

# Deja vu as the guns of the powerful slay the colonised

**T**HE evidence presented by Mr X to the Farlam Commission last week was meant to strengthen the case of the state, which argues that the police acted in self-defence and the striking workers were the aggressors at Marikana on August 2012.

The argument that the state is trying to make is that the striking miners on the hill were so stoked up on muti that they were virtual zombies, performing random acts of aggression on remote control.

This is an absurd argument. Anyone who watched the Marikana footage knows that these workers were mowed down in cold blood with live ammunition and then chased into the hills, where they were picked off by snipers. Shot in their backs, not their chests. We also know that the police ordered several mortuary vans to Marikana on the morning of the massacre, hours before anyone was shot. Why did they do this, if they did not expect people to die?

It is also known that high-level police meetings were held in Pretoria the night before the massacre and that some leading ANC officials were present there. It was decided at these meetings that the police should "terminate the strike".

Why do you think Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu) leader Joseph Manjweni was in tears when he begged his followers to give up their sticks and pangas and surrender on that day? He had been at the bottom of the hill, and knew what was coming.

By rolling out Mr X and his story of magic and muti on the hill, the state is hoping to stop the Farlam Commission from reaching the obvious conclusion, namely that the police are responsible for the massacre. Their culpability needs to be acknowledged, compensation offered and heads should roll in the ANC and police services.

But what should we make of the details of Mr X's testimony, of the rituals on the hill, the burning animals alive for their fat and ash and the alleged culling of human flesh for protective medicines by an *inyanga* paid by striking mine workers?

From an animal and human rights perspective all this is rather problematic, but for the Xhosa and Pondo people there is a familiar and historic cultural script here. A sense of deja vu. It is not the first time they have been pushed to the wall and have called on healers (*inyanga*), war doctors (*ithola*) and prophets to protect them when faced with rifles, machine guns and tanks of the oppressor.

During the War of the Axe in 1850, when the Xhosa were being chased from their land in the Kat River in the 8th Frontier War, they turned to the young Xhosa healer and prophet Mlanjeni, who was recruited by the great bull, Chief Sandile, as his leading war doctor. Mlanjeni, also known as "the riverman" because he had spent so long communing with the river spirits, was strong and decisive. He told Sandile that if the Xhosa followed him, witchcraft would be exterminated and the whites would be defeated and driven away.

Like the *inyanga* at Marikana, he told his warriors that, if they wanted to defeat the British, they would need to take war medicines to confuse the enemy, make the warriors stronger and turn the bullets of the British into water.

In 1818, the prophet Nxele

What should we make of Mr X's testimony of Marikana magic and muti? asks **Leslie Bank**



**ANCESTORS V OPPRESSORS:** The Farlam Commission last week heard evidence of the rituals on the hill and the paying for protective medicines at Marikana  
Picture: GETTY IMAGES

Makhanda (or Makana) had said much the same to his Xhosa troops before the Battle of Grahamstown. Although their medicines gave the warriors courage and hope, the outcome in both cases was a disaster – many Xhosa died, and the young prophet Mlanjeni shortly thereafter.

Sixty years later on commonage land at Bullhoek outside Queenstown, another Xhosa prophet Enoch Mgijima claimed that he had had a vision that colonialism would soon end in May 1921 on Judgment Day when Jehovah would restore the land to Africans. Mgijima's priests and followers waited on a koppie on the commonage for that day to come. As their number swelled, eventually reaching 3 000, the state became nervous just as it did at Marikana.

The situation could not be allowed to continue and General Smuts sent his troops in to end it. He did not

want an international incident, but Mgijima, like Amcu and its leaders, was stubborn and intransigent. He would not accept any compromise position.

To prepare for the worst, Mgijima performed rituals to strengthen his followers and confuse the advancing troops. Such was the power of Mgijima's message and vision that many of his supporters believed that the colonialist bullets would either simply turn to water, or go straight through their bodies without causing any harm.

Fewer died at Bullhoek than in the Battle of Grahamstown in 1837 or Mlanjeni War in 1850, but there were still 200 dead and 180 wounded after just 20 minutes of machine gun and rifle fire in May 1921. Like many of Mlanjeni warriors, the Israelites of Mgijima had only their knobkerries and assegais to defend themselves against the industrial

armoury of the colonialists.

And so, to the evidence of Mr X, which suggests a similar tragedy at Marikana. Xhosa and Pondo mine workers were hemmed by the police, who would not compromise and offer them the right to petition for a decent wage, so they put their faith in their healers and ancestors to resolve the crisis, and to give them strength to face death rather than be defeated.

Not everyone was prepared to pay the *inyanga*. Remember, there was no Chief Sandile or Chief Nlambe to order the war doctor or *inyanga* to treat every single warrior, nor was there a spiritual guru of the stature of Mgijima to inspire the strikers. The workers had to pull cash out of their own pockets, which had been depleted by the lingering strike, to engage the *inyanga* at a cost of R1 000 a worker.

This meant that only a small mi-

nority of the thousands on the hill, joined the core group, known as the *makaparas* (the hard hats), and got the full treatment.

Like the massacre at Bullhoek, those on the koppie were asked several times to disperse by the police, even begged, but they did not want to give up their right to struggle for a better wage. Like Mjanganeni's men and even the Israelites, there were some, especially in the core group, who were armed with sticks and assegais, and even stolen guns.

But the message from the *inyanga*, as Mr X repeated, was clear "do not engage the police unless they engage you".

It was essentially a defensive strategy. They feared for their lives and needed to kill animals on the hill and even (if it is true) to cull human flesh for medicine to face the might of a police force known for their uncompromising brutality. For such ruthless adversaries, powerful medicines were needed.

The majority of those on the hill at Marikana were unarmed and starting to make their way back to the informal settlements when they were herded by razor wire and eventually forced through a gap in the fencing, which led them face to face with the police.

At Marikana, the *makaparas* discovered, as their grandfathers had done at Bullhoek and their great-grandfathers in the Mlanjeni war, that bullets do not easily turn into water and that police officers with deadly weapons do not easily miss.

When seen in this context, Marikana is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it is striking for the tenacity of Xhosa beliefs and the workers' unwavering faith in their ancestors to help transform their dangerous and diminished lives.

Secondly, one is struck by how little the basic script of colonialism has changed over the past 200 years, as the guns of the wealthy and powerful, now held by the ANC and their henchmen, mutilate the bodies of the colonised, who mutilate their own bodies with razor blades, muti and charms to save themselves.

Thirdly, one also realises that the workers at Marikana might have been more effective and united if they had a prophet of the stature and charisma of Nxele, Mlanjeni or Mgijima, all of whom had a vision for the death of whites and of the world that lay beyond.

Although not at Marikana in 2012, Julius Malema now seeks to play that role, after the fact. He is the one who now speaks like a prophet of the end of an era, of the evils of monopoly capital and the tyranny of whiteness.

He aspires to fill the shoes of a Nxele, Mlanjeni, Nongqawuse, Nontheta or even Mgijima as he digs deep into reservoirs of anger and dispossession to invoke the politics of a colonial struggle, where the oppressed will be saved by the new millennium and the promise of a new dawn, where even the dead might arise.

So, as Mr X reveals further dimensions of the ancient rituals of cultural protection on the hill, let us not be confused by the cultural spin and see this tragedy for what it was – a colonial-style massacre where the weak and defenceless were killed by agents of the state.

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