The Origins of Ethnic Violence in South Africa

Shula Marks

Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London

In 1981, with a degree of prescience the historian can only envy, Anthony Smith wrote,

> In every continent and practically every state, ethnicity has re-appeared as a vital social and political force. The plural composition of most states; their policies of cultural integration; the increasing frequency amd intensity of ethnic rivalries and conflicts and the proliferation of ethnic movements; these are the main trends and phenomena which testify to the growing role of ethnicity in the modern world.[1]

A decade later, the world is awash in a veritable sea of warring ethnicities - from Azerbaijan to Zaghreb, from the Armenians to the Zulu: the alphabetical symmetry is irresistable. Daily our papers are filled with stories of Serbs and Croats killing one another in Yugoslavia, and Zulu and Xhosa apparently doing the same thing in South Africa. People who have lived side by side for decades have suddenly taken to hating and killing. And in all these cases, journalists are wont to describe these events as the emergence of long-held animosities and innate identities which inevitably rise to the surface when a coercive state finally loosens its hold. It is what one might call the genie in the bottle theory of ethnicity. The genie is there all the time, but only escapes when you uncork the bottle. This has its variant in the oft-repeated explanation of what is happening in South Africa as black on black violence or atavistic tribal conflict between a Zulu Inkatha and an allegedly Xhosa ANC. Yet the reality is far more complex and historically specific than these simple stereotypes allow, and, as we shall see, in South Africa at least ethnic explanations by themselves have only limited value.

In South Africa, over the past half dozen years, some 6000 people have been killed in internecine warfare in the province of Natal, ostensibly between members of the Zulu cultural organisation, Inkatha, and its political opponents, although the vast majority who have been killed, injured and displaced from their homes have been ordinary members of the community. There the battle has been

1 AD Smith, The Ethnic Revival (Cambridge, 1981), 12.

between Zulu-speakers, over the soul of the Zulu and what constitutes Zulu-ness: in much the same way as there have been struggles between Afrikaners over the soul of the Afrikaner and what constitutes Afrikanerdom. In July-August, 1990, the battle was taken from Natal to South Africa's industrial heartland, where more than 500 Africans were killed in a matter of days. Since then what amounts to a war against the black urban community on the Rand has been waged and another 2-3000 Africans have lost their lives; the bloodletting continues. Clearly both the violence and the form it has taken demand explanation. Quite apart from the sheer horror and suffering it inflicts, the warfare has threatened at times to throw off course the delicate negotiations between the government and the ANC over a constitutional settlement; it has weakened the ANC and is likely to endanger a stable post-apartheid government. And this may of course be its main purpose.

Although the allocation of responsibility for these events, it is a matter of controversy, it seems clear that Inkatha supporters, mobilised around a specific Zulu ethnic identity, have been the source of most of the aggression. This is true both in Natal where the work of a variety of church-attached monitoring groups has shown this to be overwhelmingly the case, and on the Rand, where a study based on a content analysis of media reports across a broad political spectrum showed that Inkatha supporters were the aggressors in 51 per cent of attributable incidents of violence between July 1990 and July 1991. This was ten times more often than the ANC at 4 per cent. And by far the largest number of dead - 87 per cent - were ordinary members of the community.[2] These figures may be spuriously precise; they are unlikely to totally wrong as an indication of trend.

Through all this there have been persistent claims of police collusion in the violence from ordinary township residents, independent church monitoring groups, human rights lawyers and the ANC, and, according to the CASE investigation, the security forces were held responsible in nearly a quarter of the episodes reported. Until very recently, the police in Natal have been noticeably and notoriously reluctant to act even when there have been court injunctions against senior members of Inkatha for multiple murders; in Natal and on the Rand they have appeared on the scene to escort Zulu impis into safety after their murderous assaults on shantytown dwellers and township funeral vigils.[3] Over the past few months,

2 Community Agency for Social Enquiry, 'Who is murdering the peace? C.A.S.E. Research Statistics', p.1. The research was compiled by Dr David Everatt.

3 International Commission of Jurists, Signposts to Peace. An independent survey of the violence in Natal, South Africa (London, 1990.

the evidence of state collusion in the violence has mounted: in the European summer conclusive evidence was published showing that the government had been funding Inkatha for a number of years (perhaps since its inception) and had continued to do so even after the unbanning of the ANC.[4] There is further evidence that this continued a full ten months after de Klerk assured parliament that it had been ended.

There is little doubt, then, that the violence in the townships of Natal and the Rand is being and has been fomented by elements in the army and the police. As Dave Everatt argues, 'The aim seems to be to destabilise black South Africa life and to prevent the establishment of a normalised political climate'.[5] And the state president does not seem particularly perturbed: bloodletting on this scale among whites would almost certainly have seen far more concerted efforts by the state to bring matters to a halt. Nelson Mandela is surely correct to say that black lives are still held cheap in South Africa - and that as head of state de Klerk bears the responsibility whether it is because he actually approves of state involvement in the violence or because he does not have sufficient control over the police and army to do anything about it. After all, if more than 3000 white citizens had been killed in communal violence over fifteen months, the government of the day would undoubtedly be called to account. Some Nationalists may well hope to take advantage of the violence to weaken the ANC deliberately in the run up to non-racial elections; at least until Inkathagate there was also talk of an electoral alliance between the National Party and Inkatha, although this seems less and less likely. The strategy of destabilisation is one the South Africans adopted in Namibia at the time of the elections in order to weaken SWAPO; it should not surprise us if it is being used in South Africa.[6] But it is a very dangerous game to play.

---

4 This was reported extensively in the press at the time, but see, for example, Allister Sparks, 'FW must have known of secret funding', Reality, Sept. 1991, 15-16.

5 CASE, 'Who is murdering the peace', 2.

6 This draws on the evidnece of former SADF Major Nico Basson, who admitted to being in charge of these operations. According to Basson, the whole Namibian exercise, which also involved the illegal funding of anti-SWAPO parties was a 'trial run for a similar but more elaborate campaign to destabilise the ANC' and enabled the NP and its black allies to win the first post-apartheid election. (See Allister Sparks, 'FW must have known of secret funding', Reality, September 1991, 16.) See also Weekly Mail, 4-10 October, 1991, 3, where Basson is cited as saying 'the deployment of former Koevoet and South West African Territory Force men [in South Africa] formed part of a concerted strategy carried out by the special forces of the SADF and the SAP.' See also 'Namibia. Report of a visit by Peter Pike, MP, John MacDonald, QC and Alison Harvey from Sunday 28th May to Friday 2nd June, 1989'. I am grateful to Alison Harvey for a copy of this report.

At one level the violence has clearly been between members of Inkatha, the Zulu National Cultural Movement, founded by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi in 1975, and members of the non-racial democratic organizations, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the United Democratic Front (UDF) and, since 1990, the African National Congress (ANC). Nevertheless, in both Natal and on the Rand, as Lauren Segal has recently reminded us such explanations may be imposing 'an official sounding order on the overwhelming confusion and horror of the violence' where in fact there is no such coherence: only a 'shifting asortment, a "kaleidoscope" of explanations... the human face of violence is far more diffuse and complex than most media and political accounts portray'.[7]

Moreover, important as the concrete evidence is of SADF and police culpability in fomenting the political violence, this does not fully explain its nature, form or timing. The security forces are watering a ready-made field. The field was ploughed and the seeds of the violence were sown by the apartheid state, and - ironically - it was fertilised by its very disintegration.[8] South Africa was a very violent society long before the current wave of killings hit the headlines, and apartheid has been a major source of this violence. In all parts of the world rapid industrialisation and urbanisation have led to massive social dislocations. These are powerful and painful processes not captured by the bland term 'modernization'. In South Africa, where whites have been the beneficiaries, and blacks have borne the burdens, these processes have been made even more disruptive and traumatic through the destruction of social support systems as a result of the migrant labour system and the uprooting of communities in the name of a myriad racial laws and regulations. Apartheid has created a veritable laboratory for violent behaviour, but this violence has always afflicted the unprotected black communities to a far greater extent than it has the white population,

---

7 See L. Segal, 'The human face of violence. Hostel dwellers speak', Project for the Study of Violence, Seminar Paper no.6, Sept. 1991. (ISAS forthcoming). See also S.Stavrou and A. Crouch, 'Violence on the Periphery: Molweni', unpublished paper presented at the Twentieth Annual Congress of the Association for Sociology in South Africa University of Witwatersrand, July, 1989), who also argue that the political definitions are too clear-cut and that these identities cohere around different factions in a struggle for scarce material resources, rather than out of the different ideologies of the organisations per se.

8 For a development of this argument see M. Morris and D. Hindson, 'Political Violence and Urban Reconstruction in South Africa', unpublished paper for Economic Trends Meeting 7th July 1991. I am grateful to Mike Morris for sending me this paper.

which has traditionally been protected by the state and by their residential segregation from the worst of its impact.

For both black and white the psychological toll of of these processes has been immense over the past hundred years. But while the racial form that capitalist development has taken in South Africa has offered blacks impoverishment and all-pervasive humiliations in daily life, it has afforded whites an almost unlicensed domination. The results can be seen in the Republic's inordinately high rates of physical violent crime: murder and robbery; capital punishment, and the brutal flogging of rural labour; domestic, industrial and motor accidents; alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide and divorce are all symptoms of a dis-ordered society. As Neil Andersson and I have remarked elsewhere, 'These phenomena are not simply isolated aberrations; they combine to form a matrix of cultural violence which is integral to continued social inequality in South Africa'.[9]

Much of this violence is gender-specific; with a few exceptions, the violence is perpetrated by men, both white and black. And while most of the political violence is probably directed by young men against young men, every day violence against women - rape, assault, witchcraft accusations - is also extremely high: and this too is structural, related to the nature of the wider society. Mamphela Rampele's work in the hostels of Cape Town has shown how in a situation of powerlessness, black men take out their frustrations and aggressions on the only people lower in the pecking order than they are - black women. Cathy Campbell, who has looked at the gendered nature of violence in Natal argues, 'The ability of men to control women and the use of violence to ensure this control is the one area where not only has the power of working class men not been threatened by racial capitalist society, but [has] actually reinforced by it'.[10] And Albie Sachs has recently remarked, 'Patriarchy is likely to outlast racism in South Africa.'

None of this is particularly new - but this high level of violence, family break-up and frustration forms part of the essential backdrop to the contemporary situation. Faced with intense social problems, there is a ready recourse to violent 'solutions.' Nevertheless, overtly political violence between blacks in South Africa is relatively new and entered a new phase over the past de-

9 N. Andersson and S. Marks, 'The epidemiology and culture of violence' in A. du Toit and C. Manganyi, Political Violence in South Africa (London, 1990).

10 See C Campbell, 'Learning to kill? Masculinity, the family and the current political violence', paper presented to the Conference on Violence, St Antony's College, Oxford June 1991. Forthcoming ISAS.

cade, the decade of reformism, as street battles between police and people became commonplace in the industrial heartlands, as the youth responded to calls from the ANC to render the country 'ungovernable', and as warlords began to mount their onslaught against the communities who refused to acknowledge their power in Natal.

And this shift, this escalation of violence may, as Doug Hindson and Mike Morris have recently pointed out, have as much to do with the disintegration of apartheid as with apartheid itself. For them, 'the harsh reality is that racial, ethnic and class antagonisms held in check under classic apartheid have resurfaced in the climate of [economic] liberalisation and deracialisation.' The irony is that apartheid which spawned so much of the violence also held it in check. With the collapse of apartheid and 'the changing role of the state has come an ever increasing level of social chaos... The disintegration of apartheid has been accompanied by, and given rise to, a variety of economic, social and political processes which shape the contours of the violence: rapid urbanisation, increasing class differentiation, struggles between geographically and socially distinct urbanizing communities over scarce residential resources, and major political struggles between competing power centres'.[11]

In many ways it can be argued that the newly unleashed political violence all over South Africa has resulted as much from the insecurities - and unfulfilled but suddenly no longer wholly unattainable aspirations - released by reform as by apartheid itself: the massive influx of people into shacklands around the cities with the repeal of the pass laws at a time of economic recession and massive unemployment, the power vacuum as old lines of authority have broken down and have to be reasserted, and the gerontocratic order was defied as young people came to assert their political agency.

Thus another major cause of the violence have been generational divisions, witnessed for example in the rise of vigilantes in the Cape townships and in some of the struggles on the Witwatersrand. In a situation of rapid social change in which the power of adult men in the family is being constantly eroded, both by their lowly position in the race and class hierarchy and with the growing number of female headed families, high rates of unemployment and the 'catapulting' of the youth into political prominence, it is hardly surprising perhaps that a reassertion of the power of the 'fathers' should characterise not only tensions in

11 Hindson and Morris, 'Political Violence and Urban Reconstruction'.

family life but also so many of the street struggles in South Africa. So we have witdoeke - white head banded vigilantes attacking 'comrades' in Cape Town, and rooidoeke, red-head banded vigilantes acting against 'comrades' in Natal and on the Rand.[12] But the former have not taken an ethnic form, and the latter have. Generational conflict has long been one of the idioms of African politics: it is now being played out in a new and deadly fashion.

And this serves to alert us to the reality that material and political conflicts are always played out in a cultural idiom, and these have their own regional specificities. Culture, as Stuart Hall and others have remninded us, is not only 'the way the social relationships of a group are structured and shaped... it is also the way these shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted.' It is materialised in 'patterns of social organisation' and internalised through the institutions and experiences of daily life.[13] Thus, the very terms ANC/UDF/'comrades'/ amaqabane on the one hand, and Inkatha and amatheleweni on the other, encapsulate 'maps of meaning', clusters of attributes in the minds both of those who identify themselves in this way and in those of their opponents. The labels go far beyond what we usually consider political allegiance, to encompass urban and rural values, styles of language and dress. Membership means being a part of the 'culture' or sub-culture of the groups involved, rather than mere adherence to a political programme: hence the inability, which many observers have noted with bewilderment, of many of the members of both movements to specify 'the national policies and leaders of the organisations they are killing and dying for'.[14]

What has been remarkable about all this conflict, however, is how relatively insignificant ethnicity has been as a political force until comparatively recently. This is not to say that people do not have an ethnic consciousness: an awareness of being Zulu or Xhosa, or Sotho or Tswana. Migrants to cities all over the world have used

12 See C Campbell, 'Learning to kill?'

13 John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts, 'Introduction' in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., Resistance through Rituals. Youth subcultures in post-war Britain (London, 1975), 10-11. Cf. Buthelezi in 1975 before the Kwazulu Legislative Assembly: 'In other words, all members of the Zulu nation are automatically members of Inkatha if they are Zulus. There may be people who are inactive members as no one escapes being a member as long as he or she is a member of the Zulu nation' (Kwazulu Legislative Assembly Debates, vol.5: 134, cited in Gerhard Maré, 'Tradition and control', 5).

14 Hindson and Morris, 'Political Violence and Urban Reconstruction'. They argue that this renders the political explanation of the violence used by many of the participants themselves problematic. Segal, 'The human face of violence' and Stavrou and Crouch, 'Violence on the periphery' make similar statements. I find it less puzzling.

ethnic strategies of survival and solidarity - and South Africa is no different. From at least the 1920s, black workers from the same areas, even the same villages, have clustered together to form new ethnically based associations in the cities, to find jobs, to find housing, to find company, to find burial. And these associations could could at times be used for other purposes of mobilisation - whether as in the case of the 'Amarashea' or 'Russians' from Lesotho who terrorised the Rand in the 1940s and 1950s -, or for more political purspoes, as in the case of the Mpondo young men's association, the Indhlavini, which provided a network for the mobilisation of mineworkers at the time of the 1946 strikle. The Sabatakgomo movement which provided a network between town and countryside for Pedi migrants to the Rand, and which was a major means of ANC mobilisation in the Northern Transvaal in the 1950s is another example.[15]

Nevertheless, what is striking about black South Africa is how relatively insignificant ethnicity has been - except in Zululand-Natal - and even there it is complex - as a salient cultural/political category. And this is all the more surprising when one considers the enormous investment of the state in utilising ethnicity in order to divde and rule: perhaps because the attempts have been so blatant that they have debased the currency. Thus, the reinforcement, manipulation and construction of ethnic identities have been at the heart of segregationist policies of the state before 1948 as they have been central to its apartheid policies since. Crucial to the latter was the so-called Bantu homelands policy whereby a form of local 'independence' was granted to politically manageable, ethnically defined rural 'homelands' under chiefly control. In the 'independent homelands', or 'Bantustans' as they are derided by their critics, the state gave ethnicity a new reality by providing material incentives for ethnic identification: a platform and 'perks'for local politicians; an infrastructure of control involving compliant chiefs and headmen, paid for by the state; a local police force; access to jobs in the bureaucracy and business opportunities, for the small middle class - all this on the basis of their ethnic affiliation. In the Bantustans as in the urban areas, welfare was allocated through ethnic networks, either refurbished or even newly invented for the purpose. Housing was distributed on a supposedly ethnic basis and all forms of representation were linked to ethnic ties. 'Bantu education' ensured that schooling was duly ethnicized; Radio Bantu - a much understudied

15 See for example, W. Beinart, 'Worker consciousness, ethnic particularism and nationalism: the experience of a South African migrant, 1930-19600' in S. Marks and S. Trapido, eds., The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism (London, 1987); P. Delius, 'Sebatagkomo: Pedi migrants, the ANC and the 1950 Sekhukhuniland Revolt', ISAS.

phenomenon - inculcated similar messages; and the state also directed its attention to the black intelligentsia, through the provision of separate ethnic universities in the Bantustans - even ethnic Nursing Councils and Nursing Associations.

In all its attempts to ethnicize politics, however, the state was only partially successful. At one level, state discourse probably did alter people's perceptions, often in unforeseen ways, and this could include an acceptance of the state's ethnic categorisations which were in turn taking up and manipulating exisiting popular perceptions and identifications, especially in rural areas. It would be amazing if it had not done so - and the legacy may well continue to bedevil post-apartheid South Africa. Yet, for the permanently urbanised, the towns, especially on the Witwatersrand, constituted a remarkable melting pot, and have done so for the best part of a hundred years. And although there were undoubted ethnic tensions in the urban areas, often expressed over access to jobs and women, and voiced in negative stereotypes of 'the other', apart from the on mines (which had made use of ethnicity for purposes of social control in specific ways which I have not time to consider here), this was rarely expressed in overt physical conflict.

Indeed, in the late 1970s with the resurgence of trade union organisation on the Rand it seemed as if ethnic tensions even among migrant workers, who were most steeped in rural and parochial values, were being overcome. Thus in a sociological investigation of metal-workers on the East Rand, the sociologist Ari Sitas concluded that the rapid unionisation amongst migrant workers on the East Rand had transformed worker consciousness, cutting across regionalism and ethnicity, so that migrant hostel dwellers were in the forefront of the strike wave there. Yet but a decade later the East Rand hostel dwellers are in the forefront of the ethnic violence.[16] Clearly the genie in the bottle argument, the argument of innate tribalism, cannot hold. As Barrington Moore has reminded us:

> Culture or tradition... is not something that exists outside of or independently of individual human beings living together in so-

16 A Sitas, 'African workers' responses on the East Rand to changes in the metal industry', Wits. Ph.D. 1983, cited in Segal, 'The human face of violence'. Segal proceeds to show how and why this changed in the mid 1980s, as the unions came to be led by urban-based trade unoinists who were less sensitive to the needs of the hostel-dwellers, and as the migrants themselves came under pressure from the huge number of unemployed kin who made the hostels their first port of call in search of work on the Rand. Her work, based on interviews with nineteen Zulu hostel-dwellers, informs much of my analysis.

> ciety... The assumption of inertia, that cultural and social continuity do not require explanation, obliterates the fact that both have to be recreated anew in each generation, often with great pain and suffering... To speak of cultural inertia is to overlook the concrete interests and privileges that are served by indoctrination, education and the entire complicated process of transmitting culture from one generation to the next.[17]

Undoubtedly there are real ethnic identities to be mobilised - elements of language and kinship and custom which are deeply ingrained and powerfully felt, and which can be drawn on by politicians and culture brokers. How and why ethnicity remains a powerful way of doing so has in part been explained by Raymond Williams:

> ... we are in fact aligned long before we realise we are aligned. For we are all born into a social situation, into social relationships into a family, all of which have formed what we can later abstract as ourselves as individuals. Much of this formation occurs before we can be conscious of any individuality, indeed the consciousness of individuality is often the consciousness of all those elements of our formation, yet this can never be complete. The alignments are very deep. They are our normal ways of seeing the world. Of course we may become intellectually aware that they are not normal in the sense that they are universal. We come to recognize that other people live differently, were born into different social relationships, see the world differently. Yet still, at certain deep levels... our own actual alignment is so inseparable form the constitution of our own individuality that to separate them is quite inseparable.[18]

But these alignments are never innocent, are never simply the ideas and sentiments imbibed with our mother's milk. They are constant constructions and reconstructions in the present as elements of our individuality posed and juxtaposed in our effort to make sense of, survive in, an ever shifting world; and they are frequently assisted by powerful messages from politicians, media and state as well as, in the South African case, various individuals determined to sow dissension in the community.[19] We all have multiple identities which get called to duty in different contexts, together or singly. Eddie

---

17 Barrington Moore, Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World (Harmonsworth, 1967), 485-6.

18 In his Resources for Hope, 1989. Williams is writing of course of the alignment and commitment of the writer - but this is equally true of the people of Natal who are trying to make sense of lives being disrupted by the forces of modernity - and who return to these subterranean, subliminal alignments to enable them to do so.

19 Hence the many rumours and forged pamphlets, attributing warlike motives to the ANC and deliberately spread in the hostels.

Webster's account of the lifestory of the Zulu migrant, Mandlenkosi Makhoba, simultaneously foundry-worker, trade unionist, Inkatha founder member, and now subsistence farmer in Kwazaulu illuminates the point beautifully.[20] Which one is salient is the result of multiple determinations.

Why then has the ethnic card been played with such devastating success by Inkatha in Kwazulu-Natal, and then taken on to the Rand? What is peculiar about this region, that has led to so successful an ethnicization of politics. The first point to make is perhaps a simple demographic one. At seven million the Zulu are the single largest 'ethnic ' group in South Africa today, with relative linguistic and cultural homogeneity. This has clearly provided Buthelezi with the incentive to engage in the form of ethnic politics played with such success by the Afrikaner nationalists of the 1930s and 1940s. With a decentralised federal state and proportional representation he has everything to play for if, like the Afrikaners of a previous generation, he can get the Zulu to identify first and foremost as Zulu - not as Africans, or as workers, or as social democrats, but as 'Zulu'. Thus, ever since the resurgence of African opposition in the early 1980s Buthelezi has attempted to assert Inkatha's political hegemony among the Zulu, and to do so like the Afrikaner nationalists, by fanning the fears and discontents of a people undergoing all the strains of rapid impoverishment and urbanisation in order to mobilise the Zulu around an ethnic identity.

Again, in itself this is inadequate to explain the whole story. After all, other Bantustan leaders have attempted to mobilise equally impoverished populations along ethnic lines - but without the same degree of success. What is it that differentiates Inkatha and Kwazulu? An article by the Indian historian David Washbrook may hold some of the clues.[21] In this Washbrook explores the application (and limitations) of Wallerstein's world system theory as applied to India and the ways in which South Asia's modern history has been moulded by forces associated with a capitalist world system. He argues on the one hand that in India the culture of the protonationalist elite became imbued with what he, like Wallerstein, terms the '"the ideology of Hegemonic Universalism" which emerged out of the Western Enlightenment' so that most of its nationalist leaders identified 'freedom with nation state formation in a way that was originally and uniquely Western' and subscribed

20 E. Webster, 'Taking Labour Seriously', paper presented to the annual conference of the African Studies Assocaition of Australia and the Pacific, Perth, Dec 1991.

21 'South Asia, the World System and World Capitalism', The Journal of Asian Studies, 49, 3 (August 1990), 481-2.

to 'the truths that were discoverable by positivistic social science and to the ideals of progress, especially in the material domain, envisioned by industrialization.' In other words, the Indian elite subscribed to the vision of redemption through capitalist development. Yet, he argues, it was not only South Asia's

> perceptions of the future that were hijacked by modernity. It was also, and perhaps more crucially, its perceptions of the past. All theories of progress and development view history teleologically and are inclined to define the future, which they venerate, against denigrated caricatures of the past, or "tradition", which they abhor.

This caricature of the past, 'universalism's distorted version of traditional, has become the basis of mass identity in South Asia.' Of course, popular versions of the past have, of course, little relationship to anything that actually existed in the eighteenth century or before. 'If not in its ability to commit the majorities of society to "modernizing" progress,' concludes Washbrook, 'then in its ability to imprison the pasts, from which they gain their identities, in rigid, irrational and changeless structures, the culture of hegemonic Universalism has become unquestionably dominant over the society of contemporary South Asia.'

What Washbrook and Wallerstein have called the ideology of hegemonic universalism is pretty close I think to what Philip Corrigan has recently termed 'occidentalism' - 'a way of seeing, saying and showing the world (historically and contemporaneously) .... not only as a view <u>from</u> the West, but as a viewpoint, a standpoint, a set-up imposed on those countries, peoples, and geographies not conceived as in/of the West. Occidentalism is about cartographic orthogonality - how maps display untruths, not accidentally but systematically'.[22] Central to this cartographic orthogonality is the concept of 'tribalism', a concept which partially enables the hijacking of the past in order to blur the contradictions of the present in order to stake a claim to the future.

It is, I believe in this double hijacking - of the future and of the past - that the origins of Zulu ethnic violence in contemporary South Africa lie. Let me expand and explain:

---

22 'Occidentalism: from Montaigne to Trink-Minh-ha, via Fanon and Foucault', a summary version of Professor Corrigan's inaugural lecture, 'The Necessity for Historical Sociology', given at the University of Exeter, 19 April 1991. I am grateful to Professor Patrick O'Brien for a copy of the lecture.

In South Africa the notion of 'tribalism' follows much the same trajectory as 'traditionalism' (indeed that word is also used) in India, and has the same function of locking people into a static, simplified, brutalised version of the past. This was par excellence the function of the segregationist and apartheid state. No group has been more locked into this colonial version of the past than the Zulu with their 'proud military history.'

Originally simply one of the small, closely related chiefdoms in the coastlands of South East Africa, the Zulu rose to prominence in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, under their revolutionary leader, Shaka, who became king of the Zulu people in 1816, by conquering their neighbours.[23] Crucial to the later history and image of the Zulu was the co-incidence that it was during Shaka's reign that white traders from the Cape Colony arrived in Natal, harbingers of the missionaries, settlers and colonial rulers who were to establish themselves between the Tugela and Umtamvuna Rivers in the succeeding two decades. As Carolyn Hamilton and Daphna Golan have pointed out in rather different ways, it was during this period that the mythology of Shaka and the mighty Zulu military machine was produced both by African communities and the literate whites who encountered them, for their very different purposes, and provided some of the raw material for the Inkatha version of Zulu history and its heroic picture of Zulu manhood.[24]

Moreover, although Natal became a British colony in 1843, north of the Tugela River Zululand remained independent of white rule, until 1879, periodically inspiring fear among white settlers with their collective memories of Zulu might. This was reinforced in 1872 when Cetshwayo became king, and was believed by many to be restoring Shaka's 'military machine'. The Anglo-Zulu war of 1879 with its initial Zulu victories further confirmed this stereotype, of utility both to the settlers and to the Zulu themselves. The image of the Zulu as a powerful 'warrior race' thus became crucial to later

---

23 There is a lively controversy in South African historiography at present on the reasons for the rise of Shaka Zulu, but this does not need to detain us here. See, for example, J. Cobbing, 'The mfecane as alibi: thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo', J. Afr. Hist. 29, 4, 1988; J. Wright, 'Political mythology and the making of Natal's mfecane', Canadian Hournal of African Studies, 23,2, 1989, and E. Elbourne, 'The Mfecane reconsdiered: the origins of violence in South Africa, ca. 1800-1830', C. Hamilton, 'The character and objects of Chaka: a reconsideration of the making of Shaka as Mefecane "motor"', and J. Cobbing, 'The mfecane: a rejoinder', all in J. Afr. Hist., 1992, forthcoming.

24 Hamilton, 'The character and objects of Chaka'; and D. Golan, History in Africa

Zulu self-representations, drawing both on settler and imperial imagery and popular memory.

At the same time, for much of the nineteenth century the colonial state south of the Tugela in Natal was extremely weak, and was forced to come to terms with the existing structures of the African chiefdoms. As I have argued elsewhere, the British colony of Natal provided a model in the twentieth century for broader South African policies of segregation and later apartheid. Thus, in the absence of administrative or financial resources, Africans were constituted into 'tribes' and governed through chiefs, appointed by the government. African customary law - as interpreted by the colonizers - was recognised, and the British governor took the position of 'Supreme Chief', with powers over the African population that were supposedly modelled on those of the Zulu kings. The material basis of this system were reserves set aside for the sole occupation of Africans, some one-eighth of the land area of Natal. At the time these lands were regarded as adequate, although even then the missionaries argued that they were 'fit only for the eagle and the baboon.' In the twentieth century they became increasingly overpopulated, amd land shortage fuelled so-called 'faction fights' between chiefdoms and fractions of chiefdoms which had been given a continued reality by their recognition by the colonial state. And, after its annexation by the British in 1879, similar policies were applied to Zululand, north of the Tugela.[25]

Initially, Africans in Natal appear to have acquiesced in colonial rule. So long as they had access to land, Africans had little need to work on the white-owned sugar plantations that had become the most important sector of the colonial economy by 1860. As a result Indian indentured labourers were brought to Natal in large numbers: by 1900 they slightly outnumbered the number of white settlers. Despite the increasing involvement in the world economy of both white settlers and black peasants, these policies tended to conserve - albeit in deformed ways - rather than to restructure African social forms. The result of all this in both Natal and Zululand was to perpetuate parochial group loyalties and residual land claims. Helen Bradford has put it characteristically succinctly in her admirable A Taste of Freedom -

25 This paragraph and what follows draws heavily on my 'Patriotism, Patriarchy and Purity: Natal and the politics of Zulu ethnic consciousness', in Leroy Vail, The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa (London, Berkely and Los Angeles, 1989), and The Ambiguities of Dependence. State, class and nationalism in early twentieth century Natal (Baltimore and Johannesburg, 1987).

> ... it was hard to improve on the South African prescription for people to seize hold of parochial identities for political purposes. Take a tract of land containing a multiplicity of heterogeneous precapitalist societies in which production is deeply integrated with territory, kinship, language and political authority. Let the boundaries of the country as whole and the reserves in particular be "jerry-built by imperialism". Add mine magnates and traditionalist blacks striving with uneven success, to preserve older social formations. And then insert petty bourgeois nationalist politicians, striving to "stitch together" alliances and rally constituencies.[26]

And nowhere has this 'prescription' been followed more closely than in Natal-Zululand. This means, as Professor Michael Whisson has recently suggested, that today

> ... what in other, similarly deprived areas like the Cape Flats, Soweto or the peri-urban slums of Latin America erupt as gang fights for turf and racket control, in Zululand [sic.] are articulated into the clan identity of everyone in the region.

There was, however, another card which the Zulu had up their sleeve, another reason why ethnicity was to have greater resonance there than elsewhere. The existence of a cohesive kingdom, under threat from the mid-nineteenth century, and under a king who claimed to represent all the people, probably gave Zululand a capacity for constructing a nationalist identity which was not matched in the rest of South Africa. As Eric Hobsbawm has remarked, 'in one way or another, membership of an historical state, present or past, can act directly upon the consciousness of the common people to produce proto-nationalism... The potential popular appeal of a state tradition for modern nationalism is obvious...' This, then, was the great advantage the Zulu had over the other ethnic groups in South Africa. It was also the advantage that the first Inkatha movement founded in the early 1920s had over other ethnic associations which flourished in South Africa in the 1920s and 1930s as a response to the segregationist policies of the state, the migrant labour system and the activities of ideological brokers. The history of their kingdom, and its ethnic symbolism, provided a ready and rich resource for the culture brokers of the twentieth century. So rich a resource was it that Africans in Natal who had never formed part of the Zulu kingdom, who had actively resisted it or had served in colonial armies fighting it came to identify with it as a an alternative to colonial oppression. As Helen Bradford has put it, 'In

---

26 A Taste of Freedom. The ICU in Rural South Africa 1924-1930 (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1987), 96.

Natal in particular, the ruins of South Africa's most powerful pre-colonial kingdom [has] haunted the present'.[27]

Natal's attempts to destroy the Zulu monarchy as the pivot of Zulu national unity, even after Natal became part of the Union of South Africa in 1910, merely served to increase its legitimacy in the twentieth century. A new Zulu ethnic identity was forged based on the reinterpretation of past history, and 'custom'. This new Zulu nationalism was not an unmediated transmission of innate and immutable past values and culture, however. The rich historical and cultural tradition of the Zulu did not in itself predict that a Zulu ethnic nationalism would be constructed, although it undoubtedly assisted its creators who formed the first Inkatha movement in the early 1920s and the Zulu Cultural Soceity which followed on its demise in the 1930s. Ironically the first Inkatha was created jointly by Natal African Christians many of whose forbears had fled persecution in the Zulu kingdom in the nineteenth century; by the Zulu Royal Family, anxious to mobilize popular support in order to gain state recognition; and by white ideologues of segregation, who saw, now that the Zulu kingdom had been destroyed, that a refurbished traditionalism based on the monarchy could provide a bulwark against the more radical class-based and nationalist politics for example of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union which spread like wildfire amongst the dispossessed peasants and labour tenants of Natal in the late 1920s or the less radical but still pan-South African African National Congress in the interwar years. The conversion of the Communist Party of South Africa to working amongst African peasants and workers also roused the anxieties of South Africa's white rulers.

G.N. Heaton Nicholls, a prominent Zululand sugar planter who was also one of the key ideologues of segregation, saw the issues clearly. He had urged the state to recognise the authority of the Zulu king, in order to 'stem the tide of tribal disintegration' and prevent 'the evolution of a native proletariat'. As he wrote in May 1929, 'We must come back to the real ssue of tribal life - communalism - a very different thing to communism. If we do not get back to communalism we will certainly arrive at communism... We cannot long continue as a white aristocracy or black proletariat... We end ultimately in the not too distant future in the class war.' In the 1930s, Heaton Nicholls was a close ally of the Zulu Cultural Society, and persuaded the Department of Native Affairs to fund its activities to the tune of £250 a year - not a vast sum, but substantial

27 Bradford, A Taste of Freedom, 100.

enough and indicative of where its sympathies lay. Neither the state recognition of the conservative role that can be played by Zulu cultural nationalism nor its funding of Zulu ethnic endeavours is new.

At a time of growing dispossession and exploitation, many people turned to the Zulu Royal family, precisely because of the state's refusal to recognize the King's powers - despite the efforts of Heaton Nicholls and the Zulu Society. Through their allegiance to the Zulu Royal family, they expressed their resentment against white rule: the king was to be their redeemer, representative of a heroic past in strong contrast to their impoverished and humiliating present as farm labourers and miners and 'houseboys'.

Zulu ethnic nationalism was never uncontested, however, whether in the 1920s and 30s or later. Many of the same socially disruptive forces which led the more conservative intelligentsia to construct Zulu ethnic nationalism were responsible also for the rise of more radical pan-South African movements, which found a ready constituency in Natal although they all had to come to terms in different ways with a powerful undertow of Zulu cultural identity. Even in the 1950s when the ANC expanded to claim the allegiance of a far wider constituency in Natal for the first time, there were tensions, particularly over the ANC's non-racial policies and its collaboration, born in 1949 in the midst of a dangerous anti-Indian riot, with the South African Indian Congress. Nevertheless, for much of the 1950s, Natal was firmly in the ANC fold, under the leadership of the Natal-based Chief, Albert Luthuli. The Zulu Cultural Society died when it backed the wrong incumbent to the chieftaincy, and even support for the monarchy dwindled once the apartheid state handed the king a poisoned chalice by recognising him.

Since the 1950s, several processes have intensified the struggles in Natal. Many of the social dislocations of the interwar period have been greatly exacerbated by the state's policies of apartheid between 1948 and the early 1980s. In the 1960s and 1970s, these involved even greater control over African influx into the urban areas, the extension of the migrant labour system, and, in 1972, the establishment of Kwazulu as a 'Bantu homeland' (or Bantustan). This gave the inchoate but still pulsating Zulu cultural nationalism a territorial base even if the highly fragmented Kwazulu state relied on South Africa for more than three-quarters of its revenue and most of its investment. At the same time it also gave its political leaders powerful material resources and patronage. These were particularly important at a time when in other ways Kwazulu, like

the other Bantustans, was quite incapable of providing subsistence for the vast majority of its inhabitants. As elsewhere in the South African periphery, dire poverty and dependence had led to and been aggravated by the constant drain of the able-bodied and energetic from the rural areas to South Africa's white-controlled mines and farms and industries, whose wealth has been built on their labour.

Nowhere was the space provided by the state's Bantustan policies more inventively used than by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who became Kwazulu's first and only Prime Minister. In 1975, at a time when the ANC and other radical non-racial political organizations were banned, Buthelezi, cousin of the Zulu king, grandson of Cetshwayo's Chief Minister, and Prime Minister of Kwazulu, filled the political vacuum by resurrecting the Inkatha Zulu Cultural National Movement, with the covert support of the ANC. Combining an appeal to the heroic reconstructed Zulu past and the colours, songs and slogans of the 1950s ANC, he used his Kwazulu base and resources to build up his constituency.

Initially, Buthelezi was brilliantly successful in working within the system, while distancing himself from it. This did not last long, however. By 1979, he had broken with what he termed contemptuously 'the ANC in exile', while portraying himself as the true heir to its legitimate tradtion. By opposing its armed struggle and sanctions campaign, Buthelezi was now able to project himself nationally and internationally as the 'moderate' leader whom local whites and international capitalists could trust - and fund. Between 1979 and 1985, the dramatic resurgence of the trade union movement, the rise of the non-racial UDF and of its aggressive youth constituency, sharpened and radicalized politics and challenged Buthelezi's claims, driving him back on his local constituency and its ethnic symbolism. Opposed for the first time, Inkatha rapidly acquired a reputation for violent action, against students, workers and community leaders, while the Chief himself uttered veiled threats against his critics. With his close ties to business, Buthelezi was particularly angered by the launch of the COSATU in Natal in 1985 and the violence escalated. With the unbanning of the ANC in February 1990 it reached a new pitch of intensity, as the Zulu people now had to chose among competing loyalties, contrasting definitions of Zulu-ness.

In his attempts to mobilise his constituency, Buthelezi laid great stress on Zulu history - with frequent invocations of the Zulu past in Inkatha rallies and political events - and on traditional virtues em-

bodied in the 'Ubunthu-Botho' (Good Citizenship) school syllabus.[28] This like the Charter of the Zulu Cultural Society in the 1930s stresses, involves the need for discipline and obedience from the youth, and deference from women. Playing on the gender and generation insecurities, Ubunthu-Botho provides an ethnic ideology and social order calculated to appeal to older men from the rural areas who feel most threatened and alienated by the corrupting ways of the town and of the disrespectful amaqabane.

Yet there is an ambiguity at the heart of the discipline of the elders, for in the current civil war, Buthelezi cannot ignore his youthful constituency. On the contrary, the Inkatha Youth Brigade has always been his direct responsibility, and he claims it is now the largest section of the Inkatha Freedom Party.[29] And as Segal points out in the hostels it is the young workers who have taken the lead in organising the violence, and that this has 'to some extent upset the gerontocratic order' which previously provided the organising principle of the hostels.[30]

There is an even greater contradiction at the heart of Inkatha's espousal of 'tradition'. To return to Washbrook: Buthelezi's espousal of 'traditionalism' is not simply a caricature of the past, it also serves to disguise the radicalism of his espousal of free enterprise, and the consequences of his alliance with the state and capital. By the late 1970s he had emerged as the most articulate black protagonist of capitalist development, wooing the international business community and persuading some of its mopre maverick millionaires to fund him. Over the past decade Kwazulu has been the site of some economic development - an economic development which has intensified the stratification of the local populace into a small select band associated with the top echelons of Inkatha and Kwazulu who have managed to accumulate considerable wealth through their ties with the bureaucracy, through sugar farming and the Kwazulu Development Corporation, and a vast mass of people who are being marginalised and displaced by the same processes of 'enterprise capitalism' -and who are finding their way into the burgeoning squatter camps around the towns of Natal and into the hostels of the Rand.[31] The enterprise capitalism which Buthelezi ap-

---

28 History in Africa, 18 (1991), 115, 122.

29 Address of MG Buthelezi to the IYB, 'Peaceful change through negotiations and tolerance or chaos and conflict through violence and intimidation', Ulundi, 24 Aug. 1991.

30 Segal, 10.

31 This is based on D. J. Tilton, 'Writing the script for the future. Inkatha and the role of development in Kwazulu', D. Phil. Oxford, 1991. The inference is mine. Although development aid from international donors has not been vast, given the dire poverty of

plauds has thus involved the breaking up of community in Natal and Kwazulu through, for example, the allocation of communally held lands for individual tenure; together with drought it has led to the accelerated proletarianisation of its inhabitants over the past decade to such an extent that Durban and Pietermaritzburg are amongst the fastest growing urban areas in the world.

Thus the current processes of urbanisation, as Doug Hindson and Mike Morris argue, have been accompanied by 'massive social dislocation, upheaval, violence and heightened political conflict', as people struggle over 'the distribution and control of the resources necessary to support city life: employment, land, housing and services.' 'Ultimately', they say, the turmoil in the townships of Natal 'is part of a much wider struggle over the country's wealth: who owns and controls it and how it is distributed'.[32] How better to blur the explosive consequences of this class formation and potential class conflict than in the time honoured way of calling for a cross-class Zulu identification - and blaming the increased impoverishment of the Zulu not on apartheid, or the accumulating ventures of the home-grown new middle class - but on the youth, the ANC and the unions, whose calls for boycotts and sanctions and strikes undoubtedly deprive frequently unconsulted migrants of vitally needed employment.

Thus, the most desperately impoverished of South Africa's black population - the migrants living in the anomic hostels on the Rand - have been enlisted in an all-out war on neighbouring squatter camps through appeals to their Zulu identity and their ancient military glory on the one hand, and in an onslaught against the political programme of the ANC and the unions on the other. For those caught up in the struggle, the battle has seemed necessary to protect what little they had.

There can be little doubt that the ethnic nationalism being mobilized by Buthelezi and fomented by elements in the state is of grave importance for the future stability of a post-apartheid South Africa, despite the fact that the unbannning of the ANC, the violence and the evidence of state support has clearly eroded Inkatha's support quite dramatically over the past few months.[33] The complexity of

---

Kwazulu, its impact is considerable, and there has been some trickle-down effect: the patronage it has made possible is one of the reasons why Buthelezi has been able to maintain some of his support, especially among older women in the rural areas.

32 Doug Hindson and Mike Morris, 'Class differentiation, political conflict and state reform: a study of black urbanisation in the 1980s', unpublished proposal, 1990.

33 Last year Buthelezi was alleged to have about 7 per cent of the popular vote nationally; recently it has been put at 3-4 per cent. Poll figures in South Africa are notoriously unreliable

these events warns, however, against their easy labelling as some kind of return to an atavistic past. Zulu history enters the current configuration of events as an invented and reworked past, not an accurate portrayal of reality. Behind the violence lie not deep cultural or psychological traits but the intensification of rural poverty, migrancy, unemployment and urban overcrowding; that it takes an ethnic form is the result of the consistent working and reworking of ethnic divisions and the deliberate glorification of Zulu military 'traditions' by politicians and culture-brokers, both black and white. As everywhere, the ethnicizing of political conflict and its eruption into brutal killing is a product of present interests not of past culture.

for all kinds of reasons; but they are useful in suggesting at least an order of magnitude.