‘Where wealth and power and blood (still) reign as worshipped gods!’ A farewell to Lungisile Ntsebeza

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ABSTRACT

This article is a subjective account of the patterns of polarisation in KwaZulu-Natal. It explores such polarisations in gender politics, livelihoods procurement in the cities and countryside, and in cultural and normative tensions. The article traces how the new ‘kingdom of money’ mobilises the aspirations of an African middle class in its belief in upward mobility. These polarisations had led to violence even before the July 2021 riots in Greater Durban.

KEYWORDS

Labour; KwaZulu-Natal; Inkatha; customary; movements

Introduction

Lungisile Ntsebeza and I met in 1993 in Durban. It was a hectic but hopeful time: I was at the helm of the Natal Culture Congress (NCC) and despairing about the peace process as I chaired its media and culture committees. The conflicts around the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) were seriously under way. By then, from what I recall, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) had put their weight behind Jacob Zuma as a ‘third way’ alternative to the stand-off between the ‘reconcilers’ of Durban, led by Sbu Ndebele and Jeff Radebe, and the Midlands militants like Harry Gwala.

The province had come out of a serious civil war between Chief Buthelezi’s Inkatha movement and Congress-linked militants, a war that despite promises of peace was still simmering. Support for the reconcilers was seen as an elite-based solution, support for Gwala’s militancy meant an escalation of a people’s war. Zuma was seen as a leader who was sensitive to Zulu custom and traditions and one who could broker peace. Zuma was to
lead the ANC, but failed to achieve a majority in the province. Lungisile and I met 10 years later, in ‘a new country’, to launch with Gillian Hart the beyond the urban–rural divide research project, which tried to combine our disappointments with the transition over issues of livelihoods, land and dispossession (Hart and Sitas 2005). By then, the Reconstruction and Development Programme which struck a hopeful note on redistribution was truly buried and discontent was in the air.

We met again in 2009 through the Sociology Department at the University of Cape Town, trying to balance our work with even bigger disappointments about the prospects of social transformation. This was short-lived as Lungisile soon left to head the Centre for African Studies.

Since then, I have tried to keep abreast of the original span of my scholarship: monitoring the stresses and strains in KwaZulu-Natal and following up on my compereers from the 1980s and 1990s despite the great distance between my new location and my networks there. Most of them and their leadership, including my own participation in forms of resistance and struggle, have been edited out of the historical narratives that are beginning to own the past. Still, there is a thin layer left, made up of those who are still with us, because plenty have passed away. All this has been short-circuited by Covid-19 and the current explosion of discontent. What follows taps into the insights of remarkable people who are still trying to decipher the burden of the contemporary moment.

What is the lived experience of change in this mutinous province? I dare say that the habit of reading popular responses off a structure of inequality hides more than it reveals because what is obvious is that the social actors that animate this narrative are in the midst of a major social transformation that is altering the very structure of inequality and the social agents that are bringing about social changes. This article offers a subjective account of how this major transformation is felt by key social actors and how their struggles are interpreted and often sanitised.

As Lungisile and I were always concerned about labour, land and livelihoods, it was obvious that my first point of contact would be with serious labour leaders of yesteryear.

Livelihoods and ‘uncontrollable women’

In 2018, by accident I met Sipho Mvelase at the Bartel Arts Centre by Durban’s harbour. He was a retired shop steward from one of the most important metalworking unions. He had begun work with a brief contract at Coronation Brick and Tile, where the 1973 strikes started, and retired in 2015. He sees himself as an elder of the trade union movement that was the backbone of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and later COSATU. I had met him when he was in his thirties and forties, as the major struggles for union recognition and then the struggles to overthrow apartheid were under way.

By now in his late sixties, he had two wives, seven children and 21 grandchildren, the eldest of whom had just undergone the reed ceremony and virginity testing at his insistence, because women were ‘losing … their way’. It was around the time when hysteria gripped the thousand or so maidens on display and Jacob Zuma had to be rushed away from the ceremony (Hans and Ntsele 2015). Instead of answering my question about his turn and allegiance to customary ceremonies, he smiled and said that the hysteria was an omen that uMsholozi (Zuma’s praise name) was on his way out. He was by then quite
cynical about the capacity of COSATU to keep the working class satisfied but was worried that his own union, the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), would fizzle away after its noisy expulsion from the federation. His life was mostly based in the rural areas, but he was taking advantage of the monetisation of the customary areas and quite content to keep others out of customary KwaZulu-Natal. He had bought two ‘zero-valued’ trucks from the firm on his retirement and was doing quite well, with about seven such machines by now.

There was a more unexpected turn when the issue of foreigners came up. Mvelase said that they are stamping on our fields ‘uninvited’; they do not have ‘usufruct’ on the land. I was surprised he used such a legal term in English but there was no time to explore who has usufruct or who doesn’t in his mind. He surprised me further: when the King ordered the foreigners out, Mvelase allowed his drivers to use his trucks to cart men from the KwaMashu hostels to go into town to ‘sort out’ the foreigners. Whether he was lying or not, showing off or trying to rile me, is less important than that such ideas are active in the cultural formations he inhabited: the customary, women out of control, rural–urban interconnections, the amakhosi (Zulu clan chiefs) and the royal house, trade unionism and omens about the decline of Zuma.

His references to women and hostels reminded me of the work of Nomkhosi Xulu: she explicated such a place of ‘perplexity’, the KwaMashu hostel, which despite post-apartheid desires had turned into a catchment area of rural pain (Xulu-Gama 2017). The 70,000 souls camped there, save a few old-timers with regular jobs, were eking out their existence on the margins of Durban’s economy. It was designed for 18,000 people during apartheid. The actual buildings and their rooms were occupied by men and on their periphery was the women’s squatter camp and its ukuphanda (improvisation) of an economy. There is at least one murder a day there.

What concerns me here is the perception of ‘women out of control’, women, as Nthabiseng Motsemme argued in her doctoral study, who negotiated their lives between uhlonipha (respect) and ukuphanda, negotiating with patriarchy and hustling a way out of there through informal labour. These women were and are part of the fast-growing statistic of women-headed households (Motsemme 2011; Casale, Dorritt and Mosomi 2020), women who were caught between two contradictory extremes: the Nobkhubulwana Institute’s cultural call for a return to tradition, led by Patience Gugu Ngobese, also responsible for the reed rituals and testing; and the Rural Women’s Movement, led until her tragic death from Covid-19 in December 2020 by Sizani Ngubane, calling for the tradition’s social transformation.

I followed up with two remarkable women: a student leader of the late 1980s, an activist who was also an elected councillor until 2014, and another who was a labour movement cultural activist. They emphasised the real and all-encompassing tension between the poles of tradition and its reinvention and the need for women’s independence, and were preoccupied with establishing safe woman-headed households.

It is not about politics anymore, I was told. Their struggle was about recreating the ‘social’: in the streets (where most women’s livelihoods are earned), in the transport nodes (where women are humiliated daily), in the neighbourhood and in the home. The ‘traditional’ is a powerful shaming weapon, I was told, in the struggle against gender-based violence. It is also a trap that reproduces male domination. The former labour activist mourned the decline of garment and textile jobs and the comradeship of thousands of
women wage-earners who were central to the everyday politics of Durban’s townships such as Claremont and Ntuzuma (where the textile mills were located).

The former councillor, who has worked extensively on women’s health issues, highlighted the importance of nurses and community development workers. But there are limits to such solidarities, as nurses use their wages to stay away from the communities that nurtured them, moving ‘to old white and Indian’ areas. Community development workers are more than vulnerable – often unpaid, often afraid to deal with the most volatile areas. When I asked her why she withdrew from local and branch politics she shaped a pistol with her fingers and mimed a shot. This was not without substance, as the Moerane Report made explicit (Moerane Commission 2018).

The kingdom of money

To return to the KwaMashu hostel and the areas around it. The management area of INK (Inanda, Ntuzuma and KwaMashu) is eThekwini’s (the renamed Durban) most populous urban cluster. I had reliable information about its initiatives because Linda Mbonambi, a brilliant student in the last years of the University of Natal, was in charge of all development projects there, but had moved on to a broader role in the eThekwini Metro. The hostel is a small part of the million mostly African working-class people who occupy the area’s varied households. Whereas the hostel is still a strong Inkatha space, the broader area is not.

Musa Ndlovu was my next contact – he had recently discovered me on Facebook. His story was curious: he saw an opportunity in the early 1990s to provide a service that Durban’s waste management ignored. He had some connections there who led the way. One was also a friend of mine – a young rebel in the 1980s, a victim of Inkatha’s retaliations and someone who wanted out of politics and out of the creative world he worked in after his senior degree. He saw a gap in the system and followed it. Ndlovu watched the beginnings of our friend’s success story and followed suit. He also became an adjunct to the system, offering an outsourced service which DSW (Durban Solid Waste) embraced. The waste management services were then outsourced further, so by 2013 there were a range of service providers in its ever-expanding margins. Ndlovu was doing well. But the whole policy had to be reviewed. Why? Precisely because it was doing well.

Enter Zandile Gumede, a rising INK political star with working-class roots who was beginning to associate closely with the Jacob Zuma ‘RET faction’ and with the Women’s League pivots that enhanced his popularity. In KwaZulu-Natal the women’s question remained high on the agenda, not only because of the violence against them and against children, but also because the ANC Women’s League and Inkatha Women’s Brigade kept it as a political space for their own (mostly middle-class) aspirations. Many African women in business and in the higher echelons of the state bureaucracy owed their success to such networks. They provided a route out of the ukuphanda priorities of the majority. I was told that Gumede understood too well that she could be entering the ‘kingdom of money’ and her mayoral success was impressive and speedy. Barely four years later she and 20 co-accused were about to face 2,786 charges spread across 374 pages, over the R320 million waste management contract that allegedly benefited her closest friends and counsellors and which by implication might have left Ndlovu in the lurch.
**Land and power**

I am less concerned with the issues of corruption in this article than about the kingdom of money and its implications. It is about two fast-growing sociological categories, rand millionaires and unemployed African youth, over the last decade. The growth of black millionaires is a big issue nationally, and the reality in KwaZulu-Natal seems to lag way behind, but not the idea’s potential. The economy has shrunk, employment has shrunk, and one in two are now out of work. The latest Statistics South Africa data (2021) showed that the current expanded unemployment rate in KwaZulu-Natal is high at 41.9%, compared to the national average of 38.7%. Among youth it increases to 66%. This leads into the major issues of land and labour and the links between the countryside and the city.

The statistics on wealth in the country show the increase of dollar millionaires, who are predominantly black. Even more punchy is the increase of rand millionaires, whose achievement needs careful analysis, but it seems that their numbers are lower in KwaZulu-Natal than in the rest of the country. It is not clear whether the numbers are made up primarily of formal business activities or if they are steeped in the illicit, the violent, the ‘tenderpreneurial’, the professional, the consultant bidding networks, the fixer networks, or the high-level professional stratum that works for erstwhile white or multinational corporations. We are talking of a class that is only 1.4% of the population, and within that small slither only 20% are African (AfrAsia Bank 2021).

Despite the small numbers, most people seem to know someone who made it and the possibility of personal, family or household success is there and shapes behaviour – as do the mythemes of success punted in all the media. Ndlovu is close to being a rand millionaire, but he is not there yet. Asked how the experience has been, if I recall correctly, he replied we are *izinyonga*, indicating a limpid, lame, rising black bourgeoisie. Why? Because it needed an *udondolo* (walking stick). Is this the 2010 class project to build an African bourgeoisie, unleashed through Zuma’s ascendancy? I think the answer lies somewhere there.

To understand such experiences, I have to insist that it is not only about abstract activity or money, but also has to be located in a provincial livelihoods question, where everyday struggles over land, labour power and reproduction hold sway. In KwaZulu-Natal, land ownership by black people in ‘white lands’ has increased. The government’s Land Audit Report has it at 19% (Republic of South Africa 2017), which is a vast increase if one looks at the 5% that marked the 1994 reality. It shows too that numerically black landowners outnumber white landowners. The Bornman Report asserts that the province is the only one in South Africa where black farmers own more than 50% of the farming land outside the customary areas (Land Centre of Excellence 2017). The difference between the two reports is about method: the Bornman Report studied 200,000 property transactions since the 1990s without a clear baseline. It ignored that more than one-third of the land outside the customary areas was and is owned by corporate entities (agribusinesses), whose owners are in the main white. The sugar and timber plantation economy in the province represents a major concentration and centralisation of assets. So, a more realistic picture would be somewhere in between and closer to the Land Audit Report. Yet, it signifies a trend of land acquisition by black farmers outside the reserves that constitutes an important economic interest.

The pattern of ownership is not the result of the government’s Land Restitution Programme – this has achieved about 5% of such a transfer (Republic of South Africa 2017).
2017). The acquisition of land was an ‘own affair’ of borrowing from banks and buying from willing sellers, or where (as in the sugar industry) black land ownership was assisted. They are doing so in a climate of declining value generation from agriculture, from 9% of the provincial GDP in 2011 to 5.1% in 2017 (Republic of South Africa 2017). The drought of 2015/16 exacerbated the transfer, whereby many more landed whites were ready to sell to willing buyers.

KwaZulu-Natal has also a different ratio between hitherto white lands and the KwaZulu reserve areas. Unlike the national figure of 13% of land under customary forms of control, 40% of the land was in the old KwaZulu homeland. A staggering 80% of this is now under the control of the Ingonyama Trust, set up for the Zulu royal house. Despite the Trust’s recent claim over the entire land of KwaZulu-Natal,2 it still holds on tightly to the 80% it controls in the customary areas. The latest challenge to it reversed the Trust’s attempt to reduce its captive population into ‘payee tenants’ (The Witness 2022). This should have been a moment for jubilation for Sizani Ngubane’s women-centred leadership. But her challenge to give women rights to land and to equity continues to meet with serious patriarchal resistance.

The land struggle in the customary areas is even more complicated because chiefs were stymied in their efforts to deal, behind their communities’ backs, with multinational mining interests. I was told that the chiefs needed to valorise their advantages over development projects and business ventures because the R600,000 (more or less) they received from the government per annum was in their minds not sustainable. This is just under the average annual salary of a university lecturer in South Africa (Talent.com 2024). Chiefs also report tensions with their izinduna (headmen) who allegedly are not listening to them (because they are paid directly by government, informants assert) and instead are instigating their own schemes. The tensions translated into violence and killings during 2020. According to the Minister of Traditional Affairs in the province, Sipho Hlomuka:

More than 27 of these individuals have been murdered and several others have escaped assassination attempts since 2019. These murders are increasingly destabilising the institution of traditional leadership. There is currently no evidence linking these killings to any particular development within our traditional institutions. (Charles 2021)

For their part the izinduna, 3,140 in number, were supposed to earn a stipend of R96,000 a year, but the province only approved an allocation of R80,163 per capita. What can you do with R7–8,000 a month, they ask, according to my retired ex-Dunlop shop steward friend, Jacob Cele (Bhengu 2014). Per capita they would be responsible for 1,600 rural souls, but mostly elderly and young people – as their unemployed youth would have headed off to the cities. And in the vast agrarian land only 24% of households are involved in agricultural activity, and even they depend on urban wages for their subsistence.

Mvelase felt that the Department of Agriculture was a mess anyway and that Inkatha would have had a better run there because that is where its support base was. Yet, I am sure he would been happier with what was promised in the 2021 budget, helping small-scale farmers enter livestock value chains (R2.5 billion is no small amount). Beef, poultry and pig farming were prioritised, along with 3,400 red meat producers, and the areas he is active in, uThukela and Zululand, were named as major beneficiaries. Although cannabis was not mentioned and indeed constitutes a growing activity in both customary and non-customary lands, mega-nurseries to produce seeds, seedlings and indigenous fruit
trees were mentioned. Caution is necessary with such allocations, with Estina in the Free State a vivid example of a big government promise that imploded into corruption.

The link between what is going on in the countryside and the city is obvious too in the lives of black workers in the formal economy, as close to 60% of them have rural homesteads. Those in employment and working for the big companies, such as Beier, Beacon, Unilever, Engen Refineries and Toyota, are very mindful of the need to keep their jobs; mindful too of the fact that their union power is not what it used to be.

Labour and politics

The organised black working class has had and has a major role to play in the province, but this claim must be contextualised. It has a specific history. The fact that it was the cradle of the post-1970s unionism has been noted and many of us have written about the impact on it from the opening up to the world economy: how core industrial sectors have de-industrialised, how the textile and clothing industry had been affected, and how formal employment had shrunk. Furthermore, it had a major political role in shifting the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal away from the ‘Gwala vs Ndebele/Radebe’ (or Midlands vs Durban) power struggle and buttressing Zuma’s ascendency. In turn, many unionists, shop stewards and researchers who were at its service became parliamentarians or occupied key positions in the KwaZulu-Natal administration and urban areas management. Fortuitously, in 1994 Inkatha handed over the Executive Committee membership for Economic Affairs to the ANC’s Zuma as a gesture of provincial unity, which in turn facilitated the creation of the KwaZulu-Natal Social and Economic Council, the Mandela Lead Project of Cato Manor (led by Willies Mchunu) and a Workers’ Parliament that survives to this day.

In turn, the links between the SACP and COSATU were tight, even though most of the membership of the former was and is made up of unemployed youth. But there has been decisive change afoot: struggles were less about the share of surplus value at the point of work, and more about encroachment and distributional challenges. Workers in the informal economy had no labour power to withdraw as a sign of power, but are involved in a persistent politics of encroachment: on pavements, in streets, at access points, around resources and about projects, existing in a constant tension with urban area forms of management; distributional, insofar as key-point access at all levels of government releases opportunities and money. Furthermore, all social movements that started responding to the extreme inequalities and lack of service delivery, including environmental forms of degradation, have been in tension with the ANC and SACP: like Abahlali baseMjondolo (Shack Dwellers) or the Poor People’s Alliance. They all found themselves in extreme spaces of hostility. One notable example was the murder of Abahlali baseMjondolo leader Ayanda Ngila (Phungula 2022).

Statistically, youth presents a potentially explosive category, with more than 50% of young people being unemployed and at the source of serious volatility. But in lived reality youth does not exist as a category: young people are members of families, kinship systems, street gangs, school- or project-based networks, cultural, sport and performance groups, and provide too, especially young women, large amounts of unpaid labour around their households. Where they are a serious constant presence is in the long lines to collect the meagre R350 that the state offers once a month to mitigate their poverty. They know
each other well and a lot of information-sharing happens there or when they gather after spending some of it in the local stores. They then disappear into manifold activities, from drug-related networks to street-corner pre-libidinal encounters. Most do not bother to vote. Most subsist primarily through the earnings of a working member of the household because R350 does not feed anyone for more than two weeks. It is formal labour that guarantees their subsistence rather than government handouts. They are available for any mobilisation that makes sense regarding livelihoods. The majority of SACP members are young and unemployed. They are thinly spread out across the province so their impact at a local level has not yet been tested.

The Zuma denouement in the ANC has significantly weakened the influence of organised labour. Two of the most important industrial unions, NUMSA and the Food and Canning Workers Union, have respectively been expelled from and left COSATU. Dunlop, the most militant of shopfloors since the early 1980s, has been closed down. Nationally, despite the SACP’s formal support for Cyril Ramaphosa, his more business-friendly networks had them removed from the ANC National Executive Committee, and their opposition to Zuma meant a loss of access to the KwaZulu-Natal legislature and cabinet. For the SACP this was a blow because the strategic mandate of its General Secretary, Themba Mthembu, as a Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in KwaZulu-Natal helped with an agrarian alternative and the urban–rural links I have researched in the past. His replacement by a controversial and allegedly corrupt ex-mayor from Ngungundlovu raised some ire, even from the Inkatha Freedom Party.

Cultural formation

Whereas labour, land and livelihoods struggles were and are on tenterhooks, where breaking points have been reached are around forms of expression and culture: the link between rural and urban was key to much of KwaZulu-Natal’s creativity. Tourism and spaces like the African Arts Centre emphasised the exotic aspects of the ‘cultural’: even there the arts and crafts nourished an impressive array of work. There was a creative line linked to the Zulu royal house that was ‘rural’ by default because the separation between the white lands of Natal and Zululand forced it into the rural. Epic poetry, choral work, music and dance preserved a past that blended Zulu-ness with Christianity and European modernism. At the core of all this was the idea of an unfinished Shakan revolution: an idea that kept on being trapped into the tribal and the exotic.

Enter the colonial in Natal. Among whites there were interesting divides: the old Natal families (ONFs) versus the old Durban families (ODFs), a division too subtle for outsiders. The one was based on landed and agrarian settler descendants, the other based on Durban’s mercantile winds, but both facing northwest towards England and its claim to a hegemony in Western civilisation. Both were bourgeois to the core, establishing schools and cultural institutions that mirrored upper-class Britain.

Then there were the ordinary settlers who demanded stricter controls over Indians and the ‘natives’, searching for white privilege. In between were the clergy and missionaries, who had an ambiguous role. Christianity took root and the amakholwa (believers) found access to church land and to education. What they had lost control of were the recalcitrant African Christianities that found fascinating syncretic solutions.
Then there were the sources of creativity, both urban and rural, that defined the everyday reality of the black working class: *mbube, maskanda, isicathamiya*, gospel, call and response song-dances, *mbaqanga*, popular *isibongo*, *ngoma* rituals and dance – many of these were allowed to survive during the segregation and apartheid periods because of the need to shape a Zulu homeland identity. This everyday creativity brought the cultural, the performative and orality into the political mainframe. There were waves of it in the 1970s and 1980s, whether through Inkatha, the UDF or the trade union movement. Black Consciousness created a different dynamic as it prioritised English and the unity of all the oppressed who could consider themselves black. It also emphasised a different take on collective performance and a radical non-participation in structures created through white supremacy. Yet what was to predominate by the 1980s was a working class, Zulu-based renaissance. This was wedded to the belief that labour was the source of all value (‘the humble bride affianced with only the bridgroom’s consent’ in Mi Hlatshwayo’s more poetic words [1986]); the bride that provided the energy for the wheels to turn and to become the expressive vanguard of ‘the struggle’.

When I was at the helm of the NCC in 1991–92, negotiating with the provincial structures and institutions like the Performing Arts Council of Natal, we could safely say that we had memberships that reached deep. The largest were COSATU’s cultural teams, numbering more than 5,000 members. To that one could add writers’ organisations, the associations of musicians, filmmakers, artists, photographers, traditional Indian and Zulu cultural associations, community and youth groups, drama groups; 37 distinctive units in total. The negotiations were tough and reached a compromise on a Commission for the Restructuring of the Arts in Natal which prefigured a deeply democratic and community-sensitive dispensation.

This energy was tested during the civil war and truly stymied, as the compromise and the transition handed the national Culture Ministry and Department to Inkatha and creativity to the market. By implication, all the labour movements’ energy was marginalised and what came to predominate was a conservative turn in the forms of expression – a patriarchal and hierarchical notion of the past and the future. Here *udondolo* returns. It was precisely the name of the trust created to assist the revival of black working-class forms of expression in 2006. It consisted of ‘veterans’ in the movement, chaired by Don Gumede, a Member of Parliament and the son of Archie Gumede and grandson of Josiah (therefore of a radical national tradition), Mi Hlatshwayo (COSATU cultural leader), Nomusa Dube (ANC Women’s League and until recently Premier of KwaZulu-Natal), Willies Mchunu, MacGrapes Hlatshwayo (ex-NUMSA leader), and many others (including me). It met with applause and then a rapid demise.

Instead, the post-apartheid energies were defined by a symbiosis between a white bourgeois and an emerging black one. Durban harbour’s Bartel Arts Centre was a white liberal non-racial dream led by competent black leadership, but turned into a black middle-class hive of energy, outreach community programmes and training. The Playhouse was a hybrid led by new black leadership emphasising the European classical or on occasion the popular energy of the late Mbongeni Ngema’s theatre and many Ngema-like clones. The Centre for Creative Arts at the University of Natal created a cosmopolitan atmosphere which was beginning to veer towards Africa in its writers, poets, dance and film festivals. Big events and festivals were money-making chances for black impresarios and township musicians; club scenes and drugs proliferated and within that, the cult of the DJ and hip-hop (with its
local takes on kwaito and rap). White ‘alternatives’ kept the mix of English folk and rock in mountain retreats of the Underberg. Overall, there was energy, but of a different kind from the resistance years. What the state dispensation did was to fund the ‘traditional’, as defined by customary authorities, and absorb much of the old working-class energy into a neo-traditional mould.

**Values and morals**

The final area of concern is the clash of values and the kind of discourses that are defining the good or bad, the right or wrong: a normative struggle, not quite a ‘motive force’ (to use Congress language) but a strong motivational force that mobilises emotions. A surface reading would identify *ubuntu* as a concept that is deeply valued. Its story is older in KwaZulu-Natal than other parts of the country. It was first scripted by Jordan Ngubane while in exile in the 1960s. It was adopted by Chief Buthelezi not only as central to his Inkatha movement but also as the core principle for the homelands education system: Ubuntu-Botho. It is now used by everyone as the definition of an African ‘humanitude’ but, despite its claimants, the daily experience of violent force and autocratic and patriarchal re-enforcement has made its effectiveness limited. It remains a contested discursive construction.

What gained dominance for a while in the province was Premier Sbu Ndebele’s take on the African renaissance. It was a version of African nationalism locating its continuity with an unfinished Shakan revolution. The revolution was not about tradition in this narrative but about an African modernity which had been torn up through discord and betrayal. It dovetailed with the increasingly popular Pitika Ntuli’s take on a pan-Africanist vision and projects. Whereas Ndebele emphasised modernity, Ntuli’s philosophy and his creative ‘neo-traditionalism’ emphasised something different.

The renaissance demanded to bring the province ‘beyond conflict’ and saw itself as the only way for the ANC and Inkatha to depart from the regrettable past. Whereas Ntuli emphasised tradition, Ndebele linked up with African American religious and funding networks, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Through them the move towards linking up with an all-faith constituency worked. Ndebele won the province for the ANC and the renaissance initiative, attracting big capital and major players in an emerging African bourgeoisie.

Ideas of reconciliation remained quite strong in the province as there was much that was regrettable and left to be reconciled. Such ideas were buttressed by neo-Gandhian and quasi-Luthulian networks which found common ground with ecclesiastical social justice networks like the ones hosted by Diakonia. But they were under duress because what resurfaced was a language of ‘overcoming’ based on violent and militaristic metaphors straight out of the Inkatha movements and the ANC ‘Hawks’ vocabulary. It has been normalised as the language of ‘removing obstacles’ created by seemingly uncomfortable Others: Indians, foreigners, whites, other ethnicities, and so on. People who did not have what Mvelase called a shifting ‘usufruct’.

The constitutional take on an equality of faiths was also wearing thin as assertive anti-colonial thinkers were demanding a return to a pre-colonial indigeneity and its belief systems. The idea of who has usufruct was becoming deeply contested, as was the constitution and
the judicial system as the space through which social movements, women and workers found remedial corrections to everyday threats.

Furthermore, the ANC in the province was now less about keeping a non-racial political core – there is only one person of Indian descent and no people of white or coloured descent in the current provincial legislature. There is also a strong Zulu presence made up of people who are area representatives with links to the electoral base across the province. This is a serious petty bourgeoisie on its road to class power, and whites and Indians have become characters in a defining binary: you are either ‘useful’ or ‘surplus’.

An African bourgeoisie on its road to class power

Now we can return to the crux of this piece. What we are observing is the rise of a serious ‘motive’ force, an aspiring African bourgeoisie often aided by capitalists in the white and Indian communities. It is gaining confidence on the livelihoods front, amassing some wealth and land in the white and Zulu agrarian sectors, beginning to work with customary authorities, valorising tradition, cultural expression and beginning to find the language for its hegemonic project. Is it still a lame bourgeoisie?

Even if Zuma’s 2010 class project is still ‘lame’ in economic terms does it mean that it is without a mass base? I doubt it, because it is made up of at least half of the existing councillors and branch leaders that reach into the working class, their kindred izabeth and some amakhosi, a large bureaucratic and white-collar state employee stratum, a large student population and many dependent tenderpreneurs. Zuma’s hope was that the Gupta brothers would be the vehicle to usher this onto the national stage and its kingdom of money. The project only succeeded in elevating a tiny slither of interests into the kingdom of money. Perhaps the reed maiden hysteria was prophetic and Mvelase was right that it was a sign that Zuma was on his way out: even so, it does not mean that the 2010 class project is over.

Lungisile Ntsebeza will understand this fully: let me use a metaphor from the sport he played and loved in the Eastern Cape. Imagine Zuma with a rugby ball: there is a maul behind him pushing him towards a touchdown in the kingdom of money. If he is injured, they will be looking for a substitute because the try has not been scored. Was what I am describing somehow complicit in the riotous and mutinous explosion of July 2021? I have not had the time to follow up with enough people in KwaZulu-Natal to pass judgement on what had occurred and what was simmering beneath thousands of tweets. All I want to say is, please: hlalani phansi (sit down)! No party, trade union organisation, civil society movement, non-governmental or community-based organisation of the broadest left can claim that it was close to or gave direction or some formative shape to the poor’s discontent in Gauteng or especially in KwaZulu-Natal. No formation was rooted enough to provide an alternative which, despite efforts, was rejected. All I can say is please, sit down and stop claiming the anger, the upsurge, the revolutionary energy even, as having to do anything with a recognisable social movement.

We must stop reading into people’s actions our own interpretative frameworks without speaking to the people who defied, rioted, burned or looted. Here would enter the second fastest-growing sociological category: unemployed youth. What was their role in all this? We also should not be drafting opinions without speaking to many of them. Take a breather, be a real thinker, get informed and be ruthlessly honest.
In these post-truth days where everything is a ‘construction’, we can fabricate anything on a laptop. We can also claim that we have always been right. Look at poverty, unemployment, inequality. The only thing I can surmise at such a distance is that 100 targets were reached within a day in KwaZulu-Natal. They could only be reached if amareliables\(^9\) told thousands of people that it was right and urgent to do so. The question is not whether people were ready to do so; they were obviously ready, there is enough ‘shit’, to quote one of them who laid it out on camera, to make them ready to do so. The question is who were and are the amareliables? What gives them the authority of voice? How do they cohere across locales?

We are back to what I quoted H. I. E. Dhlomo saying in my article on the violence in 1985: KwaZulu-Natal, ‘where wealth and power and blood reign, worshipped Gods’ (Sitas 2016, 98).

**Notes**

1. My host, Tiki Phungula, ex-general secretary of the Congress of South African Writers who facilitated this meeting, insisted that he was lying and showing off. She claimed that he often regaled people with fantastical stories of relevance and prowess. He passed away in August 2021.
2. This was articulated during the dispute around Kgalema Mothlante’s committee, which threatened to dissolve the Ingonyama Trust.
3. Mchunu was a leading trade unionist in northern Natal and a key advocate for negotiations and peace processes in the province. Later he became the Chair of the SACP and then Premier of KwaZulu-Natal. The Cato Manor project was the first attempt to create decent urban living conditions for the expanding informal settlement of Mkhumbane.
4. I was to help SACP’s Stalin Mtshali to get a grip on this through several student research projects, an idea that died out with my departure from the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
5. *Mbube* and *isicathamiya* are old and newer forms of a capella singing, mainly by men; *maskanda* is often called Zulu blues.
6. Diakonia Council of Churches is an ecumenical, interchurch initiative and organisation that worked and works with multi-faith initiatives for social justice. It had a major role in Durban during the apartheid and post-apartheid periods.
7. In common parlance there: ‘it takes a thorn to remove another thorn’, in this land of thorns, ‘*uhlaba yahlaba*’.
9. A combination of the words *amakomanisi* (communists) and reliable.

**Disclosure statement**

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