CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and Its Frontier Zones, C. 1806-70

Author(s): Helen Bradford

Source: *The Journal of African History*, 1996, Vol. 37, No. 3 (1996), pp. 351-370

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/182498

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of African History*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Journal of African History, **37** (1996), pp. 351–370

Copyright © 1996 Cambridge University Press

WOMEN, GENDER AND COLONIALISM: RETHINKING THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH CAPE COLONY AND ITS FRONTIER ZONES, *c.* 1806–70

BY HELEN BRADFORD
University of Cape Town

FOR a number of years, scholars have been pointing accusing fingers at both African and imperial historiography for widespread neglect of both women and gender. Female invisibility, it has been argued, is the 'most dominant trend in African historiography *vis-à-vis* women'; there have been '"gross sins of omission"'.[1] Historians of empire have attracted similar critiques: 'few experts on imperialism have seriously considered gender'.[2] Located in both historiographical traditions, scholarship on the British Cape Colony and its frontier zones is vulnerable to similar strictures. Outside a tiny ghettoized corpus of 'women's history', gender is rarely deployed as a concept; women and socially constructed relationships between the sexes have been badly neglected.

This is evident in both syntheses and monographs. In a 1980 edited collection, for example, four articles on this region contain no indexed entry for bridewealth or marriage or women.[3] In a 1981 history of Xhosa-speakers, the work of women – the only 'class of permanent dependent labourers' if one existed – is allocated fourteen sentences.[4] A 1987 general history of South Africa accords Portugal more index entries than women.[5]

It was, however, becoming more common to confess to androcentric sins, typically in introductions or epilogues. An 'insensitivity to issues of gender runs right through the book', admitted one, reissuing his account of African peasants in 1988. His analysis, he observed, 'would have been enhanced had it included a discussion of *women*'.[6] '[W]omen's war experiences are noted only fleetingly', stated another of his 1991 account of the impact of the South African War on blacks in the Cape.[7] Fleeting glimpses continue to this day. A 1995 monograph on Victorian Cape Town does not use the concept of gender; specific references to women occupy less than three per cent of the text.[8]

[1] A. Imam, 'The presentation of African women in historical writing', in S. Kleinberg (ed.), *Retrieving Women's History* (Oxford, 1988), 31, quoting G. Emeagwali. See also B. Awe, 'Writing women into history: the Nigerian experience', in K. Offen, R. Pierson and J. Rendall (eds.), *Writing Women's History* (London, 1991), 211–12.

[2] M. Formes, 'Review essay: beyond complicity versus resistance: recent work on gender and European imperialism', *Journal of Social History*, XXV (1995), 629.

[3] The articles, by C. Bundy, T. Kirk, S. Newton-King and S. Trapido, are in S. Marks and A. Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980). [4] J. Peires, *The House of Phalo* (Johannesburg, 1981), 4, 41, 104.

[5] T. Davenport, *South Africa* (3rd ed., Johannesburg, 1987), 681, 691.

[6] C. Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (2nd ed., London, 1988), preface to second edition, np.

[7] B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War* (Cambridge, 1991), 3.

[8] V. Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town* (Cambridge, 1995).

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

For the pre-industrial Cape – a region and period claimed as formative in South African history – some solutions have been suggested for what is now increasingly recognized as a problem. Calls have been made for texts on slavery to be 'fleshed out' by including women,[9] for frontier women to be studied from the perspectives 'of helpmate, intermarriage, or as a governing force both within and outside the family unit.'[10] 'The "important" areas in which men were so prominent in colonial history – commerce, legislation, wars – only superficially seem to outweigh the "ordinary" activities that women performed, such as fashioning garments, cooking, and, more important, running families', observes another.[11]

Yet for some, these gendered conceptualizations of women as 'helpmates', engaging in 'ordinary' activities that 'flesh out' existing accounts, are inadequate. Taking women or gender seriously, they contend, involves a rather more substantive rethinking of traditional approaches to the past.[12] This has been argued in more detail for broader South African history. Scholars have long been delineating the consequences of 'the endemic gender-blindness' of most historians of South Africa.[13]

What follows – a focus on texts produced since the late 1960s, when feminist strictures first began to affect the writing of history internationally – aligns itself with these latter critiques. It is not an argument that a timeless, androcentric discourse pervades all histories of the nineteenth-century pre-industrial Cape and its frontier zones. It is an argument that interpretations marginalizing women or gender are problematic, as are those practising sexual apartheid: by conceptually segregating women and 'the family unit' from the 'important' domains of men. There is a large intellectual price to be paid when either of these approaches are followed, I argue. It is paid not least in misrepresentations of colonialism and men. And there is a large intellectual gain when gender and feminist insights are integrated into *every* aspect of history. They have potential for transforming our vision of the past.

THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

One troubling feature of many texts is that women are not merely neglected: their existence is often conceptually denied. Numerous scholars linguistically

[9] N. Southey, 'The historiography of Cape slavery: some reactions' (Paper presented at 'Cape slavery and after conference', University of Cape Town [hereafter UCT], Aug. 1989), 13.

[10] H. Lamar and L. Thompson, 'Epilogue', in H. Lamar and L. Thompson (eds.), *The Frontier in History* (New Haven, 1981), 314.

[11] R. Shell, *Children of Bondage* (Johannesburg, 1994), 285.

[12] For this region and period, the key critiques are J. Guy, 'Gender oppression in Southern Africa's precapitalist societies', in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (London, 1990), 33–47, and P. van der Spuy, 'Gender and slavery: towards a feminist revision', *South African Historical Journal* (hereafter *SAHJ*), XXV (1991), 184–8. But see also S. Marks, 'Racial capitalism: a cultural or economic system?' *SAHJ*, XXVIII (1993), 316; P. Scully, 'Private and public worlds of emancipation in the rural Western Cape, *c.* 1830–1842', in N. Worden and C. Crais (eds.), *Breaking the Chains* (Johannesburg, 1994), 202.

[13] L. Manicom, 'Ruling relations: rethinking state and gender in South African history', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XXXIII (1992), 463. For an overview of criticisms, see P. Hetherington, 'Women in South Africa: the historiography in English', *Int. J. Afr. Hist. Studies*, XXVI (1993), 247–69.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

subsume 'women' under the category 'man'.[14] The 'ordinary' person is often conceptualized as male. In addition, ethnic, racial and class categories are frequently gendered, referring implicitly only to men.

The political implications of this androcentric bias have often been noted: the writing of history becomes 'part of the politics of the gender system.'[15] Some intellectual consequences are less well known. Yet when scholars use mental maps in which woman and man were one, and that one was man, they frequently misdirect readers.

People's sex, and the sexual composition of communities or occupations, are obvious problem areas. To discuss all Xhosa doctors as men masks the fact that they were predominantly women; to analyze populations as though they consisted entirely of men can be deeply confusing.[16] To represent the female historian Nosipho Majeke as a man is simply incorrect.[17] The Xhosa woman who allegedly symbolized the start of black feminism similarly loses her sex in four accounts: she and her female and male companions all become the 'sons of chiefs'.[18] Gender imperialism extends even to physical appearances: 'The Xhosa mark the transition from childhood to maturity by circumcision'.[19]

As this suggests, many statements about ethnic groups would be better formulated if qualified by the adjective 'male'. 'The Griqua way of life was fundamentally based on hunting, pastoralism, trading, and raiding'; 'the Nguni' were preoccupied with cattle; 'the precolonial Basotho' had a 'consultative political style'; 'the settlers gained control over their own

[14] Examples are legion: for a recent text, see S. Newton-King, 'The enemy within', in Worden and Crais (eds.), *Breaking the Chains*. Categories implicitly including women in this collection include 'masters', 'townsmen', 'frontiersmen', 'Bushman', 'bondsman' and 'white men'.

[15] J. Scott, 'The problem of invisibility', in Kleinberg (ed.), *Women's History*, 15.

[16] J. Peires, 'Nxele, Ntsikana and the origins of the Xhosa religious reaction', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XX (1979), 55, and *The Dead Will Arise* (London, 1989), 129. The white population of Cape Town in 1819 was allegedly 'made up of Government officials, merchants, hotel keepers and some artisans'. Was it almost entirely male?: A. Ross, *John Philip (1775–1851)* (Aberdeen, 1986), 16. How does one interpret the claim that 'the 1,300–1,400 Khoikhoi living on boer farms' in Graaff-Reinet owned 7,571 cattle, averaging 5 cattle 'per man'? Were the 1,300–1,400 Khoikhoi all men? Did tax enumerators only count men among the many more Khoi on the farms? Or should 'per man' be read as 'per person'?: C. Crais, *The Making of the Colonial Order* (Johannesburg, 1992), 44.

[17] T. Kirk, 'The role of the missionaries in conquest', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XVII (1976), 143; C. Saunders, 'James Read: towards a reassessment', in *The Societies of Southern Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Collected Seminar Papers* (hereafter *SSAS*), VII (University of London, 1976), 22.

[18] The same phrase is used by A. Odendaal, 'South Africa's black Victorians: sport, race and class in the nineteenth century', in J. Mangan (ed.), *Pleasure, Profit, Proselytism* (London, 1988), 197; J. Rutherford, *Sir George Grey* (London, 1961), 302; C. Saunders, 'Africans in Cape Town in the nineteenth century: an outline', in C. Saunders and H. Phillips (eds.), *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, (Cape Town, 1980), ii, 23; E. Walker, *A History of Southern Africa* (3rd ed., London, 1968), 237. The existence of the woman herself is largely confined to a little known biography: J. Hodgson, *Princess Emma* (Johannesburg, 1987).

[19] Peires, *House of Phalo*, 20. 'Nguni physique' has also been described as 'moulded not by ... tillage ... but by the leaner demands of herding, the chase and the athletic competitions that trained them for combat': N. Mostert, *Frontiers* (New York, 1992), 195.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

legislative affairs in 1872': none of these claims is particularly accurate for women.[20]

'It was in the courts of law that the Afrikaner felt the effects of anglicization most profoundly', it has also been argued, because 'he was not excused jury service'. She was, however. So how helpful is the claim that courts were central for 'the Afrikaner'?[21] Similarly, to argue that 'legal equality for all' existed in the Cape by the 1840s bypasses the legal disabilities of women in general and wives in particular.[22] It is essentially an assertion dependent on the assumption that 'all' means men.

Numerous arguments about class formation are also problematic because of neglect of gender bias in state policy and popular practice. In 1820, newly arrived British settlers in the Cape were allegedly granted '100 acres for each immigrant'.[23] Yet this option was not available to female immigrants. Decades later, there was supposedly a 'flowering of an African peasantry' which displayed an 'individualistic ethic'.[24] '[M]iddle-sector peasants' were allegedly 'potential if not actual voters'; 'most [poorest peasants] survived as participants in the migrant labor system'; indebtedness was 'the crucial device in separating Transkeian peasants from the means of production'.[25] However the vote, and much migrant labour, were only open to men. Most female peasants had long been separated from key means of production. As legal minors they could by law neither contract debts nor attain individualism. Their ability to 'flower', as they reaped harvests legally belonging to men, is also debatable.

Consider, too, interpretations of ideologies. Claims made about 'Christian egalitarian' values include missionaries regarding 'all humankind as potentially equal' and thinking Christianity allowed a person to advance to a position 'that his or her talents and virtues merited'.[26] Yet women could not be ordained. The Bible – and many churchmen – strongly opposed sexual equality. Similarly, John Philip, a leading missionary, has been praised for his 'egalitarian ideals' and belief that 'the absolute rights belonging to every

[20] M. Legassick, 'The northern frontier to *c.* 1840: the rise and decline of the Griqua people', in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds.), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1840* (2nd ed., Cape Town, 1992), 400; M. Wilson, 'The Nguni people', in M. Wilson and L. Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford History of South Africa* (2 vols.) (Oxford, 1969), i, 127; D. Coplan, *In the Time of the Cannibals* (Chicago, 1994), 34; L. Switzer, *Power and Resistance in an African Society* (Madison, 1993), 132.

[21] R. Davenport, 'The consolidation of a new society: the Cape Colony', in Wilson and Thompson (eds.), *Oxford History*, i, 285.

[22] D. Warren, 'Class rivalry and Cape politics in the mid-nineteenth century: a reappraisal of the Kirk thesis', *SAHJ*, XXIV (1991), 119. Entirely focused on race, numerous scholars agree that British rulers introduced 'legal equality', but differ over the dating of 'the removal of arbitrary forms and differential standards of justice, together with the legal emancipation of subject groups': A. Bank, 'The erosion of urban slavery at the Cape, 1806–1834', in Worden and Crais (eds.), *Breaking the Chains*, 85; Davenport, 'Consolidation of a new society', 272–3.

[23] B. le Cordeur, *The Politics of Eastern Cape Separatism 1820–1854* (Cape Town 1981), 2.

[24] P. Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa* (London, 1989), 108.

[25] Switzer, *Power and Resistance*, 90; Bundy, *Rise and Fall*, 130.

[26] Odendaal, 'Black Victorians', 195; Switzer, *Power and Resistance*, 116; Ross, *Philip*, 80.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Briton were those of political freedom, personal security, personal freedom, and private property'.[27] His 'campaign for equal civil rights for all British subjects within the Cape Colony' has also been noted.[28] Yet unless we assume the category 'British' included only women, these claims misrepresent Philip, who had stern opinions about domesticity as women's destiny, and fostered gender inequality among his children.

Then there are conclusions drawn about political domains, from which women, whether black or white, were rigorously excluded. Yet Xhosa society, we are repeatedly told, was 'democratic'.[29] One chief's proceedings were 'democratic in the extreme'.[30] Similar misrepresentations occur of events in 1853, when British rulers conceded a property- and income-based franchise to black and white men. As in much of Europe, all women were classified as voteless, alongside the insane. In a colony where a wife 'may herself have brought into the marriage the whole joint estate', poor men could, however, qualify for the vote: the new constitution deemed husbands to own all property belonging to their wives.[31]

This construction of novel gender identities, this linking of men to politics and (even propertied) women to the insane, has however been read very differently by numerous scholars. Supposedly, the Cape fell into line with what 'has been accurately [*sic*] described as the "age of democratic revolution" in Europe'.[32] 'Like liberal constitutions in Europe at the time, it abolished monopoly of power by right of birth'.[33] However, 'only the propertied could vote', since 'Cape liberalism, like British liberalism in the era of the first [1832] Reform Act, limited equality to property owners'.[34] More accurately, as in Britain in 1832, when the vote was for the first time limited to male property owners, it was also necessary to belong to the dominant sex. The colonial state was a male state: in its social base, personnel, and, not least, its military preoccupations and gender discriminatory laws.

In all, numerous androcentric interpretations have the liability not only of tunnel vision, but also of being incorrect, because they are false for women. Analyses of the 'big' questions – class formation, ideologies, the state – can clearly all be affected by what a philosopher terms the 'devastating conceptual error' of androcentric thought.[35]

[27] S. Trapido, 'The emergence of liberalism and the making of "Hottentot nationalism", 1815–1834', in *SSAS*, XVII (University of London, 1992), 40, 41.

[28] Ross, *Philip*, 73.

[29] Wilson, 'Nguni people', 124; Ross, *Philip*, 15; Mostert, *Frontiers*, 183, 202, 493, 1075.

[30] Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, 67.

[31] Cape of Good Hope, *Report of the Law of Inheritance Commission for the Western Districts* (Cape Town, 1866), xi. See also *Government Gazette Extraordinary*, 1 July 1853.

[32] G. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy* (New York, 1981), 140.

[33] N. Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa* (Oxford, 1994), 68.

[34] Fredrickson, *White Supremacy*, 183; Trapido, 'Emergence of liberalism', 35. For similar references to property as central to power, and omission of the fact that it was also necessary to be male, see Warren, 'Class rivalry', 126; R. Ross, *Adam Kok's Griquas* (Cambridge, 1976), 4–5.

[35] Personal Narratives Group, 'Origins', in Personal Narratives Group (eds.), *Interpreting Women's Lives* (Bloomington, 1989), 4, quoting E. Minnich.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

INSIGNIFICANT WOMAN, UNGENDERED MAN

Women are not, however, completely invisible. A repertoire of gender stereotypes exists in many androcentric texts, structuring ways of thinking about both sexes. On the one hand, men are largely gender neutral, conceptualized not as men but as people, linked with categories like economics, politics or race. On the other hand, women are gendered beings, with an implicit or explicit emphasis on their sexual attributes and their familial relationships with men.

Thus in the 0·3 per cent of a monograph on politics containing specific references to women, female exclusion from the vote is not noted, but almost every woman is labelled as a wife, a widow, a sister-in-law, a sister or a daughter.[36] In a 31-page article discussing agrarian capitalism, men are accorded a multitude of independent economic roles; women surface in four sentences, linked either to men or to children.[37] Similarly, a monograph on white supremacy barely mentions women, except for brief references to 'mates', and a chapter devoted to white men engaging in sex with black women.[38] A social history of slavery pays more attention to female work: it notes in particular that 82 per cent of female slaves were classified as housemaids between 1823 and 1830. Nonetheless, this was not 'manual labor': a term reserved for agricultural work dominated by men. Slave women's (non-manual?) provision of crucial services and cash-generating goods was allegedly valued less than their sexualized bodies: their 'biological duties' with 'psychosexual ramifications', their 'reproductive functions of being a wet nurse, a nanny, a mistress, and sometimes a wife', their being 'not only brought into the bosom of the family' but becoming 'in a literal sense the bosom of the settler family'.[39]

Biology, 'a modern metaphor for the old assumption that men are ungendered and women are ... the "other sex"', is similarly closely associated with women in another monograph.[40] Specific references to women occupy less than one per cent of the text; women nonetheless feature in half the illustrations. We are also referred to dark blobs in the background of one picture: the eyes of one blob, a Khoi man, were allegedly 'transfixed on a woman's large pendulous breasts'. Blood and wombs enter the tale when Xhosa women are introduced. Their huts and fields 'pulsated to the rhythms of ecological and biological time; planting, weeding, harvesting, menstruation, child-birth. A second centre, a domain of men, was more overtly social and political'. An alternative reading might be that the men's centre, often filled with almost entirely naked men, was more overtly sexual, as well as more overtly unproductive. But this is absent from an account

[36] Le Cordeur, *Politics*.

[37] R. Ross, 'The origins of capitalist agriculture in the Cape Colony: a survey', in W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido (eds.), *Putting A Plough to the Ground* (Johannesburg, 1986).

[38] Fredrickson, *White Supremacy*, 127, 94–135.

[39] Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 52, 145–6, 411–12, xlii, 304. For an alternative interpretation of the significance of their domestic labour, see E. Eldredge, 'Slave raiding across the Cape frontier', in E. Eldredge and F. Morton (eds.), *Slavery in South Africa* (Boulder, 1994), 94–6.

[40] G. Bock, 'Women's history and gender history: aspects of an international debate', *Gender and History*, 1 (1989), 12.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

underpinned by familiar body/mind, nature/culture, child/adult dichotomies. The prophecies of two Xhosa women are interpreted in terms of 'uterine dampness', a 'uterine hole'; Xhosa women are also defined as eternally 'liminal', as incapable of becoming full adults. Female hunter-gatherers are similarly infantilized: 'colonists shot the adults and captured the children and women'.[41]

Texts representing half the adult populace as inferior or unimportant members of the 'other sex' have certain obvious limitations, for analyses of men as well as of women.[42] Families, for example, cannot simply be relegated to a marginal female domain. If women, as numerous scholars claim, were wives and mothers, then very many men were husbands and fathers. These were not, moreover, insignificant kinship identities, 'disguising the relations of production'.[43] On the contrary, in a period when innumerable black and white households were centres of production, marriage was a hierarchical institution of central economic importance. It typically inaugurated new productive and reproductive relations; it was often deeply imbricated with transfers of wealth; it was closely connected to gendered class formation. In the capitalizing Cape, where marriage accorded settler men access to the property of widows, heiresses or their kin, male title holders frequently 'played a nominal role in histories which had women as their central players.'[44] In precapitalist African societies, marriage 'initiated the productive processes upon which the society was based': processes 'predicated upon male control of female productive and reproductive capacity.'[45] Or as a distressed settler expressed it of the 'heathen': 'the woman supports the man, rather than the man the woman'.[46]

Consequently, when scholars marginalize women, they simultaneously

[41] Crais, *Colonial Order*, 130, 20, 206–7, 12.

[42] The narrative strategies evoking inferiority are various: reproduction of contemporary misogynist comments without interpretation; description of women in language usually reserved for non-humans; explicit references to female deficiencies. Xhosa women, for example, were allegedly 'less capable of foraging for themselves' than men; their war-cry was 'a sharp cry like that of a wild dog'; the 'large numbers ... rejecting various oppressions, such as unwanted husbands, the levirate, and [forced sex]' were 'misfits', 'peripheral to Xhosa society', 'out of place there': Peires, *House of Phalo*, 158, 136, 77, 106. Perhaps more typically, women are simply insignificant. 'What of his family?' asks a historian, five pages from the end of his 214-page biography of a man. 'They have not figured largely in this story because there is no evidence that his two wives and children influenced his actions': D. Williams, *When Races Meet* (Johannesburg, 1967), 210. Olive Schreiner receives similar treatment, losing both her sex and her international feminist reputation in the process. 'There was hardly any impressive literature, but authors and poets such as Cooper, Schreiner, Huet and S. J. du Toit may be deemed the heralds of the South African literature of the twentieth century': P. Scholtz, 'The Cape Colony, 1853–1902', in C. Muller (ed.), *Five Hundred Years* (5th ed., Pretoria, 1993), 212.

[43] Legassick, 'Northern frontier', 365.

[44] M. Hall, 'The secret lives of houses: women and gables in the eighteenth-century Cape', *Social Dynamics*, XX (1994), 17. For women's centrality in capital accumulation in England, see L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes* (London, 1987.) Although the topic has attracted almost no attention for the nineteenth-century Cape, marriage to the daughters of wealthy men, or to widows, was highly significant for numerous men.

[45] Guy, 'Gender oppression', 41.

[46] *Proceedings of, and Evidence Taken By, the Commission on Native Affairs* (Grahamstown, 1865), 14.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

impoverish the history of both men and the region as a whole. Women's domestic labour, for example, is one of the least examined forms of work in Cape historiography.[47] Yet it was central to many men's subsistence, health, prosperity and participation in the private domains of men. African women's agricultural work has also been neglected. The consequences, one scholar observes, are failure to understand peasant economies, and history which obstructs our understanding of the past.[48] The political significance of female sexuality and reproductive labour in a colonial context has been sidelined as well. Yet, contends one historian, 'sex in the colonies was a political act'.[49] Or as a commander of the Xhosa army expressed it, blacks should 'make love, so that the black people would multiply and fill the earth'.[50]

Perhaps, however, the consequences of viewing women as insignificant and men as ungendered are best demonstrated by examining particular events. Consider, then, how neglect of men as gendered people, with identities as patriarchs or sexual beings, and neglect of women as significant actors, with links to production or politics, have affected interpretations of two well-known events.

WOMEN, GENDER AND A SLAVE REBELLION

There were only two slave rebellions in the Cape. The second has gone down in history as a cross-class and cross-racial revolt, as the 'slave uprising of 1825, in which Khoisan people also participated'.[51] Robert Ross, a leading social historian of slavery, tells the tale as follows.[52]

A slave, Galant, lived on a farm, where, statistics in the text reveal, subaltern women outnumbered men and child labourers almost outnumbered both. Galant was brutally maltreated by his master. He was deeply affected by rumours of emancipation. Cited as evidence 'of his strength of will [is] that Galant had two wives, one slave and one Khoi woman'. The 'slave wife, Betje', is mentioned in four more sentences, the last being when she is tied up to prevent her revealing that 'the slaves and Khoi' had embarked on rebellion.[53] The nameless Khoi wife does not feature again.

The description of the revolt contains a subtext: subalterns restraining Galant from killing white children. The 'maids' make their only appearance in the tale by saving these children from arson. Galant's order that a baby be smashed against a wall was also disobeyed. But three settler men were killed. Before shooting his master, Galant shouted at him: '*Moerneuker*' (mother-fucker).[54]

Aside from the abrupt intrusion of this sexually loaded term, Ross's account epitomizes broad trends in Cape historiography: in its focus on class and race, its labelling of almost every woman who surfaces as a wife, and in

[47] E. van Heyningen, 'The diary as a historical source: a response', *Historia*, XXXVIII (1993), 20.

[48] J. Guy, 'A landmark, not a breakthrough', *SAHJ*, XXV (1991), 229–30.

[49] P. Scully, 'Rape, race, and colonial culture: the sexual politics of identity in the nineteenth-century Cape Colony, South Africa', *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, C (1995), 343.

[50] Peires, *House of Phalo*, 71. [51] Trapido, 'Emergence of liberalism', 39.

[52] R. Ross, *Cape of Torments* (London, 1983), 105–16. [53] *Ibid.* 106, 112, 113.

[54] *Ibid.* 113.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the brief appearance of women-and-children. Its key features, including the absence of a gendered perspective, can be found in two more recent accounts. However, due partly to the little known work of one feminist, the outlines of a different tale are apparent.[55]

Firstly, Betje's class status has been misrepresented. She was not a slave: she was a Khoi woman. This apparently deeply affected her response to revolt. When Galant asked whether she wished to join his fight for freedom, she responded 'that he was a slave and I was free, and that I could not follow him'.[56]

Secondly, Galant was a father as well as a husband, just as Betje was a mother as well as a wife. Infant mortality, moreover, could be greater on slaveowners' farms than suggested by some scholars exploring slave women's 'failure' to reproduce the slave population. (This was allegedly due partly to female physiology: to 'hormonal imbalance' consequent upon wet nursing.)[57] Betje, who had worked as a wet nurse, had borne six children, of whom no fewer than four had died. One son had died after a flogging by Galant's master. The causes of death of the three other infants are unclear. But being a wet nurse imposed costs other than hormonal imbalances: Betje's newborn were probably deprived of breast milk and care.

Thus paying attention to Galant as a father, to his bitterness over child loss, helps explain his angry insistence that 'at least all the [white] boys must be killed'.[58] Investigating his second wife more carefully provides a third revision to the tale.

She, too, has been misrepresented. She was not a nameless Khoi woman. She was a slave, Pamela, seemingly with one child by Galant, one child by another. Moreover, as a female slave, Pamela was obliged to sleep every night with Galant's loathed master. She was in his bedroom when the massacre began. She was therefore not Galant's wife in any meaningful sense. Indeed, the '*moerneuker*' had opposed Galant's attempt to marry her.[59]

Providing Pamela with space in the tale accordingly expands our vision. Sexual competition between men was apparently an important dimension to the rebellion, infusing it right to the end. Galant was not only a slave, a husband, a father; he was also a sexual being, and this aspect of his identity was significant.

Fourthly, this was a period in which masculinity and femininity were being redefined. In addition to the 1823 introduction of legal marriage for slaves, subalterns had recently been officially informed that women could no

[55] For other accounts, see R. Watson, *The Slave Question* (Johannesburg, 1991), 50–9; M. Rayner, 'Wine and slaves: the failure of an export economy and the ending of slavery in the Cape Colony, South Africa, 1806–1834' (Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 1986), 174–89. What follows is drawn from P. van der Spuy, 'A collection of discrete essays with the common theme of gender and slavery at the Cape of Good Hope with a focus on the 1820s' (M.A. thesis, UCT, 1993), 199–244, and G. Theal, *Records of the Cape Colony from February to April 1825* (Cape Town, 1904), xx, 188–341.

[56] Van der Spuy, 'Discrete essays', 220–1, quoting from Theal.

[57] R. Shell, 'Tender ties: women and the slave household, 1652–1834', in *SSAS*, XVII (University of London, 1992), 14; M. Adhikari, 'The sons of Ham: slavery and the making of Coloured identity', *SAHJ*, XXVII, 1992, 100. A contemporary, claiming abortion was extremely common, gave slave women's minds rather more emphasis.

[58] Theal, *Records*, 273. [59] Van der Spuy, 'Discrete essays', 214, 225–6.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

longer be whipped. Pamela and others, however, were still flogged. There were also other punishments which husbands regarded as utterly inappropriate for wives. Settlers might infantilize them as *meijden* ('girls'); and Ross might reproduce the same term. But many husbands saw women differently. One slave, declared Galant, was a wife, an adult, a mother, 'and notwithstanding my mistress stripped her stark naked', and made her 'eat ordure and drink urine'.[60]

Fifthly, there was a strong gender dimension to the revolt, obscured by its description in class and racial terms. The only woman among 'the slave' and 'the Khoi' rebels was Pamela. The advantages of being part of the settler family, which have attracted some scholarly attention, were seemingly not that apparent to her. Yet all the other Khoi and slave women failed to join Galant in his militaristic resistance. Like Betje, with her two surviving infants, with her tense relationship with her abusive husband, women did not join their husbands or sons in revolt.

Thus subaltern families split along gender lines. Gender was more important in determining subordinates' participation in violent resistance than race or class. It was also, for that matter, a crucial variable in determining who survived. Some female subalterns tried to assist women settlers in whose bedrooms they slept or whose children they had suckled. Male slaves largely sought to kill masters, not mistresses.

In sum, the tale told by Ross almost entirely neglects issues which seem crucial when the story is subjected to revision from a gendered perspective. Sex, reproduction, men-and-children; gender-differentiated state policies, as well as gender-differentiated relationships to settlers, to violence, to child care and to flight; femininity, masculinity, intra-familial conflicts, bonding along gendered rather than familial lines: if these are marginalized, and women sidelined, then the story becomes somewhat skewed. Betje's incorrect class status, and the neglect of her relations with her husband and children, result in her effective identification as a collaborator. Pamela features only as a backdrop to masculine prowess, to a man's ability to acquire more than one wife. Key explanations for Galant's conduct are missing. Moreover, a key feature of the 'mass' movement he tried to construct was that it consisted only of his lover and a handful of men.[61]

WOMEN, GENDER AND 'THE GREAT XHOSA CATTLE-KILLING MOVEMENT'[62]

If Galant's rebellion can be better understood if we know more about women and gender, what of a far larger millenarian movement among the Xhosa? One teenager, with her 1856–7 calls for the Xhosa to cease cultivation and slaughter their cattle, to await the appearance of new grain, new cattle, and the resurrection of the dead who would defeat settlers, is widely remembered to this day. Consciousness remains seared by the devastation associated with her name, Nongqawuse. Perhaps 400,000 cattle were killed. Some 40,000 Xhosa died of starvation and Xhosa military resistance to colonialism was shattered.[63]

[60] Theal, *Records*, 216, see also 258.
[61] Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 96, 117.
[62] This is derived from the subtitle of Peires, *Dead Will Arise*.
[63] Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, 319.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

One scholar has already argued that we have been misled by androcentric interpretations of these events. By declining to trivialize female labour, he has convincingly demonstrated how connecting women to production radically alters perspectives. The destruction of grain, the cessation of female labour in the fields, was, he contends, a far more significant cause of mass starvation than the death of male-owned cattle. Moreover, abandoning hard work had considerable attraction for women, whose support for the prophecies was significantly greater than that of men. The androcentric concept long attached to this millenarian movement – cattle-killing – has probably obstructed our understanding of the catastrophe.[64]

This illuminating critique, however, does not extend to the consequences of marginalizing aspects of women's lives other than their labour. Moreover, cattle continue to be conceptualized as objects entirely within the male domain: an intellectual construction that, once again, reproduces male opinions of the time. As nineteenth-century Xhosa men asked, why was slaughter of stock being urged by 'a mere girl who has nothing to do with cattle?'[65]

Yet an adolescent, of marriageable age, had everything to do with cattle. The taboos surrounding her association with stock were intimately connected with 'the symbolic association of women's reproductive functions with the cattle of the lineage'.[66] Although what follows is tentative and provisional, hints in sources suggest that incorporating reproduction, sexuality and marriage into analyses is crucial. Let me try to demonstrate this by focusing on Nongqawuse herself.

In 1856, she was an orphan of about fifteen. She lived with her uncle, Mhlakaza: a diviner, a chief's councillor, an owner of large herds. Like her peers, Nongqawuse was probably regarded by her male relatives as 'the cattle of the family', due to the stock acquired on her marriage.[67]

But Nongqawuse was not yet a wife – and secondary literature, as ever, displays little interest in a single woman. She had, however, almost certainly undergone initiation ceremonies associated with puberty. These established her new status as a sexual being, an *intombi*, for whom non-penetrational sex was normal.[68] If seduction occurred, elders would sue for stock.

Yet massive cattle losses from the 1830s – in frontier wars, in drought and in famine, in the lungsickness epidemic from 1854 – were presumably

[64] Guy, 'A landmark', 229–31. The significance of cattle for subsistence has yet to be fully probed. Milk was a crucial element in many diets, but prophecies often allowed people to keep some cattle, and milk cows were the last to be killed. Trade, too, needs to be incorporated into analyses: much grain was purchased with money from the sale of hides of dead cattle. [65] Mostert, *Frontiers*, 1190. [66] Wilson, 'Nguni people', 127.

[67] J. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa* (Lovedale, 1931), 132. See also J. Zarwan, 'The Xhosa cattle killings, 1856–57', *Cah. Et. Afr.*, XVI (1976), 521; Cape of Good Hope, *Appendix I, To Votes and Proceedings of Parliament, 1858*, vol. 1, G38–'58, deposition of Nongqawuse, n.p.

[68] A photograph, depicting a well-developed adolescent, is in Mostert, *Frontiers*. Nongqawuse also referred to a female initiation rite in her prophecies. African poets and a playwright, like Xhosa oral tradition, saw her as an *intombi*: H. Dhlomo, *The Girl Who Killed To Save* (Lovedale, 1936); G. Sirayi, 'The African perspective of the 1856/1857 cattle-killing movement', *South African Journal of African Languages*, XI (1991), 44.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

wreaking havoc with older ways of regulating sexuality. By 1848, in the heartland of the region later swept by 'cattle-killing', some 80 per cent of households owned fewer than six cattle; nearly a third owned none at all. Furthermore, bridewealth had recently risen to ten oxen: completely out of reach for most homesteads.[69] Strain on traditional juridicial penalties, centred on 'eating up' offenders' cattle, combined with the extension of colonial rule from the 1840s, with magistrates appropriating rights to administer justice, must also have profoundly disrupted regulation of masculine behaviour.

The secondary literature, however, tells almost nothing about the impact on gender relations of this vast upheaval. Yet in a comparable, later catastrophe, when rinderpest decimated cattle in southern and eastern Africa, one of the cries was: 'No more cattle, no more marriages, how shall we marry?'[70] In one region, the number of marriages dropped sharply, while pre-marital pregnancies increased; in another, prostitution emerged. Throughout southern Africa, one of the key consequences was 'debauchery'.[71]

In the eyes of missionaries, 'debauchery' had long pervaded Xhosaland. Yet there are signs of a more hysterical edge to their condemnations from the mid-1840s: 'ever occurring polluting practices when a female reaches womanhood... the land is filled with fornication, whoredom, and all uncleanness'.[72] In one region, the requisitioning of virgins for sex by a chief and his councillors, a custom abrogated due to resistance, reappeared in a new form. Youths, perhaps partly because their masculinity was threatened by delayed marriages, defeat, and colonial encroachment, were extensively press-ganging young women into pre-marital relationships, despite elders' opposition.[73] There are other hints that older men were losing the ability to impose heavy penalties for sexual offences, and that ever more women were being exposed to unwanted pregnancies. Certainly in 1856, a magistrate claimed that abortion, which supposedly defiled cattle, was 'almost universally practised by all classes of females'.[74]

What of Nongqawuse herself in this era of gender and generational turmoil? Almost the only reference to her sexuality derives from a man who

[69] J. Lewis, 'An economic history of the Ciskei, 1848–1900' (Ph.D. thesis, UCT, 1984), 158, 717. Households were clustered in homesteads; 59 per cent of homesteads had ten or fewer cattle in 1848.

[70] P. Phoofolo, 'Epidemics and revolutions: the rinderpest epidemic in late nineteenth-century Southern Africa', *Past and Present*, CIIIVIII (1993), 118.

[71] Phoofolo, 'Epidemics', 142. See also J. Lambert, 'The weakening of family ties among Africans in Natal in the colonial period' (Unpublished paper), 15; L. White, *The Comforts of Home* (Chicago, 1990), 34.

[72] D. Williams, 'The missionaries on the Eastern Frontier of the Cape, 1799–1853' (Ph.D. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1960), 310–11.

[73] J. Maclean, comp., *A Compendium of Kafir Laws and Customs* (Mount Coke, 1858), 126–7.

[74] Maclean, *Compendium*, 62, see also 64, 110–11. The *Report and Proceedings of the Government Commission on Native Laws and Customs*, G 4 of 1883, contains numerous complaints about decreased punishment for 'fornication' since the 'olden time' – and, specifically, by 1856. Abortion was not previously described as sweepingly: see H. Bradford, 'Herbs, knives and plastic: 150 years of abortion in South Africa', in T. Meade and M. Walker (eds.), *Science, Medicine and Cultural Imperialism* (New York, 1991), 122.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

saw her in 1856. She neither painted herself with ochre, nor seemed 'to take any pains with her appearance'.[75] In an alternative formulation, she had, on this occasion at least, ensured she was not sexually attractive to Xhosa men.

Male sexuality was also on her mind when she first prophesied in about April 1856, when harvest failure threatened to compound decimation of cattle from lungsickness. So, too, was witchcraft, which could supposedly cause blighted crops and cattle disease; a rash of accusations had already occurred. Two men, said Nongqawuse, had appeared while she worked in the fields. One, none other than her dead father, had this message for her uncle, from a dead Xhosa paramount chief: cultivation should cease and all cattle should be killed, 'for they have been reared by contaminated hands', 'reared by dirty hands that were handling witchcraft and other things such as incests and adulteries'. 'The people must leave their witchcraft' – and 'fornications' fell under her definition of witchcraft. If they obeyed, if they performed certain tasks associated with preventing miscarriages, then grain, disease-free cattle and the dead would arise.[76]

Thus a woman had invoked the authority of the greatest Xhosa chief, to warn a diviner that those who reared cattle – men – were involved in witchcraft, fornication, incest, adultery and 'other things'. She had provided an explanation connecting pollution of cattle to male sexual offences. In a period, seemingly, of widespread sexual transgressions, of turmoil in punishing male culprits, she said strong chiefs of old regarded these misdeeds as so heinous that all cattle had been defiled, all had to be 'eaten up'.

In a society where marriages were arranged, her claim that adultery contaminated men was sweeping. Married men typically had lovers, for which wives could obtain no redress. Very many husbands were now being indicted as unclean, as defiling the animals to which brides were symbolically equated. Incest, moreover, referred way beyond the immediate family, to liaisons in the same clan. Nongqawuse also had an unheard-of injunction for men seeking relationships with widows (who, like orphans, were ever more significant in a society repeatedly devastated by war.) Widows were married to the dead, she said; they 'should not be touched by other men'.[77] If Nongqawuse made any original contributions to the innumerable millenarian prophecies, then these apparently centred around promiscuous men, engaging in sex that defiled them and the animals symbolically linked to female reproductive capacities.

This, then, is a tenative reading, focusing on reinserting gendered identities into the tale, on the pent-up frustrations associated with inability to arrange marriages, on the 'links between witchcraft, gender, and sexuality' familiar from other societies.[78] What, however, of the analyses of scholars far more familiar with the events? Consider the account of J. B. Peires, 'the premier historian of the Xhosa', whose 'compelling and convincing' analysis has been widely acclaimed.[79]

Compelling it undoubtedly is. Yet it is less than convincing about the majority of the population. The space accorded to analysing women's

[75] Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, 87. [76] *Ibid.* 79, 126, 132, 227. [77] *Ibid.* 227.

[78] R. Austen, 'The moral economy of witchcraft: an essay in comparative history', in J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents* (Chicago, 1993), 99.

[79] C. Crais, 'Peires and the past', *SAHJ*, XXV (1991), 239; Switzer, *Power and Resistance*, 66.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

participation in the movement occupies only two of the 338 pages. Here the notion in comparative literature – that female oppression predisposed women's support for millenarian beliefs – is dismissed as a 'dubious cliché'. There 'seem to have been many women who were sceptical'. The evidence produced refers to three (one a Mfengu). Due to these 'many' Xhosa women, the movement's social base allegedly displayed no gender-differentiated pattern.[80]

Marriage, reproduction and sexuality, too, are marginalized. The role of cattle as bridewealth is barely mentioned. Consequently, the claim of another scholar that unmarried men provided 'the major impetus' to support for the prophecies is not explored.[81] Similarly, fatherhood attracts little attention, except in the case of the single most important believer. For the promiscuous Xhosa king, the link between witchcraft, death of children and resurrection of a male heir if witchcraft were abandoned was seemingly central.[82]

Finally, Nongqawuse's concern with adulterous and incestuous men is sidelined in three sentences. This 'probably' referred to general sexual 'indiscretions', like the peccadillo of sex before battle.[83] Incest, however, was decidedly not an 'indiscretion'. '[T]heir superstitious fears', noted a magistrate in 1856, 'teach them to dread that some supernatural evil will befall the parties committing such acts; they ... are considered in the light of sorcerers'.[84] Decades earlier, Xhosa 'horror of incest' precipitated a rebellion against a chiefly offender; decades later, an incestuous relationship defiled all local women.[85] Incest was seemingly central in prophecies linking sex to witchcraft, pollution and punishment.

There was perhaps also a more personal dimension, worthy of further investigation by future scholars. The charge, after all, was made by an orphan, living in a homestead with some twenty people, including her own brother, her uncle's son, her married uncle, her uncle's elder brother.[86] She first invoked her dead father and the most powerful dead chief to warn her uncle against undefined men accused of adultery and incest. On at least one occasion she repudiated traditions accenting her sexuality. She and a young female relative in the same homestead also tried for several months, for reasons which Peires cannot explain, to replace her uncle as her mouthpiece with her chief. This 'came to dominate the fantasies of these two young girls'.[87] In addition, Nongqawuse displayed frighteningly similar patterns of

[80] Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, 172–4.

[81] J. Lewis, 'Materialism and idealism in the historiography of the Xhosa cattle-killing movement 1856–7', *SAHJ*, XXV (1991), 249. Little evidence accompanies this assertion.

[82] According to evidence scattered in the text, Sarhili was devastated by having no male heir. Four sons had died; chiefs taunted him: 'we have long told you that you cannot keep children'. In mid-1856, some twenty people having been killed for bewitching his last son or the cattle dying from lungsickness, Sarhili descended on Mhlakaza's homestead. The king whose praises celebrated 'his prowess as an uninhibited lover of women' was then confronted with prophecies linking witchcraft to 'fornications' (Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, 82–4, 87, 227). He commanded obedience to the prophecies, and supported the movement whenever it faltered.

[83] *Ibid.* 127, 142.

[84] Maclean, *Compendium*, 62, see also 115.

[85] Mostert, *Frontiers*, 361; see also Anonymous, 'Nachrichten aus Britisch-Kafferland', *Berliner Missionsberichte*, III/IV (1877), 45.

[86] *Appendix I*, deposition of Nongqawuse, n.p.; Zarwan, 'Cattle killings', 528.

[87] Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, 148.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

behaviour to incest survivors elsewhere, in societies where incest refers to immediate family members.[88]

Whatever Nongqawuse's personal history, a broader feminist argument still applies: if incest is a logical outgrowth of men extending to one more sphere their control over women, it is also often misrepresented or suppressed. In this case, the word was edited out of the most reliable Xhosa account of Nongqawuse's prophecies, when a 1906 bowdlerized Xhosa version was produced. To this day, this censorship influences scholars, who read the English translation of the expurgated text. This suppresses all sexual words: incest, adultery, fornication, widows who should not be touched.[89] Peires has now resurrected the original, only to term the charges as referring to 'indiscretions', 'probably'.

Having expunged male sexuality, Peires follows more traditional lines of enquiry: a black man's oppression by the colonial order. Before millenarianism erupted, Mhlakaza was allegedly a white archdeacon's servant. He became a Christian convert, a 'Gospel man', thwarted by whites who saw him as a mere worker.[90]

Historians have already noted that imputing this past to a wealthy chief's councillor is inherently unlikely and lacks substantiation. Closer examination of the sources reveals that their concerns are justified. This text presents no reliable evidence for Mhlakaza's alleged work as a servant. Nonetheless, according to this creative interpretation of seemingly non-existent sources, a Xhosa man's relationship with the archdeacon changed 'the whole course of South African history'. Deeply frustrated, Mhlakaza supposedly began preaching 'a new Gospel of his own devising'.[91]

[88] African literature on incest survivors seems remarkably sparse. Western texts, defining incest more narrowly, argue that common behavioural patterns include uncontrollable flashbacks and dreams, phobic withdrawals from the world, survivors' descriptions of their bodies as tainted, symbolic retelling of abuse in stories filled with aggression, creating an imaginary friend, and/or creating fantasy worlds which are pure, safe, beautiful.

[89] The 1906 Xhosa version was translated into English, and published in A. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature* (Berkeley, 1973), 70–5. Peires has made some use of the original 1888 Xhosa text, which is clearly different.

[90] Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, 311, see also 33–6, 309–10.

[91] *Ibid.* 34, 36. Peires identifies Mhlakaza, a wealthy, Gcaleka chief's councillor, and a diviner, with Wilhelm Goliath, a Christian, Dutch-speaking husband of a Mfengu woman, and an ex-servant of Archdeacon Merriman. Those querying this claim include Guy, 'Landmark', 227, and N. Tisani, 'Peires, pathbreaker', *SAHJ*, XXV (1991), 235. Peires however claims the link was 'irrefutably established' in an archival source, and also noted in a newspaper: *Dead Will Arise*, 43.

In the archival source, the Superintendent of Grahamstown Natives reported, in August 1856, that Willem Goliat, who previously travelled with Merriman, had begun prophesying that cattle were contaminated, that if they were removed from the face of the earth pure stock would replace them, that he saw a new race of people, and that whites would be forced to leave. No link whatever is established between 'Goliat' and Mhlakaza. Five days later, the newspaper to which Peires refers claimed 'their country is now full of Witch Doctors or Prophets', and that Merriman's ex-servant was prophesying 'the usual rubbish about dead chiefs, Kafirs and cattle coming to life again'. Again, no link is established between Goliath and Mhlakaza. Some two weeks later, the same paper reported that 'the Kafir prophet has run away'. This claim is ignored, as is the discrepancy in dates between Nongqawuse's first prophecy (April) and this reference to Goliath (August).

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Thus Peires places a black man who, on his own confession, mouthed the words of a woman, centre-stage.[92] He devised the gospel. He changed the course of history. He did so because of his relationship with a white male employer: an assertion seemingly based on no evidence whatever.

In many ways, this is not a novel interpretation, as is claimed, but a very familiar tale. It partly replicates analyses in many male-generated primary sources; these, too, attribute the prophecies to a man. It also subordinates women, sexuality and the young to class, race and men. But the gender imperialism is so extreme that an explanation should perhaps rest partly on the strength of Nongqawuse's challenge to patriarchal power. Not only did she denounce male sexual offences. She also urged women to cease cultivation. She predicated a new order where female labour would be unnecessary. She declined to talk to powerful men beseeching her to produce the new people; she told some to go home, or threatened them with death, or ordered them first to destroy the cattle associated with male power over women. Not surprisingly, many chiefs disliked her, and one tried to beat her up.[93] Rather than this being interpreted as gender conflict, an unruly woman has suffered the same fate as other proto-feminists. A historian who finds comparative literature on female oppression clichéd has investigated her – and has awarded her words and historical significance to a man.

Nongqawuse's deficiencies as a woman are also stressed. References to her attractiveness and intelligence are omitted. The focus instead is on her 'dishevelled appearance', her 'confused' mind, her sub-male occupation as a 'prophetess'.[94] She is also infantilized and rendered in need of protection. An extremely independent adolescent, almost certainly an *intombi*, is repeatedly described as a 'young girl', an 'orphan girl'.[95] The consequences of being confused, a girl, without a nuclear family, are then summarized. In the absence of '[n]ormal Xhosa parents', her 'childish games', her 'daydreams' originating in 'fantasies', were unleashed upon the world by her uncle, 'a preacher in search of a prophecy'.[96]

Significantly, a subtext disrupts this narrative. Oral history, conducted almost entirely with men, suggests Xhosa informants saw neither Mhlakaza as the lead figure, nor male sexuality as unimportant, nor Nongqawuse as a child. Of course, men asked about tales transmitted in male spaces, from male generation to male generation, also added their own glosses to tradition. Asked to explain Nongqawuse's visions, many simply said 'she was a *binqa*, a female, and that was the sort of behaviour one expected from a *binqa*'.[97]

Peires also claims the link between Goliath and Mhlakaza was noted by a settler, forty years later, with 'the details' wrong. Mrs Merriman denied it, and twice asked for a retraction. Peires, however, believes the man, who had neither lived in the eastern Cape, nor employed Goliath. This is the sole 'evidence' linking Mhlakaza to Goliath (*Ibid.* 43–4.)

[92] *Ibid.* 90, 149, 154.

[93] *Ibid.* 87–93.

[94] *Ibid.* 87, 90, 91; see also 310–11. Alternative characterizations to these, which rest on the disparaging comment of a Xhosa man who saw her once, are in Jordan, *African Literature*, 72; *Appendix I*, deposition of Nongqawuse, np.

[95] Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, ix, 36, 44, 73, 79, 148, 310, 311.

[96] *Ibid.* 311.

[97] *Ibid.* 173. The correct term is (*i*)*bhinqa*.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Yet a rather more novel form of sexism also surfaces. The belief that 'Nongqawuse's visions were the typical fantasies of a young girl', we are told, the 'view that there was something peculiarly feminine and adolescent in Nongqawuse's behaviour was one shared by many Xhosa men, as this story from oral tradition indicates'.[98] The story concerns a chief's councillor, who had opposed the cattle-killing. He allegedly said 'they must bring that girl for him to lie with, and then she would stop telling such lies'. How does Peires interpret this? 'The implication, quite clearly, is that Nongqawuse's visions were the result of the unconscious sexual frustrations of an adolescent girl.'[99]

Quite clearly? An alternative reading is that this oral tradition, and this interpretation, quite clearly demonstrate how tales transmitted through a chain of men can pathologize women. To take a story, told by men, stating that an unruly *intombi* should have been sexually appropriated by a man who shared her uncle's status; to use this to prove that many Xhosa men thought her 'peculiarly feminine'; to conclude that these men thought a woman, who demonstrated all too conscious frustration with male sexual offences, was unconsciously sexually frustrated: this is not merely profoundly misleading. It also reproduces rape myths in scholarly form.[100]

The weaknesses of this study are not peculiar to it alone. A large literature replicates the same type of analysis, not least because androcentric distortions have been transmitted from one scholar to another. Some have, in addition, elaborated on received wisdom. They have added gendered twists to why Nongqawuse's behaviour was even more peculiarly feminine and infantile than has already been argued, and why Mhlakaza's was 'the mind from which most of it came'.[101] Nongqawuse's charges of male sexual offences have also been further sidelined, by being omitted from recent accounts altogether. Consequently, the ongoing debate centres on which ungendered men were key to the millenarian movement. In a historiography centred on race, class and men, the candidates range from white colonial officials to male commoners locked in class struggle with the Xhosa aristocracy.[102]

[98] *Ibid.* 310, 172. [99] *Ibid.* 172–3.

[100] L. Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Cambridge, 1988), 34–8, 47–8, 163–4, outlines rape myths: these revolve around women deserving it; rape happens only to problematic women. Scholars reproducing these myths have argued that raped women are 'more feminine' women, 'refeminized' through rape; they have claimed rapes were 'victim precipitated'; they have failed to problematize rapists' accounts. Similarly, Nongqawuse is positioned in this narrative as a sexually frustrated, peculiarly feminine liar; no attempt has been made to analyse why men should tell and retell a tale centring on silencing her by exercising sexual power.

[101] Mostert, *Frontiers*, 1191. The vision Nongqawuse outlined 'was sophisticated and highly detailed, and it must be remembered that, at Archdeacon Merriman's home, Mhalakaza [*sic*] had been prone to such'. Sophistication and command of detail, seemingly, were not the province of Xhosa women. Nor, according to Crais, *Colonial Order*, 206, was the possibility of attaining adulthood; moreover, 'the central place' in Nongqawuse's visions was a 'river with wet banks', an 'area of wetness, of uterine dampness'.

[102] Crais, *Colonial Order*, 204–10; Mostert, *Frontiers*, 1177–216; Sirayi, 'African perspective', 40–3; T. Stapleton, '"They no longer care for their chiefs": another look at the Xhosa cattle-killing of 1856–1857', *Int. J. Afr. Hist. Studies*, XXIV (1991), 390; T. Stapleton, 'Reluctant slaughter: rethinking Maqoma's role in the Xhosa cattle-killing (1853–1857), *Int. J. Afr. Hist. Studies*, XXVI (1993), 369.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Thus a central woman, and a central event in Xhosa, Cape and South African history, still await a gendered analysis. The causes of mass starvation have not yet been adequately determined, because the catastrophe has been seen through the androcentric lens of 'cattle-killing' and women's labour has been trivialized. The motives of Nongqawuse's largest support base have barely been probed. (Was the movement partly 'an attack by women on existing male structures and power bases weakened by cattle losses'?[103]) The role of cattle as bridewealth, and the significance of male identities as bachelors or fathers, have scarcely surfaced. Finally, incest, adultery, fornication and 'other things' have been almost entirely written out of history. A woman's words have been found offensive or irrelevant within a historiography that marginalizes male sexuality and male sexual abuse, except where it involves class or racial oppression as well.

Consequently, there are no explanations for why these offences were seemingly central to Nongqawuse herself. There are no explorations of their popular resonance. There are no analyses of turmoil in marital, sexual and fertility practices and punishments. Instead, our attention has been focused on ungendered men, around whom fictions have been woven. Nongqawuse, the teenager at the heart of the tragedy, displaying the behavioural patterns of many women subjected to sexual abuse, appears variously as a sexually frustrated virgin, a 'niece of a prophet' articulating 'visions' rather than 'prophecies',[104] a 'liminal' being with visions centred on 'uterine dampness',[105] or simply a 'demented girl'.[106]

But then, as we have also been told, she was a *bhinqa*, who behaved in *bhinqa* ways. As such, she represents countless women – and what androcentric historians have done to them. Narratives that subject women to textual abuse while declining to listen to their voices or analyse their lives perhaps deserve a response developed among Xhosa-speakers after the catastrophe. People who told unbelievable stories could be dismissed in a line: 'those who heard him, said: "You are telling a Nongqawuse tale"'.[107]

CONCLUSION

In 1969, the editors of the *Oxford History of South Africa* noted that almost all recent histories focused 'on one physical type' and 'embodie[d] the point of view of only one community.' The reason, they claimed, was obvious. In highly stratified South Africa, the historian was affected by the 'prejudices of his own community'. The consequence was equally plan. History was 'a powerful instrument for the *maintenance* of inequality'.[108]

They were addressing racism – but South Africa was, and is, also stratified by gender. Analogous critiques of male bias have, however, made much less impact. They have typically been made by white women addressing an overwhelmingly white male profession, in the absence of an indigenous feminist movement, in a society where women historians have often been

[103] Guy, 'A landmark', 231.
[104] Lewis, 'Economic history', 345.
[105] Crais, *Colonial Order*, 206.
[106] Rutherford, *Grey*, 348.
[107] Jordan, *African Literature*, 75.
[108] M. Wilson and L. Thompson, 'Preface', in Wilson and Thompson (eds.), *Oxford History*, vol. i, v–vi.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

regarded as wives, mothers or teachers, not as academics.[109] Consequently, the concepts, analysis, periodization and power relations inscribed in texts that neglect both women and gender remain persuasive.

Nonetheless, women of the past did not feel obliged to live their lives according to coarse academic representations drawing heavily on present-day gender stereotypes. This is evident from primary sources. Victorian men were often more 'modern' than many historians today: they saw women; they represented them in words as well as illustrations; and they conceded space to women wanting to articulate their own views. So far as the nineteenth-century Cape and its frontier zones are concerned, texts in which women are visible and significant exist. Most were produced over a century ago.

Much secondary literature is a more problematic source for historians of women. Many narratives passed off as general accounts allocate to men prestigious topics, concepts and spaces: 99 per cent of the text, as well as politics, work, cattle, historical significance and 'the' class or ethnic group. Women receive the leftovers: families, bodies and illustrations. In addition, numerous texts leaping from the male particular to the human universal contain generalizations – 'the Xhosa', 'the propertied' – that are inapplicable to women. The fallibility of the 'facts', combined with the neglect of crucial issues – women's labour, patriarchal families, systemic gender discrimination – make androcentric secondary texts one of the most barren of all possible sources for historians of the majority of the population.

The minority, however, does not escape unscathed when women are misrepresented or marginalized. Mhlakaza cannot be placed centre-stage, displacing a sexually frustrated *bhinqa*, devising his own gospel and changing the course of history, without doing violence to the tenets distinguishing historians from novelists. To take another example: in the 1825 revolt, Pamela was a slave, and slept every night with her master. If she is inaccurately portrayed as a Khoi wife, then a seemingly key dimension of a male rebellion is missing.

To make a third, more general point: if women are omitted, or trivialized, or not examined with the same rigour automatically accorded men, then the price is frequently interpretations with limited purchase on the past. Numerous analyses of key events or processes – class formation, the emergence of 'democracy', black resistance, mass starvation – are flawed by the inapplicability of interpretations to the female majority, or by the impossibility of accounting for these phenomena without according serious attention to women.

Sins of omission are apparent as well as sins of commission. Men of the past did not confine themselves to the 'important' domains of men. They were also sons, lovers and/or fathers of women; marriage, and heirs, and masculinity, were often highly significant to them. Moreover, many male lives were premised on exclusion of women from most property and political rights, on access to unpaid female productive and reproductive labour. This underpinned male activities ranging from daily subsistence, to economic survival as a peasant, to political dreams of establishing a settler society. As

[109] S. Pienaar, 'Interview with Phyllis Lewsen', *SAHJ*, XXVIII (1993), 21; Editorial, *SAHJ*, XXVIII (1993), n.p.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

a scholar elsewhere has noted, 'there is precious little men's history that can be divorced either from women's contributions or, perhaps more importantly, from men's pervasive consciousness of and attempts to enforce women's subordination'.[110]

In conclusion: numerous accounts of the nineteenth-century Cape and its frontier zones provide support for arguments about African history more broadly. '[W]ithout inclusion of women', without consideration of people as gendered beings, 'our historical vision is so impaired as to be unacceptably inaccurate'.[111] According to another writer, an analysis that neglects gender relations in households – 'among the most fundamental social relations' – as well as 'domestic struggle, the lives of women, and their critical contribution to production and biological and social reproduction misconceives the society as a whole'.[112] And as a third has argued, the new knowledge generated by feminist historians has 'called into question the adequacy not only of the substance of existing history, but also of its conceptual foundations'.[113]

SUMMARY

That many studies in African and imperial history neglect women and gender is a commonplace. Using a case-study – the British Cape Colony and its frontier zones – this article attempts to demonstrate some consequences of this neglect. It argues, firstly, that it generates empirical inaccuracies as a result of the insignificance accorded to gender differentiation and to women themselves. Secondly, representations of women as unimportant, and men as ungendered, result in flawed analysis of both men and the colonial encounter. This view is argued in detail for two events: an 1825 slave rebellion and an 1856–7 millenarian movement. The article concludes that if gender and half the adult populace are marginalized in this way, the price is frequently interpretations which have limited purchase on the past.

[110] E. Fox-Genovese, *Feminism without Illusions* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 144.

[111] C. Robertson, 'Never underestimate the power of women: the transforming vision of African women's history', *Women's Studies International Forum*, XI (1988), 440, 450.

[112] E. Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders, and Wives* (Portsmouth, 1992), 1.

[113] J. Scott, 'Women's history', in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 1993), 60.

This content downloaded from
109.81.212.241 on Tue, 13 Apr 2021 18:03:12 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms