

## THE FINGER OF GOD AND THE BULHOEK MASSACRE IN SOUTH AFRICA

*The Finger of God: Enoch Mgijima, the Israelites, and the Bulhoek Massacre in South Africa.*

By Robert R. Edgar.

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Robert Edgar's book *The Finger of God: Enoch Mgijima, the Israelites, and the Bulhoek Massacre* is important in that it deals with an example of state brutality in South Africa, the Bulhoek Massacre, which few other scholars have studied. Also, while the Bulhoek massacre can be described as one of the violent encounters between the South African masses and the government during the time of white domination (akin to Sharpeville, 1960; Soweto, 1976; Langa, 1985; etc.) and the post-apartheid period (Marikana, 2012), 'what distinguishes Bulhoek is that the government directed its power at the community of faith, whereas in the other cases, the government faced off against opponents voicing political and economic grievances' (2). In this instance, the conflict involved Enoch Mgijima, and his followers, who referred to themselves as Israelites. They believed that God had spoken to their leader and wanted them to occupy the state-owned land in Ntabelanga — the action that led the conflict which resulted in about 163 Israelites dead, 129 injured, and 95 taken as prisoners.

Perhaps the most important issue that Edgar addresses is why and how the seemingly minor offense of religious people trespassing on state-owned land led to the massacre. To help us understand this process, Edgar employs James Scott's idea of a public transcript, described as an 'open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate', and a hidden transcript in which the dominated express 'a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant'.<sup>1</sup> Scott argues that this relationship remains stable as long as the hidden transcript stays hidden, but once it intrudes on the public transcript, it functions like a declaration of war.

Edgar suggests that this approach does not accurately explain the Bulhoek massacre, or as he puts it, 'it does not capture the full range of relations between the two groups', because Mgijima and the Israelites made a number of 'declarations of war' over an extended period (120). However, I do not think that the transgression of the public transcript needs to happen once for this idea to be applicable. The point here is that we do not quite know what the Israelites were saying behind the backs of state officials (hidden transcript), but all their open confrontation constituted a public transcript and it is those open challenges to the state which led to the massacre.

What is more important, however, is explaining how the hidden transcript became a public one, and Edgar convincingly illuminates that process. The main issue was that the Israelites created 'their own autonomous theocratic community' quite opposed to

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1 J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990), xii, 2.

the state. For instance, when E. C. A. Welsh, Senior Magistrate of Queenstown, demanded that the Israelites compile a register of their members, Charles Mgijima (Enoch Mgijima's brother and a high ranking member of the Israelites) challenged him by saying that they were already 'enumerated in God's book' and were now operating out of European time, 'for it is God's time now' (121). Another point of serious contention emerged around Mgijima's talk about war and retribution, which led to complaints by white farmers who saw this movement as a threat and claimed that the 'strangers' — that is the increasing followers of Enoch Mgijima who flocked to Ntabelanga — were stealing their crops and cattle. This led to a disastrous encounter on 7 December 1920, at which the Israelites forced the police to retreat. This initial triumph bolstered the Israelites' confidence in their challenge to the government, while it prompted the government to view the church as a serious political threat whose members were plotting a rebellion.

Another question addressed in the book regards the reasons that Mgijima called his followers to Ntabelanga and the Israelites' willing response to his summons. Edgar suggests that there were a number of contributing factors. Top among these was the economic decline that affected many of them: the East Coast fever of 1912 destroyed hundreds of thousands of cattle, the First World War led to rising prices, and the Spanish flu epidemic killed scores of African people, with about a thousand people dying in Queenstown alone. All these catastrophes — disease, war, and drought — made it clear to many Africans that 'something was radically wrong with their world' (70). It is because of this that 'Mgijima's millennial vision offered an attractive alternative by providing a grand narrative that not only explained these disasters but also offered a radical solution' (70).

On the whole, the book is a valuable contribution to the history of South Africa, and it is a good reevaluation of one of the very important events in South African history, in the wake of a new political dispensation. The book covers all necessary areas which contributed to the massacre, explaining the origins of the *Mfengu*, an 'ethnic' group to which Mgijima and most of his followers belonged. It also explains how Mgijima established the Israelites, tracing their origins from a church founded by William Crowdy in the United States of America.

While this is a very solid book, I do have an issue with its end. The book has six chapters, and Chapter Five is clearly the last chapter of Edgar's work done in the 1970s. The chapter that follows it, Chapter Six, entitled 'The Lost Ark', is based on the work he did post-1994. The chapter details how Edgar found the ark that was lost during the massacre and helped in its return to the Israelites. While this chapter is useful in describing how a researcher might give back to the community, I found the section on Nontetha Nkwenkwe irrelevant and confusing. It was not clear to me how this relates to the massacre until I realised that it does not.

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