

Resistance and survival: Demolishing myths of disappearing people, minor chiefs and non-existent boundaries in the early 19th century Zuurveld of the Cape Colony

Julia C Wells
Rhodes University
j.wells@ru.ac.za

Abstract

Starting with fragments of information from the archives about a rebellious young man designated a “Ghona [Xhosa]” in 1820, the study constructed a plausible biography to be used in a dance performance. This uncovered several myths and omissions in historical writings about the western part of the historic “Zuurveld” area of today’s Eastern Cape. While many writers pronounced the Gonaqua to have disappeared from about 1750, they remained visible as a special category of versatile and innovative people at least through the 1850s. The imiDange Xhosa chiefs of this era were in the forefront of defending African interests against colonial encroachment, as occupants over a fifty-year period of the land north, south and west of the Fish River. The geographical location of the imiDange meant their fate was intimately linked to the colonial designation of the Fish River as a boundary between white and black. Their consistent role as resisters has been marginalised in historical writing, especially the strong defence they made in the Zuurberg mountains in the war of 1812. They challenged colonial practices not only militarily but also by trying to define the terms and conditions of labour relations. The disregard of boundaries reveals the complex dynamics of the contested frontier zone of encounter between Europeans and Africans prior to the defeat of the amaXhosa in late 1819. The study demonstrates the gains made by asking personal questions about marginal historic figures.

Keywords: Zuurveld; Colonial boundaries; Gonaqua; imiDange; amaXhosa; Fish River; Women captives; Robben Island.

“He didn’t wear red socks or have a yellow ‘S’ on his chest, but he is our hero.” So opened a play on the life and exploits of an unknown African activist named simply, Piet.¹ The scraps of information available about his life show that he participated in two daring escapes from colonial rule in 1820. The first freed his mother from forced labour, and the second liberated the Xhosa prophet-warrior, Makhanda, from Robben Island. Risky, daring and determined, Piet’s actions suggest he was someone

¹ Azile Cibi, author. The performance evolved into a play entitled *Umnqa! – Never Defeated* staged at the 2018 National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, 28 June-2 July. It also won first prize in a Sarah Baartman District Arts competition and was performed at the provincial East Cape *Iphulo* Drama Festival in March 2019.

who did not accept authority. He stands out.

An offer to turn his story into a performance by two young people, a poet and a pantsula dancer, stimulated further historical research into his life and times.² Their desire to know as much as possible about him forced relentless questioning. Site visits to the places associated with events in Piet's life added a further dimension to constructing his world. The performance portrayed the feelings and emotions of a young person living through the painful times of conquest yet responding in his own bold way.³

The search for Piet opened new doors of inquiry which overturned several historical lines of thinking about the places, events and people of his era. The development of a fuller story required using skills of creativity and imagination, which is now becoming an emerging methodology in history-writing.⁴ After considering how Piet's story emerged, the new discoveries and demolition of myths that it led to will be considered.

Constructing Piet's story

Historians have long prioritised written records as the source of "hard" facts, so that is where the enquiry started. The first discovery of Piet in the archives of the colonial government was an odd bit of correspondence in May 1820 from Colonel Jacob G Cuyler.⁵ He was scrambling to manage a bungled attempt to send a group of 22 African men to Robben Island, overstepping his powers. Eventually, he had to admit his error and accept their return home, with the exception of Piet, a known troublemaker. Cuyler explained that Piet had come to Uitenhage where "he wished to stop with me and I took him into my service, but before he had been a month with me, he with his mother and two other women made off with the intention to return to [Xhosaland]". Piet's mother had been with Cuyler, he said, for eight years, brought to him by Lieutenant Lyster.⁶

These bits of information were enough to stimulate further investigation. Piet's rescue of his mother forms the heart of the story. Colonel Cuyler got his way and Piet alone went to Robben Island, where he was held prisoner, without benefit of trial or sentencing. About three months after he arrived, a major escape took place,

2 The two performers are Azile Cibi, poet, and Likhaya Jack, pantsula dancer, both from Grahamstown/Makhanda. They started developing their performance in late 2017.

3 For the performers to construct a viable story, they at times had to invent plausible details. Though partly imaginary, these, remained rooted in the known information. The performers took part in extensive discussions about research findings and so are considered to be part of the author's research team.

4 The author acknowledges with appreciation grants from Rhodes University Research Committee 2017-2020, the National Research Foundation 2018-2020 and from the Mellon Foundation in 2020 in support of developing Creative History as a tool for the social sciences.

5 Cape Archives (CA), Colonial Office (CO) 2626: Letter, J Cuyler (Landdrost of Uitenhage)/C Bird (Colonial Secretary, Cape Town), 12 May 1820.

6 CA, CO 2626: Letter, J Cuyler (Landdrost of Uitenhage)/C Bird (Colonial Secretary, Cape Town), 13 May 1820.

freeing Makhanda, the Xhosa prophet and warrior who had led a major attack on British military headquarters at Grahamstown one year earlier. At first glance, it was not clear if Piet took part, as his name was missing from the detailed court records of the trial which followed. But eventually it emerged that he had not only been involved but had survived to successfully elude capture on land longer than most others. This confirms Piet's participation in his second escape, much bigger and more daring. The fact that he remained at large for nearly eight weeks confirms that he had especially good survival skills. This time the court pronounced that he should receive the same sentence as other escapees: Fourteen years in hard labour at Robben Island. Over the next seven years, Piet's name appeared in the monthly records for Robben Island. Perhaps most importantly, these records consistently refer to him as a "Ghona [Xhosa]". In the construction of Piet's life story, three basic facts came from the archives: That he freed his mother, that he took part in Makhanda's escape from Robben Island and that he then served there for seven years.

The search for Piet's life story reveals far more about the times in which he lived than about himself as an individual. The exercise of developing a creative performance out of Piet's story required a responsible blending of fact and fiction. The few details that exist in the written historical records about Piet can be taken as "fact" in the usual historical sense. But it is also a fact that the records were written by colonial officials, using their own terminology and format, totally shaped by the context in which they worked. As with all archival sources, they need to be read "against the grain" to see what clues they can offer about the lives of African people who had no voice in constructing the records.

Such remnants of facts offer important clues which guide the construction of the imagined parts of the story. Perhaps this part of the task should be seen as inventing plausibilities. In order to tell a believable story about Piet, some very simple but fundamental questions needed plausible answers. These included: How old Piet was in 1820; who were his parents; and where did they live? Finding credible answers to these questions formed the pillars to imagining the rest. These pillars derived from known facts but went beyond them into the realm of analytical probability. If not literally true for Piet, the core findings apply to many others.

With regard to Piet's age, none of the documents offer information. However, the closely related records of his fellow-escapees from Robben Island do give estimated ages. The other Xhosa prisoners with whom he was held at Robben Island were Batty/Hallela, 25; Jan, 28; Jakawa, 18; and Klaas, 25.⁷ Piet was not at their trial because he was still at large and then only joined them later. All of these four served their sentences with Piet for the next seven years, so might be taken as coming from a similar age grouping. Using this as a basis, it is plausible to assign Piet the age of

⁷ CA, Court of Justice, (CJ) 814, Criminal sentences, p. 275.

25 when he carried out his two recorded escapes in 1820. With this tool in hand, it is then possible to start reconstructing other possible details of Piet's identity and background.

For the second key question, the labelling of Piet as a "Ghona [Xhosa]" in the Robben Island records suggests who his parents might have been. The research team chose to believe that Piet's mother could be defined as a Gonaqua, while his father was Xhosa.⁸ This choice is consistent with the views commonly shared by historians. Harinck believes that it would have been far more common for Khoen women to marry Xhosa men than vice versa, and the evidence suggests that Khoen mothers influenced passing on their language and culture to the children.⁹ Makhanda personally told the missionary J Campbell that his father was Xhosa and his mother was not, implying she was Khoen.¹⁰ So this is a reasonably safe plausibility for Piet.

The third question of where the family lived is very nearly answered in Cuyler's account. It is highly probable that Piet's mother was captured by British forces in the Zuurberg mountains during the 1811-1812 war. This comes from Colonel Cuyler's claims that she had worked for him for eight years prior to 1820 and his mentioning that she was brought by Lieutenant Lyster. This information is consistent with known accounts of the war, which will be discussed below. These statements establish crucial evidence of a relevant place, as it can then be deduced where the refugees in the Zuurberg mountains originally came from.

With these three constructs in mind, it was then possible to revisit the historical records to piece together somewhat more speculative parts of Piet's life. The imaginative approach led to new lines of questioning. It might be said that working with what is plausible entails dealing with "soft" facts, the art of contextualisation. A responsible blending of hard and soft details opens space for the marginalised and silenced voices of African people. We have no choice but to read between the lines of their recorded actions to identify the emotions and feelings. The need to use imagination to produce a performance led to asking new and probing questions. This revealed a need to revise the historical records and demolish some of the prevailing myths. The search for Piet's life exposed five further little-told stories of the turbulent forty years and five wars that it took for Europeans to conquer the amaXhosa by 1820. Each of these will be dealt with in turn.

8 "Gonaqua" refers to people of mixed Khoen and Xhosa descent, as will be discussed further on.

9 G Harinck, "Interaction between Xhosa and Khoi: Emphasis on the period 1620-1750", L Thompson, (ed.), *African societies in Southern Africa* (London, Hutchinson Educational Books, 1969), p. 158.

10 J Campbell, *Voyages to and from the Cape of Good Hope with an account of a journey into the interior of South Africa* (London, Religious Tract Society, 1820), p. 210.

Redefining the Gonaqua identity

The construction of Piet's story starts best with the last clue – that he was called a “Ghona [Xhosa]” by those who imprisoned him. What did this mean in 1820? Understanding the term Gona, or Gonaqua, was particularly challenging as two opposing historical traditions emerged. One defines them as “disappearing people” derived mostly from 18th century sources, whereas the other describes them in mid-19th century as a “fifth column”.¹¹ Our scanty details show that Piet's experience in 1820 supports the latter view.

The 2013 republication of the 1752 memoirs of Ensign AF Beutler firmly supports the “disappearing people” version.¹² The editors, Crampton, Peires and Vernon, attempt to define who the Gonaqua were, but rest their argument on Beutler's famous comment that the people of Khoer descent that he met in the eastern borders of the Colony “do not know of what people they are”.¹³ They speculate that the last independent Gonaqua leader may have been Babbelan, conquered by Rharhabe in 1736. From this, they conclude that “by the time of Beutler's arrival in 1752, the Gonaqua had altogether ceased to exist as an independent political entity”.¹⁴

Significantly, Crampton, Peires and Vernon brush aside the claim of Gonaqua informants that the term Gonaqua simply meant people of mixed Khoer and Xhosa descent. Andrew Smith recorded in his 1836 interview of two Gonaqua men, Scappers, (age 100) and Prince (age 82) that “In early days they knew nothing of Gonas; that is the late name given to those who are bastards between [Xhosa] and [Khoer]”.¹⁵ The Beutler editors judge this as “incorrect” because they are aware the name appeared from the late 1600s. However, they do not take into consideration that the interviewees described many things that predated their own lifetimes. They could have meant it was a colonial usage which only became significant after their childhood, needing correction.

This description fits the evidence far better. If Gonaqua were a “category” of people, then the Euro-centric search for tribes with leaders and territory is inappropriate. It also explains the very wide geographical dispersion of people defined as Gonaqua, as well as the persistence of such people over very long periods of time. Linguists believe that the high level of Khoer features in the Xhosa language could well be the product

11 R Ross, *Borders of race in colonial South Africa, the Kat River settlement, 1829 -1856* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 94.

12 H Crampton, J Peires and C Vernon (eds.), *Into the hitherto unknown, Ensign Beutler's expedition to the Eastern Cape, 1752*, translated by T Toussaint van Hove and M Wilson (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, Second Series 44, 2013).

13 H Crampton, J Peires and C Vernon (eds.), *Into the hitherto unknown...*, p. xxxvii.

14 H Crampton, J Peires and C Vernon (eds.), *Into the hitherto unknown...*, p xxxiii.

15 PR Kirby (ed.), *Andrew Smith and Natal, documents relating to the early history of that province* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1955), p. 138.

of nearly three hundred years of cultural mixing.¹⁶ Instead of looking for marching Xhosa armies who conquered their Khoe neighbours, perhaps a kinder, slower process of itinerant men finding homes among new people makes more sense. Such social adventurers appear to have maintained contact with their chiefs “back home”, thus aligning their new communities with their old families to a certain extent. A Gonaqua could have been a first-generation person whose parents were Khoe and Xhosa, as we have assumed about Piet, following the example of Makhanda. Or it could be that distinct communities formed over several generations. From Smith’s informants, it is clear that they considered Gonaqua to be neither Khoe or Xhosa, but something unique, an indigenous African creole type of people.

The challenge of understanding who the Gonaqua were lies with the artificiality of European constructions of “tribes”. Wherever they went, travellers, missionaries and government officials sought to label people, usually on the basis of language, special customs, appearance, geographical origins and hereditary leadership.¹⁷ The people who called themselves Gonaqua, however, did not fit this exercise. The Europeans who briefly visited the region east of the Cape Colony insisted on looking for leaders and territories. The “disappearance” school of thought is echoed by several others. For example, the English traveller, John Barrow, produced a map in 1797 that showed the area just north of the middle Fish River as a place of Gonaquas, “a race now extinct”.¹⁸ Giliomee and Mostert skim over any mention of the Gonaqua in their histories of the south eastern frontier, claiming they “disintegrated” under pressure from Dutch-African farmers from the west and stronger Xhosa chiefdoms from the east.¹⁹

It makes more sense to view Gonaqua as a broadly generic, but indigenous term, for people who were a mix of Khoe and Xhosa in culture, language and lifestyle. Over time, some might have lost their distinctive identity. But new Gonaqua might have kept emerging with every first-generation encounter, anywhere in the region. Small pockets of Gonaqua settlement appear to have continued for at least another century after Beutler’s time. Gonaqua should be seen as comparable to the Korana and Namaqua for diverse

16 G Harinck, “Interaction between Xhosa and Khoi...”, L Thompson, (ed.), *African societies in Southern Africa...*, p. 150.

17 L Vail, “Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern African history”, L Vail (ed.), *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, James Currey, 1989), p. 12.

18 J Barrow, *An account of travels into the interior of Southern Africa 1801-1804*, 1 (London, T Cadell and W Davies, 1801 and 1804), Map 1, General Chart of the colony of the Cape of Good Hope, p. xxx. For our argument, it is also significant to note that this geographical area is the same one associated with occupation by the imiDange. It later became part of the Somerset District.

19 N Mostert, *Frontiers: The epic of South Africa’s creation and the tragedy of the Xhosa people* (New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1992); H Giliomee, “The Eastern frontier, 1770-1812”, R Elphick and H Giliomee (eds.), *The shaping of South African society, 1652-184* (Johannesburg, Maskew Miller Longman, 1989), p. 427. Thomas Pringle uses the term “Dutch-African farmers” to describe those who are elsewhere often referred to as trekboers, or just boers, farmers or inhabitants. I follow his example as it is explicit without carrying offense. T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa*, 2 (London, Edward Moxon, 1834), p. 8.

people within a large geographical area, not necessarily followers of a particular lineage, chief or “captain”, but who shared roots in the Khoe culture in their respective regions.²⁰

Despite the pronouncement of the “disappearance” of the Gonaqua, the editors of the Beutler journal provide a wealth of contradictory information which supports the view that the Gonaqua were an indigenous African creole people. They cite traveller accounts which name them as known from the earliest time of Dutch occupation, claiming they traded in dagga near the coast of the interior in 1689; that they were pillaged by a Dutch commando near Algoa Bay in 1723; defeated by Rharhabe east of the Fish River in 1736 and then pronounced as lost by Beutler in 1752.²¹ Not finding a Gonaqua tribe, Beutler nevertheless went on to find Gonaqua people in a wide variety of places that he visited. He named a place between the Bushman’s and Fish Rivers as “Gonaqua kloof” because “the Gonaqua nation is here”.²² As he travelled eastward beyond the Keiskamma and Kei Rivers, he used Gonaqua guides everywhere, implying their deep familiarity with the countryside.

The editors do not ask how it happened that Gonaqua ranged from Algoa Bay to the Transkei, a distance of five hundred kilometres. If it is assumed that a Gonaqua tribe migrated, it is not clear in which direction – westward or eastward? Though the editors mention other accounts, they do not interpret what they report. Later travellers stretch the Gonaqua-inhabited zone even further by adding places deeply inland. The “disappearing people” version does not ask how it happened that Sparrman met Gonaqua at the Gamtoos River and in Camdeboo in 1775, while Le Vaillant described them living near present-day Bedford in 1780.²³ Both writers viewed the Gonaqua as a curious “tribe” who appeared strikingly different, both physically and in lifestyle from the western Khoe. Sparrman gave a particularly vivid description of what he observed when he first met Gonaqua people just beyond the Gamtoos River. Paintings of Gonaqua individuals also tried to portray what European travellers considered to be their distinctive ethnic traits.²⁴ Paintings could not be made of them if they had disappeared. Sparrman described meeting a group of people of mixed culture on the upper Sundays River who took special pride in

20 M Lesniewski, “Guns and horses, c. 1750 to c. 1850: Korana – people or raiding hordes?”, *Werkwenkel*, 5(2), 2010. Missionary leader John Philip saw Namaqua and Korana as major categories but was unfamiliar with Gonaqua. J Philip, *Researches in South Africa, illustrating the civil, moral, and religious condition of the native tribes: journals of the author’s travels in the interior together with detailed accounts of the Christian missions, exhibiting the influence of Christianity in promoting civilization* (London, James Duncan, 1828), p. 15.

21 H Crampton, J Peires and C Vernon (eds.), *Into the hitherto unknown...*, pp. xxxiv, xxxvi, xxxviii, xxxvi.

22 H Crampton, J Peires and C Vernon (eds.), *Into the hitherto unknown...*, p. 70.

23 A Sparrman, *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope and travels in the country of the Hottentots* (Philadelphia, Joseph and James Cruikshank, 1801), pp. 73, 78; H Crampton, J Peires and C Vernon, *Into the hitherto unknown...*, p. xxxviii.

24 S Newton-King, *Masters and servants on the Cape eastern frontier, 1760-1803* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999). Francois Le Vaillant, travelling in 1780, produced an etching of a strong young man, wearing only a few beads and a loincloth, holding a large bow and arrows, p. 31; and William Daniell painted a portrait, entitled, *Gonah Hottentot*, of a moustached man wearing an animal-skin hat and a skin covering over one shoulder, p. 223.

the way they braided their hair, setting them apart from others.²⁵ This implies that perhaps the Gonaqua saw themselves as unique people who took pride in being neither Khoe nor Xhosa, but just themselves. These widely scattered encounters are consistent with the explanation that any time Khoe and Xhosa met and intermingled, their joint communities and their offspring became known as Gonaqua. It was an identity that did not depend on a prominent leader or a place.

Robert Ross adds valuable insight about the very active and influential presence of Gonaqua people in the Kat River settlement during the war of 1850-1853. The continuation of scattered communities called Gonaqua is abundantly evident in the first half of the 19th century. In 1818, the missionary Joseph Williams noted that the Gonaqua had kraals all up and down the Kat River.²⁶ An 1836 map in Andries Stockenström's autobiography shows a distinct region called Ghonaqualand.²⁷ A late 1830s map shows numerous "Hottentot locations" along the curves of the Fish River, near its juncture with the Kat River.²⁸ Elbourne points out that "hundreds of Ghonaqua" flocked to the Kat River settlement between 1828 and 1850.²⁹

In his in-depth study of the 1850 rebellion of the Kat River settlement, Ross concluded that the complexities of the Gonaqua made them masters of all, impossible to categorize or even identify. They were neither colonial Khoe servants nor Xhosa, but something else. By the 1850s, colonial officials were "frequently at a loss to tell when a Gona is a Hottentot [sic], Fingo or Kafir [sic] as he appears Proteuslike as each occasionally".³⁰ As Ross puts it, the Gonaqua were "bilingual, bicultural and able to make use of whichever cultural repertoire gave a greater chance of accumulation".³¹ He compares them to a "fifth column", able to "serve as camouflage to others" and confounding the British, who could not understand how to handle such people.³² Their creative hybridity remained a factor well into the 1850s when Gonaqua played a distinctive role during the war. Andries Botha, a prominent community leader and ultimately a rebel against British rule defined himself as a Gona Xhosa as did Jacomina, a Gona widow of Ngqika, also living at Kat River.³³ The Gonaqua may have disappeared as an independent, self-governing community, but they remained everywhere.

25 A Sparrman, *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope...*, p. 78.

26 B Holt, *Joseph Williams and the pioneer mission to the south-eastern Bantu* (Lovedale, Lovedale Press, 1954), p. 42.

27 A Stockenström, *The autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström, Bart., sometime Lieutenant-Governor of the Eastern Province of the colony of the Cape of Good Hope, I*, CW Hutton (ed.) (Cape Town, Juta, 1887, republished Cape Town, Struik, 1964), frontispiece. This map should be seen as partly fictitious. It includes a broad area to the north of the eastern Cape Colony, called "Hottentotia" – clearly a name of convenience as it is otherwise unknown.

28 Cory Library, MP 134, Survey of the roads from Graham's Town to Fort-Brown, Koonap-drift, Committee's Drift, Trompetter's Drift, Fraser's Camp and Fort Peddie.

29 E Elbourne, "To colonize the mind: Evangelical missionaries in Britain and the Eastern Cape, 1790-1837" (PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1991), p. 301.

30 R Ross, *Borders of race in colonial South Africa...*, p. 175.

31 R Ross, *Borders of race in colonial South Africa...*, p. 18.

32 R Ross, *Borders of race in colonial South Africa...*, p. 94.

33 R Ross, *Borders of race in colonial South Africa...*, pp. 106; 183. Jacomina assisted King Ngqika in hosting Europeans, suggesting she had been raised among Dutch-African farmers.

Piet's story fits this profile, but thirty years earlier in 1820. When the British took over final control of the Cape Colony in 1806, the Gonaqua had not disappeared. The writings of two prominent officials, Colonel Richard Collins and Colonel Jacob Cuyler are laced with numerous references to them as an important part of frontier society. Collins came on a reconnaissance mission into the eastern areas in 1809, resulting in a detailed report on what he found. Throughout the report, he referred repeatedly to the "Ghonaquas and the [Xhosa]" obviously not seeing them as one and the same. He urged a policy that would force the Gonaqua to choose, either to become servants of white people, as the Khoe from the western parts of the colony had, or to simply join the amaXhosa.³⁴ Above all, he wanted the Gonaqua to be removed from within the borders of the colony. He viewed Gonaqua as a distinct category from the amaGqunukwebe, who in those days were defined simply as Xhosa.³⁵

Collins may well have learned these terms from Cuyler, who assisted him with all his needs. The two conferred at length at the end of Collins' travels. Together with Landdrost Anders Stockenström from the neighbouring Graaf Reinet District, they crafted policy recommendations for the future of the eastern areas.³⁶ Their goal was to replicate the Cape Colony, where virtually no indigenous people lived, except to work as servants for whites. He advocated the large-scale settlement by Europeans to keep the indigenous people out. Within a decade, the colonial government pursued all these policies.

The Gonaqua were particularly threatening to this vision because they could not be readily distinguished from colonial Khoe servants, who were desperately wanted. After 1800, it is evident that Gonaqua people could move in and out of colonial society, without being fully dependent on it as exploited labour. This gave them a measure of control and command of a special niche market for certain kinds of social functions, such as traders, interpreters and guides. Others took service with white farmers simply to earn some livestock before returning home to Xhosa country. They always had one foot in another world. In short, they were Khoe-type people who were still semi-independent. This confused the colonial social order. Clearly, in 1820, the Gonaqua presence was still alive and well, posing a real threat to master-servant relationships and providing unruly leaders. Hans Trompetter, a key rebel leader in the third war, was Gonaqua.³⁷ Similarly, Makhanda, the leader of the fifth war, could

34 R Collins, "Journal of a tour to the north-eastern boundary...", D Moodie (ed.), *The record: ...*, p. 22.

35 R Collins, "Journal of a tour to the north-eastern boundary...", D Moodie (ed.), *The record: ...*, p. 19. They were also well-known by Collins' time for harbouring and supporting former servants of the Dutch-African farmers, who had deserted their masters and cast in their lot with Chief Chungwa of the Gqunukwebe. For an explanation of the creation of the Gqunukwebe chieftaincy, see J Peires, *House of Phalo: A history of the Xhosa people in the days of their independence* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1981).

36 A Stockenström, *The autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström...*, p. 50.

37 S Newton-King, *Masters and servants on the Cape eastern frontier...*, p. 55. In 1819, Trompetter was executed by British authorities for his role in the escape of Makhanda from Robben Island. See J Wells, *Rebellion and uproar. Makhanda's escape from Robben Island* (Pretoria, UNISA Press, 2007).

have also been viewed as Gonaqua. Thomas Pringle identified Makhanda's two wives, who negotiated his surrender as Gonaqua.³⁸ Piet's story confirms the colonial fears of the Gonaqua, as will be explained below.

The ImiDange in the forefront of resistance to colonialism

The placement of Piet's family in the Zuurberg mountains in 1812 secures a geographical anchor, which in turn opens the doors to the high probability that the Xhosa part of Piet's identity could be associated with the imiDange. As with the Gonaqua, a fair amount has been written about the imiDange, but it is scattered and has not been pulled into a larger, coherent picture. Although consistently referred to as "minor chiefs", their striking militancy has commanded attention from historians.³⁹ The ImiDange's long history adds insights about Piet's family.

Studies of the westward migrations of the Xhosa people tend to focus on those who moved along the coast. However, the earlier migrations of the imiDange further inland to the north, are documented, but seldom acknowledged. Jeff Peires puts them "in the vanguard of western expansion", suggesting that their progenitor, Mdange, moved west across the Kei River as early as 1700.⁴⁰ Mdange was the uncle and sponsor of Phalo, who claimed the kingship of all amaXhosa at that time. The imiDange westward migrations, Peires asserts, are likely to have taken three generations, in "jerky spurts" of travel.⁴¹ This placed them in the forefront of contact by the 1760s with Dutch-African farmers migrating eastward from the Cape of Good Hope. This would have also given them several generations of interaction with indigenous Khoe people and the creation of Gonaqua people.

If Piet's story incorporates imiDange descent, then he becomes embedded in one of the longest histories of resistance in the mingling of Europeans and Africans. By all accounts, in the early years of encounter, white and black lived peacefully with each other.⁴² The imiDange had settled west of the upper Fish River, in an area the Dutch later called Agter Brintjies Hoogt. But the peaceful joint settlement of the area did not last. Over time, both sides raided each other's cattle and homes. The imiDange often attacked farmhouses at night and then took away the servants.⁴³ This suggests a

38 T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, p. 98.

39 For example, see H Gulioome, "The Eastern Frontier ...", p. 446; B Nqezo, J Peires, and W Tabata (eds.), "Imidange, history of an African chiefdom" (Cory Library, Grahamstown, Pamphlet Box 239. Self-published booklet, Grahamstown 2005), 1-27 n.d., p. 4.

40 B Nqezo, J Peires, and W Tabata (eds.), "Imidange, history of an African chiefdom ...", p. 4.

41 J Peires, "He wears short clothes!': Rethinking Rharhabe (c. 1715- c. 1782)", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38(2), 2012, p. 347.

42 T Pringle, "Letters from South Africa, No. 2: [Xhosa] campaigns: The prophet Makanna", *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 1827, 74; R Collins, "Journal of a tour to the north-eastern boundary...", D Moodie (ed.), *The record: ...*, p. 10.

43 A van Jaarsveld, Commandant, Camdebo, 20 July 1781, "Report on the expulsion of the [Xhosa]", D Moodie (ed.) *The record: ...*, p. 110.

possible history of liberating labourers, which reminds us of Piet's story.

The first of many wars between them took place in 1781 and is widely believed by historians to be over the enforcement of a Dutch declaration of the Fish River as a boundary in 1778. Peires provides an in-depth account of the imiDange and this war, which he views as "hitherto hopelessly obscure".⁴⁴ He demonstrates that there was no discussion of a boundary in 1778, but rather cordial exchanges between imiDange chiefs, led by Qoba, Mdange's grandson, and colonial representatives. They even "sang songs to each other" around the fire at night.⁴⁵ The first mention of a boundary came two years later with a Council of Polity announcement, made in Amsterdam. Peires argues that the war and the boundary came about because of a major influx of new Dutch-African farmers into the area just west of the upper Fish River, as they fled heavy attacks from Twa people to the north.⁴⁶ They, in turn, objected to sharing the land with the imiDange. As would often be the case in subsequent years, these white settlers used the "violation" of the wished-for boundary as a reason to get government to sponsor a commando. This provided them with much-needed ammunition from Cape Town and a pretext to go on large-scale cattle-looting raids against their Xhosa neighbours.⁴⁷

The first war is best known for the "tobacco trick" massacre, planned and executed by Adriaan Van Jaarsveld, leading the commando. His efforts to negotiate a peace settlement had all failed because at meetings the imiDange mingled closely with the Dutch making them feel intimidated. They insisted they just wanted tobacco. So, on the third encounter, as Van Jaarsveld explained, he "hastily collected all the tobacco the men had with them, and having cut it into small bits, I went about twelve paces in front, and threw it to the [Xhosa] calling to them to pick it up; they ran out from amongst us, and forgot their plan".⁴⁸ The imiDange acceptance of the gift turned into a hugely destructive massacre as the commando members shot all the enemy men, including Chief Jalamba, a grandson of Mdange. Historians frequently cite this event as leaving a long-term legacy of "unparalleled bitterness".⁴⁹ It is chronologically possible that Piet's grandfather died at this massacre. The story of Dutch treachery certainly would have been passed down for many generations to come, as every family lost someone.

44 J Peires, "The other side of the black silk handkerchief: The Van Plettenberg agreement of 1778", *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library Association*, 62(1), 2008, p. 9.

45 J Peires, "The other side of the black silk handkerchief...", *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library Association*, 62(1), 2008, p. 15.

46 J Peires, "The other side of the black silk handkerchief...", *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library Association*, 62(1), 2008, p. 22. The Xhosa term "Twa" is used for hunter-gatherer people at times referred to as "Bushmen".

47 H Giliomee, "The Eastern frontier, 1770-1812", R Elphick and H Giliomee (eds.) *The shaping of South African society...*, pp. 444-445.

48 A van Jaarsveld, "Report on the expulsion", D Moodie (ed.), *The record: ...*, p. 110.

49 T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, pp. 34, 94; J Peires, "The other side of the black silk handkerchief...", *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library Association*, 62(1), 2008, p. 30.

After this, the surviving imiDange scattered. Some of the chiefs moved their people further south into the western parts of the area known as the Zuurveld, where from then on, they were often defined as “minor chiefs” scarcely visible in the historical records, yet never fully absent.⁵⁰ During Piet’s lifetime, three chiefs, two sons of Qoba and therefore great-grandsons of Mdange, and their cousin crop up frequently in colonial writing, usually for their non-cooperation. These were Chiefs Habana, Krata and Xasa. The geographical location of these imiDange chieftaincies, to the south of the Agter Bruintjies Hoogt area, coincides with known features of Piet’s story. Chief Habana’s name is associated with the Zuurberg refuge where British soldiers captured Piet’s mother, while Chief Krata maintained hostile links with Uitenhage, years later. Chief Xasa earned a reputation as the feistiest of all the Xhosa chiefs living within colonial boundaries before 1812.⁵¹

This closer look at imiDange history suggests the further need for a major revision of late 18th century and early 19th century frontier history. Central in the inherited versions is a pre-occupation with the colonial declaration of the Fish River as a firm boundary between Dutch-African farmers and amaXhosa. Anders Sparrman’s 1775 map depicts the Fish River as colonials imagined it to be, more or less a straight line from northwest to southeast.⁵² This misrepresents the geography of the Fish River, whose winding course falls into three distinct segments. After running generally northward for 65 kilometres from its mouth at the Indian Ocean, it takes a distinctive westward turn near the point where the Kat River joins it. For a distance of about 80 kilometres, it runs more or less parallel to the coast. The River then takes another significant turn to again follow a north to south course. The three parts can be usefully described as the lower Fish, the middle Fish and the upper Fish Rivers.

Some histories, such as Noel Mostert’s, *Frontiers*, focus on the events of the lower Fish River alone. This includes the history of the Gqunukwebe, who were joined by Rharhabe’s sons, Ndlambe and Mnyaluza in the 1790s. Together they pressed their settlements west to the banks of the Sundays River, showed little tolerance for white farmers and took part in the next three wars to assert their authority. Mostert refers to their area, the Zuurveld, as a special geographical “pocket” between the Fish and Sundays Rivers.⁵³

The area of land just to the east of the upper Fish River and north of the middle Fish River has a significance of its own. This zone might be usefully referred to as “the basket”, an imiDange base bounded by the Fish River on both the south and the west, by the Kat River on the east and the Winterberg mountains to the north.

50 J Peires, “The other side of the black silk handkerchief...”, *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library Association*, 62(1), 2008, p. 33, footnote 18.

51 R Collins, “Journal of a tour to the north-eastern boundary...”, D Moodie (ed.), *The record: ...*, p. 54.

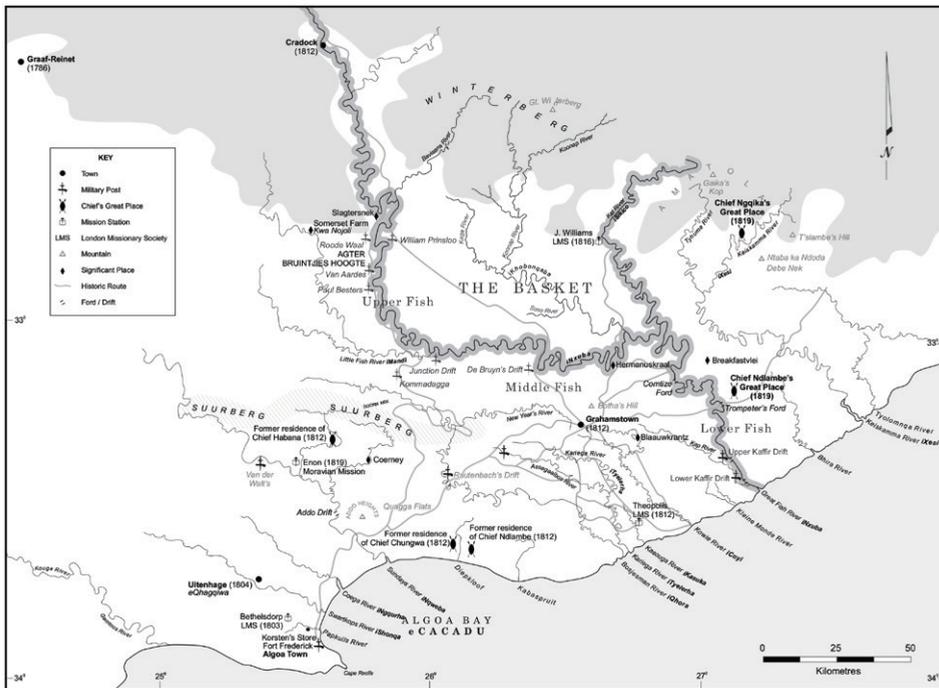
52 A Sparrman, *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope...*, 1, endpiece.

53 N Mostert, *Frontiers...*, p. 224.

This area is scarcely mentioned in historical accounts, and is even referred to on an 1820 map as “unexplored tracts”.⁵⁴ Historian, JS Marais, is one of the few who made a strong case for differentiating between the lower Fish River (the Zuurveld) and the upper Fish River as distinctive zones. This is echoed in Jeff Peires’ work.⁵⁵

Peires places early imiDange settlements on the Koonap, Kaga and Soso Rivers – all west of the Kat.⁵⁶ From there, the people migrated further westward to encounter the Dutch-African farmers in the Agter Bruintjies Hoogt area. The aggressive colonial demand in 1781 that all Xhosa should “go back to their own country across the Fish River” for the imiDange meant they should confine themselves to the “basket”, adjacent to the colony on two sides.

Image 1: The “basket” in relation to the Zuurveld



Source: Designed by author.

54 Military chart and sketch, of the south-eastern frontier of the Cape of Good Hope, showing the country ceded by the [Xhosa] chiefs to the British crown agreeably to terms offered to them by His Excellency, General the Right Honorable Lord Charles Somerset, Governor and Commander of the Forces on the 14th October 1819 at a conference held by His Lordship in person on that day. Cape of Good Hope, No. 10. I Stocker, Lieut. Royal Engineers. This is the same area that on J Barrow’s 1797 map is listed as “Ghonaquas, a race extinct”. J Barrow, *An account of travels into the interior...* p. xxx.

55 JS Marais, *Maynier and the first Boer Republic* (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Limited, 1944); J Peires, “The other side of the black silk handkerchief...”, *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library Association*, 62(1), 2008.

56 J Peires, “The other side of the black silk handkerchief...”, *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library Association*, 62(1), 2008. Scattered references.

What is generally referred to as the second war between white and black on the eastern edge of the Cape Colony had very little to do with the imiDange. The fighting that eventually broke out in 1791 was limited almost entirely to the lower Fish River area. The imiDange to the north and west were not affected and remained where they were.⁵⁷ In the early decades of co-settlement, the amaXhosa understood that the Dutch-African farmers were prone to “spasms of panic”.⁵⁸ So they at times just spread rumours to secure the farmers’ departure. This non-violent tactic is attributed to the areas under imiDange control.

The imiDange base in the “basket” played a pivotal role in the third war between 1799-1802. Historians have described this as an effort for the colonial Khoeservants of the Dutch-African farmers to regain their independence from servanthood and to secure land.⁵⁹ The war is also remembered as confirming the colonists’ worst nightmare – that their servants would join the independent Xhosa to retaliate.⁶⁰ This entailed large-scale desertion of their labourers to join the Gqunukwebe in the south and the imiDange in the north.

The fighting resulted in several significant military victories over Dutch-speaking adversaries, including at the Gamtoos River, the Sundays River, Rooiwaal on the upper Fish and a major imiDange victory at Agter Bruintjies Hoogt.⁶¹ Raids against colonists during the war extended as far west as Knysna and Mossel Bay, raising colonial fears that the whole of the Cape was threatened.⁶² The imiDange played a very prominent role in this, the longest of the early colonial wars, with huge implication for the labour patterns of the future. They simply did not tolerate brutal working conditions.

This war, like the previous two, left many Xhosa-speaking people residing west of the Fish River “boundary”. Just prior to the start of the war, and during its course, the southern Zuurveld was heavily occupied by large numbers of followers of Chief Ndlambe, as they abandoned their King, Ngqika.⁶³ It appears that all the other chiefs already living in the area, including the imiDange, readily acknowledged Ndlambe’s authority, leaving the amaXhosa stronger and more united than previously. When white settlers and officials asked them to go away, across the Fish River, they comically

57 JS Marais, *Maynier and the first Boer Republic*, p. 49; H Giliomee, “The Eastern Frontier, 1770-1812”, R Elphick and H Giliomee (eds.), *The shaping of South African society...*, p. 441.

58 JS Marais, *Maynier and the first Boer Republic*, p. 36.

59 H Giliomee, “The Eastern frontier, 1770-1812”, R Elphick and H Giliomee (eds.) *The shaping of South African society...*, p. 441; E Elbourne, “To colonize the mind...” (PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1991), p. 136; VC Malherbe, “David Stuurman: ‘Last Chief of the Hottentots’”, *African Studies*, 39(1), 1980, p. 200.

60 S Newton-King, *Masters and servants on the Cape eastern frontier...*, p. 222.

61 JS Marais, *Maynier and the first Boer Republic*, p. 136; S Newton-King, *Masters and servants on the Cape eastern frontier...*, p. 222; T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, p. 82; N Mostert, *Frontiers...*, p. 297.

62 R Collins, “Journal of a tour to the north-eastern boundary...”, D Moodie (ed.), *The record: ...*, p. 86.

63 JS Marais, *Maynier and the first Boer Republic*, 14; N Mostert, *Frontiers...*, p. 274.

pointed to their ears “to say they are deaf to any representations of that nature”.⁶⁴

In the decade following this war, and before the next one, the imiDange chiefs in the western Zuurveld became notorious for raiding white farmers. Their chiefs, Olela and Xasa were singled out by Chief Ndlambe as renegade chiefs that he could not control.⁶⁵ In 1809 Collins viewed the imiDange chiefs Habana, Xasa and Krata, to be doing the “most damage” to colonists.⁶⁶ So, when the fourth war started in 1811, they were special targets of the British.

The distinctive sense of identity and historical legacy of the imiDange emerged dramatically during the fourth war. The followers of Chief Ndlambe and the Gqunukwebe evacuated their lands by travelling east and crossing the Fish River near the coast, but the imiDange took refuge in the Zuurberg mountains, which bordered on the “basket” area, south of the middle Fish River. Peires correctly points out that the importance of the Zuurberg mountains as the major scene of military action in this war has been badly neglected by historians of the 1811-1812 war.⁶⁷ For the next seven years, Chief Ndlambe was viewed by the colonial authorities as their number one enemy, who resided east of the lower Fish River.⁶⁸ All of this leaves out the imiDange who lived further north and west. Piet’s story takes us to the heart of the western front.

Understanding the Zuurberg war and the politics of captured women

When the study started, Piet’s rescue of his mother stood out as particularly bold and daring. But as the research progressed, several hints emerged that this was perhaps nothing new. Gendered warfare followed by retaliation was expected by those who understood the dynamics of the 18th century frontier zone. Cases where the imiDange were especially active in releasing people from working for colonists, many of whom could have been their own relatives and friends, have been mentioned above.⁶⁹

The practice of taking women and children as captives derived from the long decades of experience of the Dutch-African farmers in dealing with smaller groups of Khoe and Twa people further west. Women’s presumed acquiescence as servants and inability to survive escape, made them targets for being taken alive by the farmers, while their

64 R Collins, “Journal of a tour to the north-eastern boundary...”, D Moodie (ed.), *The record: ...*, p. 60.

65 R Collins, “Journal of a tour to the north-eastern boundary...”, D Moodie (ed.), *The record: ...*, pp. 50-54.

66 R Collins, “Journal of a tour to the north-eastern boundary...”, D Moodie (ed.), *The record: ...*, p. 50.

67 J Peires, “The other side of the black silk handkerchief...”, *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library Association*, 62(1), 2008, p. 30.

68 J Wells, *The return of Makhanda, exploring the legend* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2012), see Chapters 3 and 4 for the role of Chief Ndlambe.

69 J Wells, *The return of Makhanda, exploring the legend* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2012), see Chapters 3 and 4 for the role of Chief Ndlambe.

menfolk were killed, due to fears of revenge.⁷⁰ For historians, female captives are commonplace. But the histories of how their families and communities fought back, as Piet did, are seldom mentioned. A few examples suggest a buried trend.

In the early decades of black and white encounters the capturing of women and children provoked major conflict. The first three wars between the Europeans and Africans all included allegations of abuse of Xhosa women and children as causes of war.⁷¹ The commanding officer of the frontier at the time of the first war in 1781, Adriaan Van Jaarsveld, blamed Xhosa counter-attacks on the homes of the white farmers on the unruly Prinsloo family, who relentlessly raided their black neighbours, kidnapping children.⁷² In the Zuurveld, during this war, two Khoe men fought running skirmishes with a commando in their attempt to free their captured wives.⁷³ The practice of taking Xhosa and Khoe captives, and destruction of their homesteads, had become a way of life.

Similarly, the outbreak of the second war in 1791 was attributed by the Landdrost of Graaf Reinet, HCD Maynier, to the sexually abusive exploits of Coenrad De Buys who had kidnapped a wife of Chief Langa, in the southern Zuurveld and kept her “as a concubine”.⁷⁴ The outraged and avenging amaMbalu people especially targeted De Buys’s own property for destruction during that war. Maynier understood that taking family members from the amaXhosa produced dire consequences. So, when a commando under his control seized 120 women and children, he ordered them to be returned to prevent revenge attacks on white women and children.⁷⁵ Later in the same war, when a commando took 60 women and children as prisoners, Maynier not only ordered their release, but used them as peace envoys to take extravagant gifts to the chiefs as evidence of colonial good will.⁷⁶

At the height of the third war, when the Zuurveld Xhosa and Khoe extended their fighting into the Swellendam district to the west, Landdrost Fourie, like Maynier before him, cautioned that any abuse of African women and children would only

70 J Philip, *Researches in South Africa, illustrating the civil, moral, and religious condition...*, p. 42. At times, pursuers even killed women so that children could be captured and taught subservience from a young and vulnerable age. E Eldridge, “Slave raiding across the Cape frontier”, E Eldridge and F Morton (eds.), *Slavery in South Africa: Captive labour on the Dutch frontier* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1994), p. 99.

71 During the time before wars started, chiefs could successfully demand the return of captives. In 1776 Chief Jalamba of the imiDange secured the return of a captive boy upon his request. S Newton-King, *Masters and servants on the Cape eastern frontier*, p. 59.

72 JS Marais, *Maynier and the First Boer Republic*, p. 12.

73 PR Kirby (ed.), *Andrew Smith and Natal...*, p. 137.

74 JS Marais, *Maynier and the First Boer Republic*, p. 31.

75 JS Marais, *Maynier and the First Boer Republic*, p. 46.

76 JS Marais, *Maynier and the First Boer Republic*, p. 48. The released prisoners included two sons of Chief Langa. Such thinking, however, eventually cost Maynier his post, when in 1799, many of the Dutch-African farmers rebelled against him. They viewed him as too lenient and as having given up the second war effort too soon, effectively admitting defeat at the hands of the combined Xhosa and Khoe forces. p. 52.

lead to disastrous consequences for the families of the Dutch-African farmers.⁷⁷ When amaXhosa returned three captured white women and children to their homes unharmed, Fourie instructed his followers to do the same. But such considerations for family feelings were more the exception than the rule. Thomas Pringle believed that the entire third war ended because wives and children of the rebel Khoe fighters “were held hostage” by their masters.⁷⁸

The high risk of taking female captives was respected by only a few commanding officials in the frontier districts. In the prevention of women’s capture, the English lacked the insights of their predecessors. Colonel Jacob Cuyler, arriving to manage the new British colonial acquisition in 1806, quickly sided with the demands of the Dutch-African farmers for more labour. He had been chosen for the job because of his fluency in Dutch. He steered British policy to meet the wishes of the farmers and then became zealous in acquiring captive women. The fourth war, during which Piet’s mother was captured, embodied British commitment to implement the recommendations of the 1809 Collins report, which Cuyler had a firm hand in designing.⁷⁹ All Xhosa and Gonaqua found west of the Fish River were to be treated as unwelcome intruders, and completely expelled. At last the river as the boundary was to become real. At stake, from the British point of view, was securing “the great nursery from which the rest of the Colony was chiefly supplied with cattle”.⁸⁰ To carry out this task, Governor Cradock appointed Lieutenant Colonel John Graham as Commissioner over the eastern districts, with unlimited civil and military powers.⁸¹ Assisting him was Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Lyster who handed over Piet’s mother.⁸² Both relied heavily on the advice of Colonel Cuyler.

Graham intended to gather all captured people and their livestock at Rautenbach’s Drift, in the centre of the Zuurveld, so that they could be safely escorted out of the colony by his troops. If men resisted, they could be shot; however: “No women or children are upon any account to be molested but suffered to go quietly with their flocks”.⁸³ But little went quite according to the plan. When Chief Ndlambe and an estimated 20,000 followers from the southern Zuurveld retreated across the lower

77 JS Marais, *Maynier and the First Boer Republic*, p. 148.

78 T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, p. 82.

79 A Stockenström, *The autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström...*, p. 50.

80 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham Esq of Fintry* (Great Britain, Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts. London, HM Stationery Office, 1940), from Henry Alexander to Colonel J Graham, 7 February 1812, p. 103.

81 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, from J Graham to Robert Graham, 4 October 1811. He was appointed by Gov. Sir John Francis Cradock in October 1811.

82 CA, CO 2626: Letter, J Cuyler (Landdrost of Uitenhage)/C Bird (Colonial Secretary, Cape Town), 12 May 1820. In June 1811, Governor Caledon gave the order to expel all Xhosa from the Zuurveld, and placed Thomas Lyster of the Cape Regiment in command.

83 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, General Instructions by Lieutenant Colonel Graham, November 1811.

Fish River, Graham complained: “He completely outgeneraled us”.⁸⁴ The African residents of the north western Zuurveld took refuge in the Zuurberg mountains. This included the scattered imiDange chiefs and their followers. The dense vegetation and rugged terrain of these mountains offered a measure of safety to the refugees. As Colonel Graham observed: “The immense ravines which are formed by and intersect these mountains, the quantity and thickness of the woods which grow in them, I am unable to describe”.⁸⁵

Deep in the middle of the mountains, the massacre of Landdrost Anders Stockenström and fourteen Dutch-African farmers in 1811 stands out as one of the most dramatic events of the fourth war.⁸⁶ The killing was led by imiDange chiefs, in bitter retaliation for the “tobacco” massacre of their people in 1781.⁸⁷ Further, the Khoer leader of the third war, and a recent escapee from Robben Island, David Stuurman, was present, as was another prominent figure named Antonie, who was later associated with the imiDange chief Krata.⁸⁸

By the start of January 1812, Graham despaired at not having enough men to clear the Zuurberg mountains and had to secure an additional two hundred troops from Cape Town.⁸⁹ Graham believed Chief Habana was at the centre of continuing resistance. Raiding and murders, even of white women and children, escalated in the adjacent area of the upper Fish River during January, and ex-servants of the farmers, were arming themselves with guns under David Stuurman. Chief Habana, living just north of the Zuurberg, had been joined by several other inferior chiefs, who formerly were under Slambie, probably including the other imiDange chiefs. But, they remained elusive, “the moment the troops advanced, the [Xhosa] fled to the immense wooded kloofs and ravines”.⁹⁰ In the peoples’ absence from their home villages in the valleys, Graham removed anything that might act as an inducement for people to return, including destruction of their houses and crops.⁹¹ At one point, he reported that “the whole force is constantly employed in destroying the prodigious

84 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, J Graham to Lieutenant Colonel Reynell, 31 January 1812. Those who fled with Ndlambe are likely to have included the amaGqunukwebe, amaMbalu and amaNtinde.

85 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, John Graham to Lieutenant Colonel Reynell, 26 February 1812.

86 T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, pp. 33-34; A Stockenström, *The autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström...*, pp. 57-59, 61. The massacre took place on 28 December 1811.

87 T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, citing Reverend John Brownlee, as quoted in Thomson (vol. ii, p. 341), p. 34.

88 VC Malherbe, “David Stuurman: ‘Last chief of the Hottentots’”, *African Studies*, 39(1), 1980, p. 58.

89 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, Gen. Cradock to J Graham, 18 January 1812.

90 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, J Graham to Lieutenant Colonel Reynell, 31 January 1812. Graham noted that this information was provided to him by Xhosa women.

91 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, Lieutenant Colonel Reynell to J Graham, 7 February 1812.

quantities of Indian corn and millet, which they have planted, and which is now fit for use".⁹²

Once troop reinforcements arrived from Cape Town in early February 1812, Graham commenced his final assault on the Zuurberg mountains. Within two weeks, he claimed that no Xhosa were left, and "upwards of 100 women and children fell into our hands".⁹³ Graham then ordered them to be sent back to their own people using the Rooiwal crossing of the upper Fish River to enter Xhosa territory. Whatever Graham intended for the captured women and children, Piet's mother ended up in the service of Colonel Cuyler, not escorted safely back to her people. Possibly she had remained among the "stragglers" Graham reported in mid-May.⁹⁴ At that point, the British army apparently shot all male Xhosa still found within the colony on sight, as well as many women and children.⁹⁵

How does all of this affect the construction of Piet's story? Since his mother's capture is likely to have taken place within the Zuurberg mountains, he was probably there as well. In 1811, he could have been about 15 – not old enough to be part of an army, but old enough to help protect the women, children and elderly. With the imiDange in the mountains, a young Piet would have been exposed to the veteran Khoe anti-colonial fighter, David Stuurman, with whom he would one day share a boat escaping from Robben Island. He most certainly heard about the massacre of Stockenström or was even present. As a survivor of the scouring of the Zuurberg, Piet would also have been introduced to the, probably, frightening sight of the British army's red coats followed by the disappearance of his mother.

It appears that Cuyler directly disobeyed orders from his commanding officer, Graham. An 1820 map shows Cuyler as owning property at the foot of the Zuurberg mountains.⁹⁶ Perhaps this allowed him to unofficially intercept the captive women and children sent to him by Lieutenant Colonel Lyster in 1812.⁹⁷ Throughout his career, Cuyler made it no secret that he played the role of labour broker, finding African women and children to place in the service of Dutch-African farmers. He was not above helping himself to the spoils of war. He confiscated all the land of David Stuurman in 1809, after personally entrapping him and sending him off to

92 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, J Graham to his father, 14 February 1812.

93 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, J Graham to Lieutenant Colonel Reynell, 26 February 1812.

94 CT Atkinson (ed.), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham...*, J Graham to Lieutenant Colonel Reynell, 15 May 1812.

95 Writing in 1834, Thomas Pringle claimed "I have in my possession, unquestionable proof, that men, women and children, were indiscriminately slaughtered during this campaign by the Boor and British troops". T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, p. 34.

96 Map: The District of Albany, formerly t'Zuurveld being the eastern frontier of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, shewing the locations of the settlers lately arrived from England and the situation of the town of Bathurst, J. Knoebel, 1820. London, W Fadden, 1822.

97 CA, CO 2626: Letter, J Cuyler (Landdrost of Uitenhage)/C Bird (Colonial Secretary, Cape Town), 12 May 1820.

Robben Island. He then kept four of Stuurman's children as his own servants.⁹⁸ So his possible retention of Piet's mother in 1812 was nothing new.

Cuyler's conduct reflects the new level of aggression that accompanied the start of British rule in the eastern district of the Colony, soon to be named Albany, after Cuyler's hometown in New York. With bigger and better resourced armies, the expulsion of Africans and the enforcement of the boundary was at last taking hold. A string of new military posts all along the Fish River enabled patrolling the crossing points to ensure that no one violated the boundary.⁹⁹ People who wanted to come and find missing family members among the farmers could only do so clandestinely, as Piet did.

Coming of age with the imiDange 1812-1820

As Piet's identity was constructed by the research effort, the question was asked about what he might have done during the eight years between the capture of his mother in 1812 and his escapes in 1820. If Piet was circumcised in 1814 to become a man fit for military service, he could have easily seen action in all the events of this time and place.¹⁰⁰ An understanding of the imiDange role during these years contributes to their history as ardent resisters, Piet's legacy.

Traces of the lives of the imiDange living in the "basket" reveal that they remained both at the centre of developments, but also maintained their own way of responding to the unfolding events. Between 1812 and 1819, British colonisers officially viewed the "basket" as outside their boundaries. It remained a hotbed of strained relations with the colony on its two sides but was also caught in the crosscurrents of the frontier, wedged between the colony and King Ngqika.¹⁰¹

Peace in this part of the frontier remained elusive. After the 1812 war ended, intensive cattle raiding from both sides continued. By early 1813, the "troublesome" Xhosa faced a new commando ordered by Governor Cradock to cross the upper Fish River at Van Aarde's post to move up the western side of the "basket".¹⁰² Its success resulted in some of the officers discussing the possibility of taking land within the "basket" for their

98 T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, pp. 84-85.

99 This included posts on the middle Fish at Hermanuskraal, De Bruins Drift, Wentzel Coetzer, Junction Drift, Van der Merwe's, De Lange's; and on the upper Fish at Paul Bester, Van Aarde's, and Kruger's crossing points. The Rooiwaal crossing remained as the main entryway to the Agter Bruintjies Hoogt part of the colony. Another post at Kommadagga guarded the main access track through the mountains. See map, Military Chart.

100 Circumcision into manhood is an important Xhosa custom, which usually takes place when a boy reaches the age of 18.

101 Not all the homes of the imiDange chiefs and their people are known, but it appears that Chief Krata had settled on the eastern side of the "basket" on the Koonap River. I Stocker, "Report upon [Xhosaland] in southern Africa", G Theal, *Records of the Cape Colony, 12, 1820* (Government of the Cape Colony, 1901), p. 40.

102 A Stockenström, *The autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström ...*, 80. Stockenström himself considered taking a site called Maastrom, which later became the town of Bedford, in the centre of the "basket", p. 83.

personal use, an informal disregard of the Fish River boundary. The Prinsloo family living on the “basket’s” north-western edge were a law unto themselves, fighting against both English and Xhosa.¹⁰³ They never held any regard for rules about boundaries, prohibitions on trade with the amaXhosa or bans against hiring people. They were particularly fond of going into nearby Xhosa territory for elephant hunting and selling the treasured ivory back to the amaXhosa. For someone like Piet, growing up in the “basket” the ongoing presence of mounted, armed white men might have served as a constant reminder of the frontier tensions.

The imiDange chiefs, in turn, remained primary suspects in pillaging colonial farms. Chief Habana allegedly gave a stolen horse to Makhanda, and the guns of slain soldiers from the De Bruins Drift military post were spotted inside Chief Krata’s house.¹⁰⁴ Followers of Chief Krata also lived in the vicinity of the first mission station established by the London Missionary Society on the Kat River in 1816, situated just to their east, under the direction of Joseph Williams. Although it is likely that his people visited the station once it was up and running, there is no evidence to suggest that they became adherents. Possibly Piet met the missionary’s wife, Elizabeth, who he was destined to cross paths with again after his release from Robben Island.

Due to its geographical location, the “basket” witnessed the passage of the contending forces. In 1817 Governor Charles Somerset passed through the middle of the gently rolling, grassy hills, travelling the full distance from the Rooiwaal crossing on the west to the Kat River mission station on the east.¹⁰⁵ He was on his way to a major meeting with the Xhosa chiefs at the Kat River and travelled with a long string of wagons, artillery pieces, British troops, civilian mounted farmers and members of the Cape Corps regiment, mostly of Khoë background. He considered the area to be in the friendly hands of followers of his ally, King Ngqika. However, imiDange chiefs, including Habana, appear to have not attended this historic meeting, where the British dictated their right to cross into Xhosa country any time to follow the tracks of stolen cattle, and then take an equivalent number of cattle from the first kraal they came to. This would have had dire implications for the residents of the “basket”, as it was their homes that were first approached by any search parties. Indeed, three weeks later, when a commando made the first effort to use this prerogative, Chief Habana met it with a well-planned ambush, not cooperation.¹⁰⁶ Like Ndlambe before him,

103 T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, p. 10. The Prinsloos led a rebellion against the English at Slagter’s Nek in 1815.

104 CA, 1/UIT/15/3: Letter, J Cuyler (Landdrost of Uitenhage)/J Read (Missionary of London Missionary Society, Bethelsdorp), 1 August 1816.

105 Map, Military Chart. A distinct line shows “His Excellency, LCH Somerset’s first route into [Xhosaland]”.

106 G Theal, *Records*, 11: Letter, Lord Charles Somerset (Governor, Cape Colony, Somerset)/Earl Bathurst (Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, London), 23 June 1817, pp. 357-358.

Ngqika had protested that he had no power to control his subordinate chiefs.¹⁰⁷

Chief Krata made a name for himself during the events of 1818. When his cattle were raided in late January 1818 by Major Fraser, King Ngqika sprang to his defence via official correspondence. This eventually saw 122 head of cattle returned to Chief Krata, something virtually unheard of on the troubled frontier. Fraser insisted that he had always known Krata to be a follower of Ndlambe, not Ngqika.

In late January, his followers became the victims of a strong military commando, led by Major George Fraser who had set out with instructions to deal decisively with Chief Ndlambe. However, when Ndlambe put up a fierce resistance, Fraser moved northward, and plundered 2,000 head of cattle. King Ngqika quickly sent a letter of protest, stating that it was his followers, who had been pillaged, not Ndlambe's. When a thorough investigation was done, the Governor ordered that the 122 head of cattle should be returned to Chief Krata, who was viewed should indeed be seen as a "friendly" chief under Ngqika, whom he served as a councillor. Fraser fumed because he had always known Krata to be one of the Ndlambe chiefs. This incident revealed that imiDange chiefs could and did change their loyalties according to circumstances.¹⁰⁸

Chief Krata almost immediately became embroiled in still another controversy with the colony. He hosted four Khoe escapees from the Uitenhage prison, who came to him with a creative plan to murder Colonel Cuyler and trigger an uprising that would end with all colonists fleeing and the restoration of the land to its people.¹⁰⁹ They expected Chief Krata to lead an invasion of amaXhosa to support the initiative in Uitenhage. The plotters claimed that Krata wanted to be first in driving out the colonists and was friendly to Khoe people, as some lived in his kraal.¹¹⁰ For the Piet narrative, this episode of frontier intrigue establishes some important information. Chief Krata clearly had strong links with disgruntled Khoe people if they turned to him for their plot. Further, he was viewed by them as the most militant of the border chiefs, and likely to take part in an uprising. Where could Piet have been in the midst of all this intrigue? It is possible that the plotters had news of his mother as a servant of Colonel Cuyler. At best, the coup story links Chief Krata with the Uitenhage area.

107 Great Britain, Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements) together with Minutes of evidence, Appendix and Index, ordered by the House of Commons, 5 August 1836, Dyani Tshatshu evidence, p. 569.

108 CA, CO 2613, full report on commando from G Fraser, 31 July 1818. Krata had formerly been a councillor to Chief Ndlambe. CA 1/UIT/15/4: Letter, J Cuyler/G Fraser, 28 September 1818.

109 VC Malherbe, "Hermanus and his sons: Khoi bandits and conspirators in the post-rebellion period (1803-1818)", *African Studies*, 41, 1982, p. 195.

110 VC Malherbe, "Hermanus and his sons...", *African Studies*, 41, 1982, p. 196. Ultimately, the plot fizzled and Cuyler captured the escapees and put them on trial, hanging one. Chief Krata's people assisted one of the main plotters to escape. p. 197.

It is impossible to determine the role of the imiDange in the Xhosa civil war that took place later in 1818 at amaLinde between Ngqika and Ndlambe. Chief Ndlambe's forces completely routed King Ngqika, driving him from Debe Nek eighty miles through the imiDange-occupied "basket" to take refuge on its north western side. As an exile from his own country, Ngqika communicated with the British via the Rooiwaal river crossing. The ensuing British response, the "Brereton raid", seized 23,000 head of cattle from Chief Ndlambe, with the assistance of Ngqika's soldiers.¹¹¹

If it was the imiDange who supported King Ngqika on the Brereton raid in November 1818, they must have switched allegiances by the beginning of 1819. Pringle believed that most of the chiefs abandoned King Ngqika because of his "acts of tyranny and insultLieutenant". From an unprecedented surge of warfare at the start of 1819, Stockenström deduced that Ngqika was left completely alone as a friend of the British. All the Xhosa, he claimed, sided with Chief Ndlambe "because they were sure of themselves", confident in their numbers and in the justification for defying Ngqika.¹¹²

The abandonment of King Ngqika by the occupants of the "basket" spelt disaster for the colony when war broke out. Impressive military success in the western Zuurveld, between Grahamstown and Uitenhage suggested that the imiDange had returned to their former homes with a vengeance. They re-occupied the Zuurberg mountains, forced the few remaining Dutch-African famers into a protected camp at Rautenbach's Drift, severed communication channels between Grahamstown and Uitenhage and relentlessly followed the large herds of booty cattle the British were trying to drive westward for safety.¹¹³ When the Sunday's River at Addo Drift flooded, the cattle could not cross, making them easy pickings for Xhosa soldiers. Their strong forces defeated colonists in major battles at De Bruin's Drift, Riet River and the Enon Mission station.¹¹⁴ As Makhanda's own councillor put it, "We found you weak. We destroyed your soldiers. We saw that we were strong; we attacked your headquarters".¹¹⁵

The overwhelming Xhosa warfare triggered complete panic among British officers and officials, who sent desperate requests for help to the Governor in Cape Town

111 N Mostert, *Frontiers...*, p. 468.

112 A Stockenström, *The autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström...*, p. 145.

113 J Wells, *The return of Makhanda, exploring the legend* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2012), pp. 155-159.

114 For full details, see Map of Xhosa invasions of the Zuurveld, January-April 1819, JC Wells, *Return of Makhanda...*, p. 156.

115 T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, p. 99.

during February 1819.¹¹⁶ By late February, a state of emergency in Uitenhage gave Colonel Cuyler powers to call on every able-bodied man to defend the town from an expected immanent attack. The ringing of the church bell would be the signal to rally everyone. So great were his fears that he refused orders to send any men to help defend Grahamstown. Fighting on the western front continued right up through 21 April, the day before the all-out attack on Grahamstown.¹¹⁷ In the days, weeks and months following the defeat of the amaXhosa at Grahamstown, bitter fighting continued in the western Zuurveld, confirming that the Xhosa soldiers had not retreated back across the Fish River border, at least not over the middle Fish and upper Fish.¹¹⁸

There are no clues about Piet's direct role in these events of 1818 and 1819, so they can only be surmised. But given his eventual rescue of his mother, the question must be asked if the intensive fighting in the western Zuurveld was not partly motivated by the desire of the imiDange and others to try to free their own captured friends and relatives, ending decades of coercive servitude.

Three months after the battle at Grahamstown, the British launched a three-pronged counterattack which included two invasions of the central "basket" area. First, coming from the north and east, Landdrost Stockenström "scoured the country of the Kagaberg to the Kat River" forcing most of the Xhosa people to move "quietly eastward as I advanced".¹¹⁹ Only a few followers of Chief Xasa lingered to try to continue planting their crops. A second, central invading column crossed the Fish River at De Bruin's drift on the central Fish River and travelled eastward from there.¹²⁰ Ives Stocker, an army engineer, kept a diary of the progress of the force. He described the land formerly occupied by Chief Krata as lying along the Koonap and Kat Rivers, but utterly deserted. He noted: "The country was much inhabited ... and the Kraals were abundant, particularly between the Kat and the Gaigai Rivers".¹²¹ He noted the extreme beauty of Chief Xasa's abandoned kraal. Thomas Pringle, who settled in 1820 on the Baviaans River, just to the west of the "basket", explored the territory on a number of occasions. He observed: "The remains of [Xhosa] hamlets, scattered through every grassy nook and dell, and now fast crumbling with decay, excited reflections of a very melancholy character and of dreary lonesomeness."¹²² The imiDange had lost their homes once again.

116 Major G Fraser made a hasty six-day ride from Grahamstown to Cape Town, arriving 16 February with letters to inform the Governor of the desperate military situation and to request urgent assistance. CA, CO 4841: Letter, J Cuyler (Landdrost of Uitenhage)/C Bird (Colonial Secretary, Cape Town), 17 February 1819. Shortly after, Landdrost Stockenström of Graaf Reinet sent his trusted emissary, Heemraad Meintjies to Cape Town to further impress upon the Governor the urgency of the situation. A Stockenström, *The autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström...*, p. 148.

117 JC Wells *Return of Makhandu...*, p. 166.

118 CA 1/UIT/15/5, 24 April 1819; and CA 1/UIT/15/5 letter from Cuyler to Wilshire, 27 April 1819.

119 A Stockenström, *The autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström...*, p. 163.

120 I Stocker, "Report upon [Xhosaland] in southern Africa", G Theal, *Records of the Cape Colony...*, p. 34.

121 I Stocker, "Report upon [Xhosaland] in southern Africa", G Theal, *Records of the Cape Colony...*, p. 40.

122 T Pringle, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa...*, p. 41.

Testing frontier labour policies

Possibly Piet's daring rescue of his mother triggered a crisis for British colonial officials over labour issues. Under Dutch rule, a laissez-faire attitude made it possible for African people to come and go as workers for the Dutch-African farmers who settled near them. They supplemented the coerced labour most farmers brought with them, slaves and colonised Khoe dependants. Unlike them, however, the local Africans could easily go home to their villages and chiefs, as Piet's case illustrated.

The conclusion of the fifth war saw the British try to implement a new policy of total geographical separation from their African neighbours. As victors in the war, they established "neutral zones" defined as no-mans-land between the now fully white-owned colony and its former occupants. Along the upper Fish River, this meant that the entire "basket" should remain empty. The unending conflicts between 1812 and 1819 had showed how dangerous it was to have disgruntled indigenous people living right next door, but with a long boundary that had been impossible to enforce. So, creating empty spaces offered the next best solution. But the formalisation of the boundary at last in 1819, raised the question of whether any African people could cross it to take up work with the colonists.

From the beginning of January 1820, the issue of the presence of "Ghona [Xhosa]" within the colony suddenly erupted as an important concern for Colonel Cuyler. It is likely that Piet's escape with his mother came at this time, based on subsequent events. When he found them gone, what would Cuyler have done? It appears that he immediately contacted Asking the Commander of the Frontier, Colonel Willshire, to help track them down, seems logical. The records do not reveal the question, but Willshire provided an answer. A letter from Willshire to Cuyler on 6 January pointed out that Dutch-African farmers, especially in the Rooiwaal area were creating great danger by employing Xhosa men and women. Could this have been his way of saying he was not likely to detect Piet's runaway group in reply to a call for help from Cuyler? Cuyler used this letter to justify his appeal in mid-January to the Colonial Secretary, C Bird, for a new official Proclamation to prohibit any African from entering the colony for work. Existing provisions from the end of the 1812 war "to prevent all intercourse with the [Xhosa] people" were inadequate for taking firm legal action, he argued. Cuyler wanted all such employed Xhosa and Gona men to be rounded up and sent to Robben Island as an example. Women, however, were to be sent to him for distribution to farmers wanting labour. His role to send out captured women, he said, was a direct instruction from Governor Somerset when he was there two months earlier.¹²³

By the end of January 1820, Cuyler had indeed secured a fresh government Proclamation prohibiting the employment of male Gonaqua and Xhosa within the

¹²³ CA, CO 2626: Letter, J Cuyler (Landdrost of Uitenhage)/C Bird (Colonial Secretary, Cape Town), 14 January 1820, with enclosure of excerpts from a letter received from Colonel Willshire dated 6 January 1820.

Colony. The new Proclamation on 28 January 1820 made it illegal for residents of the colony to hire any “wandering [Xhosa] and Ghonaquas”.¹²⁴ Such employees, it warned, might draw their friends and relatives to come visit them, and commit acts of “depredations.” The prohibition was against hiring “or harbouring any Male [Xhosa] or Gonaqua[Khoe], belonging to the [Xhosa] Kraals.” The Proclamation freshly empowered officials to arrest “any [Xhosa or] Ghonaquas” but excluded women. Since the Proclamation directly prohibited what Cuyler had just done with Piet, it might well have been prompted by his outraged response to Piet’s escape.

Without waiting for the Proclamation, Cuyler gave instructions to military officials in Grahamstown to round up all Gonaquas and Xhosa in the colony. Cuyler viewed this “punishment” as important to serve as a warning to all white farmers on the frontier. By the end of March, such a group of arrested men, women and children reached Cuyler in Uitenhage. He duly sent the women and children into service, in areas far-removed from the frontier, west of the Gamtoos River to prevent their possible escape, and he sent twenty-two men to Robben Island.¹²⁵ Piet appears to have been arrested separately and sent to Uitenhage on orders from Colonel Willshire, but was added to the group.¹²⁶

But this firm action backfired. When the group arrived in Cape Town, with no reason given for their being sent to Robben Island, the new Acting Governor, Sir Rufane Donkin, sat down and interviewed them, taking their names and details. He ordered that they should all be sent back to Algoa Bay and have their wives, children and cattle restored to them. He further pointed out that the intention of the Proclamation was to have any suspicious people sent to Grahamstown, where their cases could be determined on a case by case basis and if needed, military escorts arranged to return them to their chiefs. It was the employers who should be prosecuted, not their workers. The Acting Governor followed the line of reasoning offered by Andries Stockenstrom, the Landdrost of Graaf Reinet, who objected to the January Proclamation on the grounds that allowing people to come to work for farmers was perfectly desirable. He warned that if people were evicted, they would simply join bands of thieves, sharing their intimate knowledge of the colony.¹²⁷ This more moderate view was taken up by Donkin, who cautioned Willshire that it was too soon after the war to treat the Xhosa harshly, warning, “they must either suffer

124 Proclamation, 28 January 1820. Sir Richard Plaskett and T Miller, compilers, *Proclamations, advertisements and other official notices published by the government of the Cape of Good Hope from January 10th, 1806 to May 21st, 1825* (Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope Government Press, 1827), p. 465.

125 J Philip, *Researches in South Africa...*, p. 192.

126 CA, CO 2626: Letter, J Cuyler (Landdrost of Uitenhage)/C Bird (Colonial Secretary, Cape Town), 12 May 1820. By March, Colonel Willshire was based at Fort Willshire which was then under construction on the Keiskamma River.

127 CA CO 2625: Letters from Graaf Reinet: A Stockenstrom (Landdrost Graaf Reinet)/C Bird (Colonial Secretary, Cape Town), 9 March 1820.

from hunger, or they must plunder”.¹²⁸

The abrupt reversal appears to have been due to the involvement of missionaries from the London Missionary Society, appealing to Major Fraser.¹²⁹ The action seriously backfired for Cuyler when it was learned that the arrested group were part of a small Christian community formed at the mission station of Joseph Williams before he died in 1818. At the time of the battle of amaLinde in late 1818, the families had been “enticed” by Dutch-African farmers living near the Rooiwaal crossing of the Fish River, to come work for them on the grounds that they were likely to suffer persecution as African Christians if they remained in Xhosa country.¹³⁰ When the army rounded up the families in March, they were told they were being sent to join Reverend Brownlee at his new mission station in Xhosa territory. Instead, they ended up sent to Robben Island, with the women and children scattered as servants. By 10 May, Colonel Willshire wrote a letter of apology, taking full blame for the errors.¹³¹ The softer policy line had to be followed. Cuyler, in his cover letter to Willshire’s, however, protested the return of Piet, explaining why he was considered dangerous.¹³²

It is likely that Piet arrived at Robben Island in mid-May 1820. He would have found there, several people that he already knew, being held as prisoners of war related to the 1819 fighting. This included David Stuurman, a possible acquaintance from the days of evading Graham’s forces in the Zuurberg mountains in 1812 and perhaps the subsequent plan to overthrow Cuyler in 1818. On the morning of 9 August 1820, Piet joined a group of prisoners who overpowered their sleeping guards, seized their weapons and literally fought their way off the Island. Though not specifically named, Piet could have been involved at all stages. Under the command of Hans Trompetter, fourteen Xhosa men secured Makhanda’s release. One of the whaling boats used to escape contained “a party mostly [Xhosa] among whom was Chief Lynx under the command of ... Hans Trompetter”.¹³³ This boat also included David Stuurman. When it crashed on the rocks near the shore of the Blaubeergstrand, about half its occupants drowned, while the other half survived. Judging from the records of how the escapees on shore were eventually apprehended by the authorities, it is likely that Piet was in this boat with his comrades from the eastern war zone.

Testimony at the subsequent trial of escapees, noted that the fate of several boat occupants was not known – whether they had drowned or made it to land. Therefore, the record makes no mention specifically of Piet. However, he surfaced in the court

128 CA CO 4843: Letter, Book, R Donkin (Acting Governor)/T Willshire (Commandant), 21 February 1820.

129 B Holt, *Joseph Williams and the pioneer mission...*, p. 192.

130 B Holt, *Joseph Williams and the pioneer mission...*, p. 191.

131 CA, CO 2626: Letter from Colonel Willshire, from Ft. Willshire, 10 May 1820; enclosed with letter from J Cuyler to Colonial Secretary, 13 May 1820.

132 CA, CO 2626: Letter, J Cuyler (Landdrost of Uitenhage)/C Bird (Colonial Secretary, Cape Town), 13 May 1820.

The letter which explains Piet’s case reads as if it was a cover letter for returning Piet to Cape Town.

133 CA, CJ 613, Bill of Indictment.

records on 15 September, two weeks after the conclusion of the main trial. He had been apprehended on “suspicions of burglary and theft” and sent to Cape Town by Fiscal Fischer from Tulbagh. This confirms that Piet was heading eastward, when caught. A brief trial took place on 17 October, where the court found him guilty, not of theft, but for his role in the escape. He received the same sentence as the others, “to be scourged, branded and confined for 14 years at public works”.¹³⁴ He also had to “witness the execution” of the leaders on 16 December 1820.

Piet remained at Robben Island for the next seven years. Records for that period show that he worked at cleaning rocks in the quarry for sale. While his three Xhosa colleagues who shared the same sentence with him, Batty, Jacob and Jacawa all had occasional spells of illness and hospitalization, Piet appears to have maintained remarkably good health. He only went to the prison hospital once in 1826, when he was listed as sick for five days.¹³⁵

Then suddenly, in August 1827, the four Xhosa men and another one classified as a [Koe] named Klaas, all found themselves on a boat leaving the Island and on their way home. The Commandant of Robben Island had written to the Acting Governor, Richard Plasket, in June of that year, asking why they were still being held, observing that they were “considered the best behaved prisoners on the island”.¹³⁶ On 1 August, the Commandant received a letter from Plasket, informing him of an official pardon and a plan to escort the freed men back to their chiefs on the frontier.¹³⁷ He duly placed the ex-prisoners in the same boat that had delivered the letter, as it returned to Cape Town. After five days, they embarked on the *Harriet* for Port Elizabeth, under the watchful eye of a newly arriving LMS missionary, Friedrich Gottlob Kayser. Once in Port Elizabeth, the men went to the near-by Bethelsdorp Mission Station, Kayser’s destination. There, they would have found the former wife of the late Reverend Joseph Williams, Elizabeth, who remarried Adam Robson, the man heading Bethelsdorp in 1827. A few weeks later, Robson wrote to the Magistrate of Uitenhage to ask formal permission for the ex-prisoners to remain at Bethelsdorp instead of “proceeding to their native country” because “they left their wives and children in this neighbourhood & they are anxious to ascertain where they are & to see them”.¹³⁸ The last news of the former prisoners was that “one of them has found a Son, whose mother died, and others have discovered distant relatives”.¹³⁹ Here the trail of Piet’s story ends.

134 CA, CO 125, List of Criminal Prisoners for September, October and November 1820.

135 CA, CO 288, Commandant of Robben Island 1826; CO 333, Commandant of Robben Island, 1827. Piet was ill from 14-19 September.

136 CA, CO 334, Commandant of Robben Island, 1827: Letter to R Plasket (Acting Governor), 18 June 1827.

137 CA, CO 4887, Letter, R Plasket/Landdrost of Albany, 8 August 1827.

138 CA, CO 2690, Letter, Landdrost Uitenhage from A Robson, Bethelsdorp, 7 September 1827.

139 CA, CO 2690, Letter from Landdrost Uitenhag/Major General Bourke, Lieutenant Gov. 25 September 1827.

Conclusions

The effort to provide Piet with a life story led to uncovering several other untold, or little told stories, about the time in which he lived. Each fragment of what we know about him opens new doors, as vague clues expose further buried histories. The Gonaqua name emerges as an important long-term identification of people unique to the eastern Cape. The role of the imiDange as those in the forefront of conflict with colonial powers is extended far beyond the first war in 1781 to their first expulsion in 1812 through their second one in 1819 after waging a powerful war in the western Zuurveld. A few cases where families fought for the freedom of their captured women and children have been identified. The “unexplored tracts” turn out to be a highly significant area whose history was related to that of the Zuurveld but should not be confused with it. Piet may have triggered the Proclamation which put labour policies to the test.

All of these new insights, while assisting the broader task of building historical understanding, have the effect of making Piet less of a super-hero. He can be seen freshly as a product of his time, place and people. As part Gonaqua, he moved between cultures and worlds. His possible immersion in the feisty unbending culture of the ImiDange taught him not to give in without resisting. All of the identified revisions set out here assist in the recovery of a silenced African past. In this case, it reveals the complex dynamics of the long period of conquest in the place where cultures clashed so dramatically.

The experience of inventing the performance, *Umnqa – Never Defeated*, offers important lessons for historians as they try to retrieve a vague and obscured past about the time before colonisation. The search for plausible people, places and deeds serves as a valuable supplement to the traditional category of “facts.” By asking simple, but basic human questions, we can begin to uncover unexpected answers.