the amaXhosa (Bantu) nation migrations occupying the Wild Coast, just as it were for other Nguni as well as the Khoikhoi / Khoisan indigenous peoples. Xhosa land was now under siege by British invaders - scattering them under a process known as "mfecane" - eventually weakening Bantu societies - unable to resist colonial expansion resulting in continuous loss of their territories and autonomy - the birth of apartheid governance and systematic order of white rule. In 1853, a lung disease began killing off the Xhosa's cattle herds. By 1856-1857, South Africa (as many places within the world) suffered droughts which withered food harvests, and in the case of the Xhosa, their prized cattle were dwindling because of this \*strange\* infectious disease further exacerbated by drought conditions. AmaXhosa ambition seemed promising from the voice of a young girl called Nongqawuse, the niece of a prophet. Nongqawuse claimed ancestor spirits had prophetically counseled her during a visit in the Gxara River of an ancestral resurrection: "If the people would only kill all their cattle and burn their crops, a day would come when new cattle and crops would arise along with an army of the ancestors who would drive the whites into the sea." The 16-17 year old Nongqawuse's supposed \*vision\* absorbed the precarious condition of her people, and split the Xhosa into two groups; believers of the prophesy and non-believers; while believers followed her oracles, slaughtering their cattle and burning their remaining summer crops. The alleged \*dedicated day\* arrived and nothing happened. Starvation and disease occurred within months - greater than a third of the amaXhosa nation died. In turn, the British easily claimed the remnants of the defeated Xhosa kingdom and imprisoned their chiefs. Nongqawuse was arrested near the Mbashe River and imprisoned on Robben Island - held under a different name for her own safety - she was the target of Xhosa death threats, but her people were broken and tattered as a result of the cattle-killing. By the 1870s, white settlers occupied most of the Xhosa's lands. The surviving Xhosa were rounded up and moved to reserves in British Kaffraria. Nongqawuse eventually released and returned to the Eastern Cape. Intriguingly enough, the name "Nongqawuse" by implication means "a spiritual experience."-----In 2012, I visited Johannesburg, South Africa for a six-month period. During this time, I learned about the "Xhosa Great Cattle-Killing" from a fairly prominent and accomplished South African (British) artist who captured a unique rendition of an ancestor speaking to Nongqawuse in his painting titled "The Message." The reality of his explanation, and ethnic "communication-centered" Drakensburg interpretation captivated my senses. I eagerly began to query many individuals over several months - to my dismay, I could only find one (black or colored) person with knowledge about Nongqawuse and the Xhosa cattle killing - or rather, who would admit to it. This person was a Xhosa man in his early thirties or so. He presented an imperviously lack-luster and sketchy account. Other Nguni

persons; certain Sotho, Tswana, Tsonga-Shangaan, Ndebele, Zulu or Themba which I encountered daily displayed an innocuous ignorance or disinterest! A few individuals immediately passed it off as "just another white-lie." This provoked me (even more) to investigate via Internet and attempt to seek more information. My searching proved arduous and inconclusive in South Africa. Even respected friends and associates were not helpful, and (publically accessible) data about this subject seemed obscure and non-existent there, as if intentional. By the time I finally returned home, I was compelled and easily located various sources of information over the Internet and several written accounts. Throughout the 1850s and beyond, it is indeed a fact that Sir George Grey and the Cape Colonists experienced strained relations with the indigenous people of South Africa.(1). According to British interviews with Nongqawuse, the "risen ancestors" promised her that, if their requests be followed, more Xhosa ancestors would appear to provide food and 'drive the English out' of the country. The history of the cattle-killing has been explained as part of a Xhosa conspiracy to initiate war with the Cape Colony, the result of a trick by Sir George Grey to deceive the Xhosa into destroying themselves, along with a millenarian-movement driven by economic and political pressures. For Grey, his paramount objective was the implementation of his frontier policy of 'civilizing' the Xhosa, believing in 'separatist relations' whereby the British and Dutch should be "employer" and indigenous Africans as "employee."(2). On the other hand, Xhosa historians such as Mqhayi and Imbongi Yesizwe believe as (Chief Bhotomane) that Xhosa oral history and close advisor's to the Paramount Chief Sarhili: "It is a theory still widely held today and has recently been conscripted to argue for moral redress and pecuniary recompense." In 1999, the Xhosa Royal Council accused the British of \*direct complicity\* in the Cattle-Killing, and formally requested Prince Charles make amends and apologize for the part played by Sir George Grey and the British Colonial administration. There are claims (on both sides) that it was the governor himself (Grey) who hid in the bushes and appeared, pretending as one of the ancestral messengers.(3). Another explanation recently designated the \*Cauldron of Witchcraft Interpretation\* by Peires, identifies Xhosa superstition, whereas Xhosa (Bantu) beliefs are deemed false, irrational or considered "religious faith" as the origin of the Cattle-Killing. Indeed, Europeans travelled thousands of miles to enslave Africans and others through-out the world, while laying siege and control of their lands. They were, after all, self-professed \*civilized people\*, and they were simply behaving like predators, bringing alleged "progress" to people who were doing just fine without them, right? The truth largely remains that the story of Nongqawuse served to reinforce "white" notions of "black" savagery and irrationality. Is it little wonder why South African "blacks and coloreds" demonstrate scant knowledge of these [oral] historical accounts? Yet, as it were, a Xhosa young prophetess was accused of

bringing destruction, equally miraculous and fitting, perhaps ancestral redemption 138 years later with an Eastern Cape Xhosa royal named Nelson Mandela - the first black President of the Republic of South Africa - after foreign "cultural imperialism" and apartheid rule. So, could there be truth to Nongqawuse's prophecy? Both Mandela and Nongqawuse share Eastern Cape Xhosa heritage; were anti-Colonial; imprisoned at Robben Island and wielded considerable influential assistance. Once released, Mandela was groomed and accredited for initiating a process of "resurrection" from a long anti-apartheid journey.... an "anti-Machiavellian" prophecy.

This book holds on particular strength: it's the only one of its kind. This is an authoritative account of a fascinating event in the history of South Africa. When a young prophetess named Nonqawuse instructed her people, the powerful Xhosa of South Africa, to slaughter their cattle, let their fields go unplanted, and await the rising of their dead loved ones, the people responded en masse in an event that furthered the decline of the Xhosa and the expansion of British rule in South Africa. This bizarre story, unknown to me previously, is explained thoroughly by Peires. He explains the antecedents, putting the cattle-killing into context. Rather than passing judgement on the Xhosa, or the British, as is so often the case, Peires gives an even-handed account and corrects the myths that have sprung up from both sides. Very well written account of an event so far-fetched it must be history.

This interesting book by Jeff Peires has three distinct parts. Peires has a significant track-record as an historian of the Xhosa people both through collecting oral traditions and by studying archive sources. Overall, it is well researched and highly readable, it contains a number of thought-provoking views and it has several useful maps and illustrations. However, its three elements are rather different. The first combines a clear and fascinating narrative of the events leading up to the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing, and of the tragic event itself with an explanation based on the reaction of the Xhosa people to wholly unprecedented pressure from alien political and military forces and introduced cattle disease. In this analysis, the Great Cattle-Killing was an act of resistance rather than suicidal folly. Peires first describes the impact of the earlier British attacks on the Xhosa people in the 1830s and the religious practices for fighting contamination it caused. He then describes the combined effects of cattle and crop diseases and presents these and religious changes including Christian influences as the context to Nongqawuse and her prophecies which led to the Great Cattle-Killing. Finally, in this part he describes the course of the Cattle-Killing, the reactions of believers and non-believers to the prophecies and the effects of the Cattle-Killing. This

element can only be described as excellent. Peires' second theme is the advantage Sir George Grey took of the aftermath of the Cattle-Killing to subjugate those of the Xhosa not already under colonial rule. Peires first sketches Grey's background as a colonial administrator and emphasises his personal arrogance and his lack of scruples and harshness in other colonial postings. His reported actions in South Africa are very disturbing, and he is presented as the villain of the piece, attacking the Xhosa when he should have helped them, allowing many to starve and creating a web of deceit in his official reports to hide his wrong-doing. This presentation is clearly justified, and Peires has done it to debunk the image of Grey as a wise statesman that had been presented up to then. Unfortunately, Peires makes Grey and his subordinates evil monsters without redeeming features. It is not at all surprising that they were, in the mid 19th century, racists and imperialists, and to judge them solely by late-20th century standards creates some distortion. In his other works also, Peires presents British administrators in South Africa in an unrelievedly bad light, and he may have lost objectivity through his sympathy with the Xhosa. The final section is Peires' Afterword. An earlier edition of this book drew criticism from other historians, and this is his response. It does him little credit, as much of his response looks more like personal attacks than reasoned answers. I accept that history in South Africa is politically sensitive, but when Peires presented a revisionist interpretation, however justified, he should have expected and accepted a range of criticism. Even with its minor flaws, this is a fine book.

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