

THE PROPHET'S 'WAR AGAINST WHITES':  
SHEPHERD STUURMAN IN NAMIBIA AND SOUTH  
AFRICA, 1904–7\*

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'GOD HAS TAKEN POWER FROM WHITE MEN THROUGHOUT  
THE WORLD'

EARLY on the morning of 5 September 1906, at a small asbestos mine in the northern Cape, six African workers entered the tent of their white foreman and his family. They assaulted the sleepers with stones, knobkerries, the leg of a chair and an ox-yoke. The foreman, Dirk Mans, died of his injuries eighteen hours later, while his son, Jan, who had been sleeping in another tent, ran away. Dirk Mans's wife also had a narrow escape. She woke up when a blow narrowly missed the head of her three-year-old child, who was sleeping in her bed. Both could flee in the general mêlée. Another victim, the well digger, William Swanepoel, was bludgeoned to death so ferociously that his skull 'was entirely knocked out of shape [and] separated in halves'.<sup>1</sup> The perpetrators tried to kill more whites, but dispersed in the ensuing confusion. The six men were tracked down by the police after several days. The Griqualand West Supreme Court in Kimberley sentenced four of the culprits to death; they were hanged in March 1907.

The ringleader of the Hopefield gang, Hendrik Bekeer, told the policeman who had followed his tracks for several days, that 'he was glad to be caught, although he knew that his life would be at an end'.<sup>2</sup> He could hardly wait to tell the prison warder that the group had planned to kill all whites in South Africa. In court, the eloquent Bekeer explained:

I admit that I am guilty. I, Hendrik Bikier [sic], laid hands on these two souls. I have a craving in my heart which must be made known to everyone. I admit that I am a worker of God. I confess to the Court and all the white people that I am placed here by the Lord, and that I do his will. ... The time when the whites had the upper hand is past. This is for Africa alone, but God has taken power from white men throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

Much about the prophet remains obscure. Bekeer/Stuurman<sup>4</sup> does not

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<sup>1</sup> District Surgeon for the district of Hay, J. Cranke, *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 2 Oct. 1906; 13 Feb. 1907. <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 13 Feb. 1907. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 26 Oct. 1906.

<sup>4</sup> I refer to the prophet as Stuurman, when discussing his activities in Namibia, and as Bekeer in respect of his appearance in the Cape Colony, thus following his own usage.

only deserve the attention of historians because he has remained a 'mystery man' in the scholarly literature on German colonialism in Namibia,<sup>5</sup> but also because his life story touches on many of the themes that dominated relations between Africans and Europeans in southern Africa during a period of dramatic upheaval.<sup>6</sup> He appeared at a time when whites viewed any indigenous articulation of social and political independence as the portent of general insurrection. These fears of the 'black peril' had been nurtured by the proliferation of independent Christian movements among the indigenous population. Christian ideas had gained currency among Africans all over southern Africa and, in some cases, might have been disseminated through communication networks which still need to be uncovered by scholars.

Bekeer disclosed only snippets of his life story after he had been caught. He grew up in Hankey and then lived in Port Elizabeth, where he joined the 'Native Independent Church'.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the South African War (1899–1902) he settled in the Transvaal, and later moved to Hopefield.<sup>8</sup> The 'Hopefield Outrage' or 'Hopefield Tragedy', with which he was associated, was reported in several newspapers under headlines such as 'War against Whites'. The press coverage of the killings both reflected and contributed to a general sense of insecurity among the white population. White claims to racial superiority had been challenged by several wars and disturbances in colonial Africa since the 1890s. Fears of African insubordination also increased in the wake of the South African War, because many Europeans were convinced that it had undermined the respect Africans were expected to have for the 'white master race'.

During this period, the Ethiopian Churches were increasingly identified by whites as the main instigators of unrest among Africans.<sup>9</sup> Blacks were accused of falling prey to half-baked Christian ideas of social equality and political independence. The Ethiopian label quickly became attached to real or imagined troublemakers, foreshadowing the sweeping manner in which the epithet 'communist' was later to be used in South Africa to brand opponents of apartheid, irrespective of their real political allegiances.

Jeremy Krikler, in probing the psychological sources from which racist anxieties among whites emerged intermittently in the early 1900s, has

<sup>5</sup> In his comprehensive account of German colonialism, Horst Gründer merely asserts that Stuurman's influence on the Nama war was of secondary importance: H. Gründer, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien* (3rd ed., Paderborn, Munich and Vienna, 1995), 205.

<sup>6</sup> The German novelist, Uwe Timm, renders a dramatized version of the prophet's appearance in his book, *Morenga* (Reinbek, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> After the trial, Cape officials suspected that Bekeer also might have been involved in unrest which was observed among Africans at Hankey in 1906. 'It is noteworthy that Bekeer was at Hankey a year or two ago and that there was a year ago a good deal of fear in the south western districts of a rising by the natives of these mission stations to murder the whites and [I] think now that an attempt has been made to carry out that programme'. Cape Archives (henceforth CA), Attorney General Files (henceforth AG), 2663 Letter Book, V. Sampson, 24 Feb. 1907, Re Hendrik Bekeer and others: murder. I could not verify the claim that Bekeer had visited the region at the time indicated.

<sup>8</sup> *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 13 Feb. 1907.

<sup>9</sup> J. T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion. The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York and Oxford, 1995). See also M. T. Moeti, *Ethiopianism: Separatist roots of African nationalism in South Africa* (Ann Arbor, 1996); B. Sundkler, *Bantu prophets in South Africa* (2nd ed., London, 1961).

pointed out that such fears were hardly ever grounded in reality.<sup>10</sup> The white scenario of a large-scale African uprising was fed by a peculiar mixture of racism and an awareness of numerical isolation rather than by impending mass resistance.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the Hopefield murders, however, white fears cannot be attributed merely to a symbolic expression of neurotic 'pre-cognition' which was situated 'beyond the perimeters of the conscious'.<sup>12</sup> The powerful image of the innocent whites, who had been murdered in their sleep by African religious fanatics, seemed to confirm white assumptions about the 'black peril'.

The murders aroused considerable foreboding in the northern Cape. The strong religious undercurrents of the Bekeer case particularly upset whites in the Hay district.<sup>13</sup> Farmers took precautionary steps, fearing a 'general massacre',<sup>14</sup> and the authorities were petitioned to provide police protection for whites and their property.<sup>15</sup> The Griquatown Magistrate secured the prison where Bekeer and his accomplices were detained, following rumours about 'coloured people' planning to rescue the detainees by force.<sup>16</sup>

The Hopefield killings might have caused even more alarm if the adventurous life of the ringleader, Bekeer, had come to light. After his execution, the authorities discovered that he had also been known as Shepherd Stuurman (or Klaas Shepherd), a religious prophet and military leader in the Nama war (1904–7) against the Germans in Namibia. The German commander, General Lothar von Trotha, had placed a price on the head of the 'false prophet' who had reputedly encouraged the chief of the Witboois, Hendrik Witbooi, to declare war on the Germans in 1904.

#### THE WAR IN NAMIBIA AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS IN THE CAPE COLONY

Stuurman enters the archival records during the initial phase of the Herero-German war, before the Nama became involved in the conflict. He could not have chosen more fertile ground for sowing the seeds of millenarian unrest. Africans in Namibia had reason to feel bitter about the way in which German colonialism had disrupted their communities. Up to 1904, disorientation had been spreading among the Herero because of the intrusive trade conducted by European traders on a credit basis, and the colonial restrictions placed on chiefly authority. Large sections of land changed ownership, not only as a result of white expansion, but also because Herero leaders sold their land to

<sup>10</sup> J. Krikler, 'Social neurosis and hysterical pre-cognition in South Africa: a case-study and reflections', *South African Historical Journal*, 28 (1993), 63–97.

<sup>11</sup> On the sexual connotations of the 'black peril' motive see G. Cornwell, 'George Webb Hardy's *The Black Peril* and the social meaning of "Black Peril" in early twentieth-century South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22 (1996), 441–53.

<sup>12</sup> Krikler, 'Social neurosis', 90.

<sup>13</sup> *Cape Times*, 18 Oct. 1906, headline: 'Religion and murder'; *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 21 Sept. 1906.

<sup>14</sup> CA, Colonial Office (henceforth CO), Defence and Police Correspondence Files, 8331, X 6585, Sept.–Nov. 1906, Wimble to Commander, C.M.P. Cape Town, 16 Sept. 1906.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* L. Wiener, Chairman of Peiser Diamond Mining and Estate Company Ltd. to AG, V. Sampson, Cape Town, 11 Sept. 1906.

<sup>16</sup> CA, AG, 1718, no. 6292, Resident Magistrate Griqualand, 14 Nov. 1906.

recoup their losses and regain their power. This general socio-cultural crisis was compounded by the devastating effects of the *rinderpest* in 1897. When the Herero forces, including thousands of women and children, were driven into the Omaheke desert by the *Schutztruppe* after the battle at the Waterberg in August 1904, most of the Nama in the south of the colony severed their alliance with the Germans.<sup>17</sup>

The colonial campaign against ‘a handful of Hottentots’, as the social democratic opposition in the *Reichstag* chanted, was encumbered by logistical difficulties, and it proved much more costly in human lives and material resources than the Germans had anticipated. Moreover, the Germans felt humiliated because their war efforts relied on the collaboration of the Cape authorities. The most important harbour in Namibia, Walvis Bay, was in British hands. Goods that were vital to the German campaign, excluding arms and ammunition, were purchased in the Cape Colony and transported across the Orange River or through the Kalahari desert to Namibia. The Germans also hired thousands of African contract workers from South Africa, who often laboured under extremely harsh and exploitative conditions.<sup>18</sup> The smuggling of arms and ammunition and the uninhibited movements of African resistance fighters across the colonial borders were also of major concern to the German military command. Anglo-German relations, which had suffered from the effects of Berlin’s *Weltpolitik* for some time, were therefore exposed to additional strains in southern Africa.<sup>19</sup> The Nama war provided the occasion for the two powers to argue over border incidents, the treatment of Cape workers in Namibia and Nama refugees in the Cape Colony.

The Cape authorities justified their refusal to extradite Nama warriors or to strengthen their border police by explaining that, apart from a lack of resources, their endorsement of the German war effort could antagonize their own African population, especially in view of the close historical and

<sup>17</sup> On the history of the Herero-German war, see H. Bley, *South West Africa under German Rule, 1898–1914* (London, 1971); J. Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros* (Berkeley, 1981); H. Drechsler, ‘*Let Us Die Fighting: The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism (1884–1915)*’ (London, 1981); J.-B. Gewald, ‘Towards redemption: a socio-political history of the Herero of Namibia between 1890 and 1923’ (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Leiden, 1996); G. Krüger, ‘Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewußsein: Zur Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkrieges 1904–1907’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Hanover, 1995); W. Nuhn, *Sturm über Südwest: Der Hereroaufstand von 1904 – ein düsteres Kapitel der deutschen kolonialen Vergangenheit Namibias* (Koblenz, 1989); G. Pool, *Die Hereroopstand 1904–1907* (Cape Town, 1989). A concise history of the war between the Nama and the Germans still remains to be written.

<sup>18</sup> W. Beinart, ‘“Jamani”: Cape workers in German South West Africa, 1904–12’, in W. Beinart and C. Bundy (eds.), *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa: Politics and Popular Movements in the Transkei and Eastern Cape 1890–1930* (Johannesburg, 1987), 166–90.

<sup>19</sup> See R. F. Dreyer, *The Mind of Official Imperialism. British and Cape Government Perceptions of German Rule in Namibia from the Helgoland-Zanzibar Treaty to the Kruger Telegram (1890–1896)* (Essen, 1987); M. Fröhlich, *Von Konfrontation zur Koexistenz: Die deutsch-englischen Kolonialbeziehungen in Afrika zwischen 1884 und 1914* (Bochum, 1990); H. Rosenbach, *Das deutsche Reich, Großbritannien und der Transvaal (1896–1902): Anfänge deutsch-britischer Entfremdung* (Göttingen, 1993). The seminal comprehensive study on the history of Anglo-German relations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is Paul Kennedy’s, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860–1914* (London, 1980).

ethnic ties between the Khoekhoe on both sides of the Orange River.<sup>20</sup> Consular reports in South Africa and German newspapers repeatedly claimed that Great Britain was watching the drawn-out conflict in South West Africa with satisfaction, and even supported the African rebels in the hope of acquiring the territory 'below its value' once the Germans had exhausted their strength.<sup>21</sup> Some German commentators, searching for the causes of the war, insinuated that the British were obsessed by liberal ideas, which inhibited any efficient control of 'the native'. Thus, the *Cape Times* disapprovingly cited the *Berliner National Zeitung's* claim that the Ethiopian movement not only threatened to unleash a general uprising of the black population in southern Africa, but that it had been encouraged by 'an incomprehensible softness of the British in dealing with the natives'.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Stuurman appeared on the scene when many German officials and opinion-makers were looking for a scapegoat who could partly be blamed for the war in South West Africa. The Germans believed that Stuurman was an agent of the Ethiopian movement which, so German commentators complained, had been allowed to thrive in British South Africa.

#### STUURMAN IN NAMIBIA

According to some accounts, Stuurman was arrested by the Cape Police in Rietfontein on the colonial border at the beginning of 1904, because he had 'held riotous speeches'.<sup>23</sup> In February 1904, Stuurman arrived in Rehoboth. He told the so-called Bastards or Bastards that he had begun his journey in Port Elizabeth in November 1903, 'in order to talk to all the chiefs. The time had come for the blacks to be redeemed. God had come to him in a fire. At first he did not want to obey his orders, but then God had told him that Jonah had been swallowed by the whale because he had refused to follow his instruction to go to Nineveh'.<sup>24</sup> Stuurman said that he had come to Namibia via Kimberley and Upington and had visited Hendrik Witbooi in Gibeon and Rietmond. His efforts to persuade the old chief to take up arms against the Germans had, however, been unsuccessful. Apparently, 'Stuurman then said the time of redemption had come, he had been sent by God to drive all whites out of Africa. When the Captain replied, "No, my child, this is not the time to rise against the Germans", Stuurman said, "If you put obstacles in my way I shall leave. I don't need the red [Khoekhoe] in order to drive the Europeans away. I can do that with the blacks [Herero] too."' <sup>25</sup> The captain

<sup>20</sup> See Fröhlich, *Von Konfrontation zur Koexistenz*, 233–66.

<sup>21</sup> Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (Political Archive of the German Foreign Office), Bonn (henceforth PA), Akten des deutschen Generalkonsulats in Kapstadt (records of the German Consulate-General in Cape Town), Politische Angelegenheiten (Political Affairs), bundle 37, B1, vol. 17, Consulate Pretoria to Chancellor Bülow, 24 Dec. 1906.

<sup>22</sup> *Cape Times*, 13 Apr. 1905.

<sup>23</sup> Vereinte Evangelische Mission (United Protestant Mission) (henceforth VEM), records of the Rhenish Mission Society (henceforth RMG), Personalakten (Personnel Files), 1.619 (B/c II 47), H. Pabst, Rietfontein, 1 Dec. 1904, 123.

<sup>24</sup> Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives) Lichterfelde [formerly Potsdam] (henceforth BAL), Reichskolonialamt (records of the Imperial Colonial Office) (henceforth RKA), 2134, Wilhelm Koopmann, Rehoboth, 11 Nov. 1904, 50.

<sup>25</sup> BAL, Zentralbureau, Kaiserliches Gouvernement von Deutsch-Südwestafrika (records of the Central Office, Imperial Government of German South West Africa) (henceforth ZB) (microfilm), D.IV.m.2., interrogation of the former Undercaptain of the Witboois, Samuel Isaak, Windhoek, 15 Mar. 1906.

of the Rehoboth Basters dismissed Stuurman when he declared that 'a little king' had been chosen to liberate black people, leaving no doubt about who that king was.<sup>26</sup>

In May 1904, the wandering prophet was arrested by the Germans at the Herero location in Windhoek. An official investigation, which was conducted after Stuurman's activities had aroused the suspicion of the German military, suggested that Stuurman was in possession of two passports issued in South Africa. He was sentenced to several weeks of hard labour, but was released in June after being paid ten Marks, because the German magistrate hoped to forestall any trouble with the Cape authorities who might have intervened on behalf of their subject.<sup>27</sup>

Before he was allowed to leave, however, the Rhenish missionary, Carl Wandres, interviewed the stranger. He noted that Stuurman was about 30 years old, spoke English and Dutch but no African language, and that 'duba, sulphur and duivelsdrek (*asa foetida*)' were discovered among his belongings. According to the missionary, these substances were used in witchcraft,<sup>28</sup> and it was later claimed that Stuurman impressed the Witboois with these paraphernalia.<sup>29</sup> Stuurman stated that he was a member of a Cape Presbyterian community under the eldership of an African preacher. As if this were not enough to incite the missionary's suspicions, Stuurman called himself a 'prophet' who had a mission to liberate all blacks.<sup>30</sup> Wandres concluded that Stuurman was an 'agent' of the Ethiopian movement:

About his holy mission, from which I tried, of course, to dissuade him in various ways, he told me: 'I was a stable groom in Kimberley. One day I cleaned the horse stable and I saw a fire in front of me. In the fire, there was a figure that looked at me with piercing eyes. I realised it was Jesus Christ. Next to that figure I noticed black people. The Lord in the fire gave me the order to go west in order to preach to black people.'<sup>31</sup>

In his report, Wandres seized the opportunity and insinuated that the pitiful state of race relations in British South Africa was partly to blame for Germany's troubles in Namibia, 'Shepherd came from the Cape Colony where he witnessed the defeats suffered by both British and Boers. In that country the natives have become extremely cheeky [*frech*], and they strive for religious and even political independence'.<sup>32</sup> While not specifying his source, a German official claimed that Stuurman had been a 'native constable' in the Cape Colony during the South African War,<sup>33</sup> and it is not unlikely that Stuurman experienced the war and its traumatizing effects at close quarters.

When Stuurman was released from prison in Windhoek, he promised to leave the German colony. However, he returned to southern Namibia. Colonial officials heard rumours about him in the Keetmanshoop area, where 'he preached and converted and conducted religious conversations' among

<sup>26</sup> BAL, RKA, 2134, Undercaptain Wilhelm Koopmann, Rehoboth, 11 Nov. 1904, 50.

<sup>27</sup> BAL, RKA, 2134, Sergeant Lauterbach, Windhoek, 10 Nov. 1904, 38.

<sup>28</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.1, Carl Wandres to Imperial Government, Windhoek, 31 Dec. 1904.

<sup>29</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, Samuel Isaak, Windhoek, 15 Mar. 1906.

<sup>30</sup> VEM, RMG, Personalakten, 1.623 (B/cII 51), Carl Wandres, Windhoek, 25 Oct. 1904, 131.

<sup>31</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.1, Carl Wandres to Imperial Government, Windhoek, 31 Dec. 1904.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> BAL, RKA, 2135, Schmidt to Colonial Department, Keetmanshoop, 26 Oct. 1904, 227-29.

Africans.<sup>34</sup> From June 1904, Rhenish missionaries became aware of his presence in Rietmond, where Hendrik Witbooi had his headquarters. The captain introduced Stuurman to the technical assistant of the mission society, Ludwig Holzapfel, and his wife, Meta. Holzapfel described Stuurman as 'intelligent, of small stature and dark brown complexion, a real kapenaar'.<sup>35</sup>

He is 'the prophet' as they call him in Rietmond and he has appointed several people to be 'god's servants' by 'giving them the holy ghost'. Only those, whom he has specifically chosen, are allowed to preach and pray. His body is supposed to radiate light and his head to be surrounded by a halo. He always walks by himself. Nobody must touch him.<sup>36</sup>

Despite some doubts, Spellmeyer in Gibeon shared Wandres's view that Stuurman could be an emissary of the Ethiopian Church.<sup>37</sup> Spellmeyer was alarmed by the strange behaviour of some of his old Nama acquaintances, who appeared shaken up by what the prophet told them at secret meetings.<sup>38</sup>

The presumed connection between Stuurman and the Ethiopian movement, however, is not confirmed in the records. Isaak Witbooi, Hendrik's son, later stated under interrogation that his father had been encouraged by the prophet to declare war on the Germans. Isaak emphasized that Stuurman had 'never spoken about church matters in the Cape Colony' and added: 'I do not know anything about an Ethiopian Church. Stuurman never mentioned it'.<sup>39</sup>

After the defeat of the Herero, many settlers launched hysterical appeals in favour of a general hardening of colonial policies towards the African population. The radicalization of such racial attitudes signalled the end of Hendrik Witbooi's precarious status as an ally of the Germans. The captain, therefore, became more receptive to Stuurman's revelations of the impending end of white supremacy.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, the German Governor, Theodor Leutwein, did not doubt that 'the false prophet from the Cape Colony' had been the main reason for Hendrik Witbooi's defection.<sup>41</sup> Leutwein insinuated that indigenous Namibians, who were well informed about the relatively colour-blind legislation at the Cape, would probably prefer to live under British rule, 'thus, Hendrik Witbooi's rebellion has to be seen in connection with the disturbances that have shaken up the natives all over South Africa. In this regard we are at the losing end, because the natives in the British colonies do actually enjoy more freedom than ours'.<sup>42</sup>

A Bastard, who had been sent by the Germans to spy on the Witboois at the outbreak of hostilities, reported:

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>35</sup> *Rheinische Missions-Berichte* (henceforth *RMB*), Apr. 1905, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Spellmeyer wondered if the prophet used modern technological devices. 'Perhaps he is carrying some electrical machines on his body, which of course no one is allowed to see': *ibid.* 76–7.

<sup>37</sup> BAL, RKA, 2134, Spellmeyer to the Rhenish Mission Society, Gibeon, 2 Oct.–2 Nov. 1904, 39–49. <sup>38</sup> *RMB*, Apr. 1905, 27–8.

<sup>39</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, vol. 4; interrogation of Isaak Witboi, Windhoek, 2 June 1906; Samuel Isaak, Windhoek, 15 Mar. 1906.

<sup>40</sup> T. Dederling, 'Hendrik Witbooi, the prophet', *Kleio*, 25 (1993), 54–78; 'Hendrik Witbooi; Religion, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Deutsch-Südwestafrika', in U. v. d. Heyden and H. Liebau (eds.), *Missionsgeschichte – Kirchengeschichte – Weltgeschichte, Studien der Berliner Gesellschaft für Missionsgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 1996), 325–41.

<sup>41</sup> BAL, RKA, 2134, Leutwein to Colonial Department, 11 Nov. 1904, 29–33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

There is a Griqua-Hottentot in Rietmond, who is like a god to the Witboois. He preaches that all whites are delivered into his hands, all whites shall die. Not one of them shall be able to enter Rietmond alive. The Witboois believe in that man. Thus they refuse to leave Rietmond, because the preacher – Skipper Stuurman [sic] – has assured them that they will be safe there. Skipper has enormous power over Hendrik and all Witboois. He only has to give orders and instructions. His commands are followed unquestioningly.<sup>43</sup>

Spies reported that Hendrik Witbooi was ready to abandon his collaboration policies, fomented by Stuurman's promises to chase all Germans out of the country with the help of a dedicated group of anointed men, the so-called 'sacred warriors' [*Gottesstreiter*]. Such prophecies were readily received by the Witboois, who were acutely affected by the mounting racial tension which spread through the colony in the wake of the Herero-German war.<sup>44</sup> The radical expectations which Stuurman's calls for resistance must have evoked were also reflected in the growing vehemence of millenarian beliefs which circulated among the Nama. Spellmeyer was informed by an eyewitness that the people were talking about a holy war of liberation which would extend beyond Africa. After the liberation of Namibia, the prophet declared, the Witboois and their allies would free the Cape Colony from white rule. Then the fighters would walk across an enormous bridge to Germany where they would kill all whites, except those who could be used as servants.<sup>45</sup>

This image of the reversal of the roles of master and servant – a powerful theme in many religious protest movements all over the world – was not only accepted by the Nama because of colonial pressure on fragile indigenous autonomy in 1904, but also because the ground had been prepared by about a hundred years of inculturation and contact with mission Christianity. Stuurman's appeals to the Nama, which were based on his Africanist interpretation of Christian ideas, therefore found a receptive audience, whose attention was heightened by a shared experience of the struggle for survival. Hendrik Witbooi, himself strongly influenced by Christianity, became one of the prophet's most ardent supporters. In the 1880s, the Witbooi leader had bolstered his claims to power as a prophet and leader of a religious movement that had challenged the spiritual hegemony of the European missionaries.<sup>46</sup>

Many members in high-ranking Witbooi families 'had always shown great enthusiasm for proselytizing' their fellow Africans.<sup>47</sup> One of Hendrik's sons, the schoolteacher Klein-Hendrik, used to preach among the dispersed Nama. Such unauthorized evangelism was observed with considerable reservation. When Stuurman appeared, the Witboois increasingly displayed an 'independent spirit' towards the Europeans, which the missionaries found inappropriate.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, vol. 2, District Magistrate, Keetmanshoop, to Leutwein, 8 Nov. 1904, 26; Martinus Wimmert, Keetmanshoop, 8 Nov. 1904, 27. See also *RMB*, Apr. 1905, 77. <sup>44</sup> BAL, RKA, 2134, Jan Beukes, Rehoboth, 9 Nov. 1904, 35–6.

<sup>45</sup> *RMB*, Apr. 1905, 77. <sup>46</sup> See Dederich, 'Hendrik Witbooi, the prophet'.

<sup>47</sup> *RMB*, Feb. 1905, 28.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 28–9. For similar missionary reaction to African expressions of dissent in the eastern Cape, see G. Cuthbertson, '"Cave of Adullam": missionary reaction to Ethiopianism at Lovedale, 1898–1902', *Missionalia*, 19 (1991), 51–64.

The interrogations of Nama prisoners of war suggest that Stuurman influenced Hendrik Witbooi's decision not to wait until the Germans disarmed his people. Several Witbooi leaders later blamed the South African prophet for ordering the murder of two whites, which sent shockwaves through the settler community. The district administrator, Henning von Burgsdorff, who had always believed that a genuine bond of friendship existed between himself and the Witbooi captain, was killed while on his way to seek negotiations. Ludwig Holzapfel was executed by a Witbooi firing squad because he refused to hand over his firearm and ammunition. For Hendrik Witbooi, these killings marked an irrevocable break with the Germans.<sup>49</sup> The missionaries, on the other hand, were scandalized by the invocation of explicit Christian symbolism in such acts of violence. The Witboois conducted prayers for their victims, and on one occasion they ostentatiously left an open bible on the threshold of a ransacked house.<sup>50</sup>

While there is relatively little information about the way in which Stuurman interacted with the Witboois on a day-to-day basis, the records suggest that he could be quite ruthless. In September 1904, he 'married the daughter of the Hottentot-Bastard Moses Meier in Marienthal'.<sup>51</sup> The seventeen-year-old woman later complained that her own father had coerced her into accepting the stranger's advances. She continued to resist, because eventually Stuurman had to force her at gunpoint to 'sleep with him and prepare his meals'.<sup>52</sup>

Stuurman was soon playing an active role in the conflict between the Nama and Germans. With about thirty 'sacred warriors', who were thought to be invulnerable, he participated in several skirmishes with the *Schutztruppe*,<sup>53</sup> leading groups of up to 200 men.<sup>54</sup> He roamed through southern Namibia in order to propagate the holy war against the colonizers and to collect stragglers.<sup>55</sup> For a while, the Witboois and their allies remained under the spell of the prophet and his calls for armed resistance to colonial rule.<sup>56</sup> The Witboois were impressed when Stuurman once cut telegraph wires, a tactic to which the Nama only very rarely resorted – to the amazement of the German military.<sup>57</sup> However, Stuurman's charisma was increasingly under-

<sup>49</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, vol. 2, Commando Windhoek, 23 Nov. 1905, 189–90; D.IV.m.2, vol. 4, Jacob Isaak, 6 June 1906; Isaak Witbooi, 2 June 1906; Cornelius Fredericks, 13 June 1906; Samuel Isaak, 15 Mar. 1906.

<sup>50</sup> It displayed Psalm 106, relating the story of Moses and the chosen people of Israel: *RMB*, Feb. 1905, 30.

<sup>51</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, vol. 4, Samuel Isaak, Windhoek, 15 Mar. 1906.

<sup>52</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, vol. 5, interrogation of the two sons, daughter and wife of Moses Meier, Keetmanshoop, 15 May 1906, 188–90.

<sup>53</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, 1906, vol. 4, Jacob Isaak, Windhoek, 6 June 1906.

<sup>54</sup> BAL, RKA, 2135, Von Trotha to General Staff, Windhoek, 29 Mar. 1905, 85–6.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 9 May 1905; 22 May 1905.

<sup>56</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, vol. 4, 1906, Samuel Isaak, Windhoek, 15 Mar. 1906.

<sup>57</sup> Museum für Post und Kommunikation (Museum for Post and Communication), Berlin, Aktenmaterial (files), Reichspostministerium (Imperial Post Office), Telegraph Keetmanshoop-Warmabad-Ramansdrift, 1908, Imperial Post Office Windhoek, 18 May 1908, 8. See also the reports of the British military attaché in Namibia, Colonel F. J. A. Trench: Public Records Office, London (henceforth PRO), Foreign Office (henceforth FO) 64/1646, Native rising in German South West Africa (1905), Trench to War Office, Keetmanshoop, 26 June 1905; FO 367/8, General Correspondence Africa. Germany (1906), Trench to Chief Staff Office Cape Colony, 1 Nov. 1905.

mined by his military incompetence and lack of courage. Once the Germans had defeated the Witboois on several occasions, the battle-hardened Witboois began to harbour doubts about the prophet and his holy mission. They noticed that Stuurman was terrified by the German machine guns and field artillery.

When Stuurman encountered a German patrol near Stamprietfontein, he managed 'a narrow escape after he had thrown away his rifle and ammunition belt and got rid of his clothes so as not be identified in case he was taken prisoner'.<sup>58</sup> During an engagement with the Germans at Nabas, which lasted for several days,<sup>59</sup> Stuurman inaccurately informed the Witboois that some of the German troops had miraculously fled and predicted that the rest would soon be driven off by thirst. After his assurance of imminent victory, the old captain was intercepted by a German patrol, which resulted in a hasty retreat by the Witboois.<sup>60</sup> The prophet also tried unsuccessfully to muster support from the Herero. After these setbacks, Stuurman angrily returned his 'sacred warriors' to the Witbooi captain, condemning them for their lack of an unyielding faith which was essential to the mission. It seems that Hendrik Witbooi became sceptical of Stuurman's claims, but did not openly express his doubts.<sup>61</sup>

Intensified fighting weighed heavily on the Witboois, and desertions occurred. When the Witboois and their allies held an emergency council in the Kalahari desert, Stuurman accused the Nama of a lack of faith in his divine mission. Open confrontation between him and 'under-captain' Samuel Isaak, who ridiculed the prophet's lack of courage, showed that there was a chasm between millenarian expectations on the one hand, and military prowess on the other. Stuurman made a last desperate appeal to the Witboois' unconditional acceptance of his role as a prophet: 'why are you fleeing? Is there any place on earth where man will not be found by death?'<sup>62</sup>

Hendrik Witbooi kept his cards close to his chest, refusing to take sides in this altercation. Once Stuurman's authority had been openly challenged, the prophet left the Witboois and lived with the family of his father-in-law, Moses Meier, near the Auob and Fish Rivers. Again, he met Samuel Isaak, who was searching for dispersed Nama partisans near Heirubkobis Vley in April 1905. Stuurman had established himself as an independent warlord who attacked German platoons. He renewed his collaboration with Samuel Isaak, but when a commando failed, the tensions between the two flared up again. The prophet's prestige eventually waned, and it seems that he was generally despised as a coward. Thus, he once called off a planned raid on a German telegraph crew, 'when a ghost appeared to him in the guise of a jackal and told him [the raid] would be his downfall'.<sup>63</sup> In May 1905, Isaak and Stuurman were driven from their hiding place near Mukorob by Von Trotha's soldiers.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, vol. 4, Samuel Isaak, Windhoek, 15 Mar. 1906.

<sup>59</sup> Grosser Generalstab, *Die Kämpfe der deutschen Truppen in Südwestafrika*, Bd. 2: *Der Hottentottenkrieg* (Berlin, 1907), 47–57.

<sup>60</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, 1906, vol. 4, Lucas Hans, Windhoek, 14 June 1906.

<sup>61</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, vol. 4, Isaak Witbooi, Windhoek, 2 June 1906.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* Samuel Isaak, Windhoek, 15 Mar. 1906.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> BAL, RKA, 2135, Trotha to General Staff, Windhoek, 22 May 1905, 139–40.

Perhaps the illiterate Stuurman intended emulating Hendrik Witbooi, who enjoyed a reputation as an eager writer of letters, when he dictated a message to the *Schutztruppe* in Keetmanshoop. The prophet declared 'that a king will be born during the last days... in order to destroy a kingdom'. A missionary in Keetmanshoop, Tobias Fenchel, commented on this 'confused letter', concluding, 'the poor, misguided people has been drawn into the war by a fanatical visionary and is now bleeding to death'.<sup>65</sup> The German military command took the prophet very seriously, however. This is clear from the so-called Hottentot Proclamation released by Von Trotha on 22 April 1905. The proclamation placed rewards on the heads of leaders of the Nama rebellion. For Hendrik Witbooi, the general promised 5000 Marks; Stuurman was worth 3000 Marks.<sup>66</sup>

Stuurman knew about Von Trotha's proclamation. On the orders of the general, it had been fastened to poles in the veld, where the prophet stumbled across a copy which was read to him by his companions.<sup>67</sup> A little later, the Witboois were informed that Stuurman had left Namibia 'one night on his own' and gone into hiding in the Upington region.<sup>68</sup> The German General Staff found out about the prophet's escape. In August 1905, Von Trotha notified the German Consulate-General in Cape Town that Stuurman was probably hiding in British Bechuanaland. He instructed the Consulate to ask the British police to prevent Stuurman from returning to the German colony. The German Legation Councillor at the Consulate-General in Cape Town, D. H. von Jacobs, wrote to the High Commissioner, Lord Selborne, that Stuurman was 'known as one of the most fanatic members of the Ethiopian Church and is considered a grave danger to the white race in South Africa as a whole'.<sup>69</sup> The Cape Mounted Police complied by despatching a patrol in search of the 'native Hottentot leader Stuurman Scheppert'.<sup>70</sup> They reported that the prophet had been seen at Twee Rivier, near Rietfontein, in August 1905.<sup>71</sup>

It is difficult to reconstruct the course of events that ensued, but it seems that some German officers devised a plan to kill the detested 'Ethiopian agent'. This can be deduced from a formal complaint submitted to the German government by the British ambassador in Berlin, Sir Frank Lascelles, on the instruction of the Foreign Minister, Sir Edward Grey, in February 1906. Lascelles stated that the commander of the Cape Mounted Police was annoyed about the arrest of a Bastard, Dirk Campbell, who had been caught in British territory. Campbell, formerly a policeman in the German colony, had been gathering information on the whereabouts of Stuurman. Campbell confessed to the Cape Police that the commander of the

<sup>65</sup> VEM, RMG, Personalakten, 1.617 d (B/c II 45, vol. 4), Tobias Fenchel, Keetmanshoop, 9 Sept. 1905, 30. <sup>66</sup> Generalstab, *Kämpfe der deutschen Truppen*, 186.

<sup>67</sup> BAL, ZB, D.IV.m.2, vol. 4, Samuel Isaak, Windhoek, 15 Mar. 1906. The proclamation had been translated into Nama. <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> PRO, FO 64/1647, Native rising in German South West Africa (1905), Jacobs to High Commissioner, Cape Town, 19 Aug. 1905.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* Commissioner, Cape Mounted Police to Major Berrange in Upington, Cape Town, 28 Aug. 1905.

<sup>71</sup> BAL, RKA, 2137, Lascelles to Richthofen, Berlin, 2 Nov. 1905, 45-8; RKA, 2093, Jacobs to Chancellor Bülow, 17 Oct. 1905, 9; CA, CO, 4567, Inspector Spencer to Commissioner Cape Mounted Police, Upington, 11 Sept. 1905.

German military station at Klipdam, *Oberleutnant* Beyer, had equipped him with a horse and a revolver and promised him £250, if he killed Stuurman. The would-be assassin was hastily returned to Namibia across the border.<sup>72</sup>

This incident was one of the many border violations that soured relations between the Germans and the British.<sup>73</sup> In an investigation conducted by the German colonial administration, Beyer denied that he had plotted Stuurman's death on British soil, and claimed that he had given Campbell a gun for his own self-defence.<sup>74</sup>

The military ineptitude and the ensuing flight of the prophet did nothing to enhance his reputation among the Witboois, who had given up the fight after Hendrik Witbooi had died of wounds sustained in a skirmish in October 1905, and suffered a miserable fate as prisoners of war. As the British military attaché, Colonel F. J. A. Trench, reported in November 1905, the Witbooi prisoners blamed collusion between Stuurman and Hendrik Witbooi for the death of white settlers at the beginning of the war.<sup>75</sup> In December 1906, when Bekeer was imprisoned in Kimberley, the Rhenish Mission Inspector, J. Spiecker, visited the Witbooi prisoners of war on the notorious Shark Island at Lüderitzbucht.<sup>76</sup> Spiecker's account suggests that the prophet had become the evil spirit in the memory of the Witboois, who accused him of goading their captain into a self-destructive war. Some prisoners alleged that the death of the settlers had occurred without the knowledge of their captain.<sup>77</sup> The view that Hendrik Witbooi had become a mere tool in the hands of 'the false prophet' was shared by many missionaries, and even by German officers.<sup>78</sup> The news about his execution aroused some interest,<sup>79</sup> but

<sup>72</sup> BAL, RKA, 2137, Lascelles to Richthofen, Berlin, 2 Nov. 1905, 45–8. See also PRO, FO 367/27: Native refugees from German South West Africa (1906), Commander of the Cape Mounted Police, 27 Oct. 1905, attached to: Ministers to Governor of the Cape Colony, Cape Town, 10 Nov. 1905.

<sup>73</sup> German consuls in South Africa regularly enclosed cuttings from local newspapers in their reports to the German Colonial Office. Many papers levelled criticism at the harsh conduct of the military campaign against Herero und Nama. See for instance: PA, Afrika, Generalia 13, vol. R 14671, Jacobs to Chancellor Bülow, Cape Town, 10 Oct. 1905.

<sup>74</sup> Beyer's claim was, not very convincingly, supported by Governor Lindequist: BAL, RKA, 2139, Lindequist to Colonial Department, Windhoek, 18 Sept. 1906, 19–20.

<sup>75</sup> PRO, FO 367/8, General Correspondence Africa. Germany (1906), F. J. A. Trench, Lüderitzbucht, to Chief Staff Officer, Cape Colony District, Cape Town, 24 Nov. 1905.

<sup>76</sup> Drechsler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 211. From Sept. 1906 to Apr. 1907, 1,032 out of 1,795 prisoners died on Shark Island: *ibid.* 212. Drechsler estimates the total losses sustained by the Nama at 50 per cent of the pre-war population, those of the Herero at 80 per cent: *ibid.* 214. On the debate about casualty figures and genocide, see Dederling, 'The German-Herero war of 1904: revisionism of genocide or imaginary historiography', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19 (1993), 80–9.

<sup>77</sup> VEM, RMG, Feldakten, 3.346a (C/s, 5, 8 a), Afrikareise Inspektor Spiecker, vol. 8, 1 – part 3, entry of 6 Dec. 1906, conversation with Samuel Isaak. This view was reiterated by Klein-Hendrik: *RMB*, May 1907, 84.

<sup>78</sup> For example: VEM, RMG, Personalakten, 1.642 a, vol. 1 (B/c II 70), Carl Berger, 1898–1976, Berger to Mission Inspector, Gibeon, 18 May 1905, 225–30; VEM, RMG, Personalakten 1.647 a, vol. 1 (B/c II 75), Christian Spellmeyer, 1892–1906, Spellmeyer to Inspector, Gibeon, 14 Jan. 1905, 63–4; VEM, RMG, Feldakten, 3.346 a (C/s 5, 8a-b), vol. 8, 1 – part 2, Spiecker, 22 Apr. 1906, 15–16.

<sup>79</sup> *Windhuker Nachrichten*, 11 Apr. 1907.

other prominent figures of Nama resistance, especially Jacob Morenga, diverted the attention of the Germans and the British at the time.<sup>80</sup>

'THE HOPEFIELD OUTRAGE'

The prophet had failed in his mission in Namibia, but he continued his holy war in South Africa. Under the name of Hendrik Bekeer he worked at the Hopefield asbestos mine, which was run by the Hay Asbestos Company, from mid-1906.<sup>81</sup> The mine was situated in the district of Hay, on a relatively straight line stretching from Upington westwards to Kimberley, about 14 miles north of Griquatown.<sup>82</sup> The region which roughly extends from Prieska in the south to the area north of Griquatown, is still demarcated as the Asbestos Mountains (formerly the Rooiberge) on some modern maps of South Africa.

Asbestos 'farming', as it is called, began in the northern Cape in the early 1880s, but had become more systematic by 1893. From the beginning, the exploitation of asbestos was mainly undertaken by 'free-lance tributors', who were given tools and explosives by the mining companies. Griqua, Tswana and white farmers were involved in mining, especially during periods of agricultural depression. The rinderpest, the Langeberg Rebellion in 1897 and the South African War interrupted mining activities, which were resumed as late as 1905.<sup>83</sup>

Surface mining was complemented by driving shallow adits into the hills. In 1893, the Cape Asbestos Company, the first to exploit asbestos, produced 120 tons, which increased to 1,345 tons by 1895. The report of the inspector of mines in 1899 also noted that different wages were paid on the basis of colour. Whites earned between 20 and 30 shillings, while 'native' labourers received only 12 to 15 shillings per week.<sup>84</sup> In 1895, the Cape Asbestos Company employed ten white and fifty 'coloured' men. Women and children were involved in cleaning the asbestos; a total number of 145 'coloured' and thirty white women and children worked for the company. They toiled under extremely hazardous conditions, because the enormous health risks of asbestos mining were unknown during the first fifty years of the asbestos industry.<sup>85</sup>

Before Bekeer had instigated the killings, there had been complaints by mine workers in Hopefield about racial discrimination at the hands of white bosses. For example, there had been dissatisfaction over insufficient food rations. Most resentment was caused by the unfair terms of competition

<sup>80</sup> J. R. Masson, 'A fragment of colonial history: the killing of Jacob Marengo', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21 (1995), 247-56.

<sup>81</sup> *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 7 Sept. 1906.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 7 Sept. 1906. See also the map in: P. H. R. Snyman, 'Safety and health in the northern Cape Blue Asbestos Belt', *Historia*, 33 (1988), 31-52.

<sup>83</sup> Snyman, 'Safety and health', 34.

<sup>84</sup> See *Report of the Inspector of Mines on the Mining and Production of Coal, Copper, Asbestos and Crocidolite*, Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Inspector of Mines, Thomas Quentral (Cape Town, 1899).

<sup>85</sup> Snyman, 'Safety and health', 37. See also Marianne Felix, 'Risking their lives in ignorance: the story of an asbestos-polluted community', in J. Cock and E. Koch (eds.), *Going Green: People, Politics and the Environment in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991), 33-43.

between white and African workers. African labourers were not permitted to exploit new asbestos deposits, which they had discovered themselves. Instead, the white miners took over the more rewarding new veins, leaving the Africans to less productive ones.<sup>86</sup>

The conspiracy was a predominantly male affair. At a prayer-meeting on the night before the assault, about twenty workers had endorsed Bekeer's plans. On the morning of 5 September 1906, however, only six men had the courage to 'kill two white men for the Lord', as Bekeer had instructed.<sup>87</sup> Klaas Kortom was the only one who excused himself because 'he still had a headache and that he was willing to come but his wife won't hear of his coming to take part'.<sup>88</sup> But in the course of the trial, it emerged that the accused had been spurred not only by more immediate labour grievances, but that Bekeer had racially incited the asbestos miners against their white foremen. Bekeer reminded the court that god had told him: 'I [God said] take you from the Hottentot tribe and appoint you king above all kings.'<sup>89</sup>

He made frequent references to himself as a 'Hottentot', thus striking an ethnic chord among his accomplices. The names of his co-defendants, such as Van Wyk, Hans Vannel and Thys Jantjes, suggest their origins among the marginalized Khoekhoe population of the Cape. In court these men were ethnically classified as 'Bushmen and Hottentots', except one who was called a 'Bastard'.<sup>90</sup> During the preliminary investigation the prisoners labelled themselves as 'Hottentots', or 'half-bred Griqua'.<sup>91</sup>

Another accused, Hendrik Viviers, not only called himself a 'Hottentot', but also claimed to be son of the Khoekhoe chief, Hendrik Waterboer, 'whom the Government shot at Griquatown when the white people invaded the district of Hay'. This allegation provoked a rebuttal from the judge.<sup>92</sup> Viviers, however, was determined to make his point, insisting that 'my father in heaven told me this. If the English race feels itself in a position to stop the war for which I am standing here now, let them do it. I feel myself able with five men, myself being captain, to drive all Englishmen out of Africa'.<sup>93</sup> Such statements suggest that Bekeer's fire-and-brimstone rhetoric had impressed his accomplices. Viviers boosted his claims by invoking the history of the decline of the Cape Khoekhoe which had not been erased from the minds of their descendants by the beginning of the twentieth century.

The judge emphasized that the name 'Bekeer', the *nom-de-guerre* that

<sup>86</sup> CA, CO, Defence and Police Correspondence Files, 8331, X 6585, Sept.–Nov. 1906, C. E. Wimble to Commander C.M.P. in Cape Town, 16 Sept. 1906.

<sup>87</sup> CA, Griqualand West Supreme Court, Criminal Cases, High Court Kimberley (henceforth KSC) 1/1/1/38, Hendrik Bekeer, Preparatory Examinations [1906].

<sup>88</sup> CA, KSC 1/1/1/38, Hendrik Bekeer, Preparatory Examinations, Hendrik Viviers, 23 Sept. 1906. Other conspirators wisely professed stomach pains and so on, in order to abscond from the plot: *ibid.* Hans van Nel. <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* Hendrik Bekeer, 26 Sept. 1906.

<sup>90</sup> *Diamond Fields Adviser*, 13 Feb. 1907.

<sup>91</sup> CA, Magistrate Griquatown, 1 GSD, Criminal Cases 1905–6, 1/28, Resident Magistrate's Office and Crown Prosecutor's Office, preliminary examination 'Hendrik Bekeer and others', 28 Sept. 1906.

<sup>92</sup> 'His Lordship: That was long before you were born. – Viviers: I was then a baby, I am now 25. – His Lordship: There was no war there for many years before you were born. – My father was considered a great man, and drew money from the Government. – His Lordship: You are mixed in your history – that chief was not shot; he was a pensioner and died of old age': *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 13 Feb. 1907. <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

Stuurman had acquired in the Cape Colony, meant 'to convert'.<sup>94</sup> Bekeer seemed eager to confess his crime in court, but he did not beg forgiveness. His eloquence in front of the white judge, jury and audience indicates how persuasive his speeches must have been among his cohorts. It had been the custom among the Hopefield labourers to hold prayer-meetings twice on Sundays, and occasionally during the week, under the tutelage of an African preacher. Once the preacher had left Hopefield, Bekeer transformed these gatherings, where Dutch hymns were sung, into a platform for his own purposes.<sup>95</sup> The attacks on the whites had been planned at these prayer meetings.

He thus created an environment in Hopefield which was receptive to his millenarian message. Several of his comrades recalled how Bekeer had emphasized during the church service which he conducted on the eve of the killings, that 'it is war. It is not a plaything. It is the truth'.<sup>96</sup> Apart from hinting about war, however, Bekeer did not reveal his identity or disclose past exploits to his new followers. Perhaps he was still humiliated by his unsuccessful mission in Namibia, and therefore did not want to undermine his influence on the Hopefield miners by telling them the truth about how he had lost his previous war and the trust of the Witboois. It remains unclear how the Cape authorities later realized that they had executed the same man as had gained notoriety for his influential role in the Nama war.<sup>97</sup> In December 1906 when Bekeer was already in jail, the *Cape Times* reported that 'the false prophet Shepherd Stuurman' had been sighted in the Vryburg region and recommended that the government might give 'some attention' to the dangerous agitator.<sup>98</sup> In court, Bekeer repeated the story of his vision, which had perturbed the Rhenish missionary Carl Wandres two years earlier in Windhoek, declaring, 'it is five years since the Lord came to me in a red fire saying that I appoint you as one of my workers, and I will be your Lord'.<sup>99</sup> The prophet's defiant spirit captured the imagination of his disciples, who self-confidently confessed their complicity in the killings. His co-accused, Hanns Vannel, supported him by saying:

I am a worker of Hendrik Bekeer. I believe in him and I admit that we killed the people. There is no distinction with the Lord that I can see myself. Now at this time, the whites are better than the blacks, but when death comes there is no difference. The Lord takes as they come, white and black, big and small.<sup>100</sup>

Another defendant, Thys Jantjes, declared: 'I admit this deed that has the name of murder. It is not murder. It is an incident in history.'<sup>101</sup>

Bekeer's attorney entered a belated plea for his client's insanity, arguing

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Cape Times*, 18 Oct. 1906; *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 18 Oct. 1906.

<sup>97</sup> BAL, ZB, VIII, vol. 1, Schroetter, Consulate-General Cape Town, to Government Windhoek, 10 May 1907, 22; Estorff, Commander Schutztruppe, to Government Windhoek, 8 Apr. 1907, 125; Humboldt, Consulate-General Cape Town, to Government Windhoek, 24 June 1907, 128: 'According to another message from the Commander of the Cape Mounted Police, Bekeer was identical with Stuurman'.

<sup>98</sup> *Cape Times*, 22 Dec. 1906.

<sup>99</sup> CA, KSC 1/1/1/38, Hendrik Bekeer; see also *Cape Times*, 18 Oct. 1906; 27 Oct. 1906.

<sup>100</sup> CA, KSC 1/1/1/38, Hendrik Bekeer, Preparatory Examinations, Hendrik Viviers, Hanns Vannel [1906].

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* Thys Jantjes.

that 'if Bekeer was not suffering from delusions, he did not know what delusions were'.<sup>102</sup> The judge rejected this line of defence. Instead, he accepted the district surgeon's statement which declared that Bekeer 'was not of normal mind regarding what he called his mission, though perfectly normal on all other points'.<sup>103</sup> The crown prosecutor called for the death sentence, leaving no doubt that capital punishment was the only sentence severe enough to deter 'any tendency in the direction of religious fanaticism amongst the lower classes of the native population of this great country'.<sup>104</sup> Addressing the packed courtroom for 85 minutes,<sup>105</sup> the judge passed four death sentences. Two of the accused received life sentences with hard labour because of extenuating circumstances.<sup>106</sup> The jury took only five minutes to deliberate.<sup>107</sup> On 24 February 1907, Shepherd Stuurman, alias Hendrik Bekeer, and his three accomplices were hanged in Kimberley prison.<sup>108</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The personal background of Stuurman/Bekeer remains enigmatic. There is little if any information about his experiences, which turned him into a wandering prophet, travelling from Port Elizabeth to Windhoek and then back to the northern Cape. His own statements suggest that he was rebellious in the same way as many African and coloured communities were in the early 1900s. His illiteracy indicates that the supposed 'Ethiopian agent' found it difficult to enter the higher ranks of the Ethiopian movement, in which only a small educated élite claimed positions of prestige and power.<sup>109</sup>

The records contain only fragmentary evidence of the content of his religious ideas. What emerges from his life story, however, is how thoroughly Christianity had permeated African politics and resistance in early twentieth-century southern Africa. From the Cape Colony to German South West Africa, Stuurman/Bekeer found eager listeners who were prepared to follow him in his crusade against European rule.

Whites were scared by the idea of an underground network of black

<sup>102</sup> *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 14 Feb. 1907. <sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* 15 Feb. 1907.

<sup>105</sup> *Cape Times*, 14 Feb. 1907.

<sup>106</sup> CA, AG, 1718, no. 6292, Attorney General, V. Sampson, to Justice Lange, Kimberley, 14 Mar. 1907.

<sup>107</sup> *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 15 Feb. 1907. Juries in the Cape Colony were overwhelmingly dominated by whites, even though in theory the law did not contain a colour bar. Albie Sachs, *Justice in South Africa* (Brighton, 1973), 60.

<sup>108</sup> *South African News*, 25 Feb. 1907. Judge Lange was later criticized by the Attorney General, Victor Sampson, for having misdirected the jury. Sampson argued that Bekeer had not been moved by 'malice' against his victims but 'by his insane beliefs', which would have justified lifelong imprisonment as a 'criminal lunatic'. He emphasized, however, that in contrast to the ringleader's mentally disturbed state, his accomplices had deliberately joined the conspiracy. Thus, in his view, they had fully deserved their death sentences. Sampson seemed to have taken for granted that Bekeer's millenarian ideas amounted to clinical insanity. CA, AG, 2663, Reports despatched in regard to matters referred to Attorney-General, 1907-8, Victor Sampson, 24 Feb. 1907, Re Hendrik Bekeer and others: murder. Thanks to Rob Turrell for this reference. See also Rob Turrell, 'Hanging women: the "singular case" of Mietje Bontnaal' (Conference paper, *Land, violence and social problems in the history of southern Africa, 16th Biennial Conference of the South African Historical Society*, Pretoria, 6-9 July 1997).

<sup>109</sup> See Campbell, *Songs of Zion*.

resistance extending beyond colonial boundaries. Yet South African historiography has maintained a geographical separation between the Cape and Namibia. Contemporary European observers, however, were well aware of the connections between Africans in both territories, and worried about the repercussions that African mobility and resistance might have on colonial rule on both sides of the border. When the Bambatha rebellion broke out in Natal in March 1906, whites believed that news about the war in the German colony was being rapidly absorbed by the Zulu.<sup>110</sup> The German consul in Durban observed 'dangerous developments for the white colonists, which could become as disastrous as the Herero rebellion'.<sup>111</sup> On the other hand, the rebellion in Natal could also cause repercussions in the German colony.<sup>112</sup> The German General Staff in Namibia therefore followed the events in Natal closely.<sup>113</sup>

James Campbell has observed that millenarian rumours swept through the eastern Cape. In the district of Oudtshoorn, stories about Hendrik Witbooi circulated among the coloured population, who claimed that the Witbooi leader 'would sweep into South Africa at the head of a great army', accompanied by 'three black Bishops'.<sup>114</sup> In another tirade against the Ethiopian movement, the *Transvaal Leader* put things in perspective by emphasizing that a South African prophet, Stuurman, had incited the Nama against the Germans. The newspaper suggested that it was time to take measures against the Ethiopians because indigenous agitation threatened white rule in southern Africa.<sup>115</sup> The prospect of a chain reaction throughout 'white' southern Africa was therefore always in the minds of Europeans. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the expression of political and social distress in religious terms was the sole prerogative of black people. Albert Grundlingh has recently pointed out that feelings of deprivation and alienation, which sparked African prophetic movements, were also articulated by the Afrikaner prophet, N. J. van Rensburg, called Siener, who addressed the visceral fears of many whites.<sup>116</sup>

One of the most noticeable aspects of the life of Stuurman/Bekeer is the militancy of his message of the impending end of white rule. In contrast to

<sup>110</sup> See S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion. The 1906–8 disturbances in Natal* (Oxford, 1970), 155.

<sup>111</sup> PA, Akten Generalkonsulat Kapstadt, Politische Angelegenheiten, bundle 37, B1, vol. 14, Lettenbaur to Chancellor Bülow, 24 Feb. 1904.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* vol. 15, Reuter to Chancellor Bülow, 20 Dec. 1905.

<sup>113</sup> PRO, FO 367/8, General Correspondence Africa. Germany (1906), Wade to the General Staff in Cape Town, Keetmanshoop, 6 June 1906.

<sup>114</sup> Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 211.

<sup>115</sup> PA, Afrika Generalia 13, vol. R 14675, Johannesburg Consulate, Frank to Chancellor Bülow, 7 Jan. 1907.

<sup>116</sup> A. Grundlingh, 'Probing the prophet: the psychology and politics of the Siener van Rensburg phenomenon', *South African Historical Journal*, 34 (1996), 225–39. Even if they shared notions of disorientation, this did not prevent whites from reacting very sensitively to the slightest sign of millenarian unrest among Africans. Such cases were immediately reported in white newspapers. The 'coloured agitator' in the eastern Cape, Hendrik Abrahams, for example, claimed that he had been ordered by King Edward VII 'to give over to the coloured people the whole of South Africa as far as the Orange River Colony'. Abrahams had reputedly appointed several deputies and employed a private secretary. He encouraged his followers 'to seize any shops, as he would be crowned in George, from which place he would proceed to Mossel Bay', *Cape Times*, 4 Nov. 1905.

those Africans who used independent churches to find moral support for their struggle against discrimination, Bekeer wanted nothing less than to destroy the social order. In the world that he saw in his millenarian visions, there was no place for white people. This uncompromising stance gave him political and religious credibility. Moreover, it may be assumed that the prophet's affirmation of his 'Hottentot' identity played an important role in securing his influence over the Witboois in Namibia and the miners at Hopefield. Robert Ross has recently suggested that the indigenous expression of 'Hottentot nationalism'<sup>117</sup> became muted in the aftermath of the failed Kat River rebellion of 1851–2, because new ways of formulating ethnic identity were subsequently explored.<sup>118</sup> The statements of Stuurman/Bekeer and his accomplices seem, however, to suggest that the indigenous appeal to a 'Hottentot identity' still had considerable power in the early 1900s, even though one needs to look very carefully at the specific historical and regional circumstances in each case.

The prophet's frequent hints at his 'Hottentot' identity do not indicate, however, that he intended to lead his followers back to a glorified pre-colonial Khoekhoe past. As noted in preceding discussion, the vision of a gigantic bridge which would allow the Nama to cross into Germany can be read in terms of a forward movement into a future in which power relations between blacks and whites would be transformed. Not content with evicting all whites from Africa, Stuurman/Bekeer's millenarian dreams forecast a dramatic reversal of the colonial order: to colonize the land of the colonizers, to kill them or turn them into slaves.

#### SUMMARY

The article focuses on the political activities of a Khoekhoe prophet in the early 1900s. His life story shows that Christian ideas played a crucial role in the resistance of Africans against European rule in southern Africa. Shepherd Stuurman alias Hendrik Bekeer wandered from the eastern Cape in South Africa to German South West Africa in 1904. His millenarian message of the impending end of white supremacy contributed decisively to the outbreak of the war between the Nama and Germans. The latter believed that Stuurman acted as an 'agent' of the South African Ethiopian movement in order to foment a racial war. The Germans also insinuated that the 'lenient native policy' of the British at the Cape had encouraged African resistance to extend into the German colony and that the British were therefore partly responsible for the war in Namibia. A price was put on Stuurman's head, and an attempt was made to have him killed even after he had returned to the Cape Colony. The prophet, who had abandoned the struggle in Namibia because his military incompetence aroused suspicion among the Nama, reappeared in the northern Cape under the name of Hendrik Bekeer. There he incited several African workers to kill their white foremen in order to unleash all-

<sup>117</sup> S. Trapido, 'The emergence of liberalism and the making of "Hottentot nationalism", 1815–1834', *Collected seminar papers of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London: The societies of southern Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, 17 (1992).

<sup>118</sup> R. Ross, 'The Kat River Rebellion and Khoikhoi nationalism: the fate of an ethnic identification' (Conference paper, *Khoisan identities and cultural heritage*, University of the Western Cape at the South African Museum, Cape Town, 12–16 July 1997).

out 'war against whites'. Before he was sentenced to death, the prophet eloquently defended his actions in court and insisted that he had acted on orders from God, who had 'chosen him from the Hottentot tribe'. Despite his frequent references to his Khoekhoe identity, the prophet formulated ideas of anti-colonial resistance which extended beyond Africa, thus imagining the reversal of the power relations between colonizers and colonized on a global scale.