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The Invisible Cohesion of African Leadership: The Lead Up to the 1819 Battle at Grahamstown Reconsidered

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Abstract

Historians are often troubled by the need to account for the ways that disunity among African leaders helped to pave the way for colonial conquest. In the Eastern Cape of South Africa, the success of the British in conquering territory belonging to the Xhosa people has been frequently attributed to a bitter power struggle between King Ngqika and his uncle Chief Ndlambe of the Rharhabe nation. From the first arrival of the British in the area in 1798, the newly-inaugurated Ngqika tried to enlist their help to counter the influence of his uncle, who had recently handed over the reins of power after a long regency. Over the next 20 years, the two leaders went to battle against each other on three occasions. The ultimate massive defeat of a large Xhosa force of up to 10,000 men at the battle of Grahamstown in 1819 has been identified as the turning point of Xhosa power, confirming the high price to be paid for royal rivalries. This article, however, identifies a concurrent trend towards cooperation between the two Chiefs, which has gone unrecognised. It argues that through the tumultuous twenty years of trying to come to terms with the implications of the British presence, the younger chief came to understand the greater imperative of unity in the face of a dangerous enemy. A starting point is the insight of Xhosa informal historians which claims that the conflicts between the Chiefs had more of a character of disciplining and enforcing traditional leadership values, than of a rivalry for the sole domination of one over the other. Using oral traditions, archival sources and translations from texts written in the Xhosa language, the seldom-appreciated spirit of building the nation is traced.

Résumé

Les historiens ont souvent des difficultés face au besoin d'expliquer la manière dont la désunion au sein des leaders africains a aidé à baliser la voie de la conquête coloniale. Dans la partie orientale du Cap de l'Afrique du Sud, le

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succès des britanniques dans leur conquête du territoire du peuple Xhosa a été fréquemment attribué à une lutte de pouvoir âpre entre le Chef Ngqika et son oncle le Chef Ndlambe de la nation Rharhabe. Dès l'arrivée des britanniques pour la première fois dans la région en 1798, le Chef Ngqika, nouvellement intronisé, a tenté de s'assurer de leur concours pour contrer l'influence de son oncle qui venait de transmettre les rênes du pouvoir, suite à un long règne. Au cours des vingt années qui suivirent, les deux leaders sont allés en guerre l'un contre l'autre à trois reprises. L'ultime défaite massive d'une force Xhosa prodigieuse d'environ 10.000 hommes à la bataille de Grahamstown en 1819 fut perçue comme étant la période charnière de la puissance Xhosa, confirmant le lourd prix à payer pour les rivalités royales. Toutefois, cet article identifie une tendance concomitante sur une coopération entre les deux chefs qui a été occultée par les chercheurs. Il indique qu'à travers les vingt années tumultueuses consacrée à la résistance contre la présence britannique, le plus jeune chef en est arrivé à comprendre l'impératif d'une plus grande unité pour faire face à un ennemi dangereux. Un bon point de départ serait les récits des historiens informels Xhosa qui affirment que les conflits entre les Chefs revêtaient plus un caractère visant à discipliner et renforcer les valeurs traditionnelles du leadership, que celui d'une rivalité pour la domination unique de l'un sur l'autre. L'esprit rarement apprécié de la construction de la nation est retracé dans cet article sur la base des traditions orales, des sources d'archives et de traductions de textes écrits dans la langue Xhosa.

Introduction

Anyone attempting to understand the events that led up to the attack of 10,000 Xhosa soldiers on Grahamstown, British military headquarters, on the Cape Colony's eastern frontier, in 1819, starts with three well-known and central events. The slide into all out warfare is often seen as starting with the Kat River meeting in 1817. At this time, the colonial government laid down to the Xhosa chiefs its own prescription for dealing with rampant cattle theft. The infamous 'spoor law' stated that colonial forces could trace the tracks of stolen cattle to the first kraal it encountered and then demand the number of missing cattle from the occupants thereof. To prevent such actions, the chiefs were expected to stop thieving and to return any stolen livestock they found.

The second major event was a bitter battle fought between the followers of Chiefs Ndlambe and Ngqika at a place called Amalinde. Ngqika's forces were severely beaten, leading him to request assistance from his British friends and allies. This, in turn led to the third major event, commonly referred to as the Brereton raid, after the British commanding officer. In this attack on the AmaNdlambe, 23,000 head of cattle were taken by the colonial forces. The fourth and final event in the sequence was the attack on Grahamstown itself, of up to ten thousand Xhosa soldiers, which ended in their bloody defeat. The war did not end in Grahamstown. When the long-fermenting struggle

was eventually concluded, an expulsion took place, as the British annexed the second portion of Xhosa territory in seven years – the land between the Fish and the Keiskamma River.

While historians focus primarily on the disputes between the British and the amaXhosa, the divisions between the two contending Xhosa chiefs, Ndlambe and Ngqika, follow close behind. Their differences with each other are viewed as offering a classic example of the high price paid by African disunity. No historian could possibly dispute the fact that these two chiefs were locked into an enormously destructive power struggle throughout most of the period when the Zuurveld area was being heavily contested. The attack on Grahamstown in 1819 is often seen as simply a by-product of the dispute between these chiefs. They went to war against each other at least three times over a twenty year period. Their final battle against each other at Amalinde in 1818 is considered one of the most virulent and destructive wars ever fought amongst amaXhosa. This has led historians with colonial sympathies to point to the inevitable African propensity towards violence and bloodshed. On the other hand, even the most pro-Africanist historians see it as a tragic object lesson of the dangers of falling into the colonial trap of divide and rule. Or, their volatile relationship left historians simply confused. As Noel Mostert puts it, 'In the quarrels between Ndlambe and Ngqika power shifted frequently from one to the other. It is sometimes difficult to trace the course of it'.¹

None of these approaches, however, takes into consideration a more subtle, less visible dynamic of cooperation and unity that also operated between them. Ferocious as their conflicts with each other were, they also enjoyed periods of peace, cooperation and mutual support. This submerged dynamic suggests that a powerful imperative towards unity was also present. Though the colonial observers who recorded events could not make sense of this tendency, they nevertheless captured enough information to allow us to retrieve a glimpse into the inner dynamics of traditional leadership to formulate a new appreciation of a potent unity principle at work. Indeed, the documentary evidence gives us glimpses into this other side of the relationship during the intervals of peace. It could be referred to as a particularly African dynamic of maintaining cohesion among leaders. By reading carefully between the lines and finding the odd fragments of supporting evidence, it is possible to construct another dimension to this relationship – one that helps us understand why, for starters, despite all of the animosity, they never killed each other. This dimension takes us deep into the dynamics of a particularly Xhosa-style of traditional leadership. Some day, no doubt, they will write more about this and articulate it much more effectively than is done here. However, a preliminary attempt to raise some of the issues is made.

The impetus for this kind of re-interpretation of the events comes from Xhosa attorney and historian, Mda Mda, who believes that few published histories have come close to understanding the nature of the tensions between Ngqika and Ndlambe.² Rather than viewing their strife as a contest for power, in which first one and then the other, tried to annihilate his rival, the conflicts should be seen as an attempt on the part of the older, royal leaders, to discipline Ngqika to bring him back into line with traditions whenever he erred. Mda views Ngqika as having been young and rebellious, often testing the limits of his authority. By contrast, Ndlambe represented an older generation, which was soon to die out, still trying to maintain a familiar social order. Traditional leadership, Mda claims, functioned as an institution, whose rules and guidelines were widely understood, and which had the capacity to correct itself in times of threat.

Early Disputes and Harmonies

It was generally said by British sources that the problems between Ngqika and Ndlambe started when Ngqika completed his circumcision rituals, attained manhood and was inaugurated as chief of the amaRharhabe nation. Ndlambe had been serving as regent since the death of his brother, Mlawu, who had died while Ngqika, his heir-apparent, was still very young. These sources claim that Ndlambe refused to hand over the reins of power, wishing to maintain himself as the ruling king.³ However, others, such as Col. Collins and Lt. J Cuyler, who interviewed Ndlambe in person, portray him as *always* acknowledging the senior rank of his nephew, Ngqika.⁴ Before looking more closely at the tumultuous ups and downs of their relationship, it is useful to first look at how traditional leadership as an institution functioned.

First, the possibility that two related men from royal families could amicably co-rule together is amply born out by Xhosa history, particularly close to the time that Ndlambe and Ngqika lived. European travellers and writers were perhaps most impressed by what they observed of the high levels of cooperation between chief Pato and his older brother, Chungwa, who had acted as his regent for many years. George Thompson noted that,

though Pato has now come of age, he generally deposes Congo (Chungwa) to act on all important occasions, such as holding conferences with the other chiefs, or the British officers on the frontier, etc. The two brothers seem to live in a very good understanding, and to act with great unanimity.⁵

The younger brother became chief of the amaGqunukwebe because his mother held higher rank than his older brother. At the time of writing, they lived near the coast in the area between the Keiskamma and Buffalo Rivers.

Similar accounts of high level cooperation, trust and respect describe the rule of King Hintsa, the most senior of all Xhosa chiefs, and his brother Bhurhu. In the years following Ngqika's death, his own sons also followed the more

traditional pattern of cooperation, as the elder Maqoma nurtured his younger brother Sandile and then gracefully saw him installed as chief when he came of age.⁶

Secondly, when conflicts did arise between chiefs, the animosities got resolved and were not maintained. Beverly Mackenzie described the amaXhosa as people who 'pass over grievous provocations as soon as a wish for conciliation is manifested'.⁷ Though wars were fought between chiefs, they were never intended to destroy each other, but rather to establish a recognised supremacy of one over the other. Writing in 1799, the missionary Johannes Van der Kemp described how the chiefs Phalo and Gcaleka, of an earlier generation, had often fought, with each of them at one time or another defeating the other. However, whatever was won by the victor was always returned to the loser, in order to 'restore him to his dignity'.⁸

A third notable quality within the institution of traditional rule is the important role played by councillors to the chiefs. No chief rules as an individual, but rather through the advice and deliberations of a carefully-chosen group of wise men. As we shall see, Xhosa traditions credit the councillors of Ngqika in particular of often intervening in poor decisions. This form of collective rule is also sensitive to the interests of the chief's followers, thus reducing the solo focus of leadership more familiar to western traditions.

Finally, tensions and conflicts between chiefs were often resolved by contracting marriages between royal rivals. This made the women, who moved to their new husband's home, important diplomats and ambassadors between royal families. In theory, a husband was expected to treat his wife well, showing due respect for both her and her family. A marriage was never seen as simply a personal matter between two individuals. A failure to treat the daughter-in-law well could be grounds for going to war, making the woman's life a barometer of how well two chiefs' communities were relating to each other.

If Mda's views are taken seriously, they expose previous attempts to explain this strained relationship as all too typical of the western 'great man' school of thinking. Until the late twentieth century, this approach dominated all forms of history-writing coming from Europe. Male historians traditionally wrote about male political leaders who contested for power. Such contestations were generally understood to be motivated by personal ambitions of individuals to achieve personal power, rank, status, control and authority over others. This heavily masculinist approach to the past leaves little room for the subtler nuances of African collective leadership. As such, the differences between Ndlambe and Ngqika have always been interpreted within the western framework, as simply a rivalry to see who would 'win' the top leadership position of the Rharhabe nation. N. Tisani points out that this European

obsession with kings, chiefs and other male leaders also left out the important roles played by advisors and queen mothers.⁹

With all these checks and balances, what then went wrong between the nephew and uncle? Why was there so much friction? Following the line of thinking proposed by Mda, the blame falls squarely on the shoulders of Ngqika, the rebel, seeking new levels of independence. Evidence from the written sources makes it abundantly clear that he had a very unique personality which often jarred the expectations of even his European observers. In particular, his unabashed greediness for small and large items of personal gain flabbergasted those who met him. For example, at a critical meeting with the Governor of the Cape Colony in 1817 at Kat River, Ngqika's behaviour was described as follows:

The conduct of Gaika was remarkable while receiving the presents. So greedy was he, that he could not wait a moment to examine separately what was presented to him, although Colonel Cuyler was at the pains of opening each parcel for that purpose: the articles were no sooner put into his hand than they were laid on the ground, and his hand stretched out for more.¹⁰

In this account, Ngqika then retired for the night but came back the next day with a long list of further desires, 'Not being content with all that he had received, he sent next morning to ask me for a knife, tinder-boxes, looking-glasses, handkerchiefs, and food.'¹¹ Historian Jeff Peires makes perhaps the most scathing judgment of Ngqika, who by the end of his life in 1829 had become a chronic alcoholic,

Alcohol was a logical consequence of his moral capitulation. He purchased it, danced for it, 'sold' his wives for it, and ultimately died of it. He would do nothing unless he was paid for it, and even took to receiving his presents in private to avoid sharing them with his councillors.¹²

He simply did not conform to the kind of behaviour and bearing that was expected of a chief of such high standing.

By contrast, Chief Ndlambe is always described as maintaining at all times a sense of dignity, calm power and command of every situation. Mostert captures this sense of Ndlambe as a chief of an entirely different order, when describing his encounter with Col. Collins in 1809, as meeting 'an elderly chieftainly figure of great experience and presence, confident in his power and authority, and possessed of all the considerable Xhosa diplomatic gifts in blank-faced parley, circumvention and subtle disdain'.¹³

Mostert goes on to paint a vivid picture of how Ndlambe dramatically stage-managed that encounter in a way that left Collins feeling he had been treated as a small boy. First refusing to meet Collins in his own camp, Ndlambe forced him to come meet him on his own turf.

A scene of great power confronted them. The moon was full but ridge behind heavy clouds, and its shifting light helped to dramatize the solemnity of their reception. Ndlambe was seated at the edge of his kraal surrounded by a host of his warriors and people. More of his army were known to be hidden from view inside the kraal itself. But his power and the force it brought to this encounter were symbolised by the forest of uplifted spear shafts that stretched in a wide curve around him, their shiny blades gleaming fitfully, menacingly in the restless moonlight.¹⁴

This level of controlling encounters with colonial authorities was not an art Ngqika commanded. Eight years later, when Governor Somerset met with him at the Kat River, it was Somerset who meticulously stage-managed the event. Ngqika, with his uncle Ndlambe beside him, sat on a grass mat in front of the impressive marquee that Governor had set up to house his own entourage. Although Ngqika was acknowledged by all as the senior chief in rank, he came dressed as ‘the commonest Caffre, except that he had a handkerchief tied around his head’ while Ndlambe by contrast, wore ‘a handsome tiger skin, and he had round his head a bandeau of about an inch in breadth, made of very small beads’.¹⁵

If Ngqika struck outside observers as strange, how much more did his unique personality challenge his own family and people? His unchiefly behaviour cost the amaXhosa dearly on many occasions. He showed disrespect for both Hintsa, the highest ranking of all Xhosa chiefs and Ngqika’s superior, as well as his uncle Ndlambe, by taking them by surprise in military attacks and then holding them prisoner. He was emotionally volatile, at times terrifying his own people while at other times, blubbing his deepest fears to European visitors. Sometimes, he evaded his councillors and acted and spoke compulsively and alone. Emotional insecurity, greed and jealousy appeared to shape his every deed. How could the other members of Xhosa royalty not see him as a great embarrassment and buffoon? Such concerns would lead to what Mda sees as the ‘disciplinary actions’ they felt compelled to take against Ngqika on various occasions.

The Unfolding Relationship

Ndlambe grew up in a world in which the Xhosa nation had divided itself into two. The elder son of the great chief, Phalo, who was named Gcaleka, remained east of the Kei River as head of the senior house. His younger brother, Rharhabe, moved his headquarters further west, presumably settling in the breathtakingly beautiful Chumie River valley at the foot of the Amathola mountains. All of this took place prior to the arrival of Dutch-speaking farmers, or boors, as they called themselves. Rharhabe’s eldest son and heir, Mlawu, was reputed to be even more powerful than his father.¹⁶ But when

he died in battle, Rharhabe named his younger son, Ndlambe, to fill Mlawu's place, including marrying one of his widows. He then became regent over Mlawu's eldest son, the very young Ngqika, thus securing Ndlambe's role as mentor and father-figure for the small boy. Peires believes that Ngqika was born in 1779 and that his father, Mlawu, died in 1782.¹⁷ When Rharhabe died soon afterwards, Ndlambe was left clearly as the senior chief of the western Xhosa nation, a position he held by 1783.¹⁸ In acknowledgement of the seniority of the Gcaleka royal house, the King, Khawuta, was called to officially pronounce on the next heir. According to Peires, 'the majority of the councillors chose Ntimbo and sent for the paramount Khawuta to invest him, but to their surprise he invested Ngqika, who was the choice of Mlawu's younger brother, Ndlambe.'¹⁹ This indicates that Ndlambe backed Ngqika as the choice for future Rharhabe leadership.

Only a few hints exist about the early relationship between Ndlambe and his young ward. Ndlambe was once recorded as having referred to Ngqika as 'a boy whom I have nursed'.²⁰ Ngqika also expressed a similar sentiment, saying, 'When you were my tutor, you taught me to be a generous king'.²¹ Clearly, the elder chief played a crucial teaching and mentoring role as regent of the future king. Ndlambe 'placed his sister, Ishua over those kraals that had been under the sway of his deceased brother'.²²

When it came close to the time for Ngqika's initiation into manhood, his uncle introduced him to the arts of warfare, taking him along on the campaigns of the second frontier war. As the traveller George Thompson put it, 'At this time Gaika was a very young man; and was carried by S'Lhambi on the expedition, to train him to hardihood and heroism'.²³ This 1793 war witnessed the resounding victory of the amaXhosa over the boers, but only after the various chiefs stopped fighting each other and united against a common enemy. This stands as one of the examples of Xhosa leadership acting according to the unifying principle. It quite puzzled pro-colonial historian, George Cory, who said, 'Strange to say, a reconciliation seemed to have taken place between the tribes, which up to that time, had been at variance'.²⁴ He then goes on to describe the utter annihilation of boer farms and livestock. It was during this war, Peires states, that Ngqika got his praise name 'Aah! Lwaganda' meaning he who stamps the ground while fighting'.²⁵

All sources agree that the problems between Ndlambe and Ngqika started as soon as the young man's initiation into manhood was finished. Although colonial sources allege that it was Ndlambe who refused to acknowledge Ngqika's new status as king, more detailed and reliable accounts show that it was Ngqika who provoked the first war between the two of them. Juju, the son of one of Rharhabe's councillors, claimed that Ndlambe fully accepted the young man's kingship, and peacefully moved further west, to create a

reasonable distance between them.²⁶ However, Ngqika became jealous because so many people followed the elder statesman. At that time, it was understood that when people were unhappy with their chiefs, they simply moved away, seeking protection from another chief; 'the fear of desertion consequently operates as a considerable check on the arrogance and cupidity of the chieftains'.²⁷ Ngqika's unpredictable personality might well have induced people to remain close to their veteran chief, Ndlambe.

The fighting apparently started when Ngqika urged some of the young men from his initiation group to steal cattle from the kraals of Ndlambe's people. Ndlambe intervened, coming to Ngqika 'in a peaceable manner, and remonstrated against his violent conduct,' and the cattle were restored.²⁸ But then Ngqika's young men stole cattle from Ndlambe himself, which were in turn recovered by Ndlambe's followers. To this, Ngqika claimed he had no knowledge, leaving his uncle to go back to his home. But the final blow was still to come,

It was the custom for young men just emerged from circumcision to distinguish themselves in some brave action, and his young age-mates urged him on. 'you see, chief', they said, 'the *Maduna* [big-shot] is running away with your people, for they have become accustomed to him. Go, pretend you are paying him a courtesy visit and then we shall attack him'. Shortly thereafter, Ngqika visited Ndlambe, ostensibly to settle a court case between their subjects. Oxen were slaughtered for the visitors and a dance was in progress when Ngqika gave the signal to attack.²⁹

Thompson learned that 'this act of audacity gained Gaika no small admiration, particularly among the young warriors of his tribe'.³⁰ This account confirms Mda's view that it was Ngqika's independent and rebellious spirit that launched them into their spiral of conflict.

As a result of this provocation, Ndlambe fled to the Gcaleka Great Place, where he remained for nearly a year. When King Khawuta died, however, not long thereafter, in about 1796, Ndlambe and the Gcaleka initiated an attack on Ngqika at Debe.³¹ The Gcaleka were over- confident of victory and brought their women and children along to the battle. Suffering a disastrous loss, several key people fell into the hands of Ngqika as his prisoners. This included the young Gcaleka heir-apparent, Hintsa, one of his brothers and Ndlambe. Ngqika is alleged to have killed the brother with his own hands, but released Hintsa 'because he was only a boy'.³² Collins claims that elder councillors had a hand in securing the young heir's freedom, giving some insight into the role played by councillors to mitigate the actions of errant chiefs.³³

Ngqika then held Ndlambe as a prisoner, although he was given a fair amount of freedom of movement and allowed to have his wives with him. The old

chief was placed under the watchful eye of Ngqika's sister, Dusa.³⁴ During this time, the old chief was protected from harm by 'his own people' who lived under Ngqika's rule and by Ngqika's councillors, suggesting that the rift between the two was not considered worth spilling royal blood over.³⁵ This demonstrates how the unitary nature of traditional leadership operated on the ground. As a result, Ndlambe was held prisoner for six months and then released and allowed to move to the southern coast, near present day Alexandria. Again, it was the insistence of Ngqika's councillors, who restrained him from taking punitive action against his departing uncle. But Ndlambe's maturity as a senior leader influenced many people, including, Dusa, to join him.³⁶

At the time when Ndlambe fled, his brother, Mnyaluza, an influential chief in his own right, chose to flee to the south. He settled in the area of present day Alexandria around 1796. When Ndlambe left his confinement, it was to this brother that he came. Ndlambe and large numbers of followers flooded into the Zuurveld just before the third frontier war started in 1799.³⁷

During the time that Ndlambe was still being held prisoner, a pair of British colonial officials paid a call on Ngqika, describing him as 'the adored object of his subjects; the name of Gaika was in every mouth, and it was seldom pronounced without symptoms of joy'.³⁸ Although the exact dates and timing are not clear, it appears that the missionary, Johannes van der Kemp arrived in Ngqika's territory just prior to the time of Ndlambe's departure. He noted that Ngqika feared a rebellion led by Ndlambe, but when it came to day-to-day governance, Ngqika only made decisions after consulting his mother, his sister and Ndlambe.³⁹ 'He treats him outwardly with great respect, and resolves nothing of importance before he has consulted him ... but keeps him as much as possible out of real power.'⁴⁰ Of the other Xhosa chiefs who lived in the Zuurveld, van der Kemp reported, 'There exists no war between them and Gika, who corresponds daily with them, and receives their deputies in a friendly manner'.⁴¹

All of these observations reveal the gentler side of the relationship between the two rivals. At this point in time, one might say it was Ngqika trying to discipline his uncle to conform to his own definition of power sharing. Upon releasing Ndlambe after his imprisonment, Ngqika said to him, 'When you were my tutor, you taught me to be a generous king, and since I became your king I hope I have taught you to be a faithful subject'.⁴² Peires sees Ndlambe's flight into the Zuurveld as a move to nurture his own 'hunger for power', but also describes how Ndlambe had just had to intervene to prevent Ngqika from killing Ndlambe's brother, Siko.⁴³ Ndlambe himself described his move as having the intention of living peacefully, without causing problems to Ngqika.⁴⁴ It appears that Ndlambe's move to the Zuurveld was all done in good faith.

So far, the Mda theory is confirmed. It was not a question of Ndlambe ousting Ngqika and taking over, but rather of establishing a hierarchy and mode of operation. What good is it to be 'king' if nobody likes you and they all move away? These events indicate that Ngqika had a rather fragile ego which played an important role in shaping the relationship. There is every indication that because it was in line with tradition, Ndlambe always respected Ngqika as the hereditary head of the Rharhabe nation. However, his ability to attract numerous followers should not be credited to his own ambitions for power. Given, the impetuous nature of Ngqika's personality, no doubt many people chose to join Ndlambe because of seniority, maturity and wisdom which earned him respect and high regard among his people. This in turn triggered jealousy and anger in the young King Ngqika.

However, the impetuous Ngqika could not remain at peace with his uncle. A second major war between them took place around 1807 when Ngqika abducted one of Ndlambe's wives for himself. Famous for her exceeding beauty, Thuthula appears to have had her own romantic interest in Ngqika. When he sent men to fetch her, she willingly complied. As one account puts it,

They said to her, We are here because we have been sent by King Ngqika, he has sent us to steal you so that you can be his wife. At the mention of Ngqika's name she dashed to her hut. When she got into the hut, she took off the chief's skirt she was wearing and wrapped it with the grass mat, and left it there. She immediately left with the men.⁴⁵

This brazen deed was viewed as an intolerable moral disgrace and as an act of incest. Even Ngqika's own councillors were outraged and soon authorised military actions against him. Ndlambe, the one to whom the greatest insult had been made, however, sent messages cautioning them that they were 'fighting a chief' and that they should not pursue him.⁴⁶ So outraged were the people, that they continued fighting anyway, reducing Ngqika to absolute poverty. It was in this reduced condition that the British intelligence officer, Col. Collins, found him in 1809. At that time the British were still relative newcomers to take control over the Cape Colony, having finally taken over from the Dutch in 1806. Collins had been sent to assess conditions on the borders of the colony, and in particular to find potential allies among the chiefs. Ngqika received him kindly, being in sore need of recognition and material support. One of the consequences of the Collins report was the expulsion in 1812 of chief Ndlambe, all of his followers and his subordinate chiefs, from the portion of the Cape called the Zuurveld. Col. John Graham used a scorched-earth strategy to clear the entire area from the Sundays to the Fish River of 20,000 Xhosa people. It took him nine months to rout out the last stragglers, burn their huts and destroy their crops. He thus forced all of Ndlambe's people to settle in territory under the control of Ngqika.

Peace from 1812 to 1817

The traditional euro-centric masculinist approach to history would expect such a turn of events to mark a course for disaster and intensified conflict between the two powerful chiefs vying endlessly for power. However, the period from 1812 to 1817 rather gives us glimpses into their special style of mutual respect and cooperation. Though documentation is sparse, a few key events emerge. In 1815, when renegade boers instigated an armed rebellion against British overrule, they tried to enlist Ngqika as an ally by making him the attractive offer of handing back the Zuurveld. Ngqika consulted with Ndlambe and together they agreed to refuse this offer. No doubt Ndlambe would have been interested, three years after his violent expulsion, to get the Zuurveld back. But it appears they were unwilling to place much faith in the success in the boers who approached them, as they were well-known among the Xhosa as drunkards and trouble-makers.⁴⁷

Apart from open rebellion, the biggest concern on the eastern frontier for the British authorities in this period was the never-ending raiding of cattle. The amaXhosa came in small parties of about six to seven men, who in the middle of the night set fire to settler farm houses and made off with their cattle. The boers, in retribution, formed armed commandos of generally 10 to 20 men, who rode into Xhosa territory, searching for their stolen livestock, but often removing much more than they had lost. This left the frontier in a state of ongoing turmoil and violence.

When a new governor, Sir Lord Charles Somerset, was sent to the Colony in 1815, his instructions on how to handle the frontier were very clear. He was to use every possible means of influencing the dominant chief to cooperate peacefully in suppressing cattle thefts and desertions of people, and to minimise military costs.

Presents in his (*the King of England*) name should be made to them principally of articles of consumption, such as Brandy, wine, sugar, tea, coffee, tobacco and which may be easily distributed amongst their women & other of the Chiefs' favourites – that a few ornaments and other articles of essential utility, such as hoes, saws, axes, files should be given to the Chiefs in small quantities with an intimation that, if the Chief pleases, two or more annual meetings may take place for barter.⁴⁸

Ngqika was by then already identified as not only the titular head of the Rharhabe nation, but as someone who was more than receptive to special gifts. After creating an appetite for European manufactured goods, it was hoped that the Xhosa would soon learn to bring in 'their cattle, skins or wild beasts and that ivory of different kinds and gold dust should be pointed out to them as articles most desirable by us'.⁴⁹ Not only did the British choose to

win friends through generous gifts, but they also sought ways to create sustainable forms of dependency on themselves. Trade was just such an important sector. Always on the look-out for opportunities for economic gain, part of colonial policy included shaping the new trade in ways that gave the local leaders, like Ngqika, a cut in what was to come and to give them monopolistic powers. In this way they would be rendered unlikely to object to any other measures their new-found benefactors might impose. Similarly, and perhaps even more effective, was the British policy of quickly trying to induce a chemical dependency on alcohol among their new allies. All of these dynamic permeate the history of Ngqika's rule.

Whilst Ngqika faced these pressures, however, it appears that he and Ndlambe maintained a common front. Together with all their subordinate chiefs, their approach was to do nothing to seriously curtail thefts and other forms of harassment of colonists, whilst at the same time doing just enough to appease the officials to maintain their favour. When confronted by commandos, the chiefs assisted them to search for cattle. Very occasionally, they returned stolen goods and livestock. As the pressure for greater results mounted on Ngqika, he insisted that he could not control the actions of the other chiefs and that if he tried, 'they would raise up against himself'.⁵⁰ At times he claimed to have gathered stolen cattle to be returned to colonists, only to have them stolen from him before he could do so.⁵¹ In the hopes of promoting better cooperation, the governor ordered that Ngqika should be given 'a good horse with Saddle and bridle ...and forward by the first Vessel going to Algoa Bay a Cask of Brandy for Gaika.'⁵²

The entry of missionaries into Xhosa territory in 1816 provides us with some particularly vivid glimpses into the working relationship of chiefs Ndlambe and Ngqika. James Read led an expedition in April 1816 to determine if the Xhosa were willing to have a mission station established amongst them, and if so, where. He first visited chief Ndlambe and his powerful senior councillor-cum-diviner, Makhanda. Both eagerly welcomed the proposal, with Ndlambe leaving the selection of a site to Makhanda. They offered little assistance to the missionary group in finding King Ngqika to also consult with him. This left Read to conclude that there was a high level of tension between them, though it was not openly articulated. Eventually, he met with Ngqika and settled on building a mission station about an hour's horse ride away from his Great Place, on the banks of the Kat River. Joseph Williams and his wife arrived to set up the station in June 1816. From then on, he served as a virtual secretary for Ngqika, conducting written correspondence with the Governor's office, via the military authorities in Grahamstown.

In August of 1816, Ngqika paid an extended visit to the mission station, bringing along three wives and his elder sons to learn what the missionary had to offer.⁵³ By November 1816, the mission station became the focus of attention of the two great chiefs. At the beginning of the month, Williams heard rumours that Ndlambe was determined to 'murder us all and take our cattle' due to his outrage at people living at the station.' Ngqika, when asked for advice, answered that it was just the opposite. Ndlambe had 'expressed great satisfaction at his having the word of god with him first and that he should be glad to come hear but the distance prevented him'.⁵⁴ Next, Williams learned that both Ngqika and Makhanda were on their way to the mission station. To his great surprise, Ngqika came running up, on foot, alone and covered in perspiration. He said he had come to warn Williams about Makhanda's evil intention to ridicule him and Christianity, but to also advise him on how to appease this important visitor with appropriate housing, gifts, etc. When Makhanda appeared and Williams asked him if he was angry, he replied, 'No, why should I be angry?'.⁵⁵ Indeed, he was even more friendly than on previous occasions. The two leaders remained for about five days, during which time Williams engaged in discussions on what was expected of good believers. Makhanda also mastered the alphabet in one day, whilst Ngqika and his wives soon caught up with him. Each of the prominent men confided freely with Williams, Makhanda about his recent polygamous marriage to Ndlambe's niece and Ngqika about his confusion over Makhanda's belief system.⁵⁶

Before the extended meeting ended, sharp words, however, were exchanged between Makhanda and Ngqika. Just as Makhanda was about to depart, Ngqika asked him for 'news'. In answer to this request, Makhanda called a special meeting of all present, which opened with a session of prayer and hymn singing. Then he lambasted Ngqika in front of everyone for a full 15 minutes. It appears the required 'news' had to do with stolen cattle and the implications for relations with the colony. He berated Ngqika for not being willing to practice the 'good news' of the missionaries, presumably in relation to the evil of theft, 'How is it you go on to steal now you have God's word among you? How is it that on my way here I took 10 beasts which were stolen by your caffers? Are you not yet satisfied that you enquire after news?'.⁵⁷ A heated exchange ensued between the councillors of both men, but resulted in Ngqika's men heartily condemning cattle thefts. In a private session, however, Makhanda further blasted Ngqika, 'the ridicule was begun in an indirect and ended in a direct manner'.⁵⁸ Among other issues, Makhanda touched on the issue of Ngqika having 20 wives already and made indirect references to the immoral Thuthula affair. He also indicated that he had refused to give permission for Ngqika to marry his own sister. To all this, Ngqika

'sat speechless' and then asked Williams to tell him what to do. After Makhanda left, Williams tried to get Ngqika to respond to the latest complaint about cattle thefts from the Governor, but all he could do was present a list of further gifts that he wanted.

This vivid description of the meetings between Makhanda and Ngqika reveal many interesting aspects of the relationship between the uncle and nephew chiefs. Throughout, Ngqika's childish and compulsive behaviour emerges. He clearly greatly feared Makhanda as both a spiritual leader and as his uncle's closest advisor. Apparently, he was quite accustomed to being upbraided and belittled by them. Also, the issue of how to handle relations with the colony proved to be a sore point.

In later years, Ndlambe's people recalled with bitterness how the British foolishly placed their trust in Ngqika, while he was more guilty than them of crimes against the colonists. Speaking at the conclusion of the 1819 war, Makhanda's head councillor told the British,

When there was war we plundered you. When there was peace, some of our bad people stole; but our chiefs forbade it. Your treacherous friend Gaika always had peace with you; always plundered you; and when his people stole, always shared in the plunder. Have your patrols ever found cattle taken in time of peace, runaway slaves or deserters, in the kraals of *our* chiefs? Have they ever gone into Gaika's country without finding such cattle, such slaves, such deserters, in Gaika's *own* kraals?⁵⁹

At this time, the colonial authorities strongly encouraged Ngqika not only to return stolen cattle, but also to severely punish anyone found guilty of theft, but to no avail. Ngqika continuously pleaded that he had no powers to detect who had done the stealing. Col. Cuyler, the magistrate of Uitenhage, applied pressure on Williams to act as a spy and report even on the Ngqika's facial expressions when certain demands were made on him. Forwarding the most recent quarterly 'Depredations Return' to Fraser, Cuyler curtly suggested, 'Perhaps Mr W may from these circumstances feel rather more anxious to explain to Gika the nature of what should be his conduct as Upper Chief of those murderous fellows'.⁶⁰ Despite the lack of progress in curbing hostilities, the Governor chose to maintain faith in Ngqika's character, stating that 'all Gaika's assurances appear to be as candid & pacific as could be expected from a Chief professing so little real authority as he does'.⁶¹

By January of 1817, Somerset decided to pay a personal visit to the Eastern frontier to try to take firm command of the situation, knowing that his 'policy of treating the Caffres with mildness and kindness' was not very effective and that his capacity to use military force was dwindling due to troop reductions.⁶² Xhosa attacks were 'rapidly driving the Colonists from

those fertile tracts' and raids had taken place as deep into the Zuurveld as Uitenhage.⁶³ The Xhosa raiders 'kept the country in such a disturbed state that it was impossible to carry on agricultural or pastoral operations with any prospect of success'.⁶⁴ Ngqika's acquisitive disposition made him particularly vulnerable to British tactics. Knowing of his own low regard among his royal peers, the British aimed to secure him as a firm ally. They did all in their power to elevate him to a higher status among the amaXhosa than he occupied by tradition.

Meeting at Kat River

In late March, 1817, Ngqika was summoned to a meeting with the Governor himself, ostensibly so that he could give Ngqika numerous presents as a 'token of a more lasting friendship between His Majesty and the Kaffer people'.⁶⁵ The Governor arrived on the banks of the Kat River, across from Williams's mission station on 2 April, with a strong military force, designed to impress on the amaXhosa that the British 'had easy access to their abodes' and 'by our formidable appearance in some measure to overawe the Caffer Chiefs in their own country'.⁶⁶ Never before had such a military force, with all its pageantry and bright uniforms, been seen so deep inside Xhosa territory, a mere 15 miles from Ngqika's Great Place. The spectacle nearly made the whole plan back-fire. At first Ngqika simply refused to attend. Major George Fraser, sent ahead a few days in advance, had to rely heavily on the missionary, Joseph Williams to find a way to persuade Ngqika. On arriving at Ngqika's kraal, he found him engaged in deep consultation with his 'principal people and councillors'.⁶⁷ Fraser's account of what he observed gives rare insight into how chiefs Ndlambe and Ngqika related to each other at that time:

I have always stated that Gika and Psambie invariably meet and consult relative to any thing which they consider of importance, when I was ordered to Gika's kraal in April 1817 I found him and Psambie in close and friendly consultation, and for a long time Gika would not consent to meet His Excellency because Psambie refused to accompany him, after much persuasion Gika at length consented though I could not obtain a positive promise from Psambie.⁶⁸

Although Ngqika's Great Place was only an hour's walk away from the meeting site, he continued to balk. When the appointed day arrived, he secured a postponement for a day due to rain. Hours after the starting time had passed, he sent messengers to Williams 'to ask me what he should do ... he was much afraid'.⁶⁹ Eventually, Fraser rode, with a group of armed boers, to meet Ngqika and once again assure him of his safety. Agreeing only reluctantly, 'on the way his heart failed so much, that he halted several times in the short space of an hour's journey'.⁷⁰ On reaching the river, Ngqika refused to cross

until Williams came over. 'He appeared to be in great distress and dread, but on seeing me, he seemed much relieved, and took me by the hand very heartily.'⁷¹ Ngqika had an armed honour guard of three hundred men, but they did not interfere with events. At this stage the two Landdrosts, Cuyler and Stockenstrom, took both Ngqika and Ndlambe 'with great difficulty' arm in arm and escorted them across the river to the meeting site. The depth of the terror felt by the Xhosa chiefs was unmistakable. Interestingly, the Governor noted that it was Chief Ndlambe and other chiefs who had ultimately convinced Ngqika to take part.⁷²

Once across the river, the chiefs were escorted to their places in a carefully-orchestrated event. The combined British forces formed three sides of a square, with a white marquee tent in the middle and the two pieces of field artillery poised ceremonially on either side of it. 'The walls of the marquee were thrown down in order that the conference should be as public as possible, and that all the Caffre attendants upon the Chief should hear what passed and know and disseminate the results.'⁷³ When the royal entourage arrived, 'The square then opened and formed into line and the Chiefs Gaika and Tsambie came forward and walked for the Marquee, arm in arm with Lt. Col. Cuyler, Major Fraser, and Mr. Stockenstrom, several other chiefs being in the rear, the Caffre guard following.'⁷⁴ Somerset sat in a chair, while Ngqika sat to his right with Ndlambe and other chiefs next to him and his young son, prince Maqoma, just behind him.⁷⁵ Interpreters came from both sides, to ensure there could be no misunderstandings.⁷⁶ Ngqika's guard formed a semi-circle around him and the other chiefs and followed the proceedings very attentively, though often breaking in with their own comments.⁷⁷ Placed in this exalted position, Ngqika acquitted himself well: 'The gracefulness with which Gaika spoke was very striking, and the manly and decided tone he took was extremely impressive', noted the Cape Town press.⁷⁸

Most of the issues that were discussed have been thoroughly recorded and form part of the record of subsequent events. In retrospect, it is clear that whatever Ngqika agreed to at the time was under extreme duress and coercion, endured only because his uncle was by his side. Fraser noticed that 'Gika not only frequently addressed Psambie but appeared most anxious to meet his approbation in whatever he said'. A particularly sensitive point was the pivotal one of the British insisting that they would deal only with Ngqika as the supreme chief who would be held responsible for the actions of all the other chiefs and their followers. To this, Ngqika replied, 'We do not do things as you do them; you have but one chief, but with us it is not so; but although I am a great man and king of other Caffres, still every chief rules and governs his own people. There is my uncle, and there are the other chiefs.'⁷⁹ Ngqika pointed out to Somerset that 'many who were there present

considered themselves to be independent of him, nor does he believe that any of them excepting his uncle 'T Zambie will entirely acknowledge his authority'.⁸⁰ When the Governor flatly refused to accept this explanation of the Xhosa style of leadership, the other chiefs conferred and said, out of the hearing of the interpreters, 'Say yes, that you will be responsible, for we see the man is getting angry'.⁸¹ Speaking nearly twenty years later, Dyani Tshatshu clearly recalled the sense of coercion experienced by the chiefs, 'for we had the cannon and artillerymen and soldiers and boors with loaded muskets standing about us'.⁸² Ngqika also tried to resist Somerset's suggestion that the British could make him king of the Rharhabe, by humorously asking if he, Ngqika, in turn could make Somerset into a king.⁸³ In the months and years to come it would be clear that from the Xhosa point of view, nothing legitimate had been concluded under these circumstances, let alone a morally binding 'treaty'.

The issues that were raised and discussed at this meeting elicited Ngqika's statement of his willingness to punish cattle thieves, cooperate in the return of stolen livestock, prevent runaway slaves, servants and military deserters from taking refuge among the amaXhosa, assist colonial forces to trace livestock and to agree to the 'spoor' law. In return, he was to be given twelve specially designed gorgets, as symbols of his authority. These he could give as a kind of passport to any person he authorised to visit Grahamstown. Such visitors could only cross the Fish River at De Bruyn's Drift and had to travel strictly on the road, without deviation, under armed escort. Also, trade fairs were to be established in Grahamstown twice a year, in which the amaXhosa could bring their goods for barter. The colony would try to reciprocate with copper, copper wire, brass wire and iron as trade goods. All of these measures advanced the British strategy of enhancing his role over that of all other chiefs.

The detailed descriptions of the Kat River meeting offer interesting glimpses into the personality of Ngqika and also his relationship, at that time, to his uncle, Ndlambe. He showed almost pathological fear of meeting with the British, and was only convinced by the wisdom of his councillors and by the hand-holding of missionary Williams. He did not even come dressed for the occasion, although he impressed the Cape Town journalists with his authoritative style of speaking. He greedily grasped at the gifts offered to him, followed by making a sudden exit before the meeting's events had concluded. These things can be taken as symptomatic of the compulsive side of his personality. Ndlambe, by contrast came dressed as a chief of high standing, and apparently maintained his comportment throughout the event. He played out his role as a fully supportive uncle, regent and co-ruler of the

amaRharhabe. The manner in which they conducted themselves through this trying event exemplifies the unity principle of traditional leadership.

Enforcing the Kat River Agreements

The Kat River meeting is generally considered as pivotal for two reasons. The first, as cited above, was that it opened the door to new colonial dynamics which could be seen as a form of massive 'legalised' plunder against the amaXhosa. The second is the way in which the British drove a poisoned wedge between the Xhosa chiefs by trying to accord more power to Ngqika than he deserved. The dynamics among the chiefs were to change dramatically over the coming year and a half as the implications of the new policies came to be felt. Though many historians point to the third and final war between Ndlambe and Ngqika, fought at Amalinde in October 1818, as evidence of their intractable hatred for each other, a closer scrutiny of the records shows that up through the first half of 1818 they were acting in one accord on a level that is seldom appreciated.

There is surprisingly little evidence of regular efforts to carry out the provisions of the spoor law. It was first tested in May, 1817, in a confrontation with Chief Habana. His armed warriors fought against the invading commando, but suffered several casualties. Another recorded attempt in July 1817, led to the recovery of 66 cattle and 18 horses.⁸⁴ By that time, just four months after the meeting at the Kat River, Ngqika protested that if he enforced the spoor law, all his people would defect to Makhanda, who was 'already stronger than himself'.⁸⁵ This statement offers further evidence that apart from himself, the idea of cooperating with the British was not embraced by anyone else, neither the rest of the chiefs, nor the ordinary people. The second armed confrontation over the issue involved Chief Ndlambe, who was visited by a commando in November 1817. After taking cattle from the first three chiefs it met, the commando got an extremely hostile and non-cooperative response from Chief Ndlambe. The leaders reported that he met them with a large military force, and that in discussions, he had used very rude and insulting language, ferociously ordering them get out of his land.⁸⁶

As Peires puts it, such events contributed to a simplistic 'good Ngqika, bad Ndlambe' stereotype.⁸⁷ By early December, Governor Somerset sent orders to Major George Fraser, to lead a major commando against Ndlambe, which was to be punitive in nature and using the services of armed boers from both Uitenhage and Graaff-Reinet. His instructions were very clear: to punish Ndlambe and make an example of him by kidnapping him and holding him captive until he yielded up all the stolen cattle held by his people. The plan included warning Ngqika to remove his people from harm's way, so that they would not suffer.

Crossing the Fish River on January 7, 1818, when Fraser reached Ndlambe, however, he found him fully prepared for the encounter. The chief had gathered hundreds of men and organised them into three units, which surrounded the commando. Bravely, Fraser demanded all the colonial cattle be given up to him, asking that it should be done by the next day. When the day dawned and the full strength of the Xhosa resistance became apparent, his boer colleagues advised a hasty withdrawal.⁸⁸ Not wanting to return empty handed, Fraser then moved into what had always been considered Ngqika's territory, and conducted wildly successful raids against the kraals of many prominent chiefs. Before he finished, he had collected 2,000 head of cattle – an unprecedented number for any commando, which usually recovered under 100. When he returned to Grahamstown, he was congratulated for a job well done and for having severely punished Ndlambe.⁸⁹

However, his triumph was to be short lived. By early February, he received a letter from Ngqika, protesting that rather than punishing Ndlambe, he, the British friend and ally, had been punished, as all those who lost cattle were his own adherents.⁹⁰ He angrily demanded an explanation. It took nearly another nine months for his questions to be adequately answered by the Governor. The British were thoroughly perplexed about which subordinate chief belonged to Ndlambe or Ngqika. They could not comprehend that in their own minds, the chiefs formed part of one and the same nation, defended by their co-rulers. Somerset clung desperately to his policy of nurturing friendship with Ngqika as the low-cost solution to frontier problems. Eventually a small number of cattle were restored.

Of far greater significance, however, was the way that the Fraser commando served as a catalyst to unite the Xhosa chiefs on an unprecedented level. Jeff Peires, in his 1971 Honours thesis, put forward the idea that a great confederation of all the Xhosa chiefs, including not only Ndlambe and Ngqika, but also Hintsa of the Gcaleka senior house and the leaders of the Thembu nation, all came together and agreed on a plan to launch a major attack against the colony, designed to eradicate the pernicious settler presence and colonial rule once and for all.⁹¹ This theory flies in the face of everything ever written about this period. Even Peires himself seems hesitant to take the proposition very far, as he remained steadfastly dedicated to the idea that the root cause of problems on the frontier was the implacable hatred between Ndlambe and Ngqika.

Peires based his argument on a few odd reports which trickled into the ears of the British. A recaptured runaway slave explained the basic developments. Suspicions that something was up were then fuelled by a report from Khoikhoi 'spies' who reported the presence of even Ngqika at a series of 'rejoicing' events which included other top ranking chiefs. As Fraser

put it, 'Gika and Psambie with a number of their followers met at the Kat River where they remained in consultation and merriment for several days, and about that time, from the 16th January to the 3rd March, the Kaffers murdered no less then 11 People in this colony'.⁹²

Uncertain as these isolated reports may seem, they are supported by a wide range of circumstantial events. First, the nature of the theory is entirely consistent with the Mda theory that the institution of traditional leadership acted to unify. As we have already seen, the alleged bitter relationship between Ndlambe and Ngqika has been shown to vacillate, exhibiting as much cooperation as hostility over time.

If the combined Xhosa national forces had agreed to a major attack on the colony, surely a certain period of preparation should be evident. Indeed, the first half of 1818 witnessed unprecedented levels of not only cattle thefts, but also murders of those who offered resistance. Like other periods in the history of this era, it is clear that accelerated cattle raiding was orchestrated as part of moving towards war. First, such raids frightened off a significant portion of the white settlers. Secondly, they strengthened the amaXhosa economic basis of security by providing greater numbers of cattle. Thirdly, the raids tested the military strength and will of their opponents. Fourthly, such stepped up incursions allowed the amaXhosa to plunder the very assets that gave the colonists their military advantages: horses, guns, ammunition and iron. It is interesting to note that after 1817, no more horses were returned to the colony as tokens of good will. Indeed horses were increasingly used by the Xhosa in the military encounters.

Descriptions of a rather abrupt change in conditions in the first part of 1818 are all consistent with these actions. Even the sharply pro-colonial historian, G. M. Theal viewed this time as major turning point.⁹³ However, being dedicated to the feud between Ndlambe and Ngqika as the central factor in frontier events, he cannot quite explain why things changed so drastically. He attributes it to three causes. First, he notes that during this period, Ndlambe's alienated son, Mdushane, became persuaded by senior councillors to drop his allegiance to Ngqika and rather support his father.⁹⁴ Theal describes him as the most able of all the Xhosa chiefs living at the time. The credit that he gives to the councillors is consistent with the way that the unifying principle worked. His second point is the rise of Makhanda to prominence. He is viewed as someone who dedicated his whole energy to building the Xhosa confederacy. Again, such a rise in prominence is consistent with the unity tendency, simply naming Makhanda as a powerful driving force behind it. It is significant to note that all oral traditions about Makhanda remember him as someone who never wavered in his supportive loyalty to Chief Ndlambe. As the unification took hold, it would not be surprising that

Ndlambe, the honourable old chief with an unprecedented thirty years of experience in dealing with colonial aggression, would play a significant role in the emerging confederation. Theal's third point is that it was the weakening of British military strength that left room for the Xhosa, inevitably, to overrun the Zuurveld and plunder colonists. This view, which keeps the British at centre stage, is shared by most colonial historians.

In addition to the circumstantial evidence of some vague rumours and the noticeably stepped up raiding, the British authorities actually uncovered a serious plot to overthrow them during this time period. At the time it was probably viewed as the deeds of a few renegade individuals. However, it fits exactly with the timing and circumstances of the emerging new united Xhosa force. Three Khoisan convicts escaped from the Uitenhage prison on 1 March 1818, stole some horses and then took refuge with chief Gita, a former principal councillor of Ndlambe. He agreed to support them in an attack on Uitenhage to include murdering Magistrate Cuyler and burning the whole town. However, the chief sent along only four men to assist and the plotters were eventually captured and tried. Geswind, the leader, was sentenced to hang, while his colleagues received sentences of 10 years on Robben Island.⁹⁵

If Ngqika's own behaviour is looked at broadly, he can be seen as at least initially being in line with the rest of the chiefs. Although he complained in 1817 about losing followers to Makhanda if he enforced the spoor law too strictly, he never tried to do so with any zeal. His participation appeared to be calculated, as was Ndlambe's, to merely appease the British, but go no further. Indications that he acted in concert with the rest of the chiefs in early 1818 take several forms. First, there are the reports that he took part in the series of 'rejoicing celebrations'. Secondly, during this time he took an additional wife, which would have sealed an alliance with other royals. Thirdly, during this period he expressed virulent bitterness against his former friends, the missionaries. After a three day visit to the mission station in mid April 1818, Ngqika launched into a tirade against his mission escorts who travelled with him back to his kraal. He strenuously objected to mission teachings against the wearing of traditional insignia and facial painting, saying:

You have your manner to wash and decorate yourselves on the Lords day and I have mine the same in which I was born and that I shall follow. I have given over for a little to listen at your word but now I have done for it, for if I adopt your law I must entirely overturn all my own and that I shall not do. I shall begin to dance and praise my beast as much as I please and shall let all see who is the lord of this land.⁹⁶

Amidst the increasing tensions, Williams was abandoned by all the people from Bethelsdorp, including Dyani Tshatshu, the only individual Williams could speak with, with 'any satisfaction'.⁹⁷ When they got back to

Grahamstown, his former flock informed Fraser that Ngqika's people had descended upon them, burnt their wagons and stolen all the iron – another indicator of building military ambitions.⁹⁸

If the united Xhosa chiefs were preparing for a major attack on the colony, something went quite wrong before it could be carried out. What exactly the trigger might have been, the colonial written records do not reveal. But it is clear that all the rest of the now united chiefs came to view Ngqika as a threat to their intentions. We can see that he mended his relationship with Williams sufficiently to continue requesting gifts from the Governor, and that he is likely to have valued having such a powerful 'friend' who did his best to uphold the notion that Ngqika was indeed the chief over all other chiefs. But by October, 1818, the confederation fell apart. All the military preparations that had been intended for the united attack on the colony now were expended on a well-calculated plan to truly put the errant chief in his place once and for all. Ngqika's wavering in the direction of the British could not be tolerated, if they were to be effective against their real enemy. So he had to be dealt with first. Perhaps the ferocity can be traced to the huge resentment of Ngqika's flaunting customs when he clearly knew better.

Conclusions

The break-down of the unity principle heralded the spiral of tragic events which are most familiar to historians. The combined forces of Ndlambe and Hintsa decimated Ngqika at Amalinde in October 1818, driving him to take refuge at the nearest British military post. Upon Ngqika's cry for help, the British then undertook the infamous Brereton raid in December, which took 23,000 head of cattle from Ndlambe's followers, leaving them destitute. This, then triggered the most massive clearance of the Zuurveld ever witnessed, when Ndlambe's forces swept all colonial farmers away in the early months of 1819, before finally attacking British military headquarters in Grahamstown in April. The British had thoroughly panicked, declaring a state of emergency which allowed them to call up every able-bodied man to help them defend the frontier. With reinforcements of fresh troops from England, they launched their most massive invasion ever in July. This war concluded with Makhanda's voluntary surrender, Ndlambe's fleeing to the far north and Ngqika being forced to give up vast areas of his own territory. Yet, even amidst this massive collapse of unity, little flickers of the old uncle/nephew relationship peeped through. Shortly after the battle at Grahamstown, Ngqika asked for permission to visit Ndlambe to recover some cattle. Not long after the end of the war, Ngqika asked if he could receive his uncle back from exile. The British refused both requests, but are likely to have been ignored. Ndlambe soon settled near present-day East London, where he lived

peacefully without rancour under Ngqika's leadership throughout the 1820s. This was a decade that saw Ngqika losing his favoured status with the British. He lost his own lands, saw his son's villages subjected to massacres and even had to disguise himself as a woman to elude British soldiers sent with orders to kidnap him. Thus, the British approach to colonial conquest assisted to restore the unity that was so hard for the Xhosa leaders to maintain on their own. Ngqika's death, just one year after Ndlambe died, in his nineties, suggests that the eccentric younger chief could not live without the steady guidance of his mentor. The unity principle might be said to have survived through even the most trying of tests.

Notes

1. Noel Mostert, 1992, *Frontiers*, 360.
2. Personal interview, Mda Mda, 12 August 2005.
3. For example, see J Hutton, ed., 1887, *The Autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström*, Vol. 1. 45.
4. Jeff Peires, 1981, *House of Phalo*, 59.
5. George Thompson, 1827, *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*, Parts 2 & 3, (1968 edition) 216.
6. See Timothy Stapleton, 1994, *Maqoma, Xhosa Resistance to Colonial Advance*.
7. Justus, (Beverly Mackenzie), 1837, *The Wrongs of the Caffre Nation*, 55.
8. Johannes van der Kemp, in *Transactions of London Missionary Society*, 1801, 465.
9. Nomathamsanqa C. Tisani, 2000, Unpublished PH D Thesis, 'Continuity and Change in Xhosa Historiography during the Nineteenth Century: an Exploration through Textual Analysis', Rhodes University History Department, 51.
10. Basil Holt, 1954, *Joseph Williams and the Pioneer Mission to the South Eastern Bantu*, 64.
11. Ibid.
12. Jeff Peires, 'Ngqika, c. 1779-1829', in C. Saunders, ed., 1979, *Black Leaders in Southern African History*, 28.
13. Mostert, 369.
14. Ibid.
15. *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, 19 April 1817. The tiger-skin here would refer to the traditional leopard skin worn by royalty alone as a sign of their rank.
16. Van der Kemp, 465.
17. Peires, 'Ngqika', 15.
18. Peires, *Phalo*, 211, Fn. 27.
19. Peires, 'Ngqika', 17.
20. Thompson, 197.
21. Van der Kemp, 466.
22. Thompson, 194.

23. Thompson, 194.
24. George Cory, 1910, *The Rise of South Africa*, Vol. 1. 44.
25. Peires, 'Ngqika', 19.
26. 'Reminiscences of an Old Kaffir', *Cape Monthly Magazine*, Vol. III., July to December 1880, 290.
27. Thompson, 201.
28. Thompson, 195. In a much later publication 'Old Kaffir' related the story in a very similar way. However, since Thompson's book had long been published by then, it is possible that the narrator was familiar with it and gave the same version as if it was an authentic oral tradition.
29. Peires, 'Ngqika', 19
30. Thompson, 194.
31. 'Reminiscences', 291.
32. Thompson, 195.
33. Donald Moodie, 1841, *The Record; or, a Series of Official Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Tribes of South Africa*, Col. Collins journal 1809, 13.
34. 'Reminiscences', 292.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid, 292.
37. Collins, 14, and Stockenstrom, 26.
38. J. Barrow, *An Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa, 1801-1804*, Vol. I., 151. 'Gaika was a young man at this time under twenty years of age, of an elegant form and a graceful manly deportment; his height about five feet ten inches; his face of a deep bronze colour, approaching nearly to black; his skin soft and smooth; his eyes dark brown and full of animation; his teeth regular, well-set and white as the purest ivory.' Cited in Peires, 'Ngqika', who notes that Ngqika took offence at Barrow's paltry gifts. 22.
39. Van der Kemp, 397 and 415.
40. Ibid, 466.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Peires, 'Ngqika', 22.
44. CO 2563, 2 March 1808, 'Conversation between Major Cuyler Pro. Landdrost of Uitenhage and the Caffer Chief Slambie', on the 25th February 1808.
45. W.K. Ntsikana, 'Imfazwi KaThuthula', in W. B. Rubusana, ed., 1906, *Zemk 'inkomo Magwalandini* 53. Translation from isiXhosa by Pamela Maseko.
46. Ibid.
47. Theal, *History of South Africa*, Vol. 1, 294.
48. Cape Archives, CO (Colonial Office) 4838 Lord CH Somerset Letter Book from 19 June 1815 to 17 Oct. 1816, 16 Dec. 1815.
49. Ibid.

50. Cape Archives, 1/UIT/15/3 Letters Despatched, Miscellaneous and Statements from the District of Uitenhage 1816 and 1817, 3 Aug 1816.
51. Ibid.
52. CO 4838 Lord CH Somerset Letter Book from 19 June 1815 to 17 Oct. 1816, 7 June 1816.
53. Council on World Missions, Box 6, Williams Report, 15 June 1816; 7 Aug 1817. In addition to endless requests for goods, ranging from handkerchiefs to axes, they held long discussions on theology, who sent the missionaries, Christian worship practices and what was expected of true believers. Ngqika and his wives learned to drink tea twice a day and started to try to learn the alphabet. Though Ngqika appears to have been genuinely curious, he claimed that his councillors 'refused to come'. Some of the mission staff thought that he was indeed 'converted' but Williams was 'always in doubt respecting him – His heart seems to be set on things of no value'.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Thomas Pringle, 'Letters from South Africa, No. II – Caffer Campaigns, the Prophet Makanna', *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, January 1827.
60. 1/UIT/15/3 Letters Despatched, Miscellaneous and Statements from the District of Uitenhage 1816 and 1817, Cuyler to Fraser, 21 Oct. 1816.
61. CO 4838 Lord CH Somerset Letter Book from 19 June 1815 to 17 Oct. 1816, 22 Aug 1816.
62. George M. Theal, 1902, *Records of the Cape Colony*, Vol. XI, Letter from Lord Charles Somerset to Earl Bathurst, 23 January, 1817, 253.
63. Ibid. 252-3. Of 145 families that had been lured into settling in the Zuurveld near military posts with offers of living with reduced rents, 90 had fled by early 1817 and 3,600 head of cattle had been stolen. Theal, *History of South Africa*, Vol. 1, 323.
64. George M. Theal, *Compendium of South African History and Geography*, third edition, Lovedale 1877, 184.
65. 1/UIT/15/3 Letters Despatched, Miscellaneous and Statements from the District of Uitenhage 1816 and 1817, letter from Cuyler to Williams at Kat River, 24 March 1817.
66. Theal, *Records of Cape Colony*, Letter from Lord Charles Somerset to Earl Bathurst, 24 April 1817, 306. This show of force consisted of 'one hundred dragoons, detachments of the 83rd, 72nd and Cape Regiments, a small detachment of artillery with two field pieces, and three hundred and fifty burghers, armed and mounted', Holt, 60.
67. Holt, 58-59.
68. CO 2613, Letter from Fraser to C. Bird, Colonial Secretary, 31 July 1818.
69. Holt, 59, Williams believed this was a tactic designed to place the blame on Williams if anything went wrong.
70. Holt, 59.
71. Holt, 60.

72. Theal, *Records of Cape Colony*, Minutes relative to a communication with and of a conference between His Excellency Lord Charles Somerset and the Caffer Chief Gaika at the Kat River on the 2nd April 1817, 310.
73. Theal, *Records of Cape Colony*, 'Minutes', 311.
74. *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, 19 April 1817.
75. Theal, *Records of Cape Colony*, 'Minutes', 311. The chiefs included Ndlambe, Botoman, Nqeno, Mnyaluza and others.
76. Theal, *Records of Cape Colony*, 'Minutes', 312.
77. *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, April 1817 reports that 'the caffres made such a clacking during the whole conference, that it was with difficulty the parties could be heard', and Holt, 61.
78. Ibid.
79. Minutes of Evidence before the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements), 1836, 569.
80. Theal, *Records of Cape Colony*, 'Minutes', 313.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Justus (Mackenzie), 71, Ngqika also noted that, without being able to write down things, as the British were busy doing, he would not be able to recall all that had been said. Theal, *Records of Cape Colony*, 'Minutes', 315.
84. Peires, 76.
85. Peires, 76.
86. CO 2608, Report of Commandant Muller, 6 Nov. 1817, enclosed in Cuyler to Bird, 7 Nov. 1817.
87. Peires, *Phalo*, 61.
88. Jeff Peires, 1971, 'Causes and Development of the Frontier War of 1818-19', B.A. Honours Thesis, University of Cape Town, History, 76; CO 1/UIT/15/4 Letter from Col. Cuyler to Major Fraser, 22 January 1818 and Letter from Col. Cuyler to Landdrost Van Kervel, George District, 18 February 1818.
89. Ibid.
90. CO 4840 Letter from C. Bird, Colonial Secretary to J. Williams, Kat Rive Mission, 19 June 1818, giving summary of correspondence.
91. Peires, 'Causes'.
92. CO 2613, Letter from G. Fraser, in Grahamstown, to Col. Bird, Colonial Secretary, 31 July 1818.
93. Theal, *History*, 328.
94. Ibid.
95. 1/UIT/15/4 Uitenhage Letters Despatched July 1817 to February 1819.
96. Holt, 80.
97. Holt, 81.
98. CO 2613, Letter from Major Fraser to Col. Cuyler, 9 May.

