

Religion and politics in the heritage of uNtsikana Ka Gaba and its relevance to a democratic South Africa

R. Simangaliso Kumalo

School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics,
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Abstract

Ntsikana, the son of Gaba (1780–1820), is remembered as a Xhosa prophet *umphrofethi wakwa Xhosa* who left an indelible mark on the Christian social history landscape of South Africa. Although he lived almost two centuries ago, he is still remembered as one who laid a firm foundation for an African form of Christianity. The article examines his work as a pioneer of an African form of theology, intellectual and prophet. The emphasis is on his radical form of Christianity, which did not fit the missionary's script, his decision to be critical of the Church and its subservient relationship with European culture and his attempt to acculturate Christianity to African culture. This is demonstrated by the fact that Ntsikana responded creatively and prophetically to the ambiguous role the church played in the liberation of the African people. His unprecedented theological understanding of God expressed through his famous hymn is analysed and appraised in the article. His ability to bring into dialogue religion and politics is examined, together with his critical exposition of African traditional religion.

Introduction

Ntsikana, the son of Gaba, is remembered as the earliest African prophet who tried to adapt the Christian religion to African culture, specifically the Xhosa culture. He 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. The motivation for assimilating the two comes from a political consciousness not to allow a Western form of Christianity to dominate the African religion. The understanding is that religious or spiritual domination will lead to political domination. So as part of

R. Simangaliso Kumalo

resisting political domination, Ntsikana embraced an African form of Christianity at a time when converts to Christianity used to despise their African heritage.

Contemporary leaders of the African Initiated Church (AIC) did not materialise from nowhere or from a contextless environment. They were products of generations of Africans who preceded them and who sought to understand their place as an African people under the threat of the continually encroaching settlers and missionaries. African leaders reflected on what it meant to be an African and remained faithful to their culture, values and religion, at the same time seeking to adapt to the new culture and religion that were emerging. These were people like Ntsikana ka Gaba, SEK Mqayi, Walter Rubusana, John Tengo Jabavu and Nehemiah Tile. The earliest and probably the greatest of such leaders was uNtsikana Ka Gaba. In this article, I would like to examine how Ntsikana contributed to bridging the gap between African politics, culture and religion, on the one hand, and Western Christianity, on the other, bringing them together in a creative synergy for the well-being of all his people.

The subject of the encounter between the missionaries and the early African converts has been discussed by a number of academic and theorists. Some, like Richard Elphick, in his book, *A political, social and cultural history of South Africa*, has presented a picture of innocence and even complimented the missionaries on their work of converting the Africans into the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹ He gives an uncritical view of their work that led to the colonisation of the African people through the gospel, which annihilated their culture and spirituality. Jean and John Camaroff in their book, *Of revelation and revolution*, observe that the missionaries and the early Africans were engaged in a dialogue or conversation which culminated in mutual influence, where the Africans were influenced by the gospel, its teachings, doctrines, symbols and practices, whilst the Africans also did the same to the gospel and the missionaries.² The Camaroffs observed the following:

In the long conversation between the colonizers and the colonized a conversation full of arguments of words, images-many signifiers of the colonizing culture became unfixed. They were seized by the Africans and, sometimes refashioned, put to

¹ Elphick, R & Davenport, R (eds). 1997. *Christianity in South Africa: a political, social and cultural history*. Cape Town: David Philip:68. See also Elphick, R & Elphick, R. 1992. Of revolution and revolution (review article), *South African Historical Journal*. 26, May:182-187.

² Camaroff, J & Camaroff,, J. 1997. *Of revelation and revolution: the dialectics of modernity on a South African frontier*, vol. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press:70.

Religion and politics in the heritage of uNtsikana Ka Gaba ...

symbolic and practical ends previously unforeseen, certainly unintended. Conversely, some of the ways of the Africans interpolated themselves, again detached transformed, into the habitus of the missionaries. Here, then was a process in which signifiers were set afloat, fought over, and recaptured on both sides of the colonial encounter.³

Anthony Balcomb has observed that it is as the result of this dialogical encounter between the missionaries and the missionised that “Christianity has become, for better or worse, the dominant religion of Africa.”⁴ The reason for this is because some early Africans found ways of adapting Christianity to their religion, culture and politics.

The Xhosa prophet, Ntsikana ka Gaba, is best remembered as the first indigenous African to have initiated the Africanisation and politicisation of the Christian faith. Indeed, he founded the first African Initiated Church (AIC) in South Africa, now known as the Ntsikana Memorial Church. He contributed immensely to Christian mission by developing a new type of Christianity which contained various African tenets. This initiative came about as a result of his quest for the protection of the political freedom, religion and culture of the Gcaleka people under King Ngqika, whom he served as an advisor. This took place in 1815, soon after Ntsikana was mysteriously forced into Christianity – forced, because he did not voluntarily search for it; instead, it was thrust upon him one morning while inspecting his cattle kraal. Looking at his favourite ox named Kuluse, he suddenly spotted an unusual light patch on its horns and for a few short moments lost consciousness and fell into a trance. When he regained consciousness, he asked his son, Kobe, if he had seen the strange light patch on the ox, but the boy had seen nothing. Soon afterwards, Ntsikana felt that something had taken *possession* of him, which he accepted as God, *uThixo*, leading him to becoming a Christian.⁵ Before this incident, while herding cattle as a teenager, “he had on a few times heard Johannes van der Kemp preaching the gospel to the followers of Ngqika but this had not turned him into a Christian.”⁶ In fact, as Vuyani Booi has noted, Ntsikana, “whilst he was a boy, refused to be baptised by the missionaries.”⁷

³ Camaroff, J & J. 1991. *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press:17.

⁴ Balcomb, A. 1998. Of radical refusers and very willing victims: interpolations of the missionary messages in the stories of Nongqause, Nxele, Ntsikana, and Soga. *Bulletin for Contextual Theology*5(1)& 5(2):4-15.

⁵ Crafford, D (ed). 1991. *Trail-blazers of the Gospel*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria:21.

⁶ Crafford, D. 1991. *Trail-blazers of the Gospel*, 19.

⁷ Booi, V. 2008. Ntsikana. In Ndletyana, M. *African Intellectuals in 19th and early 20th century South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press:38.

R. Simangaliso Kumalo

It was only when he had the experience at his kraal that he was forced into Christianity. Even then he did not just accept Christianity as it was propagated by the missionaries, but embarked instead on the formation of a new faith which took into account his experience as a Xhosa person. In retrospect, Ntsikana is to be admired for being one of the first African individuals who was not only shaped by Christian mission. He also shaped and influenced Christian mission itself, thereby shaping the history of Christian missions and ultimately the church in southern Africa. He was the forerunner of African church leaders who sought to embrace the message of Christianity without the Western vestiges with which it had been covered. Amongst such leaders are Nehemiah Tile, James Dwane, David Magatla, Robert Mashaba, Makanda Nxele, Ma Nku, Isaiah Shembe, Edward Lekganyane and Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa.⁸ Each contributed, in his own way, to the growth of an African form of Christianity, its core theology, methodology and ecclesiology. Ntsikana epitomised the ideal of a liberated African religious person by bringing his culture and context into his religious experience. He merged his African experience with his Christian spirituality, and in so doing, deliberately digressed from the Christian blueprint provided by the colonial missionaries of his day. His Christian practice became the beginning of a new form of African Christian spirituality which gave birth to the Ethiopian movement, the African Initiated Churches (AICs) and other forms of Christian religions which blended Christianity with African traditional religions and have now become the dominant form of Christian religion in Africa.⁹

Two important questions arise as a result of Ntsikana's contribution. First, if Ntsikana did not entirely follow the blueprint of Western Christianity which he received, how can one characterise his contribution to African Christianity? Second, how can Ntsikana's special contributions be celebrated properly in a democratic South Africa? Each nation that celebrates its freedom must discover the heroes and heroines through which it can build a legacy to strengthen their often hard-won freedom. Ntsikana can be viewed as such a person in the African context. This is because he left a legacy of acculturated and political African spirituality which the present author contends is important for African Christians to use as they adapt and contribute to the maturing of democracy in South Africa. In such spirituality, religion cannot be separated from cultural and political freedom, but is instead seen as an intrinsic part. To understand Ntsikana and his unique contribution, we therefore need to begin by revisiting his background so that

⁸ De Kock, L 1996.. *Civilizing barbarians: missionary narrative and African textual response in nineteenth-century South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press/Lovedale Press:23.

⁹ See Erlank, N. 2003. The spread of indigenous Christianity in British Kaffraria after 1850. *Missionalia* 31(1), April:19-41.

we can establish the factors that shaped his attitude towards religion, Christianity and ultimately his spirituality.

Ntsikana's socio-political world

Ntsikana was a product of his context and community. He entered history when the Xhosa nation's culture had been under constant attack from the Western missionaries' teaching, and their (the Xhosa's) political independence had been destroyed by the British Imperial and Cape Colonial forces.¹⁰ Despite this onslaught upon their political and cultural freedom, the Xhosa people maintained their identity and consciousness. Some remained antagonistic to Christianity, whilst others incorporated it into their African way of life, which led to a new way of affecting life and politics. The presence of whites, often termed "the three Ms" (missionary, magistrate and merchant), dominated the Xhosa people's world. The indigenous people were merely clients for the three Ms who were the actors and leaders of their society.

Ntsikana came from the Gcaleka clan, which was also known as the Ama-Ngqika because they were led by king Ngqika.¹¹ The Ngqikas were the most powerful of the Xhosa chiefdoms, particularly when it came to self-defence through war. They did not hear of God for the first time from the missionaries; they had had their own understanding of the existence of a Supreme Being, *uThixo* or *Qamata*, embedded in their own cosmology. What the missionaries brought with them was their own interpretation and understanding of the God which the Gcaleka already knew. As John Knox Bokwe has noted:

... in their heathen state the Gcaleka believed that there was a God, but they had no way of describing Him. They had no idol worship. They believed in the survival of the spirits of their departed ancestors who, they thought, had power to regulate their condition of life, could take care of them on their travels, and intercede for them with the Being whom they called *Qamata*, God, or *Unkulunkulu*, the Greatest-great.¹²

The foundation of Ntsikana's faith was therefore laid on a firm cultural upbringing which was deeply embedded in the life and character of his people.

¹⁰ Elphick & Davenport (1997:68).

¹¹ Bokwe, JK. 1913. *Amaculo Ase Lovedale*. 2nd edition. (Lovedale: Lovedale Press:1.

¹² Bokwe (1913:13).

Some key aspects of Ntsikana's life

Ntsikana was born in 1780 and was a hereditary councillor of the Rharhabe chiefdom, better known amongst the Xhosa as the Cirha people. His father's name was Gaba and his mother's Nonabe. Gaba was a polygamist and Nonabe was his second wife. She had to run away from her marriage because the first wife, Noyiki, was jealous of her and accused her of witchcraft. Ntsikana was born a few months after Nonabe had left Gaba. He only came back to his father 12 years later, when his father, who had had no other son, sent for him. He was adopted by Gaba's first wife Noyiki.

Ntsikana grew up at a time when white settlers were increasing in number. There was constant conflict between them and the Xhosa people, and also between the Rharhabe and other African tribes. As there were no schools at that time, Ntsikana was sent to tend goats at the age of nine and promoted to looking after his father's cattle at the age of 12. At this point he began to learn the Xhosa man's way of life, using the knobkerrie and the assegai, and being prepared for the chief's army which, as a fully grown male, he would be expected to join. The next stage was for him to enter manhood through the *ulwaluko*, or circumcision ceremony. The dress code for a young initiate was that of a simple sheepskin (*ingubo*). Since religious beliefs are embedded in the Xhosa culture, Ntsikana was also introduced to African traditional beliefs and systems at that time.

In 1799, Reverend Johannes Theodosius van der Kemp, a missionary from the London Missionary Society (LMS), arrived in Gcalekaland. After being introduced and welcomed by the chief, Van der Kemp was given land and settled among the Gcaleka people. The Gcaleka nicknamed him *Nyengana*, meaning "one who sneaked into the community."¹³ Ntsikana heard about Christianity for the first time during his teenage years from Van der Kemp but did not embrace it. In fact, he ran away when they wanted to baptise him! Having come of age, Ntsikana became a polygamist and married two wives, Nontsonta, the mother of Kobe, and Nomamto, who was the mother of Dibakwana and two other sons. After the death of his father, Gaba, Ntsikana fetched his wives, property and livestock and moved from Peddie towards the north and settled at Gqora near the Kat River district. It was there that he had his conversion experience in 1815, prior to the arrival of the Reverend Joseph Williams, another LMS missionary, in 1816 and apart from Van der Kemp's ministry.¹⁴

¹³ Bokwe (1913:5).

¹⁴ Missionaries would arrive in his community to preach the gospel and make contact with the now-Christian Ntsikana. Here, it is important to note the tendency of pro-missionary historians to attribute Ntsikana's conversion to either Van der Kemp or Williams and yet, as we have seen, this is not necessarily correct. Although he had heard Van der Kemp preach,

Ntsikana's conversion to Christianity can be attributed to a number of factors, including his knowledge and experience of a Supreme Being, as taught through his culture, his contact with Christianity through various people in Ngqika's kraal, such as Van der Kemp and Jan Tshatshu and his quest to protect the freedom of Ngqika's people from the Western settlers and missionaries who were steadily encroaching upon their community. This said, there is a lot of evidence that once the Reverend Joseph Williams arrived, the newly converted Ntsikana constantly visited him in order to acquire more knowledge about the Christian faith.¹⁵ Following his "self-baptism", Ntsikana encouraged people to pray and began to hold religious services. The tendency was that, after converting to Christianity, people would join the local church under the leadership of a white missionary. By contrast, Ntsikana remained in his community and practised his ministry, which was characterised by three key activities, namely the composition of hymns, preaching and prophecy. Religious services were held in his home, inside one of his huts, where people would assemble to hear his teaching, during which he complained of the sin that affected him and others, and from which they needed to turn. This, in turn, led to the establishment of a small group of disciples who gathered around him, meeting for prayer and instruction in the Word of God.¹⁶ This was the beginning of what today is known as the Ntsikana Memorial Church (NMC). He taught his followers what he learnt from the missionaries during his visits. Through interaction with these missionaries, Ntsikana deepened his knowledge of the biblical God, and through divine worship, preaching and composition of hymns he nourished his African spirituality. The missionaries taught him about the Christian God's rejection of polygamy. This made him divorce his younger wife, Nomanto, so that he could become a monogamist and thus become faithful to God. Although he divorced his second wife, he nevertheless continued to support her. So his faith was a combination of African culture and the teaching of the missionaries.

Ntsikana had not been converted and when Williams came to his community in 1816, he had already had his religious experience the previous year. Another person credited with Ntsikana's conversion to Christianity is that of Jan Tshatshu who worked with Van der Kemp. Quoting Holt's 1954 work, PJ Jonas holds that "Tshatshu is presumed to have influenced Ntsikana and cooperated with him in winning other converts who played an important role in spreading the Christian message among the Xhosa peoples."¹⁴ Again, although Tshatshu befriended Ntsikana, there is no evidence of him leading Ntsikana to conversion although it can be concluded that, like others, Tshatshu contributed to the Christian foundation of Ntsikana's life.

¹⁵ Bokwe (1913:5).

¹⁶ Elphick & Davenport (1997:72)

R. Simangaliso Kumalo

A spirituality of resistance

One of Ntsikana's most significant contributions to the politics of his people was that he advised Ngqika and the Rharhabe clan to abandon violence and war and adopt the strategy of non-violence when settling disputes. This may have been as a result of his experiencing the devastation of war in the battle of Malinde in 1818.¹⁷ Furthermore, his pacifist teaching may be attributed to the patronage of Ngqika and other prominent leaders of the tribe such as Old Soga.¹⁸ Ntsikana believed that God would protect Ngqika's people from their enemies. In fact, his hymns often presented God as a shield:

He is the one, who brings together herds which oppose each other.
He is the leader who has led us.
He is the great blanket which we put on.¹⁹

Ntsikana's worship services had an African flavour. For instance, while holding regular meetings for worship and prayer, his teachings adopted some of the elements, beliefs and practices of the Christian faith. He espoused, for example, the belief in salvation through Christ, while at the same time maintaining cultural continuity by filling elements of the Xhosa tradition with Christian content. This is most notable in his great hymn, *uLoThixo Omkhulu*, the first Christian hymn in Xhosa, which drew its symbols and images from everyday life. Based upon a traditional Xhosa wedding song, it is now sung in Christian contexts, particularly during special services of The Order of Ethiopia Church – *Umzi wasTopiya*.²⁰

One can attribute his resistance form of Christianity to the Xhosas' experiences of the Western settlers and missionaries' cultural invasion. The same applies to Dube who drew his resistance to Christianity from his Zulu spirit of suspicion over Western culture and domination. Ntsikana maintained a deep suspicion of the missionary faith, although he could not resist what had "entered" him. One can thus conclude that the missionaries did not give Ntsikana his faith, but simply expanded his knowledge of God. His hymns are an expression of the joy of being able to worship and relate to God in his own language and from his own experience. Another of his important

¹⁷ Boo, (2008:8).

¹⁸ Old Soga was Ntsikana's successor and would later become the father of the Reverend Tiyo Soga, the first African to be ordained in South Africa.

¹⁹ Pieres, L. 1981. *The house of Phalo: a history of the Xhosa people in the days of their independence*. Cape Town: David Philip:82.

²⁰ KaSiboto, Lunga. "Interview 1. Interview by R. Simangaliso Kumalo. Tape recording, Johannesburg, 20 August 2007.

contributions was translating the Christian faith into the Xhosa language, the language of the ordinary people, so that they could grasp its significance and relevance. While other missionaries, such as the Methodists, struggled to approximate Xhosa words, Ntsikana's followers, who were the first to be educated in reading, played a vital role in "providing appropriate and idiomatic expressions for biblical translations."²¹ In so doing, they set in motion a dialogue between faith and culture that not only came to be largely controlled by black Christians, but also became an integral part of their spiritual liberation from the shackles of white domination.

Ntsikana also played the role of royal prophet for his Gcaleka community and its leadership under King Ngqika. Their enemies, the Ndlambe, had their own royal prophet, Makanda Nxele, and the two became active opponents.²² In his prophetic role, Ntsikana warned King Ngqika against attacking other African tribes, while at the same time admonishing him for collaborating with whites who had money. He encouraged Ngqika to adopt the Bible, and prophesied about a coming Messiah who would bring peace to the land.²³ The depth of his Africanness was shown even in his at-times overt apocalyptic:

Then the end will come, the beginning of peace for which there has been no pre-concerted council, or arrangement, of man. The reign of Broad-breast (*Sifuba Sibanzi*) will commence and continue in the lasting peace of the Son of Man.²⁴

Like Dube, whose work was influenced by Zulu nationalism, Ntsikana's work was especially marked by the evolutionary change to Xhosa nationalism brought about through non-violent means. It is important to note that he incorporated "overarching African symbols of sacred power independent of White control."²⁵ He died in 1821 at eThwatwa, having given an instruction to his disciples to preserve a spirit of unity (solidarity) – *imbumba*.

After his death, Ntsikana's followers moved from the Kat River to the Chumie Mission in the Emgwali District, also known amongst the Xhosa people as *Emaxesibeni*. Although they reached Chume, where they were readily absorbed into the missionary way of life and worship, they nevertheless continued to identify themselves as followers of Ntsikana's Great God and sang his great hymn during their mission services. Under the leadership of Old Soga (Tiyo Soga's father) – who did not become a Christian although

²¹ Elphick & Davenport (1997:77).

²² Piers 1981:81).

²³ Bokwe (1913:21).

²⁴ Elphick & Davenport (1997:73).

²⁵ Elphick & Davenport (1997:73).

R. Simangaliso Kumalo

his wife, Nosuthu, did – they continued Ntsikana’s legacy by conducting services, while simultaneously maintaining their cultural practices such as polygamy, consulting diviners and venerating the ancestors.²⁶ Old Soga and his followers also adopted Western methods of planting and irrigation and participated in food production for the European market. They were able to live between two worlds, Western Christianity and African culture, as their esteemed leader had taught them. They continued to attend religious services at the mission station, while at the same time holding services in their church (hut) where only Ntsikana’s hymns were sung. This shows that the missionaries’ service did not satisfy them, but needed to be supplemented by Ntsikana’s holistic approach to worship and faith. As oppression gathered pace, Ntsikana’s hymns were associated with the wider survival of Xhosa national identity and political consciousness. His followers also compared his vision to that of Saul’s vision on the Damascus road, thus providing a direct link with divine revelation outside of missionary control.²⁷ AC Jordan has thus noted:

Ntsikana’s hymns were the first literary composition ever to be assigned to an individual formulation – therefore constituting a bridge between traditional and the post-traditional period.²⁸

First, Ntsikana appropriated Christian symbols and used them to empower black people to direct their own transformation, using an evolutionary model. His work was focused on the reconstruction of the Xhosa culture and religion in order for it to be consistent with his newly found Christian faith. This was the challenge for most Xhosa people who converted to the Christian faith and did not know how to resolve the inevitable tension between culture and Christianity. Some, like Jan Tshatshu, resolved the issue by discarding their culture entirely.²⁹ Others, such as Makanda Nxele, accepted Christianity but were disillusioned when they were forced to discard their culture. This eventually led to them discarding Christianity, returning to their culture and working against Christianity and the missionaries.³⁰ Ntsikana developed a new form of Christianity, one which was independent from the established church and yet in continuity with his Xhosa identity and culture. Through this, he found peace in a unique way.

²⁶ Elphick & Davenport 1997:78).

²⁷ Acts 9:1-19 (NRSV),

²⁸ Jordan, AC. 1973. *Towards an African literature: the emergence of literary form in Xhosa* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press:73.

²⁹ Crafford (1991:15).

³⁰ Balcomb, A. 2008. Mission as biography: case studies from the Eastern Cape frontier. *Missionalia* 36/1, April:29-45.

Second, Ntsikana developed an African-centred Christianity which was independent of the influence of Western missionaries, who confused people with their Eurocentric Christian faith. For Ntsikana, being a Christian did not mean one had to adopt European culture. Instead, he taught that one could be a Christian and an African at the same time. As a result, he encouraged Ngqika to accept the Bible even though he admonished him to be careful of whites and the money they brought. He emphasised the importance of maintaining African nationalism and culture for the well-being of the nation as a whole. Ntsikana drew from his culture the relevant elements, symbols and values that helped to build and sustain Xhosa national identity. However, his view of African unity went beyond the Xhosa nation to embrace other African groups. This resulted in him discouraging Chief Ngqika from attacking other African tribes, and counselling him to unite with them. Ntsikana also built the first Christian movement that sought to fight for black self-determination. In this, he can be seen as the forerunner of a number of Christian African nationalists who were to emerge at a later stage.

Third, Ntsikana translated into Xhosa the basic terms of the Christian faith, such as God, love and forgiveness. He also used Xhosa idioms to explain the Christian faith and its basic doctrines.³¹ In fact, Ntsikana was the first Christian who remained an African, because he accepted Christianity within a distinctively African world view. The following are some of the key terms into which Ntsikana read deep meanings as understood by the African people of his time:

- **Shield:** The shield has been used for many years by Southern African people. In fact, some post-colonial African countries chose it as a symbol to grace their national flags and emblems. Among them are Swaziland, Lesotho and Kenya. The shield, used in time of war for shielding blows, was seen by Ntsikana as a symbol for God who defends the truth.
- **Fortress:** Ntsikana continues the motif of war by referring to God as a fortress of truth. A fortress is used solely for defence and protection in times of war. It is likely that the wars that Ntsikana had experienced between his people and the British made him see God as an impenetrable defence in time of war.
- **Forest:** A forest is majestic. Ntsikana sees God as a large forest whose truth is also as complex as an unfamiliar, majestic forest.

³¹ Jordan (1973:74).

R. Simangaliso Kumalo

Fourth, Ntsikana emphasised the importance of unity for the success of the black people in maintaining their identity and freedom and safeguarding their future. He also opposed Nxele's prophecies, which encouraged war. Instead, he held the belief that black people should work together and face their oppressors in unity. This was the earliest attempt at black consciousness rising in South African political history. It was also the first instance of a philosophy of non-violent active resistance towards white domination. Characteristically, Ntsikana called this *imbumba yamanyama* ("the unity of black people"), interpreted as "unity is strength". Ntsikana's call for *imbumba* was appropriate in a context infested with tribal wars, which weakened the African people's struggle against the Western colonialists. Indeed, *imbumba* was the name of the first black organisation formed to represent the aspirations of black people. The SANNC was formed in 1912, for the purpose of uniting African ethnic groups taking the idea of *imbumba yamanyama* forward.³²

The "Great Hymn"

Dave Dargie, a musicologist who has conducted extensive research on Ntsikana's compositions, has no doubt that the six songs he discusses in his *Hidden words of the Prophet: texts appearing in traditional versions of the Songs of Ntsikana*, are in fact one song. While that might be the case, these songs have been performed separately in various settings. Dargie has translated into English the "Great Hymn" which he wrote down in a slightly different orthography from the Hymn No. 20 found in the Methodist Hymnal and titled *Incwadi Yemibedesho*, the book of common prayers.³³ Those who performed Ntsikana's song or heard it being performed, decided to call it "great" which is how it is known today. The greatness of the song may be attributed to its length, the depth of the words and the beauty of its poetry when compared to that of other songs, such as *Intsimbi kaNtsikana* ("Ntsikana's Bell," commonly referred to as "The Bell Song") which contains fewer than four lines.³⁴ The Great Hymn introduces and identifies God as the Great God who dwells in the heavens. This line introduces the rest of the song, which takes on a descriptive nature, punctuated by four rhetorical questions. Lines 2, 3 and 4 are unique in the sense that they describe God as

³² It became one of the first attempts at black consciousness, and looking back, we can deduce that the emergence of democracy in South Africa came about as a result of Black unity in its fight against all forms of domination.

³³ Dargie, D. 1988. *Xhosa music: its techniques and instruments with a collection of songs*. Cape Town: David Philip:28.

³⁴ This is because the song was used as a call to worship. Ntsikana would sing it and then people from the neighbourhood would converge on his home for religious worship.

the “Truth” in superlatives never before used in the Holy Scriptures. The “Shield of Truth,” the “Fortress of Truth” and the “Forest of Truth” are symbols which Ntsikana introduces in praise of the divine.

Next, prophet Ntsikana turned to Biblical terminology to describe God. He began with the Old Testament which praises God as the Creator of life and of the heavens above. As such, Ntsikana hails God as the Creator of the stars above and even of blind people. He concludes the Old Testament section with a rhetorical question as to whether God creates blind people purposely. The New Testament section of the “Great Hymn” opens with the eschatological motif of a sounding trumpet. It portrays God who, through Jesus, seeks souls and also brings together into one nation souls that initially rejected one another. Through Christianity, God is seen as a big blanket that covers all believers, irrespective of race and colour. In direct reference to the story of Jesus Christ as found in the Gospels, he points to his hands and feet wounded by crucifixion. He closes his poem with yet another rhetorical question: *Are we worthy of your home?* The song is full of political connotations emanating from the political upheavals that his people faced at the time of its composition.³⁵

Ntsikana and his influence on the (indigenous) churches

Ntsikana continues to influence the mission churches today. Most churches have incorporated his hymns into their theology and worship. No other black prophet has been regarded with such esteem by the mission churches, such as Ntsikana. The Hymn Book of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa lists Ntsikana’s “Great Hymn” first. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) also includes the “Great Hymn” among their selection (Hymn #20). Interestingly, the MCSA uses the “Great Hymn” during its major services, such as the ordination of ministers and induction of bishops, and conferences. Apart from the above, there are other churches and institutional choirs which utilise Ntsikana’s music. For example, the choir of the former Lutheran Theological Seminary in Pietermaritzburg sang Ntsikana’s “Great Hymn” and “Bell Song” in 1997 while they were touring the Eastern Cape. Then there are also many AICs that Ntsikana has influenced, such as the Thembu National Church of Nehemiah Tile. Although not a contemporary of Ntsikana, Tile who died in 1891, was proud to be associated with Ntsikana’s teaching, music and legacy. As with Ntsikana, he accentuated his people’s rites of passage, seeing nothing wrong with initiation ceremonies

³⁵ For the discussion on Ntsikana’s hymns, I am here indebted to my colleagues, Radikobo Ntsimane and Douglas Dziva, who generously shared some significant insights with me.

R. Simangaliso Kumalo

into adulthood. In her conclusion to the entry on Ntsikana in the *Dictionary of African Christian biographies*, Janet Hodgson can thus write:

Following Ntsikana's death, his disciples joined a Western mission yet kept alive his teachings, prophecies, and hymns in oral and written traditions. Africans came to revere him as their own saint, which is reflected in the naming of the St. Ntsikana Memorial Association, founded in 1909 as a cultural and ecumenical Xhosa movement. In recent years he has become a symbol of a much broader African cultural identity.³⁶

What does Ntsikana's legacy mean for today?

Ntsikana's legacy teaches us that a nation's culture is a valuable heritage on which it must build its identity and future. The fact that Ntsikana's conversion did not mean disentanglement from his culture and identity in favour of Western Christianity is an eye-opener for many. Although converted to a world religion, which expects African converts to change their names and manner of dress, Ntsikana kept his cultural identity. David Chidester has observed that before Ntsikana died:

He instructed his closest followers to join the nearby mission station but told them to remain united "like a ball of scrapings from tanned hide" and thus "maintaining their cultural unity even though they submitted to the regime of the missions".³⁷

When we celebrate his legacy, South Africans need to look for what African culture can offer them in their endeavour to build a just and democratic society and sustain their hard-won freedom. There is a need for the country to hear Ntsikana's assertion for cultural identity and pride albeit within the framework of submission to Christianity, globalisation and democracy.

The above observations make us aware that celebrating the life and work of Ntsikana means accepting our identity as a nation, cherishing our culture and making our cultural values the foundation for all aspects of our lives, be they social, political or religious. Ntsikana provides us with the symbols that integrate an independent peasant movement into a newly found nationalism. He resisted the missionaries' domineering approach to Christianity. While he accepted their message, he rejected their colonising attitude and domination. For Ntsikana, Jesus Christ identified with ordinary,

³⁶ Hodgson, J. 1982. *The God of the Xhosa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press:222.

³⁷ Chidester, D. 1992. *Religions of South Africa*. London: Routledge:49.

poor people in their experience of life, be it spiritual or cultural. Ultimately, Ntsikana was a pioneer of African Christianity and the establishment of AICs. This said, mainline Christianity has also benefited from his many great hymns and form of spirituality. Elsewhere I have observed that Ntsikana's work laid the foundation for the African Christian leaders who came later to recognise the interface between politics and religion. I (2012: 91) wrote:

Inspired by the generation of uNtsikana ka Gaba, Nehemiah Tile and Tiyo Soga, Dube and his generation are the ones who, through their involvement with both religion and politics, redeemed the religious communities from a bad legacy of having collaborated with the oppressors. Had it not been for his generation the religious communities would be carrying an indelible blemish for having collaborated with the colonial government and would forever be ashamed of themselves.³⁸

In contemporary South Africa, it is generally accepted that politics and religion do interface and Christians therefore have a contribution to make to the development of citizenship and democracy.

Conclusion

Amongst his last sermons, there is one in which Ntsikana warned his followers to remain united *nimanyane nibe yimbumba*." By this time the number of his followers had grown exponentially, meaning that his teachings, values and principles had taken root amongst the people. Quite a number of people had been influenced by his teachings and had embraced a different type of Christianity from the ones that was preached by the missionaries. This was a Christianity that allowed people to observe their culture as a Xhosa and also to combine their struggle for freedom and resistance from any form of oppression. There is ample evidence that Ntsikana's teachings impacted on a number of African people, which is why his church continued after his death. Although the church did not grow to a prominent denomination compared to others such as the Israelites of Enoch Mgijima, the Ethiopians of Dwane and the Shembites of Isaiah Shembe, his influence has continued. It is not surprising that even today he is still revered by the Xhosa people, who still refer to him as uNtsikana *umphrophet wakwaXhosa*, Ntsikana the Xhosa prophet. Even his song is still being sung by mainline denominations and is now recorded in some of the hymnbooks of mainline

³⁸ Kumalo, R. 2012. *Pastor and politician: essays on the legacy of JLDube, the first President of the ANC*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster:109.

R. Simangaliso Kumalo

churches. We can safely draw the conclusion that Ntsikana is an example of an African leader who embraced Christianity but who had an unwavering commitment to his identity, principles, values and religion as an African. He should therefore be remembered as a pioneer of African Christianity and his name should remain in the books of South African social history as one of the people who shaped the narrative of Africans who were not only influenced by but also shaped Christianity.

Works consulted

- Balcomb, A. 1998. Of radical refusers and very willing victims: interpolations of the missionary messages in the stories of Nongqause, Nxele, Ntsikana, and Soga. *Bulletin for Contextual Theology* 5(1 & 2), 4-15.
- Balcomb, A. 2008. Mission as biography: case studies from the Eastern Cape frontier. *Missionalia* 36(1), April, 29-45.
- Bokwe, JK. 1913. *Amaculo Ase Lovedale*. 2nd edition. Lovedale: Lovedale Press.
- Booi, V. 2008. Ntsikana, in Ndletyana, M, *African intellectuals in 19th and early 20th century South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Camaroff, J. & Camaroff, J. 1991. *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa*, vol 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crafford, D. (ed.) 1991. *Trail-blazers of the Gospel*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- Chidester, D. 1992. *Religions of South Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Dargie, D. 2008. *Xhosa music: its techniques and instruments with a collection of songs*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- De Kock, L. 1996. *Civilizing barbarians: missionary narrative and African textual response in nineteenth-century South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press/Lovedale Press.
- Elphick, R. 1992. Of revolution and revolution (review article). *South African Historical Journal* 26, May, 182-187.
- Elphick, R. & Davenport, R. (eds.) 1997. *Christianity in South Africa: a political, social and cultural history*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Erlank, N. 2003. The spread of indigenous Christianity in British Kaffraria after 1850. *Missionalia* 31(1), April, 19-41.
- Hodgson, J. 1982. *The God of the Xhosa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Jordan, AC. 1973. *Towards an African literature: the emergence of literary form in Xhosa*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Religion and politics in the heritage of uNtsikana Ka Gaba ...

- Kumalo, RS. 2012. *Pastor and politician: essays on the legacy of JL Dube the first president of the ANC*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Kumalo, RS. 2013. *Religion and politics in Swaziland: the reflections of Dr JB Mzizi*. Bloemfontein: SUN Press.
- Millard, J. 1997. *Malihambe*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Pieres, L. 1981. *The house of Phalo: a history of the Xhosa people in the days of their independence*. Cape Town: David Philip.