

# Reinterpreting Millenarian Sentiments at the Dutch Cape Colony

The Incredulous Colonial Responses to the Khoikhoi Uprising of 1788 and the Religiously Syncretic Longing for an Apocalypse

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During the long nineteenth century, European colonists, in among others Asia and Africa, were often confronted with self-proclaimed prophets who predicted an apocalyptic uprising which would bring about a new era of peace and independence from European control. The Dutch colonial world has known several of such 'prophets of rebellion', as millenarian beliefs flourished particularly in times of distress. This article focuses on the Khoikhoi uprising of 1788 and their revealed prophet the 'liewe heer' Jan Paerl, in the Dutch Cape Colony, and seeks to break with patterns in the current study of apocalyptic prophecies and messianic, anti-colonial uprisings that approaches these phenomena from a religious radicalisation perspective. Instead, this article aims to reassess whether the religious dimension of this uprising was indeed seen as the most threatening to Dutch colonial authorities at the time, as well as the most appealing and convincing component for its followers.

Gedurende de lange negentiende eeuw werden Europese kolonisten onder andere in Azië en Afrika vaak geconfronteerd met zelfverklaarde profeten die een apocalyptische opstand voorspelden die een nieuw tijdperk van vrede en van onafhankelijkheid van de Europese onderdrukking zou teweegbrengen. Ook de Nederlandse koloniale wereld heeft dergelijke 'profeten van rebellie' gekend, aangezien millennialistische bewegingen vooral floreerden in tijden van nood.

Dit artikel analyseert de Khoikhoi-opstand van 1788 in de Nederlandse Kaapkolonie en hun zelfverklaarde profeet, de ‘liewe heer’ Jan Paerl. Anders dan de gangbare interpretaties binnen de historiografie over apocalyptische profetieën en messiaanse antikoloniale opstanden die deze verschijnselen voornamelijk vanuit een religieus radicaliseringsperspectief benaderen, pleit dit artikel juist voor een kritische herziening van de rol van religie in deze opstand. Dit artikel onderzoekt of de Nederlandse koloniale autoriteiten met name de religieuze dimensie van deze opstand als de meest bedreigende factor interpreteerden, alsook de mate waarin het Bijbelse discours van ‘het einde der tijden’ een aantrekkingskracht op de Khoikhoi uitoefende.

## Introduction

Millenarian movements have made a remarkable comeback in world politics in recent years. Millenarianism refers to ‘movements and sects that embrace ideologies positing the (typically traumatic) end of one era, promising relief from the sufferings of this world and its present age, and purporting to give rise to salvation in a new “golden age”, “heaven on earth”, or realized utopian social order’.<sup>1</sup> Whereas millenarian movements can be secular, most apocalyptic beliefs are “religious” even in its atheistic varieties, because religion involves having an “ultimate concern”.<sup>2</sup> The terrorist organisation ISIS could be seen as a millenarian movement with a worldwide appeal, as they ‘employ a number of specific Islamic apocalyptic traditions in its self-narration; and preach violence as a way to defeat the modern Western world so to return to a pre-modern lifestyle’.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, contemporary white supremacy groups in the United States have increasingly used ‘end of times’-narratives to find support for their ideology and to justify the forming of paramilitary forces.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, this combination of counter-modern movements and millenarian prophecies is not new. During the long nineteenth century, a period characterised by rapid industrialisation, modernisation and imperial conquest, European colonists were often confronted with the rise of local,

1 John R. Hall, ‘Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements’, in: David Snow, Donatella della Porta, Bert Klandermans, and Doug McAdam (eds.), *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (Blackwell 2013) 1-6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm341>.

2 Catherine Wessinger, ‘Introduction: The Interacting Dynamics of Millennial Beliefs, Persecution, and Violence’, in: Catherine

Wessinger (ed.) *Millennialism, Persecution & Violence: Historical Cases* (Syracuse University Press 2000) 7.

3 Justin J. Meggit, ‘The Problem of Apocalyptic Terrorism’, *Journal of Religion and Violence* 8:1 (2020) 62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv202061173>.

4 Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: the White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press 2018).



**Figure 1.** View of the Dutch Cape Colony from the sea in 1787, including *Tafelberg* on the left (Table Mountain), *Kaapstad* (Cape Town) and *Leeuwenkopberg* on the right (Lion's Head Mountain). Between the two mountains you can see the chasm *Nek* with a number of roads. Below this stands the *Groote Kerk* (Great Church) and the white buildings of Cape Town. *Kasteel de Goede Hoop* (Castle of Good Hope) is shown on the far left. A Dutch ship can be seen and on the right an American or French ship. *De Tafelberg en Kaapstad gezien vanaf de zee* (Table Mountain and Cape Town seen from the sea), Jan Brandes, 1787. © Rijksmuseum, NG-2012-39, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.513944>.

self-proclaimed prophets who predicted an apocalyptic uprising which would bring about a new era of peace and independence from European control. Several apocalyptic uprisings can be identified in the Dutch colonial past as well. Probably the most notable was the apocalyptic prophecy and teachings of Prince Dipanagara and the subsequent Java War in Dutch Indonesia between 1825 and 1830.<sup>5</sup> Also the Sufi-led uprising in Banten to Dutch colonialism has been understood as a millenarian movement.<sup>6</sup> In the context of severe imperial and apartheid oppression, also colonial South Africa witnessed several millenarian movements such as the infamous Xhosa cattle killing of 1857 under British colonial control and the Bulhoek Massacre of 1921. These movements, often marked by fatalism, counter-modernism, and violence, reflect the despair of marginalised communities under colonial rule. They aimed not only to overthrow existing colonial authorities, but also to renew societal purity and the collective soul.

Exploring how colonial authorities responded to these prophets and assessed the future images they propagated, allows us to understand which ideas were considered most subversive and destabilising to social stability. The study of millenarian movements in South Africa's colonial history provides a clear case study due to the evident socio-political context of power struggle and oppression. This article focuses on the Khoikhoi uprising of 1788 in the Dutch Cape Colony, led by 'Onse Liewe Heer' ('Our Dear Lord') Jan Paerl (see Figure 1). It seeks to shift the perspective on apocalyptic prophecies and anti-colonial uprisings from a religious radicalisation lens to reassess whether the religious component of this uprising was the most threatening to Dutch colonial authorities and the most convincing to its followers.

### Changing perspectives on millenarian movements

Fascination with apocalyptic prophecies is of all ages, and several studies have tried to make sense of the popular attraction of such fatalistic and violent prophecies. In studies on millenarian movements from the 1950s and 1960s, a time in which decolonisation in word and mind took hold, the term 'messianism' was frequently used, as it allowed historians to study both theological and spiritual worldviews of the community in question, as well as

5 Peter Carey, *The Power of Prophecy. Prince Dipanagara and the end of an old order in Java, 1785-1855* (KITLV Press 2008); Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion. Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (University of North Carolina Press 1979).

6 Dadi Darmadi, 'The Geger Banten of 1888: An Anthropological Perspective of 19th Century Millenarianism in Indonesia', *International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 4:1 (2015) 65-84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31291/hn.v4i1.62>.

the power and attraction of individual charismatic leaders.<sup>7</sup> In particular this last element of the studying of ‘messianic’ and millenarian uprisings enabled historians to compare such religiously inspired uprisings to secular fights for independence where the leadership of charismatic individuals was seen to be equally important. Messianism was then understood to mean ‘a collective and conscious expectation, by a group of people, of a hero or a historical epoch which promises an impending socio-cultural dispensation or ushers in a new and golden age’.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the power of conviction of individual leaders and their charismatic leadership became central in studies on millenarian uprisings. In this mid-twentieth century debate, anthropologist Anthony Wallace added the term ‘revitalization’, to interpret and understand the ideological aspirations of millenarian movements. Revitalisation movement for Wallace meant ‘a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture’.<sup>9</sup> His aim was to shift attention from leadership to a focus on the ideological aspiration underlying the uprising.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, another wave of studies on millenarian uprisings can be detected, with notable works such as Michael Adas’s *Prophets of Rebellion* (1979) and Guenther Lewy’s *Religion and Revolution* (1974). Perhaps inspired by worldwide youth protest movements of the 1970s and 1980s or by the second wave of decolonisation in mainly Southern Africa, these studies focused predominantly on the link between prophetic or ideological expressions and violence and ‘the ways in which they reinforce each other’.<sup>10</sup> The start of the third millennium furthered academic interest in the topic, with several retrospective works like Catherine Wessinger’s *Millennialism, Persecution & Violence: Historical Cases* (2000) and more recently Lionel Laborie and Ariel Hessayon’s *Early Modern Prophecies in Transnational, National and Regional Contexts* (2020), but the focus on religion and violent protest remains a dominant lens through which millenarian movements were understood and studied.<sup>11</sup> Especially in the post-9/11 context, “apocalyptic terrorism” has become a prominent subject of analysis in popular and

7 See for instance Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press 1970); Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Manchester University Press 1959); Max Assimeng, ‘Religious and Secular Messianism in Africa’, *Research Review* 6:1 (Legon 1969) 1-19.

8 Assimeng, ‘Religious and Secular Messianism’, 2.

9 Anthony Wallace, ‘Revitalization Movements’, *American Anthropologist* 58:2 (1956) 264-281.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1956.58.2.02a00040>; Guenther Lewy, *Religion and Revolution* (Oxford University Press 1974).

10 Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion*, xxi. See also: Catherine Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution & Violence: Historical Cases* (Syracuse University Press 2000); Lionel Laborie and Ariel Hessayon, *Early Modern Prophecies in Transnational, National and Regional Contexts* (Brill 2020).

11 David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, ‘Violence and Religion in Perspective’, in: David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton (eds.) *Cults, Religion and Violence* (Cambridge University

academic publications<sup>12</sup> and religious fundamentalism continues to be linked and compared to historical prophetic uprisings.<sup>13</sup>

This article, however, breaks with the current pattern of studying apocalyptic prophecies from a religious radicalisation perspective, and reassesses whether the religious components of such uprisings were indeed seen as the most threatening to colonial authorities at the time, as well as the most appealing and convincing components for its followers. Did colonial authorities, for instance, turn their attention mainly to disabling the leadership of the uprising rather than combatting the religious beliefs behind the uprising?

Even more, I question whether Dutch colonial administrators even managed to identify the religious, and in the case of the Khoi uprising, Christian inspiration for the uprising. Previous academic studies on the Khoi uprising of 1788 sought to investigate the impact of Christian teachings on pre-existing local beliefs and how the following 'syncretisation' of spiritual beliefs led to sometimes violent upheaval. South African historian Russel Viljoen has approached the 1788 uprising, in both his 2006 monograph on the life of Paerl and earlier academic articles on the Khoi uprising, as a 'revitalization movement', suggesting that there was 'a strong connection between millenarianism and Khoi receptiveness to mission Christianity'.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the South African historian Elizabeth Elbourne focused on the revitalisation aspect of early Christian conversion amongst the Khoi, and has argued that Christianity and conversion were used on a political level, offering the Khoi hope by enabling the shaping and mobilisation of an identifiable Khoi nation from the remaining and demoralised communities left at the Cape in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

As such, these works build on the academic literature from the 1980s and 1990s which sought to highlight African 'agency' in the adoption and appropriation of Christianity during the colonial era.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, these publications fit the narrative on religious and ideological expressions and violent protest which, as described above, became dominant in the late twentieth century amidst the second wave of decolonisation in mainly Southern Africa. Since the turn of the century, few works have focused directly or indirectly on the Khoi uprising of 1788. It therefore seems time to take a

Press 2004) 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511499326.002>.

12 Meggit, 'The Problem', 58.

13 For instance: Kenneth G.C. Newport and Crawford Gribben (eds.), *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Baylor University Press 2006); Ami Pedahzur and Leonard Weinberg, *Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism* (Frank Cass 2004).

14 Russel Viljoen, 'Making Sense of the KhoiKhoi Cattle-Killing of 1788: An Episode of Millenarianism in KhoiKhoi Society', *Kronos: Journal of Cape History* 24:1 (1997) 76.

15 Elizabeth Elbourne, 'Early Khoisan Uses of Mission Christianity', *Kronos: Journal of Cape History* 19 (1992) 3-27.

16 David Maxwell, 'Writing the History of African Christianity, Reflections of an Editor', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36:3-4 (2006) 380.

new and fresh look at this historical episode, and re-engage with the known and previously studied primary sources dedicated to this Khoi uprising in the VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, Dutch East India Company) archives at the Cape. Not necessarily by challenging the assumption that Christian beliefs of salvation and resurrection evoked millenarian beliefs amongst the Khoi community, but by asking new questions inspired by the ongoing historiographical debate and challenging whether this religious component was really recognised by colonial administrators and followers of the uprising alike. By trying to break with the tendency to study apocalyptic prophecies and violent unrest predominantly as a form of religious radicalisation, this article offers a reinterpretation of the responses to and of the contemporary understanding of the millenarian uprising.

### The initial colonial assessment of the Khoikhoi uprising of 1788

On 26 October 1788, the *landdrost* (i.e. the colonial administrative officer) of Swellendam, Constant Van Nuld Onkruidt, wrote an agitated and alarming letter informing Cornelis Jacob van der Graaff, the Governor of the Cape, of his suspicions of an impending uprising of the Khoi community in the Swellendam area, a colonial town 200 kilometres east of Cape Town (see Figure 2). Making an emotional and desperate plea for assistance, he wrote:

Finally your honorary general will become aware from these papers included [in this letter], that their [the Khoikhoi's] intent was to ruin the country, and had I waited so long [to inform you of my suspicion] until a farm had been attacked and taken by force, then [many here?] would have been killed. [...] Because a force as mentioned above would have been capable of attacking all the farms in and around Swellendam, with severe consequences in general. For a long time now this nation [the Khoikhoi] has cherished the hope to become master of the land again. For long now, such talk circulates within this community.<sup>17</sup>

In this first letter, Van Nuld Onkruidt pays specific attention to the rumours in his district that the uprising has been instigated by a self-declared prophet,

17 Western Cape Archives (hereafter WCA), South Africa. C1/1, C570, Incoming Letters Council of Policy 1788, p. 121. Original quote: 'Eijndelijk zal u hoog edele gestrenge genoeg gewaar werden uijt de papiere hier bijgevoegt. Dat hune [Khoikhoi] doel het Ruineren van het land is geweest, hadde ik eens soo lange gewagt tot men hier of daar een plaats hadde afgeloop en daar door Huijd & [Lood?] geneem & bemagtig geworden. Hoe soude dan het [veler/hier?] de [dooden] zijn

geweest [...] Want een magt als booven gemeld was alleen instaat geweest Swellendam & alle de plaatse hier omstreeks leggende afteloopen het geene van een [zwaar] gevolg zoude [kunne] [wesen] voor het algemeen. Al voor lang hebbe die natie zig [gekoesterd] met de hoop omme ter eenige tijd eens wederom meester van het land te worden. Wand voor lang zijn er [uit] zulke monde praatjes geweest'.

named Jan Paerl<sup>18</sup>, who claims to speak on behalf of the god of the Khoi, and who because of his immortality and his role as interpreter for the divine, has ‘occupied their [Khoikhoi] minds profoundly’.<sup>19</sup> In the attached sworn statements of colonists and Khoi, interviewed by the Swellendam authorities, Jan Paerl is depicted as a previously unknown man who has convinced his followers of his immortality, for example, by stabbing himself twice in the chest without dying.<sup>20</sup>

The reply of the Governor, however, shows that the Cape authorities received this religious element of the uprising, which Van Nuld Onkruijdt emphasized, with much scepticism. The Governor stated that first of all ‘it seems incomprehensible to me that in a time like this one should fear something of *this nature* from this nation’.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, he urges the *landdrost* de ‘gemelde natie [Khoi] geene reeden van ongenoenen te geeven’ (‘not to give any reason for grievances to the mentioned nation [Khoi]’).<sup>22</sup> This last point indicates an assumption on the part of the Cape authorities that any social unrest in the district was probably the result of local mismanagement and the failure of local authorities to uphold and respect ‘peaceful co-existence’ with the residing Khoi communities.

Numerous violent clashes had shaped the relationship between Europeans and Khoi communities ever since the Portuguese expeditions at the Cape, which later intensified with the Dutch occupation of the Cape of Good Hope. In particular the occupation of land by free burghers, those European colonists, most of Dutch descent, who were not in service of the VOC but obtained land rights at the Cape, sparked violent resistance of the Khoi, leading to the Khoi-Dutch Wars of 1659-1660 and 1673-1677 and the ‘Bushman war’ of 1739.<sup>23</sup> Towards the end of the eighteenth century, further penetration of European colonists into the South African interior implied that these violent clashes occurred far from Cape Town itself. Instead, it dominated

18 The Dutch name of this Khoi man and self-proclaimed prophet most likely stems from the fact that his father was (maybe partly) of European (Dutch) descent. According to Dutch colonial authorities Jan Paerl was fluent in Dutch. Russel Viljoen, *Jan Paerl, a Khoikhoi in Cape Colonial Society, 1761-1851* (Brill 2006).

19 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1121. Original quote: ‘Ongelovelijk sterk hunne gemoederen hebbe ingenomen’.

20 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1121; WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1127. Attachments to the letter of *landdrost* Nuld Onkruijdt, 26 October 1788.

21 WCA, CA VC 63: Outgoing letters of the Council of Policy in 1788, p. 704-708. Original quote: ‘daar ’t

mij onbegrijpelijk voorkomt, dat men in een tijd als tegenwoordig iets van dienaar van die natie zoude te vreesen’. My italics.

22 WCA, CA VC 63, p. 704-708.

23 Philippus Lodewikus Scholtz, ‘Die historiese ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier (1660-1902): ’n geskiedenis van die distrik Vanrhynsdorp’, in: *Archives Year Book for South African History* II (1966). Cited in: Robert Ross, ‘Khoesan and Immigrants: The Emergence of Colonial Society in the Cape, 1500-1800’, in: Robert Ross, Carolyn Hamilton and Bernard K. Mbenga (eds.), *Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume I* (Cambridge University Press 2010) 199.





**Figure 2.** A drawing of the *drostdij* of Swellendam in the Cape Colony where the Khoikhoi uprising took place. *Gezicht op de Drostdij van Swellendam, vanuit het noordwesten* (Panoramic view of the Drostdij of Swellendam from the northwest), attributed to Robert Jacob Gordon or Johannes Schumacher, 1777-1778. © Rijksmuseum, RP-T-1914-17-44, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.433996>.

life on the frontier, but nevertheless involved Cape authorities as they had to send military assistance to aid the farmers.

At the same time, the relationship between these frontier settlers and the VOC administration at the Cape could often be characterised by mistrust and had equally been deteriorating since the start of the eighteenth century with the first 'Afrikaner' or 'Cape Patriot' uprising of 1707 against corrupt Company officials.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century, wealthy landowners, especially in the outlying districts, sought to find some form of independence from Company rule in an effort to control the colonial economy, but also in an effort to fight a growing social division between members of the administrative elite serving within the VOC ranks and local burghers. These wealthy landowners for instance formed armed militias, known as *commando's*, to defend their outlying farms and settlements such as Stellenbosch and Swellendam. Such commandos, led in the field by a *veld-kornet* and a *veld-commandant* to supervise all commandos in an entire region, created local administrative hierarchies that enabled the colonial settlers to organise themselves, to some extent, separately from Cape Town.<sup>25</sup> Yet, despite this attempt to gain more freedom in governing and protecting themselves, these frontier farmers were nevertheless very vulnerable, militarily speaking, and remained dependent on military support from the VOC.<sup>26</sup> This reluctant dependency led to irritation at the Cape, in particular because the frontier settlers continuously clashed with the Khoi communities living in these areas and sought new ways to economically exploit them. The resulting tensions and clashes forced Cape authorities to send ammunition and sometimes soldiers to 'appease' the situation.<sup>27</sup>

In the correspondence between Van Nuld Onkruijdt and Governor Van der Graaff at the Cape in 1788, it becomes apparent that the former clearly advocated the interests of the European free burghers in his district, and as such found himself, paradoxically, opposed to the broader interests of the Dutch East India Company.<sup>28</sup> Due to this growing level of distrust, and perhaps also due to an annoyance felt because of yet another 'skirmish' at the colonial frontier in an explosive context, the Governor requested the *landdrost* to send Khoi prisoners to the Cape, so that they could be questioned and interrogated by the authorities there.<sup>29</sup> The *landdrost* complied, but sent the imprisoned Khoi to the Cape only weeks after he had received this request. It appears that by this time Van Nuld Onkruijdt had more trust in the ability of his local Boer commandos to 'deal' with the situation first, instead of awaiting the official response of the Cape authorities.<sup>30</sup> In December 1788, weeks after

24 Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa: 1652-2002* (University of Natal Press 2002) 172.

25 Ross, 'Khoesan and Immigrants', 192, 198.

26 Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality*, 172-173.

27 *Ibid.*, 173.

28 Viljoen, *Jan Paerl*, 55.

29 WCA, CA VC 63, p. 704-708.

30 Viljoen, *Jan Paerl*, 55.

the first testimonies had been sent to the Cape, the Governor came to his own conclusion. He informed the Swellendam *landdrost* that:

The five Khoi men & two Khoi women sent to the Cape by your honorary, and questioned by the fiscal, from their confessions he could only conclude that their crimes resulted from being superstitious, which could only be corrected by their own [exercise?], and not by judicial means.<sup>31</sup>

The supposed Christian inspiration of resurrection and apocalyptic prophecy apparently did not make an impression on Van der Graaff, who decried these beliefs as mere ‘superstition’ and not worthy of a real investigation. This suggests that the VOC officials questioned the severity of the situation and belittled the Swellendam *landdrost*’s cause for alarm. At the same time, they also underestimated and belittled the genuine grievances felt by the local Khoi community, as their belief of an upcoming end of the world was mocked.

### The appeal of Jan Paerl’s prophecy to the Khoi community

Whereas the colonial authorities at the Cape were not convinced of the threat the prophecy posed to the colonial order, testimonies from captured Khoi in Swellendam, drawn up by local authorities, nevertheless highlight that it was the prophecy, as well as certain miracles performed by Jan Paerl, that convinced them to join the uprising. Most testimonies spoke of the prophecy as an impending ‘end of the world’<sup>32</sup> and the necessity to prepare for this by ‘killing all their white livestock, and to inform their parents to do the same’<sup>33</sup>, as well as to ‘build straw huts with two doors’.<sup>34</sup> One Khoi man, named Gerrit, emphasized that these preparations were in full swing and, as he claimed, most had completed their preparations for the apocalypse.<sup>35</sup> Anna, a Khoi woman interviewed by Swellendam authorities, testified to the charismatic and divine appeal of Jan Paerl, who apparently had performed miracles to proof his divinity. She stated that ‘Jan Paerl told her that he, “our dear Lord”, had stabbed himself with a knife, which she had seen, and that they wanted to

31 WCA, CA VC 63, p. 736-737. Original quote: ‘De vijf “Hottentotten” en twee “Hottentottinnen” door uw edele caapwaards gesonden, door den fiscaal ondervraagd zynde, heeft uit hunne bekentenis alleen kunnen gemaaken, dan hunne misdaden bestaan uit een over groote bijgeloovigheid gebooren, en die tot niemand als hun eigen [exercitie?] kunnende strekken ook geenzints geregtelyk kunnen werden gecorrigeerd’. My quotation marks.

32 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1125-1131. 26 October 1788.

33 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1130. Original quote: ‘dat zij alle witte beesten moesten weg slagten en dat zy zyn vader en moeder onderigten moest dat zij met hem mede moesten doen’.

34 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1127. Original quote: ‘en strooyhuyzen met twee [deuren] maakten’.

35 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1130.

kill the *landdrost* and his wife and children and afterwards kill all the Christian people'.<sup>36</sup>

From a socio-political perspective, it is not difficult to imagine the feelings of desperation of the Khoi community, who were faced with an ever-expanding colonial state in their motherland, the rapid loss of biodiversity and subsequent deprivation of their traditional hunter-gatherer or nomadic pastoralist ways of living, as well as the increasing economic exploitation and political and social humiliation of being forced to work in a servile position to European settlers (see Figure 3).<sup>37</sup> Earlier works focusing on this millenarian uprising have claimed that the popularity of this 'end of the world'-prophecy can thus be mainly understood in this socio-political reality.<sup>38</sup> In political terms, the world of the Khoi was indeed coming to an end and the prophecy can as such be seen as a spiritual translation of this widely felt anxiety.

Yet, there are conflicting accounts in the VOC records that create doubt whether the self-proclaimed Khoi prophet had been inspired by Christianity and deliberately appropriated Christian elements. For instance, how can we interpret the specific actions which were part of the millenarian movement, such as the killing of white livestock and the construction of straw huts with two doors? Were these actions inspired by earlier Khoi cultural or religious practices, or were they indeed the result of increasing contacts with Christian missionaries?

Little is known about the religious world of the Khoikhoi before their conversion to Christianity.<sup>39</sup> European travellers and 'adventurers' who wrote about their encounters with the Khoikhoi and who interpreted their religious practices, mainly highlighted the, in their eyes, bizarre and strange rites so to emphasize the differences between 'civilised' Europe and 'pagan' Africa.<sup>40</sup> The word 'religion', in this context of unequal power relations and early contacts between different cultures, was used by Europeans as a category 'to understand what Africans lacked, not what they possessed'.<sup>41</sup> However, what these early accounts do indicate is that the Khoi religious or spiritual world could be described as animist, as most rites involved some veneration of the land and the elements. Moreover, animal figures dominated the myths, stories

36 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1127. Original quote: 'Dat Jan [Paer] aan haar gesegd heeft dat hij, onse lieve Heer, met een [mes], dat sy gezien had, gestoken had, dat zij dese Landdrost met vrouw en kinderen wilden vermoorden en dan vervolgens al het [...Christelijke] volk'.

37 Ross, 'Khoesan and Immigrants', 200-201.

38 For instance: Russel Viljoen, "'Revelation of a Revolution". The Prophecies of Jan Parel, *Alias Onse Liewe Heer, a Khoisan Prophet and Cape Rebel*', *Kronos: Journal of Cape History* 21:1 (1994) 6.

39 Paul Landau, "'Religion" and Christian Conversion in African History, a New Model', *Journal of Religious History* 23:1 (1999) 28; Emile Boonzaier, 'Culture Summary: Khoi' (eHuman Relations Area Files 2010).

40 David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda, Robert Petty, Judy Tobler and Darrel Wratten, *African Traditional Religion in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography* (Greenwood Press 1997) 65.

41 Landau, "'Religion" and Christian Conversion', 17.



**Figure 3.** This drawing depicts the Dutch Cape Colony in 1786. On the foreground you see two Khoikhoi men, on the left a colonist on horseback with a rifle, followed by a servant. In the background a farmer returning to his farm from Cape Town, probably with an enslaved man walking next to the cart and a servant in front of the oxen. Shown in the back is the famous *Tafelberg* (Table Mountain), drawn from the Cape Flats, the lowlands between the seaside mountain range and the Stellenbosch mountain range. *Khoikhoi en kolonisten op Kaapse vlakte* (*Khoikhoi and settlers on the Cape Plain*), by Jan Brandes, 1786. © Rijksmuseum, NG-2017-14, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.667073>.

and songs of the Khoi.<sup>42</sup> The reference to and even central place of animals in the prophecy of Jan Paerl should be read as not per se symbolising the spiritual, but rather the more worldly beliefs and earthly realities of the Khoi. Cattle were the most prized possession of the Khoi, and were at the core of their mythology.

The seemingly senseless killing of cattle could be intended as a sacrifice and gift for the ancestors who were expected to rise from the dead. A similar interpretation of the mass killing of precious cattle was proposed by the South African poet James J.R. Jolobe, who tried to understand the disastrous Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1857. He states that the cattle killing was in fact a ritual sacrifice, based on the Xhosa concept of *Ukuruma*: 'one must give something oneself when one is expecting some gift or privilege'.<sup>43</sup> From this perspective, the killing of precious cattle cannot be seen as a fatalistic act of people expecting the end of the world, but should be seen as a sensible act of reciprocity, giving a present in order to receive the gift of the new world. In fact, the Khoi clearly expected a gift upon the apocalypse, referring in their testimonies that with the uprising against the settlers 'they would get all the goods and cattle of the Christians'.<sup>44</sup> Yet, such as prospect resembles perhaps more a promise of retribution than of a divine gift.

Millenarian movements and especially its apocalyptic prophecies are clearly influenced by monotheistic theology, in this case Christianity. European settlers had brought the Christian faith to the Cape, but non-white members of colonial society only slowly converted. There was a general reluctance on the part of the settlers to convert the enslaved, as it was frowned upon to sell and buy fellow Christians.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the baptism of Khoi at the Cape was equally not encouraged, and only accepted through personal conversion rather than baptism at birth, as Christianity became more and more a marker of full citizenship and of European descent in the colonial society.<sup>46</sup> Many settlers feared that supporting large-scale conversion would destabilise the power dynamics at the Cape, and give the non-white community a false impression of equality.<sup>47</sup> Some directed their complaints

42 Elizabeth Elbourne and Robert Ross, 'Combating Spiritual and Social Bondage: Early Missions in the Cape Colony', in: Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (eds.) *Christianity in South Africa: a Political, Social and Cultural History* (James Curry 1997) 33.

43 J.B. Peires, 'The Central Beliefs of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing', *Journal of African History* 28:1 (1987) 51.

44 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1127. Original quote: '[dat] zij dan al het goed en vee van de christenen zoude

krijgen'. James J.R. Jolobe, 'Ingqawule' in: *Ilitha* (1959).

45 Jonathan Gerstner, 'A Christian Monopoly: The Reformed Church and Colonial Society under Dutch Rule', in: Elphick and Davenport (eds.), *Christianity in South Africa*, 18.

46 Gerstner, 'A Christian Monopoly', 20, 25, 30.

47 Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (University of Virginia Press 2012) 2-3.

directly at the missionaries, bemoaning the loss of Khoi servants on their farmsteads to the mission posts, where the Khoi apparently were better treated.<sup>48</sup> Others doubted whether conversion would really ‘bring sufficient improvement in [their] savage vices’ and instead feared that ‘it [religion] could be used more as a cover for violence’.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as the historian Richard Elphick has argued, the idea of equality of mankind in Christian terms ‘posed a constant challenge’ to colonial authorities and came to inspire rebellions against the colonial order by recently converted Khoisan.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the general reluctance for widespread conversion, in 1736, a missionary from the Moravian Brotherhood, Georg Schmidt, was given permission to commence a first serious attempt to convert the Khoikhoi in Baviaanskloof near Swellendam.<sup>51</sup> Khoi living in the Swellendam district thus would have been able to come into contact with the Christian faith decades before the uprising of 1788. Elizabeth Elbourne has argued that the Khoi’s quick acceptance of Christianity and their large-scale conversion in the late eighteenth century should be understood partially as a strategic move, as they were living in a society that ‘tended to identify Christianity with a white skin and political privilege’.<sup>52</sup> But, of course, conversion did not lead automatically to being seen or treated as an equal. Khoi converts often encountered outright racial hostility and rejection from Christian settlers, who questioned their ‘natural right’ to receive God’s grace. In the diary of the Dutch missionary Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp, who had come to the Cape in 1795, evidence of such racial rejection is recounted:

Couragie [Khoi convert] asked brother VanderKemp, if it were not true that God had created them [the Khoikhoi] as well as the Christians, and the beasts of the field, “for you know (said he) that the Dutch farmers teach us, that he never created us, nor taketh any notice of us”.<sup>53</sup>

Acceptance was also difficult to obtain from their local communities, who often interpreted conversion to the colonisers’ religion as a form of

48 H. Lichtenstein, ‘Vervolg van de reis van den Kommissaris-Generaal De Mist, meegedeeld door H. Lichtenstein’, in: E.C. Godée Molsbergen, *Reizen in Zuid-Afrika in de Hollandse tijd. Deel iv. Tochten in het Kafferland 1776-1805* (Martinus Nijhoff 1932) 220.

49 Godée Molsbergen, *Reizen in Zuid-Afrika*, 220.

50 Elphick, *The Equality of Believers*, 3.

51 Ross, ‘Khoesan and Immigrants’, 193.

52 Elizabeth Elbourne, “‘Race’, warfare, and religion in mid-nineteenth-century Southern Africa: The

Khoikhoi rebellion against the Cape Colony and its uses, 1850-58’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13:1 (2000) 34.

53 ‘Journey of Dr. VanderKemp to Caffraria from the Cape of Good Hope in the year 1799’, in: *Transactions of the London Missionary Society*, 1 (Bye and Law 1804) 268. Cited in: Robert Ross, *These Oppressions Won’t Cease. An Anthology of the Political Thought of the Cape Khoesan, 1777-1879* (Wits University Press 2017) 4.

betrayal.<sup>54</sup> It is important to consider, however, that the Khoikhoi conversion to Christianity cannot be seen solely as a strategy to ‘become and act white’. ‘The white man’s religion was not accepted simply as it was proffered; in various ways it was adapted to and used for African needs’, as R. L. Cope stressed.<sup>55</sup> Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have argued that it was not uncommon for early African converts to occasionally (and perhaps deliberately) misread mission metaphors, ‘interpreting the admonitions and promises of the mission in highly literal, immediate terms’.<sup>56</sup> Apart from the appealing promise of a new utopian world to come, certain theological aspects in Christianity proved to be complementary to already existing spiritual notions in local African religions. For example, the concept of the resurrection of the dead was largely absent in local African beliefs, but nevertheless fitted quite neatly within the existing ancestor worship rites.<sup>57</sup>

It remains unclear whether Jan Paerl’s followers adhered to the Christian elements in the prophecy. Viljoen has noted that ‘Paerl saw himself as a “*onstervelijke god*” [immortal god] or as a divine messenger of a God whose task it was to save the Khoisan from their colonial plight’.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Paerl was often called ‘Onse Liewe Heer’ (‘Our Dear Lord’), a way of phrasing that seems to be mainly inspired by Christianity. Yet, some Khoi and enslaved, who were captured by the Swellendam *landdrost* and accused of being part of the rebellion, stated in their testimonies that they had planned to kill all ‘Christenen’ (‘Christians’)<sup>59</sup>, a term by which they only seem to refer to white settlers.

Moreover, it is important to consider the local meaning of words like *Liewe Heer* and to question whether the Khoi understood these terms in the same way as the European settlers. Paul Landau has demonstrated how several European missionaries gave different translations of the Khoi spiritual concept of *Tsuni-//goam*<sup>60</sup>, ranging from God to *Baas* (Master).<sup>61</sup> Dutch missionary François Valentijn noted in his travel writings of 1726 that the Khoi used different terms to denominate and explain the concept of God, including ‘den grooten Capiteyn’ (‘the great Captain’).<sup>62</sup>

54 R.L. Cope, ‘Christian Missions and Independent African Chieftoms in South Africa in 19<sup>th</sup> Century’, *Theoria, Journal of Social and Political Theory* 52 (1979) 1.

55 Cope, ‘Christian Missions’, 4.

56 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Volume 1. Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago University Press 1991) 236.

57 Isaac Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa* (Routledge 1934) 366; Emily Pitek, ‘Nama “Hottentot”, also known as Khoi’, *The Database*

*of Religious History*, 6 January 2020. <https://religiondatabase.org/browse/737>.

58 Viljoen, “‘Revelation of a Revolution’”, 14.

59 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1131. Attachments to the letter of *landdrost* Van Nuld Onkruijdt, 26 October 1788.

60 Often seen as the central ‘deity’ of the Khoi.

61 Landau, “‘Religion’ and Christian Conversion”, 26-27.

62 François Valentijn, *Beschryvinge van de Kaap der Goede Hoop. Deel II*. ed. E.H. Raid ten R. Raven-Hart (Van Riebeeck Society 1973) 94.



If, as Landau argues, the concept of one universal God was unfamiliar to the Khoi, the title *Liewe Heer* cannot be a reference to the idea of God or Christ as interpreted by Christian Europeans. Perhaps the Khoi defined *Liewe Heer* more like leader (Boss/*Baas*) or ancestral father. My critical approach to the primary sources therefore challenges some of the assumptions in current historiography about the popular appeal for Paerl's prophecy. If he was seen as a leader rather than a God, it negates the Christian and religious, but not necessarily spiritual, aspect for some of his followers during this uprising. As stated, in the testimonies of Paerl's followers, most referred to Paerl as 'Liewe Heer', but one witness named Frans pointed to a 'Captyn Jan' ('Captain Jan'), which evokes the image of a leader rather than a prophet.<sup>63</sup>

In sum, Christianity seems to have inspired Paerl to take up arms against the Dutch coloniser, offering him additional rhetorical power to legitimate his quest. At the same time, the conflicting testimonies in the statements suggest that the Khoi followers saw Paerl more as a local leader than a Christian prophet. This, however, does not deny the spiritual empowerment of Paerl's prophecy, as he mixed recognisable Khoi spiritual and worldly elements with new theological concepts which promised to combat the evil of imperialism and envision the coming of a new world.

### Suppressing an uprising and belittling a prophet

In the late eighteenth century, seeing omens of an impending apocalypse was quite common.<sup>64</sup> In fact, the Dutch society itself was largely influenced by millenarianism.<sup>65</sup> What most of these radical religious beliefs in early modern Europe shared, was the acceptance of the Christian understanding of the 'end of history' and a suspicion 'that they were now living in an age that was "somehow the climax of human history"'.<sup>66</sup> Political and social unrest were easily interpreted as a sign announcing the end of the world. In such a context, it is surprising that the Cape authorities did not politicise the millenarian aspect of the Khoikhoi uprising in 1788 and continued to underestimate its popular appeal and counterhegemonic potential, denouncing the support for the prophecy as merely fuelled by 'bijgeloovigheid' ('superstition').<sup>67</sup> The Governor instructed Van Nuld Onkruidt to release all the Khoi who were still imprisoned in the Swellendam *Drostdy* and allow them to return home

63 WCA, C1/1, C570, p. 1125. Attachments to the letter of landdrost Nuld Onkruidt, 26 October 1788.

64 Elbourne and Ross, 'Combatting Spiritual and Social Bondage', 37.

65 Rie-Hilje Kielman, *In het laatste der dagen. Eindtijdverwachting in Nederland op de drempel van de moderne tijd (1790-1880)* (Eburon 2017).

66 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic. Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (Penguin 1991) 170. Cited in: John M. Court, *Approaching the Apocalypse*, 110.

67 WCA, CA VC 63, Outgoing letters of the Council of Policy, pp. 736-737. 2 December 1788.

without any hindrance, as there was nothing that ‘could be legally corrected in any way’.<sup>68</sup> The *landdrost* was less at ease with Paerl. On 15 November 1788, he communicated to the Governor that he had spared no expenses to ‘track down the vagabond, who has pretended to be the God of the Khoikhoi’.<sup>69</sup> But it took another year and a half before Paerl was apprehended around Stellenbosch<sup>70</sup>, the second colonial town, some 40 kilometres from Cape Town.

Whereas in 1790 the authorities at the Cape seem to have almost forgotten the incident in Swellendam, the prosecutor and *landdrost* of Stellenbosch, Hendrik Bletterman, prepared his case against Paerl on the basis of old testimonies obtained from Swellendam, and sent his dossier to the *Raad van Justitie* (Council of Justice) at the Cape (see Figure 4).<sup>71</sup> While Bletterman had ‘deemed it necessary to prosecute Paerl for bringing the Khoikhoi people *in beweging* [in action] against the Dutch’<sup>72</sup>, the Council of Justice in its assessment of the case deviated again from the general fears and worries expressed by the local authorities in the outlying districts, as the Council’s officers for instance did not interpret the prophecy as being anti-colonial. On 29 April 1790, the adjunct-fiscal of the Council of Justice, Johannes Andreas Truter, read out the list of offenses Paerl was accused of:

A certain Khoi man Jan Paerl in the year 1788 had convinced several Khoi in this country that the world was coming to an end on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October of that year and moved a great number of the Khoi living on the estates of Christian farmers or in the surrounding *Kraals* to come together and to conspire, and instill the idea in them to seek refuge on a hilltop, slaughter their cattle and, as described before, commit several other stupidities, which can surely be seen as ridiculous, and which, however how foolish and childish, could also have negative consequences, if one had not convinced these creatures of their foolishness and so prevent further effects of this wrong delusion which had been brought to them by Jan Paerl.<sup>73</sup>

68 WCA, CA VC 63, pp. 736-737. Original quote: ‘geenzints geregtelyk kunnen werden gecorrigeerd’.

69 WCA, C1/1, C570. Council of Policy, Incoming Letters, pp. 1255-1257. Original quote: ‘Egter spaar ik geene kosten of moeijs omme [...] die eerste vagebond, die zig voor een God der Hottentotten heeft gegeven, op te spooren’.

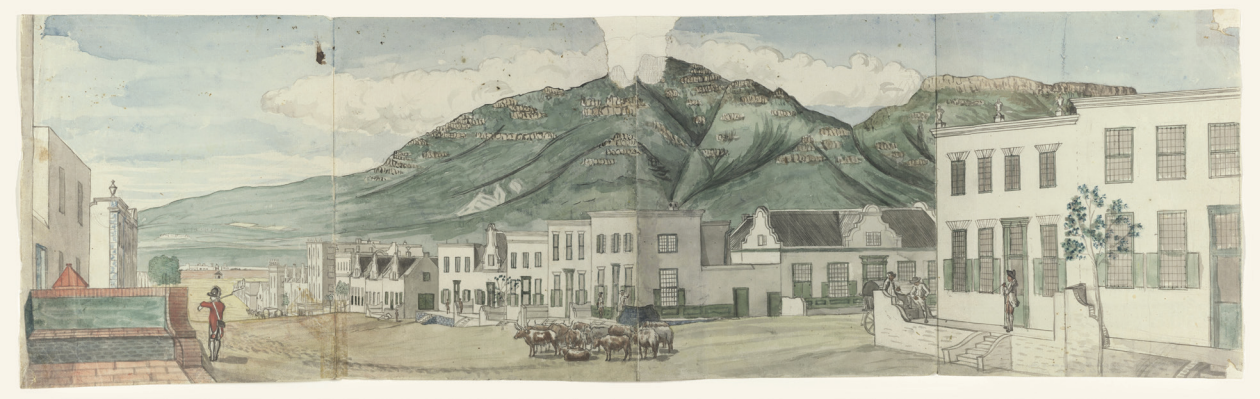
70 Viljoen, *Jan Paerl*, 80.

71 *Ibid.*, 80-81.

72 *Ibid.*

73 WCA, 1/STB, 10/17 Incoming letters of the Council of Justice, 1789-94. Extracts from the Court proceedings of the Council of Justice at the Cape

of Good Hope, Thursday 29 April 1790. Original quote: ‘zeekere Hottentot Jan Paerl in ’t jaar 1788 verscheidene Hottentotten in dit land had gebragt in beweeging door en wijs te maaken dat hij wist dat de wereld op den 25 October van dat jaar zoude vergaan en een groot aantal van de bij de Christenen inwoonende en omstreeks derzelve plaatsen in Kraalen verblijfhoudende Hottentotten bij elkander te doen complotteeren en deselve voorts in het idee te brengen om zich op zekere hooge heuvel te verschansen, wijder/n hun vee te verslagten en zoals uit boven genoemd stukken breeder consteerd verscheide andere fottices te bedriegen, welke zeerkerlijk



**Figure 4.** View of the Strandstraat in Cape Town, seen from the pavement of the Lutheran parish house where the painter, Jan Brandes, stayed between 20 April and 20 May 1786. In front of it, a Swiss soldier is guarding the company's warehouse. The walls of the castle can be seen in the background. Towering over the houses of the street is the Devil's Peak and the southernmost point of the *Tafelberg* (Table Mountain). The painting illustrates the larger urban character of Cape Town, in contrast to the rural area of Swellendam. *De Strandstraat in Kaapstad* (*The Strandstraat in Cape Town*), Jan Brandes, 1786. © Rijksmuseum, NG-2012-41. <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.513946>.

The resulting verdict was for Cape standards extremely mild. Ordinarily, as sociologist George Pavlich stated: ‘the seriousness of crimes, and its proportionate punishment, was explicitly defined with an eye to preserving the Cape’s unequal socio-economic and political arrangements’.<sup>74</sup> Being suspected of having rebelled against the colonial state with the intent of overthrowing it, a Khoi man as Paerl could have expected a severe punishment, such as being exiled to Robben Island, flogging or even the death penalty. Indeed, the function of corporal punishments, in particular when publically executed, were meant to send a signal that any inkling towards rebellion was not tolerated. In this context, ‘the severest punishments fell on the lowest social ranks’.<sup>75</sup> Yet, instead of the death penalty or exile, Paerl was ordered to work for the Dutch East India Company in Stellenbosch, and he received a restraining order prohibiting him from coming within a three-hour radius of the Swellendam *Drostdy*. The adjunct-fiscal had argued to have Paerl’s feet chained to prevent his timely escape, but that was dismissed by the Council of Justice as well.<sup>76</sup>

This surprising verdict tells us that the colonial authorities did not consider the prophecy and teachings of Paerl to be dangerous. Instead, the Cape authorities approached Paerl and his prophecy rather with incredulity and contempt. Yet, in other apocalyptic uprisings in colonial Africa, colonial authorities had deemed the religious message of subversive preachers and the (potential) political unrest fuelled by a popular movement highly problematic and volatile. For example, the case of the Congolese popular preacher and self-declared prophet Simon Kimbangu shows how his interpretation of the Bible and his religious teaching of ‘equality in the eyes of the Lord’ in the 1910s and 1920s were qualified as a real threat to the Belgian colonial system of racist inequality between European colonial administrators and Congolese subjects.<sup>77</sup> Kimbangu was sentenced to death, a sentence ultimately transformed into a life imprisonment, yet significantly more severe than that of Paerl at the Cape.

Similarly, Portuguese colonial authorities and their Congolese allies considered the religious sect in the late-seventeenth-century Kingdom of

op zich zelve beschouwd belachelijk zijn, edog hoe zot en kinderagtig ook, evenwel nadeelige gevolgen zoude hebben kunne opleveren, zo men niet in tijd die schepsels hunne dwaasheid had overtuigd en dus de verdere uitwerkselen van den verkeerden waan waarin zij door meerm: Jan Paerl waren gebracht, tegengegaan’.

74 George Pavlich, ‘Occupied Cape Judges and Colonial Knowledge of Crime, Criminals, and Punishment’, *SAGE Open* 4:1 (2014) 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013520612>.

75 Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald, *Trials of Slavery. Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from the Criminal Records of the Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1705-1794* (Van Riebeeck Society 2005) xxvi.

76 WCA, CA C1 / 72. 29 April 1790. pp 168-170.

77 Joshua Broggi, *Diversity in the Structure of Christian Reasoning: Interpretation, Disagreement, and World Christianity* (Brill 2015) 23-87.

Kongo around Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita, who had declared to be possessed by the spirit of Saint Antoni, as subversive. Not only the prophetess herself but her entire message were observed as a threat to the social and spiritual fabric of society. The ensuing civil war between followers of Kimpa Vita and those Congolese who remained loyal to the Catholic church of Congo ‘had much of a religious crusade’, as John Thornton argued.<sup>78</sup> More recently, the Christian messianic movement of Simão Toko in Angola in the 1970s, which sought to end the colonial Christianisation of Africa, ended with Toko’s exile.<sup>79</sup>

The complete lack of concern among the Cape authorities with regard to the prophetic movement itself and Paerl’s teachings therefore stands out as an anomaly and raises questions as to why the Dutch colonial authorities did not fear religious radicalisation, nor assessed the religious rhetoric as a threat to the colonial order. Viljoen has argued that the Cape ‘Judiciary “deconstructed” the true essence of the millenarian movement, [...] they focused their attention on the obscurity of the movement, claiming it had been inspired by some “zot” (“lunatic”) Khoi person’.<sup>80</sup> This dismissal of the uprising’s leader as a lunatic explains, according to Viljoen, the surprising verdict and attitude of the VOC government. Indeed, the Council of Justice, throughout the trial, consistently characterised Paerl’s actions as ‘childish’ and ‘foolish’. Yet, this interpretation alone does not fully explain the complete lack of concern with the potential undermining beliefs which might have continued to circulate among the Khoi followers of Paerl.

I argue that apart from the obviously mocking dismissal of Paerl, there is also a paternalistic and racist element in the colonial assessment and understanding of the spiritual world of the Khoi and the biblical provenance of their uprising. This particular millenarian prophecy, in part inspired by Christianity, was belittled and its popular appeal and subversive character were miscalculated, as the colonial authorities were convinced of the Khoi’s inability to acculturate to supposedly white modes of thinking, and as such being unable to grasp the gospel’s message.

After all, ever since the foundation of the colony at the Cape, colonisers and settlers had expressed disbelief in the genuineness and completeness of conversion of certain Khoi individuals. Most famously, the first Khoi convert, Krotoa, who had been adopted and raised by the Van Riebeeck family in 1652 at the Castle of Good Hope, was continuously challenged and questioned as being a true Christian. Zacharias Wagenaer,

78 John Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony. Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (Cambridge University Press 2012) 199. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/cb09780511572791>.

79 Ruy Llera Blanes, ‘Time for Self-Sacrifice: Temporal Narratives, Politics and Ideals in African Prophetism’, *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 79:3 (2014) 406-408.

80 Viljoen, *Jan Paerl*, 83.

the second Governor at the Cape, for example disapproved of the Christian burial Krotoa had received upon her early death in 1674 and noted in his journal that she had not led a real Christian life.<sup>81</sup> In a similar fashion, other Cape governors expressed themselves in most negative and racist terms when they wrote about the (lack of) ‘natural aptness’ of African communities to become Christian and to embody values that were categorised as Christian. For example, Baron van Plettenberg, Governor of the colony from 1774 until 1785, remarked that ‘it will require more than human capabilities to imprint the idea of neighbourly love in the local African residents of this colony, in order to make sure both Khoi and Xhosa are able to recognise Christians as their fellow human beings and brothers [...]’.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, in 1792, Hendrik Swellengrebel Jr., son of the late Governor of the Cape, was sceptic of the feasibility for the Moravian Brethren mission at the Cape, stating ‘for how to make Christians, before one has formed these people [Khoi] into men, I do not understand [...]’.<sup>83</sup> A similar assertion of a supposed ‘racial’ incapacity to comprehend and live by God’s word was made by both free burgher Heinrich Liechtenstein and Governor-General Jacob Abraham Uitenhage de Mist, while visiting the mission post in Baviaanskloof in 1803, observing that the ‘Moravian missionaries wanted to turn the natives first into humans, before converting them to Christians’, as the gospel so far had made no impression upon the Khoi, except for the ‘mixed-race’ population who, according to Uitenhage De Mist and Liechtenstein, were more able to convert.<sup>84</sup>

In sum, the explanation for Paerl’s mild sentence should thus be sought in the general attitude of the Dutch colonial government in the eighteenth century towards the conversion of the Khoi at the Cape. As stated, the colonial authorities were not keen on converting the Khoi communities and welcoming them into the Christian community at the Cape, because being a Christian went hand in hand with receiving certain rights and privileges, and even more importantly, because colonial authorities and settlers deemed the Khoi inapt to understand Christianity’s ‘true’ message due to their ‘uncivilised’ nature, making them unworthy of receiving God’s grace. As such the colonial authorities were generally blind to any ongoing conversion and appropriation of Christian beliefs by the Khoi, as the very possibility of conversion was esteemed implausible. In the words of Governor Van der

81 Zacharias Wagenaer, *Journal B.* 209 (30 July 1674). Cited in: Christina Landman, ‘The Religious Krotoa (c 1642-1674)’, *Kronos: Journal of Cape History* 23:1 (1996) 24.

82 Letter from J.A. Baron van Plettenberg to H. Swellengrebel, 12-5-1780. In: Gerrit Jan Schutte and A.J. Boëseken, *Briefwisseling van Hendrik*

*Swellengrebel Jr. Oor Kaapse Sake 1778-1792* (Van Riebeeck Society 1982) 119-120.

83 Letter from Hendrik Swellengrebel to H. Cloete Schoonoort, 2-6-1792. In: Schutte and Boëseken, *Briefwisseling*, 299.

84 Godée Molsbergen, *Reizen in Zuid-Afrika*, 222.

Graaff, it seemed ‘incomprehensible’ to the Dutch colonial authorities to fear such actions of ‘this nature from this nation’.<sup>85</sup> It appears that the idea of the Khoi nation, which was portrayed as barbaric and uncivilised by the Dutch, having such a Christian reading of the end of times and using such biblical prose against the colonial power, should have been utterly inconceivable to the colonial authorities.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to reinterpret the responses to the 1788 uprising among the Khoi and the Dutch colonial authorities and to reinvestigate to what extent religious radicalisation formed the main motivation for the Khoi to commit to the movement, and at the same time question whether the religious rhetoric was detected and deemed to be the most subversive element by the colonial authorities. As opposed to the current tendency in historiography to study apocalyptic prophecies and violent unrest predominantly as a form of religious radicalisation, it seems that for both groups involved the religious and in particular Christian inspiration for the apocalyptic beliefs were not per se recognised.

With regard to the Khoi’s motivation to follow Paerl’s millenarian beliefs, it seems Paerl himself had been touched by the Christian revelation of the Apocalypse, and used this new found image of salvation to create popular support. His followers, on the other hand, referred to him as both *baas* and *Liewe Heer*, and thus seem to have regarded Paerl predominantly as a worldly leader rather than a Christian prophet. At the same time, as elements of the Khoi spiritual world were central to the preparations for and prospects of the new world in the prophecy, there is nevertheless a clear spiritual inspiration for the uprising and a longing for the old world to be restored.

As to the colonial response, the dismissal of Paerl as mere delusional did not come from a haughty colonial reaction to pathologise a local man declaring to be God, but from a racist perception of the Khoi’s ability to acculturate to the way of life of the ‘Christenen volk’ (i.c. European settlers). Religious radicalisation was clearly not of any concern to colonial authorities, as they did not believe the Khoi to be capable of understanding nor adopting Christian and European modes of thought – let alone know and embrace the western interpretation of the Apocalypse.

85 WCA, CA VC 63, 1788, p. 704-708. Original quote: ‘daar ’t mij onbegrijpelijk voorkomt, dat men in een tijd als tegenwoordig iets van dienaar van die natie zoude te vreesen’.

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