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Source: *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1986), pp. 41-57

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/181336>

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ORIGINS OF THE AMAWASHA: THE ZULU WASHERMEN'S GUILD IN NATAL, 1850–1910*

BY KELETSO E. ATKINS

THE occupations undertaken by African males in the early years of urban Natal make fascinating study. The services they provided – as dairymen, fuel merchants, washermen, victuallers of farm produce, etc. – were vitally important to town dwellers. Moreover, without such special offices as those of postman, constable or messenger, it would have been impossible for colonial officials to carry on their administrative tasks. There was one group of workers, however, which repeatedly attracted inquiring comment as well as criticism: the African washermen.

While a recent study of the 'AmaWasha' guild by Charles van Onselen draws attention to the Zulu washermen on the Witwatersrand between 1890 and 1914,¹ research suggests that the origins of the *AmaWasha* lay in an earlier period and were rooted in indigenous northern Nguni society. Not only did the Zulu washerman's guild precede the development of mining centres in southern Africa; the original *AmaWasha* seem to incorporate vestiges of even earlier trade groups of *izinyanga* (skilled craftsmen) who specialized in hide or skin dressing. In Nguni society, hide specialists assumed economic functions of considerable importance – the manufacture of the community's garments and the essential production of rawhide shields for hunting and war. It may be that, when members of this artisan group (and other adult males) turned to the towns of Natal, they found that by modifying their domestic skills to meet a growing European need they could enjoy a prominence similar to that attached to their traditional roles. In the town environment, where these specialists had greater control over their labour, it was in their collective interest to combine and make their own rules and regulations. Thus as early as the 1850s washermen associations made their urban début, and for forty years, despite official efforts aimed at curbing their influence and reducing the rate of wages, and despite private attempts to displace them, Zulu guildsmen retained a virtual monopoly of clothes-washing. When their fortunes began to decline on the east coast, they, like thousands of other adventurers, black and white, made the arduous trek to *Egoli* (Johannesburg) where they recaptured brief commercial glory.

This article will examine the functions undertaken by *izinyanga* in precolonial Nguni society and the parallel roles later adopted by them in Natal. It will analyze the influence of Zulu social relations on the membership of the craft guild as well as on the organization of the African workforce in European towns; finally it will discuss official and private attempts to control the *AmaWasha*, and the latter's response.

* I would like to thank Steven Feierman, Jan Vansina, David Henige, Susan Grabler, Shula Marks and Charles van Onselen for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

¹ Charles van Onselen, 'AmaWasha: the Zulu Washermen's Guild on the Witwatersrand, 1890–1914', *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914*, II (London, 1982), 74–100.

I

A growing body of literature on the history of nineteenth and early twentieth century household labour agrees in one essential: housewives universally deplored doing laundry.² What this meant, prior to inventions that lessened that and other forms of household duties, was that women in both Europe and America who were in a position to employ general or casual help delegated washing and ironing to a live-in servant or alternatively hired out the family wash. Similarly in mid-nineteenth century Natal, diaries, letters and newspapers indicate that colonial women were consistently disinclined to do hand-laundering. Moreover, the sources testify to the existence of a mistress-servant relationship in which housewives hired 'jobbers': day workers who undertook to do the family laundry for a fee. But the experiences of these housewives were in one respect patently different from their counterparts in both America and Europe, where that household occupation engaged the specialized services of the ubiquitous washerwoman. In Natal numerous groups of 'wash kafirs', or Zulu washermen, predominated.

From the 1850s laundry was a major cause of anxiety and worry to the immigrant wife, who, when unable to do it herself, either put it out or left it undone.³ A series of letters written by the pioneer woman, Ellen Mcleod, confirm that the 'wash kafir' was an indispensable adjunct to household labour. A clue to the importance attached to this category of additional household help is that during difficult economic times the decision made was to cut back on the washerman's regular weekly visits rather than dispense with his services: 'As we cannot afford to keep any kafirs but one herd boy, we have to do everything ourselves. Once a fortnight a kafir comes to wash the clothes for a shilling.'⁴

Added to the frustrations of Natal housekeepers were seasonal shortages of clean water supplies. Cooking and bathing water was preserved in private tanks and large vessels were turned into receptacles to collect downpours during the rainy seasons. However, this method of storage was inadequate and in dry winter months scarcity was acute. Conveying village water by pipeline was not an option until the late 1880s. So inhabitants of Durban had to send barrels about four miles to be filled at the Umgeni river, or be faced with the alternative of drinking brackish water from town wells.⁵ Pieter-

² To cite the most recent publications: Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middleton, Conn., 1983), 106, 142-3; Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (New York, 1975), 69-70; David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week* (New York, 1978), 62, 85, 90-92, 124; Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, 1982), 104-124; Daniel Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants from 1820-1920* (Baton Rouge, 1981), 133-4. All these studies generally concede that of the myriad tasks performed by women in the home, hand laundry work, i.e. washing and ironing, was the most onerous. See also Catherine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (Boston, 1842), 284-96, for the fullest account of the tremendous labour involved in laundry chores.

³ George Russell, *History of Old Durban and Reminiscences of an Emigrant of 1850* (Durban, 1899), 216.

⁴ Ruth E. Gordon (ed.), *Dear Louisa: A History of a Pioneer Family in Natal, 1850-1888* (Capetown, 1970), 138. For interesting vignettes of the laundry problem facing this pioneer housewife, see *ibid.*, 18, 29, 71, 101.

⁵ Lady Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa* (London, 1894), 68-70; Mrs Joseph Shooter, 'Off to Natal by a clergyman's wife', *Golden Hours: A Weekly Journal*

maritzburg was supplied with pure water from the Dorp Spruit which, in Dutch fashion, was led in open sluits or ditches along the edge of the street.⁶

Despite seasonal water shortages, well-to-do housewives in and near the towns were not as harried by weekly laundering chores as their rural sisters. From Fenicowles, Durban, for instance, Eliza Whigham Feilden could blithely record in her diary of 9 June 1855: 'Saturday's work began. The clothes were counted and sent off with Bonnet to the wash...' The 'wash' was the Umgeni river and it was there that all the clothes of Durban were cleaned. Likewise, for many years in Maritzburg the only laundry was the Umsindusi river where, as Barbara Buchanan recalled, along its banks 'on Mondays were lined stalwart natives vigorously belabouring the stones with the family wash'.⁸

Sending the 'kitchen body' or African domestic to the river with a bundle of linen, soap, brush, and a board was originally the common practice. But assigning the task to the general domestic frequently met with uncertain results.⁹ African domestics in one-servant households were charged with a wide variety of functions: from gardening, fetching firewood, lighting fires and cooking to cleaning boots, polishing floors and silver, setting table and grooming horses. In short, the African servant, like his American and European counterparts, was expected to be a general factotum and put his hand to anything. From the outset, mutual inability to communicate their needs exacerbated mistress-servant relationships; long hours, isolation from community and friends, ill-treatment and poor wages encouraged an apathetic response to on-the-job training. The dismal, unattractive conditions of domestic service resulted in a reluctance by Africans to hire themselves out. Whenever services were sold it was done with an unwillingness to engage for long periods, and even short-term labour contracts were frequently breached. Constant turnovers in staff militated against workers acquiring competence in housework, including hand-laundering. Before long, however, this pattern gave way to an entirely different organizational structure.

To fill the need created by a worrisome domestic situation, individuals began to specialize in washing clothes and to hire their services to various householders on a daily basis. Eventually, this development led to the removal of the bulk of clothes-washing from the home. Furthermore, the occupation of laundering was elevated to a guild-like status. Within the guild, working conditions were regulated, members were disciplined, and work standards were upgraded by the membership. A further far-reaching outcome for which the washermen were largely credited was popularizing the practice of 'togt' labour (working or 'stopping' by the day or job) which gained

of Good Literature for Young Folks, 1 (1868), 159; John W. Colenso, *Ten Weeks in Natal* (Cambridge, 1855), 14.

⁶ Barbara I. Buchanan, *Pioneer Days in Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1934), 15; Allan F. Hattersley (ed.), *John Shedden Dobie's South African Journal, 1862-6* (Capetown, 1945), 15.

⁷ Eliza Whigham Feilden, *My African Home* (Durban, 1973), 224.

⁸ Shooter, 'Off to Natal', 159.

⁹ *Ibid.*; Russell, *History of Old Durban*, 216; Thomas Eastwood to Mayor and Town Council, Durban, 17 November 1874. Durban Corporation Letters (hereafter DCL), File 352.

currency among Africans in rural and urban Natal during the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

II

The first clear signs that Zulu washermen had banded together in associations coincide with the largest British colonizing movement to Natal between 1849 and 1851. Shortly after the landing of some 5,000 pioneers, many of whom settled in the towns, the sources start to yield intelligence on the 'doings' of the *AmaWasha*. George Russell provides a full account describing how Zulu males – the traditional *amakhehla* or 'ring-polled' married men of rank – who lived near the town at their own kraals began to devote themselves to that lucrative industry.¹¹ In a short time large numbers of them were circulating in and about Durban and had also established a base at Maritzburg, the administrative centre of the colony. Durban's washermen, for whom we have the fullest documentation, were remarkably well organized by 1856 in a 'combination' that punished young competitors attempting to enter the trade and lower the price of labour.¹²

Because their 'exorbitant' fees drew loud public criticism, we are able to trace the activities of these craftsmen. Yet in spite of the bitter outcry levelled at the 'washboys', the 'excessive' demands of the latter were nonetheless met. To the vast majority of white town dwellers the *AmaWasha* were engaged in a service crucial to maintaining the health of nineteenth-century European households.

As professionals, Zulu washermen maintained a regular round of customers and schedules of employment. Depending on how 'industrious' the individual was, he might work anything from one to six days a week, with each weekday possibly devoted to two customers. Clothes sent out were usually inventoried the day before washday by the householder. On the following morning a washerman made the pickup call, taking away a *muid* sack (the measure, equal to about three bushels, of a week's wash) packed tight with soiled linen. From the beginning, some laundrymen declined certain articles of underlinen at any price; intimate apparel, therefore, had to be dealt with by housewives at home. Customers provided a large bar of London yellow soap, a bucket, and two or three balls of thumb blue (a fabric whitener).

The washerman soaked dirty clothes in the river and took care to avoid their being carried away by the current. He then selected a stone, a stranded log, or a board, soaped the clothes well, kneaded them a little in his hands, then flogged them on the hard surface, rinsed them in the flowing river, blued them and wrung them out to be hung on the neighbouring bushes or spread on the hot sands to bleach and dry in the sun. Towards the decline of day, the articles were collected, the washerman refilled his sack, and returned with his load for which he received a wage of one shilling, with possible liberty to sleep in the 'kitchen boy's' hut and share in the evening meal. Over the years the price of laundering advanced to 3s. 6d. and more per bagful.¹³

¹⁰ 'Pietermaritzburg Agricultural Society', *Natal Witness*, 2 November 1875; Russell, *History of Old Durban*, 216.

¹¹ Russell, *History of Old Durban*, 216. Russell was intimately acquainted with the labour situation at Durban; his reminiscences are therefore particularly valuable.

¹² 'Kafir dodges', *Natal Mercury* (hereafter *NM*), 24 October 1856.

¹³ Russell, *History of Old Durban*, 216–17.

'Is it not a strange thing that the warlike Zulu should become a washboy?,' asked one Johannesburg newspaper in 1895.¹⁴ This uniform ethnocentric misconstruction of the Zulu's bellicose nature is indeed difficult to reconcile with the seemingly anomalous group of experts whose 'peacetime' pursuit was defined by Western standards and values as a 'female' occupation. In 1854 one colonist sought by negative comparison an explanation for this phenomenon:

In some parts of Europe, washing and shirt making are performed by women, and few or no men there would like to be seen either making a shirt or washing one; but here at Natal it is different, – the Kafir, (who it is said will not work on a farm), will wash as many shirts as we please, – or rather, he will dash their brains out at an expense of about a shilling a dozen; and he does so, because '*mama*' never washes shirts, – *she has none to wash*. In the same way it might be shewn by reference to numerous usages at home, that wherever certain duties are performed either exclusively or nearly so by one of the sexes, we shall find it difficult to get the work done by the opposite.¹⁵

The implications of "'*mama*' never washes shirts, – *she has none to wash*", are that Africans had no clothes to speak of and since no similar traditional task existed which could be viewed as women's work, Zulu men were willing to do laundering. But theirs was not an 'unsophisticated' response to a novel idea. Nor is it very useful to attribute the behaviour of the Zulu washermen to the example of Indian dhobies.¹⁶ As we have seen, the social and historical antecedents of the *AmaWasha* precede the mineral discoveries in South Africa and most certainly ante-date the arrival of Indian indentured workers in Natal in 1860. The obvious explanation is that indigenous cultural factors and the social relations surrounding them sparked an uninhibited response to that 'modern' colonial enterprise and influenced the structure of the laundry associations. These last, in turn, enabled the Zulu craftsmen to defend their interests by restricting entry into their ranks.

If we wish to appreciate their response to new opportunities in the colonial economy, it is essential to note the ordinary day-by-day activities that engaged the attention of heads of domestic production units in northern Nguni societies. Apart from their normal domestic duties – building the framework of huts, erecting and repairing the various fences of the cattlefold and kraal enclosures, cutting away virgin bush and long grass for cultivation, tending stock, etc. – the *amakhehla* were engaged in various skilled trades. A member of the professional and artisan class (whether a diviner, dispenser of medicine, headring maker, blacksmith, stock castrator, basket weaver, or shield manufacturer) was called a *nyanga* (pl. *izinyanga*, one skilled in any handicraft or profession).¹⁷ Expertise in such crafts carried the possibility of acquiring wealth.¹⁸

¹⁴ 'The wash boys' parade', *Standard and Diggers' News* (hereafter *SDN*), 2 July 1895.

¹⁵ 'The labour question', *NM*, 26 April 1854.

¹⁶ van Onselen, 'AmaWasha', 74–6, 100.

¹⁷ 'Evidence of Henry Francis Fynn before the Native Commission, 1852', John Bird (ed.), *The Annals of Natal, 1495–1845*, 1 (Pietermaritzburg, 1888), 106, 108; J. L. Dohne, *A Zulu-Kafir Dictionary* (Capetown, 1857), 253–4; A. T. Bryant, *Zulu-English Dictionary* (Johannesburg, 1905), 464; A. T. Bryant, *The Zulu People Before the White Man Came* (Pietermaritzburg, 1949), 178; Ellen Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus* (Pietermaritzburg, 1957), 211–12.

¹⁸ Krige, *Social System*, 212.

One craft worthy of special examination is that of the *nyanga* who was a hide or skin specialist. Whenever a man in Zulu society slaughtered a beast for new clothing for himself or family members, the services of the professional hidescraper (*impali*) were called in. The *impali* scraped all the adhering particles of flesh and hair off the hide and curried the surface of the skin until a fine nap was raised. Then the whole hide was cut in half (*umbando*) and the partly completed skin returned to the owner, who continued the hide dressing process himself. The owner, with two different hand movements, vigorously rubbed (*ukushuka*) and beat the hide, a process that went on for about a week until the skin became supple. When considered completely dressed, it was handed over either to a female tailor (if destined for a woman's garment) or to a professional tailor (if intended to become part of a man's wardrobe), to undergo the final stage of preparation. Wealthy men with many wives frequently prepared a number of skins in this manner and kept them stored in their hut, distributing them as required.¹⁹

In 1836 the missionary George Champion described men engaged in this work in Zululand: 'On the opposite side [of the Umhlatsi river] were two or three men preparing a cowskin for a woman's kaross. This is the business of men. They say the women have not skill enough to make their own...' ²⁰ The important point is that clothes-making was the special province of the *amakhehla*. It was a task specifically associated with the role of family provider and, while every married man was expected to have some experience in that occupation, there were individuals renowned for their greater skill. What also requires emphasis is that not just community expectations but a sense of entitlement linked this and similar tasks to senior rank. This is crucial to understanding both the nature of the guild structure and the underlying principle organizing the black labour force of the towns.

Similarly, it is necessary to recognize that precolonial Nguni society bestowed wealth and prestige on expert craftsmanship. For instance, a man who preferred to buy a dressed *umbando* to save the labour of preparing one could do so in exchange for a heifer.²¹ Writing in an earlier period, Henry Fynn recorded that, although there was no regular price fixed on either the article or the labour, the estimated payment ranged from eight to ten strings of beads of about a yard.²² Thus an energetic individual could distinguish himself in other ways than on the battlefield. We are told, for example, of one particular *nyanga* who possessed an iron axe (*izembe*) and used it so skilfully as an *impali* that he established a reputation which gained him a royal promotion to headman over the oHeni kraal.²³

A powerful incentive which led to greater specialization in the common domestic industries was the opening of commercial contact with Delagoa Bay, and subsequently Port Natal, in the latter half of the eighteenth and in the nineteenth century. Historians have stressed ivory as the primary export item

¹⁹ Bryant, *Zulu People*, 402–6.

²⁰ Alan Booth (ed.), *The Journal of the Rev. George Champion* (Capetown, 1967), 42–3; Lewis Grout, *Zululand; or Life Among the Zulu-Kafirs* (Philadelphia, 1864), 113.

²¹ Bryant, *Zulu People*, 404.

²² James Stuart (ed.), *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn* (Pietermaritzburg, 1950), 273–4.

²³ A. T. Bryant, *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*, Part 1 (London, 1929), 113. For another account of a celebrated *impali*, see C. Webb and J. B. Wright (eds.), *The James Stuart Archive*, 1 (Pietermaritzburg, 1976), 325.

in that trade, neglecting the subsidiary articles of local manufacture destined for the overseas market.²⁴ There is, however, an extant description of the expansion of domestic craft production in northern Nguniland during the 1780s. Dingiswayo has been credited with formalizing the production of home industries to meet the demands of international commerce:

The encouragement held out to ingenuity brought numbers around him, liberal rewards being given to any of his followers who devised things new or ornamental. Milk dishes, pillows, ladles of cane or wood, and snuff spoons, were produced. (Many curious specimens of excessively neat workmanship are still made in the Zulu country.) *A kross (karosse) manufactory was also established a hundred men having been generally employed in that work.* From the presents received from De la Goa Bay he selected some for imitation; and a handsome reward was offered for the production of a chair and table... The chiefs of the Zulu still have chairs made for their use by their own subjects [emphasis added].²⁵

We cannot overlook in this passage the implications of one hundred craftsmen having been employed in a 'karosse manufactory' or skin blanket-making industry, as well as several other equally salient facts. For example, according to Fynn's account, Shaka kept open the market with Delagoa Bay after the death of Dingiswayo;²⁶ one must note, too, that the military innovations introduced by Shaka were manifested, among other things, in the elaborate uniforms and distinctive equipment of each regiment, entailing altering weapons, battle tactics and battle formation. This presupposed a corps of craftsmen fully engaged in keeping the army properly accoutred.

Indeed, centred in the royal towns were several classes of professionals and artisans, quite possibly the most numerous of whom were engaged in arms production. All the cattle kept in the military towns throughout the Zulu kingdom belonged to the monarch but few of these were killed in proportion to the numbers that were daily slaughtered at the capital, which was as a consequence the centre for the State Armoury. Gardiner and Champion both made the observation that Dingane's principal headquarters at Ingungundhlovu was 'the great deposit of shields, the manufacture of which was constant and almost the only occupation of the men...'²⁷ The 'men' who chiefly lived and worked in the king's kraals were 'ringed' soldiers called *amabandhla amahlope* (white assemblies). The young *amabutho* (soldiers) lived in other military kraals.²⁸

²⁴ For example, Alan Smith, 'The trade of Delagoa Bay as a factor in Nguni politics, 1750-1835', Leonard Thompson (ed.), *African Societies in Southern Africa* (New York, 1969), 171-87; *idem*, 'Delagoa Bay and the trade with South Eastern Africa', R. Gray and D. Birmingham (eds.), *Precolonial African Trade* (London, 1970), 265-89.

²⁵ Henry Francis Fynn, 'History of Godongwana (Dingiswayo) and (in part) of Chaka', Bird, *Annals*, 1, 63. Bryant credited the Tembe Tonga with having inspired Dingiswayo with the idea of establishing a local factory for the production of such wares by his people (*Olden Times*, Part 1, 291). Mtomboti, who carved two chairs out of a wood called 'red ivory' for Mpande, was presented with cattle for his effort (Webb and Wright, *Stuart Archive*, 1, 44).

²⁶ Stuart, *Fynn's Diary*, 16, 47-8.

²⁷ Booth, *Champion's Journal*, 31-2, 36; Allan Gardiner, *Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa* (Capetown, 1966), 47-51. Two valuable accounts which provide insights into the organization of labour around this craft are in Webb and Wright, *Stuart Archive*, 1, 324-5; 11, 60.

²⁸ *Government Commission on Native Laws and Customs* (Capetown, 1883), Supplementary Minutes of Evidence, Cetshwayo, ex-king of the Zulus: Question 202, 531.

Bringing large numbers of *izinyanga* together for the purpose of full-time specialized production may very well have planted the germ which later expressed itself in a spirit of association among several groups of Zulu craftsmen and professionals who emerged in the colonial towns.²⁹ One further noticeable connection between the Zulu hide specialist and the Zulu washerman can be demonstrated. To do this we return briefly to the techniques employed by the former group of artisans.

Gardiner found that the water around Ingungundhlovu was 'polluted by the washing of hides for shields, & etc.'. ³⁰ Once the skins had been 'washed', pegged out to dry and allowed to supple for a day, they were beaten with a round stone pebble after which a professional shield cutter was engaged who skilfully cut out the shields to order.³¹ The outstanding fact about the 'crude hand dressing methods' employed both by the traditional garment worker and the shield manufacturer is that they appear to have been the same rubbing, kneading, stone-scrubbing and treating techniques utilized by Zulu laundrymen when washing European clothes. The laundry tradesmen's 'system of washing by beating the Umgeni stones' was the most reiterated observation – a technique that was also uncomplimentarily described as a spoiling process: '...the *scrubbing* expedites the wearing out of cuffs, collars, etc.', one clergyman's wife remarked, 'though not so much so as the way the Kafir adopts if left to his own mode, i.e. scrubbing between two stones',³² that is, the vigorous manner in which hide experts were accustomed to rubbing (*ukushuka*) skins with two different hand movements.

III

It is worth noting that the documents do not directly say a great deal about either the membership or the organization of the Zulu washermen. Nor does the evidence suggest how the institution may have changed over time. But implied in the available information is the idea that Zulu social relations lay at the heart of this problem and by analyzing the network of relationships it is possible to gain a first insight into the original *AmaWasha*, and from those features reconstruct a plausible model of the early guild. Using this approach we can further discern the forces shaping the broader structure of the African urban workforce.

AmaWasha associations took root in areas of concentrated European

²⁹ See, for example, Harriet Ngubane, 'Aspect of clinical practice and traditional organization of indigenous healers in South Africa', *Social Science and Medicine*, 15B, (1981), 361–5. This article gives special attention to the network of *izangoma* (female diviners) among the Zulu. Ngubane found that the *izangoma*'s traditional mode of organization was not derived from western models but was 'quite indigenous, with historical depth...' A. T. Bryant (*Zulu Medicine and Medicine Men* (Capetown, 1970), 10), pointed out that the medicine man 'constantly adds to his store of knowledge by consultation and the mutual exchange of remedies with neighbouring doctors, until, after perhaps twenty years or more, he has picked up all there is worth knowing in the kafir pharmacopoeia and kafir pathology'.

³⁰ Gardiner, *Narrative*, 130–1.

³¹ Bryant, *Zulu People*, 406.

³² Shooter, 'Off to Natal', 159; 'The labour question', *NM*, 26 April 1854; 'To the editor', *Natal Star* (hereafter *NS*), 10 September 1855; Buchanan, *Pioneer Days*, 13–14; Lady Barker, *Year's Housekeeping*, 124.

settlement, where there existed a great competitive demand for labour. As the washermen's guild was devoted wholly to satisfying a personal service for town dwellers it encompassed neither rural washing jobbers nor domestic servants in town, though the latter may have done home laundry chores as part of their duties.

All signs point to the *AmaWasha* as representing an aristocracy of labour and, being a privileged body, it bore striking similarity to the European craft guild. One other clear fact emerges from the extant data on the early history of the Zulu trade guild: age or senior rank was a criterion for entry. This should not come as a surprise; a characteristic of most pre-industrial societies was the influence of age on patterns of social formation and behaviour. It was a conspicuous feature of Zulu social institutions that special prerogatives and offices accompanied seniority, and strict rules of etiquette on how to deport oneself before elders and superiors governed almost every phase of daily life.³³

Culture determined the allocation of social roles and the tasks and economic obligations appropriate to them. Adult responsibilities in Zulu society were assumed after the individual underwent corporate rituals and ceremonies associated with various stages in the transition from childhood to adulthood. *Khehla'ing* or putting on the headring or *isicoco* was the final step by which a man was incorporated into full tribal life with full responsibilities and privileges. In the days of Zulu military power no man could marry until the king ordered his men, who by then were approaching middle age (forty years), to put on the *isicoco*. On donning the headring a man became father, teacher and master of apprentices to the younger members of the community.³⁴

Similar conventions were attested at mid-nineteenth century Port Natal, where African workers were formed into an unequal body ranked in an age hierarchy. In essence this meant that in the town environment *abafana* (boys) and *izinsizwa* (young men) were forbidden by their social superiors, the *amakhehla*, from independently taking up trades and professions for which their junior status rendered them unworthy. About this arrangement an early resident at the Bay wrote,

Within ten or fifteen miles of the village of Durban...there were thousands of Kafirs, the kraals being numerous, and many men and boys working in the towns and on the beach...[and] as to 'servants' they were boys so-called, varying in age from 15-25... These unclothed young men nursed the white children and did the cooking and washing in English families...³⁵

In these observations can be discerned a fundamental distinction maintained by Africans in the colonial labour market – that only young males hire themselves out for domestic service and other non-prestige, low-paying jobs. However, it would be a major error to interpret this behaviour solely as a response to economic stimuli. The implications are that certain town

³³ Bryant, *Zulu People*, 184-5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 186-8; Krige, *Social System*, 81-100, 134-5.

³⁵ William Clifford Holden, *A Brief History of Methodism and Methodist Missions in South Africa* (London, 1877), 431-2. Holden's observations were made between the years 1847 and 1852. One should note that when nineteenth century householders spoke of 'nurseboys', 'kitchen boys', and 'houseboys', those were 'accurate' descriptions of *abafana* and *izinsizwa* who generally undertook to engage in domestic service. European usage of the term 'boy', however, later came to be applied to all African males irrespective of age or marital status. See Shooter, 'Off to Natal', 89.

occupations had their analogues in traditional roles allocated to boys and young men of similar age within the Zulu household and as *izindibi* or carrier/servant boys.³⁶ If this analysis has merit, it explains the motives behind the *amakhehla*'s decision to remove clothes-washing from the realm of 'youthful' colonial occupations, since laundry work paralleled conventional pursuits undertaken by middle-aged men in Zulu society. In short, traditional social roles were transposed to the town labour force.

Yet efforts by the old men to impose their authority outside the traditional context met with unaccustomed opposition from upstart rivals and civic officials. As they were bent on retaining the normal order, i.e. reverence for their privileged rank and subordinate behaviour in the peccant youths, those elders drew together in a 'combination' of patriarchal power. By intimidation the old men assumed a supervisory position in allocating the labour resources in the town. Similarly, the 'ring-tops' used their association to counter attempts by municipal leaders to curtail their influence in setting town wage scales.

The best reported account of their activities is found in a newspaper item alerting readers to the extensive practices operating among African workmen in Durban in 1856:

We think it right to warn the public against several modes of imposition and fraud now practiced by kafirs in this town and neighbourhood...

The screw is applied tightly and generally by the more knowing kafirs to the younger class of native boys who engage in service. They are threatened with severe chastisement, and are often actually punished, if they accept a lower rate of wages than is fixed by 'the trade', or if they do certain kinds of work prohibited to them, and specially reserved by their self-constituted taskmasters for their own benefit, such as undertaking expresses to a distance, and similar well-paid duties. In fact, there is a widespread concert, or more properly speaking, conspiracy, for keeping up exorbitant rates of wages and regulating the labour to be given...³⁷

Seven years further on, an aggrieved 'working contractor' in Durban contended that 'Those who are unacquainted with Kafir affairs will hardly believe what a combination there exists among them about work, and masters, etc. Nor can those whose position renders them independent of Kafir labour form an idea of the worry of others less fortunate.'³⁸ Similarly, in 1873 Shepstone wrote of 'a large, but fluctuating native population living in the towns... combining to enrich themselves at the expense of the householders by excessive demands, or by directly dishonest means'.³⁹

Much the most intriguing fact about the practices of nineteenth century African workers in Natal is that they demonstrate that the 'ingenuity' displayed by the washermen was far from unique. The sources seem to imply that the guild organization, at least at Durban, was a complex structure into which was incorporated several professional groups, of which the *AmaWasha* was the most visible and perhaps the best remunerated. Also included among the jealously guarded and well-paid occupations were the *izikhonzi* or

³⁶ Bryant, *Zulu People*, 186-7. See note 49.

³⁷ 'Kafir dodges', *NM*, 24 October 1856; Bryant, *Zulu People*, 178.

³⁸ 'Day labourers', *NS*, 10 December 1863.

³⁹ Theophilus Shepstone, 'Togt memorandum', *Natal Government Gazette* (hereafter *NGG*), 31 March 1974.

'native' express messengers, the African postal brigade⁴⁰ and perhaps (though the data are sketchy on these groups) the town's suppliers of milk and fuel, the dairymen and wood merchants.

It is worth recalling the evidence that identifies 'ring-polled' men living near Durban as the class of individuals who took up laundering as a vocation.⁴¹ Assisted by family members, they came to form the nucleus of the *AmaWasha* community. Newcomers could not escape noticing the presence of a growing number of washermen at the river since nearly all Africans coming to town entered by way of the Umgeni.⁴² Natal sources are frustratingly mute on the mode by which 'outsiders' were recruited into the ranks of the guild. Nonetheless, some Transvaal material, including data from van Onselen's study of the Gold Reef *AmaWasha*, supply valuable details.

At each principal washing station scattered round the outskirts of Johannesburg, 'an induna of "high rank" and "comparative wealth" was in firm control of a corps of washermen, and it was he who organized the watch to ensure that the clothes lying around to dry were not stolen from the site'. The induna's 'local authority was ample and absolute... It was he, too, who saw to the recruiting of his own men and supplied all vacancies.'⁴³ Thus a relay system of supplying labour replacements was established by the Rand washermen. It is important to note that the relay method of filling job vacancies was an institution in vogue in Natal from very early on and persists to this day. In the past, however, the practice usually involved a private arrangement between a white colonist and either a chief or, more often, the head of a kraal; the latter would agree to provide a continuous circulating supply of labour from his homestead.⁴⁴ So it is fairly certain that relays of wash teams operated at the Umgeni sites with a regular round of family relations standing in as seasonal replacements. In fact, it is reasonable to suppose that the *AmaWasha* communities on the Rand were modelled, organized and supervised in basically the same manner as their original counterparts in Natal.

What seems even more likely is that the founding masters of the washermen's associations in Maritzburg and Durban, and later their kinsmen, predominated among the senior *izinduna* (chiefs, officials) in both Natal and Johannesburg. There is at least some suggestive evidence for this. Tucked in among the documents profiling senior *izinduna* over the Witwatersrand washing sites – including the profile of the redoubtable Kwaaiman Sutu, who presided at the summit of the Gold Reef *AmaWasha* guild (c. 1894-1910) – is a fact of major significance. The *izinduna* – Charles Kanyile Ndheleni, Samuel Kuzwayo ka Magamdela, Charles Button and Kwaaiman Sutu – hailed, not from the northern districts of Natal – the areas, from which according to van Onselen most of the Reef washermen migrated – but from the Umgeni Division or areas in very close proximity to where the original *AmaWasha* emerged.⁴⁵ It

⁴⁰ 'Kafir dodges', *NM*, 24 October 1856. ⁴¹ Russell, *History of Old Durban*, 216.

⁴² 'Durban Town Council', *Natal Colonist* (hereafter *NC*), 8 September 1876.

⁴³ 'Wash boys' parade', *SDN*, 2 July 1895; van Onselen, 'AmaWasha', 79.

⁴⁴ SNA 1/3/5. H. F. Fynn to T. Shepstone, 19 January 1856; Robert J. Mann, *The Colony of Natal* (London, 1859), 188-9.

⁴⁵ Secretary for Native Affairs (hereafter SNA), Natal. File 1/1/211. Johannesburg representative's reports dated 7 November and 16 November 1895; and SNA 1/1/214, 30 December 1895.

is just possible that the antecedents of all these men go back to the founders of the Natal *AmaWasha* communities; if so, it is also possible that the principal positions they held within the Gold Reef washing empire were secured through a line of succession.

The range of possibilities offered in Natal and the opportunity for rising in status were attractions to which many Africans enthusiastically responded. Once they had carved out careers for themselves, these men sought to secure *exclusive* title and position for their male progeny. This tendency to preserve craft monopolies and retain mastership in the family has been noticed among traditional Zulu trades and professions. Both Krige and Bryant remarked that occupations became hereditary where the labour involved great skill and where trade secrets were connected with the art – e.g. medical men, rain-makers, blacksmiths, etc.⁴⁶ In addition, there were instances where other trades (especially non-traditional colonial trades) presented fresh prospects for making considerable profit, where appointments to special offices conferred enormous prestige as well as monetary reward, and where, in such cases, members of those occupations attempted to arrogate to themselves *and their sons* the monopoly of that craft or profession.

This pre-emptive spirit is clearly evident among the *AmaWasha*.⁴⁷ However, the principle of privileged entry can best be illustrated in the career family history of Bikwayo ka Noziwawa, *isikhonzi* (pl. *izikhonzi*, i.e. 'native' messenger; it will be recalled that the *izikhonzi* were among the well-paid groups belonging to the federation of Zulu tradesmen and professionals organized in Durban.) Among the corps of *izikhonzi* sent to the great supply country of Zululand was Bikwayo's grandfather, Mzizima, appointed messenger of all the low country of Tongaland. As king's messenger he was charged with collecting annual tribute from the Tsonga and neighbouring peoples living to the north-east of Zulu country. On Mzizima's death, which occurred during the reign of Mpande, his son Noziwawa ka Mzizima (Bikwayo's father), was made his successor. His elder son, Mnyaiza, used to accompany their father on various missions to the Tsonga but when Mnyaiza died that position devolved upon the younger son, Bikwayo. 'I used to go to Tongaland with my father – as *mat bearer*... I was put in Mnyaiza's place when he died.' Eventually, following the death of Noziwawa, Bikwayo rose to the position of *induna* over the Tsonga. Under Cetshwayo, and later as messenger for the colonial government, he made frequent official visits to minor chiefs living between Zulu country and Delagoa Bay.⁴⁸

Just as pertinent to this discussion is the educational preparation that enabled Zulu boys on achieving maturity to take over the family's line of business. Between the ages of fourteen and sixteen a phase of instruction commenced aimed at exposing youths to the outside world. Acting ostensibly as mat or carrier boys (*udibi*, pl. *izindibi*), Zulu youths accompanied their fathers, elder brothers, or other kraal members with whom they had been

⁴⁶ Bryant, *Zulu People*, 376–7; *Zulu Medicine*, 10–11; Krige, *Social System*, 209, 297–305.

⁴⁷ 'Kafir dodges', *NM*, 24 October 1856; T. Eastwood to Mayor, Durban, 17 November 1874, DCL File 352; 'Wash boys' parade', *SDN*, 2 July 1895; Durban Corporation Superintendent of Police Report Book (hereafter DCSPRB), File 3310: reports dated 2 June 1905 and 3 July 1905.

⁴⁸ Webb and Wright, *Stuart Archive*, 1, 63–73.

placed on distant journeys. These outings were more than adventures on which the lad's sole purpose was to act as porter. In addition to bearing the mat and other paraphernalia of the Zulu traveller, *izindibi* boys were general factotums – cooks, assistants and trainees to their fathers.⁴⁹ In this manner they learned, as Bikwayo most assuredly had done by observations and practical experience, the family profession. The custom of enlisting young relations as apprentices was also followed by middle-aged Zulu washermen who took their younger sons with them on the long trek to the Witwatersrand.⁵⁰ With this in mind it is possible to suggest that the structural elements of the *AmaWasha* guild manifest not so much features of the Zulu military regiment, as previously proposed, as a network of inner family relations involving perhaps several kin-connected households.⁵¹

The following quotation vividly illustrates how a family head hoped to pre-empt and reserve for his sons entry into one corner of the town labour market. It is significant because it reveals in the worker's own words the *modus operandi* by which he and certainly an impressive segment of the African workforce sought to achieve prestige, power and wealth.

Who says that the native is not ambitious? This week I was told by a member of a big Durban firm employing many natives of one of them who is aiming at dominion. This native has already married four wives, and has many – I forget the number – children. As his boys come to a working age he gets them work with the same firm. He has mentioned to the firm that he is adding to his wives as rapidly as he can, and is looking forward to the day when he will be in a position to supply the whole of the native labour required by the firm from his own family. 'Then,' he adds with pride, 'I will myself stop working, and become their Induna.'⁵²

IV

The 1850s in Natal witnessed a steady arrival of white immigrants, the introduction of cane cultivation and the consequent insistent clamor for reliable labour supplies. One reason why labour never came forth in the numbers required to satisfy specifically rural needs was the paltry wages offered. Townspeople were equally dissatisfied with the quality and availability of labour and favoured stringent regulations that would give masters greater control over their servants. Singling out the washermen, local news journals frequently held forth on the imposition townsfolk were forced to endure and emphasized the urgent need to check their machinations.⁵³ But not until the 1860s did public officials begin to take definite steps towards erecting a web of restraints. In 1863 Maritzburg's Town Council 'authorized to have a number of arm badges made and numbered, and also marked "W"'. Every

⁴⁹ A purely military function is often ascribed to the *izindibi* but Dohne defined the *udibi* as 'Commonly a boy who carries the effects of equipage of an older man in going to war (or in travelling)' (*Zulu-Kafir Dictionary*, 61). Note, for example, the business of the young assistant (*impakutha*) of the Zulu medicine man in Bryant, *Zulu Medicine*, 10; also Bryant, *Zulu People*, 187.

⁵⁰ van Onselen, 'AmaWasha', 76.

⁵¹ This was true in the higher, esoteric professions where whole clans specialized in a particular line of business: the emaCubeni and emaCunwini clans were noted smiths; the Nzuzas, war doctors; and the Ntlangwini, rainmakers (Bryant, *Zulu People*, 376-7).

⁵² 'Echoes of the week', *Natal Advertiser*, 15 January 1910.

⁵³ For example, 'Kafir dodges', *NM*, 24 October 1856.

washerman not in permanent employ was to be registered and charged a monthly fee; individuals found washing without permission were to be prosecuted.⁵⁴ This initial confrontation between, on the one side, expediency and custom, and on the other, town law, ended in a humiliating loss of face. For in that year, apparently, the laundrymen successfully resisted the badge-tariff system by abandoning Maritzburg's washing sites and returning to their kraals. Householders, reluctant to take on the temporary burden of doing their own washing, did little to aid the corporation in seeing that the measures were complied with.⁵⁵

A decade later Durban passed its first vagrant bye-law aimed at curtailing the mobility of the entire body of casuals locally known as 'togtmen',⁵⁶ and the well-known 'Togt Minute' of Theophilus Shepstone, the Secretary for Native Affairs, culminated the following year (1874) in the framing of the 'Togt Rules and Regulations' – a signal document marking the transition in the status of Africans labouring in the towns from that of free to that of licensed worker.⁵⁷ The 'togt laws' were designed to prevent the formation of worker 'combinations' and generally to discourage the enormously popular jobbing types of engagements. The 'Rules' levied a monthly 2s. 6d. fee, enjoined the jobber to wear a badge, and fixed a tariff of wages.⁵⁸ Under the regulations washermen were exempted from performing jobs outside their craft.⁵⁹

Notwithstanding the 'togt' enactments, housewives steadily complained of the cost of laundering. One of them, Lady Barker, wrote:

The price of washing as this spoiling process is called is enormous, and I exhaust my faculties in devising more economical arrangements. We can't wash at home as most people do, for the simple reasons that we've no water, no proper appliances of any sort, and to build and buy such would cost a small fortune. *But a tall, white aproned Kafir, with a badge upon his arm*, comes now at daylight every Monday morning and takes away a huge sack full of linen, ... for which he received 3s. 6d. [emphasis added].⁶⁰

Efforts in 1879 to enforce new tariff scales resulted in large numbers of 'togtmen' withdrawing from Durban.⁶¹ In this instance, the *AmaWasha* successfully opposed municipal attempts to reduce by a shilling their average 3s. 6d. service fee.⁶²

Few white women were willing to perform such menial functions as washing clothes, which they considered 'kafir work'. Several private laundry ventures tried but failed to release the white community from dependence on the Zulu washermen. In the ensuing years, however, town planners and

⁵⁴ Pietermaritzburg Minutes of the Town Council, Minute Book 1/1/2, 8 June 1863, 550–1.

⁵⁵ A fuller discussion of municipal and private attempts to break the *AmaWasha* monopoly will be presented in a subsequent article.

⁵⁶ NGG, 20 January 1874.

⁵⁷ NGG, 31 March 1874.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Durban Native Case Book, 2/3/4: Supreme Chief *vs.* Umdukumban, 16 April 1874; and Supreme Chief *vs.* Umgama, 15 May 1874.

⁶⁰ Lady Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping*, 124–5.

⁶¹ NGG, 22 July 1879; DCSPRB File 3305: report dated 7 October 1879.

⁶² See, for example, 'The steam laundry', *Times of Natal*, 30 January 1880.

civic officials worked at a solution that eliminated the necessity for the 'old-fashioned wash kafir'. Out of their efforts came a scheme for a tremendously improved water-supply, which was introduced in the two leading townships in 1887.⁶³ The possibility of a water tap for every household had far-reaching social and economic consequences. For the Zulu washermen, whose eminence hinged on control over the Umgeni and the river front, that modern development obviated the need to send the town's linen four miles away to the old washing site, thus rendering the services of the *AmaWasha* obsolete. Furthermore, piped-in water made it possible to restore a substantial portion of laundering chores to the realm of household labour while simultaneously stimulating the development of a new urban industry – commercial laundries.⁶⁴

Yet some time was to pass before that innovation became generally diffused among urban dwellers; and because of their costliness neither commercial laundries nor modern home labour-saving devices, such as washing machines, could suddenly displace the nineteenth-century Zulu washerman.⁶⁵ His challenger and first effective rival coming after forty years of dominating the washing industry was the Indian dhoby, a member of the Hindu washermen's caste, whose hand laundries in the towns operated at cheap and therefore highly competitive rates.

After serving out their indentureship on sugar estates or as specialized house servants some of these Indians migrated to the towns where they engaged in sundry trades including that of ironing clothes.⁶⁶ The Hindu tradesmen were among the first consumers to take advantage of the new water system which enabled them to capture a substantial portion of the washing industry. Over the next twenty years, however, European laundrymen and other white interest groups conducted anti-Indian campaigns of which the 'unsanitary dhoby' became a focus. The effects of this agitation, which was supported by government legislation, was to undermine the Asiatic trading element in the towns and throughout Natal.⁶⁷

Apart from the incursions made by the aggressive dhobies and to a lesser extent the commercial laundries, a significant portion of the craft guild's business fell to the 'wash umfazi', many of whom came from Edendale and other outlying mission stations where they had been trained in the industrial arts.⁶⁸ Later, at Inanda Mission, African women were trained and employed to operate a commercial laundry commenced in 1889.⁶⁹ Since working

⁶³ NGG, Durban Corporation Water Service Bye-Laws, 1 May 1888 and 15 January 1889; William Henderson, *Durban: Fifty Years of Municipal History* (Durban, 1904), 225-48.

⁶⁴ Strasser, *Never Done*, 112-24.

⁶⁵ Susan Strasser, 'An enlarged human existence? Technology and household work in nineteenth century America', Susan Fenstermaker Berk (ed.), *Women and Household Labour* (California, 1980), 29-51. Although 'the technological potential of the nineteenth century house was fairly high, it could only be achieved... by wealthy people in urban areas. Indoor plumbing, electricity and gas, the innovations which ended the necessity for making fires and carrying water, were luxuries': p. 30.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Verasammy [sic] to the Mayor and Town Council, Durban, 21 March 1892. DCL File 427.

⁶⁷ A fuller discussion of the Indian dhoby and the public health movement will be presented in a subsequent article on the *AmaWasha*.

⁶⁸ 'Life at Natal', by a Lady. *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 4 (1872), 342-3.

⁶⁹ SNA 1/1/112. Report on the Inanda Laundry dated 19 June 1890.

independently in the towns brought better wages, many *kholwa* (Christian) women, such as Mrs Lettie Mcunu, resorted several times a month to the city, where they worked as laundresses in private homes.⁷⁰ From 1907, 'togt' statistics for Durban reveal that badges were being issued to both washermen and washerwomen.⁷¹

Thus as more and more water taps were connected to private premises, it became apparent the *AmaWasha* could not restore their fading position, as they had done in the craft guild's heyday, by selectively boycotting their clientele or resorting to strikes. Indeed, their reduced importance is seen in the recurring grievance which surfaced among the washermen and which was previously unheard of, that white householders were refusing to pay guild members upon completion of the job.⁷²

Against the strength of this rivalry the Zulu craft guild had to contend with broadside assaults from the state. For 1892-3, the first years for which there are figures, three hundred Zulu washermen were reported occupying 85 huts at the Umgeni; and for the first time since they had established tenancy on the banks of that river, the *AmaWasha* were forced to pay a monthly 2s. per hut 'for the right to squat on town lands...[and]...by way of asserting authority over them'.⁷³ Nor were the African laundrymen exempted from washhouse bye-laws ostensibly passed to regulate 'dhoby dens'.⁷⁴ Furthermore, an amendment to the 1901 identification pass law encompassed Africans engaged in the major prestige town occupations.⁷⁵ In 1904 new Durban bye-laws raised the monthly 'togt' fee to 5s. and provided compulsory compounds for the use of 'togt' workers.⁷⁶

In the end, modernization and white ethnocentrism overmastered the washermen's guild in Natal. So long as the boroughs lacked adequate water conveniences, labour employed in laundry work was suitably divided: washing was done by Zulu guildsmen; starching, mangling, or ironing and mending were generally performed by women, African and European laundresses.⁷⁷ Later on, Indians also took up professional ironing.⁷⁸ However, unlike the dhoby who had gained an advantage in the town laundry business by renting space from Arab and other Indian property owners, or the enterprising whites who enjoyed community encouragement, the aspiring African entrepreneur experienced all manner of frustrations in trying to

⁷⁰ SNA 1/1/356. Mrs Lettie Mcunu, Thorny Bush, 4 December 1906.

⁷¹ DCSPRB File 3310: reports dated 7 September 1907 to January 1910. See also File 3311: reports dated February 1910 to December 1914.

⁷² Evidence of Togt Inspector, William A. Hines, *Native Affairs Commission*, 1906/07, 39; see also DCSPRB File 3310: report dated 2 June 1905.

⁷³ DCL File 429: Umgeni magistrate to Mayor of Durban, 31 March 1892; and DCL File 435: Umgeni Police Station to Superintendent of Police, 31 January 1893.

⁷⁴ DCL File 485: W. C. Daugherty, Inspector of Nuisances to Chairman of Sanitary Committee, 30 December 1898.

⁷⁵ NGG, 'To amend Act no. 49, 1901, entitled "To facilitate the Identification of Native Servants"', 29 March 1904.

⁷⁶ NGG, 'New Bye-Laws for the Borough of Durban', 5 April 1904.

⁷⁷ Lady Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping*, 125. African males used also to perform 'mangling' tasks. See Russell, *History of Old Durban*, 217-18, for a description of the 'Colonial Mangle'.

⁷⁸ For example, Verasammy to Mayor and Town Council of Durban, 21 March 1892, DCL File 427.

establish town-based operations. Van Onselen overlooks a crucial fact when he writes,

...despite the fact that many of the guild's members did manage to make considerable cash savings, none of them *chose* to convert their businesses to employ the mechanized processing techniques of the modern laundryman. Looking back..., rather than ahead..., [!!!] the washermen *chose* to invest their savings in land and cattle rather than in plant and equipment... [emphasis added].⁷⁹

During this period, whites were as adverse to African competition in the trades as they were to the pronounced Asian presence in commercial activities. Racism precluded any *choice* in the matter of the *AmaWasha's* future as entrepreneurs in the developing industrialized laundry business in South Africa.⁸⁰

So it was this combination of factors, with the concurrent crises of drought, diseases and dearth,⁸¹ that moved some veteran guildsmen, together with many of their countrymen, to migrate to the gold-mining town on the Rand. By 1890 there were several hundred *AmaWasha* at work in the Braamfontein Spruit. Three years later their numbers had risen to seven hundred; and an all-time record of over 1,200 washermen were located at Johannesburg washing sites in 1896.⁸²

SUMMARY

Research into the perspectives of both worker and consumer has shown the social history of Zulu washermen to be far more complex than was previously thought. Viewed from the standpoint of Zulu men, washing clothes was not a humiliating female task into which they had been coerced by adverse circumstances. Laundering recalled the specialist craft of hide-dressing in which Zulu males engaged as *izinyanga*, a prestige occupation that paid handsomely. These astute tradesmen, a number of whom may have come from artisanal families, recognized they could play a crucial role in the European household economy. 'Craft conscious', building on indigenous institutions and customs, they combined not merely to secure their position and bar entry into 'the trade', but also to impose standards of wages and regulate the labour given by the younger men. In this manner they became one, if not indeed the most, powerful group of African workmen in nineteenth-century Natal.

The social history of the *AmaWasha* guild compels a re-evaluation of notions regarding openness to change in traditional societies; indeed, it underscores their capacity for innovation. Moreover, it has a fundamental bearing on the structural nature and patterns of resistance of early black working populations in South Africa. This study indicates that there were intimate historical links between precolonial artisanal associations and subsequent worker organizations, activities and consciousness.

⁷⁹ van Onselen, 'AmaWasha', 75.

⁸⁰ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, 1903/05, v, 185; *Native Affairs Commission Evidence* (Pietermaritzburg, 1907), 822, 824-5; Sheila T. Van der Horst, *Native Labour in South Africa* (London, 1942), 236-8; Shula Marks, 'The ambiguities of dependence: John L. Dube of Natal', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1, 2 (1975), 69.

⁸¹ For an analysis of such factors in the proletarianisation of black peasants, see C. van Onselen, 'Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa, 1896-97', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XIII, 3 (1972), 473-88.

⁸² van Onselen, 'AmaWasha', 77.