

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

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