

Worker *Izibongo* and Ethnic Identities in Durban

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Summary

Durban worker poetry is analysed and situated in contemporary debates around ethnicity and violence in Natal. It is argued that worker poetry can be seen as one example of the ANC and Cosatu's mobilisation of "traditional" cultural forms, commonly associated with Zulu-ness and ethnic identities. The common association of Inkatha with Zulu nationalism and the ANC with *non-racialism* is, therefore, challenged as misleading, being as it is primarily based on official discourse.

An analysis of events where the poetry was performed, is used to suggest that "Zulu" cultural forms (and implicitly ethnic identities) have often been demanded and mobilised "from below", by organisational membership. The apparent contradictions between this and the ANC's professed non-racialism can only be explained by acknowledging the power and persistence of various forms of "ethnic consciousness".

The paper goes on to explore another widely held notion, that of the "militarism of Zulu culture". Focusing again on worker poetry, it explores the role of popular culture in legitimising and/or authorising violence as a means of political contestation.

In conclusion, the implications of the view of ethnicity that underpins the paper for the "architects" of a post-apartheid order, are tentatively discussed.

Opsomming

Durban se werkerspoësie word geanaliseer en gesitueer in komtemporêre debatte oor etnisiteit en geweld in Natal. Daar word geredeneer dat werkerspoësie gesien kan word as een voorbeeld van die ANC en Cosatu se mobilisasie van "tradisionele" kulturele vorme, wat gewoonlik met Zuluheid en etniese identiteite geassosieer word. Die gewone assosiasie van Inkatha met Zulu nasionalisme, en die ANC met nie-rassisme word dus bevraagteken as misleidend, aangesien so 'n opvatting hoofsaaklik op amptelike diskoers gebaseer is.

Op grond van 'n ontleding van geleenthede waar die poësie uitgevoer is, word gestel dat "Zulu" kulturele vorme (en implisiete etniese identiteite) dikwels vereis en gemobiliseer is deur organisatoriese lidmaatskap op grondvlak. Die oënskynlike teenstrydigheid hiervan met die ANC se beweerde nie-rassisme kan net verduidelik word deur die erkenning van die mag en volharding van verskeie vorme van "etniese bewustheid".

Die algemene opvatting van die sogenaamde "militarisme van die Zulukultuur" word voorts ondersoek. Met die fokus weer eens op werkerspoësie, word die rol van populêre kultuur onder die loep geneem as 'n wettiging en/of 'n magtiging van geweld as 'n wyse van politieke verset.

Ten slotte word die implikasies van die siening van etnisiteit wat in die referaat die

"argitekte" van 'n post-apartheid bedeling ondersteun, tentatief bespreek.

A recent national survey claimed that Cosatu shop-stewards "attach little importance to ethnic identity" (Pityana & Orkin 1992: 17). Eighty-six percent of respondents saw themselves primarily as South Africans, nine percent as both South African and in ethnic terms, and five percent in primarily ethnic terms. Fifty percent, however, thought that "blacks and whites will never really trust each other" (1992: 71). In southern Natal, sixty percent of the respondents felt that the rights of minorities should be protected (as against forty-six percent nationally). Despite these differences, ninety-four percent of respondents intended voting for the "non-racial" African National Congress (ANC) in a fully democratic election.

In a different survey of Pietermaritzburg school students, the authors reported that ninety-five percent saw themselves "as Zulus" and that most of them supported a range of "traditional customs", such as lobola, initiation, traditional ceremonies, respect for and communication with the ancestors. At the same time, seventy-four percent were either members of, or sympathetic to, the ANC (Piper, Shange & Wedekind 1992).

These apparently contradictory results pose a number of serious questions about ethnicity and popular consciousness in Natal. Both groupings surveyed were predominantly ANC supporting, but apparently had very different views when it came to questions of ethnicity. Moreover, the shop-stewards gave significantly different responses to the three questions referred to above. If the respondents indeed attached little importance to ethnic identities, their support for the protection of minority rights seems anomalous, as do their suspicions concerning relations between "blacks" and "whites".

The most likely explanation for the apparent contradiction, offered to me by Ari Sitas (one of the researchers), is that shop-stewards are a highly politicised sector of the union movement.¹ According to this view, responses to the question on ethnic versus national identity were probably politically motivated, constituting a statement in favour of the African National Congress's non-racial policy. Different questions, phrased more carefully, would, therefore, have elicited different responses. Questions which did not specifically require respondents to choose between different types of identity (national, ethnic etcetera) may well have shown the widespread coexistence of different "identities".²

Elsewhere, Sitas (*Class, Nation, Ethnicity in Natal's Working Class 1990*: 269) claimed that most black workers in Natal do in fact "identify themselves as 'Zulu'", although there is no common "Zulu-ness". In his view, "different modalities of 'Zulu-ness' ... subsist on different working-class

formations". These solidarities are often constructed from "'sounds' ... in the public and oral world of mass movements" (1990: 267). He argues that structuralist theories have failed to explain "the passion for these comradeships of a 'movement', a 'nation', among *non-* or *semi-literate* multitudes of people".

Peter Delius, discussing ethnicity in the case of the Ndzundza Ndebele, has made a similar point:

The experience of the Ndzundza serves as a reminder that while ethnic identities and traditions may be moulded or even invented by elites, they can also be crafted from below by men and women working with available elements of culture to fashion ideologies and identities which help to sustain them in a harsh and changing world. (Delius 1989: 248)

In another discussion of Zulu ethnicity, Gerhard Mare argues that the three most important characteristics of an ethnic group are:

Cultural affinity (language, dress, rituals, values and so on); a sense of common historical origin, a unique "past" (whether it be from common ancestors, a common ruler, from the same territory, etc.); and an ethnic identity different from those of other groups (whether these "others" feel that their identities are important, or even whether they exist or not).

(Mare 1992: 11)

These authors seem to agree that cultural formations play a significant role in the formation of "ethnicities". Apparently in contrast with this, the authors of the Pietermaritzburg survey conclude that "the persistence of 'traditional culture' is not a sufficient or necessary condition for 'ethnic consciousness'" (Piper et al. 1992: 2). They argue that ethnicity is a social phenomenon which "requires a component of collective action", usually prompted by "an exclusion from power articulated in 'cultural' terms". Therefore, while the students they sampled "demonstrated ethnic moments to their identity", they could not be termed "ethnic" in the conventional use of the term (1992: 13).

Piper et al. (1992) appear, however, to gloss over the apparent correlation between the students' view of themselves as "Zulu" and their continued support of various forms of "traditional culture". These are defined as "ethnic moments of identity", which, they argue, should be distinguished from "ethnic consciousness".

While agreeing that "ethnic moments of identity" should not be mistaken for "ethnic consciousness", it seems to me to be important to recognise that these "moments" are crucial building blocks out of which ethnic ideologies

are forged. By "ethnic ideologies" I mean ideologies which seek to explain social problems and phenomena in ethnic terms, and which argue that these problems must be solved through the mobilisation of ethnic groupings. This is similar to what they call "ethnic consciousness", or what Mare has, perhaps more appropriately, called "politicised ethnicity" (Mare 1992: 38).

Mare's term is useful, because it recognises that such "ethnic moments" can be seen as prerequisites for the development, from above or below, of an "ethnic consciousness" or a "politicised ethnicity", which is embedded in forms of social or collective action. It also leaves room for the significance of material and class factors in the emergence of politicised ethnicities. Morris and Hindson (1992) in "Ethnicity and the Contest over Meaning" have argued convincingly that much of the violence in Natal has, in fact, been underpinned by conflicts over resources:

It is true that most of the violence, particularly in the Transvaal, is organisationally structured around linguistic and cultural symbols. Hostel dwellers, for example, are often mobilised as Zulus, while others direct animosity against those identified as Zulu. But one cannot explain the basis of the conflict simply by reference to the form that it takes. Although people are mobilised using ethnic or cultural symbols, this ethnic basis often coincides with material divisions.

(Morris & Hindson 1992: 152)

Their emphasis on "mobilisation" along ethnic lines does not necessarily contradict the view that the persistence of "ethnic moments" can, *but will not necessarily*, lead to the formation of ethnic identities. Material (and ultimately political) factors provide the impetus for ethnic moments of identity to be transformed into a politicised ethnicity. As Mare points out, this frequently occurs when ethnic identities are "employed to advance certain interests, usually political and economic" (1992: 26).

Political ethnicity (ethnic nationalism) moves social identity to political agency, provides the means for political mobilisation, and submits the ethnic identity and group to another set of rules - those of competition for power.

(Mare 1992: 43)

If the above arguments are to be taken seriously, ethnicity cannot simply be dismissed as an invention of colonialism and/or apartheid, nor is it simply the product of an intellectual elite's political imagination. Ethnicity frequently appears to persist *despite* the wishes and interventions of political leaders. If one is to explain instances where ethnicities appear to have lain "dormant" for long periods of time and then resurfaced as powerful political forces, one has to examine how "ethnicity" persists during these periods.

And one has to examine the specific circumstances under which politicised ethnic ideologies emerge.³ Indeed this seems to be one of the major political lessons of the 1990's.

In the Pietermaritzburg survey, Piper et al. (1992: 11) argue further that "it may be more accurate to speak of students using traditional forms to express modern concerns rather than being 'traditional'". Again one cannot disagree with this sentiment, which has wide currency within the study of popular culture. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that "traditional forms" are simply neutral or transparent media available for the expression of any ideas or concerns. Such forms are frequently "ethnically loaded" in the sense that they are often commonly associated with particular ethnicities.

Where a "politicised ethnicity" has not emerged or been developed, for whatever historical reasons, such "ethnic moments" would exist as one among many layers of identity. Thus, a worker may well see himself as Zulu, as a South African, as a Christian, as a man and so on. These layers would coexist in a state of continual and dynamic tension, with different "moments of identity" being foregrounded in different circumstances. The development of a "politicised ethnicity" entails the ethnic elements assuming dominance. This would normally take place via the formation of what I have elsewhere referred to as an interpretive community (Kromberg 1991). This would be a socially organised grouping which shares a common set of ideas (although otherwise ideologically heterogeneous) relating to the achievement of certain goals. The emergence and organisation of such a community would take place through a range of localised mobilisations. As Sitas points out, this could take place from below via oral media and could also include the use of a range of media forms emanating from an intellectual elite. The former would often be achieved via the means of available cultural (and intellectual) resources.

"Traditional" cultural forms have been viewed as an important intellectual resource through which people make sense of and give meaning to their lives. They are held onto, adapted and reinvented at least partly because of the essential roles they play in "both mirroring and engaging with social and political life", for their "capacity to create for the individual a sense of worth and wholeness in an oppressive social system" (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 31). These forms derive their affective power from their audience's intimacy with the formal conventions which enable their interpretation.

Popular culture, moreover, is often an important outlet (and medium of propagation) for ideas that are not permitted or are discouraged in the official realm. What is banned (or self-censored) in the official media can sometimes find its expression through the popular arts.⁴ In this way, the ideas expressed through cultural forms may often be a more precise indica-

tor of popular consciousness than other, more official (and often regulated) sources. Such forms can, therefore, give one access to the kinds of oral "construction of solidarities" that, Sitas (1989) argued, are so central to the formulation of different "modalities" of Zulu-ness.

I further argue that Durban worker poetry provides powerful evidence that "traditional" cultural practices and beliefs have persisted to a significant extent within the labour movement and among members of organisations affiliated to the African National Congress. More specifically it is argued that the impetus for these forms has come from its membership and not as a result of interventions by political leadership or intellectual elites.

Given the "ethnically loaded" nature of these forms, this evidence suggests that the official "non-racialism" of those organisations must be viewed sceptically. Worker poetry can be seen as an example of the ANC's use of "ethnic moments" to bolster its support among members of the African working class and as evidence that the ANC in Natal does operate on the terrain of ethnic identities.

Worker poetry illustrates how African working class audiences have demanded that political discourse takes place via "traditional" forms, at least in the realm of cultural practices. The increasingly intense contestation of the loyalties of the African working class has driven the ANC further and further into these forms, potentially alienating it further from other sectors of Natal's population. Worker culture has also increasingly become indistinguishable from broader populist or popular culture, with a significantly African (and more specifically "Zulu") component.

Given the popular resonance of Inkatha's "politicised ethnicity" it should not be assumed that Zulu ethnicity is simply an invention of an intellectual, bureaucratic and military elite.⁵ One must, therefore, assume that the dominance of "non-racialism" among ANC supporters has the potential to be transformed into "politicised ethnicity", especially given the social and material divisions which are likely to persist well beyond the establishment of a new government.

More controversially, I will argue that the "ethnic moments" which have persisted, have tended to be closely associated with militarism and have played a central role in the development of a culture of violence in Natal.

The trade union poets often are (or were) shop-stewards and, as can be expected, display similar attitudes on ethnicity to those evident in the shop-stewards' survey discussed above. In a statement prepared for a Fosatu Education Workshop in 1985, the Durban Workers' Cultural Local (DWCL) said:

We also discovered that we had to overcome our hatreds of each other: amakholwa against traditionalist; Christian of the official churches against the Zionist; Moslem against Hindu; Pondo against Zulu; Zulu royalist against Zibhebhu's offspring; migrant against urban; Zulu against Indian; black against ... oh, and this is difficult, very difficult in South Africa - black against white.

(Sitas 1989: 58)

The DWCL poets argued that differences should not prevent their uniting against their "common oppression as workers":

Our fate as workers and our needs as human beings bound us together, but language, cultural chauvinism and divisions tore us apart. We discovered that it is only through our unity that our strength and dignity could be enlarged.

(Sitas 1989)

These statements were not, surprisingly, in line with union (and ANC) policy at the time. They did not challenge the existence of such divisions but argued that their cultural interventions should serve to overcome, not underpin, them. Their view of ethnicity is thus substantially different to, and counterpoised against, that of Inkatha or the Nationalist Party, which until recently explicitly claimed to represent specific ethnic groups (1989: 70). Both of these parties also argued for political representation along ethnic lines. Recent events have seen changes in these arguments in favour of federalism which still has a strong ethnic flavour.

In my discussions with them, a number of the poets exhibited an ambiguous attitude towards "tradition". Alfred Qabula argued that he would not praise chiefs and kings, "because in most instances in the past the kings and rulers proved themselves most willing to be co-opted by the colonial rulers at the expense of their subjects". He nevertheless insisted that chiefs should play an active role in a future system of government.

In a discussion with me, Gladman Ngubo, after initially insisting that he was "civilized" and did not indulge in traditional rituals, conceded the importance of certain rituals ensuring a healthy relationship with his ancestors. He also cited an instance where he had seen *muti* effectively protecting someone from an enemy's bullets. Respect for ancestors was universal among the poets I spoke to.

This tension was also evident in their poems. There is much evidence of the poets' awareness of, and respect for, their ancestors. In "Izibongo zika-Fosatu" (Praise poem to FOSATU), Qabula speaks of FOSATU as an answer to a prayer (to the "traditional" supreme being, Mvelingqangi, and the ancestors):

Prayed we did to our Mvelingqangi
And the ancestors have answered us,
And sent us FOSATU

(Sitas 1989: 11)

He also suggests his ancestors spoke to him (or his narrator) through dreams:

I dreamed I am a Sangoma
You have come to me so that I can tell all about you
I have thrown my bones and called on my abalozi.
My bones and my abalozi are telling me this

(Sitas 1989: 11)

For Qabula, Africa consists of many "nations" and "populations" (Sitas 1989: 17). Similarly, Mi S'dumo Hlatswayo calls on the "ancestors of Africa" to rejoice at the workers' struggle in "The Black Mamba Rises" (p. 25). In "Workers' Lamentation for Ancient Africa" Hlatswayo calls on his audience to recall "the harvest ceremonies" and "the marriage ceremonies" (p. 30).

Gunner and Gwala point out that the *izibongo* of various leaders are often (but not always) set in a "combat and conflict matrix":

The emphasis on war and an accompanying macho virility, which are still prominent features of men's *izibongo*, may well have been forced to the fore during the streamlining and building up of the regimental war machine under Shaka. This process could have "driven underground" the broader biographical and autobiographical thrusts of the *izibongo*.

(Gunner & Gwala 1989: 7)

Given the intense and often violent nature of political contestations in Durban, and the harsh reality of workers' lives, it is not surprising that the worker poets frequently draw on militaristic symbolism. As is to be expected, this is far less pronounced in their earlier poetry than in the poetry of the late 1980's and early 1990's.

In "Izibongo zikaFosatu", Qabula portrays FOSATU as a "chicken with wide wings" but also as a roaring lion (Sitas 1989: 8). MAWU is a ferocious boxer. Workers, FOSATU's "sons and daughters", are militant, and the narrator "wonders what *muti* they use". More frequently in his earlier poetry, however, the narrator is a victim, as in "Migrant's Lament", "Africa" and "Death". The emphasis is on retribution, where the "orphans/those widowed,/ will turn out to be your judges".

In an example of Qabula's later poetry, "Sthandwa", the narrator, a

"singer" (symbolising a guerilla), serenades his love with stories of how, when he "played his guitar", oppressive regimes fell. In Ntanzi's 1990 version of "Buya Mandela" (Return Mandela), Mandela is a "bull with sharpened horns" who reduces his opponents to shivering, confused men with diarrhoea. Ironically, these poems were performed at the rally celebrating Mandela's release from prison. While Ntanzi and Qabula were invoking militaristic imagery and drawing on the *izibongo* conventions, Mandela was calling on ANC members to "throw their guns into the sea". Using audience response as an indicator, the former approach was more popular (in fact some members of the audience walked out during Mandela's speech).

The contemporary *izibongi* ("praise poets") have, therefore, ensured that their appropriation of the *izibongo* is also firmly anchored in a "combat and conflict" matrix and, once again decentring "the broader biographical and autobiographical thrusts".

Among the various forms of popular culture, however, it should be noted that worker poetry is still relatively sanitised and exists on the borders of official discourse. As mentioned above, the poets tend to come from the more highly politicised strata of organisers and shop-stewards (see Sole 1987: 107). Forms such as political song and various traditional *muti* rituals used before fighting are often more explicitly militaristic and more overtly "traditional" in symbolic content.⁶ Research is urgently needed into this terrain of cultural practice which is essentially an "underground" phenomenon, which does not require, but often enjoys, official sanction.⁷

Also woven into the poems are Christian symbols and references to Christian practices such as Qabula's "praying". Qabula's "Migrant's Lament" addresses "Thixo" (Lord), and Hlatswayo refers to the "New Jerusalem" and "the workers of heaven". Nise Malange's "Today" appropriates the notion of heroic ancestors ("Everyone who has died / Is here today") and combines it with Messianic imagery:

Neil Agget
 Who died for the liberation of the workers
 Is here today
 Ephraim Shabalala
 Who died
 The system's victim
 Is here today
 Andries Raditsela
 Who died
 For us all
 Is here today,

With us
Sharing,
This day with us.

(Sitas 1989: 56)

"Today" becomes a judgement day, as "those who died as oppressors are here". Malange calls on them to leave, "Away Oppressor / Away traitor". In "Death", Qabula also evokes the idea of a judgement day:

Woe unto you
On that day
The fires you stoke for others
Shall haunt you
The pain and suffering you fully inflicted
On nature
On nations
Will descend on you.

(Sitas 1989: 21)

Kelwyn Sole, who has explored the multifaceted symbolism of the poetry, says:

The poems in *Black Mamba Rising* exhibit clearly the way in which layers of class, ethnic, religious, nationalist and sexual identities are enmeshed in the minds of both these poets and the wider audience of black workers.

(Sole 1987: 110)

Sole is concerned about "whether or not (and to what extent) one's class consciousness is mixed with and transforms the other modes of identity present". He says he "feels uneasy" that the poets are "placing too much faith in the transformative power of traditional symbols alone" (Sole 1987: 111). Although Sole is obviously mindful of the poetic conventions employed by the poets, his focus is primarily on content; he speaks mainly of "symbols". The "layers of identity" are represented, though, not only in what the poets say but also in how they say it.

Many of the poets consciously drew on the *izibongo* and often referred to themselves as *izimbongi* (praise poets). They saw their performances as part of a broader task of keeping "traditional forms" alive in the face of what they perceived as the imposition of western cultural forms. Qabula (1990) said "at school we did poetry but totally useless stuff". He claims to have adopted the style of the *izibongo* "to a certain extent" but that it "had to be modified to suit the modern audience and the nowadays themes". Ngubo told me that western poetry was "written about simple things" and did not

make sense. He pointed out to me that one of his poems starts with a comment on this:

From childhood to manhood
I didn't obtain time
To focus at the nature
And the beauty of the world,
Created by the Almighty.

(Ngubo 1990: 26)

The poets' choice of the *izibongo* as a source of stylistic inspiration is more than just, as Kelwyn Sole (1987: 108) called it "the transformation of a tradition". It is, as importantly, an attempt by the poets to utilise a set of intellectual resources, with which they had already been equipped and with which they feel an affinity. Qabula tells of how he came up with an idea to use praise poetry. His first performance was to "a large worker audience":

I was nervous but the nervous tension was soon removed by the warm, encouraging response from the audience that ululated in excitement. Another form of expression had been discovered.

(Qabula 1990: 2)

What was new about the "form of expression" was the use to which it was put. Qabula said that prior to his use of the *izibongo* to praise FOSATU, many people associated the *izibongo* with chiefs and Inkatha. Mi Hlatswayo remembers the debates:

When we started reciting poetry using traditional forms of oral poetry (which was in the past linked to praising chiefs, that is the ruling classes of that day), there was a storm because people felt we were turning the clock back, that this was not part of progressive culture. They could not understand that we were joining the past to the present and the future.

(Hlatswayo 1991: 1)

Qabula referred to his poetry as one of many "weapons":

A traditional fighter would carry a knobstick, together with a spear, a bayonet and a shield but he would use one item at a time. He would first use a stick but if the stick was not doing a good job he would turn to his knobstick and the rest of his weapons. So all forms of media are important; music and newspapers are also important but poetry is the most effective.

(Qabula 1990: 5)

When Ngubo heard Qabula and the other worker poets perform, he said:

It made me so much interested because they were reciting about incidents in our daily lives - encouraging us how we must achieve our goals.⁸

The *izibongo* was not the only poetic style used by the worker poets. As I have noted elsewhere, more urban, reggae-based styles similar to that of Mzwakhe Mbuli were also commonly used, especially by younger poets (Kromberg 1991). These were often set against the performances by choirs who had transformed gospel singing into a militaristic form.⁹

If one defines the *izibongo* narrowly in terms of the formal qualities of royal *izibongo* as Trevor Cope (1968) does, it is difficult to argue that the audience shows a specific preference for this style of poetry. However, if one defines it in terms of its emphasis on performative qualities, then it is clear that the audience responds more positively to poetry situated within its conventions. I observed a number of gatherings where poets using dress, gesture, rhythm, tone, imagery and language reminiscent of *izibongo*, received the loudest applause. These included, for example, the relatively high, sustained tone and rapid rhythm of delivery, the use of cadences, the use of exaggerated body movements and atypical, usually symbolic, dress. Mi Hlatswayo gives such a definition of the *izibongo* in accounting for audience responses:

[Our poetry in the traditional form] was done in the *imbongi* style. And once the person stood there and paced the stage, raised his voice, lowered his voice, screeched, pounded the air, immediately people recognised it - hey, this is poetry let us listen!

(Hlatswayo 1991: 2)

English poetry such as that performed by Mzwakhe was well received, but only when the above-mentioned elements were present. While these performative qualities were obviously necessary to an appreciation of the poetry, so was the audience's approval of the ideas being expressed.¹⁰ Neither was, however, sufficient without the other.

It is the audience's intimacy with and preference for the *izibongo's* poetic conventions that give *izibongo* their affective power. It was this which provided the impetus for poetry in the *izibongo* style to take on its current popularity (Kromberg 1991). Initiated by workers involved in "The Dunlop Play", the enthusiastic approval given to this poetry by worker audiences led to its authorization by the union leadership (to the extent of granting poets space on their platforms and assisting in the publication of the poetry).¹¹ It can, therefore, be argued that the demand for such "traditional forms" has been from below, and reflects a continued affinity for such forms among the broad membership of the labour and political organisations.

What has been established is the way in which the poets (and their audiences) use "traditional weapons" in contemporary battles. To what extent does this imply a persistence of "ethnic moments of identity?"

That the *izibongo* has been appropriated in the service of many different causes does not, as mentioned above, make it a transparent or neutral medium. While the Zulu *izibongo* may be difficult to separate from the broader genre of Southern African praise poetry, in Natal its use is often closely linked to ideas of "Zuluness". The *izibongo's* ability to reinvent the past - to transfer and transform historical knowledge - has been recognised and exploited by many Zulu nationalists. As Gunner and Gwala have shown, the recording, publication, canonisation and teaching of the *izibongo* have all been wrapped up in Zulu nationalism of one sort or another (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 34). With regard to the teaching of *izibongo* as published in school text books, they argue that:

The emphasis on the royal praises ... seems to have become part of the attempt to create a sense of a national Zulu literature and therefore a distinctively Zulu high culture.

(Gunner & Gwala 1991: 35)

They point out that this link with authority has unfortunately "tended to hide [praise poetry's] broader social base" (1991: 9). Even if the "biographical and autobiographical thrusts" are more prevalent at the "grassroots" level, Gunner and Gwala do not show that the broader genre has less significant links with ideas of Zuluness. The fact that one of the *izibongo's* central functions is precisely to record and celebrate lineage and ancestry suggests that it is very closely tied up with Zulu ethnicity.

It is precisely the close associations that have been created between the *izibongo* and Zulu nationalism that have led some of the youth to prefer the reggae-based poetry popularised by Mzwakhe Mbuli. Young people I spoke to (and whose responses I observed at live performances) did not, however, reject the *izibongo* outright. They preferred the "Mzwakhe-style" but still appreciated the *izibongo*, and were certainly still familiar with its basic conventions. One remarked about Madlinyoka Ntanzu, who was performing in skins, that although he preferred Mzwakhe's poetry to Ntanzu's, it was good "that people like him were involved in the struggle".¹²

Worker poetry, therefore, appears to confirm the widespread persistence of "traditional" forms of popular culture. The demand has come from membership of the labour movement and the ANC to utilise and recognise these forms. This has taken the form of ordinary workers such as Qabula deciding to utilise the *izibongo* and audiences rewarding such performances with

applause.

This evidence strongly suggests that "ethnic moments of identity" exist widely among Zulu speaking ANC supporters in Natal, thus reinforcing Sitas's argument. It also suggests that the survey of Pietermaritzburg school students gives a more accurate reflection of the coexistence of "ethnic moments of identity" and the apparently contradictory "non-racialism" (than the shopstewards' survey). The latter is, therefore, highly misleading in concluding that shop-stewards "attach little importance to ethnic identity". It also casts doubt on the often expressed view that Inkatha represents ethnicity and the ANC non-racialism.

The tenacity of these "ethnically loaded" cultural forms must at least partly be ascribed to their value as intellectual resources. The poets discussed above clearly identified their use of the *izibongo* as a "weapon" to achieve their political aims (as did members of the audience). It is no coincidence that "politicised ethnicity" often has its greatest appeal to the socially marginalised. Similarly, the widespread availability of such "ethnic moments" provide a means of mobilisation to those whose interests lie in obscuring class antagonisms. To the former, any apparent threat against them as members of a (real or perceived) "ethnic group" is at least partly a fear of being robbed of precious resources - in the context of massive social alienation, dislocation and disempowerment.

The fact that these "ethnic moments" have been mobilised for sectoral interests by certain players in the political conflict should not lead to the assumption that they are false, evil and should (or could) be eradicated. Inkatha has shown how devastating its ethnic mobilisations can be - and how easy it is to use it to authorise massive bloodletting. ANC members, too, have illustrated how useful such "ethnic moments" can be in political warfare - even without translating them into politicised ethnicities. As Mare has put it:

The notions of non-racialism, democracy and non-sexism are idealist, and have to be created out of their opposites, out of a history that had confirmed racism, a profoundly anti-democratic polity and patriarchy. On the other hand, ethnic identities and ethnic group formation arise out of a real sense of a unique past, a clearly distinct culture, and the actual existence of the ethnic group, even if only as imagined community. The denial of what exists in favour of the ideal, especially when ethnic leadership presents that ideal in terms of ethnic competition, carries the seeds of massive conflict.

(Mare 1992: 110)

A future state or a party which dismisses ethnicity as a form of false consciousness, or worse, attempts to repress it, places itself in serious danger.

Recent history has shown that ethnicities can lie *politically* dormant for decades but nevertheless persist as tenaciously as the narrative forms that carry it. The dilemma which has confronted political organisations in Natal has been whether to (a) ignore ethnicity and hope it will go away; (b) recognise it and simply tolerate its existence "within limits"; (c) recognise and actively support it. The ANC and its allies have tended towards the first two positions, which has opened the way for accusations that they in fact are opposed to it. The question is, can the ANC afford to embrace it? Whether there is a "middle way" when it comes to ethnicity is an interesting question *in theory*.

In practice, however, there can be no guarantee that ethnicity will not be abused in the future, as it has been in the past. For as long as there is differential access to (and therefore conflict over) resources, the way will be open for opportunistic leaders to politicise existing ethnicities as a means of advancing their own interests. More important, it must also be expected that the socially marginalised will attempt to use ethnicity as a set of intellectual and political resources in their attempts to improve their conditions of life.

Morris and Hindson argued that:

In tackling the violence we can adopt an integrated national solution which reorients state interventions towards a radical redistribution of social resources and power, attempts to mute the contradictions, temper the antagonistic relations, but which, unfortunately but necessarily, still maintains some of the existing social divisions to reconstruction.

(Morris & Hindson 1992: 169)

The interface between continuing social divisions and the persistence of ethnic moments of identity will undoubtedly be one of the major forces of cultural reinvention and innovation. "Ethnicity" as a social phenomenon is not *necessarily* either positive or negative. The potential for ethnicity to be utilised as a destructive force will largely depend on the possibilities for a successful "integrated national solution". One of the key challenges facing political movements is to explore whether "ethnically loaded" cultural forms such as the *izibongo* can be used in the interests of peace and in the rebuilding (both imaginatively and concretely) of Natal's shattered communities.

Notes

1. Ari Sitas, personal interview, Johannesburg, December 1992.

2. In the Pietermaritzburg survey, while ninety-five percent of the students answered in the affirmative to the question: "Do you see yourself as Zulu?", eighty-five percent of the students also agreed with the statement: "There can be no united South African identity while Zulu ethnic identity still exists."
3. For further discussion of this see Mare (1992) *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood*.
4. For further discussion of this issue see, for example, Gunner and Gwala (1991: 34).
5. By "popular resonance" I am referring to that organisation's ability to use ethnicity in justifying its quasi-military warfare, both in Natal and the Transvaal. People are prepared to kill and die on the basis that "the Zulu nation" is perceived to be under attack. Such ideas may indeed be fallacious but they are widely held among Inkatha supporters, and are continually reinforced by a range of factors which I do not have time to discuss here.
6. In a striking example of this, a BBC documentary on the Natal violence shows a *sangoma* conducting a *muti* ritual for ANC "comrades", intended to protect them against bullets. One of these comrades was killed later the same night by an alleged warlord who removed certain organs from the body for use in his own *muti*.
7. Outside of the politicised forms there is other evidence of the persistence of traditional praising, which I discuss in more detail in "The Role of Audience" (1991). See also Nolleen Turner's discussion of *izihasho* in the same collection and Gunner and Gwala (1991).
8. Personal Interview, Durban, January 1990.
9. See Ari Sitas (1990). "Voice and Gesture in South Africa's Revolution: A Study of Worker Gatherings and Performance Genres in Natal." Unpublished paper presented to University of Witwatersrand: History Workshop Conference.
10. One audience member I interviewed said he "switches off" ("like a T.V.") if a poem praises Inkatha.
11. By way of contrast, worker theatre was initiated by union officials.
12. Personal Interview, Durban, July 1989.

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