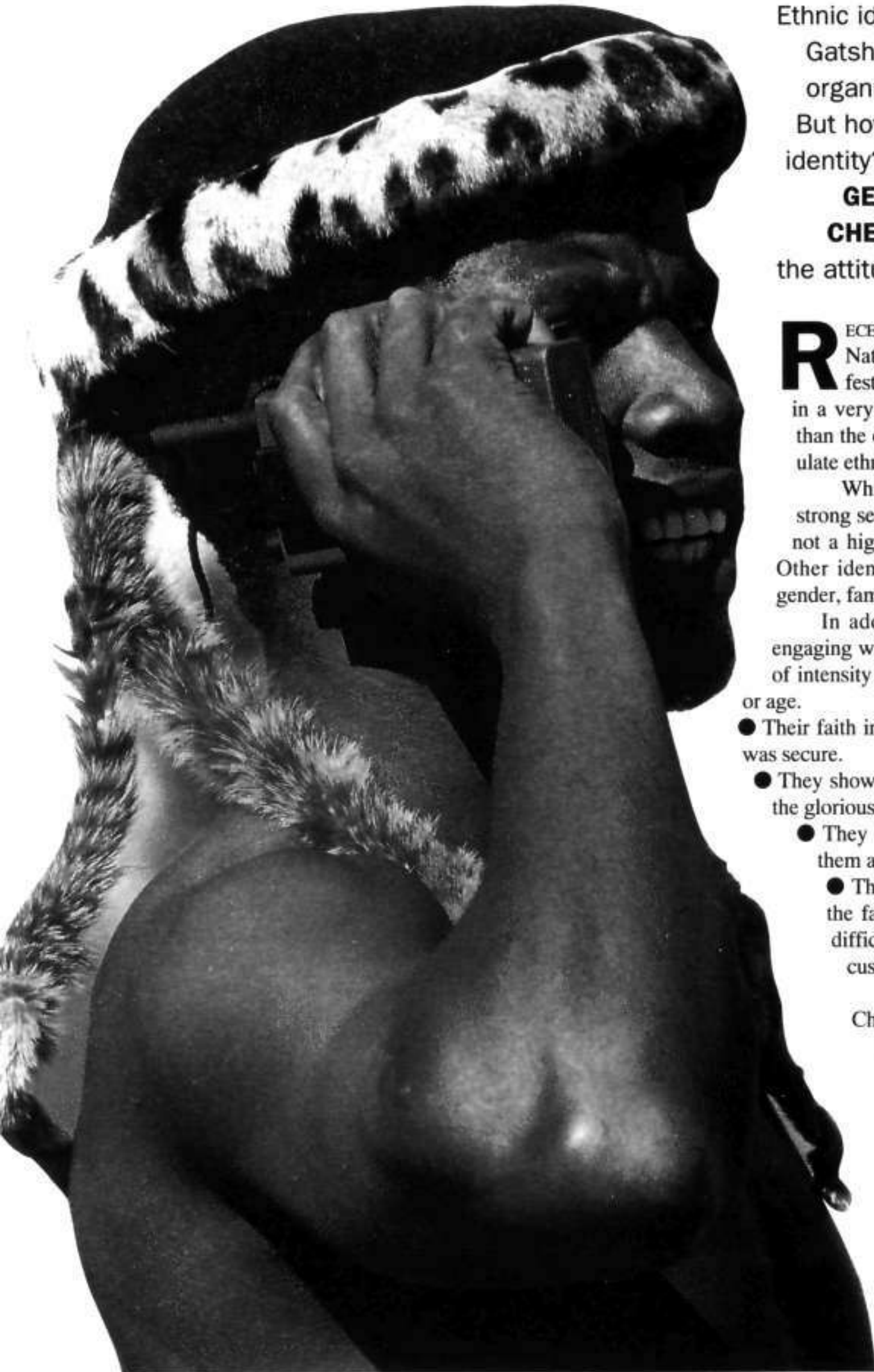




Calling all Zulus...



Ethnic identity is a cornerstone of Gatsha Buthelezi's attempts to organise Zulu-speaking people. But how important is their ethnic identity? **CATHERINE CAMPBELL, GERHARD MARÉ** and **CHERYL WALKER** assess the attitudes of a few such people

RECENT RESEARCH WE HAVE CONDUCTED IN Natal suggests that ethnicity *does* manifest itself in people's life histories — but in a very different and more fragmented way than the one put forward by those who manipulate ethnicity for political goals.

While our interviewees generally had a strong sense of themselves as “Zulu”, this was not a highly conscious or mobilised concept. Other identities came forward more strongly: gender, family, church and age in particular.

In addition, people did not appear to be engaging with their “Zuluness” at the same level of intensity and urgency as they did with gender or age.

- Their faith in the robustness of the Zulu language was secure.
- They showed little interest in Zulu history, or in the glorious Zulu past.
- They showed little sense of any threats to them as “black people” or as “Africans”.
- They appeared to be quite accepting of the fact that it was becoming increasingly difficult, and costly, to observe “traditional customs.”

Furthermore, for some informants, Christianity had provided replacements for the old-fashioned rural ways. The passing of customs was simply stated as a fact of life.

‘A Zulu person’

What evidence is there of an ethnic identity in the stories people tell about their lives? As has been mentioned, there was little evidence for the existence of a Zulu ethnic identity in the sense of a self-conscious reference to oneself as “a Zulu person”. People

Customs, past and respect

seldom spontaneously referred to themselves as Zulus. When they did it was most likely to arise when people felt their Zuluness was in question.

For example, Mr J, who has a Bhaca rather than a Zulu name, spontaneously emphasised the fact that he was a Zulu, and went to some pains to explain how he nevertheless had a Bhaca name.

When pressed, people were often vague about what being a Zulu entailed. When asked directly about their ethnic identity they usually agreed quite strongly that they were Zulu — but then were often at a loss to explain what Zuluness meant for them. Informants sometimes defined Zuluness in terms of vague stereotypes, which did not necessarily apply to their own lives.

Mr P was one of few informants who spontaneously identified himself as a Zulu person. His Zuluness came across as a strong feature of his identity: "My strong identifying as a Zulu helps whoever I am talking with to have a clear picture of who I am," he told us.

When pressed to explain his Zuluness he linked it to "certain ceremonies" such as Zulu dancing at weddings, which he described as "our pleasure". However, he then noted that there was no dancing at his own wedding because he is a Christian. He explained: "You asked what constitutes a Zulu, and how we differentiate it, [so] I explained it in the light of being a Zulu. But since we are now Christians we have forbidden those customs, as we proceed along Christian lines."

Mobilising around 'Zuluness'

We then proceeded to examine what space there might be for a political broker to mobilise under the banner of "Zuluness" in a particular situation — using, for example, issues like history, practices or symbols to reinforce an ethnic identity.

On the whole, we found our informants' accounts of their life histories were markedly lacking in references to an ethnic identity. Maré's recent study of politics and ethnicity points out that Buthelezi often refers to the glorious Zulu past to mobilise ethnic sentiment. This past is symbolised in heroes such as Shaka, Cetshwayo and Dingane; characterised by mythical wisdom and bravery; and supported by a cast of warriors of legendary disciplines, but

Three factors which spontaneously emerged in people's accounts of themselves, although not explicitly linked to a subjective sense of Zuluness, conform to criteria for an ethnic identity. They may constitute the fragments of an ethnic consciousness which could be mobilised by political brokers.

● **Customs:** There were a number of references to this, especially in relation to rites of passage. However, these customs were seldom referred to as 'Zulu' in nature.

Some people referred to them as 'our customs', and vaguely related these to 'black' or 'African' people.

There were also references to the problematic status of customs associated with the past in modern urban life. We were told it was difficult to keep up 'our customs' in the absence of land for growing food, and keeping livestock.

'There is a tendency for people to abandon Zulu culture ... the food we used to eat is no longer available ... I don't have a grinding stone here — I left it in a rural place,' was the explanation given by Mrs G.

The declining relevance of 'our custom' in people's eyes was often linked to the influence of competing frameworks (such as Christianity). Furthermore, the demands of the workplace, and the growing economic independence of women, had forced people to make a range of adjustments to patriarchal gender relations.

● **Rural past:** There were frequent references to the rural past, but these were rarely linked with Zuluness; images of the rural past were often evoked by people explaining the shortcomings of the urban present, where life was characterised in terms of poverty, alienation and conflict.

Said Mr D: 'When I was growing up I looked after everyone's cattle. I did not say: 'These are not my father's cattle.' These days if someone has a puncture, another will just say: 'That's your problem,' and walk away. If someone even kills his wife, the same thing will happen.'

There was little sense of a common historical past. Our informants' links with the past were highly individualised or family connections. Accounts of their rural history are more modest and personal than Buthelezi's evocation of a blazing trail of chiefs and warriors. They hark back to a gentle rural existence where the homestead was the main unit of production, where people were economically self-sufficient and where life was ordered and predictable.

In evoking a 'common Zulu history', Buthelezi does not refer to the homestead or to productive activities. However, perhaps his references to Shaka resonate with people's personal histories in the sense that they reinvent a time characterised by dignity and control over their own lives.

● **Respect:** Almost all our informants dwelt at length on the importance of respect, especially in inter-generational relationships. There was general agreement that respect was lacking in the modern township context, and a belief that this 'breakdown of respect' stood in the way of community harmony.

'There is a great difference between how these young ones are growing up. At home I was taught to respect the young and adults alike ... now the young ones don't do that, they don't care whether a person is young or an adult,' said Mr Q.

Again, this was not explicitly linked with Zuluness. However, it was the one feature of the interviews that was probably the most consistent with Buthelezi's mobilisation of an ethnic identity.



■ LONG LIVE THE KING: King Goodwill Zwelithini

PHOTO: JOE ALFERS (SOUTHAFRICA)

Identity to the fore

capable of an awesome anger when provoked.

In making sense of their lives, not one informant made a spontaneous reference to Zulu history. When asked what they knew about Zulu history, several people mentioned the names of Shaka, Cetshwayo and Dingane — but not one person was able to give any information about them, other than vague comments that they were “heroes of the past” and “leaders of the Zulu people”.

But they still believed their children should be taught these histories.

There was also no spontaneous evidence of a sense of a “Zulu” group belongingness among the people we interviewed.

A number of informants referred disapprovingly to the notion of marriages between black and white people, making comments such as “once you lose your colour you lose your nation” (Mr K). However, in response to enquiries about the concept of a “nation” people tended to refer vaguely to differences between blacks and whites, rather than in terms of a Zulu distinctiveness.

Cultural symbols

In relation to culturally distinctive symbols and practices there were a number of factors that are of interest in relation to the possible existence of a latent for existing (but unexpressed) Zulu identity.

The first of these is *language*. None of the informants mentioned language spontaneously. However, in reply to a specific question, everyone expressed a great personal commitment to language as the cornerstone of Zuluness. This was in fact the only feature consistently associated with a Zulu identity in the interviews.

As Mr K told us:

Under what conditions might a ‘Zulu’ identity come to the fore in Natal and KwaZulu? There are three key factors:

- **The issue of regionalism, and the specific powers that will be granted to regional governments, is of central concern in setting spatial and administrative/government boundaries to ethnic identities. At the end of last year the KwaZulu government presented a constitution for a strong federal ‘State of KwaZulu/Natal’. Mobilisation around this issue will have repercussions in the identity choices regional inhabitants will have to make, and also on the way ‘outsiders’ will define and mark ‘Zulus’.**
- **A strong central government (under ‘opposition’ control) which devolves power to the region could be presented as not truly caring for the interests of ‘Zulus’ or being insensitive to the regional specificities.**
- **Language may become a mobilising platform if, for example, these ‘insensitivities’ extend to the educational field.**

“My children speak English (at their multi-racial school), but I emphasise to them that they should speak Zulu at home. Zulu is our pride, not necessarily due to the customs, but due to the language itself. It enables one to easily merge with one’s next of kin. When someone related to you meets you it is of great pride to hear him greeting you with the distinct surnames of the lineage or clan.”

Two interesting comments can be made about language at this stage:

- While there was general agreement that the Zulu language was not of economic value (in terms of material survival) there was no sense that the language was under threat.
- Language and religion are facets of Zulu identity that have not been drawn on by Buthelezi and Inkatha. This contrasts markedly with the mobilisation of Afrikaners in the 20th century.

We have two explanations for the lack of evidence of a self-conscious ethnic Zulu identity:

● The nature of the interview situation, which was not particularly well-suited to “bringing ethnicity to the fore.” In our open-ended interview situation,

perhaps ethnicity was not adequately problematised for it to be a self-consciously salient issue.

● The declining relevance of “Zuluness” as a useful resource for making sense of everyday life, in the light of the daily challenges of modern township life.

Perhaps Zulu ethnicity as expressed by Buthelezi is not a particularly salient factor in the lives of township residents in the 1990s.

We know he has been more successful in mobilising rural people than in mobilising urban people. His claims do not resonate for many Durban township residents in the conflictual and exclusive way he uses ethnicity, because he refers to customs people cannot practice — and a past they cannot remember or recapture.

Furthermore, Buthelezi addresses his appeals to a group of people whose confidence in the robustness of the Zulu language and community appears to be quite firm and unshaken.

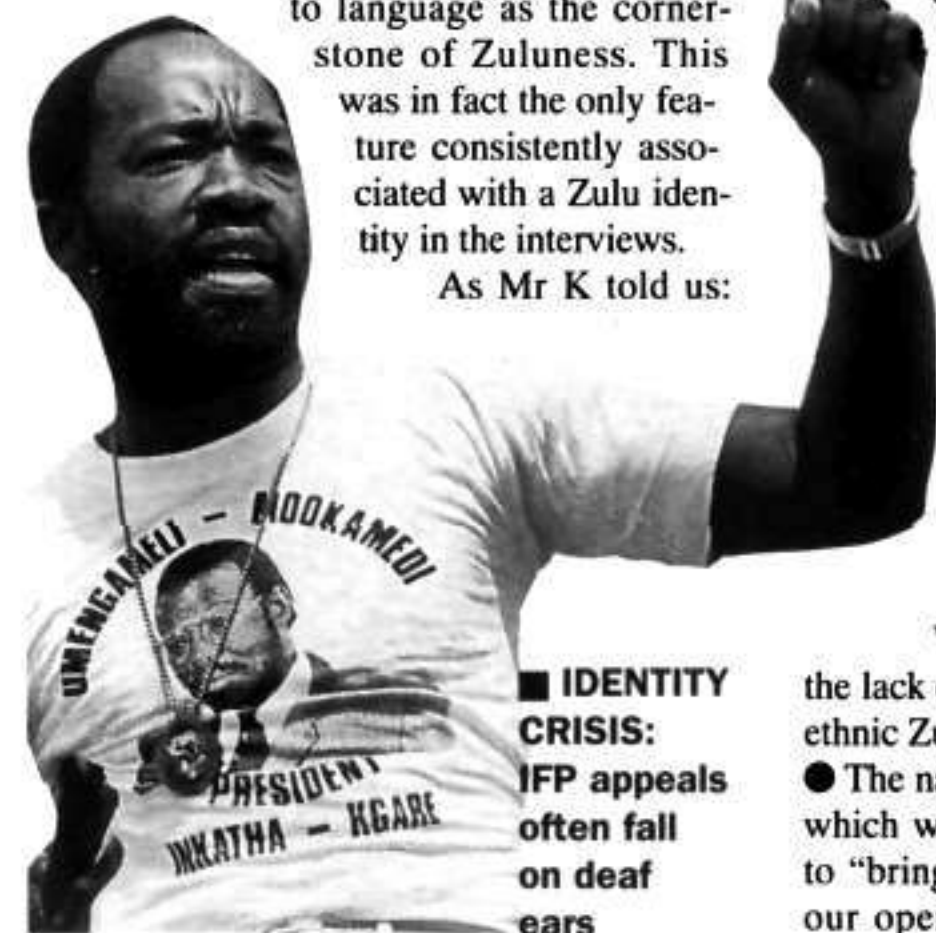
Buthelezi’s appeals to Zuluness do not resonate directly with urban people’s everyday life experience. His appeals, for example, to a glorious warrior past filled with chiefs and heroes, or his references to the threats to Zulu identities posed by Indians, whites and Xhosas, might not necessarily resonate with the experience or identity of urban people struggling to survive under conditions of social psychological disembedding and material poverty and hardship.

A sense of Zuluness

In conclusion, our interviews show little evidence for a self-conscious sense of Zuluness in the sense in which an ethnic entrepreneur such as Buthelezi would characterise it.

But it would be wrong to say Zulu identity is dead. On the contrary, people have a firm confidence in its robustness, particularly in relation to the Zulu language which appeared to be the central core of our informants’ sense of Zuluness.

In addition, the fragments of Zulu identity which do exist — particularly in relation to language, respect, a rural past and possibly customs — could potentially be mobilised in a range of circumstances in the future (see box). ■
● *This is an edited version of sections of a paper presented to a recent conference on ethnicity, identity and nationalism, organised by Rhodes University*



■ **IDENTITY CRISIS: IFP appeals often fall on deaf ears**