

BELIEFS AND VALUES YESTERDAY AND TODAY[°]

The peoples of the Eastern Cape, like people everywhere, are concerned with the fundamental questions of existence. Where do we come from? How was the world created? What happens after death? Perhaps most important of all, what are the causes of evil and misfortune?

The "Cape Nguni" believe the world was created by a Supreme Being called *uMdali* or *uQamatha*, but he no longer concerns himself, to any great extent, with the details of his creation and no prayers or rituals are directed to him. The origin of men themselves is ascribed to the myth of the *eLuhlangeni* reed-bed or they are believed to have emerged from holes in the ground. Alberti, who visited the region in 1807 and wrote an account about the way of life of its inhabitants, *amaXhosa*, could glean no more of their cosmological ideas than a myth which he quotes: "In the land where the sun rises there was a cavern from which the amaXhosa and, in fact, all peoples, as also the stock of every kind of animal, came forth. At the same time, the sun and moon came into being to shed their light, and trees, grass and other plants to provide food for man and cattle". When the missionaries commenced work among the amaXhosa, they hesitated to equate *uMdali* or *uQamatha* with the God of the Bible and used a Khoi word, *Thixo*, to refer to him. Today *uThixo* is the general term for God used by both Christians and traditionalists.

The beings from whom the people actively seek assistance are the ancestors (*iminyanya, izinyanya, amathongo*), the dead members of the lineage. These are believed to continue to take a close interest in their descendants and to brood over the homestead. Ancestors like their names to be remembered and to be kept informed of all important events, such as births, initiations, marriages and deaths. If they are neglected they may send misfortune and even sickness to their descendants. They often appear in dreams and indicate the beast that should be slaughtered for them. The important ancestors tend to be men, the deceased fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers, although some say that women also become ancestors. A special ritual, performed about a year after death, formally transforms the spirit of the dead father into an ancestor and thereafter his name is included in the praises intoned at the rituals. Responsibility for officiating at a sacrifice is vested in the *inkulu*, the lineage head, who must sometimes make long journeys to the homesteads of scattered lineage members to discharge office. The sacrificial goats and oxen are slaughtered in the cattle kraal which is sacred to the ancestors. Formerly a deceased homestead head was buried at the gate of the cattle kraal, but among the amaXhosa of the early 1800s it was apparently the custom to leave the body of a commoner out in the veld to be eaten by hyenas. Alberti also records mourning customs for widows. On the death of her husband, the widow would take an ember from the fire and kindle a new fire out in the veld. She remained in "her lonely place in the veld" for a month, living on herbs and wild vegetables. After this period she discarded her clothes, washed her entire body,

[°] Source: "Religion", in "The Republic of Transkei" (1976), Chris van Rensburg Publications, Johannesburg, ISBN 908393-06-7 (pp. 60 - 66)

put on a grass skirt and returned to her home at sundown. Here she was given an ember with which to start anew fire and drank sweet milk ritually to end her period of impurity. The cow from which the milk was taken was never milked again or killed: it was impure and allowed to die a natural death. A widower did the same, but remained a fortnight in the veld. He took some hairs from the tail of an ox, threaded on them some copper rings and wore this necklace until the hair perished.

The ancestors are not the only cause of misfortune, however, nor are they the most feared in this respect. It is believed that most illness and trouble is sent by individuals called witches or sorcerers (*abathakathi*). Witches are ordinary people who, through malice, envy and greed, send misfortune to their fellows. They do this either by leaving the body sleeping in the hut and going out to meet other witches in the veld, or, more usually, they use familiars to work their infamous purposes. The best-known of these familiars is perhaps *utikolashe*, a little man often kept in a store-hut by his owner, but there is also *ichanti*, *umamlambo*, *impundulu*, or lightning bird, and the dreaded *isithunzela*, or resurrected corpse, dug up by witches and used to do their bidding.

Witches are believed to have sexual intercourse with their familiars and frigidity in women is sometimes attributed to this. But the really frightening thing about witches is that they attack their nearest and dearest. They typically harm neighbours or close kin, and this reversal of normal morality is symbolised in the belief that witches walk backwards, or ride backwards on the backs of baboons.

With this belief in the mystical causation of misfortune, the first question that arises when someone gets sick is: *who is bewitching me?* Is the illness caused by witches, or are the ancestors angry and punishing me for some neglect of custom? To ascertain this, it is necessary to consult a diviner (*isangoma*). Diviners are called to their profession by the ancestors themselves, who send a special illness called *ukwethwasa*. Someone diagnosed as ill with *ukwethwasa* must apprentice herself (most diviners are women) to an established diviner and learn the art of divining and healing from her. Diviners commune with the ancestors who indicate to them the exact cause of the 'illness'.

In the past, reaction to the discovered witch was swift and violent. She was killed, with all her family, for witchcraft may be inherited and all would be tainted. Sometimes the witch was tortured to make her confess. Today the accusation of witchcraft is a criminal offence but accused witches often leave the district to escape public disapproval.

Another important specialist is the herbalist (*ixhwele*, *inyanga*). Rather like a pharmacist, he is a specialist in medicines which are used for a wide variety of purposes - promoting fertility in fields and stock, protection against lightning and thieves, and to ensure success in uncertain enterprises. Sometimes the professions of diviners and herbalist are combined in the same person.

It is probably true to say that most people in the Eastern Cape still believe in the reality of witchcraft and magic, and that even Christians feel the closeness and loving care of their ancestors. **In many ways the system of belief described above**

is more satisfying than the rather cold explanation in terms of scientific laws, which explain only *how* things happen, not *why*.

The Christian community tends to refrain from making ritual killings to the ancestors, but points to the Christian doctrine of the communion of saints as a justification for their continuing reverence for their forefathers. Most Christians in the Eastern Cape are members of one or other of the "mainstream" churches and the African Independent Church Movement is not as active in the Eastern Cape as it is in other parts of the country. Christians are the main agents for social change. Sunday is widely observed by Christian and traditionalist alike.

The religious rituals described so far are all related to the immediate family and lineage. In the past there were other rituals, on a "tribal" scale, involving all "tribesmen". Some were essentially religious, in that they invoked the ancestors of the "chief", while others seem to have been more magical in nature. The main communal rituals were for rain-making, securing fertility of lands and crops, protecting the country against lightning and hail and strengthening the "chief" and the army.

Responsibility for rain-making was vested in the "chief" who employed a special rain-doctor to perform the ceremonies which, as a central rite, include the killing of a black-coloured animal. Sometimes, if rain did not fall, special prayers were offered to the "chief's" ancestors.

The "chiefs" of the *amaMpondomise* relied for rain-making on certain San ("*Bushman*" / "*abaThwa*") families who lived in the Tsolo area until 1910 and subsisted on "tribal charity" in recognition of their services.

Among the *amaBhaca* no one could begin to plant before the "chief" had used his medicine to secure a good crop. At the end of winter the "chief" sent word that on a certain day representatives of all families should gather at the great place, each bringing with him a small basket containing choice seeds of millet and maize. On their arrival, all seeds were put into large baskets together with seed from the "chief's" fields, and the whole doctored with medicines. The baskets were then refilled and the representatives returned home with "the blessed seed of the great place". Protection of the country against lightning and hail was achieved by placing on the boundaries of the tribal territory medicated pegs smeared with "dark medicines" from the great place, while the maize crop was protected from blight by a ritual, again initiated by the chief, called *abagjimisi bokudla* ("the runners of the food"). Girls and unmarried young women ran through the fields of maize, plucking the dwarfed cobs rotten with blight. They slept the night at the great place, and the following day ceremoniously threw the cobs into the river.

By far the most important communal ritual was the annual feast of the first fruit, called *ulibo* by all the population groups except the *amaBhaca* and the *amaMpondo*. No one could partake of the new harvest ripening in the fields before it had been ritually "tasted" by the "chief" at a ceremony held at the great place, with a ritual eating also in each homestead. Among the *amaMpondo* and the *amaBhaca* this was combined with a doctoring of the army and, among the *amaBhaca*, of the "chieftainship" itself. Among the *amaMpondo* the ritual was called *ingxwala* and among the *amaBhaca*, *ingcubhe*.

The Bhaca *ingcubhe* always took place at the end of summer, usually during February or March, when the maize, millet and pumpkins were ripening. Some time before, the "tribal" herbalist (*inyanga yempi*) and his assistants collected medicines in the forests. These were stored in a special hut in the royal homestead, in which the sacra of "chiefship" were also kept. Men were sent by the "chief" to build a special cattle kraal in which the ritual was to be performed, while the people practised cattle racing and prepared their festive costumes. Also, certain men went secretly to the fields of surrounding peoples, bringing back cobs of green maize, sweet reed and green calabash.

On the day of *ingcubhe* the army concentrated at the great place and, in a remarkable ritual manoeuvred beforehand by the "chief", sang songs which appeared to insult him and accuse him of misgovernment. Later, the chief ritually tasted the medicated green stuffs and spat (*khafula*) strong medicines to the four points of the compass to strengthen the "tribe" against enemy attack. Finally, the army went to the river and washed themselves in protective medicines. Performed annually in the old days, *ingcubhe* was the most important ritual of the amaBhaca, symbolically bringing together the whole community and strengthening the all-important "chieftainship".

These religious and magical rituals expressed symbolically the importance of certain basic institutions in the "Cape Nguni" society. What is their *value system*, their conception of morality? How did, and do, the people of the Eastern Cape today conceive the 'good man' and correct behaviour between man and man - *man and woman - child and adult - community and individual?*

One very basic value is the health, fertility and well-being of man, cattle and crops. Another, equally important, is the attainment of harmonious social life and co-operation and goodwill between kin and neighbours, and the elimination of discord. These values are interrelated, for, as we have seen, failure in health and fortune is attributed to failure in social relations. Illness and misfortune are thus explained in moral terms.

There are also other basic values. "Cape Nguni" society is not egalitarian, but divided on the basis of rank and age. The "chief's" lineage is superior to that of commoners. There is also a class of nobles - those belonging to minor lineages of the "chief's" clan. Lineages themselves are stratified into genealogically more senior and less senior lines. Strict respect is enjoined between members of one generation and those above it. Perhaps the most important moral rule is that respect should be shown to lineage seniors. Children are taught obedience (*intlonipho*) to parents: they must interrupt adult conversations and they must always address them formally. Parents whose children fail to behave well are said to feel shame (*iintloni*). Younger brothers must respect elder brothers, and lineage members their lineage head. Respectful behaviour to seniors is a moral good in itself but, as has been seen, it is also a factor in religious practices. Every time a killing is made for the ancestors, human dependence on the supernatural is acknowledged. Respect is due to all seniors, whether related or not.

At beer-drinks and other feasts, members of various age groups sit separately, and young men do not eat from the same dish as their seniors. A junior may not sit on

something while a senior sits on the ground. Women respect men and it is not considered right for a woman to join a man's group unless asked.

A good man not only respects seniors and shows loyalty to his kin group. He is also a good neighbour. The amaMpondomise say that in times of trouble one can expect assistance from neighbours rather than from kinsmen. Neighbours assist one another working in the fields, bringing home the harvest, and in times of sickness. Generosity is the virtue par excellence of chiefs, and every man tries to act like a "chief". Of course, people sometimes need to be forced to behave morally. If a man refuses help, he may be refused help when his time comes to need assistance. The extreme condemnation of the witch (who attacks his/her neighbours) shows the high moral value placed on neighbourly co-operation. A good man is one free of the least taint of witchcraft.

Perhaps the greatest virtue in "Cape Nguni" society is the willingness to die for a "chief". Loyalty to a "chief" and his subordinate political officers was a supreme good in the past, and there are many stirring accounts in "tribal" histories of deeds of incredible valour. Linked with this is the prohibition of manslaughter within the "chiefdom", for this involves killing the "chief's" man. To this day "chiefs" enjoy considerable loyalty, especially among their more conservative followers.

Traditional arts and crafts are not highly developed. The potter's art was formerly practised fairly widely, but there was not much wood-carving, probably due to the scarcity of large trees. Iron-working was known, but, as iron is not found in the Eastern Cape, it had to be obtained through barter. The preparation of skins had reached a high stat of development. The main weapons were various types of throwing spears, clubs and large, oval cow-hide shields. The bow was unknown as a weapon. Grass-work, in the form of mats, beer-strainers and baskets, is well established. Beadwork has been developed into a highly artistic tradition, though there does not seem to be a symbolic `language´ in the beadwork as among the amaZulu. The only musical instruments were the musical bow and, in Mpondoland, the friction drum. Percussion drums were not used but a rolled ox-hide is used as a drum at diviners' séances and shields were beaten before the army went into battle. Ox-horn trumpets were recorded among the amaBomvana and amaXhosa. The main type of musical expression is vocal, usually accompanied by clapping and dancing. The easternmost groups, e.g. the amaBhaca and amaMpondo, perform a stamping dance, similar to that of the amaZulu and differing markedly from the `shaking´ dance of the amaXhosa, abaThembu and amaBomvana of the westernmost parts of the Eastern Cape where the emphasis is on control of the muscles of the chest.

This was essentially an oral culture in which ideas, traditions and disputations, couched in the musical cadences of *isixhosa*, or in music itself, were more important than material objects. One of the most valued characteristics of a councillor was his *ability closely to analyse the complex points in a law case*, or to swing an argument through logic and rhetoric. Another valued achievement is the ability to *recount the events of the past*, hence the glorious tradition of story-telling that has given pleasure to generations. Recently an American scholar, Harol Scheub, produced a study based on his witnessing of over 4.000 performances of Xhosa story-tellers (*iintsomi*) and even the non-Xhosa reader can now share in the adventure of `Little Red Stomach´ or Umkuywana and the activities of *imbulu*

and *uZimu*, and to this day it is an exhilarating experience to listen to a Xhosa story-teller.