


# 'Amadodana enu abone imibono': The interpretation of Ntsikana's vision against the book of Acts's vision experiences

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The specific aim of this article is to interpret Ntsikana's *kraal* vision by considering the vision narratives or experiences found in Acts of the Apostles. In 1987, J.B. Peires interpreted this vision as a mere 'hallucination' and further argued that there was nothing Christian about it, stating that Ntsikana had experienced a mystical vision, like any other heathen diviner. This article partly differs from this interpretation, and an argument is pursued that in South African church history vision narratives have led to 'conversion(s)' of many church leaders, including Ntsikana, and have subsequently shaped the direction of the church, especially the African indigenous churches. It is noted that the writer of Acts employed visions more frequently than any other author in the New Testament and that at strategic places throughout his work, Luke reported epiphanies in which God, or a divine agent, appeared and guided the course of events. These experiences, as reported by Luke, are not far from what Ntsikana experienced and should therefore be read as constituting the act of God in an African context.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The study has significance for Church history, African traditional religion and the New Testament. It is undertaken within (intra-) the African traditional and Christian religions discourse, with an interest in Church History that combines philosophical and theological approaches, especially with reference to South African sociopolitical and ecclesiastical contexts. The research builds on the existing Church history and New Testament discourses.

**Keywords:** Ntsikana; conversion; visions; African; Acts of the Apostles.

## Introduction

One of the casualties of the evangelical missionary movement was that of self-knowledge for African converts. Africans define themselves as people in relation to other people, ancestors and God. Hence, altering their worldview dislocates Africans to the periphery of human thought and experience. The first victim of spiritual and psychological disorientation may be self-pride if Africans are separated from both their ancestors and God as portrayed in the Bible.

This article seeks to interpret Ntsikana's *kraal* vision by considering the vision narratives or experiences found in Acts of the Apostles. It argues that Peires' (1987) dismissal of Ntsikana's vision as a mere 'hallucination' and that there was nothing Christian about it is incorrect because it overlooks the importance of visions in primitive cultures. Furthermore, this assumption is fuelled by a narrow Eurocentric understanding of the vision narratives in the book of Acts, whose role was to direct the mission of the early church.

The impetus for this research is the importance of visions in the trajectory of several large African Independent/Initiated Churches such as the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission. A significant number of African Pentecostal churches have come into existence after the founder had a visionary experience. Engenas Lekganyane (1885–1948), the founding father of the ZCC, had a vision in which a voice said that if he went to Johannesburg, he should join the church that baptises by three-fold immersion in water, and he will find healing from the eye disease he was suffering from. In Johannesburg, he met Le Roux of the Apostolic Faith Mission in 1908. His members traced the founding of the ZCC to a revelation he received from God in 1910 (Anderson & Pillay 1997:231).

Christina Nku, who was born in 1894, was known for having visions at a very young age. At the age of 20, she had a vision that she would not die from a very troubling illness. Later on, she had

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several visions, where she saw a large church with a dozen gates, instructed to pursue the baptism of John and Jesus, and the exact place where she was to erect her church (Anderson & Pillay 1997:232). These churches draw enormous figures of African believers because of their appreciation of the African context and the emphasis on healing, exorcism and prophecy, which may come through dreams or visions, more than dogma. The first reaction against missionary Christianity in Africa was the establishment of African Initiated Churches (AIC). The notable feature of these churches is the blending of the Bible, African tradition and religion in their worship, which attracted many followers (Jentile 2016:23).

The first section of this article sketches Ntsikana's life. The following section details his vision and the subsequent conversion. The section thereafter surveys the most important scholarly research on the phenomenon of visions in the Acts of the Apostles. The succeeding section uses the findings of the previous section to interpret Ntsikana's vision. The accompanying section outlines the final remarks and is followed by the conclusion.

## Ntsikana: The Xhosa prophet

From the Cira clan and a son to King Ngqika's councillor, Gaba, Ntsikana was born in 1780 and died around 1820.<sup>1</sup> Gaba was a polygamist, with two wives, and Nonabe, Ntsikana's mother, was the second wife. Having been raised in a traditional family, he was circumcised and married two wives, 'Nontsonta, who became the mother of Kobe, and Nomanto, who was the mother of Dukwana and two younger brothers' (Millard 1999:58–59).

Together with Nxele,<sup>2</sup> his contemporary, Ntsikana has been dubbed one of the 'prophet-intellectuals' (Mangcu 2012:54). He is appreciated as the first Christian convert to show signs of the holistic African worldview, in that he did not see the contradiction between the Christian faith and the socio-political involvement of his day (Saayman 2005:8). Furthermore, he is valued as the Xhosa prophet who indigenised 'the gospel in[*to*] the context of Xhosa culture and society' (Roy 2017:40). Ntsikana formed an important link between the traditional and modern worlds (Booi 2008:7). Unlike some of the contemporary converts who left their communities and remained at missionaries' mission stations, Ntsikana preferred to stay at his homestead and regularly visited both Williams and Brownlee (Millard 1999:59). He is not only known as the first Xhosa convert to have a congregation, but he is also the first to compose hymns that formed part of his services. He composed four songs: 'Ulo Thixo omkhulu ngosezulwini', the 'bell song', 'Dalubomi' and the 'hornless song' (Crafford 1991:25). Holt (1954) writes that:

Ntsikana was a poet and composer of melodies among his people. He used to summon his congregation to worship by means of his 'bell', a chant ... the singing at the Kat River mission

1.1821, according to Hodgson (1981:33); 1822, according to Peires (1987:137).

2. Also known as Makanda, a councillor of Ndlambe.

had been confined to a few who knew Dutch and could therefore sing the Dutch hymns. Ntsikana made up for this deficiency by arranging the main doctrines of his preaching in the form of a hymn, which became famous, and today is to be found in most Xhosa hymnals. (pp. 112–113)

Ntsikana has been contrasted with Nxele as representing two contrasting poles of the Xhosa reaction to Christianity and the West, with Nxele representing struggle and Ntsikana representing submission (Peires 1987:74). His ideas, according to Ndletyana (2008:17), were a trendsetter of nationalist thought and planted the seeds of Black Consciousness and Black Theology in South Africa.

## Ntsikana's 'conversion'

Conversion is defined by sociologists as 'a personal transformation or rebirth resulting from adopting new religious beliefs' (Macionis 1995:494), or the 'taking up' of a religion that is not the religion of one's cultural background (Singleton 2014:184). Conversion would then indicate the deliberate observance of new religious convictions by a convert. In conceptualising conversion, Snow and Machalek (1984:169–170) postulate that conversion involves radical personal change and a change in one's universe of discourse.

Masondo (2015) has done good work in developing a working model of understanding conversion among African Christians. His research has looked at various approaches among sociologists and theologians in conceptualising conversion and grouped these into two broad categories: social-psychological and social-historical (Masondo 2015:88). Studies under social-psychological research see conversion as self-transformation. 'The importance of the agency of the individual in this process is clearly evident. The individual plays a pivotal role in his or her conversion' (Masondo 2015:88). Social-historical explanations perceive the importance of a broader social, economic, political and historical context (Masondo 2015:88). A person's conversion is a multifaceted experience, which involves all these categories.

Ntsikana's life story attests to Masondo's (2015) observations. There is a popularly held belief that he received his divine inspiration independent of missionaries, because of the assumption that his vision, which he interpreted as a calling from God, happened in 1815, before the arrival of Williams (Hodgson 1981:3). On the other end are those who believe that his conversion to Christianity was because of his contact with missionaries, such as Van der Kemp, and that Ntsikana was Joseph Williams' convert (Crafford 1991:21; Holt 1954:106). Peires' (1987:72) opinion is that Ntsikana's conversion was an 'emergence, influenced by personal evolution and external pressure which led him towards Christianity'; this opinion agrees with Masondo (2015). A person's conversion is a personal and complicated journey, which cannot be pinned to one inspiration.

From 1799 to 1801, Van der Kemp, a missionary from the London Missionary Society, tried to evangelise the area

where Ntsikana resided, and it was from him that Ntsikana first heard the Christian message (Millard 1999:58). He was 'the most attentive, and more or less regular' listener to Van der Kemp's sermons, which in a way transformed his character (Bokwe 1914:7). The spark thus kindled was kept alive by the arrival in 1816–1817 of the Rev. Joseph Williams, also of the London Missionary Society, who came preaching the same news as Van der Kemp (Bokwe 1914:7).

It is important to note that Ntsikana's vision experience might have happened in 1815, before the arrival of Williams (Hodgson 1981:3). Even though the 'seed' of the gospel was planted in his heart, the vision happened without any missionary around. This vision marked a turning point in his life. Ntsikana's vision seems to have led to his conversion, and he totally changed his posture in the community and his family.

Bokwe (19) narrates Ntsikana's vision experience in the following manner:

Ntsikana, one morning went, as usual, to the kraal. The sun's rays were just peeping over the eastern horizon, and, as he was standing at the kraal gate, his eyes fixed with satisfied admiration on his favourite ox, he thought he observed a ray, brighter than ordinary, striking the side of his beast. As he watched the animal, Ntsikana's face betrayed excited feelings. He enquired of a lad standing nearby: 'Do you observe the thing that I now see?' The lad, turning his eyes in the direction indicated, replied: 'No, I see nothing there'. Ntsikana recovered from the trance, uplifted himself from the ground, on which he had meantime stretched himself, and said to the puzzled boy: 'You are right; the sight was not one to be seen by your eyes'. (p. 14)

The same day, Ntsikana and his family attended a wedding celebration at another homestead. At this wedding, 'a strong whirlwind suddenly blew up' whenever Ntsikana wanted to join the dance, and this happened three times. Without warning he told his wives to return to his residence. He washed the red mud off his body in a river on the way back. Crafford (1991:20) claims that this was Ntsikana's way of publicly declaring that he had gone over to the Christian faith. A form of baptism, even though he was never formally baptised.

Hodgson (1981:3) adds that those who were with him thought him being either mad or bewitched. The 'next day Ntsikana continued to act strangely, remaining at the gate of his cattle byre and humming an unfamiliar chant over and over again' (Hodgson 1981:3). Eventually, Ntsikana told the people that they should all pray and from then on, he held regular services (Millard 1999:59).

The aim of this article is to interpret Ntsikana's vision, which Peires (1987:72) dismissed as a mere hallucination, but which Ntsikana interpreted as a calling from God (Hodgson 1981:3), and compare it to the visions in the book of Acts.

## Acts of the Apostles' visions

In Acts of the Apostles, visionary experiences proliferate, which accords well with the prophecy of Joel that is cited at

Pentecost: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, "that I will pour my Spirit upon all flesh ... and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams"' (Ac 2:17). Luke paints a picture that the Pentecost event was a divine moment, where God empowered believers for their new role as witnesses. These believers were 'empowered', not only to witness but also to experience visionary revelation and to prophesy, which signalled the arrival of 'the last days'. Joel's prophecy is Luke's introduction to the Acts of the Apostles, setting a tone that visions will play a pivotal role in the spread of the gospel and that the source of these visions is divine.

To mention a few visionary narratives, it is in a vision that Christ manifested himself to Paul on the Damascus Road (9:1–19). This vision established God's role in converting Paul and sending him on his mission to the Israelites and to the gentiles. The visions to Cornelius in Caesarea (10:1–8) and Peter in Joppa (10:9–16) authorised Peter's table fellowship with gentiles and reinforced God's intentions concerning the gentile mission. The course of the gentile mission, as Luke presents it through the activities of Paul, is guided by further divine interventions through visions. In a vision that appears at night in Troas, a man invites Paul to help the Macedonians (16:9), leading Paul and his companions to conclude that this is a divine initiative. Later, the Lord himself appears to Paul in Jerusalem to confirm that he will testify in Rome (23:11). Visionary experiences lie at the heart of the Luke-Acts plots, and these appear to be divinely initiated. With that being the case, most of the studies around visionary experiences in Luke, although they offer helpful insights, leave many questions unexplored; specifically, the response of characters and their interpretation of visionary experiences in the narratives.

## Form-critical analysis

Oppenheim (1956:184) finds that visionary experiences were recorded on three clearly separate planes, namely dreams and visions as revelations of the deity, which may or may not require interpretation, which reflects, symptomatically, the state of the mind; the spiritual and bodily health of the dreamer or visionary; or visions that are only mentioned but never recorded, and forthcoming events are prognosticated. In the symbolic dream, visions consist of strange symbols or figures that must be decoded; whereas in the message dream or vision, a deity or a representative of the deity appears to the dreamer or visionary to impart a revelation. What is of interest in Oppenheim's (1956) work is the psychological status of the dreamer or visionary. Oppenheim (1956) observes that the psychological status and health of a person in the ancient Near East were an expression of that person's cultic standing or the extent to which the person was endowed with protective deities who safeguard the life, success and happiness of the individual.

Building on Oppenheim's work, John Hanson (1978) identifies three basic types of dream-vision for the purpose of form-critical description: (1) the audio-visual dream or vision, in which a figure appears to the dreamer and says or



indicates something, and there are elements of both seeing and hearing; (2) the auditory dream or vision, in which an experience occurs in which something is heard only; and (3) the visual dream or vision, in which 'only a scene or set of occurrences is described and the dreamer is a passive observer' (Hanson 1978:26). He further observes formalities between the three types, namely the scene setting (dreamer, place, time and mental state of the dreamer at or just prior to the dream); the technical terminology (terms of dream and vision, sleep and the like); the dream or vision proper (figure, description and/or position of the figure, message or scene); the reaction of the dreamer or visionary to the dream or vision; and, lastly, the response to the dream or vision (action of the dreamer or visionary as a result of the experience and its meaning) (Hanson 1978:1). Hanson observes that dreams and visions significantly surface at a transforming viewpoint in the activity of the narrative. These reports function to provide the motivation for the actions of the main characters, and this is well within the bounds of the function of dreams and visions in the other Greco-Roman literature to 'direct or redirect the movement of the narrative' (Hanson 1978:30).

### Narrative analysis

The interpretation by those who receive these visions to make sense of them and discern the will of God is important. This dictates that we focus on the mental process of the same characters. It seems like visions in the broader sense are complex psycho-social events, and interpretation and (re)actions therefore need to be taken into consideration. A good example of narrative criticism is that of Miller (2007), who argues that there are two significant facts of religious experience: the exterior element of divine irruption and the interior element of individual interpretation. He concludes that God's irruptive exterior action is inextricably bound with the interior interpretive action of the recipients (Miller 2007:192). Human interpretation or interior interpretive action calls for the analysis of social and cultural dimensions of the text and its environmental context. Miller (2007) studies the characters' responses to the experience and finds that some just do what they are told, while others interpret them to make sense of them and discern the will of God. However, he stops there without further interrogating the visionaries' psychological condition. This is important because various scholars have chosen to focus on the 'divine' side of the experience of vision while neglecting the human experience and human perception of the experience.

### Altered states of consciousness

Some scholars have relied upon insights from social sciences, including cultural anthropology, to facilitate interpretations of visions in Acts, as pioneered by, among others, Bruce Malina (1995), Felicitas Goodman (1990) and John Pilch (2004, 2011). Goodman's (1990:71–75) pioneering work has identified four major kinds of Altered states of consciousness (ASCs) that serve four human needs and desires, namely

healing, divination, metamorphosis and sky (or spirit) journeys. Building on Goodman's (1990) work, Pilch (2004) draws on insights from social sciences, including cultural anthropology, cognitive neuroscience and medical anthropology, to facilitate interpretations of visions and healings. He argues that the trance experiences reported in Acts fit into Goodman's categories. He explains ASCs as 'time-outs' while living within consensual or 'normal reality'. 'We find regular and irregular ASC experiences. Social scientists call behaviour dealing with social crossings as "rite"' (Pilch 2004:171). He expands that rites are divided into rituals and ceremonies. Rituals are irregular time-outs; they occur when situations or conditions occur that unexpectedly displace affected individuals or groups into an alternate reality. Pilch (2004:171) defines ceremonies as regular time-outs that are called for by the very social structure of a group, which may include fixed prayer times.

Bourguignon (ed. 1979) concisely defines ASCs as:

conditions in which sensations, perceptions, cognition, and emotions are altered. They are characterized by changes in sensing, perceiving, thinking, and feeling. They modify the relation of the individual to self, body, sense of identity, and the environment of time, space and the other. (p. 236)

ASCs are a recognised deviation in psychological functioning compared to the ordinary baseline 'normal' state (Craffert 2010:128; Kjellegren & Eriksson 2010; Tart 1980:244). The problem is, as Craffert (2010:128) notes, that ordinary consciousness itself is not stable but subject to many different definitions and descriptions. Winkelman (1997) addresses the evidence for the universality of ASCs as an origin of religious experience and as the foundation for some manifestations of religious behaviour. According to Winkelman (1997:395), ASCs 'in a religious behaviour is widely reported, perhaps a universal of human societies'. Winkelman (1997:395) further asserts that this universal distribution of ASCs suggests a biological basis for this aspect of religious behaviour. Indeed, Lewis-Williams and Clottes (1998) agree that the potential to shift, voluntarily or involuntarily, between different states of consciousness is a function of the universal human nervous system. All people have to cope with different states of consciousness in one way or the other. Bourguignon (ed. 1979:10–11) found that approximately 90% of the societies she studied had institutionalised forms of ASCs. Cultural information interpreted by social scientific methods strongly argues that these ASC experiences did occur in the life of Jesus and his followers, just as they continue to occur among 90% of people in the contemporary world (Pilch 2004:113).

Craffert (2010:144) agrees that the interdisciplinary research of ASCs offers a whole new dimension to be explored in biblical interpretation. Interdisciplinary ASC research is not a way to rename biblical phenomena but to reassign it as human phenomena. In other words, it is not only a different label but an explanatory category for understanding certain phenomena. Visions are a social phenomenon for Africans.

## The reading of Ntsikana's vision

From the above section, one can postulate that visions are boundary-breaking experiences between two worlds – the spiritual and physical – where a message or guidance is given from the unseen world. Because visions are a human phenomenon, human interpretation or interior interpretive action is part of the complete experience. It therefore calls for the analysis of the social and cultural dimensions of the text and its environmental context, especially that of the visionary or dreamer.

### Visual vision

Ntsikana's vision can be classified as a 'visual dream or vision', where only a scene or set of occurrences is described and the dreamer is a passive observer. In this vision, nothing was said to Ntsikana; he observed the sun's ray, brighter than ordinary, striking the side of his beast. The only conversation recorded is that of him and the lad who was standing next to him. Ntsikana was in a trance while talking to the lad, and he continued the conversation after the trance. It seems Ntsikana had experienced a 'time-out', although being in consensual or 'normal' reality. This may be a regular occurrence for him because it is said that he was a diviner. Nonetheless, one can argue that this experience meant more to him, and it significantly changed the trajectory of his life. It therefore cannot be something that he was used to. Also, there was neither a ritual nor a ceremony recorded at that time. It can, however, be referred to as an irregular time-out, which occurred unexpectedly, displacing Ntsikana into an alternate reality. Ntsikana's sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions were altered, and his sense, perception, thinking and feeling changed. Falling to the ground was also a sign that there was an alteration of the body and a sense of identity. With all these in mind, one senses God's divine disruption of the normal course of life.

Following the kraal vision, he experienced bizarre happenings like the 'wind' event during the wedding dance, the 'washing of his red ochre,' and the 'humming of a hymn' for days that ensued (Millard 1999:59). Those around him believed he was insane (Hodgson 1981:3). Clearly this vision has a similar feature to one or two of the experiences recorded in the book of Acts in the Bible. It is claimed that Ntsikana started as a diviner, and spiritualists 'are called to their office through a mystical experience characterised by what many Western psychologists would call hysterical symptoms, but which the Xhosa regard as marks of divine attention' (Peires 1987:67). Divine visitations interrupt the accepted communal behaviour and may lead to some labelling the incumbent as having lost his mind (the normal accepted consciousness). Jesus' family, for example, thought of him as being 'out of his mind', and the religious teachers claimed that he 'is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons, he is driving out demons' (Mk 3). Western Christians would accept Jesus to have been used by God, even though his immediate community thought of him being frenetic, but simply relegate Ntsikana's vision to the 'madness periphery'. Perhaps

because Paul's story is recorded in the Holy Scripture, it should not be compared to a black African heathen's encounter with God. Be that as it may, Ntsikana felt 'an insistent voice within him [*crying*]: "this thing which has entered me, it says let there be prayer! Let everything bow the knee!"' (Peires 1987:72).

### Scene symbolism

The scene of this vision is very pictorial and rich with meaning. The elements thereof seem to be socially and culturally sensitive or relevant to the visionary. Jane Hodgson (1981:8) performs very commendable work in linking Ntsikana's vision and subsequent conversion to African traditional beliefs. Before we interrogate these elements, it is important to note that the African worldview is a religious worldview based on what is called African traditional religion (ATR), which is not a 'religion' in the European sense of the word, but a daily experience or action. Pobe (1983:6) correctly notes that 'religion is more danced out than thought out, heavy intellectual theology wears thin. Such rationalization and theologizing as there are come after experience'. Furthermore, at the centre of ATR is the awareness of the deity (Kato 1987:30–31), which leads to a special relationship with the ancestors, whom Biko (2017:102) called a 'community of saints, through whom we related to our God' for they have a special place next to God. All other beliefs hinge on these two core beliefs. As we interrogate Ntsikana, it is imperative to understand his worldview – a holistic worldview defined by the 'wholeness of life' (Pato 2000:93).

With this understanding, we can then analyse the elements in the scene of Ntsikana's vision. The first symbol is the cattle kraal, which is the scene of the vision. The *kraal* is a revered place in Xhosa tradition; 'it is [*a*] sacred place associated with ancestors. It is here that intercession was made to the ancestors at the start of the *idini* or ritual killing' (Hodgson 1981:8). The second symbol is that of an ox, *hulushe*. *Hulushe* is central because of the belief that 'ancestors [*were*] thought to communicate through favoured cattle' (Hodgson 1981:8). The third symbol is the time of the day. Ntsikana's vision took place 'one morning, at daybreak' (Crafford 1991:20). The morning is regarded as a very treasured time in both African culture and biblical writings<sup>3</sup> and further telling of the significance of morning desires for the cultic or faithful. Pastoral people, such as Xhosas, are used to early rising. 'One of the first things a man does when he comes out in the morning, is to go to his kraal, to count and admire his cattle' (Bokwe 1914). It is then expected of Ntsikana to be up early and visit his *kraal*. Also, Mbiti (1990:61–62) observes that prayers are made to God in many African contexts, often in the morning, notably by the heads of the households, with the living dead or other spiritual entities acting as intermediaries. A common trend is that people kneel, facing the east, and pray to God and ask him to let the day dawn well, to pour upon the people his medicine of health, and to drive away the evil divinity; some offer water as an offering to God,

3. Psalm 5:2–3, Psalm 143:8 and Isaiah 33:2.

while others burn incense (Mbiti 1990:61–62). Africans perform these acts daily, any time of the day, especially when there is a crisis, drought, sickness, undertaking a journey (or going hunting) or thanking God and their ancestors.

Furthermore, in various African groups, the sunrise has the connotation of being related to the heavens, which are the abode of God. Setting this in context, Mbiti (1990:52) notes that in many African communities, there are those who think that the sun is God's manifestation. Some believe that the sun is one of God's sons and that it is personified as a spirit or divinity. Despite the possibility that these may be related, there is no clear evidence that the sun is thought to be God or that God is thought to be the sun. At best, the sun represents attributes of God, including his nature, omniscience, strength and unwavering endurance.

Ntsikana 'noticed a ray of the sun, brighter than the others, strike the side of the ox. He went into a trance' (Millard 1999:59). Interpreting this as an encounter with the divine or a representative of the divine may not be far-fetched. Paul is recorded as having encountered 'a light from heaven, suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground...' (Ac 9:3). Bokwe (1914) also linked the two experiences when he asks:

[I]s it possible that on the outside appearance of that ox, standing all unconscious of the charmed gazer's, there was figured a totally different picture of a heavenly object? Can the story of the Apostle to the gentiles [be] repeating itself, though on a lesser scale? (p. 8)

## Last remarks

Peires (1987:72) argues that '[i]t should be emphasised that there was nothing Christian in this' vision. This, he says, is probably because of the belief among Christians, especially from the West, that God can reveal his will today, through the Word and the indwelling Holy Spirit. In cases where African dreams and visions are accepted, these Christians would argue that the Word and the Spirit are the only godly provided tests, and any vision that contradicts the two is not of God. Furthermore, a gift of discernment is also encouraged to assess between counterfeit visions and accurate visions. Peires was probably right in that there was nothing Christian about Ntsikana's vision because there was everything godly, which may not necessarily be Christian. God is not synonymous with Christianity, as the late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu once stated (Huffington Post 2013). Ntsikana may not necessarily have had a Bible; however, he surely had an encounter with God.

Asserting that Ntsikana's vision was a mere hallucination brings two thoughts. The first is the challenge of Christians, who seek to monopolise God's action and think that God's movement and revelation depend on their own interpretation. Colonial missionaries were guilty of this sin of prejudice and intolerance. Idowu (1969:11) has correctly reasoned that theologians and Christians in general need to be mindful of the distinction between 'the action of God' and 'the reaction

of man'. His point is that the action of God is constant and ever true with a cosmic significance, whereas the reaction of people varies, 'depending as it does upon personal backgrounds, upbringing, moods and prejudices and intolerance' (Idowu 1969:11). Ntsikana's response to the vision and interpretation should be understood based on his context, religion and culture, and not that of the intolerant interpreter. Idowu (1969:11) further argues that if we uphold the integrity of the Bible and our religion, we have to acknowledge that God initially revealed himself to the entire world and that every race has, to the extent of its innate capacity, understood some aspect of this initial revelation. Denying this would be a betrayal of the truth and a culturally biased approach to theology.

Africans thus sometimes relate their conceptual understanding of God to their historical existential situations. This relationship between self-knowledge and God-knowledge is so deep that (Jones 1974):

[H]ow the black man sees himself is dependent on how he sees God. If God does not exist, then the black man's view of selfhood falls far short of being adequate. (p. 67)

In simple terms, Jones says that if you want to destroy African people, just distort their view of God, or add many gods to the picture so that their understanding of God's revelation is distorted. Make them despise their own African beliefs and customs. Another intriguing point brought up by Idowu (1969:13), which is in line with Jones's thinking is that the church faces the dilemma of the 'foreignness of Christianity'. He argues that because of a failure to fulfil its mission, the Church has been successful in educating and preaching to Africans about a peculiar God that they have come to associate with white people. He asks what became of the God their ancestors knew, and the God who forms the basis of their customary beliefs. He responds by saying that the African God is still present among them. As a result, African converts are left to manage two Gods, leading to equivocal spiritual lives for themselves and their society.

Peires deprived Ntsikana of God and, thus, of his humanity and dignity when he interpreted his 1987 vision as nothing more than a hallucination because he believed that Ntsikana could not, in accordance with his own cultural conception, communicate with God.

## Conclusion

In biblical narratives, visions appear to be given to individuals, in pictographic modes and were not necessarily captured by their travel companions. As it were with Paul of Tarsus (Acts 9:7ff), so it was with Ntsikana. Primarily, Ntsikana had his calling to serve God and he lived within his community to preserve his dignity and relevance. According to Roy (2017:38), this Xhosa, the prophet of Christ bears a resemblance to Melchizedek. Without the assistance of a missionary, this man experienced a mystical encounter with Christ. In addition, he emerged as a powerful Christian prophet, a gifted hymn composer and the head of a Christian



congregation, yet he had so little interaction with missionaries that he was never baptised. This is not meant to call into question Ntsikana's experiences with missionaries or their impact on him at any point in his life.

African biblical readers should not take Ntsikana's vision without due consideration of his context and culture, because our society has been one that is rooted in dreams and visions as a genuine divine encounter with ancestors or God. Also, this was without written texts for many years until the arrival of missionaries with their inferior education, diluted Christian messages and Eurocentric biblical interpretations. Consequently, a visionary or a dreamer's experience meant much because it bridged the gap between the seen and the unseen world, as Ntsikana and his community realised. Ntsikana's vision should not be undermined because he was 'Black' or an 'African' who belonged to a colonised group of people. God spoke to Ntsikana in a way only he could understand.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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