

A History of the Xhosa Western Frontier

J.B. Peires, *The House of Phalo*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1981, pp.x + 281, including maps, illustrations, footnotes, appendices and bibliography 'New History of Southern Africa Series', Paperback, currently retailing at P11.50

Dr Peires's sub-title, A history of the Xhosa people in the days of their independence, pointedly refers to the period before 1850 rather than to any more recent configuration on the South African map. This is not a history of the Xhosa-speaking peoples as a whole (which would include the Thembu, Mpondo and so on eastwards as far as Natal), but is confined to those who trace descent from an ancestor called Xhosa, namely the present-day Gcaleka and Rharhabe peoples. The Phalo of the title, a Xhosa king of the mid-eighteenth century, was the father of Gcaleka and Rharhabe.

As the author claims in his preface, this is the first complete history of the Xhosa to have been written since T.H. Soga's The South-Eastern Bantu, published in 1930. There is much to recommend this new book, especially the depth of research upon which it is based. Dr Peires draws upon a wide range of sources, written and oral and is the first modern historian to use vernacular sources for the writing of Xhosa history. His essay on Xhosa historiography, inserted as an Appendix, reveals a thorough awareness of the modern problems of conducting oral research into pre-colonial society, especially in South Africa in the 1970s. And historians who intend embarking upon oral field research elsewhere in southern Africa would be well advised to add this insightful short essay to the growing historiography of oral research methodology. From the same Appendix we learn that the first Xhosa newspaper *Ikhwezi* (The Morning Star) appeared as long ago as 1844 (p 175). This first generation of literate Xhosa, though convinced Christians were keenly interested in preserving their cultural heritage and committing Xhosa historical traditions to paper, and they have clearly provided a valuable collection of oral traditions, based much nearer to source than one can normally expect in central and southern Africa.

Having drawn upon such a wide range of raw materials, both oral and written, Dr Peires has produced an impressively comprehensive coverage of many aspects of Xhosa history. A word of warning, however. This is an unusually structured book, and some may be put off by its apparent discontinuities. The author has interspersed narrative with thematic chapters, in order to avoid 'a generalised social and economic chapter' which may have 'created a false impression of stagnation' (p viii). Themes chosen cover ecology, chieftaincy, religion, trade and warfare, and are interspersed at reasonably appropriate points in the narrative. It is an interesting technique and undoubtedly carefully applied, but this kind of segregation of 'narrative' and 'theme' does have its own set of problems.

It appears to the present reviewer that Dr Peires has been caught in his own trap. He has segregated and dispersed his 'themes' in an attempt to avoid a long, generalised, introductory chapter and, by dealing with them separately, to convey a better sense of change over time. On the whole these thematic chapters achieve this sense of change and tie in well with the narrative. There is, however, one notable exception. Ironically it is

that very introductory thematic chapter 'Land and People' (pp 1-10) which does in fact convey just that 'false impression of stagnation' which the author sought to avoid. Like the other chapters, it is an excellent piece of writing, providing a graphic picture of Xhosa homesteads and a clear exposition of Xhosa transhumance patterns. But there is no sense of change and I cannot believe that there was no change in land use and settlement patterns during the turbulent period from the 1770s to 1850 which is the core period of the narrative. The sources for this chapter are mostly writings ranging from early to late nineteenth century and one is thus left wondering whether this is, perhaps, an idealised picture of Xhosa society, not necessarily closely corresponding with reality.

Secondly, stripped of its supporting themes, the bare skeleton of the narrative is at times so highly condensed and Xhosa internal and external politics so complex that it is difficult to follow who is doing what and why and to whom. Furthermore, those who are accustomed to their history being a more straightforward chronological narrative may find the book's structure somewhat frustrating. If, for instance, one wants to know about Nxele (also known as Makana or Makanda), one will find only brief reference to him in the narrative section as a Xhosa warddoctor (p 63), but his role is discussed more fully as a religious diviner in the thematic chapter on 'visions and interpretations' (pp 66-74) and as a warleader in the battle of Grahamstown, April 1819, in the chapter on warfare (pp 143-4). Fortunately, there is a good index and so this kind of search can fairly readily be made, by those accustomed to using an index.

On the whole, however, these are criticisms of form rather than content. Whatever the present reviewer's slight reservations about the way the book is structured, this is not intended to detract from the book's worth as a major contribution both in its own field of Xhosa history, but also in the broader field of southern African history as a whole. As such it deserves a wide readership, 'lay' and academic, and should stand the test of time. Particularly perceptive is Dr Peires's treatment of Xhosa/Khoi and Xhosa/Colonist relations. He argues that 'the limits of Xhosadom were not ethnic or geographic, but political' (p 19). The Xhosa exercised a loose political ascendancy over most Cape Khoi as far west as the Cape Peninsula itself by the mid-seventeenth century, though this was clearly very loose as it disintegrated in the face of Dutch expansion. When faced with the westward advance of Dutch settlers, however, the Xhosa initially prepared to incorporate these new elements into a larger and greater Xhosadom. The 'total war' waged by the colonists, particularly after the British occupation of the Cape, thus came as a shock to the Xhosa chiefs. The exercise of this concept of total warfare was to be seen at its most devastating in the 'expulsion' policy of the Fourth Frontier War of 1811-12 (pp 60, 65-6, 142-3).

One of the most refreshing things about House of Phalo is the impression one gains that the advance of colonial settlement and political control is being viewed from the east looking westwards. Thus, in as much as it is a history of the first five 'frontier wars', it is an examination of the wars of the Xhosa 'western frontier' rather than the hackneyed wars of the Cape 'eastern frontier'.

Dr Peires clearly has great empathy for his subject and the people whose history he is writing. The present reviewer looks forward to the author's promised 'Phalo, Volume II', which will, 'at some future time' (p ix), deal with the conquest period of the 1850s.

KEVIN SHILLINGTON

Department of Languages and Social Sciences
University of Botswana