

Performing Myths, Ritualising Modernity: Dancing for Nomkhubulwana and the Reinvention of Zulu Tradition

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Abstract

The European colonial expansion in Africa disrupted and in instances stopped the celebration and development of traditional values in the colonised territories. This disruption is more acute in southern Africa, especially in the South African territory of Zululand, where the European economic and political policies led to a state of apartheid, which existed from 1948 to 1991, and uneven development afterwards. Several of the nations in the formerly colonised areas are trying to re-create and re-form their traditional values. The AmaZulu, who occupy the north-eastern part of South Africa, are a nation of proud antecedents and rich traditional values and they are now evolving practices and ideas to re-create the lost cultural heritage of the people. A part of the cultural rejuvenation is the annual Nomkhubulwana (Nomdede) festival in celebration of the Virgin Queen. This paper highlights some aspects of traditional revival in the 1990s, after the apartheid period when the nation was trying to reform its relevance.

Keywords: Zulu, Nomkhubulwana, Ritual, Performance, Ubuntu, Myth, Tradition, Culture, Myth of origin, Clan praises, South Africa, Apartheid

Introduction

The culture of the AmaZulu has been much romanticised, perhaps more than any other African group. With portrayals in fiction and movies, the romanticisation of the AmaZulu centres mostly on the king reputed to have shaped the nation, Shaka kaSenzangakhona. The history of the AmaZulu, especially the aspects that relate to Shaka, has become a legendary myth, with many versions of the same story being related by different writers and commentators. Many of these writers such as Henry Callaway (1868), Max Gluckman (1935, 1955, 1958), Henry Fynn (rpt. 1950), Alfred Bryant (rpt. 1970) and some recent historians like John Wright (1989, 1996), Carolyn Hamilton (1989, 1996) and Peter Colenbrander (1996) share some interpretations on the rise and formation of the Zulu nation which are based on the importance of Shaka and his reforms, especially the dramatic performances he initiated to mould the nation together socially.

Myths and rituals are employed in dramatic performances among the AmaZulu, together with codes like dances, songs, praise-poetry, storytelling conventions and narratives. Modern performers of Zulu origin generously use these codes in their performance, which is intricately linked with the worldview and humanist philosophy known as *Ubuntu*. This Zulu worldview is itself a philosophy developed over the years and based on the traditional totem

known as the *Inkatha*¹, a symbol shaped in a circular form and held as sacred. The word *Inkatha* signifies a number of things: the grass cushion placed on the throne of the Zulu monarch before the advent of other cultures into Zulu cultural existence; the grass coil used by Zulu women carrying loads on their heads, the many strands of which provide its strength and cohesion; it also denotes the legendary python skin filled with seed paid as tribute to the king by the various groups that made up the Zulu nation. Specifically, *inkatha* is a symbol of national unity for the AmaZulu.

Zulu Philosophy: Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a philosophy about fundamental things that qualify a person. Reverend Dandala describes it as “a fountain from which actions and attitudes flow” (Cows Never Die...70). It is linked to the phrase “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (a person is a person because of others) which holds that, essentially, no one can be self-sufficient and independent; a person depends on other people to exist. The concept of *Ubuntu* regards the community as the cornerstone of the Zulu culture. The essence of the community, linked together by blood ties or filial relationships, akin to the types that operate among the Yoruba or Igbo people of Nigeria, for instance, is composed of a series of communal activities like story-telling, which the AmaZulu regard as the first stage in character building, rites and ceremonies, and beliefs of the people (Cows Never Die...73).

Dandala affirms that the humanity of the AmaZulu is hinged on *Ubuntu*. He states that the philosophy is the totality of the people and is even reflected in the way they conduct greetings: '*Sanibonani*' (or '*Sawubona*', singular) which literally translates to 'we see you', an affirmation of that person's humanness through recognition (Greeting People...136). He goes into the explanation of the full greeting thus: “*Siyakubona ukuthi ungumuntu*’. We see that you are a human being – as opposed to spirits – and we recognise you as such and see ourselves reflected in you. The response would in return be an affirmation: '*Yebo, sakubona nawe*.’ Yes, we see you too, i.e., that you are also a human being” (Greeting People...136).

The Socio-Cultural History of the AmaZulu

The Zulu people have emerged from a group of the Nguni tribes located in the modern KwaZulu-Natal province of the Republic of South Africa. There is presently no available data on the population of the AmaZulu, but the South African Census report for the 2001 national census puts the population of the KwaZulu-Natal province at slightly more than 9.4 million, the highest in the country. The AmaZulu make up the majority in the province, with a population of more than eight million. They are also found in varied numbers in the other provinces as well, especially in Gauteng. The Census report specifies that about 24% of South Africa's 44.8 million people speak isiZulu as the first language. These statistics make

¹ The name *Inkatha* was later appropriated by the mainly Zulu political party, Inkatha Freedom Party, formed in 1975. The party itself was modelled after the *Inkatha kaZulu* launched in the 1920s by king Solomon kaDinuzulu as a protest against the Native Affairs Bill of 1920. For more information on the significance of *Inkatha* to the AmaZulu, see <http://www.ifp.org.za/index.htm> (accessed 25 July 2011).

the AmaZulu the largest ethnic group in South Africa. These data cannot however be generalised and scholars need to study the census report in detail; it is pertinent to note that home language speakers of isiZulu are not limited to Black Africans as there are White, Indian or Asian and Coloured native speakers of the language.²

Formation of the Nation

When Shaka kaSenzangakhona became the ruler of the Zulu clan, according to popular history, he welded other Nguni groups together to his clan between 1810 and 1828 primarily through conquest, thus establishing a national loyalty to himself as the supreme sovereign. In 1828, he was killed during a palace coup stage-managed by his brothers and one of his trusted *induna* (headmen). The young nation however survived, forged together by the national totem *Inkatha*. The Zulu lineage is descended from the royal household of the AmaZulu, traced from Shaka to the present Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelithini kaDinizulu.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the AmaZulu lived in large clusters and families under a single head who was the chief or *inkosi* (plural – *amakhosi*) and were known as belonging to the clan or lineage of their particular *inkosi*. The *inkosi* is responsible for the general welfare of the people under him. He serves as the link between them and other groups as well as between the people and the ancestors, sometimes through the *izangoma* (traditional healers; singular – *isangoma*). All the *amakhosi* owe allegiance to the Zulu monarch. An *inkosi* has authority over his territory which consists of his clan and others who are represented as a result of intermarriage (Thorpe). The territory is divided into homesteads, each under the authority of a headman whose position is not hereditary and therefore can be replaced but who is answerable to the *inkosi*. Each clan or lineage usually have a common praise name (*isibongo*) or surname which assumes a religious significance with all human actions integrated, and where the distinction between religious beliefs and social context is not defined (Thorpe 34-35).

Religiously, the AmaZulu believe that “all entities in the universe and ultimately in the cosmos are physical...that everything necessary for his [man's] physical well-being is ultimately controllable and available within his world” (Kunene xiv-xv). This is not an assertion that the AmaZulu do not believe in the almighty, gods and ancestors, rather they hold that gods constitute a “reality that ³parallels human reality” and that every action in the world has a creative purpose. This belief makes the ancestors, though dead, the same people they were on earth. Because they still exist outside and beyond this world, they use that connection to maintain a link to their previous lives and to those they left behind. Human beings are expected to regard the dead with the same respect and affection as when alive, and to seek advice and answers from the ancestors. Ancestral veneration is a major cultural manifestation of the Zulu, as Kunene reminds us.

² See <http://www.statssa.gov.za/census01/html/default.asp>, accessed 25 July 2011. See also *Census 2001: Census in Brief*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2003

As stated above, the AmaZulu were not organised into the nation that they are today until the early 19th century when they were united under a single polity by a combination of Shaka's conquest and the arrival of Europeans in Natal. The European missionaries and colonial officials recorded that Zulu ethnic consciousness also dates to this period. Indeed, Wright and Hamilton in "Politics, Ideology and the Invention of the 'Nguni'" offer that the condition for the nation's emergence did not exist until the end of the 19th century (15), premising their thesis on a re-interpretation of the history of the period as well as oral history collected from various people. Dhlomo however states that the existence of a Zulu ethnic consciousness that embraced a rich performance culture existed long before Shaka, but:

Shaka brought about great changes and wide repercussions. Life ceased to be hedonistic, peaceful and safe. The policy of *laissez-faire* succumbed to one of tyranny. People became military minded. Shaka's domestic and foreign policy, his great wars of conquest, and his studied ruthlessness transformed tribal life and gave it new patterns of behaviour, new channels of thought, new political ideologies. (36-37)

Zulu performers draw on the socio-cultural aspect of their history to express themselves in a unique way. Some of the ways include poetry and dance, respect for, and pride in, their monarch and the role of the ancestors in daily lives.

Zulu Mythological Beliefs and Rituals: Myths and Beliefs

Zulu beliefs inform the lifestyle of the people and are reflected in the performance culture of the people. In this section, I explore some of these beliefs, especially belief in the divinities, the ancestors, the diviners and rites of passage. Berglund prefers the use of the word 'shade' instead of the word 'ancestor' because the latter word is an English idiom suggesting ascendants that are dead; it is therefore a term that creates a distance between the living and the dead (29). He also holds that the Zulu concept assumes a very close and intimate relationship and association within the lineage between the departed and their survivors, and that those who are dead manifests their presence in many ways in the existence of the living. While not contesting his reasoning, I prefer to use the term 'ancestors' as this comes closest to my understanding. Even though the ancestors may not have bodily form, their influence is very tangible and therefore real and present in the lives of those they leave behind.⁴ Among the AmaZulu, it is believed that the body dies but the spirit continues living but there are other spiritual manifestations that are not ancestors but which could easily fall under existences or 'shades' with no bodily form, therefore the term connotes more than ancestral influences.

The AmaZulu call the Supreme Being *Unkulunkulu*. Not an ancestor, he is regarded as the "father of the black man" (Pettersson 150). The Supreme Being is also referred to as *Mvelinqangi* (first exister; the first to exist), *Inkosi yaphezulu*, *Inkosi yezulu* (Lord of the Sky), *uHlanga* (original source of being) or *uMninimandla* (almighty) (Thorpe 35-36). The Supreme Being is most commonly approached through the ancestors. It is the chief's duty

to ask his ancestors to address themselves to Unkulunkulu and beg for whatever the people desire, for instance, rain: in times of drought, the chief gathers the headmen and sacrifices black oxen and sheep. These cattle are called *umzimu* and are dedicated to the ancestors. The sacrificial meat is left outside during the night so that the spirits may eat of it. Special rain-songs are sung. Rain-doctors are sent for only when the chief's sacrifices and prayers have failed (Pettersson 266).

The AmaZulu refer to Mvelinqangi as the creator of man even though “the concept of the gods is not central to Zulu religion” (Kunene xxxvi). Katesa Schlosser, relating upon the information provided by the Zulu prophet Laduma Madela, claims that Mvelinqangi and his family “came out of the ground like a mushroom” in the beginning (49). The family includes OkaMjukujukwana, his wife, Sitha, his elder son who makes himself invisible, Nowa (also called Zwilakho), his younger son who is connected with the cliff and Nomkhubulwana, his daughter who sows and harvests.

There are narratives detailing creation, and the following is adapted from the narration recorded by Berglund, which also perpetuates the myth that the AmaZulu as “people of the sky” (29). In the beginning, among the people living with Mvelinqangi was a man who was fond of mischief. One day, this man was caught riding the favourite white ox of Mvelinqangi and was sentenced to live on earth so he would not cause any more trouble in the sky. Mvelinqangi ordered him to be lowered through a hole by way of the navel cord (*inkatha*) tied around his waist. When the man got to the earth, he took a reed, severed the cord connecting him to the sky, and started living on the earth. On the next new moon, Mvelinqangi opened the hole in the sky again and saw the man lying under a banana plant, looking very weak and thin. Mvelinqangi then decided to send a wife to keep him company and assuage his loneliness. So, a maiden was lowered to join the man. When the man saw the maiden, he took a reed again and cut the cord dangling from her waist. Mvelinqangi, seeing they are happy together, closed the hole in the sky so that the people on earth could not look up into heaven, and the people on earth could also have some privacy. The people are called AmaZulu, people of the sky, because they originated from the sky.

Zulu Mythological Beliefs and Rituals: Rituals

Ritual sacrifices are performed⁵ to avert evil or to appease the ancestors by slaughtering an animal for a ritual meal. Besides, “Social congruence and well-being are maintained by means of ritual action” (Thorpe 47). Thorpe identifies two kinds of rituals: the kinship rituals that relate to family matters and may be performed at the transitional stages in the cycle of life like birth, puberty, marriage and death; and community rituals that extend beyond the family and requires the participation and attendance of groups of people. These include ceremonies like rain rituals, festival of first fruits or harvest, and rituals to protect ripening crops (47). The ritual to Nomkhubulwana described below belongs to the second type of rituals, and it highlights the performance aspect of Zulu life.

Nomkhubulwana³ Festival as a Ritual Performance

For the AmaZulu, Mvelinqangi is revered for his role as the first to exist. However, in addition to the Mvelinqangi, who is conceived of as male, “a female element is represented by Nomkhubulwane” in the AmaZulu belief system (Thorpe 37). She is regarded as the princess or queen of heaven (*Inkosazana yezulu*) and is believed to be very beautiful. The rainbow, the mist and the rain are thought to be emanations of her glory. The introduction of special customs connected with women has been linked to her, especially the customs of sowing, harvesting, beer brewing and weaning of children. Every year, an agricultural rite connected with Nomkhubulwana and known as Nomdede is celebrated. Only women take part in it and its purpose is to solicit a good harvest for the year. The rite is performed on a hillside in springtime when the mountains are covered in mist. Girls prepare the soil by hoeing, and then plant a small garden for the heavenly queen. Afterwards, they pour beer, specially brewed for the occasion, as libation upon the soil of the garden. Though her worship is unrelated to ancestor veneration, she may also be appealed to in times of drought or flood (Pettersson 184-185; Berglund 64-74; Thorpe 37).

The performance of the rituals associated with Nomkhubulwana is a rite of passage for young maidens among the AmaZulu. The celebration recounted here is a 1997 re-creation of the ancient ritual performed by young, unmarried girls (*izintombi*) in honour of the goddess by an isangoma, Gugu Ngobese.⁴

The performance took place over three days in the Spring (August), from Friday to Sunday, and was celebrated on a hill near the town of Bulwer in southern KwaZulu-Natal. The ritual festival incorporated dance, music, supplications, consumption of food and drinks and sacrifice of animals. The ritual ceremony itself was structured in a way that the *izintombi* (girls) took primary positions in the affair. On the first day of the festival, young girls clad in only a piece of material (*isigege*) covering their waist filed in a procession, led by the izangoma, to a cleared area on a consecrated part of the hill, where they arranged themselves in a circle. Gathered in the circle were the izangoma and the cow to be slaughtered, as a prayer was offered to Nomkhubulwana for rain, good harvest in the year and to dispel diseases. The izangoma poured libation around a fire prepared in the middle of the circle and burned incense to invoke the spirit of Nomkhubulwana. While the izangoma prepare the cow for sacrifice, the young girls sang songs and danced, either singly or in groups. Then the cow was killed with a spear⁵ pressed in through the back of the neck. A sheep and a chicken were also killed and thrown into the fire as sacrifice. After the cow died, parts of the carcass were thrown in the fire as a burnt offering while the rest was roasted and shared among those present. Throughout the ceremony, the young girls continued to sing and dance. On this

³ Also written as Nomkhubulwane. Except in direct quotes, I use Nomkhubulwana.

⁴ I witnessed this performance in August 1997, three years after the end of apartheid. For reports of earlier performances, see Axel-Ivar Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, London: C. Hurst and Company, 1976:64 – 74; and Max Gluckman, “Zulu Women in Hoecultural Ritual”, *Bantu Studies* Vol. 9, 1935: 255 – 271.

⁵ This is a short stabbing spear called *iklwa*.

first day also, the girls prepared tents in which they would stay for the duration of the festival. In an interview with one of the izangoma, he informed me that the main prayer while the cow was being slaughtered was for rain (Ngubane, Malunga, interview with author).



The izangoma leading the girls into the consecrated ground



The izintombi dancing before Nomkhubulwana

The earlier part of the second day was used in confirming the virginity of the girls, and therefore their suitability to take part in the ritual planting of the consecrated garden. Older women comprising mostly the female izangoma made this confirmation. Girls who were confirmed to be virgins were marked with green paint on their foreheads and rubbed with *ibomvu* (red clay mixed with water). This qualified them to take part in the remaining events. After this, they moved to a pool of water at the base of the hill and bathed. Girls who failed the virginity test were disqualified and asked to leave the hill. Towards the evening, the girls who had 'passed the test' danced to celebrate their worthiness to plant the virgin queen's garden.

On the third day, the young girls take central position by sowing maize, sorghum and pumpkin seeds on Nomkhubulwana's garden while onlookers comprising men, boys, women and, presumably, the girls who failed the virginity test stood at the outer edge of the ploughed field and watched. The girls who were planting the field danced all the time to the accompaniment of music and songs from onlookers. After the planting, everybody moved back to a little clearing where more celebrations took place. Generally, different clans danced around in a procession, but groups of friends could also stage their dances.

As the girls sang and danced, they clapped their hands while the onlookers ululated and chanted to the accompaniment of drums. These dances are peculiar with stomps and kicks, and the girls use ankle rattles to heighten the effect of the stamping of feet on the ground. The dance also consists of the girls, either singly or in groups of up to eight, lifting up one leg in the air while clapping their hands between the thighs in unison. After a few minutes, a group gives way to another group and joins the ululating audience. The audience at this stage change the song and start reciting the clan praises (*isibongo*) of the new group.

The main significance of the performance, according to isangoma Gugu Ngobese, one of the organisers of the festival, apart from the symbolic rejuvenation of the clans, is to foster a sense of belonging in the Zulu nation among the girls. Specifically, the festival is the re-creation of a communion by the whole society with Nomkhubulwana, through the agency of the young girls and presided over by the izangoma. The izangoma is important in maintaining contacts with the ancestors as well as Nomkhubulwana because they are considered closer to the ancestors, having been chosen for the task by the ancestors (Thorpe 43). In essence, the belief is that once the clans are unified with a single commonality, the whole AmaZulu would become unified in the new South Africa.

Conclusion

The above describes part of the social life and beliefs of the Zulu since the people were amalgamated as a nation by Shaka kaSenzangakhona in the early nineteenth century, though celebration of most of the ceremonies were disrupted during the European incursion into Southern Africa in the nineteenth century and the institution of apartheid by the South African government from 1948 to 1991. Revising the rituals surrounding the celebration of the Spring queen is therefore a way of recreating and re-interpreting modernity into a ritual that had become antiquated, with more importance now emphasised on the symbolic performance rather than the spiritual essence for the unification of the nation.

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