

VIOLENCE AND SOLACE: THE NATAL CIVIL WAR IN LATE-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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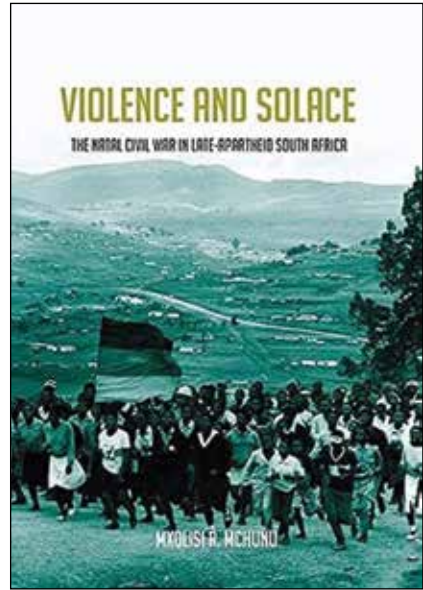
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TWO main narratives frame the civil war that engulfed the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One, broadly supported by local human rights monitors, focuses on Inkatha as a traditionalist, patriarchal, ethnocentric movement imposing its will on the region with the tacit, and often blatant, support of the apartheid state. This aroused the opposition of youth, community and labour organisations pursuing more modernist agendas usually associated with the United Democratic Front (UDF) or independent trade unions.

The other narrative, generally articulated by more distant observers, blames the conflict on a strategy of ungovernability stoked by the ANC in exile and implemented through local organisations assisted by MK. In this scenario, Inkatha is regarded as a legitimate defender of law and order. Both narratives include, to varying degrees, generational conflict (*ukuhlonipha* or respect for elders was a significant issue), a clash of urban and rural values, socio-economic conditions, historical background, and specific events (such as the May 1987 stayaway and the September 1987 floods).

Mxolisi Mchunu was eight years old in 1987 when the regional war started in earnest and he lived in KwaShange, one of the flashpoint areas. His fieldwork began as a small child hiding with his mother, a domestic worker in Pietermaritzburg, and two younger



siblings in the forest at night (his older brothers were warriors); so he is a true participant observer. In March 1990, during the Seven Day War, his family hid in a stream for a day and then moved to a church during an Inkatha attack. On 10 February 1991 he witnessed the aftermath of the second KwaShange massacre of seventeen people that followed the ambush of a bus. Such events ended his childhood and he became an angry and distrustful teenager. As an adult he returned to his birthplace, investigating and interviewing to look at the war through the eyes of individuals. This involved, in particular, women and children who were the main victims, in terms of everyday experience, the psychological effects and the legacy. This is truly history from below.

Mchunu implicitly subscribes to the narrative that regards Inkatha as the instigator of the war. But he sees its

territorial ambitions and Mangosuthu Buthelezi's desire for a national political role as building on pre-existing strife – clan faction fights over land – that was politicised in contemporary terms. Intra-communal conflict he sees as part of an historical, culturally embedded continuum: 'Violence was ... a normal feature of life' (p. 76). The murder rate recorded at Plessislaer police station before the conflict was 300 cases per annum. The end of the violence, he believes, resulted from community exhaustion. While there were strong individual allegiances, many people out of self-preservation identified with the predominant group: one's politics were those of the neighbourhood and did not necessarily mean strong ideological attachment. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report puts it, 'While two sides were clearly perceptible in the political conflict and violence, allegiances were at times complex and ambiguous.'¹ Consequently, relatives ended up killing one another. In other words, Mchunu looks to local factors to enhance his narrative rather than relying entirely on broad political trends.

There is a line of thought that places the start of the Midlands war in December 1986 in Mpophomeni during the Sarmcol strike. But this was a rehearsal for 25 September 1987 (*Ulwesihlanu Lwezibhelu* or the Friday of Killings) in KwaShange. It was no coincidence that Inkatha had been engaged in a vigorous and aggressive recruitment drive since the beginning of the year following a decision to make the province a no-go area for the UDF. Inkatha ideology was taught at all schools, including Mchunu's Henley Combined, and many of them rejected children seen as belonging to UDF families. KwaZulu civil servants suspected of UDF sympathies

were threatened with dismissal and the deadline of 4 October was given for everyone to join Inkatha (for a fee of R5, a considerable sum). Nurses at Edendale Hospital were reluctant to treat UDF patients and general social breakdown was indicated by an absence of children from the paediatric department.

KwaShange fell within the upper reaches of the Edendale valley (*ngaph- ezulu*) under Chief Shayabantu Zondi. It had once been known as the valley of peace (*isigodi sokuphela*), a place for refugees from conflict elsewhere in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and then more recently for evicted labour tenants. But from 1987 it was called the slaughterhouse. It remains a peri-urban area that now falls under the controversial Ingonyama Trust. Inkatha used KwaShange as a testing ground for forced recruitment and a much-resented levy to build a bantustan capital at Ulundi, its violent recruitment backed by police in a mini-bus taxi named Dambuza occupied by whites with blackened faces. A local policeman, Chris Nkosinathi Hlengwa, decided on a pre-emptive strike and an Inkatha house was attacked with the loss of thirteen lives in gruesome circumstances. This followed an incident in August 1987 in which Alfred Ndlovu of COSATU let fly with a salvo from an AK-47 borrowed from MK and wounded a dozen Inkatha youths.

Both sides harboured their psychopaths and warlords and behaved with extreme violence. The UDF's *amaqabane* frequently became comtsothis indistinguishable from common criminals. The ANC's Harry Gwala was later found responsible for grave violations of human rights, like Inkatha leaders, by the TRC. This was a highly personalised war fought largely at close quarters with

primitive weapons by feral gangs of young men living in the forest and bush. But most significantly the conflict was stoked by the State: through Minister of Police Adriaan Vlok's posturing about defeating 'radicals' to bolster traditional authority; Inkatha vigilantes backed and often armed by the South African Police (SAP) and its security branch under the command of counter-insurgency expert Jac Buchner; paramilitary personnel trained in Caprivi (some of them askaris or turned MK combatants); and kitskonstabels (Inkatha members and criminals given guns and uniforms). A classic case was Operation Doom of 31 January 1988 when SAP officers openly supported an attack on Ashdown from Mpumuza. The strings of this conflict were frequently played from security branch offices at Loop Street police station. The conflict spilled into the streets of Pietermaritzburg in February 1988 when commuters were attacked at Retief Street bus depot. People were especially vulnerable when waiting for transport. Retaliatory attacks on Inkatha were particularly marked in an area of mixed allegiances such as KwaShange.²

Mchunu identifies four ringleaders of the initial KwaShange violence – Nunu Mchunu and Phillip Thabethe (Inkatha) and Chris Hlengwa and Moses Ndlovu (ANC and COSATU) – and provides useful biographies. These are particularly valuable as the lives of local leaders are poorly recorded and their personal histories give added insight into the roots of conflict.

KwaShange was again in the eye of the storm during the Seven Day War (March 1990). Testimony to the TRC used terms such as 'horror movie' and questioned use of the word 'war'. It was better described as political cleansing, a disproportionate response to provo-

cation for which David Ntombela, officials of the KwaZulu government and the SAP were held directly responsible by the TRC.

The author was eyewitness to momentous and shattering events whose broad outlines are well documented. But the originality of his research lies in investigation of women's memories of the political violence (*udlame*) and the active role of war doctors and *muthi*. He records the dreams of five women that were interpreted as warnings from God and the ancestors in the context of extreme anxiety. For instance, in 1985 while conflict was still low-key, MaDlomo, a devout Christian, dreamt of a massacre by traditionalists assisted by whites with women and children drowning in the Msunduzi River. On several occasions MaNdlela heard voices and saw 'a bioscope' on a wall at home that she regarded as prophecy of imminent disaster. These dreams were ridiculed by many in the community. Whether they were forecast or post facto explanation, warning or a means to deal with post-traumatic stress is debatable; and dependent on cultural background.

Ritual murder for *muthi* purposes was essential to the conflict according to Mchunu. However, traditional practice is now a taboo subject and he had enormous difficulty persuading interviewees to talk. The warriors of both sides, once heroes, are now stigmatised as polluted people and the conflict as communal madness. *Izangoma* and *izinyanga* (diviners and traditional healers) sold body parts to well-known Inkatha warlords. David Ntombela and Shayabantu Zondi were thought to be users of especially strong *muthi* that protected them as targets: for example, a mist enveloped them and attackers fell asleep. Such happenings could be

either real or euphemistic. Dead bodies were routinely mutilated in terms of both long-standing custom and *muthi* harvesting. Cannibalism is alluded to, but no details are given.

Post-conflict, generalised cleansing has not worked and there has been anger about the actions of politicians who failed to consult the KwaShange community. Many people believe that the necessary ritual is more urgent than infrastructure development and want solutions that appeal to individual need. Cleansing is regarded as a process, not a politically driven event between the two sides that originally incited the conflict. This may help to explain why legal processes and interdicts emanating from the work of the Complaints Adjudication Board invariably failed during the conflict and stalled in May 1989.

Truth is still regarded as concealed. This emphasises the point that collective memory may differ radically from the unique recollections of individual survivors; and its dominance can be interpreted as coerced forgetting that re-traumatises. The ongoing crisis may be seen in high levels of rape, murder and vandalism frequently reported on the pages of the *Witness* today that mirror in many ways events of the civil war of 30 years ago.

Mxolisi Mchunu has produced a remarkable book that is sometimes a little confusing from an historical perspective. But his position as former community insider, now academic outsider, has given him a particularly privileged vantage point from which to comment on what might be regarded as the most significant event in regional history since the Difaqane of the nineteenth century. His work compels a far more nuanced interpretation of the Midlands war than has generally been the case. Its essence was truly intra-communal with broader political forces as the catalyst. There was a great deal in common, especially in terms of behaviour, among the protagonists; and here lies further explanation for historical continuity.

NOTES

- 1 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Report volume 3*, p. 244.
- 2 The TRC report concentrates on the culpability of high-profile individuals and groups and thus tends to neglect the general intra-communal conflict that consumed places like KwaShange from 1987 to 1990.

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