

Why is the '100% Zulu Boy' so popular?

Benedict Carton

In 2009 Jacob Zuma won the endorsement of Nelson Mandela and the overwhelming support of voters, thousands of whom wore '100% Zulu Boy' t-shirts to celebrate the approaching end of an enigma, namely Thabo Mbeki's technocratic (and some say authoritarian) rule over the African National Congress (ANC).¹ Indeed, Jacob Zuma is admired at home because, unlike his inscrutable predecessor, he is a recognizable man of tradition and struggle. Decades ago, the young Zuma left his reserve for work and activism in a South African city, sharing a formative experience with millions in his country, including his idol Mandela. Thus, Zuma travelled a common path never trodden by his rival, an intellectual almost destined from birth for exile overseas. While Mbeki prepared for an economics degree at Sussex University, Zuma reached for the iconic Kalashnikov, his 'mshini wami'.² And no sooner had the cosmopolitan Mbeki settled into his English surroundings, than the guerilla Zuma (arrested and jailed) drew inspiration on Robben Island from boyhood tales of Zulu King Cetshwayo's defeat of British

invaders at Isandlwana. This stunning victory in 1879 also fired the imaginations of Zuma's iconic cellmates. They, along with the '100% Zulu Boy', debated tactics of armed struggle under the radar of prison censors, creating an oral world of military strategy with century-old resonances smuggled in from Cetshwayo's royal house.³

Yet it is increasingly apparent that Zuma's popularity transcends his 'mshini wami' Isandlwana pedigree. Whether being interviewed on television in business suits or orating on stage in Zulu regalia, he is the people's leader with a familiar touch. He conveys this touch to audiences versed in African languages by alluding to Zulu idioms and stories that draw metaphors and counsel from growing up in Nkandla. His 'tribal' birthplace is located on the deeply rural southern fringe of the old Zulu kingdom, where polygamous homesteads raise livestock and hunt *izinyamazane* (buck), and people *ukukhonza* the *amakhosi*, offer loyalty to their chiefs. In Nkandla King Cetshwayo lies buried in a sacred grave. Candidate Zuma, the son of this hallowed region, reminded crowds that he developed the resilience to survive the trials of public life by herding unruly cattle, trapping wily game, and hearing of Zulu opposition to the white man. He learned an enduring moral, patriarchal respect (*ukuhlonipa* or *inhlonipho*), from elders who said that attaining manhood meant *ukwakha umuzi*, accepting the challenges of 'building the homestead' — from abiding the absence of loved ones during migrant labour to managing the obligations of a patriarch with wives and children.⁴ When he

1. For Thabo Mbeki's technocratic authoritarianism in the African National Congress and its echoes in the Jacob Zuma era, see Patrick Craven, 'COSATU's New Year Message', COSATU Today, 7 January 2007, <http://www.cosatu.org.za>, accessed 29 August 2009; Devan Pillay, 'Working Class Politics or Populism? The Meaning of Zuma for the Left in SA', Alternatives International, 11 October 2008, <http://www.alterinter.org/article2595.html>, accessed 29 August 2009. Dr. Laurence Piper is acknowledged as a source of these important citations.

2. For a fascinating article on the cultural roots and political ramifications of Zuma's 'mshini wami' (machine gun) lyric, see Liz Gunner, 'Jacob Zuma, the Social Body and the Unruly Power of Song', African Affairs 108, 430 (2009): 27-48.

3. Official 'struggle' histories of South Africa's second and third democratically elected presidents can be found on the anc.org.za website. This essay draws on key details presented in these hagiographic biographies, which appear to contrast Mbeki's and Zuma's involvement in liberation politics: <http://www.anc.org.za/people/mbeki.html> and <http://www.anc.org.za/people/zumaj.html>, accessed 30 August 2009.

4. For an examination of the continued importance of ukwakha

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speaks in this vein, Zuma is not addressing big news outlets. He knows the major print and broadcast media hear him differently.

The widely circulated dailies interpret Zuma's lingua franca as political pandering that betrays a dangerous agenda, resurrecting the snake-charming ritual of South African governance. Editorials warn ominously that he is serenading the volatile serpent of 'tribalism' to deflect attention from his own failings, abhorrently evident during his recent rape and corruption cases. Syndicated columnists, for their part, link Zuma's cultural pride with the spectre of internecine bloodshed, leaving open for interpretation whether he plans to incite the violent chauvinism last unleashed during a civil war between Inkatha and the ANC in the lead-up to the democratic transition. Still other commentators ask whether Zuma's intolerance of citizens he calls troublesome 'feminists' and 'deviant' gays foreshadows the substitution of constitutional equality with iron-fisted patriarchy. Unfortunately, this important question, like the other judgments above, presume the president and his followers embrace a tribal cult of personality founded on primordial male domination, a form of oppression reputedly nurtured by an atavistic genius named Shaka Zulu.⁵ In so doing the corporate me-

umuzi in modern KZN, see Mark Hunter, 'IsiZulu-speaking Men and Changing Households: From Providers within Marriage to Providers outside Marriage', in Benedict Carton, John Laband, and Jabulani Sithole (eds) *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu, Past and Present* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008; New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

5. For trenchant analyses of these negative commentaries on Zuma's rise to power, see three essays in *Representation*, 45,

dia doubtlessly lure advertisers but do little to explain why Zuma is admired, especially by his female defenders. It is striking how the gender alliances galvanizing South African politics are a footnote in media coverage of Zuma. For example, most newspapers portray

black women who back him as expressing what is natural for traditional or would-be traditional mothers, as if they were genetically programmed subordinates. Indeed, Zuma's patriarchal way is rendered as an inherited curse which continues to afflict the people of his nation, from vulnerable daughters to esteemed *amakhosikazi*, older married Zulu women with children. In 2006 some *amakhosikazi* rallied outside a courthouse to burn *imphepho*, ritual incense, in order to beckon the ancestors to protect their leader from charges of sexual assault brought by a younger, single Zulu woman. Their ceremonial presence at the magistrate's door received passing mention in bulletins that caricatured Zuma's base as the mob from Shaka's day. Yet it is a mistake to assume *amakhosikazi* blindly worship their new president or even some Zulu 'Napoleon'. They make up their own minds, whether we find it acceptable or not. And they have their own strategies of maintaining power and integrity — and making their voices heard

— through wedded motherhood in family hierarchies which bestow them with authority to direct (or redirect) resources and respect to men, including to men of public standing. How *amakhosikazi* uphold such domestic arrangements ought to provoke greater cu-

2 (2009): Laurence Piper, 'The Zuma Watershed: From Post-apartheid to Post-colonial Politics in South Africa', 101-7; Louise Vincent, 'Moral Panic and the Politics of Populism', 213-21; and Tom Lodge, 'The Zuma Tsunami: South Africa's Succession Politics', 125-41.

While Zuma promotes the dream of ordinary people, fulfilling this vision is a wager against long odds. Their president has a monumental task before him: improving economic conditions during a global recession while a national disaster unfolds at home. The horrific toll of AIDS should immediately come to mind, but this is probably not Zuma's initial priority.

It is too early to tell how Zuma will fare, but if the president falters quickly on the economic front his common touch could well become part of common lore which conjures the fable of the *imbulu*, a mythic shape-shifter with a notorious reputation for taking, not providing.

riosity among journalists. In the meantime we should take stock in far more complex perspectives of Zulu patriarchy.

Zulu patriarchy is not an ossified system safeguarded by the omnipotent father. Major transformations like shifts in labour time from subsistence production to wage earning have empowered older wives with the valued responsibility of preserving Zuma's much-vaunted customs, including *ukulobola*, certainly as unmarried members of rural households entered into migrancy. Nor does Zulu patriarchy confine all women to well-worn paths of marginalization. Rather, it is a porous institution embodying gender partnerships as well as contested negotiations between the sexes and generations. Given these unpredictable, multivalent forces, might we ask, instead, if Zuma is imposing his personalized rendition of Big Man politics on South Africa?

To date, a few academic commentaries have broached aspects of this question, if only to portray the people's 'Zulu nationalist' as a one-dimensional anomaly in the ANC, a pluralist party whose commitment to 'anti-tribalism' will probably outlast his anticipated one term.⁶ We are still waiting for a more comprehensive study of the historical and cultural processes that might frame (more usefully) the president's place in South Africa, now and in the past. To this end, we might turn to the research of historians John Wright and Jabulani Sithole as well as the literary critic Mbongiseni Buthelezi.⁷ They analyse the diverse origins and temporal identities of Zulu men and women — not just one history of one tradition dictated by one gender. Furthermore, these scholars trace permutations of *ubuZulu bethu* (the many faces, in Sithole's words, of 'our Zuluness')⁸ by gauging how African groups in KwaZulu-Natal over the last two centuries became members and

non-members of a Zulu polity without abandoning their pre-Shakan lineage identities. In other words, Wright, Sithole and Buthelezi argue that Zuluness was and is continually reconstituted by people who speak Zulu and other languages. This conclusion rightly disputes the hoary belief that Shaka or Inkatha had a monopoly on the conception of masculine Zulu values.⁹ If anything Jacob Zuma, the reputed ANC anomaly, counters such a stereotype.

There should be no surprise that South Africa's new president comes from a line of self-proclaimed Zulu pioneers of the ANC, among them John Dube and Pixley Seme, founders in 1912 of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), a forerunner of Zuma's party. As studies by Shula Marks and Paul La Hausse have demonstrated, Dube was a proponent of SANNC petitions to enlarge the qualified 'native franchise' and a tireless booster of the Zulu royal house.¹⁰ Dube's colleague, Seme, reveled in Shaka's accomplishments. Together, Dube and Seme enfolded their visions of early-twentieth-century African ethnicity and regional politics into a liberation ideology that eventually advanced national aspirations. For his part, the Ivy-graduate Seme, a B.A. valedictorian of Columbia University in 1906, loved to tap the well of Zulu tradition and capitalist modernity, the very same elixir from which Zuma drinks. While pursuing education in America, Seme signed letters 'the Zulu Boy'. During the Roaring 'Twenties, he liked the formal suits of the era, which he occasionally adorned with strips of sacred animal skins. Seme also spun eerily familiar tales of a hardscrabble Zulu childhood, including renditions of how he learned to build the homestead and uphold patriarchal tradition. In 1925 Seme elaborated: [In] 'Zulu country boys grow up showing deference to others (be sabana); younger ones show respect (hlonipha) to older ones. . . . He [the herd boy] learns the names of . . . the mountains and hills which he can

6. Zuma's (Zulu-inflected) patronage presidency and the ANC's pluralist politics are the subject of several articles in *Representation*, 45, 2 (2009), specially Raymond Sutner's 'The Challenge of African National Congress Dominance', 109-123.

7. John Wright, 'Reflections on the Politics of Being "Zulu" and "Revisiting the Stereotype of Shaka's "Devastations"': Jabulani Sithole, 'Preface: Zuluness in South Africa: From "Struggle Debate to democratic Transition": Mbongiseni Buthelezi, 'The Empire Talks Back: Re-examining the Legacies of Shaka and Zulu Power in Post-apartheid South Africa'; in Carton et al, eds. *Zulu Identities*.

8. Jabulani Sithole, 'Changing Meanings of the Battle of Ncome and Images of King Dingane in Twentieth-century South Africa', in *Zulu Identities*, 328.

9. On the (male and female) power brokers who influenced elite masculine values in the nineteenth-century Zulu kingdom, see Sifiso Ndlovu, 'A Reassessment of Women's Power in the Zulu Kingdom'; on non-Inkatha (ANC) political influences over (martial) Zulu identity in twentieth-century KZN, see: Jabulani Sithole, 'Changing Meanings of the Battle of Ncome'; in *Zulu Identities*.

10. Shula Marks, 'Ambiguities of Dependence: John L. Dube of Natal', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 1, 12 (1975); and Paul La Hausse, *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c. 1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-c.1936)* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal, 2000), 15-21, 24.

see, to which the beast [cattle] draws him forward. It draws him into the bush. . . He also learns to hunt and to run. His body becomes very firm as he grows. This is what makes black boys become strong more quickly than white children'.¹¹ Most tellingly, Seme, as we shall see with Zuma, may have had deeper reasons to be self-conscious of his claim to undiluted Zulu heritage. Seme was Thongan,¹² a less heralded ethnic group on the northern reaches of Zulu influence (on the border with Mozambique). During the twentieth century, as scholars David Webster and Dingani Mthethwa have shown, Thonga lineages engaged in cultural entrepreneurialism, borrowing and selling adopted features of Zuluness to mining recruiters obsessed with hiring 'disciplined warriors'.¹³

Zuma's ancestral history might also be illuminating. Zuma's praise name — honouring one of his pioneering patriarchs — Msholozhi is a good starting point. Extant oral traditions (which should be evaluated critically) indicate that in the nineteenth century Msholozhi (Mafahleni) kaNxamalala was Inkosi (chief) of a lineage linked to abakwaNxamalala people from a region of KwaZulu-Natal west of Nkandla (near the confluence of the Mzinyathi and Thukela Rivers). As Shaka rose to prominence after major victories over military rivals, among them Inkosi Zwide's amaNdwandwe in 1820, sections of the abakwaNxamalala probably felt they were next to be conquered. They seemed to have reacted to the Zulu threat by seeking protection from another formidable Inkosi named Ngoza, ruler of the amaThembu and sworn enemy of Shaka. To avoid subjugation, some abakwaNxamalala probably joined Ngoza's amaThembu and his client lineages — the amaKhuze, amaMabaso, amaMbatha, etc. — in a migration south to the Mngeni River Valley near Pi-

etermaritzburg, the present-day provincial capital of KZN. Other abakwaNxamalala remained behind and became part of the Zulu kingdom.¹⁴

In Shaka's nascent polity, structured as it was by a pecking order of allies and menials, the abakwaNxamalala were designated lowly 'outsiders', or amaLala. Many amaLala dwelled beyond the heartland of the kingdom, for example, in Nkandla, the flank of Shaka's influence. Zulu royals pointed to amaLala as inferior subjects, a designation the scholar Carolyn Hamilton attributes to social factors as well. AmaLala were not seen as 'clean' enough to be near Shaka and his favourites.¹⁵ Such associations between amaLala and 'dirt' could have induced fears that extended beyond ideas of bodily hygiene to notions of human pollution (*umthakathi*, malevolent dissidence), which authorities in the kingdom sought to remove from their territories through 'witch' (*umthakathi*) executions. Finally, the amaLala served as a foil to the amaNtungwa elite, the people of the 'grain basket [that rolls]', meaning those with direct access to Zulu patronage. Hence, amaLala clans, like some of Zuma's ancestors, were restricted from tapping into tributary networks that offered amaNtungwa first rights to Shaka's largesse, from royal gifts of cattle (for local redistribution) to preferential service in the king's prized regiments.¹⁶

In the light of this interpretation should we reassess Zuma's fervour for 'insider' nationalism? Is his so-

11. C. Webb and J. Wright, eds. *The James Stuart Archive*, vol. 5 (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press; Durban: Killie Campbell Africana Library; 2001); evidence of Pixley kaSeme, 18 May 1925, 274-75.

12. See Richard Rive's 'The Early Years' in <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/people/seme.html#6>, accessed 4 September 2009; see also, Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn Carter (eds). 1977. *From Protest to Challenge. A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa (1882-1964)*. Vol. 4. Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, p.137.

13. David Webster, 'Abafazi Bathonga Bafihlakala: Ethnicity and Gender in a KwaZulu Border Community', *African Studies* 50, 1 & 2 (1991) and Dingani Mthethwa, 'Two Bulls in One Kraal: Local Politics, 'Zulu History' and Heritage Tourism in Kosi Bay' in *Zulu Identities*.

14. John Wright, 'The Dynamics of Power and Conflict in the Thukela-Mzimkhulu Region in the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries: A Critical Reconstruction (PhD Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1989), 231-42; see mid-nineteenth-century testimony given by a Zulu-speaking oral historian (identified by J. Wright as Nombiba) to Natal Secretary for Native Affairs Theophilus Shepstone in John Bird, ed. *The Annals of Natal 1495 to 1845*, vol. 1 (Cape Town, 1965 [1885]), 134; also see C. Webb and J. Wright, eds. *The James Stuart Archive*, vol. 1 (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press; Durban: Killie Campbell Africana Library; 1976); evidence of Lugubhu kaMangaliso, 4 March 1909; 29 May 1916; 31 May 1916, 282-92.

15. Carolyn Hamilton, 'Ideology, Oral Tradition and the Struggle for Power in the Early Zulu Kingdom', (MA Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1986), chapter 8.

16. *Restricted amaLala access to Zulu patronage and prestige: Carolyn Hamilton and John Wright, 'The Making of the Amalala: Ethnicity, Ideology and Relations of Subordination in a Precolonial Context'*, *South African Historical Journal* 22 (1990), 2-31. For a fascinating account of *umthakathi* in Zulu politics, see Julie Parle, *States of Mind: Searching for Mental Health in Natal and Zululand, 1868-1918* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007).

called Zulu chauvinism really an echo of Shaka's 'empire-building' ambitions? Or does the president's reference to building the homestead speak to ubiquitous non-Zulu/non-elite ideals of providing for disadvantaged people on a local level? Perhaps Zuma's evocation of *ukwakha umuzi* exemplifies the act of expanding one's lineage through work, marriage and birth. This act of fostering kinship — and venerating the ancestors — is still embraced in Zululand, and in Maputalaland, Mpondoland, Basotholand, and Sekhukhune-land, as well as Soweto, Katlehong, KwaMashu, and Khayelitsha. Residents of these areas realize Shaka is long gone. What they might hear in the idiom *ukwakha umuzi* is a promise from Zuma to secure employment which buoys marital hopes, family well-being and personal integrity. The able-bodied boys and men of Nkandla still venture into migrant labour in hopes of using their earnings as their grandfathers did, to buy cattle for *ilobolo*, bridewealth, and support their domestic aspirations. Yet today in Zuma's birthplace, as in so many other communities throughout South Africa, bridewealth, when expected, is unaffordable and the living wage a thing of the past. The president's awareness of these realities probably underpinned his campaign vow to generate jobs that fill the belly and swell the home. Simply put, *ukwakha umuzi* symbolizes a better life for the poor based on a new foundation of wealth circulated the 'traditional' way (rather than elite-driven Black Economic Empowerment deals). One verse from the president's *isithakazelo*, his praise-lines recited at public events, exalts the acumen of

Zuma's ancestral Inkosi, Nxamala, who undertook to procure and reallocate resources. Now Zuma, too, proclaims that he is going to spread prosperity. Indeed, the president's *isithakazelo* hails his lineage patriarch, Nxamala, who came bearing ('Zuma, Nxamala, Maphuma ephethe') protein-rich meat ('inyama ngapha') and nutritious sour milk ('amasi ngapha'), the very sustenance which enabled the Zuma clan to build its proverbial homestead: 'Zuma, Nxamala, Maphuma ephethe, inyama ngapha, amasi ngapha . . . '.

Those who listen to Zuma's lyrical politicking have a sense of his affecting presence. He has an intimate mastery of *amasiko* (*uqotho* customs), *izithakazelo*, and specific *imilando*, clan and territorial histories of KwaZulu-Natal, which appeals to a huge black constituency that does not identify itself as Zulu. But expertise in these realms can create even greater or more precipitous risks for the leader who vernacularizes his rule. While Zuma promotes the dream of ordinary people, fulfilling this vision is a wager against long odds. Their president has a monumental task before him: improving economic conditions during a global recession while a national disaster unfolds at home. The horrific toll of AIDS should immediately come to mind, but this is probably not Zuma's initial priority. His mantra of *ukwakha umuzi* addresses another emergency related to the pandemic, a worsening crisis of social reproduction, in the words of geographer Mark Hunter, which shows no sign of abating in the months ahead, as work and weddings continue to disappear.¹⁷ It is too early to tell how Zuma will fare, but if the president falters quickly on the economic front his common touch could well become part of common lore which conjures the fable of the *imbulu*, a mythic shape-shifter with a notorious reputation for taking, not providing.

17. Mark Hunter, 'IsiZulu-speaking Men and Changing Households' in *Zulu Identities*.