

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:

“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,

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.**

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.

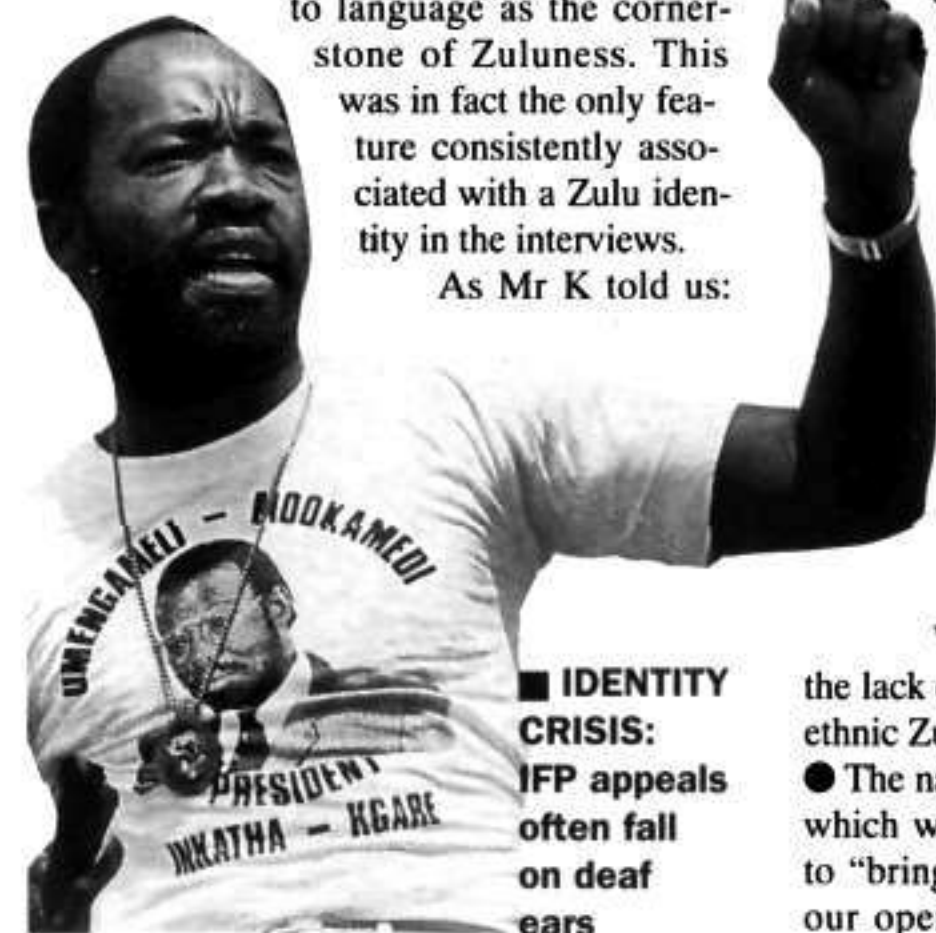
A sense of Zuluness

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**