

‘THE ABANDONED MOTHER’: AGEING,
OLD AGE AND MISSIONARIES IN EARLY AND MID
NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOUTH-EAST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines issues of ageing and old age in Xhosa-speaking communities to *c.* 1860. Drawing primarily on records of the Wesleyan Methodist and London Missionary societies, the article examines the construction of Xhosa ageing, old age and death in missionary writings. The primary medium of missionary reflection was the figure of the ‘Abandoned Mother’, modelled on contemporary British metaphors, that represented yet another atrocity story for legitimating the mission enterprise and the emerging colonial regime. It also argues that there were fundamental contrasts in the images of ageing and dying between those of the Xhosa and those of the missionaries. Though older persons found certain themes in the Christian message attractive, they preferred the local cultural model of ageing, old age and death.

KEY WORDS: South Africa, missions, generational conflict.

ON 24 February 1826, Stephan Kay, one of the pioneer Wesleyan missionaries in today’s Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, wrote about Western Xhosa communities in his personal diary, ‘how truly pitiable is the lot of [old] age in uncivilized countries!’¹ Though Kay’s judgement runs counter to the sentimental and romantic imagery prevailing in many quarters of modern Southern African gerontological research, Kay was then not alone in his dire portrayal. In fact, in the early nineteenth century, Southern African missionary writings bristle with descriptions of African old age as a lifecycle phase of degradation and misery. This dismal picture found its most graphic expression in the powerful image of the old mother who was abandoned and left behind by her own children to die in desolation in the bush. Robert Moffat, the celebrated missionary of the Tswana peoples, and the even more legendary David Livingstone, were to popularize this tragic figure by depicting her graphically in their widely-read works. However, the missionary discourse on ageing and old age in the early and mid-nineteenth century was always rather ambiguous: missionary writings envisaged the African elderly as beings with two faces, as at once innocent sufferers and as powerful impediments to spiritual and material progress.²

Focusing on mission enterprise among Xhosa-speaking communities to

¹ Archives of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), (10), extract from Kay’s journal, 24 Feb. 1826.

² Johannes W. Raum and two anonymous readers of *The Journal of African History* provided very careful and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this essay. The author is sincerely grateful to them as well as to the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG)) for its generous support of this ongoing research into cultural, political and economic aspects of ageing in South Africa.

around 1860,³ this essay argues that the concern of missionaries with the degradation of old age articulated with the wider missionary enterprise. It is posited that the treatment of ageing and dying bodies in Xhosa culture was selected by the missionaries as the locus of identifying and constituting an African 'other', and for legitimating the emerging colonial regime of power. But this article does not exclusively deal with the symbolic function of the image of the 'abandoned mother' (and of related images). Every society creates its own cultural scripts concerning the meaning of ageing and dying, which do effectively mould the experience of later life. As might be expected, the advent of missionaries entailed a contest between different perceptions of old age and mortality, as well as between alternative ways of seeing the ageing and dying body. Concentrating for purely pragmatic reasons on the activities of the missionaries of the Wesleyan Methodist and London Missionary Society, this essay focuses on the basic tension between the Xhosa master narratives of ageing and dying and the related ideas and images of the missionaries.⁴

In this regard, there are several main questions to be addressed. How did missionaries construct Xhosa ageing, old age and death in their writings? How were these narratives related to the missionaries' own Victorian notions of ageing and dying? How did the Xhosa perceive the message of the missionaries on old age and mortality? Did the age of Xhosa listeners structure their response to the missionary teaching in question? While an increasing number of anthropological studies have focused on the meaning and significance of ageing and later life in African societies, African historiography has thus far paid no attention to the historical reconstruction of local discourses on old age, or to the emergence of such new discourses in the wake of colonialism, Christianization and Islamization. Neither has there been much concern with increasing state penetration of local communities and with the analysis of the interplay of these new forms with older cultural representations of later life.⁵ This essay is meant as a small step towards

³ Regarding the history of early mission Christianity in the Eastern Cape, see Hildegard H. Fast, 'African perceptions of the missionaries and their message: Wesleyans at Mount Coke and Butterworth, 1825–35' (M.A. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1991); H. Fast, "'In at one ear and out at the other": African response to the Wesleyan message in Xhosaland, 1825–1835', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23 (1993), 147–74; Janet Hodgson, 'Do we hear you Nyengana? Dr J. T. Vanderkemp and the first mission to the Xhosa', *Religion in Southern Africa*, 5 (1984), 3–47; Hodgson, 'A battle for sacred power: Christian beginnings among the Xhosa', in Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (eds.), *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History* (Cape town, 1997), 68–88; Charles Villa-Vicencio, 'Mission Christianity', in John W. De Gruchy and Martin H. Prozesky (eds.), *Living Faiths in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1995), 45–71; Donovan Williams, 'The Missionaries of the Eastern Frontier of the Cape Colony, 1799–1853' (Ph.D. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1960). On the continuing impact of Xhosa tradition on Xhosa Christianity, see, especially, B. A. Pauw, *Christianity and Xhosa Tradition: Belief and Ritual among Xhosa-Speaking Christians* (Cape Town, 1975).

⁴ The main archival sources consulted were the WMMS, the Archives of the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Methodist Church Collection (MCC). All references refer to the microfiche copies of these collections housed in the South African Library, Cape Town (SAL). Figures in brackets denote the relevant microfiche box number.

⁵ Andreas Sagner, 'Reflections on the construction and study of elderliness', editorial, *Southern African Journal of Gerontology*, 8 (1999), 5.

redressing this omission. Ultimately, it would be desirable to pursue the overall history of the interpenetration between the Xhosa imagery of ageing and dying and the missionary view of old age and mortality and to capture the changing ideas of both the (un)converted Xhosa and the missionaries. All that can be attempted here is to throw some light on the very beginnings of this interpenetration and to sketch some of the conceptual transformations involved.

PRECOLONIAL AGEING, MISSIONARIES AND 'THE MISERY OF
THE ELDERLY'

*Material and cultural dimensions of Xhosa old age in the early nineteenth century*⁶

In the Xhosa⁷ world-view, the elderly were regarded as representatives of the ancestors, creators and guardians of cultural traditions. The Xhosa viewed ageing as a process which led to an increase in experience and wisdom and thus to a perfection of adulthood. With ageing, there was a shift away from physically-oriented values to wisdom- and mentally-oriented values, both in the old person's self-definition and in the construction of the social identity of elderly people at large. An overriding principle of interaction and social order was the rule of respect (*intlonipho*) towards seniors, especially towards those of one's own descent group. This ideological emphasis on age and seniority was bolstered by the Xhosa religious world-view. Only ritual elders as the genealogically senior males of the respective descent groups and senior men (and, sometimes, senior women) could approach the ancestors (*amathonga*); estrangement from one's elders thus meant estrangement from 'the most potent source of effectiveness in everyday life'.⁸ Reflecting the lack of a clear-cut distinction between the natural and supernatural domains in indigenous religious thought, the conceptual boundaries between living seniors and ancestors were blurred. As the Xhosa also subscribed to a patriarchal ideal of family life, their cultural representations of ageing and old age might suggest a 'golden era of ageing' in pre-industrial Xhosa

⁶ For a more detailed description of the pre-colonial ageing experience and for all references not cited, see Andreas Sagner, 'Ageing and old age in pre-industrial Africa: older persons among nineteenth-century Xhosa-speaking peoples', *Southern African Journal of Gerontology*, 8 (1999), 7–17. The statements on pre-colonial Xhosa social and economic organization are primarily based on William Beinart, *The Political Economy of Pondoland, 1860–1930* (Johannesburg, 1982); Jeffrey B. Peires, *The House of Phalo* (Johannesburg, 1981); and Andreas Sagner, *Ländliche Regionen Südafrikas im Umbruch: Thembuland, ca. 1865–1930* (Frankfurt/Main, 1991).

⁷ In this article, the ethnological terms 'Xhosa/Xhosa-speaking peoples' are used purely for convenience, as a shorthand for the whole South Nguni dialect group. This usage is justified in view of the high degree of homogeneity in respect to indigenous customs and belief systems among the Cape Nguni. Though the very existence of the 'Xhosa-speakers' as a conceptual collectivity was a product of the encroaching colonial world itself, such an understanding was already prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century. See Tiyo Soga, 25 Apr. 1865, as quoted in Donovan Williams, *The Journal and Selected Writings of The Reverend Tiyo Soga* (Cape Town, 1983), 39.

⁸ Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago, 1985), 83.

societies. However, cultural ideals and normative strictures on the one hand and social practice and experience on the other, are rarely identical, if ever. While respect for old persons was a fundamental cultural norm, social age *per se* was no guarantee that a person would be respected, could exert influence or would enjoy happiness. The experience of later life was shaped by gender, kinship and differences in social class as well as by health and biographical factors. Besides, old age was *not*, though constituting a formal life-course stage,⁹ a clear-cut period of life with unique demographic, economic or social characteristics and conditions, set apart from earlier life phases.

Though fathers as heads of homesteads (*umzi*, pl. *imizi*) did not – in the Western sense of the word – *own* the homesteads' resources (mainly cattle, land and agricultural produce), custom vested control of these assets in their hands. As the homesteads' senior males they were the principal 'trustees' of their respective *imizi*. But not all aged men headed wealthy homesteads in old age. The intimate relationship between ageing and accumulation of economic resources was always somewhat fragile. As wealth was primarily stored in living and biodegradable form (that is, mainly in the form of cattle and agricultural produce) cattle epidemics, drought and other natural calamities could easily and effectively wipe out any person's life-course 'savings'. And such catastrophes were certainly not rare. While wealth in cattle and agricultural produce depended to a large extent on one's lifelong labour input or rather on the labour input of all the members of a homestead, access to political power entailed access to economic resources. Chiefs redistributed part of their variously accumulated cattle resources, the most prized form of economic and social value, to their counsellors or great men. These were not necessarily older men, however. In fact, chiefs tended to try to appoint men of their own generation as their counsellors. Besides, political disfavour could herald the loss of one's worldly possession, mainly through witchcraft accusations. Though it was the local feeling of a puzzling and sudden turn in fortunes rather than wealth itself, that could motivate such charges, affluent aged persons with their lifelong accumulation histories were not sacrosanct in this regard.¹⁰ Contemporary sources testify to the existence of relatively poor or impoverished people, both young *and* old in early nineteenth-century Xhosa society.¹¹ However, it was not only failure in accumulating and 'saving' economic resources that could herald doom in old age. Men and women were equally concerned with having descendants, not only as a means of gaining access to labour and a multitude of services, or for ruling out the risk of being alone in old age, but also, equally importantly, for gaining immortality.

⁹ Though the term 'life-course' implies certain perceptions of life and time, I prefer it to the term 'life cycle' as the latter notion implies a too rigidly-prescribed movement from one clearly demarcated age-based status to the next: see A. Bryman *et al.* (eds.), *Rethinking the Life Cycle* (London, 1987).

¹⁰ WMMS (10), extract from Kay's journal, 24 Feb. 1826; James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Mauritius and South Africa* (London, 1844), 243; A. Steedman, *Wanderings and Adventures in the Interior of Southern Africa* (Cape Town, 1966 reprint), II, 290.

¹¹ E.g. WMMS (11), Boyce to WMMS, 21 Apr. 1831; Jacob Ludwig Döhne, *Das Kafferland und seine Bewohner* (Berlin, 1843), 29; Kayser, 3 July 1832, as quoted in Hans C. Hummel, *Rev. F. G. Kayser: Journal and Letters* (Cape Town, 1990), 86, and cf. 66.

In times of distress and severe food shortage, it was the young and the old and the infirm in general who were especially vulnerable and who were, occasionally, intentionally abandoned.¹² But it was mainly women who found themselves destitute in old age. Since women held, irrespective of age, a marginal status within the political economy and cosmology, they had far fewer opportunities to translate their culturally prescribed prominent old-age status into action than had men. Early sources suggest that elderly widows, particularly if frail or mentally confused and without sons, were occasionally disregarded or even spurned and driven away from their former husbands' homesteads.¹³

Even though banishments were rare, 'abandonment' in cases of terminal illness or extreme frailty in old age was indeed a widespread practice as *dying* persons, whether young or old, were frequently removed from their *imizi* to meet their end in the veld or forest; corpses, except those of persons of some political prominence (who were imagined as representational figures of the polity) were left unburied. The custom was, however, a late eighteenth-century innovation rather than primordial practice. Following Peires, it emerged in the aftermath of a terrible smallpox epidemic that struck Xhosaland around 1770 and intensified the dread of death.¹⁴ That the 'majority of Xhosa continued to drive out their dying relatives' was a reflection both of increasing scarcity of land (itself a consequence of the encroaching colonial world) and of Xhosa beliefs in mystical disturbance and danger connected with death.¹⁵ The latter factor was conceded even by missionaries.¹⁶

Yet, by locating dying persons outside of society, that is in the bush, among fierce wild animals (as opposed to domesticated ones in the homestead), the disruptive effect of death on the corporate body (*societas*) was symbolically expressed.¹⁷ Allegedly, the timing of the entry into the 'dying

¹² WMMS (11), Boyce to WMMS, 29 Nov. 1830; Backhouse, *A Narrative*, 269; Steedman, *Wanderings*, Vol. 2, 269.

¹³ E.g. Shrewsbury, 29 Aug. 1831, as quoted in Hildegard H. Fast, *The Journal and Selected Letters of Rev. William J. Shrewsbury, 1826–1835* (Johannesburg, 1994), 148; LMS (60), extract from Brownlee's Journal, 7 Jan. 1830; WMMS (10), extract from Kay's journal, 15 Dec. 1825; Stephen Kay, *Travels and Researches in Caffraria* (London, 1833), 156, 176; Steedman, *Wanderings*, I, 47, 49.

¹⁴ Jeff Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–7* (Johannesburg, 1989), 31. See also George Thompson, *Travels and Adventures in South Africa* (London, 1962 reprint), II, 357. It may be apposite to note that Bryant asserted with regard to the closely related Zulu that the non-interment of corpses (which arguably was common practice in early nineteenth-century Zululand) was an effect of the *mfecane* rather than of 'traditional' custom: A. T. Bryant, *The Zulu People as they were Before the White Man Came* (Pietermaritzburg, 1949), 715–6. For a contrary point of view, see Eileen J. Krige, *The Social System of the Zulu* (Pietermaritzburg, 1936), 160. See also A. F. Gardiner, *Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, 1966 reprint), 188; N. Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* (Cape Town, 1970 reprint), I, 52.

¹⁵ Peires, *The Dead*, 134.

¹⁶ E.g. WMMS (10), extract from Kay's Journal, 10 Oct. 1825.

¹⁷ Cf. W. D. Hammond-Tooke, 'The symbolic structure of Cape Nguni cosmology', in Michael G. Whisson and Martin West (eds.), *Religion and Social Change in Southern Africa* (London, 1975), 27–32.

role'¹⁸ – spatialized and symbolized by the practice of 'abandonment' – was partly conditioned by gender and social class. Early sources suggest that in case of severe frailness, women and commoners faced a higher risk of being labelled as 'dying' and thus of being 'abandoned'.¹⁹ Nevertheless, bodily events (as culturally constructed) were crucial in determining 'abandonment'. By controlling the time and manner of death, 'abandonment' was instrumental in repairing the social order, endangered by impending death. In the case of very frail older persons it was not only the threat of ritual pollution that caused possible 'neglect': according to the indigenous Xhosa world-view, such beings were neither fully human, nor did they fully partake of the ancestral world – they were in transition and thus liminal beings. As frailness was tantamount to the loss of the basic human quality of physical independence, it explicitly signified transformation from social adulthood to a state of post-humanity.²⁰ In indigenous thought, full 'this-worldly' personhood implied bodily capacities, not as an aspect of itself but as the precondition to enter and sustain social relationships. As extreme frailness was synonymous with this-worldly social death,²¹ and biological death was conceived of merely as a change of status,²² 'abandonment' was not looked upon as cruel. And as life was realized through drinking, eating, work, sexual activity and other practices,²³ one could even argue that personal well-being was evinced and objectified through a person's bodily ability to interact actively with the wider world. If so, increasing frailty in old age not only signified and embodied a person's disengaged and marginal character – as a being in transition to the post-human sphere – but was also taken as a pointer to experience of increasing discomfort and personal unhappiness.²⁴

Though it is difficult to decide whether – or to what extent – decrepit and dying elders resisted or resigned themselves to the practice, the evidence suggests that the cultural association of frailness with a generalized loss of personal well-being may have conditioned the experience of frail people. Typically, Berglund quotes an old Zulu recollecting that one of his father's brothers had asked his sons to be 'abandoned' as 'he had no teeth and not even the sun could warm him any more'.²⁵ And recent anthropological research has shown that embodied experiences such as suffering (or pain) cannot be reduced to bodily and/or psychological causes as inner exper-

¹⁸ Clive Seale, *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement* (Cambridge, 1998), 46–8.

¹⁹ Cf. WMMS (10), extract from Kay's Journal, 20 June 1826.

²⁰ Sagner, 'Ageing', 14–15.

²¹ Cf. Albert Kropf, *Das Volk der Xosa-Kaffern im östlichen Südafrika nach seiner Geschichte, Eigenart, Verfassung und Religion* (Berlin, 1889), 98.

²² W. D. Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society* (Cape Town, 1962), 68; Peires, *The Dead*, 128–9.

²³ Cf. Axel-Ivar Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (Cape Town, 1976), 84–5. Given the similarities between Zulu and Xhosa cosmological systems it seems reasonable to argue that Berglund's analysis also applies to the Xhosa-speaking Cape Nguni. For a recent ethnographic overview of pre-colonial 'Black South Africa' that demonstrates the essential unity of the Southern Bantu congeries of peoples in general and of North and South Cape Nguni in particular, see Hammond-Tooke, *The Roots of Black South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1993).

²⁴ Cf. William Shaw, *The Story of my Mission among the Natives Tribes of South Eastern Africa* (London, 1872), 172.

²⁵ Berglund, *Thought-Patterns*, 80.



Figure 1. 'The abandoned mother'. Engraving by George Baxter, from Robert Moffat's *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (1842).

iences are inseparable from cultural categories, social influences and public discourses.²⁶

Missionary images of Xhosa old age

Despite their insight into the religious reasons for 'abandonment', missionaries could not condone the practice which they perceived as being just short of murder. Obviously, the custom militated against the missionaries' basic assumptions about a moral society. Reflecting the missionaries' (and fellow Victorians')²⁷ close association between the concepts of old age and death, the evangelists viewed the rites of death as a marker for the misery of old age. Though the narrative of 'abandonment' and its pictorial representations served much wider ideological functions, George Baxter's engraving, published in Moffat's *Missionary Labours*,²⁸ clearly betrays this reductionist strategy.

What is important about this drawing is how its caption depicted the older

²⁶ Cf. Arthur Kleinman, Paul E. Brodwin, Byron J. Good and Mary-Jo Del Vecchio Good, 'Pain as human experience: an introduction', in Good, Brodwin, Good and Kleinman (eds.), *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* (Berkeley, 1992), 1–28.

²⁷ Cf. Thomas R. Cole, *The Journal of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge, 1997), 73–158.

²⁸ Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (London, 1842), 135.

mother as neglected and ‘abandoned’. The feminization of the misery of old age in the missionary narrative is hardly surprising as the figure of the ‘abandoned mother’ tallied closely with another contemporary missionary preoccupation – the exploitation and misery of women in African society.²⁹ For missionaries, so-called neglect and, finally, ‘abandonment’ in old age was indisputable, confirmation that women were valued merely as ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’.³⁰ Thus, as Kay noted, referring to a woman in her seventies:

Like the aged and worn out Kaffer female in general she is pitiably sinking under the intolerable pressure of *want* and *neglect*. A husband indeed she has; but no succour does she derive from him. *Polygamy* has rendered him deaf to the calls of her necessities; and he evidently looks upon her only as he would upon one of his *herd*, when through age and the approach of death it has become almost useless.³¹

In the missionary narrative, ‘abandonment’ of very old and extremely frail persons became neglect of ‘the aged sick’.³² And Shrewsbury, the first missionary to the Transkei, was adamant that physical and mental decay in old age automatically heralded the neglect of the very old, if not their outright ‘abandonment’. In 1831, he wrote in his journal:

A poor old decrepit woman came to us in the evening nearly dead with hunger to solicit food, the people of the kraal to which she belonged having driven her away because she was no longer able to plough the land or bring home wood and water. *The* very aged are *always* treated with barbarity and looked upon as an incumbrance to *all* their friends, who neglect or altogether abandon them.³³

By identifying specific social attributes of Xhosa old age, missionaries embarked on a particular discourse of differentiation. Age was not only singled out as a key differentiating factor in Xhosa life, which indeed it was; it was also constructed as the very basis of abstract status and social identity, which it was not – very old persons had become *the* ‘very aged’ and elder people *the* elderly. In Xhosa culture, age identities were rather a capacity which had to be revealed in interaction with others. In other words, in indigenous tradition a person’s age identity was primarily informed by what (s)he did (and how (s)he did it).³⁴

Almost totally absent in the mainstream narrative was the moral and legal obligation of a person to take care of her or his sick relations. This was all the more surprising as Stephan Kay, for example, realized that non-supportive behaviour could be prosecuted. In his journal he wrote about the bewilderment of some local chiefs when they found him:

²⁹ See, for example, Norman Etherington, ‘Gender issues in South-East African missions, 1835–85’, in Henry Bredekamp and Robert Ross (eds.), *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Johannesburg, 1995), 136–7. As Russett has noted, it was a commonplace of Victorian cultural theory that the treatment of women in any society was a prime indicator – perhaps *the* prime indicator – of that society’s place in the evolutionary hierarchy: *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, 1989), 131, and cf. 142–4.

³⁰ Shaw, *The Story*, 162.

³¹ WMMS (11), extract from Kay’s Journal, 8 Aug. 1830.

³² Samuel Young, *A Missionary Narrative of the Triumphs of Grace* (London, 1842), 14. See also WMMS (14), Ayliff to WMMS, 19 Mar. 1858.

³³ Shrewsbury, 29 Aug. 1831, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 148.

³⁴ Sagner, ‘Ageing’, 10.

in dying circumstances without either my wife 'to take care of me' or my 'children to look at me'. [In the course of his conversation with the chiefs he learnt] something of a custom of which I had no idea previously. In case of one of their wives being sick the husband is *bound* to see to her being taken care of. And altho' (sic) he is perhaps not allowed to see her (being accounted unclean), yet he can be convicted of wilfully absenting himself from the place of her affliction, he is subject to a fine of cattle, sometimes to a considerable amount.³⁵

But old age was not only associated with poverty and plight; it also represented the world of patriarchy and hierarchical power. Consequently, old people – particularly old men – were regarded by the missionaries as potent barriers to spiritual progress, symbols of the repressive and barbarous weight of the past.³⁶ The missionary discourse conceived of the aged – and their bodies – as sources of corruption and the young as their potential victims. The missionaries' negative imagery drew upon both Victorian notions of ageing and contemporary conceptions of the African 'other'. The missionaries' use of the metaphor of 'second childhood' for old age³⁷ did not only illustrate their modern understanding of personhood – as being tied to personal autonomy and thus to physical and mental functioning³⁸ – but also their Victorian conceptualization of ageing as decline.³⁹ Old age was primarily construed as a life phase that should be used to 'prepare for [one's] journey to another world',⁴⁰ not as a life stage that signified any spiritual growth.⁴¹ In accordance with the contemporary morality of self-control,⁴² missionaries emphasized the conceptual link between ageing on the one hand and dependence, disease, failure and non-performance on the other. Thus, Revd. Freeman of the London Missionary Society could write in 1849 that the two pioneer missionaries, John Brownlee and F. G. Kayser, then aged 58 and 50 respectively, were 'too far advanced in years and too confirmed in their habits to [be] remove[d] anywhere. They would be perfectly useless at any station in the Colony'.⁴³ Missionaries generally used the (ageing) physical body to define the old person as being 'other', that is to deny the aged full social personhood. Kay, for example, described how he felt 'shame' when he saw very old people – 'whom age has compelled to tatter over the

³⁵ WMMS (10), extract from Kay's Journal, 12 Dec. 1825; see also Ludwig Alberti, *Ludwig Alberti's Account of the Tribal Life and Customs of the Xhosa in 1807* (Cape Town, 1968 reprint), 93–4; Heinrich Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa, in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806* (Cape Town, 1928 reprint), I, 319, 328.

³⁶ WMMS (19), extract from Kay's Journal, 19 Nov. 1826.

³⁷ SAL, Cumming's Diary, 26 Sept. 1840; cf. Backhouse, *A Narrative*, 239.

³⁸ Cf. Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Growing Up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependency in the Life Course* (London, 1993).

³⁹ Cole, *Journey*, 73–158; cf. Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, 1978).

⁴⁰ WMMS (11), Young to WMMS, 8 Oct. 1830; see also WMMS (13), extract from Haddy's journal, 13 June 1830.

⁴¹ This segregation of time and physical ageing from spiritual growth was forcefully expressed in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the central texts of nineteenth-century Protestantism. For an analysis of Bunyan's seventeenth-century epic, see Cole, *Journey*, 40–7.

⁴² Cf. Cole, *Journey*, 90–1; Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago 1991), 55–70.

⁴³ LMS (19), Freeman to LMS, 12 Sept. 1849.

invisible gulphs' – joining in a dance.⁴⁴ And, of course, by denouncing the marriage of old men with young women as immoral, missionaries regularly embarked on a discourse which, at least indirectly, dissociated elderly people from sexuality.

Yet, in the case of Africans it was less the ageing body itself that was problematic, but rather its relationship with the socio-cultural environment and, finally, God. In the missionaries' view, every old (and non-converted) African embodied Africans' sinfulness to the utmost extent, as 'in all those years neither he nor she hath called upon the name of the Lord'.⁴⁵ Given the imagined sinfulness of old age and the old people's nearness to death (and thus, to hell), missionaries put much emphasis on convincing older people to pray to God and ask for forgiveness. It was 'for their sake especially [that] it is necessary to travel about from place to place with the glad tidings of salvation'.⁴⁶ The association between sin and age was deepened through the missionaries' conceptualization of African traditions as barbarous and spiritually as well as bodily corrupting.⁴⁷

Just as 'sickness of the [African] body' was viewed as 'a continuation of sin',⁴⁸ that is of 'barbarism', immoral behaviour was seen as speeding up the physical ageing process. Early Victorian medicine envisaged premature old age generally as a 'moral illness' that might be bettered by 'the faith and fervour of true Christianity'.⁴⁹ Hence, old age marked the point at which the 'otherness' of the Africans became particularly visible. That their ageing bodies looked more and more 'truly animal-like'⁵⁰ reflected both their 'savage' minds and their sinful life histories in the context of 'barbarous' local social worlds. The aged African body thus indicated and objectified not just natural decay but backwardness, ignorance and superstition. The ageing body was used conceptually to marginalize elderly people. As Kropf argued of the Xhosa, 'the older they get, the more paganism, cruelty, wickedness and other passions reveal themselves; one sees the barbarian. Christianity, by contrast, transfigures their features; it proves its power over the body as it bestows a dignified appearance'.⁵¹

It was not only the missionaries who devalued African old age by imagining the aged bodies of Africans as ugly and wicked. Cowper Rose who served for four years on the Cape frontier with the Royal Engineers, commented after having met the old mother of chief Kama, that she was 'blear-eye, wrinkled, with shrivelled lips, and [had] a skin that hung loose on

⁴⁴ WMMS (10), extract from Kay's Journal, 22 March 1826.

⁴⁵ Shrewsbury, 4–10 Oct. 1829, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 109.

⁴⁶ Shrewsbury, 13–17 Aug. 1832, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 155.

⁴⁷ Cf. Alexander Butchard, *The Anatomy of Power: European Constructions of the African Body* (London 1998), 74–91.

⁴⁸ R. Marley, *Medical Missionaries; or Medical Agency Co-operative with Christian Mission to the Heathen* (London, 1860), 45.

⁴⁹ J. Beale, *The Laws of Health in Relation to Mind and Body* (London, 1851), 269–71.

⁵⁰ Kropf, *Das Volk*, 81. See also Shrewsbury, 12 Dec. 1826, as quoted by Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 38–9.

⁵¹ Kropf, *Das Volk*, 84. In German, the quote reads: 'je älter sie werden, je mehr prägt sich das Heidentum, die Grausamkeit, Bosheit und andere Leidenschaften, auf ihm aus; der Barbar sieht aus den Augen; wohingegen das Christentum ihre Gesichtszüge verklärt und so auch äußerlich seine Macht über den Körper dadurch bezeugt, daß es ein würdiges Aussehen verleih.''

her long form'; her 'wretched decrepitude was in part owing to age, but more to suffering and to torture that she had undergone when young, on being accused by the rain-makers of witchcraft'.⁵² Playing on a gender-specific stereotype of old age, Rose depicted Kama's mother, the alleged former victim of witchcraft beliefs, as 'hag-like' at the same time.

Old age images of the missionaries in context

Obviously, the professional 'discovery' of old age as an inherently problematic life-course stage is a fairly modern phenomenon.⁵³ However, even before old age itself was brought under scientific inquiry and scrutiny in the twentieth century, its dilemmas had already been widely popularized in nineteenth-century industrializing societies, albeit as signifiers of larger social issues such as working-class exploitation, labour unrest, poverty and the erosion of traditional conservative values. As Quadagno has noted in her seminal study on ageing in nineteenth-century England, the issues of ageing and old age were primarily used as political and ideological weapons, hardly 'linked in any direct manner to the material conditions of the aged'.⁵⁴ Though the political employment of the imagery of old age flourished in late nineteenth-century England, mainly as a consequence of then increasing class conflict, it was not unknown to earlier generations. Given the fact that the aged poor were always among the main beneficiaries of English poor relief measures, discussions on the poor law almost automatically involved the issue of old age. Indeed, the 1834 parliamentary hearings on the poor law are quite telling in this regard.

Yet it is not only the political and ideological use of old age that is of interest here. In 1834, the gradual demise of natural filial affection between the generations was already viewed as a real danger, if not a fact of life, though confined to the social world of the 'labouring orders'. As the Poor Law Commissioners put it in their report, 'we believe that England is the only country in which it [that is, the natural felt readiness to support the parents] is neglected'.⁵⁵ Admittedly, this image of collapsing generational solidarity was publicly used to denounce poor-relief measures on behalf of the aged and infirm. Yet, it reflected a widespread contemporary concern about the effects of the industrial revolution on inter-generational relationships. The (alleged⁵⁶) practice of filial neglect exerted great attraction as a

⁵² Cowper Rose, *Four Years in Southern Africa* (London, 1829), 133. See also WMMS (10), Extract from Kay's Journal, 29 June 1826.

⁵³ Cf. Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: the Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (Charlottesville, 1996).

⁵⁴ Jill S. Quadagno, *Ageing in Early Industrial Society: Work, Family, and Social Policy in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York, 1982), 200–1.

⁵⁵ British Parliamentary Papers, *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners on the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Law, with Appendix (A) Part I*, Reports from Assistant Commissioners (44) Vol. xxvii (London, 1834), 25, cf. 258A [Reprint in: Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers, Poor Law Volume 8 (Shannon, 1970), 41, cf. 548].

⁵⁶ Though historians remain divided on the relative contribution of kin/family and parish relief (that is, of poor law assistance) to the maintenance of the aged, there is little doubt that industrialization weakened the network of kinship support within the 'labouring orders': see Susannah R. Ottaway, 'Providing for the elderly in eighteenth-century England', *Continuity and Change*, 13 (1998), 391–418. See also, especially, David

metaphor for the destructive power of emerging capitalism and, by extension, for 'degraded' social worlds in general. In this sense it tallied closely with the missionaries' hostility to urban life and their desire to rebuild rural solidarities.⁵⁷ Hence, I would argue that contemporary anxieties about filial neglect in England contributed to the popularization of the images of the abandoned mother and the destitute elderly in missionary writings on Africa. It was exactly the readers' familiarity with such representations that were helpful in evoking their compassion and served to strengthen, among others, the missionaries' plea for material support of the missionary enterprise and for humane concern with the African 'other'.

While the widespread use of the image of the 'abandoned' mother in missionary writings may be read, at least, in part, as an indirect attempt to influence the values of expected audiences, to safeguard older parents/dependents in early nineteenth-century England from perceived neglect and destitution, the main purpose lay elsewhere. It is true that the germ of such forlorn figures can be found in the mythographic reports of late Renaissance travellers.⁵⁸ Yet, as the Comaroffs have suggested, such images were part and parcel of nineteenth-century debates about the nature of 'the' African and about the colonial endeavour in which they acquired markedly different political and ideological meanings.⁵⁹ In this reading, the imagery and narratives of 'abandonment' and of the misery of old age were less about the material circumstances and subjective experiences of older people, than about the missionary, and by extension the impending colonial enterprise itself. While ostensibly depicted in a naturalist and romantic way, the figure of the 'abandoned' mother and of the neglected elderly was imbued at the same time with moral, divine and political significance. It enacted a moral drama with important lessons as the imagery was taken as a potent symbol of the 'inhumanity of heathen customs' and of the cruelty and superstition of the African 'other'.⁶⁰ It provided a convenient vehicle with which Africans could be contrasted with civilized mankind. Integral to the persuasive power of the image was that it played upon (and confirmed) the Victorian association of old age with dependence, vulnerability and deservingness. As old age implied the naturally given right of being supported by one's offspring, 'abandonment' was a brilliant symbol for the missionaries that the African way of life threatened the imagined natural order. In other words, it signified the animality of the African. It proved, to use Moffat's phrase, that

Thomson, 'The welfare of the elderly in the past: a family or community responsibility?', in M. Pelling and R. M. Smith, (eds.), *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1991), 194–221; and Pat Thane, 'Old people and their families in the English past', in M. Daunton (ed.), *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past* (New York, 1996), 113–38.

⁵⁷ Cf. Terence Ranger, 'The local and the global in Southern African religious history', in Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley, 1993), 88–92; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation*, 70–5.

⁵⁸ E.g. W. E. Hirschberg, *Monumenta Ethnographia. Early Ethnographical Pictorial Documents, Vol. 1: Black Africa* (Graz, 1967), 16–17; cf. Butchart, *Anatomy*, 34–52.

⁵⁹ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation*, ch. 2 and 3.

⁶⁰ WMMS (10), extract from Kay's Journal, 28 Feb. 1826; WMMS (11), Extract from Kay's journal, 8 Aug. 1830.

African children, and thus Africans, ‘were as bad as lions’, if not worse.⁶¹ By placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the ‘unnatural’ children, Moffat’s elaborate representation of the practice promoted a contemporary individualistic moral and material *Weltanschauung*:

I have often reasoned with the natives on this cruel practice; in reply to which, they would only laugh... It appears an awful exhibition of human depravity, when children compel their parents to perish for want, or to be devoured by beasts of prey in a desert, from no other motive than sheer laziness, or get quit of those on whose breast they hung in helpless infancy, whose lips first directed their vocal powers, whose hand led them through many a weary waste, and often suffered the most pinching want, that the babies whom nature taught them to love might be supplied. I have more than once handed food to a hungry mother, who appeared to have fasted for a month, when she would just taste it, and give it to her child, when, perhaps, that very child, instead of returning grateful service to the infancy of old age, leaves that mother to perish from hunger.⁶²

It was the image’s ambivalence that lent it its power and utility as it played upon the contemporary reinvention of the African ‘as a creature with two faces’.⁶³ The figure was not only a potent symbol of the savage debauchery and ‘natural’ brutality of Africans not constrained by civilization. Building on nineteenth-century readings of Africa as a female body, the scene of the ‘abandoned mother’ simultaneously constructed Africa as a suffering innocent. Hence, the imagery may also be read as a symbol for the missionaries’ claim that there existed a universal human community. Evidently, the imagery entailed the assumption that the missionary had both the right and the moral responsibility to act. By portraying the mother as suffering from hunger, cold and loneliness, the missionaries contended that there could be no justification whatever for what the Africans were doing. The vulnerable African elderly depicted in such images boosted an ideology of missionary zeal: ‘what powerful appeals are these distressing facts to our humanity & religion? Who can read them without feeling his Missionary zeal increased?’⁶⁴ And in the narrative constructions of ‘saved’ elderly people, the missionary’s life appeared as the fulfilment of destiny, setting an example for future generations, for ‘Oh, if the Christian Church did know the full extent of the benefits it confers on the Heathen world, it would indeed “Thank God and take Courage”’.⁶⁵

As the missionaries were, to use Laqueur’s phrase, ‘declaring epistemological sovereignty over the bodies and minds of others’,⁶⁶ they maintained they knew more about both the subjective suffering of the neglected older persons and about the actions and motivations of the

⁶¹ Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, 137.

⁶² Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, 136. Given the common social and cultural roots and ideological motivations of the Nonconformist missionaries in Southern Africa, Moffat’s position may be taken as indicative of the world-view of the Nonconformists at large, regardless of their field of activity. ⁶³ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation*, 109.

⁶⁴ LMS (29), Miles to LMS, 14 Dec. 1826; cf. Cape Archives Depot (hereafter, CA), Davis’ journal, 12 Mar. 1834.

⁶⁵ WMMS (14), John Ayliff, 19 Mar, 1858; cf. LMS (29), Miles to LMS, 14 Dec. 1826; Ayliff, 16 Dec. 1826, as quoted in Peter Hinchliff (ed.), *The Journal of John Ayliff, 1821–1830* (Cape Town, 1971), 70; Young, *Triumphs*, 14–15.

⁶⁶ Thomas W. Laqueur, ‘Bodies, details, and the humanitarian narrative’, in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989), 188.

'unnatural' children than the Africans themselves. In this respect, the missionaries' purported identification with the 'poor abandoned mother' tells us more about the significance of empathy and compassion as 'modern' signs of civility⁶⁷ than about the experience of the imagined 'sufferers'. In other words, to *image* 'abandonment' as bodily and psychological 'suffering' was part of a certain process; and one might even argue that as missionary salvation of the 'abandoned' elderly alleviated the latter's 'suffering', it brought into existence the very kind of suffering it eliminated. The aged African body became, in Foucauldian terms, both object *and* effect of the missionary 'gaze'.⁶⁸ And, given their unambiguous diagnosis of the misery of old age, the pain, suffering, or (premature) death of the aged could, in future, be mitigated, if not avoided – if a specific course of action was taken. By viewing 'abandonment' as a consequence of filial laziness, Moffat's implicit advice was simple – the enforcement of work and the discharge of filial duty.⁶⁹ By highlighting the moral and social dangers of idleness – 'the general vice of the natives', in the words of LMS missionary Kayser⁷⁰ – the imagery of old age helped to affirm the individualistic bourgeois ideology of the age as the only pathway to moral salvation. Quite clearly, 'abandonment' was a powerful metaphor for the 'inherent' sinfulness of idleness.

By using images of worn-out bodies, the missionaries made use, inadvertently or otherwise, of the powerful communicative potential of the human body⁷¹ and its capacity for eliciting sympathetic identification.⁷² The images of old age of early missionaries may be read as a continuation of an aesthetic enterprise, beginning in the eighteenth century, that deliberately used the suffering bodies of ordinary people as the locus of discourse to disseminate 'humanitarian' commiseration and to justify the call for models of specific and virtuous social action.⁷³ Although the strategy of mobilizing and legitimizing values through the spectacle of bodies was not new, the missionaries' decision to employ the body of the aged *mother* was quite ingenious as it helped to draw the readers' attention to the imagery's semiotic aspect. Arguably, there was an instinctive compassionate identification of readers with the sketched body by virtue of their enculturation to a highly idealized image of motherhood.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Cf. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford, 1978).

⁶⁸ Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London, 1976); see also Butchard, *Anatomy*, esp. 74–91.

⁶⁹ Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, 136.

⁷⁰ Kayser, 7 Dec. 1832, as quoted in Hummel, *Kayser*, 88.

⁷¹ The central role of the suffering body in exposing alleged evil was particularly evident in the missionaries' narratives on witchcraft in which they tried hard to convey the sufferings of others through detailing their bodily pain; see, for example, the detailed descriptions of mutilated bodies in LMS (29), Miles to LMS, 14 Dec. 1826 and 20 Dec. 1827; cf. Cape Archives (CA), Davies' journal, 12 Mar. 1834.

⁷² On the communicative potential of the body see, for example, Lindsay French, 'The political economy of injury and compassion: amputees on the Thai-Cambodia border', in Thomas J. Csordas (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge, 1994), 69–99.

⁷³ cf. Laqueur, *Bodies*.

⁷⁴ Russett, *Sexual Science*, 122.

THE DUALISM OF AGEING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
SOUTH AFRICA*Hope and disappointment: 'Christian ageing' under scrutiny*

Although missionaries in the early and mid nineteenth century did not deny that ageing and death were natural, these were interpreted as inevitable after-effects of primordial sin. Physical decay, the infirmities of old age and death had to be accepted as part of the human life-course and could not be ameliorated by living a moral life. The timing of physical death was uncertain and its cause providential. This shattered the hopes of contemporary Xhosa audiences, who had concluded that if death was a consequence of (individual) sin, obedience to God's laws could prevent early death.⁷⁵ This initial misunderstanding was due not only to the listeners' conflation of the concept of original sin with individual moral failure, as the missionaries presumed. In the Xhosa world-view, a person's lifespan and physical well-being were always a reflection of his/her moral and social contexts. Hence, in an ideal world (that is, a world without witchcraft, sorcery or ritual pollution), sickness and premature death would indeed be drastically diminished, if not eliminated.⁷⁶ As the Xhosa gradually realized that conversion to Christianity offered no hope of solving these fundamental existential problems of ontological security, the Christian message lost much of its initial attractiveness, especially among younger audiences. For their part, from the start, old people had entertained far less hope that Christianity could solve their own personal predicament, their experience of bodily decline and their destiny of eventual death. Xhosa-speakers, like their Zulu brethren, acknowledged that 'what is natural and alive has an inherent quality of breaking down of its own accord'.⁷⁷

Early nineteenth-century Xhosa strove after 'this-worldly' concerns and longevity rather than for the Christian sense of spiritual eternity. As a young Xhosa woman put it in 1829, 'I am young, and in health. I have a husband and we possess corn, cattle, and milk. Why should I not be happy? What do I need more?'⁷⁸ Reflecting this outlook, Xhosa cosmology offered no clear ideology of after-life.⁷⁹ Elderly people could therefore be quite worried, if

⁷⁵ Shrewsbury, 20 Feb. 1828, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 70.

⁷⁶ This corresponded with indigenous myths about the coming of death that stressed the arbitrariness and unpredictability of its emergence: Hodgson, *The God of the Xhosa* (Cape Town, 1982), 33–6). There was no sense of a spiritual or moral cause for ageing in the Xhosa world-view.

⁷⁷ Harriet Ngubane, *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine* (London, 1977), 23; Shrewsbury, 22 Oct. 1827, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 64; WMMS (11), extract from Haddy's Journal, 23 Aug. 1830; Lichtenstein, *Travels*, I, 315; J. C. Warner, 'Mr. Warner's notes', in J. Maclean (ed.), *A Compendium of Kafir Laws and Customs* (London, 1968 reprint), 91. According to the Zulu world-view the extremely aged 'went home': Bryant, *Zulu People*, 704, 711.

⁷⁸ E.g. Shaw, 6 May 1829, as quoted in Hammond-Tooke, *The Journal of William Shaw* (Cape Town, 1972), 158; CA, Ayliff's journal, 17 Apr. 1833.

⁷⁹ Hammond-Tooke, 'World-view 1 and 2', in Hammond-Tooke (ed.), *The Bantu-speaking Peoples of Southern Africa* (London, 1974), 318; Jim Kiernan, 'African traditional religions in South Africa', in De Gruchy and Prozesky (eds.), *Living Faiths in South Africa*, 25.

not apprehensive, about what happened to them after death. Despite the strong belief in ancestors, death did signify 'this-worldly' loss and deprivation. Death was cruel and feared as there was hardly any hope of returning to the human mode of existence: though the Xhosa did know the concept of possible rebirth,⁸⁰ the ontological departure (of part) of the person from humankind was, as a rule, viewed as irreversible.⁸¹ In pre-Christian Xhosa thought, it was hardly conceivable that people dying left the world in a happy and contented state of mind. As Ndlambe, then in his late eighties and one of the most senior early nineteenth-century Xhosa chiefs, put it, 'is it possible that any man can leave this fine grass and these cattle rejoicing?'⁸² Consequently, it was the 'doctrine of resurrection' in particular and the idea of heaven that drew the interest and attention of audiences, and especially of listeners who were somewhat advanced in years.⁸³ As for the aged, the one-sided 'other-worldly' orientation of the Christian message was less vexing than for younger audiences who were not so concerned about their mortality.⁸⁴ Christianity constructed death as meaningful, 'legitimated' it and transformed it into something comprehensible and reassuring, if not natural. Evidence suggests that quite early on many Xhosa were impressed by the ability of Christians to perceive their deaths as a part of a much larger God-given and divinely-structured universe.⁸⁵

However, the existential anxieties connected with death were mediated by gender and by one's 'life career'.⁸⁶ Elderly men with male descendants were much less frightened by the prospect of death, as they had a perception of generational continuity. This feeling of generational continuity was precisely what many elderly women and childless elderly men lacked;⁸⁷ this heightened their affliction caused by bodily decay and their impending death. According to the local cultural model, death could be 'timely' or 'untimely'.⁸⁸ Timeliness of death was a biological *and* a social question; it presupposed both a ripe age and a number of children and grandchildren who survived the deceased. Not to be potentially an ancestor of any descendants implied a

⁸⁰ Peires, *The Dead*, 128–34, 172.

⁸¹ Cf. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford, 1997), 145–61.

⁸² As quoted by Shrewsbury, 16 Dec. 1826, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 43–44. But see Berglund, *Thought-Patterns*, 79.

⁸³ J. T. Van der Kemp, *Transactions of the Missionary Society*, I (London, 1795), 410–11, 416, 426–9; WMMS (11), Extract from Kay's journal, 21 June 1830; LMS (60), extract from Kayser's journal, 19 July 1828; SAL, Cumming's diary, 9 Jan. 1841; Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 106, 155, 202; Shaw, 19 Feb. 1828, as quoted in Hammond-Tooke, *William Shaw*, 101; Hummel, *Kayser*, 58; WMMS (10), extract from Kay's journal, 10 Apr. 1826. Cf. Fast, 'In at one ear', 166–7.

⁸⁴ Shaw, 6 May 1829, as quoted in Hammond-Tooke, *William Shaw*, 158.

⁸⁵ WMMS (11), Young to WMMS, 8 Oct. 1830. See also: WMMS (10), Extract from Kay's Journal, 7 July 1826.

⁸⁶ Cf. Barbara G. Myerhoff and Andrei Simić (eds.), *Life's Career – Aging: Cultural Variations on Growing Old* (Newbury Park, 1978).

⁸⁷ In the Xhosa world-view, ancestral status was not automatically granted to everybody: see Hammond-Tooke, 'Symbolic structure', 17–18; Pauw, *Christianity*, 130–136. Fundamentally, the reinstatement of a dead person as an effective ancestor depended on having living descendants of the right categories. Male descendants were particularly important in this regard as it was the male heir who ultimately conferred ancestorhood on the parent: Kiernan, 'Traditional Religions', 21.

⁸⁸ Berglund, *Thought-Patterns*, 79–80.

complete break-off with life – that is, the irreversible extinction of one's person, both in its physical *and* spiritual dimensions. Particularly for individuals whose children had died, the Christian promise that they would be reunited with their offspring in the after-life was therefore quite attractive. It helped them to reconcile themselves to death and decay:

An old woman... when exhorted to seek God, she but little regarded it. Presently she began a relation of her calamities: all her children were dead, and she was left alone upon the earth. I told her that the souls of her children yet lived in another world, and that probably she would meet them there. This awakened her attention and moved her feelings, so that she listened while I spoke of an eternal world and of the judgement to come.⁸⁹

Nevertheless, the attraction of the concept of eternal life lost much of its power as listeners had to realize that it did not entail the continuation of their physical existence but merely spiritual rebirth.⁹⁰ The Christian ideology that the physical existence was peripheral to the real essence of existence – the soul – and the annihilation of the body was the *sine qua non* for resurrection and eternal life, was not very attractive for Xhosa audiences. In conformity with their vague and unsystematic indigenous notions of the underworld, they hoped that conversion to Christianity would herald an after-life in a world of mountains, fields, rich hunting grounds and lush green pastures, populated by cattle and one's ancestors.⁹¹ Besides, the missionary obsession with death and dying that viewed ageing as an uncertain journey to eternal life, alienated (older) Xhosa who were interested in life in the present within their community.⁹²

Even more important for the ambivalent reaction to the new set of concepts was the missionary stress on sin as a moral relationship with God.⁹³ As a Xhosa put it in 1859, 'and what great sin have we committed that we should be sent to such a place as that [hell]?'⁹⁴ The threat of eternal social disembodiment in indigenous thought through having no descendants of the right category, was replaced by the threat of eternal torture 'in the fiery lake of burning sulphur'.⁹⁵ This prospect of eternal suffering contrasted sharply with pre-Christian thought, which did not know any concept of retribution for past wrongs in the after-life.⁹⁶ In addition, as the missionaries' conceptualization of sin encompassed both practice and thought, both sensual pleasure and 'desires of [the] hearts',⁹⁷ there was no assurance that one would be reborn, embodied anew in 'another and better country'.⁹⁸ In fact,

⁸⁹ Shrewsbury, 22 Oct. 1827, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 64; see also Shrewsbury, 12 Dec. 1827, as quoted in Fast, *ibid.* 68.

⁹⁰ WMMS (11), extract from Haddy's journal, 13 June 1830; Shaw, 28 May 1827, as quoted in Hammond-Tooke, *William Shaw*, 80. In traditional Nguni thought the spiritual components of a human person were as visible and real as the physical body. In fact, there was no clear-cut division between the two spheres: see Shaw, 19 Feb. 1828, as quoted in Hammon-Tooke, *William Shaw*, 100–1; cf. Berglund, *Thought-Patterns*, 81–8.

⁹¹ Cf. Shaw, 2 June 1827, as quoted in Hammond) Tooke, *William Shaw*, 80.

⁹² Cf. Steedman, *Wanderings*, II, 298–300.

⁹³ Fast, 'In at one ear', 156–162; Williams, *The Journal*, 28–29.

⁹⁴ As quoted by Rev. Longden, in WMMS (14), letter by Longden, 25 July 1859.

⁹⁵ Revelation, 20: 10; see LMS (29), letter from Kayser to LMS, 15 May 1828.

⁹⁶ Fast, 'In at one ear', 163; cf. Mbiti, *African Religions*, 156–7.

⁹⁷ Romans, 1: 24. ⁹⁸ Soga, 10 Dec. 1861, as quoted in Williams, *The Journal*, 90.

early evidence indicates that conversion heightened rather than lessened anxiety about one's after-life. Although there is little doubt that many, if not most, converts did not completely abandon the old Xhosa understanding of evil as the result of a disturbed social relationship,⁹⁹ early missionary reports are replete with accounts of converts experiencing despair on account of their inwardly-felt sinfulness and desperately praying for their salvation.¹⁰⁰ The following case exemplifies this:

Gaxa [a Christian man] earnestly requested my interpreter this morning to ask me what he must do as the Lord had placed his sins in battle array against him while engaged in prayer; and he fears that the fight will turn him mad as he can neither eat nor sleep. He appeared to obtain much relief and comfort when I told him that I believed this to be only a temptation from the enemy of his Soul; and that Satan makes his business with all who desert his service and turn to God. He then very emphatically exclaimed – 'but Oh! my wicked heart, my wicked heart: it is so heavy that it almost weighs me down'.¹⁰¹

For some, anxiety about after-life reached the point of obsession, fuelling the early nineteenth-century identification of converts with lunatics.¹⁰² Despite the continued belief of Xhosa converts in some old mysterious powers, their world was now *dominated* by a personal, omnipresent, all-powerful and arbitrary and unpredictable divine force. The will of God had to be accepted, even if it proved to be incomprehensible. For Christians, it was hence much more difficult to tackle sickness, misfortune, and death by common practice and knowledge and so to make them 'meaningful and enduring'.¹⁰³ In this sense, Christianity tended to disrupt the proselytes' feeling of ontological security.¹⁰⁴ As Xhosa converts doubted the effectiveness of Christianity to solve every-day problems such as sickness and misfortune, some 'slid back' to the old ways.¹⁰⁵

Elderly people were especially sceptical about their actual salvation. To the reproach of a missionary that she should 'earnestly [pray] to God, lest she [should] perish in her sins' one 'very old woman' replied 'I am too old to pray'.¹⁰⁶ Shrewsbury, the first missionary to the Transkei, partly concurred

⁹⁹ WMMS (14), Letter to the General Secretaries, 8 Jan. 1859.

¹⁰⁰ CA, Ayliff's journal, 16 Oct. 1830 and 14 July 1831; LMS (30), Kayser to LMS, 9 Dec. 1931; WMMS (10), extract from Kay's journal, 1 Sept. 1826 and 8 Aug. 1830; WMMS (11), extract from Kay's Journal, 8 Aug. 1830.

¹⁰¹ WMMS (10), extract from Kay's journal, 14 Aug. 1826.

¹⁰² CA, Ayliff's journal, 16 Apr. 1833; Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 105; cf. 70, 86.

¹⁰³ Monica Wilson, *Religion and the Transformation of Society* (Cambridge, 1971), 54. This problem was vividly expressed in Ntsikana's famous hymn, which is still sung today. See especially line 10: Janet Hodgson, *Ntsikana's 'Great Hymn': A Xhosa Expression of Christianity in the Early Nineteenth-Century Eastern Cape* (Cape Town, 1980), 43–50.

¹⁰⁴ For a similar analysis of the effects of conversion, see: Birgit Meyer, 'Modernity and enchantment: the image of the devil in popular African Christianity', in Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (New York, 1996), 217–9.

¹⁰⁵ WMMS, Ayliff to Secretaries, 1 July 1834; see also CA, Ayliff's journal, 2 Mar. 1834 and 4 July 1834. This feeling of ontological insecurity informed not only 'backsliding into heathendom' but also the pronounced emotionalism of converts as an attempt to create trust in the new order.

¹⁰⁶ WMMS (10), extract from Kay's Journal, 30 Mar. 1826.

when he claimed, 'aged persons [in general] ... are so circumstanced that they cannot become incorporated with the church on earth'.¹⁰⁷ As formally at least, conversion implied the renunciation of core traditional customs and rites such as initiation, *lobola* and polygamy,¹⁰⁸ the price for Christian immortality seemed rather high, to elderly men in particular. The Christian ban on polygamy and *lobola* not only ran counter to indigenous male life-course strategies for obtaining security and respect in old age, which depended to a large extent on 'investments' in wives, but also to their very 'immortality' in the 'traditional' sense.¹⁰⁹ It is thus hardly surprising that older men would see 'the door [to mission Christianity as] shut'.¹¹⁰ Mission Christianity's inherent threat to patriarchal core institutions and, thus, to manhood, was conveyed through its association with children and elderly women: 'Some of the chiefs will tell us that [Christian religion] is well enough for the old women, and children; but too childish a thing for them [the men] to think about'.¹¹¹ The pronounced emotionalism of early converts reinforced this view since, as Kay noted, 'tears are regarded as the proof of an imbecile and unmanly spirit'.¹¹² And, after all, women and children were those who were provided with leverage by Christianity over and against 'traditional' patriarchal authority.

Although missionaries considered many (if not most minor) illnesses to be treatable – through Western medicine – decrepitude in old-age was not.¹¹³ This led to disappointment among Xhosa listeners, whose notions of ageing did not rule out the possibility of 'rectifying' such bodily failures.¹¹⁴ It is true that the Xhosa stressed the physical causes of old age: ageing was envisaged as a process whereby the body's heat was diminished, the body cooled down and dried up.¹¹⁵ Yet, Xhosa viewed physical decay in old age and death paradoxically: the naturalness of death did not preclude the existence of external causes such as witchcraft or pollution.¹¹⁶ Despite the awareness of age-related physical change,¹¹⁷ decay of vitality in old age was not automatically defined and accepted as natural. In the Xhosa world-view, illness and bodily symptoms derived their meaning principally from their perceived causes; that is, their meaning was flexible and externally determined. In short, whether physical decay and illness in old age was considered as natural, or as an indication of disruptive events in society, was itself the result

¹⁰⁷ Shrewsbury, 13–17 Aug. 1832, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 155.

¹⁰⁸ Wallace G. Mills, 'Missionaries, Xhosa clergy and the suppression of traditional customs', in Bredekamp and Ross (eds.), *Missions and Christianity*, 153–171.

¹⁰⁹ Sagner, 'Ageing', 13–14.

¹¹⁰ Shaw, 28 Feb. 1828, as quoted in Hammond-Tooke, *William Shaw*, 104; cf. LMS (20), Miles to WMMS, 21 Sept. 1827.

¹¹¹ WMMS (10), Kay to WMMS, Mar. 1827 (no date; emphasis as given).

¹¹² Kay, *Travels*, 192. ¹¹³ WMMS (10), extract from Kay's journal, 29 June 1826.

¹¹⁴ WMMS (13), extract from Haddy's journal, 13 June 1830.

¹¹⁵ Sagner, 'Ageing', 11; cf. Hodgson, *God*, 50 and Berglund, *Thought-Patterns*, 80.

¹¹⁶ Shrewsbury, 7 and 16 Dec. 1826, 30 June 1831, as quoted by Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 34, 43, 144; WMMS (11), extract from Haddy's journal, 23 Aug. 1830; Steedman, *Wanderings*, I, 37, and II, 298–300. See also Ngubane, *Body*, 29. Following Mbiti, *African Religions*, 151, one could even argue that this paradox was a constant in 'traditional' African thinking.

¹¹⁷ William C. Holden, *The Past and Future of the Kaffir Races* (Cape Town, 1963 reprint), 124, 204; Kay, *Travels*, 73; Kropf, *Das Volk*, 82, 155.

of a reflexive inquiry within the respective kinship group and community and depended, probably primarily, on the rank of the afflicted and the extent of bodily loss.¹¹⁸ In other words, Xhosa concepts of ageing were definitely non-linear, i.e. they went beyond biological and bodily states and processes. The essence of ageing resided, primarily in its relation to the *umzi*, community and to the supernatural sphere of the ancestor spirits.

Some sequences of 'civilized' ageing

Though some persons who sought refuge on mission stations were in fact physically disabled or 'just too old',¹¹⁹ Shrewsbury's claim, made in 1831, that *many* elder persons came to mission stations 'to die and be buried' as they were afraid of being 'abandoned by their relatives to the wolves',¹²⁰ is doubtful. As Williams points out, early and mid nineteenth-century mission stations in today's Eastern Cape 'were in the main comprised of anything but Kaffirs, if by this term is meant the pure amaXhosa'.¹²¹ Shrewsbury's dictum was part of the missionaries' grand narrative by which they sought to legitimize their enterprise. More importantly, the decision to live at a mission station did not necessarily entail embracing the message of Christianity. In fact, this was, at first, rare even if the disastrous Eighth Frontier War in 1850–3 and the even more calamitous Cattle Killing of 1856–7 reduced the resistance to Christianity significantly. Christian proselytization remained an uphill battle, even among the worst-hit western Xhosa. Yet by 1884 there were 52 mission stations in the Transkei and about 50 in the Ciskei, in addition to an unknown number of outstations and preaching and teaching places. The Wesleyan Methodists alone counted an estimated 63,400 African members in the Eastern Cape in 1891.¹²²

By the mid-nineteenth century, most non-Christians appear to have abandoned the practices of 'abandonment' and non-interment of corpses.¹²³ By ignoring eighteenth-century burial customs, missionaries took *sole* credit for these changes and fabricated them as early testimonies of their success and as legitimization of their moral authority.¹²⁴ Yet it is difficult to assess to what extent Christianity transformed pre-colonial concepts of ageing and death before 1860. Although Christianity created and sustained alternative public discourses about the meaning and significance of later life, the new framework was confined to mission stations at first. As proselytes embraced the new discourse on ageing and death, their attitude to illness and death

¹¹⁸ WMMS (10), extract from Kay's Journal, 22 Mar. 1826 and 9 Oct. 1826.

¹¹⁹ Peires, *Phalo*, 76; cf. Backhouse, *A Narrative*, 258; Williams, *Eastern Frontier*, 277.

¹²⁰ WMMS (11), extract from Shrewsbury's journal: 3/12 Sept. 1831 and 31 Dec. 1831.

¹²¹ Williams, *Eastern Frontier*, 270; cf. 246–69.

¹²² Les Switzer, *Power and Resistance in an African Society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the Making of South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 1993), 123, 124, cf. 134.

¹²³ E.g. WMMS (10), extract from Kay's journal, 7 July 1826, and extract from Shaw's journal, 12 Mar. 1825; SAL, J. F. Cumming's diary, 3 May 1841; Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 154, 160; Shaw, *The Story*, 172. Of course, the silence in mid nineteenth-century missionary reports with regard to these practices may also be read as a consequence of changed material circumstances in the wake of the closing of the frontier as the latter gave rise to new kinds of representations. See, particularly, David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, 1996).

¹²⁴ Young, *Triumphs*, 14–5.

began to change.¹²⁵ Although converted Xhosa continued to experience death as a tragic and fateful moment, among Christians death tended more and more to be perceived as something normal – if not something to be ‘celebrated’ – that was not to be feared as polluting or as a consequence of disturbed social relationships. As one converted woman put it in 1832, ‘to die is nothing, but the soul if that soul should be lost, that is great’.¹²⁶ Unsurprisingly, local knowledge held that witches or sorcerers were powerless on mission stations.¹²⁷

On the other hand, it can be argued that by reconstructing the process of bodily ageing, Christianity increased the anxiety associated with it. Under conditions of tradition, loss of bodily functions in deep old-age was institutionally ‘solved’ or ‘contained’, as this could be interpreted as a signifier of increasing other-worldliness. Although loss of bodily vitality was experienced as personally disturbing, it was not inherently socially stigmatizing. With Christianity, however, bodily decay had hardly any inherent transcendental meaning. It was at most a call to the sufferer to repent and to subordinate himself to God’s will. Ultimately, it was simply a sign of sheer decay and of impending death – though it *could* herald eternal glory. Inasmuch as physical ageing became devoid of religious meaning, age-related bodily changes had the potential to become the dominant signifiers of old age among Xhosa converts.

As ‘young Men’ were considered ‘not so prejudiced, and more open to conviction than the old Men’,¹²⁸ and as education was regarded as a prerequisite for conversion, missionaries soon felt that youth was the most favourable phase from which to be converted to Christianity.¹²⁹ Subscribing to the segregation of physical ageing from spiritual growth, nineteenth-century missionaries accorded every man and every woman, irrespective of age and generational status, the right to search for God. Conversion demanded neither experience nor wisdom, but active transformation of the heart, as it had to be ‘awakened’ to the word of God.¹³⁰ Indeed, traditional wisdom led to ‘frivolous questions concerning God’¹³¹ rather than to revelation. Certainly, mission Christianity prized the value of inter-generational respect and esteem for old age.¹³² But the missionary concept of inter-generational respect followed the mores of European society: that is, the entitlement to respect depended on ‘civilized’ forms of behaviour, or Western notions of respectability.¹³³ Indigenous forms of respect (*intlonipho*) as embodied in rules of avoidance and in the language of respect, for example, were depicted as debarring women ‘from performing all those

¹²⁵ LMS (19), Brownlee to LMS, 31 Dec. 1845; WMMS (14), Serigg to WMMS, 18 Mar. 1858; Soga, 1 May 1859 and 9 Aug. 1859, as quoted in Williams, *The Journal*, 83.

¹²⁶ CA, Ayliff’s journal, 25 Mar. 1832; see also CA, Davis’ journal, 2 July 1833.

¹²⁷ Shrewsbury, 16 Dec. 1826, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 43.

¹²⁸ LMS (29), Miles to WMMS, 21 Sept. 1827.

¹²⁹ Cf. Williams, *The Journal*, 18.

¹³⁰ Shrewsbury, 31 Mar. 1828, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 73.

¹³¹ WMMS (10), Extract from Shrewsbury’s journal, 7 Dec. 1826.

¹³² Shrewsbury, 10 June 1830, as quoted in Fast, *Shrewsbury*, 124; see also MCC (23 (11)), *various notes by B. J. Shaw, lesson no. 7; no date*.

¹³³ For a good description of the centrality of the concept of respectability in the nineteenth-century Cape, see Robert Ross, ‘Missions, respectability and civil rights: the Cape Colony, 1828–1854’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25 (1999), 333–45.

kindly offices towards the elders of her husband's family which nature dictates and Christianity commands'.¹³⁴ Indeed, parental prerogatives were severely circumscribed by filial rights to seek celestial salvation and by every person's entitlement to moral autonomy.

As might have been expected, missionaries laid great stress on 'the duties of parents to their children'.¹³⁵ Patriarchal authority thus soon faced opposition. The Scottish missionary, Cummings, realized that should 'liberty of conscience... be fully established it is striking a grand blow at many of their 'most inveterate customs'.¹³⁶ And inasmuch as the older generation was deemed to be hampering the spiritual progress of youth – a common charge during the nineteenth century – missionaries viewed the authority of the elderly in general and parental authority in particular as immoral, if not illegitimate.¹³⁷ Mission Christianity not only entailed the concept of the autonomous and self-controlled individual, but also the equality of all adult generations. More precisely, it placed considerable stress on recasting African family and inter-generational relations in the mould of the contemporary bourgeois world-view. The modern ideals were unequivocally contained in the idealization of the Western nuclear two-generation family¹³⁸ and, to use Cole's phrase,¹³⁹ in the idealization of 'companionship and affection within marriage, as well as on the right and obligation of all children to become autonomous and rational adults' as well as in the rejection of an authoritarian model of the family in favour of self-regulating and self-controlled individuals.

CONCLUSION

Although poverty in old age and dying in the bush were real, the descriptions by missionaries of misery in old age and the construction of the image of the 'abandoned' elderly must be read as part of the missions' broader civilization project. The 'discovery' of so-called abandonment presupposed the refutation, intentionally or otherwise, of the local Xhosa public discourse on pollution and personhood. Rooted in an aesthetic enterprise, beginning in the eighteenth century, that deliberately used suffering bodies of ordinary people as the locus of discourse, the treatment of ageing and sick bodies was selected as the locus of identifying and constituting the African 'other' and for legitimating the mission enterprise. As in nineteenth-century England, missionaries used the issues of ageing and old age as ideological weapons in which 'humanitarian' concern about ageing bodies became part of the emerging colonial regime of power. The moral narrative of 'abandonment' confirmed the equation of 'barbarism' with death and Christianity with life. The images were thus used conspicuously to signify – and produce – the 'evolutionary' contrast between Europeans and Africans, between

¹³⁴ Holden, *The Past*, 368–9; J. C. Warner, 'Notes', 98–100.

¹³⁵ Soga, 27 June 1858, as quoted in Williams, *The Journal*, 19.

¹³⁶ SAL, extract from Cumming's diary, 25 July 1841.

¹³⁷ WMMS (14), Brigg to WMMS, 3 Aug. 1862.

¹³⁸ J. Whiteside, *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of South Africa* (London, 1906), 196–7; see also Eileen J. Krige, 'Traditional and Christian Lovedale family structures', in Michael G. Whisson and Martin West (eds.), *Religion and Social Change in Southern Africa* (London, 1975), 130–1.

¹³⁹ Cole, *Journal*, 54–55; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation*, 55–70.

civilization and savagery. The 'descriptions' of the misery of old age and 'abandonment' articulated with the wider missionary enterprise and, by extension, with the colonial problematic and its related moral debates which, in part, foreshadowed the finding of practices such as 'abandonment'. It is thus hardly ironic that missionaries did not see the material causes such as scarcity of land caused by the encroaching 'civilized' world which contributed to that practice.

The 'abandonment' imagery as a particular form of the missionary consciousness reveals the ways in which missionaries fabricated their own position in making the history of which they were a factor. As many (if not most) reports on gerontocide (gericide, senilicide) probably rest on similar epistemological foundations, anthropological accounts of 'death-hastening' behaviour¹⁴⁰ should pay far greater attention than hitherto to the moral and political fields in which such practices were observed and narrated. The above example shows that through rendering transparent the processes through which the observation of 'abandonment' was made, we can see the contextual specificity of its meaning. And, as the Xhosa could not see the unnatural 'abandonment' which the missionaries saw, the 'abandoned/neglected body' is to be seen as a product of the missionary gaze and, in this respect, as an ideological construct.

But the image may also be read as an honest Christian endeavour to bring 'good old age' to the Africans. There is little doubt that Christianity could provide a new source of spiritual assistance when an individual was confronted with dying and death, and that for parts of older audiences, the Christian message with its emphasis on salvation and eternal life offered some attraction. As Gray has pointed out, Christianity brought 'a more vivid and complete picture of life after death than that possessed by [the] indigenous cosmologies'.¹⁴¹ However, the message held attraction mainly for elderly people who had no offspring. Just like younger persons, elderly people were indifferent, if not hostile, to the missionary message as it proved to be barely compatible with their 'this-worldly' concerns and needs.¹⁴² In fact, Christian tidings clashed with male life-course strategies to secure old-age security and 'immortality'. Moreover, the imagery of the missionaries concerning late-life entailed a cultural devaluation of old age. While the Xhosa did not deny the biological changes that take place as the body changes, unlike the missionaries they did not employ dependence and decline as the standard metaphors for normal ageing. In the Xhosa world-view, old age was culturally constructed as the perfection of the former stage of adulthood. This was mirrored in the metaphorical association of old age with wisdom and experience – the latter being one of the fundamental signifiers of old age. Christianity amounted to a set of new images and rules. These were designed to secure familial care in deep old age and, at the same time were intended to construct older people as a special group of persons characterized by special problems, and, finally, to cut loose the ageing and frail body from its earlier religious meanings. While in the Xhosa world-view, dependency

¹⁴⁰ E.g. Anthony P. Glascock, 'By any other name, it is still killing: a comparison of the treatment of the elderly in America and other societies', in Jay Sokolovsky (ed.), *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives* (New York, 1990), 43–56.

¹⁴¹ Richard Gray, *Black Christians and White Missionaries* (London, 1990), 84.

¹⁴² Fast, 'In at one ear'.

in old age because of frailness tended to position people in a 'twilight marginal zone' – 'betwixt and between'¹⁴³ the human and superhuman sphere, Christianity perceived it as a sign of decay and of impending death rather than as a symbol of liminality. By changing the cultural and social meaning of the ageing body, Christianity thus depressed its value as part of the physical and cultural capital of the aged. In Christian ideology, older people (especially if frail) were transformed from active persons whose status and security of care was achieved rather than prescribed, gained by life-course achievements and everyday behaviour in family and community, to a dependent group with an ascribed status and the 'natural' right to be cared for until biological death. Paradoxically then, with Christianity, old-age constructions tended to become more normative and the ageing body tended to be 'secularized'.

Recent work on conversion to Christianity has shown that conversion does rarely, if ever, entail a completely new way of thinking or acting.¹⁴⁴ The same applies to the Xhosa, even though first-generation Christian Xhosa may have been more willing to make 'a radical break with...tradition than their descendants'.¹⁴⁵ However this may be, the social life of Xhosa converts was never simply patterned on Christian principles. As nineteenth-century mission Christianity lacked – compared to traditional religion – concepts and common practices effectively to tackle life crises such as sickness, it generated, of necessity, feelings of ontological insecurity. That sense of 'vulnerability' led even early converts to cling to the indigenous belief in ancestors and other spirits, even though acknowledged only in a *sub rosa* fashion. (This is not to deny that in later stages of Christianization – when converts increasingly faced non-assimilationist ideologies in the colonial society – the indigenous belief system tended to play a much larger role in the world-view of converts.)¹⁴⁶ This continuity of belief helped, in turn, to preserve the importance of the wider family and kin group. And for the increasing number of converts who did not reside on stations under the civil and religious tutelage of missionaries, the wider family remained central for sheer economic reasons such as access to land and mutual support. The experience of material and spiritual interdependence of people and of generations counteracted the Christian ideology of the autonomy of individuals and of the equality of all adult generations, and reinforced the fundamental values of intergenerational solidarity, seniority and paternal authority.

But, of course, the acceptance of Christianity involved change – both with regard to the inter-generational relationships of its adherents and to the symbolic domain. By constituting new identities beyond the confines of family and polity and introducing a universalistic ethic, mission Christianity helped to undermine the ideological basis of older patriarchal values. In 1834, for instance, the LMS missionary Kayser could report that a 'sickly Kaffir' who 'could now see his former sins...*admitted* that his cattle and

¹⁴³ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, 1978), 232.

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley, 1993) and van der Veer (ed.), *Conversion to Modernities*.

¹⁴⁵ Pauw, *Christianity*, 207.

¹⁴⁶ Phillip Mayer, 'The origin and decline of two rural resistance ideologies', in Philip Mayer (ed.), *Black Villagers in an Industrial Society* (Cape Town, 1980), 20–5.

family were no longer as dear to him as before'.¹⁴⁷ And inasmuch as Christianity weakened the belief in ancestors, it must have heightened the danger of frail persons' ill-treatment. In traditional times, the loss of 'this-worldly' power through decline in bodily and mental controls was construed as being only temporary: according to the local cultural model, most individuals would return as an ancestor to his or her descendants. Furthermore, the ancestor collective protected senior kin. Obviously, the less one believed in ancestral spirits, the less one had reason to fear that the ancestor collective would return to wreak any vengeance. The Christian commandment to care for one's frail kin was, allegedly, much less effective in this regard.

Irrespective of whether one describes religious development in the wake of Christianization as syncretistic or as pluralistic,¹⁴⁸ the emerging ideology was – to take up a phrase coined by Philip Mayer – 'subject to inner contradictions, for the two sets of ideological apparatuses emphasized different values'.¹⁴⁹ Christianity opened up alternative discourses on ageing and old age that were ready to be activated when favourable opportunities arose.

When underdevelopment and mass poverty set in the Transkei and Ciskei in the early twentieth century, the missionary construction of old age as a life phase of dependency gained currency. The contemporary debate on old-age poverty and on the question of whether 'certain aged and indigent people' should be housed in an 'establishment',¹⁵⁰ is evidence of the then already attained degree of subjectification of the elderly as a special group of persons.¹⁵¹ Of course, this development was primarily caused by the partial economic marginalization of the elderly. This, in turn, was in part due to the fact that employment in the formal sector was always tied to a higher level of bodily competence, and that physical weakness impaired the capacity to be counted as a competent adult in the capitalist economy. This applied particularly to Africans as they were excluded from many, if not most, skilled jobs. There is little doubt that the missionary image of old age as dependency reinforced rather than impeded this change in cultural attitudes towards later life. Though the discursive practice prevalent in the capitalist sector did not condition local discourses in any mechanical way, it did influence the latter. As W. W. Dana stated in his testimony to the Native Economic Commission in 1930, 'Native[s] will become old, i.e. emaciated, at the age of 45 years',¹⁵² that was, at a point when there were scarcely any opportunities left for African (re-)employment in the formal sector. Ageing was thus fabricated as an inherent pathological problem. As capitalist industrialization tended to weaken the value of accumulated life experience, the elderly did increasingly face the risk of being represented as forgetful and confused rather than as embodiments of the collective memory. This is exemplified by the fact that the concept of senility, a social construction based in 'Western' bio-

¹⁴⁷ Kayser, 10 Aug. 1834, as quoted in Hummel, *Kayser*, 100, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Gray, *Black Christians*, 70–7.

¹⁴⁹ Mayer, 'Origin', 25.

¹⁵⁰ United Transkeian Territories General Council, *Proceedings and Reports* (Umtata, 1943), 104.

¹⁵¹ Andreas Sagner, 'Ageing and social policy in South Africa: historical perspectives with particular reference to the Eastern Cape', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26 (2000), forthcoming.

¹⁵² National Archives Pretoria, K 26, V, pp. 2,711–2.

medicine, began to emerge in the local discourse on old age in the early twentieth century,¹⁵³ ‘push[ing] bodies to matter as old, poor, and as global in new ways’.¹⁵⁴ Although many twentieth-century Xhosa Christians continued to see the aged ‘as ancestral spirits and as a source of information linking the present with the past’,¹⁵⁵ others saw them just as dependent and needy people if they were frail or poor. In this sense, frailty was, to borrow one of Thomas Cole’s phrases, ‘cut loose from [most of its] earlier religious moorings’.¹⁵⁶ It is thus arguable that old age gradually became a narrative of the loss of self, and of culture and death. Yet I would contend that as long as people were committed to rural practices and as long as homestead production locally still moulded people’s life-plans and goals, the way in which an old person was classified still continued to depend on the way they presented themselves – albeit an identification with increasing ambivalence.

¹⁵³ See, for example, CA 3/CT, 1/4/10/1/1/3, Minutes of Native Affairs Committee, 18 Mar. 1929, statement by George Mkwanzani.

¹⁵⁴ Lawrence Cohen, *No Aging in India: Alzheimer’s, the Bad Family, and Other Modern Things* (Berkeley, 1998), 38.

¹⁵⁵ CA CMT 3/1445 (36), Dalindyebo Regional Authority to Secretary, Territorial Authority, 2 Mar. 1962.

¹⁵⁶ Cole, *Journey*, 192.