



Xhosa-Speakers' Traditional Concept of God

The Xhosa-speaking peoples of South Africa, living along the eastern seaboard between the Great Fish River in the south and the KwaZulu-Natal border in the north, were the first Bantu-speakers to engage with the expanding white colonists in the late eighteenth century. Their traditional religion, like that of all Southern Bantu, comprised four main elements: the belief in a Supreme Being, the veneration of the ancestors, the manipulation of medicines and the fear of witchcraft. Of these, the belief in God was the least developed, although there is evidence that it was early influenced, to some extent, by concepts derived from neighboring San (Bushmen) and Khoekhoen ("Hottentots"). Later, under the teachings of missionaries, the concept was greatly modified.

The belief in a supreme creator being can be traced at least to 1100, when Late Iron Age agropastoralist Bantu-speakers moved out of the coastal plains of the Transvaal Lowveld onto the interior plateau or, as among Nguni, down the fertile corridor between the Drakensberg range and the Indian Ocean. Belief in a Supreme Being may, indeed, go back to the first settlement of Early Iron Age peoples south of the Limpopo River, dated to ca. 600. The Xhosa-speakers (or Cape Nguni) over the centuries split up into a number of chiefdom clusters, such as Thembu, Xesibe and Mpondo; the Xhosa proper, discussed here, were the southernmost group, living in what was formerly the Ciskei and southwestern Transkei.

The Xhosa had a number of names for the Supreme Being. Some obviously derived from the pre-Khoesan contact period, as both Xhosa and Zulu share them. These comprise distinct sets of reference. One set perceives God as a craftsman – the Maker, the Molder or, by extension, as *uHlanga*, referring, in Xhosa, to a mystical cave and, in Zulu, to a bed of reeds, from which all beings came forth by God's command. Another set of concepts conceived him as a nature god, seeing him in the natural phenomena of lightning, thunder and rainbow, and in the all-important rain. Thus God was called the Lord of the Sky, *iNkosi yeZulu*. He acted by his powerful will; his actions – good or evil were beyond question, whether he struck human or beast with lightning or withheld rain. No sacrifice was offered to him: only prayer or entreaty could propitiate him. He was different from and beyond the ancestors, and his actions would never be confused with witchcraft, even though it was believed that God sometimes sent the "lightning bird."

The pre-Khoesan period also undoubtedly employed a kinship-related metaphor in its theology. The association of God with *uHlanga* and the emergence of humans and animals was as the creator of the world, the First-in-Time, *Mvelatangi* or *Mvelanqangi*. But he seems to have been likened also to a firstborn son (*imvelanqangi*), forever identified as the First Authority, on the model of a homestead head, autonomous over his family and expressing the vitally important principle of agnatic authority characteristic, particularly, of Nguni. But he was not in any way a type of super-ancestor, for he was utterly outside the realm of ancestorhood. An authoritative explanation of misfortune, evil, ill-health and death is an important function of all religions. Here the explanations of choice among Xhosa (as in all South African groups) were ancestral wrath, witchcraft and pollution. Explanation in terms of God was more in the nature of an ultimate residual category when these failed – rather like the exasperated statement "God only knows!" In this sense, God was peripheral to the everyday, practical religion of the common man or woman. The ever-present, brooding, spiritual influences resided in the ancestors.

Among Xhosa, however, there appears to have been a new elaboration of the God concept, related to the institution of chieftainship, and possibly influenced by Khoe culture. This change is expressed by the introduction of two new names for God, *uQamata* and *uThixo*, the most typical Xhosa names for God today. Both derived from San (or from Khoe) sources, possibly after Xhosa began to intermarry with San and Khoekhoen.

The term *uQamata* first appears in the literature only in the 1870s, but Xhosa oral tradition holds that it is the most ancient of the two San (Khoe) terms. L.F. Maingard speculated that *uQamata* was perhaps the name of a Khoe culture hero. Tentative reconstruction of the *uQamata* cult suggests that it only operated in times of national crises, was orchestrated by the chiefs and held on mountaintops – unlike the ancestral rituals, which always took place in the cattle byre. If all the rain-makers' medicine had failed, then the chief prayed to *uQamata* on behalf of the people for rain, or the warding off of storms. This cult contrasted strongly with the kin-based ancestral blood sacrifice, officiated over by clan elders. It, significantly, consisted of prayer only. With one exception, none of the old records mention sacrificial killings or libations in *uQamata's* honor. It thus reflected God's role in the interface between society and

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nature, not, typically, the relationships between kinsmen – the essence of the ancestor religion. It also had a national, political dimension.

Probably due to Christian practice, the name of God most widely used today is uThixo, deriving from Khoe *Tsui//Goab*, meaning “Wounded Knee,” the name of the divinized hero and Rain God of the Khoekhoen. It was adapted in this form by the missionaries, to clearly distinguish traditional concepts from that of the new, universal deity that they proclaimed.

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Further Reading

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See also: Khoisan Religion; Pollution Beliefs in South Africa; Venda Religion and the Land; Zulu (amaZulu) Culture, Plants, and Spirit Worlds.