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Christianity in Transformation: The rise of African Christianity among the *AmaXhosa* of the Eastern Cape

ABSTRACT

This article explores the roots and expansion of African Christianity – that is, the synthesis of Christianity and African Traditional Religion among the amaXhosa tribes of the Eastern Cape. This form of synthesis appears to have been an age-old problem of the Christian church, beginning with the missionary epoch, and up to contemporary times, and it is still not acknowledged. It appears that conservative Christians, in particular, undermine this realism. Reflecting on the character and life of Ntsikana, who was both a Xhosa Christian prophet and a diviner, this article debates the acceptance of African Christianity by indigenous converts as a way of transforming or contextualising Christianity to communicate with the African religious heritage. Using a qualitative research approach, in the form of document analysis, the article found that African Christianity among the AmaXhosa of the Eastern Cape has existed for a long time and has become an acceptable form of expression in transforming Christianity to communicate with the African cultural context.

1. INTRODUCTION

The missionary efforts that occurred in the interior of the country in the 18th century led to the evangelisation of the *amaXhosa*, who lived in the eastern frontier beyond the Colony (Hastings

1994:199). The *AmaXhosa* are a *Bantu*-speaking people, who settled mainly in the coastal region of South Africa, east of the Sundays River, in the early second millennium AD (Ehlers 1992:27). The earliest known name for the *amaXhosa* tribes was “*Abe-Nguni*”. The name “was derived from a progenitor in the royal line called ‘*Mnguni*’” (Soga 1931:6). Unfortunately, hardly anything is known about *Mnguni* beyond his name. As a result, his name was overshadowed by that of his successor, *Xhosa*.

According to Peires (1981:13), the name “*Xhosa*” is derived from a *Khoi* word meaning “angry men”. Soga (1931:7) notes that *Xhosa* was the chief of the clan, but was later overthrown, in the 1600s, by his younger brother Tshawe, who also reigned in his stead. Ehlers (1992:27) also states that, at about this time, Tshawe consolidated the *amaXhosa* into a large polity. As the territory under Tshawe’s control grew, Ehlers (1992:27) notes that the polity assumed the traits of a segmentary state, in which Tshawe’s male heirs established smaller chiefdoms, but were still subordinate to the paramount chief.

Tshawe’s many descendants spurred territorial expansion, as each new generation of leaders set out with their contemporary mates and followers to claim their own lands (Peires 1981:19-21). By the end of the 1600s, the *amaXhosa* chiefdoms were established on both sides of the Kei River. Giving a brief overview of the *amaXhosa* and their subdivisions, Pauw (1994:2-5) notes that the *amaXhosa* tribes are characterised by the following groups:

- a. *Aba-Thembu*;
- b. *Ama-Mbo* (characterised by clans such as *Mpondo*, *Mpondomise*, *Xesibe*, *Qwathi*, and *Bomvana*);
- c. *Ama-Xhosa* (with clans such as *Ndlambe*, *Ngqika*, *Gqunukwebe*, *Dushane*, *Gasela*, *Qhayi*, *Hleke*, *Dange*, *Mbalu*, *Rharhabe*, *Gcaleka*, and so on), and
- d. *Ama-Bhaca* and *Ama-Mfengu* (the later fugitives).

All these tribes can be found on both sides of the Kei River (Transkei and Ciskei) in the Eastern Cape. In the late 17th century, many mission societies sent missionaries to South Africa (Hastings 1994:197). On their arrival at the Cape Colony, they travelled to various places for the purpose of evangelism and reached even the most distant of places for missions among the *Khoikhoi* or *Hottentots*, the San and indigenous peoples (Isichei 1995:100). These places included the eastern frontier, a geographical area now known as the Eastern Cape.

The London Missionary Society, the Glasgow Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Missionary Society, the Moravian Missionary Society, the Berlin Missionary Society, and the American Board of Missions were among the missionary societies that worked in the area. According to Saule (1985:1), the London and Glasgow Missionary Societies played a far greater role than others in the Eastern Cape, particularly among the *amaXhosa*. Saule (1985:2) summarises the contribution of these two missionary societies as follows:

[A]lthough there is a lot that has been written on the missionaries and the *Xhosas* in the Eastern Cape, there is nothing that compares these two societies and the work they performed. I feel this is important because the impact of these two societies has had a ripple effect down the waters of the history of South Africa up to the present day. In other words, they have been in the forefront in the provision of education to the African people and their educational institutions have produced prominent leaders in all [walks] of life in the African community. We have had men like Rev. Tiyo Soga, the first educated African minister in South Africa, Professor D.D.T. Jabavu, Professor Z.K. Matthews, and more recently men like Nelson Mandela and Gatsha Buthelezi to mention a few. It is also noteworthy that a number of African leaders north of the *Zambesi* River are products of institutions like Lovedale and Fort Hare.

Both the London Missionary and the Glasgow Missionary Societies played a prominent role, in terms not only of the educational development, but also of evangelising the *amaXhosa* in the Eastern Cape. Johannes Van der Kemp and James Read of the London Missionary Society (Hastings 1994:201), as well as Dr James Stewart and Robert Shepherd of the Glasgow Missionary Society (Saule 1985:4) are among the many missionaries who worked amidst the *amaXhosa*.

This article critically examines the influence of these early missionaries, which led to the origins of African Christianity among the *amaXhosa*, by focusing on the character and life of Ntsikana who is regarded as the pioneer of religious hybridity among the *amaXhosa*. As a Xhosa Christian prophet and an African religionist diviner, he synthesised Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR).

2. CRITICAL ENCOUNTERS – NTSIKANA AND VAN DER KEMP

Most significant from these missionaries is the influence and role of Johannes van der Kemp, who worked with the *Gcaleka* people in the

eastern frontier and is said to have introduced the Christian gospel to Ntsikana (Ross 2015:2). Ntsikana is, thus, regarded as the symbol of religious hybridity, because he brought together two different religious traditions – that is, Christianity and ATR¹. Khumalo (2014:21) asserts that:

He [Ntsikana] was the pioneer of acculturation because he believed that African Traditional Religion (ATR) could be merged with Christianity in order to produce a unique brand of Christianity which later came to be known as African Christianity. This is a Christianity that brings together the fundamental teachings of Christianity with the basic teachings, practices and symbols of African Traditional Religion.

From this contention, one gets the impression that the synthesis of Christianity and ATR in the Eastern Cape is a phenomenon that began with the religious encounter between Van der Kemp and Ntsikana, who was still a teenager in 1799 (Khumalo 2014:26). Ross (2015:2) further states that

it may well have been van der Kemp who first inspired *Ntsikana* to give his poetry and teaching a Christian content as he travelled the country praising God and praying.

Although this may have been the case, Ross (2015:2) also notes that Ntsikana still continued to live the traditional normal *Xhosa* life:

To all outward appearances he [Ntsikana] continued as a normal *Xhosa* lad, passing through circumcision to manhood and by c.1815 going quietly about his business as a respected but unremarkable homestead-head, enjoying what he had inherited of his father's holdings and contently married to two wives.

As a person who was inspired by a missionary to give his poetry and teaching a Christian content, and as someone who went about the country praising God and praying, why did Ntsikana remain a normal *Xhosa* lad,

1 In this instance, the term "African Traditional Religion" is used in the singular (Mokhoathi 2017:3). This stands against the popular perception that the term should be used in the plural – as African religions (Mndende 2013:76-77). Mbiti (1990:1-5) initially followed this direction, as he referred to "ATR" in plural (as African religions). But he later abandoned this usage in his second edition: "in the first edition I spoke about "African religions" in the plural to keep alive the diversity of African religiosity ... I now use the singular, 'African religion', more than the plural expression" (Mbiti 1990:13). The word "traditional" is included "to indicate that these religions emerged among traditional communities in specific regions before they came into contact with other world religions and cultures" (Crafford 2015:2). Thus, the use of "ATR" in the singular is perceived to be more approving, because it accounts for the common racial origin of Africans and the similarities of their culture and religious beliefs (Idowu 1973:103-104).

who engaged in *amaXhosa* traditional practices such as circumcision, divination and polygamy, which were often prohibited by missionaries? This makes one wonder about the nature of Christianity practised by Ntsikana, and what the missionaries of his time thought thereof? Did they perceive Ntsikana as a Christian, even though he kept *amaXhosa* traditional practices?

As a traditional *Xhosa* man, how did his native people perceive him? Was he still regarded as an African religionist, since he engaged in his traditional practices, even though he had converted to Christianity and started preaching the Christian message? Or was he viewed in a different light, as a pioneer who brought forth a new dimension of religiosity, characterised by the hybridisation of Christianity and ATR?

This makes Ntsikana's case worthwhile exploring. His character, and how he came to be understood as the pioneer of religious hybridity offers something valuable for current scholars in the fields of African Christianity and ATR to consider. The reason for this is that Ntsikana was not merely an *umXhosa* man, who kept his traditional practices or preached the Christian gospel; he was also an *isiXhosa* diviner (Peires 1981:67). With that in mind, it is worth exploring whether Ntsikana utterly abandoned his *isiXhosa* culture after his conversion, or simply incorporated it with the newly found Christian faith.

3. NTSIKANA, THE PIONEER OF AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY?

Ntsikana was the son of Gaba, from the *Gcaleka* tribe,² and his mother was Nonabe, Gaba's second wife (Bokwe 1914:4). According to Bokwe, Nonabe was better loved by Gaba. Therefore, the first wife, Noyiki, became jealous and accused Nonabe of witchcraft. To do this, Noyiki is said to have consulted a diviner and succeeded, as it was easy to do in those days, in getting him to confirm the charge of witchcraft against Nonabe. Nonabe was thus "adjudged a witch and had to flee for her life to her own kindred" (Bokwe 1914:4). During this time, Nonabe was heavy with child and a few months later, Ntsikana was born (between 1780 and 1821).

2 Khumalo (2014:25) notes that the *Gcaleka* clan was also known as the *Ama-Nggjika*, because they were led by the king Nggjika. Bokwe (1914:1) further notes that the *Ama-Nggjika* clan was Anglicized by missionaries, because they could not pronounce the name "Nggjika". They referred to Nggjika as "Gaika", and called *Ama-Nggjika* as the "Gaikas" for easier pronunciation.

Ntsikana spent most of his infancy among his mother's people. Bokwe (1914:4) states that Gaba sent for him, then aged twelve or thirteen years, by laying

claim to the lad on account of the cattle that had been paid for the mother before marriage, and paid another beast for maintenance of the child from infancy.

Ntsikana thus returned under his father's custody. Approximately seven years later (in 1799), when Ntsikana was almost nineteen years old, Johannes van der Kemp arrived at the *Ngqikaland* – often misspelt as *Gaikaland* (Read 2011:4). Bokwe (1914:5) describes his arrival as follows:

Ntsikana was at this cattle-herding age, when one day a strange, elderly, white man arrived in *Gaikaland*. After being cautiously welcomed by the chief, he was allowed to pitch his tent on the banks of the Keiskama River. The natives gave the stranger a name peculiar to the circumstance of his arrival, as they have since done to every European who has come to dwell with them, sometimes descriptive of a blemish in his person, or a certain mannerism in his bearing. The name given to the new arrival was *Nyengana*, meaning one who had appeared sneakingly, as if by accident. His European name was Johannes Theodosius Vanderkemp.

On his arrival, Van der Kemp was carrying a Book (the Bible) in his hand, as the *Ngqika* tribe gathered to see and hear what his business was. He stood like a “brave soldier of the Cross, telling the Good Tidings for the first time to a congregation of wondering *Gaikas!*” (Bokwe 1914:5). Amidst the crowds, were young boys who attentively listened to the words of the strange White man. One of these boys was Ntsikana, who received the precious seed of the gospel. Bokwe (1914:6) asserts that

[i]t lay in his heart as it were barren, but it was destined one day to take root, to spring up and bear abundant fruit, to the glory of its ever-careful Husband-man.

However, before that seed could sprout and bear abundant fruit, Ntsikana lived a normal *isiXhosa* life. He went through the *isiXhosa* initiation rite like all the *amaXhosa* boys of his days; he became a traditional healer or witchdoctor as they were known by missionaries; he got married as a polygamist, and gained renown as a singer, dancer³ and orator in addition

3 The term “dancer” does not do justice to the meaning of the *Xhosa* word “*Xhentsa*”. Bührmann (1981:188) notes that the term “*Xhentsa*” is called “dancing” for want of a better word. It is a special kind of stamping, with rhythmic movements that put more emphasis on the vigorous pounding of the feet on the ground while slowly moving in a circle. It is a ritual dance, accompanied

to becoming hereditary councillor to chief Ngqika (Read 2011:5). As a traditional healer⁴ and counsellor to chief Ngqika, Ntsikana tapped into the spiritual and magical mysteries of indigenous beliefs. Peires (1979:54) notes that every traditional healer was “credited with the ability to ‘tie up’ the enemy and nullify his (their) weapon”.

In that sense, all people admired diviners, because they “were not metaphysicians but technicians who understood the mechanics of the unseen world” (Peires 1979:55). The influence of traditional healers such as Ntsikana was too inordinate in those days. Diviners were alleged to possess great control and profound magical powers, and chiefs mostly revered them for their resourcefulness and mystic aptitudes, which proved to be useful in times of crises. In that manner, the political leadership of the *amaXhosa* tribes passed from the hands of chiefs into the hands of prophet-figures (Peires 1979:54).

Among the well-known *amaXhosa* traditional healers were the likes of Mlanjeni, who followed Nxele in warning his people to do away with witchcraft, shedding of blood, and stealing, which was a common practice between the *amaXhosa* and the White settlers. These were accredited with great exploits. Hodgson (1985:351), for instance, notes that Mlanjeni was known

to light his pipe from the sun, to wear his face on one cheek, to detect witches and cause their paralysis. He was also credited with being able “to heal the sick, to give sight to the blind, to make the dumb speak and the lame walk”. The chiefs and their followers came from far and wide to hear his “words” and to be purified; but he refused to accept any gifts.

Traditional healers were thus viewed as technicians who understood the mechanics of the unseen world. They were also capable of detecting terms and strategies for inter-tribal wars and/or against colonial powers (Read 2011:3). They had great influence to either sway chiefs to war or to encourage them to seek peace against their enemies. One antiphon was promulgated by the militant leader Nxele, while another came through the ministry of Ntsikana. Both diviners were very influential. Nxele was

by clapping of the hands, singing of special songs, and beating of a drum. This is the basic pattern but there are variations in detail (Bühmann 1981:188).

4 As a dancer and song writer, Ntsikana probably belonged to the category of diviners who were known as *Amaxukazana okuwombelela* (those who act with the assistance of singing). These diviners start with a song, in which they may request the company of consultants by singing and the clapping of hands (*ukuwombelela*), or by assenting (*ukuvumisa*). See Soga 1914:160.

established as a councillor to Chief Ndlambe, and Ntsikana was the esteemed councillor to Chief Ngqika.

Because of their antagonistic positions, they came to be known as adversaries. Jordan (1973:113) expounds on this rivalry as follows:

Two commoners, both of them diviners ('witchdoctors') had profound social influence among the *Xhosa* at this time – Ntsikana, a one-time adherent of Ndlambe, later of Ngqika and, ultimately, of Christ; and Makhanda or Nxele (the left[-]handed warrior misnamed 'Makana'), an adherent of Ndlambe. There was rivalry between these two figures, and, since we know the story only from Ntsikana's disciples, Makhanda inevitably suffers.

Peires (1979:54), however, notes that Nxele and Ntsikana were revered not only for their immeasurable magical powers:

[t]he peculiar attraction which Nxele and Ntsikana had for the *amaXhosa* stemmed not from any unfathomable magical powers but from their capacity to provide rational answers to pressing and very real questions: Who were these white people? What did they want? What should be done about them?

Consequently, both diviners enjoyed an equal status within their respective communities. They possessed great acumen to provide rational answers to pressing and very real questions concerning the presence of White people (missionaries) among the *amaXhosa*.

This became the source of their rivalry, because they were both equally esteemed and were very influential as councillors to their respective chiefs. They were both capable of providing critical and rational answers about the presence of White people in what was perceived to be the *amaXhosa* land. Nxele had encountered Europeans and their Christian faith as a young boy while living in the Cape Colony (Wauchope 1908:34),⁵ where he picked up Dutch and gained knowledge of Christianity (Peires 1979:56).

His conversations with James Read, the missionary, and Gottlieb van der Lingen, the military chaplain in Grahamstown, further enhanced Nxele's understanding of Christianity (Ross 2015:n.p.). According to Peires (1979:56), this "knowledge of Christianity and European ways enabled him to mediate between two cultures". Ntsikana had also witnessed European presence and the arrival of Christianity among the *amaXhosa*, in the form of Johannes van der Kemp, while still a young lad. On his arrival among

5 Peires (1979:56) notes that Nxele grew up in the Cape Colony, son of a commoner who worked for a Boer farmer.

the *Ngqikas*, Van der Kemp preached the gospel “for the first time to a congregation of wondering *Gaikas*!” (Bokwe 1914:5).

Bokwe (1914:6) notes that, even though he was still a young lad, Ntsikana received the precious seed of the gospel. His knowledge of Christianity improved when he became a Christian in roughly 1815.⁶ Subsequent to his conversion, James Read and Joseph Williams mentored Ntsikana. Citing Holt, Ross (2015:n.p.) describes this scenario as follows:

Somewhere beneath the *Amathole* Mountains, near the present town (Fort Beaufort), Read and Williams met Ntsikana, who shared with them what was on his heart. They listened keenly to what he said, offered words of encouragement and some further Scriptural teaching, before inviting him to travel with them back to Bethelsdorp when they returned. But such a journey was impossible, neither his chiefs nor the British authorities would allow him to travel into the colony, so the missionaries advised him to remain where he was until Williams could return to establish the new mission station and offer him further instruction.

These two were, therefore, very capable and could explain the presence of European settlers among the *amaXhosa*. As the antagonist of Ntsikana, Nxele was often regarded as a counterfeit by missionaries. Hodgson (1985:369), for instance, notes that Reverend John Brownlee perceived Nxele as a counterfeit to his people:

Brownlee describes the way Nxele turned his religious knowledge to “bad account”, seeing him as nothing but a charlatan in working on his people’s superstitions for his own gain, and as a trouble-maker in fomenting discord and challenging the authority of the whites.

Clearly, Nxele was understood as the symbol of militant resistance against White superiority and their Christian faith. Therefore, he was

6 Read (2011:5-6) states that there were three incidents which combined to form what is accepted as Ntsikana’s conversion experience. The first pertains to his vision of a ray of light which struck the side of Hulushe, his most prized Ox: “The first occurred as Ntsikana went out one day to inspect his cattle at day break. Standing in his kraal, a ray of light struck the side of Hulushe, his most prized ox, holding Ntsikana’s gaze” (Read 2011:5). The second incident regards Ntsikana’s attendance of a traditional dance, during which he saw a violent gale arise: “He gives a start. Suddenly a violent gale arises. At first, no one hears it. It keeps on however, till at last the dancers stop for a little, and Ntsikana returns to his seat” (Bokwe 1914:11). This gale appeared twice to Ntsikana, but on the second time, the on-lookers also saw it (Read 2011:5). The last incident pertains to Ntsikana’s washing-off of his red ochre, which had been painted on his body: “As they neared home, they came to a small river. Here Ntsikana threw aside his blanket, plunged himself into the water and washed off all the red ochre that painted his body” (Bokwe 1914:11-12).

viewed as a counterfeit, and deceptive to his people. Ntsikana, on the other hand, was regarded as the symbol of peace and non-violence. He was well-respected and known for

his friendly acceptance of the missionaries (in 1816) and his regular attendance at Kat River station, his own services and observance of the Sabbath, his parting with his younger wife in compliance with the law of God, the composition of his hymn and its African theology, his last words, and the comparatively recent death of his Great Wife, who had been a diligent Christian for many years (Hodgson 1985:368).

Ntsikana was thus perceived as an exemplary character, whose friendly welcome of the missionaries, his acceptance of White authority, and his parting ways with his younger wife, Nomanto, in compliance with the law of God, seemed to demonstrate his sincerity as a Christian (Bokwe 1914:27). It is not apparent, however, in this transition, whether Ntsikana stopped being a diviner after his conversion. From Brownlee's account, as cited by Hodgson, Ntsikana discontinued his polygamous life. He parted ways with "his younger wife in compliance with the law of God" (Hodgson 1985:368). He further observed the Sabbath, conducted prayer services, and had regular meetings with Reverend John Browlee at the Kat River station (Hodgson 1985:368).

Against this backdrop, it appears that Ntsikana utterly parted ways with his old life after his conversion. However, what is remarkable about this transition is that Ntsikana appears to have substituted divination for prophecy. He moved from being a diviner to being a prophet. Certainly, the question arises: Was this simply a pure coincidence, or were the same mystic forces of divination still in effect? How is it that Ntsikana easily exchanged offices – from being a diviner to being a prophet – without any serious concerns from the missionaries? Surely, this must have been very strange. It does not often happen that a diviner turns into a prophet.

Jordan (1973:116) further reveals the complexity of this matter, stating that Ntsikana remained a trusted councillor to chief Ngqjika and was unlike the "other pagan" councillors who misled the chief. By referring to other councillors as "pagan", Jordan appears to have taken Ntsikana to be a "Christian". In this understanding, Ntsikana was already a *Xhosa* prophet, or a Christian at this point. But then, if Ntsikana was already a *Xhosa* prophet, why did Jordan mention that he continued with his work of divination? Jordan (1973:116) notes that Ntsikana's divination resulted in the death of chief Ngqjika's warriors in a war against Ndlambe:

For a long time after being 'led away' by his pagan councillors, however, Ngqika continued to have faith in Ntsikana and his strategy in war. It was an ill-fated military expedition against Ndlambe, in which Ntsikana's divination took too long to foresee "the gnats swarming on the skulls" of Ngqika's dead warriors, that decided the issue for the army commanders. And on their return, the latter clamoured that "these praying men" be killed. "How can we be defeated when they are praying?" they asked angrily.

Jordan's usage of the term "divination" instead of "prophecy" seems to discredit Ntsikana's role as a *Xhosa* prophet. A prophet is commonly known for prophesying, and not for divination. A diviner is known for divination. For that reason, by attesting that Ntsikana's divination took too long to foresee the gnats swarming on the skulls of Ngqika's dead warriors, Jordan revealed something about the occupation of Ntsikana. Ntsikana must have continued to be a trusted diviner and councillor to chief Ngqika, even though he had become a Christian.

This would explain the commanders' frustration with him – that "these praying men" should be killed. The commanders did not understand why they should be defeated when they were praying. This may indicate that Ntsikana mixed his divination with Christian practices such as prayer services, scriptural readings, and, at times, preaching. Against this backdrop, the narrative seems to support Khumalo's (2014:21) assertion that Ntsikana was the pioneer of "acculturation". According to Khumalo (2014:21), Ntsikana

believed that African Traditional Religion (ATR) could be merged with Christianity in order to produce a unique brand of Christianity which later came to be known as African Christianity. This is a Christianity that brings together the fundamental teachings of Christianity with the basic teachings, practices and symbols of African Traditional Religion

Against this context, Ntsikana's role as a councillor, which included divination, to chief Ngqika and his position as a *Xhosa* Christian prophet appear to square with the eminence that Khumalo attributes to him. Khumalo considers Ntsikana to be the pioneer of religious hybridity. Pending the crises of manslaughter, resulting from Ntsikana's failed prophecies or rather divinations, he and his leading disciples had to flee for their lives from the death threats by chief Ngqika's commanders. According to Makhapela Noyi Balfour, one of Ntsikana's leading disciples, they went to reside at *Tambo* – where Ntsikana died and was buried (Jordan 1973:116-117).

4. NTSIKANA'S DISCIPLES – THE EXPANSION OF AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Prior to his death, Ntsikana left some instructions for his followers. Bokwe (1914:30) quotes him, asserting the following:

At last, addressing his children, he said. "I am going home to my Father. Do not, after I die, go back to Kafirdom (*ema-Xoseni*, meaning heathendom). I want you to go to Buluneli (Rev. John Brownlee's) at *Gwali*. Have nothing to do with heathen dances, but keep a firm hold of the word of God. Always stick together, and be as close to one another as particles of a ball of cement. Should a rope be thrown round your neck or a spear pierce your body, whatever persecution comes upon you, on account of the word of God don't give way, keep it, and stick to it and to each other. To my two sons I say, *Kobe* (the elder), you will be my back-bone (*ufundo lwam*), and *Dukwana*, you will be my walking-stick (*umsimelelo*). Don't allow my children to return to red clay and heathenism; take them to *Gwali*. I am going home to my Father, to my Master!" He was now exhausted, and, turning to the person on whom he was leaning, he said, "Lay me down"; so saying, he quietly passed away, and Ntsikana the son of Gaba was gone up higher.

Following his death, Ntsikana's disciples fell under the care and guidance of Reverend John Brownlee, at *Gwali*, as instructed by Ntsikana. At the *Gwali* mission station, the understanding of Christianity and its teachings began to considerably change for the disciples. They were accustomed to Ntsikana's teachings, which did not require any alienation with their cultural roots. But, at the *Gwali* mission station, the missionary teachings appeared to be different and required Ntsikana's disciples to forsake their cultural heritage. This included changing their *Xhosa* names. Their indigenous names were generally changed after baptism. Citing Makhaphela, Jordan (1973:117) recounts how this happened:

Some of these disciples of the son of Gaba were baptized by the first White missionaries and given more training in the Truth that they had accepted ... Each person was given a new name by which he would be known as a Christian. So it was that Noyi (Makhaphela's own father) was renamed 'Balfour'. This became the practice for us who had chosen this new road. Nonetheless it was strange, because we had never seen anything wrong with our own names. But so eagerly was this new teaching accepted that many a man, even while still a pagan, kept in mind some new name that he fancied, so that, in the event of his becoming a Christian, he should be known by that name.

Ntsikana's disciples were, therefore, very cautious with the teachings of the missionaries. They were careful not to allow what the missionaries taught clash with what Ntsikana had passed down to them. As a result, the instructions of the missionaries appeared to be very strange and seemed to be different from those they received from Ntsikana. Ntsikana had practised a synthesised form of Christianity, which acknowledged both the Christian tradition and the African traditional heritage. Peires (1979:60-61) affirms this, stating that Ntsikana's Christianity was "an adaptation within the traditional religious framework of innovation and experimentation rather than a radical break away from it".

This seems to suggest that Ntsikana never utterly abandoned his traditional heritage but synthesised it with the Christian faith. In this regard, Ntsikana appears to have been the preliminary representation of acculturation. His synthesising of Christianity and ATR appears to have served as an embryo of religious hybridity, which significantly expanded through the influence of his disciples. Nowadays, his role and influence are acknowledged in the erection of monuments and the establishment of Indigenous Churches. One such example is the Ntsikana Memorial Church, in Pirie, King Williams Town, in the Eastern Cape.

This church was established in July 1911 by Ntsikana's grandson, the Reverend Burnet Gaba, and represents an early example of an Independent or Indigenous Church. His legacy lives on and is being celebrated by the vast majority of African Independent/Initiated Churches, including some Reformed/Mission Churches such as the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (Somniso 2005:136-137). These churches share in the legacy of Ntsikana's sacred hymns, with the famous hymn being "*Ulo Thixo oMkhulu ngoseZulwini*", "He is the Great God, who is in Heaven" (Hodgson 1980:19).

5. CONCLUSION

A closer look at the character and life of Ntsikana seems to suggest that he indeed paved a way for the practice of religious hybridity among the *amaXhosa* tribes in the Eastern Cape. It seems that he never utterly abandoned his African religious heritage but synthesised it with some Christian components, in order to produce a unique form of Christianity, commonly known as African Christianity. What is remarkable about this exploration is that Ntsikana still earned great respect from missionaries such as Reverend John Brownlee, James Read and Joseph Williams, and was considered to be an African Christian prophet, even though he never utterly abandoned his African traditional heritage. This is contrary to what

is transpiring nowadays. African Christians, like Ntsikana, who synthesise Christianity and their African traditional heritage, are often judged or accused of syncretism, if not of “sitting on the fence”. This is the dreadful predicament, in which African Christians find themselves. But, as it stands, it is safe to say that Ntsikana’s legacy is well established and is thriving through his disciples.

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