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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Special Issue: Political Violence in Southern Africa (Sep., 1992), pp. 629-641

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2637302>

Accessed: 06/02/2012 05:08

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## *The Making of the 'Comrades' Movement in Natal, 1985–91\**

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It is hard to believe that death is part of the process  
it is hard to believe that blood nurtures the tree of freedom  
(Makhosi Khoza, *Writers' Notebook*, 1, 1990, p. 42.)

### **Introduction**

Sociologists have largely discussed 'comrades' or '*amaqabane*' within the parameters of two broad social indicators: black youth unemployment and 'anomic' behaviour. The first indicator, unemployment, has destroyed the life-chances and aspirations of the majority of youths. Studies like those of the Inkatha Institute emphasise how unemployment led to frustration and how that turned into aggression and violence.<sup>1</sup> The second indicator is that of 'normlessness', the breakdown of values, the breakdown of a communal social solidarity and the anti-social actions that follow. The 'normlessness' school is much favoured by sociologists. Elements of a Durkheimian conception of 'anomie' based on the breakdown of social solidarity, norms, and the family are presented as definitive of black youth behaviour.

In what follows I will argue against both indicators. First, it is not, I believe, helpful to explain the emergence of 'comrades' simply via the category of black youth unemployment. It is true that most 'comrades' are young (below 35); that most 'comrades' come from embattled working-class homesteads and households; that most of their cultural codes emerge outside households and kinship relations; and that many are unemployed. But among the phenomenon called 'comrades' there are full wage-earners, informal sector vendors, university graduates, political

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\* This study forms a part of a broader one initiated by the Youth Unemployment Project in the Centre for Industrial Studies. This collaborative project between the Centre, the churches, youth and culture organisations is in the process of completing its broader reports about youth cultures and politics in South Africa I would like to thank Rob Turrell for careful editing.

<sup>1</sup> Gavin Woods (Inkatha Institute), presentation at Workshop on Violence, Pietermaritzburg, 1988. See also Gavin Woods, 'Rebels With a Cause: the Discontent of Black Youth', *Indicator South Africa*, 7, 1 (1989), p. 62ff.

activists, school-children, shop-stewards, petty criminals and lumpenproletarians.<sup>2</sup> The question is, what binds them together?

Second, 'anomie' is not an adequate concept to use in capturing the process of mobilisation of youth. More appropriate is its direct opposite or what Mark Orkin has called 'contranomia':<sup>3</sup> an attempt, desperate at times, to control and defend their areas, after the collective efforts of protest action against the 'system' were repulsed and almost destroyed.<sup>4</sup> We are dealing, then, with a large-scale social movement, with its peculiar Natal overtones.

Studies of social movements have generated three research imperatives: that upsurges of people in history do not occur as a result of societal 'breakdowns', but are the result of mobilised forms of collective power;<sup>5</sup> that these phenomena, involving masses of people, are not 'spasmodic' reflexes to crises — they are, rather, challenges to social orders and class structures and they, therefore, introduce novel normative orientations and outlooks;<sup>6</sup> that they are best studied through the voices and discussions of those who constitute collective nuclei of participants, formal or informal, within such movements.<sup>7</sup>

This case-study attempts to extend our understanding in two ways: first, by capturing the 'relative autonomy' of 'comrade' mobilisation and its impact, the political folklore and emotive capital that it generates in the solidarities it has created; and, second, to help the democratic movement in South Africa in finding the correct ways of translating these energies into a viable civic democracy.<sup>8</sup>

### The Emergence of the 'Comrades'

In 1983 the United Democratic Front was launched in a new era of mass mobilisation against apartheid. Although many felt that a disciplined mobilisation

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<sup>2</sup> For a literature review, see M. Bosman, 'Youth and the Subculture of Violence', paper presented at the South African Sociological Conference, Stellenbosch, 1990. See also M. Marks, 'Youth and Violence: the Problem of Anomie and the Role of Organisation', paper presented at the South African Sociological Conference, Pretoria, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> M. Orkin, 'Black Education and Struggles in South Africa', Phd Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Originally, in N.J. Smelser's work *Theory of Collective Behaviour* (New York, Free Press, 1963) social movements were seen to be responses to 'structural strain'. Since the 1970s studies of such forms of collective behaviour and revolution point to active interventions by people who shape or attempt to control their destinies. See, for instance, C. Tilly, *From Mobilisation to Revolution* (New York, 1978) and the work of A. Touraine, *The Self Reproduction of Society* (Chicago University Press, 1977) and *The Voice and the Eye: an Analysis of Social Movements* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> See A. Touraine, *Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> See A. Sitas, *The Drought in the City: the Making of Metalworkers' Movement on the East Rand* (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> The conception of the Youth Unemployment Project arises out of our observations that 'youth' were not spasmodic respondents to structural contradictions. The only attempt to understand a movement in socio-historic terms has been C. Bundy, 'Street Sociology and Pavement Politics: Aspects of Youth and Student Resistance in Cape Town, 1985', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 13, 3 (1987).

<sup>8</sup> See my 'Trade Unions and Democracy in the 1990s' in K. Nurnberger, *A Democratic Vision for South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 1991).

would forestall the government's attempts to reform, after the police shot the Langa demonstrators in 1984, protests turned to insurrection; by 1985 South Africa was engulfed in a black youth uprising.<sup>9</sup>

Mass mobilisation in Natal had its own dynamics. By 1985 the emerging Congress movement and its militant youth was pitted against Chief Buthelezi's Inkatha, the Kwazulu homeland structure and the central state. The Durban explosion around August that year brought together Inkatha's urban power blocs, the Kwazulu Administration and the apartheid state in an effort to 'normalise' the townships and to roll back the United Democratic Front's street mobilisation.<sup>10</sup> By 1987 the war in Natal was officially spoken of as being between, on the one side, supporters of the Mass Democratic Movement and, on the other, Inkatha and the state. Congress youth spoke of it as being between the "comrades" on the one hand, and whom they termed, with derogatory vigour, *thelweni* on the other.<sup>11</sup>

The 'youth' were seen to be at the forefront of political struggle throughout the insurrection years of 1984–6. For many, they were seen as the salutary shock troops of the South African revolution — 'the young lions'. For many too, they were seen as the 'problem' — the 'insurgent hordes', the 'marauders', the 'undisciplined red guards', capable of great brutality in making the townships 'ungovernable'.<sup>12</sup>

The political moments of struggle during 1985–88 are central to our understanding of the 'comrades' as a social movement. As most social observers were declaring the defeat of the Congress movement through state-repression, the 'comrades' grew in numbers and swamped most urban localities without precedent. On the one hand, the socio-economic conditions of urban poverty put severe pressure on ordinary black people's lives; on the other, there emerged a style of politics which attracted black youths in their thousands.

The nature of the United Democratic Front's mobilisation forms a central link in our understanding of youth action. The leadership of the Front, aware of a rise in grievances amongst black people all over South Africa, launched a series of campaigns to resist attempts by the state to modernise apartheid. Three factors, though, encouraged a tight concentration of the movement's leadership core in Natal. To start with, the Front's style of campaigning involved the mobilisation of people rather than their organisations in the community; such mobilisation, it was envisioned, would heighten the consciousness of the masses and link their concrete

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<sup>9</sup> On the violence, see the South African Institute of Race Relations *Surveys of Race Relations*, 1984–90 (Johannesburg, 1984–1990).

<sup>10</sup> On this see my 'Where Wealth and Power and Blood Reign Worshipped Gods' *South African Bulletin*, 13, 4 & 5 (1985). See also John Aitcheson, 'Counting the Dead', occasional paper, Centre for Adult Education, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1988 and J. Aitcheson (ed.), 'The Seven Days War: 25–31 March 1990 — the Victim's Narrative', occasional paper, Centre for Adult Education, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1988 for the Pietermaritzburg region and the Black Sash Repression Monitoring Group monthly newsletter for Durban and its coastlines.

<sup>11</sup> See M. Kentrige, *An Unofficial War* (Cape Town, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> See *SA Indicator's* two volumes on political trends in South Africa, 1988, especially, *An Overview of Political Conflict in South Africa: Some Data Trends 1984–88*.

grievances with a democratic alternative. Furthermore, state repression and constant detentions made the leadership cautious and secretive, and, although there was a forum for broader consultation in its weekly or bi-weekly meetings, a tiny core assumed most of the responsibility. Finally, a loose self definition of the leadership core as a vanguard of the national democratic struggle sealed the centralisation of leadership.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, after the 1985 carnage it had to rely on the self-activity of the masses and, by 1986, on the Congress of South African Trade Union's initiatives in the region.<sup>14</sup>

It is difficult to find the precise language or rather imagery to describe the Congress movements' mobilisation. Perhaps the best image is one of an unusual octopus with a head and tentacles growing out and outward; as the tentacles grow too long, a new head grows on them and it, in turn, grows new tentacles. Core groups of activists in the townships spread from area to area and, in that spread, new nuclei grow on and coalesce. Calls from the 'head' over campaigns and issues are responded to. But within each 'tentacle', unique conditions arising from local socio-economic conditions, *shape* growth and the way this 'octopus' grips on to its environment.

Add to this image another ingredient: the state's repressive arm and, with a varying degrees of efficacy, Kwazulu authorities, councillors, vigilantes, and Inkatha-led networks, who remove the heads or slash through the tentacles. With this the growth of the movement can be visualised as a process that constantly cohered and fragmented. As leading core-activists got removed, detained, killed, 'headless' tentacles grew independently of one another. Still, in 1985, when the conflict started, Congress was small in numbers and vulnerable. By 1991 the 'comrades' were everywhere from Port Shepstone to Paulpietersburg to Newcastle and Richards Bay.

Growth happened through *real* township spaces — the streets, the schools, the shebeens, the backyards, the open soccer spaces, in an oral continuum of communication despite the State of Emergency, violence and 'Casspir' patrols. Such growth was helped by the large numbers of black youth in the streets, whether unemployed or at school. But, from 1986, Congress of South African Trade Union shop-stewards and younger workers started throwing their lot into the fray as did, depending on the locality, the self-employed, the graduate, the student and the lumpenproletarian. Since then, from the ferocity of the movement's repression sprang defence committees at street and area levels.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On the 'cabal' question, it is being said that the United Democratic Front was controlled by a self-appointed grouping, primarily Indian, which 'ran' the movement in an undemocratic way as a closed shop. Apart from an unavailable and voluminous critique of the 'cabal' by Robben Island inmates, there is very little documentary evidence of its existence. Chief Buthelezi has constantly made reference to its existence and the *New African* (Durban) has published a position paper drafted allegedly by the 'cabal'. And thus folklore continues.

<sup>14</sup> On Congress of South African Trade Unions and the violence, see J. Baskin's, *Striking Back: a History of Cosatu* (Ravan Press, 1991). See also my 'Ethnicity and Nationalism in Natal's Labour Movement', Institute of Commonwealth, London, Paper no. 38, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> See also N. Gwala, 'Political Violence and the Struggle for Control in Pietermaritzburg', *Journal of South African Studies*, 15, 3 (1989).

The 'comrades', then, are not strictly speaking the correlate of an objective structure (for example, unemployment) or a structure's simple 'manifestation'. They are a movement involving voluntary (and sometimes coerced) participation, cultural dynamics and a new volatile social identity shaped through mobilisation and conflict. Furthermore, 'comrades' were drawn from both sexes. But there was simultaneously a military division of labour: young men would be the warriors, and young women their assistants, their support and caring networks, and also the messengers and the organisers of the supply lines for battle. Yet in the cultural manifestations of the movement, women were as militantly present as were the men. And in some instances, they also took frontline defence and combat positions.

### **Thumb-nail Portrait of 'Comrades'**

The material presented below follows a strict procedural logic: common themes gathered below were identified in the Youth Unemployment Project's group discussions and by what Touraine has termed 'self-analyses' by participants. Groups were from, *inter alia*, KwaMashu (two), Inanda Newtown, Umlazi (two), and Pietermaritzburg (Edendale). The themes were compared with similar discussions arranged by the Congress of South African Writers over the effect of violence in its locals. The latter groups were in, Mandeni, Newcastle, Ladysmith, Port Shepstone, Chesterville, Lamontville, Clermont and the peri-urban areas of Klaarwater, Dassenhoek, Shongweni and Sweetwaters.<sup>16</sup> The more in-depth interviews and autobiographies of 'comrades' are used as illustrative material of the themes. Similarly the documentary material of songs, lyrics and styles of performance are, *inter alia*, drawn from the meticulous documentation of the Culture and Working Life Project and Congress of South African Writers. At this stage none of the affidavits or monitor evidence are being used.

Of the 200 people who formed the group-discussion forums, 72% of youths came from working-class households; 15% came from a lower middle-class stratum of civil servants, businessmen and traders; 6% came from professional middle-class backgrounds; 6% came from no households whatsoever, but lived in the streets. Their ages ranged from 14 to 31: 60% were under 18 years old; 24% were under 24 years. Only 6% were women, all over 18 and under 24.

None of them were heads of their own households (though, an estimated 24%, did not stay home because of the 'war'); 24% came from women-headed households. A small fraction (9%) rented rooms in the townships and held their jobs in factories. Most of the under-18s were, or were supposed to be, at school (of these 65% were in standard 9 and 10). Most of the rest were unemployed (53%) and/or casually employed (21%); a smaller grouping was working in factories and shops and in the commercial and distributive sector (13%); 8% were tertiary education students and 5% were clerks and trainee managers. Finally, 65% of their

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<sup>16</sup> A. Touraine, *The Voice of the Eye*.

elders *used* to be Inkatha supporters, but stopped after Inkatha's vigilante mobilisation after 1985 and 12% of them continue to be so.<sup>17</sup>

This sketchy profile provides a thumb-nail portrait of 'comrades'. At the two extremes we find: a 14 year-old who grew up in a harsh environment, abandoned by parents and raised by youth gangs, an expert survivor as petty criminal; and a 27 year-old ex-Congress of South African Students, Fort Hare fine art graduate, semi-employed democratic-socialist intellectual. In between, there is a South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union shop steward, a sprinkling of young mass production workers and a mass of unemployed.

### **Who are the 'Comrades'?**

It is important then to allow the subjective voice of the 'comrades' to define their own image of the movement that has shaped them. Here a skeletal outline of the issues raised will be provided in order to illuminate Natal's struggles. Our work has isolated five ideological components around which the politico-cultural web of the 'comrade' movement is woven.

First, there is a levelling idea animating their responses: 'comrades' are those who cannot escape their social geography, the streets of their township. They distinguish themselves from others, for example, with cars or money who are able to flee their locality. Initially, the 'comrades' aggressively defined themselves against those with middle-class aspirations (the people with 'perms' and with 'funky' clothes) but as the conflict engulfed everybody other criteria were developed.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, they see themselves as the children of the poor and the oppressed. Given the large numbers of unemployed youths, a strong sense of 'having nothing' punctuates their networks:

We look around and we see everybody with fear. Only the criminals are happy. Workers are with burdens, heavy burdens. Many people in our area lost their jobs. My uncle was a supervisor at Frame. Finished. Out, thank you very much ... Many can't get jobs. Everybody is suffering. There's nothing without money, and we don't have money.

(J. Ntuli, KwaMashu, February 1991.)

You are poor. You say I want a job. I want money. I want education. They burn down your house.

(M. Radebe, Umlazi, January, 1989.)

Stones. We don't throw all the stones when vigilantes come. It's the only thing we have to eat.

(M. Mdlalose, Lamontville, October 1989.)

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<sup>17</sup> Data based on a brief, demographic questionnaire given to the participants in the group discussions.

<sup>18</sup> Newtown group, 1990.

We are a menace. We can't get a job. We just cost this, and cost that. It's our fault that we are poor.

(J. Jwara, Umlazi, January, 1989.)

You work your life. You get a house at Newtown. They chased you out, these war-lords and put their people in.

(I. Mbambo, Umlazi, January 1989.)

Second, they obey the codes of a 'metaphor': they are soldiers of the liberation movement and a militarisation of their subculture is endemic to any of their gatherings — military and militant songs (the 'aka' the 'bazooka' are some of the commonest words in their lyrics), gestures, artificial (but also increasingly real) guns, *toyi-toyi*, rhythms, khaki attire: they see themselves as the movement's combatants 'unto death'.<sup>19</sup>

This 'metaphor' spills over into the performance-genres that were created in the heat of the 'war'. Indeed, cultural activity became a central feature of youth struggle throughout Natal. Since the emergence of performance groups, like the controversial and militant Mathiwane group in the Natal Midlands in the early 1980s, youth choirs combined the older (and more pious) *amakhwaya* style with the chants of the *toyi-toyi*. Every song would involve military words and choreographed gestures; in its midst, a lull would occur and a humming of a tune from Mzwakhe Mbuli's repertoire would begin. Others would use some of the local worker poets' words, but mostly their own compositions would materialise: the self as hero, as liberator, as an MK cadre, crossing the border and back, shooting and fighting.<sup>20</sup>

Each gathering, from a church-hall to graveyard, would also resonate with the call and response rhythms of the *toyi-toyi*: despite many creative calls, with rich imagery and breath-taking precision, a lot of the refrains were about the bazooka, the AK 47, and the experience of soldierhood, 'Come guerilla' — '*hayi ... hayi*', 'come guerilla *ubom(bu): Pah Pah*':

the workers at the union local are worried. They lack the courage we have. Most of them using songs about the war, and talk about the war. They pass resolutions about the war. But it's handful who fight. We are the freedom fighters. We don't have bazookas, but there is explosion in my heart.

(E. Ndlovu, KwaMashu, October 1990.)

We are the movements' combatants. The regime has oppressed us for years. The blueflies and the zaps do their work for them. We are fighting the regime in the name of the liberation movement ... We have our heroes who suffered, our heroes did not become fat behind offices and payouts. We are fighters.

(M. Radebe, Umlazi, January 1989.)

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<sup>19</sup> Culture and Working Life Project, Documentary Source Material, University of Natal, Durban.

<sup>20</sup> Group Discussions, Culture and Working Life Project.



This 'explosion of the heart' against apartheid is both a deep personal militarisation and a public ritual. Invariably in any mass gathering, personal strife is translated into an act of defiance and through that to a call to arms: 'I am guilty in South Africa/ I am destroyed in South Africa/ I must be arrested whenever I am not satisfied/ I live like a dog in South Africa', incants a youth from KwaMashu, after a tirade of how the Boere, the *amabhunu* and 'Gatsha' are killing the nation, he asserts himself with 'aka' and 'TNT'.<sup>21</sup>

Third, there is a further cultural dimension between the levelling idea of belonging to the 'have-nots' and the militarised culture of resistance. This dimension is about 'style' in everyday common behaviour. You belong because of the way you sing, the slogans you know, the lineages you have learnt, the way you speak to each other. With such styles there is innovation and imitation as mannerisms and fashions spread very fast. Youths who became mobile through involvement in the structures of community organisations would arrive back from regional meetings bringing with them the latest lyrics, dance-movements and fashions. Hours would be spent learning from each other. Also, fashions in terms of dressing and displaying oneself have been ringing the changes: *pantsula*, hippy, smart, *shapu* (sharp) and the latest in 'comrade' paraphernalia. On the edges, though, the poverty of the townships and of many households was also evident in threadbare seams, patched third-hand clothes, and tattered shoes.<sup>22</sup>

Fourth, there is amongst 'comrades' a new community of social solidarity and a new gender division: a new brotherhood of combatants have emerged with all the self-sacrifices for the group and for the community/struggle; there are real communities of care and sharing. Mlungise Mkhize's poetic slogan, 'one calabash/ one *gudu*', captures the sharing of food, drink and feelings prevalent in their cultural formations. But in all expressions by youth — 'your comrade is your blood, you brother', *umadlandawonye*, *amakomanisi*<sup>23</sup> — words denoting unity, togetherness and communism abound.

You are a comrade. You have a mission. But in this mission, you are what the words says the loving equal of all, the defender of all. There is no other love stronger than the one between the 'comrades' in the struggle.

(H. Ndlovu, Newtown, November 1990.)

There is also a new sisterhood. Outside the constraints of the homestead sisterhood plays a new supportive role of caring, nursing, risking and feeling. Part of this new experience involves romantic liaisons and social problems proliferate, as do teenage pregnancies and other scares.<sup>24</sup>

Fifth, there is a fragile combination between two contradictory ideas. On the one level, 'comrades' are fearless, they are the death-defiers (the *amadlakufa*); they stand against the 'system' and its puppets' and 'lackeys'. On another level, this

<sup>21</sup> Youth performance at May day, 1989, Culture and Working Life Project Transcript.

<sup>22</sup> KwaMashu gp, 1990; Newtown group, 1990.

<sup>23</sup> All group discussions, 1990-1.

<sup>24</sup> Group discussion: KwaMashu, Umlazi, 1990.

fearlessness needs treatment against fear: there is a proliferation of *muti* and war medicine in their daily lives and battles:<sup>25</sup>

The *thelweni* ... attacked Lamontville, they allied themselves and sang across the bridge all night long. They were getting ready for the battle. We also stayed in camp the whole night. Somebody brought *muti* from Msinga, they do not fear Buthelezi and his *inyangas* there. We sang the whole night. The younger ones, boys and girls gathered stones.

They take *muti*. They have wizards to weaken us. We take *muti*. We sing: kill the wizards.

(J. Ntuli, KwaMashu, February 1991.)

They killed my brother and father. They cut their ears and parts to make war medicine. We went to the South Coast to take our own.

It's difficult to find strong *muti* if you are a comrade.

(O. Gumede, KwaMashu, February 1991.)

These ideological components mark a boundary of feelings that define some of the 'comrades' politico-cultural framework. Such feelings are embroidered in 'violence' against the 'system' or, as 'comrades' see it, as a process of territorial 'counter-violence'.

### **Ideology of the 'Comrades'**

To understand why the 'comrades' conceive of the use of violence as 'counter-violence' we need to explore their legitimating ideas, or what defines the core of their ideological positions. First, then, 'comrades' see themselves as 'home-defenders'.<sup>26</sup> Their violence is seen by them as a counter-violence to the obvious violence of the 'other', the 'system', 'Inkatha'. They react to the actual or even potential capacity for violence of the 'other' by acting or pro-acting. The same, of course, can be said of Inkatha supporters or ordinary policemen. What is crucial here, though, is to stress that for 'comrades' the concept of defence or home-defending is central to their self-perception and actions.

Songs speak of the people's cries for Umkhonto we Sizwe to defend communities because 'Gatsha is killing us', or 'Gatsha and the boers are killing our nation', or 'our brothers and sisters are killed/ the puppets are burning our homes':<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Newtown group, 1991, Umlazi, 1990.

<sup>26</sup> All group discussions.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

We all group to defend our territory from Shabalala's people from Lindelani, or from our own councillors. They all flee, and come back with the system in the dark attacking our homes. We try to defend our homes.

In our section in KwaMashu they all come: the councillors, the police, the ZP, the kitskonstabels, the war-lords from Lindelani, and they all know whom to attack, whose house to break. We fight back. They killed all our leaders save one or two.

(T. Maphumulo, KwaMashu, February 1991.)

Furthermore, the 'other' is not an abstraction; every comrade can name the community person on the other side who either led or participated in an attack on their household or their friends. Unless it was a case of combis in the night shooting at them, or unmarked cars, or sudden night raids, they were fully aware of the 'war-lords' who led the attacks, their leadership structures and their residences.<sup>28</sup> For both sides it is a war between 'knowns' within familiar territories; but of note here is that, in order to defend themselves, 'comrades' created the 'other' as a 'surplus entity' to be physically routed — exactly in the same way as they are seen by the opposing side. And as Martin Bosman has argued, the 'other' or this 'surplus entity' has been invested with evil qualities.<sup>29</sup>

The knowledge of who is who amongst the 'comrades' is not only due to the meticulous surveillance by the state. According to 'comrades' it comes from prior relationships in the community. For example, one of the most formidable Inkatha leaders and war-lords in the KwaMashu area was, *inter alia*, a FOSATU shop steward for a chemical plant, a community councillor and a person who initiated and trained youth in community drama. His chief target were youths with whom he had worked before. In every case, and every affidavit, sworn and unsworn, the leader of the attack is mentioned and specified.

Second, in the case of community defence, *practice is primary*. According to our discussions and interviews, 'comrades' insist that they get judged through action, and that it is in action that their social worth is estimated:

I respect the worker locals and their democracy. But they talk and talk. You can never judge their commitment. It's only *in* the struggle where you find who is a sellout and who is a comrade. You quickly find out, because the weak ones disappear.

(A. Faya, Newton, March 1991.)

Furthermore, even when in flight or retreat their behaviour continues to measure worth: in retreat a romantic notion of being 'hunted' takes over — they are being 'hunted' for a cause for justice, for being a freedom fighter. Their behaviour in protecting and helping fellow 'comrades' in flight is definitive of character. Carrying on with confident and direct speech, with presence of mind, and

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<sup>28</sup> *Inter alia*, all group discussions.

<sup>29</sup> M. Bosman, 'Youth and the Subculture of Violence', pp. 6-7.

monosyllabic incantation, respect follows. But the 'hunted' turn also into 'hunters', and status moves from defence to combat action.

The romantic strains of the 'hunted' theme find echoes in the older generation's popular poetry. The theme of exile can be found in poems of suffering: Qabula's 'Dearest', a poem to his lover, describes how he became a 'wanderer', a 'sailor' travelling the continent strumming his guitar, learning from nature and the heritage of other African traditions. And the return: he strummed his guitar at Messina and Sasol and the 'in-laws' danced and fell.<sup>30</sup>

Similar themes run through the self evocations of youth: suffering and then return. A youth from Greytown recites how on his return he sits on the hill observing, 'how the plantation is wearing/ night dress of tranquillity' and how the Western Industrial township, which he rebaptises as 'Worstmeat Towncheat' stares at him. He has returned from his wanderings with his AK, and this is the night before the storm.

Third, existence as a comrade is also punctuated by poverty and a total lack of resources. Everything counts for much — food, drink, sustenance, medicines. Leading a warrior life outside of homesteads requires new support structures but also a respect for common property. What is won is shared and distributed according to need, and to a passionate and militant egalitarianism.

I cannot eat if my brother is hungry. If I starve my brother must not eat.

We receive stolen goods from "comrades" who are in the business. They steal some for themselves and their families and some for their "comrades".

If my mother makes stew with leaves it till late. I return on the quiet. I take it down the road and call the others from their bed.

(A. Faya, Newton, March 1991.)

Fourth, there are amongst 'comrades' not only the fighters, the lions, but there are, too, the thinkers and the resource people. Leadership demands a study in its own right: it has to do with martyrdom, experience, connections, popularity, charisma. Leaders range from worker leaders to ex-Robben Island people, student militants, university graduates and hundreds of unemployed youths.

Central, too, are the varied 'resource' people, who provide goods, weapons, fuel, *muti*, money, guns, cars, pamphlets, and information. Such resource people range from workers in anti-apartheid projects, workers in church and charity extension programmes, Kwazulu administration people, civil servants, and — a very important constituency — criminals. Another kind of resource person is the one who is mobile enough to attend rallies in the province and beyond.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> A. Qabula, 'Sthandwa' in *Writers' Notebook*, 1, 2 (1989). The poem, in its oral presentation, starts from a series of nostalgic statements which the youth found puzzling until the basic metaphor became clear and then the roars of approval became overwhelming. Poems referred to are in the files of the Congress of South African Writers, Natal.

<sup>31</sup> KwaMashu gp 1990; Umlazi gp 1990; Chesterville, Cosaw Workshop, 1988.

Fifth, 'struggle' (*umzabalazo*) is not legitimated in the abstract by a broader movement that was everywhere and nowhere, but also practically. Here two connections are central: the peers who had crossed the borders to join MK to 'fight for freedom'; and those who have come back, died or who had been jailed. Every death and atrocity reinforced the comrades' political economy of martyrdom. Once again cultural work weaves the wreaths of martyrdom and symbolism. The dead martyrs, larger than life, are sung about, remembered in poems and committed to lineage, to memory: from 'comrade Sipho ... who was forced/ to swallow/ cooking bullets/ and the angry sound of gunfire' to Solomon Mahlangu, the Mxenges, Sibiya and Ngubane and so on. 'Andrew Zondo was born/ Andrew Zondo was gone' goes a chant of reaffirmation. Even in one of the most cautious of worker poets, Mi Hlatshwayo, one finds a stunning and defiant eulogy on Mahlangu.<sup>32</sup> According to one youth from Kwa Mashu:

They killed Eric Gumede. I was angry. They killed Jonathan Sithole. I was angry again. They killed Vusumuzi Ndlovu. They must kill me now. The murderers.  
(E. Bhengu, KwaMashu, April 1990.)

Sixth, processes of conflict within existing institutions — at school, the struggles over democratic SRCs, against Inkatha membership drives, against sexual abuse in schools, boycotts, stay-aways, strikes — all spilled out into the streets to confirm the 'comrades' resistance folklore. Conflicts between elders and youngsters, conflict over overcrowded home-spaces, flowed into the youth-bias of the movement. The parallel struggles of workers in the factories confirmed for all of them that this was total struggle for 'freedom':

We are a movement for freedom. For democracy. We demand democratic SRCs, a living wage, votes for all, housing for the poor. Freedom in our lifetime.  
(M. Madlala, Chesterville, May 1988.)

Finally, a final goal in the 'comrades' mobilisation was the idea of a general strike: *the* strike that would mobilise *all* in a final action that would destroy the structure of apartheid. Boycotts, stayaways and campaigns were energised by the ideal of a final apocalyptic strike:

We have achieved a lot. But we have not paralysed the racists. Imagine, a strike where nothing moves. A total boycott of the regime. No airplanes, no machines, no telephones. No drivers and gardeners for FW and Buthelezi. Nothing. It will collapse. Without our labour power: Nothing.  
(R. Nene, Umlazi, April 1990.)

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<sup>32</sup> Transcripts, Congress of South African Writers, Natal (1990); Hlatshwayo's poem is to appear in his new poetry collection *Umzila*.

## Conclusion

I argued at the beginning that it was not the *breakdown* of norms that explains the phenomenon of 'comrades', but its opposite: an attempt to generate a new type of mobilisation, and after they were embattled and attacked, a new kind of defensive organisation. The ferocity of violence and its effects relate to three different processes.<sup>33</sup> Once worker leaders threw in their lot with community initiatives in Natal, tight-knit defence committees evolved in some instances that encompassed everybody at the street and area level. The distance between older and younger generations was bridged and the word 'comrade' came to denote more than being young and militant. However militarised these structures, they began exercising control over significant territories in the townships. Violence here related to skirmishes and clashes between them and the 'other', or shootings allegedly from the state structures.

Where the attempt to bridge distances was shattered by the police initiatives, warlords and/or Inkatha supporters, and no community bonding emerged; or where worker leaders and political activists got into loggerheads with black youth by ignoring them, or not drawing near to them, serious problems emerged. 'Comrades', that is, the youth, still asserted their territorial sway and fought their battles but in a volatile situation without coherent legitimacy. Violence here turned inwards. Where the process of mobilisation was fragmented early, then 'comrades' splintered into manifold tentacles and due to the scarcity of resources and competing legitimacies, conflict was not only turned 'inwards', but into the youth structures themselves.

Nevertheless, wherever you turn in every township or village in Natal, if you listen as you move through the teeming streets, teeming with the younger generations, a phrase here a snippet of song there betrays the echoes of the 'comrade' movement, a movement that has not only been about matches and *toyitoyi* chants.

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<sup>33</sup> See my 'Trade Unions and Democracy in the 1990s'.