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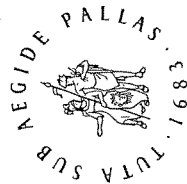
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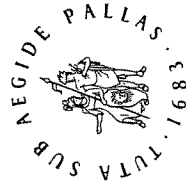


# PRODUCING AFRICAN FUTURES

*Ritual and Reproduction in a Neoliberal Age*

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## POETIC JUSTICE: KHOSA IDIOMS AND MORAL BREACH IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

Anne-Maria B. Makhulu

Freedom came and with it a chaos of possibility to fragment the meanings of misfortune. The solidarity of suffering was shattered as the question *Why are we suffering?* lost its distinctive hue. Blaming Apartheid and the White Man made less sense in an era of unparalleled social and economic advancement for black South Africans—*some* black South Africans. . . . And whereas in the old days the prosperous could be branded as 'sellouts' [in] the new South Africa everyone was supposed to be 'progressing,' and the purpose of political power was to make that happen. The image of power no longer represented the White Man. Institutions of government slowly took the form of ordinary black men and women. . . . The sense of the enormous evil potential of government gradually withered away. If there was no longer a monumental force of evil named Apartheid in the new South Africa, there was no massive countervailing force of good, either. In such a field, the lesser agents of misfortune, the witches, could flourish.

—Ashforth 2000a, 101-102

In the victory over apartheid many South Africans read, at least initially, the guarantee of an economically secure future. But the adoption of neoliberal policy, since 1996—notably the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Macroeconomic Strategy (GEAR)—has dampened many preliberation hopes that were grounded in deeply felt leftist ideals. As the effects of this strategy have taken hold, the African National Congress has jettisoned the concept of 'growth through redistribution' and has ignored a growing clamor for fundamental reform.

Although some view this newer ideological position as something of a sea change (cf. Adam, van Zyl Slabbert, and Moodley 1998; James and Levy 1998), it is equally possible to argue that post-apartheid politics remain fairly consistent with the growth of a black

bourgeoisie in the 1980s. As the apartheid regime faced mounting political opposition, the creation of a black middle-class buffer, against the possibility of mass insurrection by poor radicalized blacks, offered one solution to a growing political crisis. We should not forget that the ANC later drew some of its leadership from this bourgeois class as well as from a highly educated returning exile community. From this perspective, the current alignment of political and economic interests in the new government connects to a much longer historical process of black class formation and to the creation of a broadly populist sensibility over and above a commitment to proletarian politics.

As Michael MacDonald and Wilnot James, executive director of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA),<sup>1</sup> suggest:

The ANC [generally] characterizes inequality as racial in origin and nature, advocates black empowerment without specifying its class content, and assembles the broadest possible coalition even at the cost of muddling its position on property. It is in other words, nationalist and populist, not socialist and proletarian. (1993, 399)

While the ANC's strategic allies in coalition building have traditionally been on the far left (the South African Communist Party [SACP] and the Congress of South African Trade Unions [COSATU]) in committing to policies of market liberalization, the ruling alliance has begun to disintegrate. This has been particularly apparent since the last general election in 1999. In view of this fact it will be interesting to see what impact the new politics have on the ANC's traditional grassroots support base in the upcoming 2004 presidential race.<sup>2</sup>

Hindsight is 20/20 to be sure; however, realistically even the shrewdest political forecaster could not have predicted that such policies would emerge nor how quickly they did so. In 1990, Nelson Mandela stated that "the nationalization of the mines, the banks and monopoly industry is the policy of the ANC and a change or modification of our views in this regard is inconceivable"; by 1994, he plugged the free market as a 'magical elixir' (Saul 2001, 15).

<sup>1</sup> The Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) is an independent, non-profit, public interest organization that promotes democracy in South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> See Mattes 2000a and Mattes 2000b. Compare with Barrel 2000 for a conservative reading of South Africa's macroeconomic policy.

Then again, it isn't as if South Africa's democratization occurred free of powerful influence from institutions of the free market. The World Bank was already involved in the interim negotiations between the apartheid government and national liberation organizations in 1990, calling for a restructuring of the urban economy in an effort to affect the outcome of the political transition (Mabin 1998).

Constituted in the often lopsided and perverse articulations of local and global economies, the structural contradictions that flow from South Africa's capitulation to neoliberal interests have become visible in the ordinary day-to-day working out of the terms of post-apartheid governance. Pressures to adopt new austerity measures, which some have labeled a form of 'homegrown' structural adjustment (Bond 2000; also see Marais 1999)—take, for example, the decision to honor repayment on apartheid debt—have given rise to discourses of new and unnatural cash flows, mysterious accumulations, and strange "fusion[s] of enfranchisement and exclusion" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a; 1999b, 19).

It is perhaps no surprise then that the frenetic trajectories of value (both real and imagined) ranging from churches for profit to myriad and monstrous pyramid schemes should prey on the poorest of the poor. Much like cargo cults, and the circuits of value in which they are implicated, these schemes reflect anxieties over blockages in flows of goods and wealth between elites and nonelites, whether in colonial or postcolonial contexts. Arjun Appadurai puts it well when he says that "[t]he commodities involved in cargo, as with kula valuables, and other indigenous forms of specialized exchange, are seen as metonymic of a whole system of power, prosperity, and status" (Appadurai 1986, 52, also see Cochrane 1970, Worsley 1968). Likewise in the South African context, the circulation of certain objects of symbolic value suggests one means of reading from daily practice the limits of change.

Whatever the ritual activities of those involved in evermore posterous wealth schemes, secular or sacred, the breathlessness of early South African independence has necessarily given way to a political and economic pragmatism that affords very limited opportunities for thoroughgoing reform. To the extent that comprehensive social welfare policies are no longer on the negotiating table, this era of new freedoms has introduced new unfreedoms as well.

Consider the following three signposts: (1) the continued growth of a small yet significant black bourgeoisie poised to empower others,

though committed to self-enrichment first; (2) the state's promise to attend to the very basic needs of the majority, but as yet it has a poor record of delivery on programs ranging from housing to public education; and (3) a growing wealth gap fueled by extraordinary reassurances of 'a better life for all' (the ANC's long-held campaign slogan). All three index efforts to establish optimal market conditions, at whatever cost to local economies (Adam, van Zyl Slabbert, and Moodley 1998, 206). For its part, the ANC continues to vacillate between a political style necessary to market-oriented reform and a participatory style effective for maintaining consensus (Przeworski 1991, cf. Sachikonye 1995, Nzimande and Sikhosana 1995).

What then of the ethnographic intervention? Can the ethnographer gain from observation of everyday practice the kinds of insights necessary to explain the dramatic ruptures and continuities that frame South African contemporary reality? *Pace* those with a more broadly sociological view, the ethnographic encounter arguably reveals a great deal of matters both general and specific. Take the 'mad prophet,' a patient at a small mental hospital on the outskirts of Mafeking and the subject of an essay concerning historical consciousness in South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 155–178). Who else might have spoken as eloquently of the technologies of order and repression that characterized apartheid, its careful econometrics of race and labor?

In contemporary South Africa, the predicament is somewhat different given new freedoms as well as new fiscal strictures and staggering levels of violence (Gastrow 1998, Steinberg 2001).<sup>3</sup> If local politicians can profess to knowing how to solve South Africa's woes, and if clerics can appeal to divine intervention, for ordinary people recourse comes in a variety of forms ranging from intercession with the ancestors, to consultations with witchdoctors and healers, to a multitude of signifying practices that detail both the past struggle and the struggle in the here and now. Where then is the ethnographic window?

Black Capetonians, poor though many of them may be, pay a great deal of attention to the little they have: whether it is a television that takes pride of place in a tiny one-room shack or it is small trinkets carefully displayed on a much-coveted wall unit that divides sleeping areas from living areas in many homes. Though much about

domestic life in Cape Town's black townships and shantytowns surprises (Meinjes 2001)—such as the painstaking efforts to maintain vegetable patches and flower beds or to reproduce rural life through the use of wattle pole fencing and vividly painted perimeter walls—the practice of framing and mounting Xhosa idioms is perhaps one of the most remarkable practices.

Produced in consultation with local craftsmen and carefully stenciled on paper and framed for display in people's homes, Xhosa idioms serve to repair moral breaches stemming from many of the contradictions of the 'new' South Africa. They are purchased and publicly displayed, often in the face of some kind of dispute, their language admonishing the opposing parties to set aside their differences. These parochial signs "enjoin a reality and an authority stretching far beyond the immediacies of the present" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, xvii) and as such they offer insight into the everyday practices of South Africa's marginalized.

This chapter lends coherence to otherwise seemingly dissimilar registers of political discourse—debates about reconstruction and development, national memory and forgiveness, for that matter, social justice—each emerging in a new age of democracy and voter rights, non-racialism and 'transparency.' As a 'situated moral discourse' (ibid., xviii), the Xhosa idiom locates quite precisely the national debate at the site of its impact: in the places where RDP (Reconstruction and Development Program) homes are built and families must reconcile themselves to the narratives produced by commissions of enquiry and other institutions that profess to the highest order of accountability.

### *Going to the Polls*

In 1999, during the country's second presidential election, I followed the rituals that make going to the polls a remarkable event in this country still new to democracy: the impressive voter turnout, the people camped out on the street from before first light, and their unmistakable enthusiasm. In Lower Crossroads informal settlement,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> South African planners draw a distinction between 'informal settlements' and 'squatter areas' or 'transit camps.' From these terms, it is possible to read an entire history of planned and unplanned squatting in and around South Africa's urban

<sup>3</sup> See Smith 2001.

located on the Cape Flats,<sup>5</sup> a pre-recorded Brenda Fassie (diva *extra-ordinaire*) belted out the ANC's campaign song through a public address system. The crowds, the music, and the strong party turnout are all ingredients critical to rousing the 'masses.'

Despite, or perhaps because of, high rates of voter participation, practical challenges threatened the election process. Widespread illiteracy in urban squatter settlements across the country, and in much of rural South Africa too, made it difficult to design a suitable ballot and instruction leaflet. In this second general election, the ballot displayed party symbols and photographs of presidential candidates, with as little text as possible. These were essential steps in a country where rates of adult illiteracy are almost 40 percent (Steyn 2000).<sup>6</sup> Voters were also educated in the mechanics of casting a vote through extensive pre-election door-to-door campaigning, which targeted poor black communities in particular. No surprise, given its populist base, the ANC had its work cut out for it as Election Day neared.

At one of two polling stations in Lower Crossroads (an ANC stronghold), voters exited a small prefabricated building in a slow trickle on that sunny winter day in June. Officials did their best to keep the voter line moving, despite delays owing to the many requests for help in reading off party candidates' names and ballot instructions. Soon, however, things slowed to a halt as a local resident edged toward the entrance to the polling station and called for assistance. 'I want to vote for the housing candidate,' he said, his bloodshot eyes steadily trained on Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) officials who exchanged nervous glances. Other voters tittered and murmured. Amid chatter about *shebeens* (the local term for beer halls) and the prevalence of cheap brandy, each in their way a diagnos-

areas. In some instances, controlled intake or 'influx' of black workers, under apartheid, led to the formation of settlements that were legally recognized (i.e., 'informal settlements'). Nevertheless, these remained without formal housing despite their legitimacy. Cape Town is dotted with such settlements, the most famous of which, Crossroads, has been recently redeveloped.

<sup>5</sup> The Cape Flats are both a sociological space—formerly a dumping ground where the apartheid state built housing for Africans and Coloureds removed from the city bowl—and a geological space, owing to the flat, sandy terrain in this part of the Cape leading down to the ocean.

<sup>6</sup> There seems to be some disagreement regarding rates of adult illiteracy in South Africa. The World Bank measures illiteracy in 'adults' (who are understood to be persons over the age of 15). Data for 2001 suggest that adult illiteracy is close to 30 percent. See 'World Development Indicators' database for April 2002.

tic of high unemployment and widespread township violence,<sup>7</sup> the man tottered into the prefabricated one-room voter station, demanding to know which candidate would give him a house.

Notice served on already weary election officials that they would have to process an overflow of voters from another nearby polling station discouraged anyone from offering any advice. And soon enough the man was asked to leave on grounds of drunkenness and disorderly conduct. Outside, the ANC faithful rallied: "A vote for the ANC is a vote for a house," they insisted, trying as best they might to stir up party loyalties. But the man stood his ground, clinging to the new South African dream of a small cinder-block one-room house with an outdoor flush toilet. Steadfast in his decision to vote for a 'housing' candidate, he made off in a slow-weaving motion across the township.<sup>8</sup>

Though anecdote has rather limited explanatory power, drunken voters, much like mad prophets, tend to depict the social worlds they inhabit in surprising and often highly illuminating ways. They show us the fragmentation and fissuring of worlds in deep crisis or transition and render all too clearly what is taken for granted.

The residents of Lower Crossroads remain alert to the dissonances of life after apartheid. They are perfectly conscious of the discourses mobilized in the name of democracy and the ever-widening gap between the much-admired constitution and its capacity (or indeed incapacity) to make socioeconomic rights a reality. By this measure political choices, though still closely linked to the collective memory of struggle embraced by the ANC and other parties of national liberation, bank on other kinds of decisive factors besides. In 1994, most black voters went to the polls in the name of civil liberties and with the weight of history on their side. But they could hardly have predicted the slow pace of change.

Today, by contrast, the circumspection with which the promises of government are met undermines older ideological commitments

<sup>7</sup> Alcoholism is a very real problem in the townships and often enough a pre-condition for fatal stabbings and shootings.

<sup>8</sup> I suspect the 'housing candidate' in question was the late Joe Slovo, the former Housing Minister before his death in January 1995, and previously the head of the South African Communist Party as well as chief of staff to the armed wing of the ANC, *Umkhonto weSizwe* or MK ('Spear of the Nation'). Slovo's popularity ratings soared after his return to South Africa from exile in the early 1990s; he remained, until his death, a key populist figure famous for his red socks and sensitivity to the plight of ordinary South Africans.

(Mayekiso cited in Sachikonye 1995, 9). Despite the 1999 election outcome, in which the ANC enjoyed landslide victories in urban informal settlements, townships, and much of rural South Africa, the content of people's choices seemed to have shifted. If in the 1994 elections voting was primarily about ensuring the continuation of the South African revolution, five years later the revolution was at a kind of impasse. Voting could no longer guarantee that emancipation would deliver on the improvements to daily life that many had imagined to be its fruits.

In the run-up to the election, this paradigmatic shift became most clearly visible in the heightened circulation of rumors and public secrets produced in the fecund disjuncture between official discourse and social reality. In a structurally fragmented society, as apartheid South Africa was and still is, and where state coercion fostered a radical distinction between official and unofficial representations of lived reality, people came to deploy altogether different communicative codes for making sense of the world around them.<sup>9</sup> Though post-apartheid South Africa is much changed, people's perceptions remain largely informed by the wide class gap and persistent differences of social experience across racial groups.

Stories of free homes in exchange for votes spread like wildfire and even gave pause to local civic associations. Meetings were held to dispel rumors that local contractors, already involved in bidding wars to win government housing contracts, were promising to hand out free homes in return for New National Party support at the polls.<sup>10</sup> It was rumored that beneficiaries of the RDP would no longer have to wait for tender decisions or for the lengthy process of contract work to begin in their settlements, where many, by 1999, had been waiting over four years for groundbreaking to begin. Eligible residents could receive homes immediately. That the construction industry in the Western Cape is largely controlled by Afrikaners, devoutly nationalist in their sympathies, should tell us something about the capacity of rumor to spell out the kernel truth of eco-

<sup>9</sup> My thanks to Allen Feldman for his seminar series at the University of the Western Cape on the anthropologies of the body, violence, and ethnographic practice and also for our discussion of the South African 'speech economy.' These conversations could not have come at a better time, immersed as I was in fieldwork in January 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Note that the 'New' National Party is merely a refiguration of the National Party, which introduced apartheid in 1948.

nomie and political power relations. For those fighting it out in the informal settlements, these relationships signal not only the opaque qualities of the new democracy, but also the perverse eloquence of local rumor to illuminate the charged political space in which housing reform operates.

To situate the dilemma of the 'new' South Africa at the crossroads of institutional recourse for apartheid and other more private attempts to mobilize local knowledge in the cause of healing the social person is to suggest one way of making legible the present. As a form of signifying practice, Xhosa idioms<sup>11</sup> articulate a connection between the symbolic world and the 'poverty and distress' that, at least in contemporary South Africa, remain its preconditions (Moore and Sanders 2001, 1). Indeed, much like witchcraft, to which the idioms necessarily allude as a 'patent feature' of the world (ibid., 4),<sup>12</sup> the idioms offer extreme ontological insight.

*First Frame: Truth Commission Deliberations and Limitations*

Cultural responses to the traumatic effects of political violence often transform the local idioms of victims into universal professional languages of complaint and restitution—and thereby remake both representations and experiences of suffering. (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997, x)

In April 1996, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began to excavate a recent national history, which began with the 1960 Sharpville massacre<sup>13</sup> and ended in a widespread escala-

<sup>11</sup> The idioms are written in a deep rural Xhosa that is rarely used in the former homelands, although it is commonly heard in Cape Town's squatter areas.

<sup>12</sup> My sincere thanks go to Veena Das for her 'breakfast conversation' with graduate students in the Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, November 2000. Her subtle analysis of the ways in which public discourse obscures questions of the margins suggests a way forward in challenging official narratives through the mobilization of concepts of 'female' and 'marginal' voice. These, she argues, though not necessarily related to gendered subjectivity per se, counter official discourses by 'haunting' or 'troubling' them.

<sup>13</sup> The 1960 Sharpville massacre not only shifted state policies toward opponents of apartheid—hence the incremental increase in the use of force that left sixty-nine dead in the wake of otherwise peaceable demonstrations—but it was also a call to arms by the ANC and PAC. Though driven underground after 1960, it is precisely at this moment in the liberation struggle that a younger leadership took hold, moving to advocate the use of 'force' over 'rhetoric' (Lodge 1983).

tion in political violence during 1993, signaling the end of apartheid (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998, 1999; Taylor and Shaw 1998).<sup>14</sup> The TRC's launch was much anticipated. Beginning with legal fine-tuning in the lead-up to the country's first democratic election, it culminated in the passage of the Proclamation of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995. This legislation addressed deep anxieties about the country's repressive past and hopes for a just society, giving a green light to formal inquiry into apartheid atrocities. The expectation was that the recuperation of the truth about South Africa's violent past would at least facilitate a *symbolic* reconciliation (Asmal, Asmal, and Roberts 1997, cf. Meredith 1999, McCarthy 1999).

Focusing attention on victim testimony, the TRC began its work, moving across the country from *dorps* (small towns) to mid-size towns and finally to metropolitan centers, in each commanding a local community hall, makeshift courtroom, or church. Packed tightly with ordinary people, these familiar municipal and religious spaces were quickly given over to the extraordinary spectacle of South Africa's grim history (Feldman 1999). From the assumption of truth as a means to reconciliation, hearings also moved an additional step to assert more or less transparently the "therapeutic effect[t] of giving testimony about abuse, hardship and suffering" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998 (1), 146, cf. Young 1995). Likewise, the almost theological tone of the Commission—a tone set in major part by Archbishop Tutu—suggested that 'suffering,' 'repentance,' and 'forgiveness' had an important part to play in the reconstruction of the society (Botman and Petersen 1996). "Profound questions about what it means to have faith, about human suffering, shame and guilt, about the nature of God, surface in a time of awakening" such as this, argued one theologian (Ackerman 1996, 52).

The TRC, despite its failure to resolve the contentious issue of reparations, has been hailed in many quarters as an effective instrument of political transformation. It has earned the praise of the international community, including countries coming to terms with their own lega-

<sup>14</sup> The year before South Africa's first democratic elections, the country witnessed the worst escalation in political violence in the history of the struggle against apartheid. In part, an expression of right-wing opposition to the negotiated settlement, in part attributable to an ongoing political war in Natal between the apparently victorious ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the lead-up to the 1994 elections looked grim at best. See Ferreira 2000.

cies of authoritarian rule and repression (Hayner 1994, 2001; Chapman 1999; Liebenberg and Zegeye 1998; Parlevliet 1998).<sup>15</sup> At home, however, the Commission has received mixed reviews: At times held up as having set South Africa on a strong footing for the future, it is also the object of grave disappointment, largely because amnesty decisions set free many of those who committed unforgivable acts (James and van de Vijver 2001; Mamdani 1998, 2000; cf. Abel 1995).<sup>16</sup>

Despite the varied challenges to the TRC's mandate and the resentment it has caused, the Commission has resolved many of apartheid's criminal activities—among them, the location of clandestine burial sites, the identity of security police, and the nature of covert operations inside and beyond South Africa's borders (Ellis 1998; Minaar, Liebenberg, and Schutte 1994). To some degree too, the recuperation of state secrets has brought closure and offered a means of ending the many 'accusations and counter-accusations about the past.'<sup>17</sup> And in the end, for some the simple issuing of a death certificate for a missing relative, disappeared almost twenty years ago, is both a gift and a form of retribution.

### *Second Frame: Speaking in Local Idioms or 'Cultural Intimacies'*<sup>18</sup>

How do discussions of neoliberalism and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission relate to the production of Xhosa idioms within the squatter settlements? Specifically, these are idioms produced as tangible objects—framed ditties and proverbs, both new and old, invented and recycled—following the conventions of 'pious kitsch' seen the world over. They are probably connected on one hand to 'religious art,' excerpts from the Psalms and Scriptures and on the other hand to proverbs and other traditional expressions found, for example, in young Zulu women's beaded bridal aprons. Whatever the case may be, my major concern is to trace their circulation in the moral economy of the informal settlements on Cape Town's margins.

<sup>15</sup> Commissions have been set up in Panama and Peru, as well as similar initiatives in Ghana, Sierra Leone, and East Timor.

<sup>16</sup> See Ferreira 2000 for insight into the debate over monetary compensation for victims. Also see Powell 2000.

<sup>17</sup> See 'An Open Appeal to Political Leaders and Potential Amnesty Applicants,' Truth and Reconciliation Commission press release, December 9, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> See Herzfeld 1997.

If neoliberal reforms have deepened the economic crisis in South Africa, the discourse of reconciliation has introduced other kinds of woes. While symbolizing an active and self-conscious attempt to recuperate history, revelation has brought new silences as well (Nuttall 1998). Imagine then, the particular socioeconomic impact on squatters. As social welfare policies have shrunk to accommodate limited public spending, people living in South Africa's shantytowns have seen hopes of adequate housing fade. Almost as critical are the ways in which their local histories and personal narratives have been evacuated from the 'national memory' (Nuttall and Coetzee 1998, Harris n.d.).

While history departments at major universities thrash out the terms of post-apartheid historiography, at least in some quarters reinvigorating a long tradition of social history (Bonner and Niefertgodien 2001), the debate about the past has mainly taken place beyond such disciplinary confines amongst cultural critics, writers, museologists, and others (Brink 1998, Krog 1998, Ndebele 1998).<sup>19</sup> Popular history now falls within the sphere of 'heritage' and to some extent, 'tourism.' Visits to Robben Island, where former inmates and prison guards lead guided tours, compete with sightseeing tours to the townships, organized by entrepreneurs or (occasionally) former freedom fighters. To the extent that these kinds of ventures narrate what was only a few years ago the view from the margins, today such narratives recount the struggle mostly from the perspective of the major liberation organizations. By contrast, those who actively engaged the state at the grassroots level—people in townships and squatter settlements, many of them only loosely affiliated with organized structures—are persistently excluded from the emerging account of apartheid's demise.

This has surely been the case for squatters whose efforts to overcome the 'pass laws' (Hindson 1987, Posel 1997) distinguished them from the trade unions on the one hand and the strategically organized protests of the underground movements on the other. Like many 'youth' activists, long viewed as lacking in 'laudable political purpose,' squatters have been only "tenuously linked to political struggle" (Seekings 1993, 20). Yet squatters, likewise many 'youth,' fought not just on the local frontline, but also in struggles that were pivotal to the success of the broader anti-apartheid movement.

By bringing together two distinct levels of historical narrative—

<sup>19</sup> Consider the work of the District Six Museum's sound archivists in recreating the buzz of 1950s District Six through music (mostly jazz) and oral history.

one intimate and private, the other official and public—I want to revisit the debate on historical revisionism. In order to address such questions in relation to a history of squatting on the Cape Flats, we turn at long last to Xhosa idioms.

### *Objects of Local History*

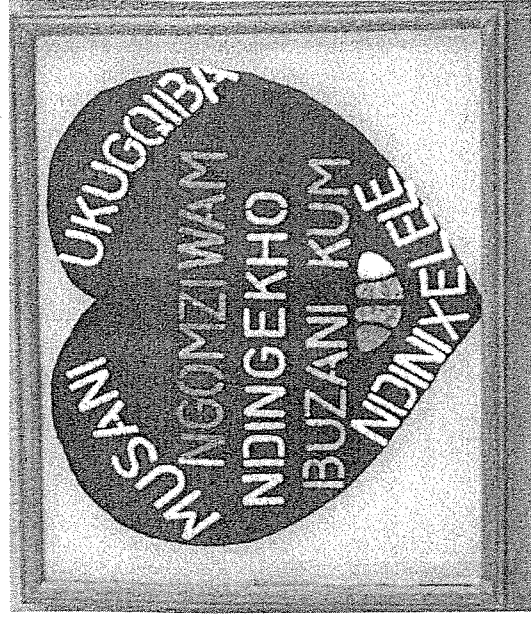


Figure 1. Xhosa 'Idiom'.

*Musani (ningab' ukugqiba) ngomzi wam ndingekho.  
Buzani kum ndinxelele.*<sup>20</sup>

Conclude nothing about my home in my absence.  
Instead ask me and I will tell you.

The many layers of meaning are slowly revealed through the reading and careful contextualization of Xhosa idioms. They address

<sup>20</sup> The version of the idiom that appears here has been reworked both in terms of its idiomatic and syntactic form. Because many Xhosa speakers were schooled in English and Afrikaans but rarely in their first language, as was the case with almost all Bantu language speakers, literacy is at a minimum, hence variations in orthography and 'contraction' of words and terms occur frequently. In addition, many of these forms are no longer in common usage, except in places like Cape Town's squatter areas.



themselves to visitors welcomed into the home, and they narrate tales of threats to personal propriety as well as collective and familial anxieties about respectability and moral purpose. Seen in many households in the townships and particularly in the squatter settlements that make up the multiply marginal boundaries of Cape Town, these idiomatic expressions adorn walls in cinder-block two-room council houses and dilapidated shacks. In a deep rural Xhosa, rarely uttered anywhere in South Africa today, these sayings reflect and reframe the moral dilemmas and challenges of a social universe turned on its head. Inside wooden frames and mounted behind black pasteboard, these 'images in words' represent a popular urban aesthetic form commonly sought after by women.<sup>21</sup>

The idioms, which Xhosa speakers refer to as 'photo' or occasionally 'photo frame,' look out onto the neatly swept linoleum and dust floors of shacks, and onto the overstuffed sofas and wall units, filled with cheap china, that are the common trappings of township homes and shacks alike. They comment on the state of matters in the house, and the relations of members of the household and the extended family. They warn of the dangers of gossip and the need for constant vigilance; in the most serious instances they strive to ward off possible witchcraft or witchcraft accusations (Ashforth 2000a, 2000b; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a, 1999b; Geschiere 1997).<sup>22</sup> They are thought to intercede with a terrifying world in which the body becomes a privileged site of occult activities—human waste, nail clippings, and hair are meticulously disposed of for precisely this reason—and even speech runs the risk of attracting great mischief. To this end, public meetings, and even casual conversation on the street, become the subject of strict self-regulation.

Against the turbulent backdrop of contemporary South Africa, the anxiety over matters of social value is no less pressing than it was in the days of forced removals and surveillance that characterized everyday life in Cape Town's squatter areas during the 1970s and 1980s. 'Influx control' regulations,<sup>23</sup> as elsewhere in the country, dis-

<sup>21</sup> See Das 1997 for critical treatment of the gendered nature of language.

<sup>22</sup> See Feldman 1991 for a comparative view of the function of rumor and gossip in occupied Northern Ireland.

<sup>23</sup> Problems mostly arose from the linkage of residence rights legislation to employment histories, making it almost impossible for most migrant workers to provide evidence of continuous employment, essential to earning 'Section 10(1)' status. The

couraged African settlement in Cape Town. They also dictated that the primary residence of Xhosas were the so-called homelands of the Transkei and Ciskei, located in the Eastern Cape hundreds of miles away (Posel 1997, Swanson 1968).

Whether the application of the legislation was consistent, or achieved its desired aims, is hard to say in view of the many concessions the state was forced to make in the face of squatter defiance (cf. Ashforth 1990, Norval 1993).<sup>24</sup> A formidable number of squatter areas and informal settlements emerged to challenge the apartheid legal apparatus (Andrew and Japha 1978, Ellis 1977, Emmett 1992a, 1992b). In Cape Town, the most famous of such struggles involved the residents of Crossroads, who fought for permission to reside legally in the city. Today such difficulties no longer exist, nor do the coping strategies that went with them. Yet, even with the prospect of formal housing, a mostly sympathetic government in office, and an overall sense that the challenges of the past have disappeared, poverty, unemployment,<sup>25</sup> and extreme violence mediate day-to-day experience.

My first glimpse of framed idiomatic expressions came in the course of recording genealogies and life histories with families in Lower Crossroads, an informal settlement within walking distance of Crossroads, and a site to which many Crossroads' squatters fled at the height of internal power struggles in the famed shantytown during the early 1990s (Cole 1987). In Mrs. Ntlika's home, a widow and influential leader of the 'old people's organization' for the area, there is one such idiom or 'photo' carefully hung on the wall of her makeshift sitting room. An old apartheid-era passbook (or *dompas*)<sup>26</sup>

dilemma grew more serious with the dispossession of rural families, forcing women to enter urban contexts as well. Yet women tended to lack official documentation of prior residence or employment, since they had long been banned from working and living in Cape Town. See the Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923 and the Natives Urban Areas Amendment Act of 1945.

<sup>24</sup> Officials estimate that as many as 3.5 million people were displaced by forced removals during the period 1960 to 1983 alone. See Ashley Dawson, 'Documenting Democratization: New Media Practices in Post-Apartheid South Africa' ([web.mit.edu/comm-forum/paper/dawson.html](http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/paper/dawson.html)).

<sup>25</sup> Official unemployment figures for the Western Cape Province hover at about 38 percent. But it is my conviction that, in the informal settlements, levels of joblessness climb as high as 90 percent. See the South African government's official statistics website for comprehensive data on unemployment and other major economic indicators ([www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za)).

<sup>26</sup> *Dompas* is a term that Africans used to refer to the old passbooks. It is a pejorative Afrikaans term that means 'damn' passbook or 'stupid' passbook.

photograph of her late husband had been blown up with a photocopying machine—the state's official stamp across the right-hand lower corner greatly magnified—and beneath it is this statement: "What is a home without a father?" alternatively, "A home is *not* a home without a father." In Xhosa, *Lijintoni ikhaya engoko utata?*<sup>27</sup> The idiom, composed and produced after her husband's death, signals the troubles of a household without a breadwinner and several dependent adult children to look after. It also speaks to the general struggles that come with being old, at this time, and with so few prospects.

In many cases, the idiom or 'image text' (Mitchell 1994) bears a not altogether clear connection to an otherwise significant life event. Such events occasion a visit to a local craftsman, who creates a fitting, but often broadly standardized, message. For example, Sylvia Nombembe—a woman in her mid-thirties who became a parent when she was only nineteen—purchased one of the idioms from a local 'artisan,' some time after the birth of her first child. With a photograph of her then one-year-old baby inset into the matte and multicolored text appearing beneath, image and words speak past each other, or at least so it seems. The date divulges the celebration of birth and the survival of the baby through the first year. But the text reads, "Let me not be discouraged because of trials and tribulations." In Xhosa, *Mandingapheli amandla ngenxa yezilingo*.

By piecing together the life event, in this case the birth of a child, and the 'photo's' message, the idiom reveals its multiple meanings. For Sylvia Nombembe, 1985 marked her sudden departure from rallies, organizing, and various political activities including pamphleteering in and around Crossroads, which by this time was well known as a site of political unrest. It also concluded her association with the Comrades or 'Young Lions' (Bundy 1987, Seekings 1993, Mayekiso 1996), those children and teenagers (mostly, but not exclusively male) who played a significant role in African communities; the Comrades rallied local people to political action, often against the will of parents and community 'elders.' With her withdrawal into a domestic space in late term and with the birth of her child, Sylvia Nombembe could no longer participate in ongoing battles between ANC forces

<sup>27</sup> Again, this is an alternative formulation of the expression. Note the liaising or contraction of words that makes up the contemporary Xhosa written form.

and the conservative Crossroads leadership, who were by the mid-1980s in the pay of the security forces (Cole 1987, Robins 1998). These "black vigilantes (*witdoeke*),<sup>28</sup> themselves victims turned perpetrators," would forcibly remove fellow residents from Crossroads to reduce overcrowding (Cronin 1999, 93). This had become a stipulation of provincial government if the settlement was to remain in existence at all.

There are at least two possible readings of Sylvia's 'image text.' The first situates her withdrawal from political life in a set of pragmatic decisions about the future, and in the move to focus on the private domestic space there is even perhaps a reactionary impulse or a desire to abandon a former militancy. Alternatively, the effort to create a normal family life under dire circumstances could be seen less as a conservative gesture, and more as a revolutionary act. "Because of the nature of the South African state's attempts to control both productive and reproductive roles," to create family in the city would have provoked official ire (Cole 1986). The statement, "Let me not be discouraged because of trials and tribulations," once made legible in the context of social and political upheaval, can be seen to mediate two forms of praxis—the one bold defiance, the other a quiet refusal to accept state control over the African family, both in terms of its location and the conditions of its reproduction.

### Third Frame: *Ontological Anxieties*

*Musani (ningab' ukugqiba) ngomzi wam ndingekho.  
Buzani kum ndinxitele.*

Conclude nothing about my home in my absence.  
Instead ask me and I will tell you.

Mrs. Sindiswa Tshatani's story begins with the shooting death of her son in 1992, in that final and desperate push that marked the register of political violence just before the end of apartheid (Taylor and Shaw 1998).

In September of that year, Phumezo Tshatani was ambushed and

<sup>28</sup> Afrikaans for 'white scarf,' the term *witdoek* (or *witdoeke* in the plural) describes the strips of white cloth that vigilantes placed around their arms or heads in order to draw a visual distinction between themselves and the Comrades during battle.

shot dead near Crossroads police station in what was later recast during TRC hearings in Cape Town in 1998—as a politically motivated murder. Tshatani's killer, Peter Noquiet, a trained Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) operative had formed a task-force unit to provide military training to new combat recruits, in the months preceding the Crossroads incident.<sup>29</sup> Handed down from a senior operative, also within the Pan-Africanist Congress' armed wing, Noquiet's orders were to select armed targets for 'elimination,' after which he was to strip the bodies of weapons to be used in future operations.

It is safe to assume that Tshatani's murder accomplished several of the political and strategic aims of the PAC. As a *kitsconstabel* or 'instant recruit'—a pejorative term used to describe low-ranking black police—Tshatani was a symbol of opposition to the liberation struggle (Steytler 1990, Cawthra 1993). Of practical, yet no lesser, significance was his possession of a firearm, which, for a liberation organization with limited resources, represented a substantial reward.

What is known about this operation is drawn largely from TRC reconstruction and police records for the events of the evening of September 8, 1992, when Phumezo Tshatani walked with a friend, Thembiso Mantshi, away from Crossroads Police Station, presumably after finishing a shift. As they approached that part of Crossroads where brick homes in the Unathi area give way to the shacks of the informal settlement, three men (one under cover of the other two) advanced toward them. Noquiet shot Tshatani then Mantshi, while his trainee recruits acted as lookouts, one holding an AK-47 and the other a hand grenade. Then suddenly a kombi minibus appeared on the road ahead, blinding the three APLA operatives with its headlights, and they fled without seizing Tshatani and Mantshi's revolvers.

Had they got that much closer before shooting their targets, Noquiet and his accomplices would have realized that, while Tshatani was indeed a policeman, Mantshi, almost identically dressed in a blue uniform, was actually a security guard who worked for Spoornet, the national railway. That Thembiso Mantshi had been confused for a policeman was a tragic irony surely not lost on his family. They

<sup>29</sup> APLA was the armed wing of the Pan-Africanist Congress. Evidence is drawn from the Amnesty Decision report for claimant Peter Noquiet; also see Truth and Reconciliation Commission amnesty hearings, September 1998.

would have been familiar with the term 'blue lines,' a township term that many employed to describe uniformed police.

There is little else by way of evidence to shed further light on the events of that evening. In fact, the case went more or less unremarked until talk of amnesty applications surfaced amidst broader discussions of national reconciliation after 1994. Sometime in 1997, as the work of the TRC progressed, an inquiry into a number of incidents in the Cape Town area began. Amidst many far higher profile cases, such as the Heidelberg Tavern bombing, the St. James Massacre, and the Amy Biehl murder<sup>30</sup>—all of these were PAC operations, occurring in 1993, and all involved white victims—hearings were scheduled pertaining to amnesty applications made on behalf of three members of the PAC. At this time, Peter Noquiet came forward to apply for amnesty in a number of shooting-related deaths, including those of Phumezo Tshatani and Thembiso Mantshi. He was granted amnesty within two or three months of appearing before the Commission. This, in effect, closed the chapter on PAC operations; which is to say the matter was resolved insofar as the TRC was concerned.

However, in Lower Crossroads, given the loss of two male breadwinners, the battle to make ends meet had hardly abated. By all accounts, Phumezo's mother, Mrs. Tshatani, was rather unlucky; she had lost her husband in the early 1980s, while still living in Crossroads, where he had been run over by a car at the intersection after which the famed squatter camp gets its name.

Not uncommonly in such cases, suspicion surrounding the two deaths focused on Mrs. Tshatani; much of this stemmed from discussion between her in-laws and clan folk. Perhaps the husband and son had been poisoned. Perhaps she was responsible. After Mrs. Tshatani's husband died, Phumezo had taken over financial responsibility for the household and his greatest achievement had been his recruitment as a policeman assigned to the Crossroads – Nyanga East area.

Despite her unwavering support of the ANC, and its subversive activities in which she herself had played a role, she was as proud of her son's accomplishments as any mother could be. Besides which Phumezo was earning, by local standards, a substantial amount; never

<sup>30</sup> See Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998, 1999.

mind the political implications of his role within the apartheid apparatus. And so, despite the moral conundrums posed by her son's employment by the South African Police Force, she proudly adorned her home with photographs of Phumezo touting a rifle in training, graduating from training in his uniform, and striking a defensive pose with her youngest daughter in the streets of Crossroads.

After his death, and with the apartheid economy on its knees, her prospects for employment diminished. In this dramatically shifting political and economic landscape, domestic work—the only thing she was qualified to do—was scarce in Cape Town. With this in mind, Mrs. Tshatani decided to try to make ends meet by taking in laundry in the squatter area. Meanwhile, she complained, her husband's kin continued to goad her. She should not be this self-sufficient, they said. Instead, she recalls, they expected her to ask them for help. What she ought to be doing is coming to them “asking for twenty cents for bread, because I don't have any money.”

*Ndawa ndiwuka, ndizama ukuziphilela  
Uleqana nam ndikawenzeni?*

I rise and fall trying to make a living

You are chasing me relentlessly, what have I done to you?

Or

I am trying to make a living despite the ups and downs of life

What have I done that you pursue me so?

By all accounts, her affinal kin became firmly convinced that she was at the business of powerful witchcraft. The evidence for this was her continued self-sufficiency—she seemed to be able to provide for herself, her other son Lungile, a daughter, and a grandchild. It might not be much, but it was adequate. These muted accusations of the uses of ‘magical means for material ends’ grew ever louder and ever more threatening (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a, 279). It is true that Mrs. Tshatani was sitting on a small hidden sum of money; it came from Phumezo's South African Police Force life insurance policy. This payout, while it might shore up the family finances in the short to medium term, presented almost as many problems as it solved: Mrs. Tshatani's concealment of the money, quite apart from provoking conjecture about how she could be managing, was essential to preventing multiple claims by relatives on already dwindling resources. Such scarcity and making-do often refashion relationships

within families and extended kin networks, conjoining material poverty to moral economy (interview with Sindiswa Tshatani, 2/1/99).

### *The Artisan and the Idiom*

Most often, the person who diagnoses and deciphers the troubles of a household is a diviner or healer, an *inyanga* in Zulu or an *igqira* in Xhosa, to whom people present symptoms that require identification and treatment. But the individual who is ‘skilled’ (*ichule*) or has been ‘given a gift’ (*ophize esophiwe*)<sup>31</sup> and can see how people might repair things for themselves is often, at least in this part of the country, an itinerant craftsman and soothsayer who sells ‘idioms’; this is done in part for profit, in part for reasons of moral intercession. Typically, the craftsman has suffered as much as the client has, and he or she draws on a wealth of personal encounters with a whole community of suffering through which problems are articulated and eventually resolved through the production of idioms in object form.

Mrs. Tshatani would eventually consult with one of these ‘skilled’ or ‘gifted’ people and acquired a framed idiom that said “Conclude nothing about my home in my absence. Instead ask me and I will tell you.” In fact, she would acquire six such idioms, covering a range of themes from concerns with gossip about the home, to accusations of ill-gotten gains, and, finally, the subject of Phumezo's death. This last idiom addressed the unknown identity of her son's killer, his ability to walk the streets with impunity, and Mrs. Tshatani's deepest fear that he might well be a member of her own community, even a neighbor or friend.

A very strongly worded idiom, in which Mrs. Tshatani equates her son's killer with Satan, was purchased at almost the same time that the TRC inquiry into gross human rights violations began and investigators tracked Mrs. Tshatani down so they might inform her of the Commission's work. She was invited to attend public hearings, held at TRC headquarters in downtown Cape Town, and to reconcile with Peter Noquiet. Commission staff argued that in this way some kind of closure could be sought for both the victim's family and the perpetrator.

<sup>31</sup> This expression can also be translated as a person who has that gift.

*Usisibhu Thuyhuthu*  
*Ubile Umanzi*  
*Uleqana Nam*  
*Ufumenene Nioni*  
*Ekyfeni Komtwana*  
*Wam Sathana?*

You are lurching towards me (as only a witch could),  
 Glistening with sweat as you chase me.  
 What did you gain from my child's death, Satan?

Or

You are bulldozing your way through (as only a witch could),  
 Glistening with sweat as you chase me.  
 What did you gain from my child's death, Satan?

Moral closure is hard to imagine for South African society as a whole in view of the many continuities with and traces of apartheid that frame the post-apartheid everyday, never mind the very particular concerns of families who were directly implicated in the old regime's repressive apparatus. How Mrs. Tshatani came to take possession of the final idiom in her collection is thus by turns astonishing, by turns utterly unsurprising.

She said that one day a neighbor called from the street, saying, "The 'skilled' one is here, come and see what he has in his bag." With the help of her neighbor, she sifted through the craftsman's collection of framed idioms, chancing on the following: "You are lurching towards me, glistening with sweat as you chase me. What did you gain from my child's death, Satan?" It was extraordinary because it matched her sentiments regarding her son's murderer, yet also ordinary in that any number of local women might have deemed it appropriate in view of the high levels of mortality amongst young men, whether owing to bar brawls, domestic disputes, or witchcraft. This last idiom captured the spirit of the 'standardized nightmare,' which is the 'new' South Africa at its margins.

The idiom, by implication, describes someone hardly human. This is not merely owing to the accusation of Satanism but in the use of language to describe the movements and physical attributes of the person in question. He 'lurches' about in a fashion characteristic of witches—dashing to and fro in an erratic manner, practically 'bulldozing' his way through. It is surely something other than mere coincidence that bulldozers, those machines on the frontlines of forced

removals, should be equated with the movements of witches run amuck. For Mrs. Tshatani and other squatters who lived in Crossroads in the 1970s, 'bulldozers' recall the height of apartheid repression and threats to home and livelihood.

It is unclear whether Mrs. Tshatani perceived the Commission to be an appropriate means by which to settle moral scores. What is clear is that she saw Phumezo's death within both a political and much larger cosmological context. While she was fully aware of the role of the PAC in the liberation struggle, she felt it more likely that Phumezo had been the victim of witchcraft. As such, the ancestors demanded an altogether different sort of recourse—not simply a legal remedy, but a remedy whose presuppositions were epistemologically and ontologically consonant with the Xhosa lived world. Such logics are never mutually exclusive. As Evans-Pritchard taught us long ago, the 'how' of an event is hardly a mystery, but rather it is the 'why.' And the 'why' of the granary falling or the 'why' of a son dying requires secondary or supernatural explanation (Evans-Pritchard 1976, Moore and Sanders 2001).

Mrs. Tshatani never attended the hearings and, whether owing to bureaucratic error or her refusal to engage with the Commission, she remained unaware of the amnesty decision exonerating Peter Noquiet. Waiting resolutely in her shack in Lower Crossroads—bright and pink on the outside, owing to cheap paint in that particular shade; dark and dank on the inside but for the many varieties of wallpaper—Mrs. Tshatani's thoughts turned to the rumblings of the ancestors and her own feelings of disquiet regarding unresolved matters.

Though the Commission's decision to grant Peter Noquiet amnesty was never communicated to Mrs. Tshatani, at least not until some time after we met in late 1998, there is more at stake than the timely disclosure of the outcome of the hearings. It seemed of very little significance to her that Peter Noquiet's identity had become a matter of the public record. She took little solace in it, nor found it helpful in making sense of what had happened; the claims to recourse, to truth, to reconciliation appeared to mean nothing. It should be said that the publics in which such information circulates—through a variety of sophisticated electronic media and well-connected officials and civil servants—are remarkably distant from the social world of the informal settlements. And this raises serious questions about information flows and knowledge-power relations, even in the 'new' South Africa.

*Fourth Frame: Enframing the Standardized Nightmare*

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin drew attention to the relationship between the 'aura' of the work of art and its originality; likewise, he drew attention to the threat posed by new technologies of mass production. Yet at the same time, reproductions, forgeries, and other often-illicit replications played an important role in constituting the 'aura' of the original. Significantly, the actual concept of the 'authentic' only emerged much later as appreciation of Renaissance art grew in the nineteenth century (Benjamin 1969, 243). As Baudrillard (1981) has argued, such considerations hardly figured in the calculus of artistic work, neither by artists nor by collectors, until recent times.

Formerly painters regularly used collaborators or 'negros': one specialized in trees, another in animals. The act of painting, and so the signature as well, did not bear the same mythological insistence upon authenticity—that moral imperative to which modern art is dedicated and by which it becomes modern—which has been evident ever since the relation to illustration and hence the very meaning of the artistic object changed with the act of painting itself. (103)

Benjamin's later work on the Arcades moved to address concerns with industrial culture more broadly and the "precise material replica of the internal consciousness" of the bourgeoisie (Buck-Morss 1991, 39). As for art in particular, the Industrial Revolution marked a significant transformation in the meaning and value of artistic work as it emerged as a secular form, shedding its cult image and thus bringing about a shift from 'cult value' to 'exchange value.'

Unlike the mass-produced commodities sold to a burgeoning middle class in the Parisian Arcades, the framed Xhosa idioms have a limited consuming public. Nor are these *aesthetic* works, notions of taste and distinction being quite different in modern Europe and postcolonial South Africa. However, Benjamin's contribution to a historical sociology, centrally focused on the concrete world of objects, is suggestive for thinking through the ways in which local things—the cultural detritus of a very particular kind of political economy—may be used to outline and explain the conditions of a specific historical moment.

Within a system of moral value, the idioms address the social order as a whole; invoking deep rural Xhosa,<sup>32</sup> they refer to the

<sup>32</sup> On the Flats, where many migrant workers have traditionally made their homes,

chaos that has emerged in the aftermath of apartheid and the loss of a common cause. In a society now more or less disengaged from a collective politics, the forces of liberalization have taken over. And they appear to pit neighbor against neighbor in battles over housing and other benefits. These are strange times indeed, ripe with possibility: the possibility of ancestral interventions, of spirit possessions, of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, and of a retreat into private spaces of contemplation regarding the world and its instabilities.

*Idioms in Circulation*

Xhosa idioms are not exactly prestige objects per se, yet they do seem to have a powerful effect on those who acquire them and presumably on those to whom their messages are directed. Their potency derives in part from the complex interconnections of their production and the contexts in which they are consumed. But consider the fact that the idioms, while reliant on the power of words, tend to be deployed in social contexts in which adult illiteracy is high. To be sure 'economies of literacy' vary widely, likewise the 'text-artifacts' that are their products (Blommaert n.d.). Consequently, it mattered little that Mrs. Tshatani could not read and required the help of her neighbor in selecting an idiom that would address Phumezo's murder.

The idioms are produced by two different kinds of craftsmen. There are those whose whole livelihood depends on the production of idioms and who bank their social reputation on selling idioms that perfectly fit their clients' needs. I frequently heard of a craftsman who lived in Khayelitsha, Cape Town's largest informal settlement, a good 40 km outside the city. He was well-known, famous even, for his skills as a craftsman; he could create idioms that not only reflected commonly shared experiences, but also the very particular circumstances of a given client, thus transcending the 'standardized nightmare.' Such a craftsman can generate as many idioms as he wishes without fear that his supply will surpass demand, while

'deep' Xhosa functions to connect rural and urban worlds. If Mayer, Wilson, and Mafeje observed a degree of cultural conservatism among rural migrants in 1960s East London and Cape Town (Mayer 1963, Wilson and Mafeje 1963), to some degree such cultural retentions remain even today.

other less talented craftsmen must adhere more closely to their client requests.

Quite unlike the celebrated soothsayers, small-timers necessarily rely on producing idioms as a supplement to preexisting income from other sources. As part-time workers in this regard, these idiom makers are not nearly as skilled in assessing the needs of their customers and will often produce 'photos' or idioms in close consultation with clients. The clients, in their turn, place demands on the craftsmen to write a particular phrase or to approach a given predicament in a specific way. Many times such encounters depend on a craftsman's literacy so he can transcribe the words of clients who are unable to read or write.

The two types of craftsmen—one an expert, the other, not—circulate together in the same delimited social field. As such, they articulate together what is collectively and individually experienced. In this sense, they can become the conditions of each other's possibility and can dictate the terms of each other's production, thus blurring the distinction between 'expert' and 'amateur.'

The idioms, as epiphanies of the ordinary, mediate a world in which the written word becomes a potent sign (cf. Smith 1998). Referring to the many uses to which writing and texts are put and the need for a very conscious 'ethnography of writing' (Basso 1974), Jan Blommaert argues that "little can be taken for granted here: neither the conventional practices, not the attached functions and domains, and even less the specific place writing takes in the repertoires of its users" (n.d., 5). He suggests that none of these elements can be defined *a priori*.

The idioms are used often enough as a way of blocking witchcraft accusations, and in preventing rumors that might damage the reputation of neighbors, friends, and kin. They are indeed spell-binding and their owners often enough hope that the words, carefully crafted for personal use, will have an effect on those most likely to be guilty of wrongdoing (cf. Favret-Saada 1980, also see Tambiah 1990). In the end, idioms operating within the unique space of the home promise the possibility of *moral* reconstruction.

As a craftsman in Lower Crossroads told me

it depends, but . . . let's say the person has purchased a photo frame and then the person for whom the words in that photo are intended doesn't see them or doesn't take account of them—they don't read the writing on the wall—then in that case a person may turn to an

*igqira* or *ixhwele*<sup>33</sup> for another form of help. This would be in order to prevent that person from continuing with their jealous gossip.<sup>34</sup>

The photos are a first line of defense against jealousy and other moral breaches. Only when the idioms fail do people turn to healers or witch doctors in search of other more radical interventions. The photo acts as a first warning: It promises reprisals that are more serious if the rumors don't stop. In such a fragile universe, where measures are constantly taken to safeguard reputation, rumor can have serious consequences, especially when a person is alleged to have engaged in witchcraft.

These, in sum, are the relations that sustain the production of Xhosa idioms. About the means of their production there is a little more yet to say.

#### *Idioms in Production*

Watching Mr. Rasmeni, a local craftsman in Lower Crossroads, at work as he produces texts and decorative frames is a lesson in the 'making-do' of the poor. The *means* at his disposal are extremely limited. They consist mainly of paper left over from the covers that schoolchildren are required to make for their textbooks. This paper is supplemented with gold and silver 'foil' carefully collected from discarded cigarette boxes; these foil papers are used to illuminate the texts in their multicolored frames. To buy the idioms, women, who are the most frequent purchasers, scrimp and save for weeks or months to put down the necessary R20 or R30 (approximately \$2.80 to \$4.25 in late 2003). For their own part, craftsmen often make the photos as a way to get by during times of unemployment or prolonged underemployment, when the additional income makes the difference between staying afloat and starvation. In this sense, the relationship between craftsman and client is one of mutuality: each is as likely to understand the circumstances described in the idioms and presented for public view in the homes of those living on the Flats.

<sup>33</sup> The *igqira* and *ixhwele* are both able to address forms of 'indigenous' illness, but they do so by distinct means. The *igqira* is best understood as a diagnostician, who often pinpoints the source and type of illness during dreams, while the *ixhwele* is an expert in herbal medicines and other treatment regimens. Nevertheless, the herbalist also possesses divinatory powers.

<sup>34</sup> Mr. Rasmeni, craftsman and Lower Crossroads resident, January 20, 2002.

insurance policy. And so, when I first began to ask questions about the circumstances and details of her son's death, commenting on the many pictures of this young man in uniform, she paused and said, "I have something to show you. Wait here while I go and get them from beneath my bed." In this way she conceded the fact that the potency of the idioms was so great as to court suspicion, even possibly setting in motion a new cycle of jealousy. And this of course would require the purchase of new Xhosa idioms or recourse to more powerful magic still.

"It is to all those I encountered on this wondrous journey to consciousness of South Africa's past and present that this essay is dedicated. And it is in view of the risks they took in telling their stories that I am obliged at one and the same time to honor their contributions, while protecting their identities."

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#### Fifth Frame: Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with the place of personal history in post-apartheid South Africa. Focusing on local narratives arising in the context of the country's political and economic transition, I have tried to show the means by which personal biographies play a small yet significant role in reshaping contemporary accounts of the recent past. I began first by looking at the contemporary moment, broadly defined by neoliberal reforms, and the severe limits such reforms have placed on the possibility for thoroughgoing social change. I went on to address the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and its role in reconstructing the past, often enough in stark, dualistic terms related to the liberation struggle and its allies and enemies. I suggested that the TRC, by way of legal and theological frameworks, had become a powerful mechanism for creating and stewarding 'national memory.'

By contrast, local histories tend to follow a set of altogether different conventions. Xhosa idioms, for example, while ostensibly used to mark special life events or to ward off gossip and accusations of wrongdoing, in some sense narrate a set of personal histories that have been erased from official accounts of South Africa's past.

I suggested that the intense need for justice felt by so many South Africans had made it very difficult to accept the terms of national reconciliation. To be sure, impunity is a tough pill to swallow, and Mrs. Tshatani's efforts to acquire idioms illustrate the lack of moral resolution that accompanied the work of the TRC. But there is something more profound still about the forms of acknowledgment and dis-acknowledgment that followed from the South African government's desire to speak truth to power, without punitive consequence for those who 'confessed' to apartheid crimes. Mrs. Tshatani's focus on the supernatural forces at work in the old South Africa move us beyond debates about the institutional procedures and rationalities and successes and failures of the new dispensation. To fight back with magic—words, even 'deadly words' (Favret-Saada 1980)—is to undercut the legal and political abstractions of the new order and to produce in their place "newly nuanced notions of evil and affliction" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, xxii).

Mrs. Tshatani's collection of idioms were so powerful that, after only a short time, she realized they would have to be removed from public view, much like the money she received from Phumezo's life



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