

Sibusisiwe Nombuso Dlamini.
Youth and Identity Politics in South Africa, 1990-94.

University of Toronto Press, 2005, 260 pp.
\$55.00 hardcover (0-8020-3911-1).

This book might usefully have been titled “Being Zulu”. It is an insightful study of the dilemmas and difficulties of growing up and negotiating identities in Zulu society during South Africa’s transition to democracy in the early 1990s. The author, a Zulu anthropologist, conducted fieldwork with young people in and outside school in 1992, in the townships of Umlazi and KwaMashu in Durban.

Being Zulu was not easy for young men and women in Umlazi and KwaMashu. In the mid- and late 1980s, these townships had seen protracted and violent conflict between supporters of the (banned) African National Congress (ANC) and Inkatha, the Zulu nationalist movement headed by Chief Mangosothu ‘Gatsha’ Buthelezi, who was Chief Minister of the apartheid ‘bantustan’ of KwaZulu. Amidst this conflict, to survive meant remaining anonymous: not only avoiding the colours or symbols associated with the two movements, but also speaking little in public lest one’s accent might be interpreted as indicating partisanship.

The book is based on research conducted among young people, many of whom are clearly ANC-leaning. The author herself comes from ‘a strong Zulu background’ in an Inkatha-supporting family but was drawn into pro-ANC activities at university and later, when she worked as a high school teacher. She herself had experienced pressures in the 1980s to choose between being Zulu and supporting the ANC-led liberation struggle. She approached her research, she writes, as “a Zulu person trying to reconcile being ... [pro-] ANC and remaining Zulu” (p. 22).

An incident reported early in the book indicates the difficulties inherent in reconciling politics and culture. A teacher tells her students that there will be no class on the following day because she, and probably many of them, would be going to a service for the assassinated ANC leader, Chris Hani. One of the students warns that ‘Gatsha’ – i.e. Chief Minister Buthelezi – would not like this. The student is correct, but the teacher admonishes him for using the disrespectful term ‘Gatsha’. ‘Why are you calling the Chief Minister by name?’, she asks him; ‘In Zulu do you call adults by name?’ The teacher – and Nombuso Dlamini – clearly believe that the ‘Zulu’ practice of *ukuhlonipha* (respect) should be followed even with respect to one’s political opponents.

The core of the book comprises chapters on *tsatsatsa*, i.e. young men and women who considered themselves ‘progressive’ (and pro-ANC), members of soccer teams, and members of some churches. These groups dealt with the perils of politics in different ways. The *tsatsatsa* sought ways of keeping their political loyalties largely hidden. Soccer, writes Dlamini, is characterized by a ‘code of silence’: players do not talk about themselves or their lives outside of soccer, because this might lead to political topics. Finally, some churches define politics as an unchristian practice, and forbid their members from political activity. Young men (and women) in these groups also had to construct their own understandings of Zuluness, their use of Zulu language, and their identities as Zulus.

This book has the strengths of an ‘inside’ account. But it is weakened by an unsystematic structure and a lack of analytic depth. The concluding chapter and epilogue are very disappointing, failing to draw together the threads in the case-study chapters. We are also left without any sense of how

numerous are the different cases described here. Since the early 1990s, a wealth of survey data has become available, covering issues of identity among many others. Whilst there are clear limits to what surveys can tell us, they should be able to provide some sense of the overall landscape of youth social and cultural life.

One possible reason for the analytic weakness of this book is the lack of any attention to any comparative literature. Chapters 1 and 3 provide a rather cursory introduction to the study of youth and identity in this part of South Africa. Chapter 1 refers to the processes of identity formation in South Africa from above (by the apartheid state) and from below (as part of the struggle against apartheid), but there is no discussion of the ways that pre-apartheid identities and cultures informed (and impeded) these two processes. This is especially important among 'Zulus' who, as the author notes, can draw on the powerful symbolic resources of language, history and culture (even if they do not comprise a neatly bounded group). Very little attention is paid to work on Zulu politics and identity in the twentieth century (for example, Ben Carton's *Blood From Your Children: The Colonial Origins of Generational Conflict in South Africa*, Nicholas Cope's *To Bind the Nation: Solomon kaDinuzulu and Zulu Nationalism, 1913-1933*, Paul La Hausse's *Restless Identities*, or Courtney Jung's *Then I Was Black: South African Political Identities in Transition*), or to classic comparative work (such as Leroy Vail's edited collection, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*). I am not an anthropologist myself, but I suspect that there is anthropological work on Zuluness that is also ignored.

Nor is there any reference to any comparative literature on youth and identity. How different is it for young Pedi or Tswana men and women in Pretoria, or for Xhosa-speaking youth in Port Elizabeth or East London? Dlamini makes no reference to Clive Glaser's important work on urban youth in Soweto (Johannesburg's most famous townships), nor to Lungisile Ntsebeza's unpublished thesis on youth in the Eastern Cape.

The bibliography is instructive. It includes two books published in 2001 and 2003, which are referred to in the introduction and epilogue, but otherwise nothing published after 1995 and very little from 1990-95. Perhaps the book is based on a thesis completed in or around 1994-95, and the author was unable to revise it thereafter to take into account newly-published research. This certainly undermines its value.

In addition, the book includes sloppy errors. Some works cited in the text are not included in the bibliography (including one of my papers, on p. 61, where she compounds the problem by misspelling my name!). The chronology provided as an appendix includes numerous errors (as well as typos). Overall, there is some fascinating material here, but it is not clear that it warrants book-length treatment rather than an article or two.

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