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ROYAL BY BIRTH, RULER BY THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE:
AMAXHOSA ROYALTY REVISITED

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Introduction

During the last decade of the 20th century the African continent is witnessing a movement of democratisation of governments.[1] For various reasons, some of which are international pressure as well as a genuine search for stability and peace in their countries, African statespeople have embarked on a process of testing popular will by giving people a vote to decide the shape and character of their governments. In the wake of the heave towards democracy, there has been a general feeling of euphoria reminiscent of the uhuru days of the 1960s. This is what has prompted some political analysts to speak of the second independence of African states. The great leap towards democracy by the last bastion of white rule in Africa is now in the annals of history. It is however, premature to make an assessment of the democratisation process in Africa. In the case of South Africa, the dust of celebrating the election results has hardly settled.

In trying to understand the democratisation process taking place in Africa, it is important to remember that there is a multiplicity of forces at work. The major factors are the western influences and beliefs in democracy as well as the African value system in government and popular will. The general

elections that have been conducted in a number of African countries during the 1990s have all been modelled on formats followed in western countries. The Westminister model is the core that has been inherited. In addition, the electioneering process; the campaigning, canvassing for votes, use of the media and modern technology, duplicated what happens in western democracies.

The existing faith in western democracy dictates an unmitigated observation of the established elections canon. Unfortunately, the post independence African "crisis" has robbed Africans of the confidence of creating an African democracy. Yet, the African politicians and voters continue to operate within the ambit of African political value system. The colonial and post colonial political system have not obliterated the ability for Africans to contruct their own political reality and arrive at political judgements. While the framework of the general elections is fashioned according to the western design, the decisions taken are influenced essentially by the Africanness of the electorate.

In this paper a study is to be made of the political dynamics in a Xhosa polity during the first half of the 19th century. During this period amaXhosa still enjoyed political independence. They were, however, already in contact with the Boers and the British. It is from the latter that there are written documents that give clues about the character of a Xhosa kingdom. In addition, oral tradition continues to be a valuable source of information on key aspects of Xhosa politics.

The documents that cover the period under study are largely creations of British civil servants and European missionaries. There are a few writings by African who were missions educated by the 1850s. A serious handicap to be borne in mind when using these documents as sources of information on Xhosa politics is that the chroniclers were commenting on what was virtually a foreign society. The African converts were to some extent alienated from their societies and were beginning to see reality differently from their people. The documents also tend to focus mainly on reports on points of interaction between amaXhosa and the settlers. They are records of responses of amaXhosa to settler action. The recorders lacked the opportunity of observing amaXhosa in control of their lives and world.

Some of the oral traditions of amaXhosa have been recorded and stored as written texts. Further, oral tradition continues to be handed down by word of mouth even during these days of literacy. The oral texts are subjected to the process of elimination, selection and mutation. What is deemed insignificant by the collective mind is left out and forgotten. Yet, dominant themes are nurtured and survive. Among amaXhosa royal traditions have been used as the dominant ideology of the powerful and have to a large measure survived. It has to be noted however, that clan and family historics give a view of the different formations within Xhosa society and how they related to each other. At the same time the impact of the colonial order and Christian teachings have left an imprint on the political outlook of amaXhosa. There has been a definate fusion and

mutation of ideas and understanding and, in the process, new traditions have been invented. There also has been a wholesale adoption of western political ideology. The current political slogans and songs can be viewed as the new oral texts of the times.

The precolonial political values, the colonial political mutation together with the contemporary political perceptions continue to exist and, at varrying degrees, influence the political thinking of Africans. A revisitation of the precolonial political order is as necessary as an analysis of contemporary politics in gaining an understanding of the political dynamics in African communities. A study of the early 19th century Xhosa polity stands to inform analysts on some aspects of political thinking and actions of amaXhosa. AmaXhosa form part of the bigger South African society. Even though different from other African societies, yet they at the same time share similarities. A study of the Xhosa political world will reveal some elements operational in the wider South African politics.

AmaXhosa

Perceive themselves as descendants of Ntu[2]. Phrases like <u>lusapho lukaNtu</u> - Family of Ntu and <u>zinto zikaNtu</u> - descendants of <u>Ntu</u> - are phrases amaXhosa use to refer to themselves. Linguistics classify isiXhosa as belonging to the siNtu languages family. Geographically isiXhosa is the southernmost of the various siNtu languages that are scattered over the African

continent. From centuries of contact with people who spoke Khoisan languages, isiXhosa has been heavily influenced by them. Three clicks were incorporated and now are part of isiXhosa.

There is no clear indication about the origin of the word Xhosa. Maingard[3] contends that it is from the word //Kosa which means angry men in a Khoikhoi language. Another tradition related and recorded towards the end of the 19th century claims that amaXhosa are the descendants of a girl, Nomagwayi, who went out with inggina - hunting party. During her absence from home she fell pregnant and because of the scandal the hunting party dreaded returning home. They settled in the new territory and founded amaXhosa. This word came from ixhontsa, a name for hunting dogs.[4] This founding story is hardly known by amaXhosa and may well be example of an invented tradition. The presence of the click 'X' in the word is, however, a strong indication that the gelling of the Xhosa group took place when they were in contact with the Khoisan.

There is no agreement among scholars about the territory that can be defined as belonging to amaXhosa. Peires[5] contends that between 1700 and 1850 the boundaries of the territory occupied by amaXhosa did not often extended west of the Sundays river and east of Mbashe. On the other hand Mqhayi[6] outlines Hintsa's kingdom as stretching from Mbashe to Maxelexwa (Gamtoos). Yet, a well known claim is the one that identifies iNxuba (Fish River) as having formed the boundary to Xhosa western expansion. The myth of iNxuba (Fish River) as being the western boundary of

amaXhosa can be traced to the claim made by van Plettenberg that he had signed an agreement with Gwali chiefs, observing iNxuba as a boundary. Settler historian upgraded that claim to a fact. Recent scholarship has however moved away from the Fish River boundary myth. It is not possible to establish a fixed boundary that demarcated Xhosa territory. Changing factors and circumstances meant that Xhosa sphere of influence was forever in a state of flux.

Cattle occupied the centre of the economic, religious, social and political life of amaXhosa. That meant that even though amaXhosa were agriculturalist, the pastoral element in their lives dominated as well. They were, subsequently, a transhumant people who, seasonally, occupied different places in accordance to the needs of their stock. That meant that areas which were dry for agricultural farming, could still be desirable as pastures. The present day Somerset East, though rather arid, seems to have been important enough to have been named after Queen Nonjoli, wife of the Xhosa king, Tshiwo who reigned during the second half of the 17th century.

The sphere of influence of amaXhosa was further determined by the changing political influence that was exercised over the neighbouring Khoisan and Ntu communities. King Tshiwo, for example, is remembered for having expanded the Xhosa kingdom during his reign through the incorporation of amaGqunukhwebe who otherwise had been a group that had not been part of the Xhosa hegemony.[7] AmaNtinde and amaNgqosini are other groups that are

known to have been Khoisan but were assimilated into the Xhosa world. Information given to Jan van Riebeek by the indigenous people at the Cape referred to a sovereign in the east who lorded over the various Khoisan tribes. The sovereign was said to be the king of the Chobona.*

At the centre of the Xhosa polity was the royal family, amaTshawe. The ascendance of amaTshawe to power is shrouded in founding myths that are not easy to interprete. A story is told of how Tshawe fought with his brother Cira and the former won the battle with the assistance of amaRudulu. AmaCira power was broken. A new dynasty was founded. If anything, the myth conveys the military conquest of the then existing polity. The word amaqhawe which means the brave ones can be linked to amaTshawe - the military ones who became royalty.

Various attempts have been made in the past to draw up genealogical lists of the Tshawe royal house. Such exercises have been accompanied by attempts to attach dates to the various names that appear in the list of Tshawe kings. The major weakness in such an undertaking is that the Xhosa conception of time is different from that of westerners. The names of the kings that have been retained in collective memory have been elected from a longer list. The list of names is not chronological in the western sense. The question of the date of the founding of the Tshawe dynasty can only be a matter of conjecture.

The set of praise names reserved for amaTshawe conveys the sense of reverence with which the dynasty is regarded by amaXhosa. Anyone of the Tshawe clan is regarded as the special person of the royal blood - umntwana wegazi. Royalty is good and beautiful - abahlekazi. Their royal highnesses are credited with having outstripped everyone in growth and development - wena wakhula silibele. Ironically, referring to royalty as umntwana - child is a constant reminder of the limits and boundaries that are placed on their Highnesses. In their being children, the implication is that royalty is innocent and needs to be guided and protected by adults. The adults are the various sectors of the community who execute certain duties in collaboration as well as in competition with one another in the realisation of the political drama in the Xhosa polity. The ruler cannot exercise his/her rule except in conjunction with his/her people. The belief is aptly expressed in this phrase: inkosi yinkosi ngabantu - the king realises his kingship through the will of the people. The king cannot be unless the people so will.

This concept of an African democracy tends to escape analysts when they undertake a study of the Xhosa polity. Scholars tend to approach it with preset conceptions of a government. They search for a centralised unit or, worse still, they bring along a European post enlightenment notion of government. What does not fit into their existing framework is defined in negative terms. It is in this vein that Hammond - Tooke refers to the decentralised character of the Xhosa polity as being segmentary in nature which he perceives as having been a cause of an

outstanding feature - instability.' The confederal character of the Xhosa kingdom instead of being a weakness was the best way of attaining a sharing of power between members of the royal house. Further sharing occured between the royal house - abantwana - and the rest of the population. The differences in interests between royalty and commoners could cause instability, on the other hand it brought about a tautness in Xhosa politics. There was always that striving for a balance between royal power and popular will. Switzer's view that amaXhosa and other siNtu speaking neighbours were organised in hierachical structures with chiefs of royal lineage on top,[10] fails to capture the essence of Xhosa politics. Certainly Xhosa royalty never got near the political clout that was enjoyed by the divine royalty of European dynasties.

The king was a central figure in the kingdom and his position had a strong unifying role. He was the key figure in the nation's religious ceremonies. Ultimately, the supreme court of justice lay in his council. Even the special duties that were assigned to the king were still restricted in some form or another. For example, where religious ceremonies were concerned, they were performed in conjunction with national inyanga and other leading figures. That is why there was a political crisis among amaXhosa when uKumkani Gcaleka claimed ukuthwasa - that is, he was being called to be inyanga. Through that process, ukumkani was amassing a lot of power, and there would have been no way of controlling him.

At the beginning of the 19th century the monarch on the Xhosa throne was Hintsa, the son of Khawuta. He resided along iGcuwa a tributary of the Kei river. The Gcuwa area was then a recent site for Xhosa kings. Hintsa's predecessors, Khawuta, Gcaleka and Phalo had settled further west of Gcuwa. An eastward retreat had been necessitated by the growing unrest at the point of encounter between the indigenous people and the Boers and later the British. Hintsa had several provinces under his sway. There was an inland province that stretched Xhosa territory up to the arid zone of the present day Somerset East. The senior inkosi at the time was Ngqika who co-ruled with other Tshawe iinkosi of various houses like imiDange, amaNtinde and amaMbalu. Groupings of abaThwa, hunter gathers, hovered on the edges of Hintsa's kingdom free and dependent according to circumstances prevailing at a given time. There was the coastal province of amaGqunukhwebe under Chungwa after his death in 1811 was succeeded by his son Pato. To the east of amaGqunukhwebe was a new province that was being carved by Ndlambe of the Rarabe house. From the east and north-east had come stragglers or refugees who had sought refuge under the protection of ukumkani. The newcomers were the founding members of what later came to be known as a Mfengu people who were to make an important mark in Xhosa history in later times.

Abantwana begazi - the Royal House.

Were an identifiable class of people who belonged to the ruling house. It is important to note that on rare occasions

assimilation of outsiders into the House was possible. When King Tshiwo incorporated amaGqunukhwebe into the Xhosa polity, he awarded Gqunukhwebe leaders with membership of Tshawe clan.[11] Up to the present Gqunukhwebe ruling house is regarded as of Tshawe descent. On the other hand excision happened to the descendants of Ngconde who there after were perceived as not full members of the Tshawe clan. AmaNgconde could then intermarry with amaTshawe. The ruling dynasty had mechanisms of checking and counter balancing power among themselves. Even the one who had been proclaimed ukumkani or inkosi in a province or region had his authority circumscribed in direct and indirect ways by other royals.

Hintsa and, at a later stage Sandile of amaRarabe exercised their authority under the shadow of an elder brother; Burhu (died 1857) for Hintsa and Maqoma (died 1873) for Sandile. In an African setting an elder brother - umkhuluwa - stands in the place of a father and is an important figure in a man's life. Both Burhu and Maqoma were towering figures in Xhosa politics during their times. Maqoma was virtually co-regent with Suthu, Sandile's mother during the minority of Sandile. Maqoma never left the centre stage even after the ascendance of Sandile to the throne. He shouldered the responsibility of military resistance to the British until he died prisoner in their hands. For weighty decisions uKumkani did not just consult ibhunga,the council, but iinkosi in the outlying provinces as well. When the missionaries approached Hintsa with a request to allow missionary activity in his place, he informed them that he would have to consult not

only his elder brother Burhu, but Ngqika and Ndlambe as well.[12]

In times of external threat iinkosi rallied around their kumkani and gave support. Besides the army Komkhulu, at the Great Place, Xhosa men grouped themselves around iinkosi. The same military support that could be given to ukumkani could be withheld or worst still be directed against ukumkani by a Tshawe prince. In fighting among the Tshawe princes did not diminish their perception of themselves as family who still had a lot to share especially at a religious level. In effect, the royal family was its own watchdogs against absolutism.

Azinakuba mbini iinkunzi ebuhlanti obunye - There can be no two bulls in one kraal.

The manner of succession to the throne was such that the heir to the throne was identified only during the declining years of ukumkani. By not practising primogeniture amaXhosa were able to reduce potential rivalry between father and the sons of the his youth. When Hintsa was killed by the British in 1835 his heir Sarili was iKrwala - fresh from the circumcision school. Ngqika died in 1829 When Sandile his heir was but a boy. Xhosa rulers ascended to power in their youth. Even though they were sons of the deceased ukumkani they were strangers to him as well. In the young kumkani there was a freshness of youth, and further, there was no distinct mark that had been inprinted on the young sovereign by the previous monarch. The dead king could not continue ruling through his son. There were other influences

that were allowed to shape ukumkani. These forces vied with each other for influence as well as collaborated to produce a healthy state of popular participation in Xhosa politics.

INkosi nguNina - The status of the mother decides whether the candidate will be ruler or not.

One of the deciding factors for kingship candidacy was the status of the mother. She was expected to be a royal princess in her own right. Thembu royalty supplied the royal wives for amaXhosa although some also came from Mpondo and Mpondomise dynasties. Such a prerequisite for mothers helped reduce competition among the princes for the throne. At times however, the royal rule was wavered, and other considerations took precedence. Fault could be found even with a royal mother leading to her son's exclusion from candidacy. This is what happened sometime at the beginning of the 19th century in the house of amaMbalu. A Thembu princess' son, Thole, was replaced by Nqeno whose mother was of the Ngqosini clan. How Nqeno won the day was that it was noted that his mother was "warm handed", generous, and could be a respectable mother of inkosi.[13] The fact that rulers had several wives meant that the various sectors could have a choice to decide on the most capable candidate after juggling a number of criteria one of which was the character and identity of the mother of the candidate.

It is fascinating, however, to note that the custom of obtaining an heir from the Great House was, at times, strictly adhered to.

On several occasions, when the Great Wife failed to produce an heir, several steps would be taken in order to secure an heir for the house. At times, one of the junior wives of the king would be attached to the Great House, and her son would then qualify for kingship. When Ndlambe died in 1829, Mhala, son of a "concubine" of the late Ndlambe, but who had been an attendant to the Great House, succeded as inkosi of amaNdlambe.[14]

The custom of identifying an heir during the declining years of the like of ukumkani meant that there were frequent interregnums. The famous example was when Ndlambe was regent for his nephew Ngqika. During such periods even though a regent might be appointed, the queen mother was given political space. She continued to be an important factor in the politics of the nation during the early days of the young ukumkani. Queen mother Suthu, wife of Ngqika and mother of Sandile became regent when her husband died in 1829. During the difficult years of the 1830s and 1840s faced with the growing British threat, she wielded political powers in collaboration and at times an opposition to her step-sons Maqoma and Tyhali. She effectively guarded the throne for her son who eventually took over in 1840.

The political space enjoyed by the queen mothers (of ukumkani as well as iinkosi) meant that the sectors having influence in politics within the confederation were expanded. An outsider, she unavoidably brought into politics constituencies that would otherwise have had no say or influence. When van der Kemp moved into Ngqika's province in 1799 and was wanting to establish a

mission station, he was interrogated by Ngqika's mother, MamThembu, on his mission.[15] Of greater significance, however is the fact it was Damien, a former slave, and therefore a complete outsider, who actually undertook the interrogation.[16] In addition, the oral tradition on Tshawe, the founding ancestor of the Xhosa dynasty, contends that his early retainers were his mother's people.[17] The queen mothers sector effectively balanced the influence of other sectors whose position could have been assured by birth. Her political influence was a window that could allow external influence in. It could include people who would otherwise not fit in the traditional sectors. The mothers people were an important power base for the Xhosa ruler.

A fair judgement of the part played by women beyond the queen mothers in Xhosa politics is difficult to arrive at. The absence of women from colonial records may be due to the fact that they did not play a major role in politics. The other reason, however, is that on occasion when they did participate colonial officers were just not in the habit of interacting with women in the political field and therefore women were excluded from their records. It is a fact, however that queen mothers were accompanied by women attendants in their meetings with colonial officials. Women also featured during the times of war as ambassadresses between the warring sides.[18] That the British soldiers never respected their status and instead raped them,[19] does not reduce the important role they were playing. Princesses seem to have mainly been used by their male relatives to seal political alliances though marriage contracts. The irony is that

it was the same princesses who then exercised political power in their capacity as queen mothers after marriage.

A certain route to political influence by women was through the passage ukuthwasa. For inyanga there was no gender role in the Xhosa society. A woman could be a powerful inyanga that looked after the health and well being of ukumkani and his family. In that position inyanga had the scope to topple even the highest political players. An inyanga could virtually remake membership of ibhunga. Even in his brief visit to Ngqika's court and country Alberti could not but remark about the many women iinyanga. He observed, "It is mainly the women who fruitlessly practice the benevolent magic and use this deceit for their own benefit".[20] The activities of women doctors are a common thread that runs through the records of missionaries. After all in the 1857 crisis that befell amaXhosa the central figures were two young women Nonkosi and Nongqawuse.[21]

Amaphakathi - the Insiders - The Counsellors

Formed the inner circle of ukumkani or inkosi which was known as ibhunga. The notion of an inner circle implies exclusion. While there were in reality outsiders incorporation into the circle was flexible. There were a number of qualifying criteria for membership. In the end amaphakathi were a motley crowd really bound together by the common task of being the chief and immediate advisers of ukumkani. Ibhunga was made up of members whose diverse backgrounds effectively gave then a popular

representatives colour.

There were the grand old men respected for their age and experience who belonged to the previous reign. The new kumkani had to inherit a set of those sages who in effect provided continuity with the past. Historians came from this group so were specialist in rituals and tradition. Some of them had inherited their positions from their fathers, others had earned the status. There were these who had the advantage over others by belonging to those clans from which amaphakathi had always come. AmaNgwevu, amaJwara amaGiqwa amaQwambi were some of the families from which political leaders came. The elders could effectively use the fact that they were associates of the deceased king, and were therefore close to an ancestor as a political leverage. Nonethelss, there were other deciding factors which could effectively bridle their power.

Membership to the inner council could also be through specialisation in an esteemed skill. A specialist position like that of imbongi - bard - had the potency to influence political direction, to strengthen or weaken the position of those in power. Imbongi, believed to be the mouthpiece of ancestors, enjoyed a latitude to comment negatively or positively on the state of the nation including the actions of those in power. The position of being imbongi yakomkhulu - national bard could run in the same family. Anyone, however, who evidenced skill and talent would be accepted as having been called to carry out the task. Being imbongi was perceived as a calling. Thus, such

powerful political commentators could come from any sector of the population. Mqhayi, who was newly arrived among imiDange from Thembuland, was invited by Ngqika to his Komkhulu when the latter heard him bonga - sing praises.[22] Tha national inyanga - itola lakomkhulu - was anyone whose skill and charisma were convincing to ibhunga. More often than not these important personages were complete outsiders to the Xhosa community. They wielded tremendous power in their task of looking after the spiritual welfare of ukumkani and the people. According to the Reverend Ayliff Hintsa's favourite inyanga was a "Fingo Doctor, Umhloko Umkhulu"[23] The fate of itola largely depended on political development in the polity. In the event of a political disaster, like defeat in battle, itola, like politicians being forced to resign, in western democracies, went down with the disaster.

The doctoring of the army and ibhunga was a secret undertaking which could not be witnessed by missionaries, whose presence would have polluted the ritual in any case. Early 19th century missionaries however were keenly aware of the power enjoyed by iinyanga or amatola. In their battle against them, competing for spiritual as well as political space, they painted a negative picture of a "witchdoctor" from which these otherwise respected specialists have not fully recovered. Their role of strengthning the king and the army, building their confidence, binding them and reinforcing their morale has been lost to the eyes of scholars. Their royal highnesses could not be rulers without the support of the specialist who in the final analysis were ordinary people.

Merit was also a factor in deciding whether one could be an iphakathi or not. There were certain attributes that were regarded as essential for amaphakathi to have. Any man who had oratorical skills, who could, through the use of language, present persuasive argument[24] in imbizo - national assembly - was ideal to sit in court and participate in the deliberations. Henry Smith, while negotiating with Hintsa and Mtini, iphakathi, during the 1835 war observed, "I was never more astonished than by the ability with which Hintsa arrived in every point and by the shrewd and cautious opinions expressed by Umtini[25]". Ukumkani was the supreme judge who had the task of reviewing cases referred to him from all over the kingdom. The assistance and advice he got from his assessors decided his popularity as a ruler.[26] Eventually, it decided how loyal and faithful his subjects would be. Leadership skills that could be discerned in such dangerous activities like hunting and fighting war were admired. Colonel Collins in 1809 was informed that courage and military conduct were held in high estimation by amaXhosa.[27] Those who were seen to be so gifted were then given the opportunity to serve ukumkani and the people by becoming the king's military advisors. Langa, who otherwise was a minor son of ukumkani Phalo rose to be a prominent inkosi who founded the amaMbalu house. Langa was renowned for his courage and skill at inggina - national hunt for large animals like elephants and rhinoceroses.[28]

The youth had scope for political expression and participation

in a Xhosa polity. Ibhunga was not a monopoly of the elders and the specialists only. The young kumkani brought along in his own political contingent when he ascended to power. The king's age mates who had grown up with him Komkhulu, since the age of 12 and who had hunted with him and most importantly, who had gone to the circumcision school together were important players in the politics of the nation.[29] Youth power can be seen in the tradition about the ascendance of Ngeno to power which has been referred to earlier. It was the young people who were responsible for the displacement of Tole. In the tradition, as recorded in "Isigidimi", it is said that Kumkani Gcaleka, on being told of the political developments among amaMbalu, simply concurred, observing that MamNgqosini had been declared senior wife by choice of the youth.[30]

"Inkosi Engenawo Umhlaba Iphulukene Nobukhosi Bayo"[31] - A King without land looses his authority to rule.

Land, being such a crucial aspect of kingship was a commodity that could be obtained and retained through the assistance of subjects. It was in this respect that able-bodied men could give or withhold their support of the king. All Xhosa men were subject to military conscription, according to Reverend Kay's observation in 1826.[32] Military power was the strongest political card that young men and able bodies men could use to assert their own political presence in the kingdom. Their support could ensure the defence of land as well as conquest and extension of new territory for rulers. On the other hand in the

event of political dissatisfaction subjects had an option to vote with their feet and give allegiance to ikumkani or inkosi of their choice. Such desertion left the rulers in an exceedingly vulnerable position. Individuals could leave on their own or they could be part of a contigent under a minor prince, that broke away either to attach themselves to ikumkani or to establish a new outpost. This threat was real. According to Kay, "Every Kaffer however humble his station in society is a politician and ever evinces the greatest possible interest in all subjects of a political nature".[33] When Collins met Ngqika in 1809 the latter had just suffered a split by the desertion of Ndlambe and his retainers. He had further "suffered a greater dimunition by another insurrection of his people".[34] Ngqika's hold to political power at that time seems to have been just by the skin of his teeth. He was destitute with only the cows and often the oxen. His people only occupied a few square.[35] Towards the end of his life Ngqika once again had to contend with desertion by some of inkosi who had attached themselves to him. In 1827 Dundas reported to Bourke that "Enno and Botma [Nqeno and Botomane] have deserted him and intended joining Hintsa"[36]

Land, wherein sacred sites were found where, the bones of the deceased were interred and, further, the abode of ancestors was, in reality, inalienable. Loss of land was therefore a political as well as spiritual trauma. In the event of loss of land ukumkani and inkosi were immediately emptied of their sovereignty. Repeated annexation of land by the British during the 19th century wreaked havoc to political integrity of the

rulers and eventually their people. A people's defence of the land assured the rulers of the continuation of their position.

It would appear as though the political system in a Xhosa polity defied order. There seems to have been a lack of a tightly controlled framework from which to operate. Established custom could be bent in many ways. It is in this light that analysts have had cause to complain about a multiplicity of weaknesses in the Xhosa political systems. What has hitherto not been fully appreciated is the pliability and flexibility of the customs that guided amaXhosa as they played their politics. The guiding principles behind political thought among amaXhosa were those that shaped Xhosa view.

An analysis that presents the Xhosa universe as operating in a hierachical structure or identifies struggles or tension between binary opposition as key formation that made up Xhosa reality is yet another form of intellectual colonialism. It is an imposition of Western epistemology as a format for interpreting the rest of the world, a continuation of the arrogance of equating Western thought and practices with universalism. An attempt needs to be made to view the Xhosa world from the way amaXhosa perceived and live[27].

A diagramic presentation of the Xhosa world view, rather than be depicted in an ascending versus descending order or in juxtaposed opposites that never meet, can best be captured in circular symbols. The circle dominated the lives of amaXhosa. It was a

symbol deeply arched in their collective psyche. The very houses they built and lived in, the fireplace which warmed them, cattle byres, the sun, the moon and the horizon were circles without a beginning or end. Time was an unending circle too. The seasons of the year merged into one another without an obvious break or a beginning, so did the day into the night. This in no way implied that there is no day or night, winter or summer as seperate entities.

Constructs or cells that made up the Xhosa systems of thought were circular in so far as they were entities yet they overlapped and intersected with other constructs to produce the communal life, so dominant in the Xhosa character. An overlap with other cells helped for a transfusion of the elements of the constructs into one another. That is the main reason for the absence of Absolutes in the Xhosa experience. Not even the circle of death is isolated. There can be no room for rigidity. A circle, by its very nature can expand without loosing its form. Formations were elastic enough to accomodate what could be perceived as a contradiction or an opposite by those who were not appreciative of the Xhosa thoughts system.

Naturally, such a system applied in the political arena as well. There were various political contituencies (which were not necessarily geographical) that were constructs in the Xhosa political reality. They were entities operating with in delimited zones, yet in constant intersection with other constructs. The royal constituency was clearly identifiable with

defined roles and separate existence. Yet, royalty was actually fully operational in interaction with the commoner constituency (as well as others). The circles of either constituency could accomodate the others character. Visitors to the homesteads of ukumkani and iinkosi did not fail to notice how their royal highnesses could be engaged in common pursuits like looking after cattle, just like any Xhosa man. Similarly, boundaries set up to define gender role role were criscrossed in both the male and female directions. Xhosa women could become doctors with religions and political power. There was no rigid role identity.

The breaking through the walls of the various circles even though it was a practise embodied in the outlook of life of amaXhosa, still had to be systematic. It was not anarchical. Certain flood gates were used as channels for opening or enlarging the circle. Age, for example was effectively used to expand the circle of women in their social lives. Older women could thread where younger ones were forbidden. A call by ancestors through dreams or ukuthwasa ploughed through fences of gender. Women doctors with unrestrained authority could cut down any one. Possession of skills like raise singing were also perceived as gifts from ancestors and no restraint could be placed on the exercise of these gifts.

CONCLUSION

In this paper an argument is put forward that there are strong precedents of popular participation in the Xhosa political world. Structured as a kingdom but run an confederal lines, the Xhosa polity was an arena where a number of contituencies enjoyed political expression. Royalty was at the centre of political life. At the same time various groupings - amaphakathi, the youth, women, special people - all contributed in making the Xhosa political system the taut and balanced experience it was. The lives of political leaders like Hintsa, Sutu, Ngqika, MamThembu Maqoma in a way verify the arguments presented. There is a strong indication that being royal was no guarantee to power. Other factors, largely decided by a variety of sectors in the xhosa society, were taken into consideration in finally deciding who be ukumkani would be.

If as Jean claims,"African traditions ..... are not fossilised artifacts in the historical consciousness"[34], but are alive and continue to inform Africans in their decisions and perception of reality, how much influence do they have on contemporary politics? Can it be that the circle of royalty, or remnants there of, still exists and is in constant interaction with other constituent circles like women, youth and the special?

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