

## The Bulhoek Massacre Remembered

I am not here to fight anybody or to cause only bloodshed, but if the finger of God has pointed out that "This" must be the place, no earthly place, no earthly force can prevent it. I did not call this gathering here every follower of mine came of his own free will. It may be the fulfillment of the Scriptures that say, "All my people will gather together for that journey to the promised land." And if this is the place, Bullhoek, no earthly power can interfere.

*Extract from a letter from Enoch Mgijima, mid-May 1921, quoted in Edgar (2018: Loc 23 of 5657, Kindle edition).*



## The Bulhoek Massacre Centenary: An Invitation to a Scholarly Re-Examination

On the 24th of May 2021, to the day, it will be a hundred years since South Africa's largest massacre in which more than 200 members of the Israelites church were killed by the Union police. The tragic event has come to be known as the Bulhoek Massacre (Mandew 1997). The killings occurred in Ntabelanga in the Eastern Cape, which is today the seat of a monument commemorating the brutal event. More than a hundred members of the church were wounded and more than 141, including their leader, Enoch Mgijima, were arrested.

Sixty-five years earlier, in 1856 and 1857, there was the great Xhosa cattle-killing movement in which thousands of humans and cattle died, when a young girl, Nongqawuse, "lured an entire people to death by starvation" (Peires 1989: ix).

While Edgar (2018) is correct to suggest that "what distinguishes Bulhoek is that the government directed its power at a community of faith" what is common to the two tragedies was a religion-inspired dystopian vision of the ending of the world undergirded by a repressed quest for land and for political freedom. Living as they did through different phases of colonial rule and conquest, Nongqawuse and Mgijima articulated their dystopian visions differently. The former proclaimed a "beautiful but hopeless dream" (Peires 1989: ix) of a glorious resurrection into a better world, while the latter prophesied about the imminent and abrupt ending of the evil world.

To understand the emergence of such prophetic movements as those of Nongqawuse and Mgijima, it is important to appreciate their religious, political and cultural contexts. Both Nongqawuse and Mgijima must be viewed within the context of several similar prophets such as Nxele, Mlanjeni, Ntsikana, Lekganyane, Nontetha Nkwenkwe and others. In this regard, the pioneering works of Sundkler (1961), Barret (1968),

Hollenweger (1972) as well as such evocative historical works of the likes of Peires (1989) and Edgar (2018) are crucial guides.

And yet as Lodge (2011) and others have observed, South African history is punctuated with bloody massacres large and small, slow and quick, massacres whose common denominator is the wanton loss of human life. It may not be accidental that Enoch Mgijima's Israelite church emerges almost at the same time as the formation of the African National Congress as well as the proclamation of the Native Land Act of 1913 (Plaatje 1916) and also at the backdrop of the devastation of the 1918 influenza epidemic (Spinney 2017).

Around 1907, when 'the call' of God came to Enoch Mgijima, he broke away from the local Methodist Church in which he was a lay preacher, and attached himself, not to any of the growing number of breakaway churches in South Africa at the time, but to an African American Church – The Church of God and Saints of Christ (CGSC) which was led and founded by charismatic African American church leader, William Saunders Rowdy. It seems that this was carefully considered choice by Mgijima – strategic in its Pan-Africanist intent and subversive in its espousal of the radical theology of liberation practised by the CGSC at that time.

It would seem that the 1920/21 'invasion' of Ntabelanga by more than a thousand members of the Israelite church was not a sudden occurrence that came out of the blue. It was born out of years of pilgrimages by members who came to temporarily camp there during the dates of key religious ceremonies in the annual calendar of the Israelites. Initially there was collaboration between the Israelites and the local Moravian Church in terms of sharing premises. But as the ranks of the Amasirayeli swelled and as the prophecies of Enoch Mgijima became more and more apocalyptic the church

members slowly ran out of land space even as they began to exhaust the tolerance of government and some locals.

In 1920, as Mgijima was preparing for the Passover ceremony to be held at his homestead, a larger than usual number of pilgrims started pouring into Ntabelanga. In that year, many of the pilgrims arrived early and they looked like they were there to stay longer than the usual pilgrimage period. At that time, rumours reached the ears of the inspector of locations, Geoffrey Nightingale "that "strangers" were selling all their possessions and settling at Bulhoek with the intention of taking up permanent residence" (Edgar 2018: Loc 1545 of 5657).

Throughout 1920 tensions were growing between the Israelites and the government so that by May 1921 these tensions reached boiling point, as the members of the church appeared to dig in their heels, refusing to move. On the 24th of May 1921, the police opened fire on the members of the Israelite Church. The church members tried to fight back, but the police fire power was vastly superior.

### An Invitation to Scholarly Re-Examination

In the week or 23rd to 30th May 2021, that being the week of the Bulhoek Massacre Centenary, the scholarly community has a unique and historical opportunity to revisit the tragic event. From a scholarly point of view, although the Bulhoek Massacre is a religious tragedy in which religious adherents were massacred in the course of practising their faith, their specific religious dogma notwithstanding, our quest to understand the massacre, requires that we seek the contribution of various disciplines.

### A Multi-Disciplinary Approach

While the first and most obvious humanities discipline, is the discipline of theology in all its various sub-disciplines, by its very nature, the Bulhoek Massacre requires an interdisciplinary approach. In the context of similar break-away churches such as those of Mokone, Tile, Nkwenkwe and Lekganyane, what was the theological trajectory of Enoch Mgijima? What theological hermeneutics informed the practices of the Israelite church at that time? In this regard it would be interesting to track the evolution of the theology of the Israelites from the days of their formation up to the present day. Equally interesting would be a scholarly comparison between such so-called Ethiopian Churches as the Israelites and the Neo-Pentecostal churches of 21st Century (South) Africa.

Religion scholars may explore the possible intersection between African Religion, White Settler Christianity, African Christianity and African American Christianity in the cocktail of beliefs that may have generated the eventual conflict.

Other disciplines such as history, sociology and anthropology are crucial in helping us not only to connect the scholarly dots that link Bulhoek to similar tragedies in (South) Africa and elsewhere but in order for us to form as complete a picture of the available records as possible. Similarly, psychologists, police scientists and lawyers could help us understand the psychology, ideologies of the police as well as the legal framework, within

which the tragedy occurred as well as the nature of leadership provided by Enoch Mgijima and his lieutenants.

### A Call for Papers

In light of the upcoming centenary of the Bulhoek Massacre in 2021, the UP Center for the Advancement of Scholarship together with the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS), University of Johannesburg, have decided to hold a two-day commemorative conference.

We are hereby making a call for papers aimed in re-examining the significance of the Bulhoek Massacre in (South) African history in general and in (South) African church history in particular. Focussed on the Bulhoek Massacre and related, the papers can be written from the point of view of specific disciplines or across two or more disciplines. In other words, the papers may be theological, sociological, anthropological, historical, psychological or from the point of view of religion studies, law or police science.

### When

The Conference is planned for the 24th and 25th of May 2021.

### Where and How

The conference will take place in two different physical venues as well as online. On the 24th of May, the venue of the conference will be the University of Pretoria, Hatfield Campus. The conference will conclude at the University of Johannesburg on the 25th of May 2021. The conference will be streamed online and some may be broadcast on television and radio media.

### Abstract Deadline

Titles and abstracts should be sent to Ms Kirsty Nepomuceno [kirsty.agnew@up.ac.za](mailto:kirsty.agnew@up.ac.za) and [tinyiko.maluleke@up.ac.za](mailto:tinyiko.maluleke@up.ac.za) by the 15th of January 2021.

### Information Contacts

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### Conference Outcomes

It is intended that, once peer reviewed and revised, the papers delivered at the colloquium will result in a book commemorating the centenary of the 1921 Bulhoek Massacre.

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