

Review

Ben Carton, John Laband and Jabulani Sithole
(eds) (2008). *Zulu Identities: being Zulu, past
and present*. Pietermaritzburg: University of
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Zulu Identities is an impressive achievement; it will certainly become an important reference for scholars working on Natal and southern Africanists more generally. Almost encyclopaedic in scope, the collection assembles 52 chapters on topics ranging from the archaeology of pre-colonial farming to the tourism industry of contemporary Natal. The editors have deliberately avoided perpetuating the acrimonious divisions that have sometimes characterised the historiography of KwaZulu-Natal – for example, the debates around the so-called *mfecane* – by including articles reflecting a sweeping variety of methodological and political viewpoints. If a central claim of this volume is that Zulu identity is complex, multiple, and contested, the editors have certainly demonstrated that the field of Zulu studies is now richly developed, including vibrant and evolving research in literary and performance studies, anthropology, material culture and art history, urban sociology, and the history of medicine. Importantly, this volume includes an unprecedented number of Zulu-speaking intellectuals and showcases a new generation of scholarship much more strongly grounded in the Zulu language. In this respect, it provides a timely model for the reorientation of South African scholarship, particularly history, toward vernacular language sources and popular traditions.

The ecumenical nature of *Zulu Identities* also explains some of its limitations. At over 600 pages, two worthwhile projects seem to have been awkwardly combined: a compendium of things Zulu and an in depth reconsideration of Zulu identity in the light of post-Apartheid developments.

There is a fair amount of repetition and some truly surprising omissions (neither Isaiah Shembe nor Zionism appear in the index, for example). Consequently, the volume is too cumbersome to serve as a general overview of Zulu history or culture, while the brief character of the essays (6-10 pages on average) does not provide individual authors the space to develop their analysis of identity – a fraught and over-determined term in any context – in the depth that the issues involved frequently merit. There are several new and truly groundbreaking contributions, for example Mbongiseni Buthelezi's discussion of *izibongo* (praise songs) and the violence of how the Shakan kingdom recast earlier histories, or Philip Bonner and Vusi Ndima's reconsideration of the roots of martial Zuluness on the East Rand. But close to half of the entries are short resumes extracted from long-available monographs and journal articles – useful for reference or perhaps teaching, but already well known to scholars in the field.

Some common themes and arguments do, nonetheless, emerge. As Benedict Carton explores in his substantial introduction, the post-apartheid moment has generated a contradictory and (largely) unexpected development with regards to discourses of Zulu identity. The seemingly irreversible political decline of the Inkatha Freedom Party – for several decades, the foremost defender of a separate, 'traditional' Zuluness – has not resulted in the erosion of a powerful sense of Zulu identity in Natal and elsewhere. To the contrary, *UbuZulu bethu* (our Zuluness) has remained enormously vital as it has been reconfigured through new arenas and modes of articulation: from the reinvented ritual of virginity testing to the pop psychology of Zulu corporate ethics, from legal disputes over the historical authority of the Zulu monarchy to the campaign to defend Jacob Zuma against charges of rape. Many of the essays seek to take advantage of the political and intellectual space created by the detachment of Zulu identity from the IFP and the image of the leopard-skinned, traditional warrior: they insist of the dynamic, plural, and hybrid elements of contemporary appropriations of Zuluness.

The collection is arranged in six sections, some of which are chronological and others thematic. Given the omnibus character of some rubrics ('Foundations of Zuluness: Iron Age to the late 1800s') and significant overlap between them, this review will discuss the four main approaches to rethinking Zulu identity that authors take: historical revisionism, the analysis of modern inventions or performances, complicating the geography of Zulu identity, and interrogating the relationship between Zuluness and gender.

The least satisfying group of essays deals with pre-colonial history, the

nineteenth century Zulu kingdom, and the emergence of a Zulu ethnic identity in the early twentieth century. On the whole, these pieces attempt to challenge the wide-spread assumption that a Zulu ethnic identity was born with the foundation of Shaka's kingdom. Anchoring the volume as one of its three framing texts, John Wright's 'Reflections on the Politics of Being Zulu' restates almost three decades of scholarship that has argued that Zuluness – in its modern ethno-linguistic sense – first consolidated in the aftermath of the 1906 rebellion and, especially, in the 1920s with an alliance between the Christian *amakholwa* landowners, the chiefs north of the Thukela, and the Zulu Royal House. Wright sharply differentiates this identity from the social categories of the Zulu Kingdom, a young conquest state that institutionalised the division between members of the Royal house (for whom the term 'Zulu' was reserved), the insider *amantungwa* chiefdoms in the state's heartland, and outsider chiefdoms which were known by a variety of opprobrious terms. Useful texts by Wright, Dan Wylie, Jeff Guy, John Laband, and Jeremy Martins further expand on nineteenth century colonial constructs and appropriations. Here we are on familiar ground – some of these arguments first appeared almost 20 years ago – and it is regrettable that the editors did not present more of the recent social history of the Zulu kingdom and northern Nguni-speakers that has appeared in their wake. Instead, they have chosen to include a survey of pre-colonial archaeology by Gavin Whitelaw, a 'great men' narrative of the nineteenth century Zulu kingdom by John Laband, and a charming but terribly dated piece by the late WD Hammond-Tooke on cattle symbolism. Beyond a few passing mentions, other Nguni-speaking groups or nineteenth century Southern African societies are troublingly absent, as if an underlying teleology is still in play. An attempt to place nineteenth century Zulu society in a broader comparative or regional context would have gone a long way toward elucidating its specific features while underscoring the different character of identities – and the social dynamics they were rooted within – in pre-conquest southern Africa.

The essays that deal with different inventions or performances of Zuluness are more successful in large part because they generally seek to complicate the distinction between the two categories. Building on Carolyn Hamilton's intervention in her book *Terrific Majesty*, these contributions often explore intense, ongoing dialogues between colonial ideologies and the ideas of Zulu actors, whether in the form of collaborations or the mobilization of the same discourses for different ends. As a result, an easy distinction between

the colonial or elite imposition of an identity and subaltern deployment becomes increasingly untenable. In his essay 'Awaken *Nkulunkulu*, Zulu God of the Old Testament', Benedict Carton traces 'long conversation' between nineteenth century missionaries and Zulu speakers in which the initial, often faltering, efforts of European evangelists gave way to Zulu neophytes who appropriated and remade a Christian discourse of righteousness. Central to Carton's story is the way in which Christian missionaries began to argue that Zulus represented a lost and degenerated tribe of Israel, while by the late nineteenth century many Zulu Christians had embraced and elaborated on the same identification to contest elements of colonial displacement. Regarding more contemporary issues, Michael Lambert provides a fascinating discussion of the collaboration between *isangoma* Nomagugu Ngobese and feminist academic Kathryn Kendall in the creation of a contemporary 'revived' festival for the Zulu goddess Nomkhobilwane; Liz and Imogen Gunner collaborate to explore social performance and the practice of 'self-writing' by *isicathamiya* musicians in the 'age of 9/11'; and Nsizwa Dlamini discusses conflicts over the representations of Zulu identity in Natal's museums. Each of these articles undermines the 'traditional'/ 'modern' dichotomy by showing ways that Zulu tradition has been regenerated through cultural borrowings, translated into new terms, fought over, and negotiated between different political interests.

Given the numerical predominance of Zulu speakers in the province, the identification of Zulus with Natal – and particularly the world of rural custom – is one of the most persistent tropes of an essential Zuluness. Several essays challenge this association either implicitly or explicitly by redefining the geographical frame within which Zulu identity is situated. In "'Death is Not the End": Zulu cosmopolitanism and the politics of cultural revival', Paul La Hausse begins to explore the early history of Zulu *amakholwa* (educated Christians) on the Rand, noting that a Zulu Institute was formed in Johannesburg in 1917 and graduates of Natal mission schools saw employment on the Rand as a 'virtual rite of passage'. La Hausse argues that Zulu intellectuals drew on the experience of urban life and played a key role reimagining the Zulu nation and shaping nationalist politics in Natal during the interwar period. Tracing the prehistory of the Zulu's enormous visibility in the African diaspora (from the New Orleans Zulu social Aid and Pleasure Club to the pioneering hip-hop figure Afrika Bambaata), Robert Vinson and Robert Edgar describe the impact of Zulu performers in American circuses, Zulu students in the United States, and the experience of African-American

travellers in colonial Natal and Zululand. Two other significant essays complicate the geography of Zuluness by excavating local political dynamics in Natal where the overarching identification of Zulu has little relevance. In an ambitious history of local politics and heritage tourism in Kosi Bay, Dingani Mthethwa describes how the area's residents initially accepted the Zulu tourism industry in the 1990s despite the fact that many of the so-called Zulu inhabitants of the area considered themselves Thonga subjects of Maputaland and profess loyalty to competing Thonga clans rather than a Zulu nation. Similarly, Cheryl Walker details a story of dispossession and community struggles on the Eastern shore of St Lucia where Zuluness was far less significant than patriarchal, clan-based identifications and relationships with the land. Such micro-studies, which are attentive to the changing dynamics of rural areas, indicate an important direction for research and have the potential to revise significantly our understanding of Natal history.

Many of the most sophisticated contributions concern the question of gender. Engaged with the politics of Natal's HIV/AIDS pandemic, these essays also address one of the principle fault lines of post-Apartheid South African society: the uneasy coexistence of a liberal constitutional order based on individual rights and the powerful resurgence of cultural nationalisms that frequently mobilise forms of gender and generational hierarchy. The editors have included examples of feminist scholarship highly critical of Zulu neo-traditionalisms and more sympathetic accounts, allowing some productive tensions to develop. Building on earlier work by Sean Hanretta and Jennifer Weir, Sifiso Ndlovu examines the formative role of the women in the Zulu kingdom and critiques earlier historians for relying on an anachronistic feminist terminology rather than analysing the 'the historical realities of everyday collaboration between sexes'. While such revisionist claims are somewhat weakened by her focus on elite women, she convincingly argues for a far more complex picture of women's roles within the Zulu kingdom and draws on a fascinating history of commentary on Queen Mnkabayi in the writings of twentieth century Zulu intellectuals. Mxolisi Mchunu's history of Zulu gardeners and their 'kitchen suit' provides a richly detailed window into the world of domestic workers and the highly sexualized mythology that grew up around the relationship between male gardeners and their white madams. Concerning more contemporary questions, a grouping of very strong essays by Tessa Marcus, Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala, Mark Hunter, and Philippe Denis analyse questions like virginity

testing, ideas of female ‘pollution’, the changing role of men in households, and generational hierarchies without either simplifying the complexity of power relationships or reifying an unchanging Zulu tradition.

What are the limitations to approaching Zulu history through the lens of identity? And what gets lost in this portrait of a more hybrid, protean, complex Zuluness? As with any project of this scope, it is always possible to point to topics that might have received more extensive consideration: religion, modernist Zulu artists and intellectuals like Dumile Feni or Mafika Gwala, working class and trade union history. However, a few of the collection’s weaknesses should be underlined because they reflect broader deficiencies in the field of Zulu studies. First, the collection as a whole fails to place the question of Zulu identity with a broader South African context or engage with the extensive literature on questions of identity in other parts of Africa. A few exceptions deserve mention: Karen Flint and Julie Parle draw on a broader southern African literature in discussing Zulu healing beliefs, Leclerc-Madlala utilises on AIDS research from across Africa, and Bill Freund contextualises the ANC/Inkatha conflict of the 1980s and 90s by discussing parallel examples from across sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, the overall project depicts Zulu history strangely abstracted from the developments in the rest of South Africa; virtually no attention is given the debates over the questions of nationalism and ethnicity that have played such a major part in politics across the continent. This is especially surprising given that Mahmood Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject*, which has been at the centre of debates over ethnic identity in Africa since its publication in 1996, generalises an analysis of colonial governance and post colonial politics based largely on his Zulu case study.

Second, the collection gives very little attention to the formation of Zuluness in relationship to its more ‘intimate’ others, in particular Natal Indians and the Xhosa. In part, this elision reflects the longstanding bifurcation of Natal’s historiography between writings on Indians and Zulu-speaking Africans. But in the context of a collection of this kind, the result is an untenable divorce of Zuluness from a broader social field of competing, overlapping, and entangled identities. La Hausse does note the presence of anti-Indian rhetoric in the politics of early Zulu intellectuals like Charles Dube (the first president of the ANC’s brother) and Freund briefly discusses the 1999 *Ilanga lase Natal* editorial that called for the expulsion of Indian ‘bloodsuckers’. But the complex history of African racial attitudes toward Indians during the intervening century has been passed over in silence and

major events fail to appear at all: the 1949 anti-Indian pogroms, the 1985 violence in Inanda, the fierce debates over Mbongeni Ngema's song 'AmaNdiya'. Nor does the collection point to a somewhat less well-known history of cultural influence, syncretism, and grass-root political solidarities across racial lines. Regarding other African groups, Bonner and Ndima advance an important and nuanced reinterpretation of the Rand violence of the 1990s that emphasises the collapsing economy of the Natal countryside, the dilemma faced by migrant workers caught between rising labour militancy and the support of their families, and violent competition over the control of taxi routes (a major arena of petty entrepreneurship). While documenting the later role played by police and the 'third force', Bonner and Ndima stress the interrelated character of social and political conflict, arguing that the available evidence indicates that a Zulu-Xhosa animosity first developed in the late 1980s as self-identified Zulu and Xhosa factions struggled for scarce resources and power. This analysis is convincing for the Rand during the period in question, but it overstates the case for a single origin to idea of a Zulu/Xhosa rivalry. Certainly, Inkatha had already begun to use anti-Xhosa statements alongside anti-Indian rhetoric in Natal by late 1987. Unfortunately, the collection does not provide a fuller account of how the construct of a timeless 'Zulu/Xhosa rivalry' became so central to post-apartheid political mythology, including within the ANC. Other African groups are virtually absent (there is one passing mention of the Ndebele, for example).

Third, the collection's treatment of the politics of Zulu identity – and particularly the ANC's long and complex relationship with different constructions of Zuluness – is decidedly partial. The editors have included a number of compelling essays that address various aspects of Inkatha's construction of history: Thembisa Waetjen and Gerhard Maré on Royal politics and Inkatha's modernisation of Zulu nationalism; Timothy Parsons on Inkatha and the Boy Scout movement; and Nsizwa Dlamini on post-apartheid disputes over Zulu heritage sites. But only one essay seriously examines the ANC's role in the history of defining Zulu identity, Jabulani Sithole's excellent discussion of competing Inkatha/ANC constructions of King Dingane. As a result, *Zulu Identities* gives the overall impression that modern Zulu nationalism originated largely outside of the ANC and the ANC has generally opposed Inkatha's construction of Zuluness. This is far too simplistic, and the implicit identification of Zulu nationalism solely with Inkatha is unsustainable. In his analysis of Natal voting patterns since 1994, Laurence Piper declares that 'Zulu nationalism is dead' and argues that

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Natal's political life increasingly resembles the rest of the country. However, developments since 2006 (the Zuma rape trial, the ANC hoax emails affair, events during the xenophobic violence of 2008) show that forms of Zulu nationalism and questions of Zuluness remain enormously powerful despite being largely refracted through the broader political terrain of the country's ruling party. As Freund observes in his concluding essay, the ANC has successfully competed with the IFP in mobilising the imagery of Zulu greatness throughout the post-apartheid period; ANC political leaders from John Dube to Harry Gwala and Jacob Zuma have successfully combined elements of Zulu 'traditionalism' with a broader African nationalism.

Despite these shortcomings, *Zulu Identities* is a major statement that will inspire new directions in the field for a long time to come. It presents a more layered, dynamic, and fluid image of Zuluness than any account to this point – a version of Zulu identity particularly suited for a pluralistic vision of a liberal South Africa.