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*'The Cows of Nongoloza': Youth, Crime and Amalaita Gangs in Durban, 1900-1936**

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Forms of youth organisation and culture which emerged amongst African migrants in towns during the first decades of the century remain obscure. Based on oral and archival sources, this article attempts to disaggregate, periodise and construct an understanding of those forms of cultural organisation which came to be known as amalaita. In Durban the amalaita emerged in the wake of the massive social dislocation experienced by African societies in Natal and Zululand in the late nineteenth century. It is argued that they were first and foremost migrant youth organisations whose members adapted a repertoire of Zulu rural cultural practices and forms of self-organisation to cope with new conditions of life in town. This is an interpretation supported by oral testimonies although even within popular memory itself the meaning of the term is sometimes extended to include relatively discrete forms of adult migrant and even criminal association, for reasons which the article explains.

Although the amalaita cannot be described as 'political' in any advanced sense, their organisation and consciousness could, at times, provide the basis for more concerted challenges to local political authority. While the cultural idioms of Zulu youth were absorbed into a local popular political culture after 1925, there is also evidence to suggest the mobilisation of certain youth gangs by ICU activists. It is also argued that official attempts to de-politicise popular cultural expression together with qualitative changes in police control and the rapid social transformation of local society, had, by the late Thirties, begun to re-mould patterns of migrant youth association in Durban.

* I am indebted to William Beinart for his invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this article, to Charles van Onselen who kindly gave me access to comparative research material for the Witwatersrand and to Ezekiel Mbebe for the assistance which he provided me in tracing and interviewing elderly informants.

Introduction

'The Terrible Spectre of Armed Youngsters'. These words introduce a letter written by a resident of a Pietermaritzburg township to a local newspaper in 1989. The subject of the correspondence is the rolling violence between youthful *amaQabane* (comrades) and *oThelewini* (Inkatha supporters) in the civil wars which continue to dismember African communities in Natal.¹ The *amaQabane* of Natal are but one example of forms of youth organisation which have become an indelible feature of the contemporary South African political landscape since the 1976 risings in Soweto and the resurgence of politically organised youth in the early Eighties. Yet, together with the dramatic transformation of general patterns of African youth culture during the Forties,² the more recent prominence of a new generation of disaffected African youth has tended to obscure earlier, less-obviously politicised forms of African youth association and culture which emerged in the interstices of industrialising South Africa.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous but least understood of these groupings were the *amalaita* — combinations of young, mainly migrant workers whose traditions have been, unlike the proud groups of Pathfinders who posed for photographs in mission school Annuals, transmitted mainly through popular memory. This article attempts to recover part of the largely hidden history of early youth gangs in South Africa by exploring struggles straddling town and countryside, but symbolically fought out in the backyards and streets of Durban, through which the *amalaita* were formed and transformed between 1900 and 1936.³

From the time of its initial appearance in the language of officialdom at the turn of the century, the use of the term '*amalaita*' was predominantly pejorative. In the post-South African war Transvaal it was a generic term for urban African male criminals or was used interchangeably with 'Ninevite' — the name of a criminal gang formed under Jan Note (or Nongoloza) the nature of which has been explored in the pioneering urban social history of Charles van Onselen.⁴ Those who came closer to a more sensitive understanding of the *amalaita* usually did so within a discourse of criminality. Thus one early report was able to point not only to different categories of criminals such as *abatelisa* (robbers or 'tax-collectors') and *amasela* (housebreakers), but also to the distinct identity of the *amalaita* as a discrete form of youth organisation involved in activities which set them apart

¹ *Natal Witness Echo*, 15 June 1989.

² See P. Bonner, 'Family, Crime and Political Consciousness on the East Rand, 1935–1955', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 3 (1988).

³ This project has at times seemed to have had more in common with the accretive travails of the archaeologist than the conventional procedures of the historian. A number of interviews, primarily with elderly men who worked in Durban between 1912 and 1935, have provided crucial insights into the nature of early migrant youth organisation. References to the gangs in official records, at least for the period under discussion, are diffuse and seldom attempt to 'decode' gang activities. Potentially invaluable records such as police and court reports are fragmentary, most of them having been lost or destroyed.

⁴ See C. van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, Vol. 2, New Nineveh* (Johannesburg, 1982), pp. 171–201.

from *isigebengu* (adult criminals).⁵ Still others, not entirely inappropriately, invoked exotic cultural categories such as London's 'hooligans' and Australias's 'larrikins' to define the nature of the *amalaita*.

The frequent identification of the *amalaita* with urban forms of criminality was founded in the uneven ability of the state and its functionaries to grasp the complexity of African cultural and political responses to proletarianisation. Paradoxically, it was only during the course of the Thirties, precisely at the time when the *amalaita* began to be confronted by the emergence of new, distinctively urban forms of African youth culture, that more sociologically sensitive accounts of the *amalaita* were constructed.⁶ Yet, nearly seventy years after C.T. Loram made an insightful appeal to sociologists to explore what he termed 'secret societies among Natives' and 'organisations for vicious purposes', the historical literature on early forms of self-organisation and cultural identity amongst African youth in South Africa remains sparse and uneven.⁷ Two notable early attempts by historians to raise questions in relation to the *amalaita* as discrete forms of youth association were those of van Onselen and Beinart.⁸ More recent studies, however, have begun to cast significant new light on patterns of African youth organisation in town and countryside within the context of migrant association and consciousness in the post-1930 period.⁹ Hopefully the present study, in conjunction with this emerging literature, will begin to provide the basis for the beginnings of a more careful periodisation of regional forms of migrant association and their relationship to political organisation.¹⁰

⁵ Central Archives Depot, (CAD), South African Police, 89, 15/48/17, Det. Hoffmann to Dep. Commissioner, CID, 12 October 1911. For a sense of the hold of perceived *amalaita* criminality on white popular consciousness during this period, see N. Devitt, *Famous South African Trials* (Pretoria, 1930), pp. 86-93.

⁶ See, for example, CAD, NTS 7642, 8/331, Findings and Recommendations of a Conference on Urban Juvenile Delinquency, October 1938.

⁷ See C.T. Loram, 'The Claims of the Native Question upon Scientists', *South African Journal of Science*, XVIII, 1 and 2 (December 1921), p. 109. Comparative anthropological and historical studies in Natal offer few insights into the *amalaita*. Krige mentions the groups in relation to the procurement of human medicine through murder, while Hemson's important historical work refers to the *amalaita* in relation to the emergence of 'a new and specifically urban culture'. See E. Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus* (Pietermaritzburg, 1965), p. 242, n. 1; and D. Hemson, 'Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: Dockworkers of Durban', unpublished Ph.D. University of Warwick, 1979, p. 82.

⁸ C. van Onselen, *New Nineveh*, pp. 54-60; and W. Beinart, 'The Family, Youth Organisation, Gangs and Politics in the Transkeian Area', paper presented to the Conference on the Family in Africa, London, 1981, esp. pp. 8-10.

⁹ See W. Beinart's most recent contribution 'The Origins of the Indlavini: Male Associations and Migrant Labour in the Transkei', unpublished paper, 1989; and Peter Delius 'Sebatagomo; Migrant Organisation, the ANC and the Sekhukhuneland Revolt', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 4 (1989), pp. 589-592, for a useful discussion of the Pedi Malaita.

¹⁰ I have benefitted from the insights of a rich comparative historical literature on youth, much of which explores the implications of the ambiguous social location of youth. See, for example, N.Z. Davis, 'The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth Century France', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971); and E. Lloyd Peters, 'Aspects of the control of moral ambiguities: a comparative analysis of two culturally disparate modes of social control', in M. Gluckman (ed.), *The Allocation of Responsibility* (Manchester, 1972). Also see J.R. Gillis, *Youth and History* (New York, 1974), for a critical discussion of a historical notions

'Turbulent Umfaans': The Origins of the Amalaita, 1900-12

The period of mineral discoveries in South Africa marked the massive expansion of the coal and sugar industries in Natal. In response to these developments Durban rapidly assumed a position as the main entrepot port of South Africa. Early industry in the town had been primarily concerned with supplying the needs of a predominantly agrarian colony. By the turn of the century, however, economic activities such as wagon making and wool processing, were based increasingly on inland commerce, while new engineering works catered for the shipping trade coastal sugar plantations and the coal industry.¹¹

In 1900 Durban's African migrant population, numbering around 18,000, was channelled into four main sectors of the labour market: togt labour (comprising mainly dockworkers), ricksha-pullers, washermen and monthly servants. Workers in each sector were governed by relatively discrete sets of regulations designed to achieve the overall control of the workforce. The togt labour system was related to the need to depress wages and to accommodate the fluctuating labour requirements of white merchants and shipping companies. The togt worker was obliged to pay a monthly registration fee, wear a togt badge and accept any work which paid at a rate above an official minimum. Contravention of these regulations could take the form of a fine of 20s or hard labour. Ricksha-pullers and washermen were also forced to comply with regulations framed along similar lines. Registration as a monthly worker, on the other hand, brought an individual under the penal discipline of the Master and Servants Act.¹²

These attempts to regulate the labour market were underpinned by a wider struggle to police the working lives of migrant workers. A penal code provided against 'disorderliness', 'provocative language' and 'indecent conduct' and the Vagrant Law (No. 15 of 1869) enforced a 9 pm curfew, while the erection of several barracks between 1878 and 1904 was designed to replace the rhythms of rural time with those of the clock and the working week.¹³ By the turn of the century, then, the basis for the control and coercion of workers was achieved through a rudimentary system of 'native administration' which was funded by worker fines and registration fees, enforced by the Borough Police and supported by the sanctions of the prison. At the level of everyday struggles, however, this

such as 'the traditions of youth'. For the creation by youth of defensive and often criminal networks of gangs in response to the social disorganisation of urban life, see the classic study of F.M. Thrasher, *The Gang* (Chicago, 1930); and R. Lincoln Keiser, *The Vice Lords: Warriors of the Streets* (New York, 1969).

¹¹ See D. Hemson, 'Dockworkers', Ch. 1; and M. Katzen, *Industry in Greater Durban*, Part I (Pietermaritzburg, 1961).

¹² P. la Hausse, 'The Struggle for the City: Alcohol, the Ematsheni and Popular Culture in Durban, 1902-36,' unpublished MA, University of Cape Town, 1984, pp. 24-31; and Hemson, 'Dockworkers', Ch.2.

¹³ For cultural conflict between white employers and Zulu labourers, particularly over time, see K. Atkins, 'The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic and Practices: Natal, South Africa, 1843-1875', unpublished Ph.D, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1986, pp. 160-208.

'system' was continually resisted,¹⁴ and by 1901 a third of the African population of around 20,000 had been arrested in terms of various municipal and government laws.

The first decade of the century was a crucial moment in the restructuring of capitalist settler domination in Natal. In Durban, this period was characterized by sustained attempts to refine domination on racial lines and to secure, control and house an adequate supply of African labour. In conditions of labour shortage, especially during the economic boom of 1902-03, this proved to be a difficult task. African workers evaded the registration system, generally refused to enter barracks which they compared to gaols and succeeded in pushing up wages in 1903 through strike action. Then, during the depression between 1904 and 1909, a massive influx of African workseekers and the emergence of a flourishing African shebeen trade threatened to erode time and labour discipline altogether.

The ability of local government and employers to obtain particular forms of labour power under specific conditions thus foundered in the face of labour shortages, lack of finances inadequate laws and the common sense ideologies of African workers. If the problem of labour supply declined after the Bambatha rebellion in 1906, it was only in 1908 that the basis for a more coercive and efficient system of urban control was laid through the establishment of a municipal beer monopoly. It was during this period of massive social upheaval — spanned by war, moral panics, rebellion and depression — that the first reports of *amalaita* gangs appeared.

In 1900 Durban's Superintendent of Police lamented that 'daring young thieves ... have started their games in Durban in broad daylight. I sincerely hope the community will be more careful whom they employ as domestic servants'.¹⁵ This was the first of a number of reports which noted the appearance of African youth gangs in Durban. By 1903 a word to describe these gangs — '*amalaita*' — had entered the language of municipal officials and in 1905 appeared in Bryant's *Zulu-English Dictionary*. The various contemporary explanations of the origins of the term reflect the contested social meaning of the phenomenon. While some emphasised the genesis of the term in relation to criminal activity, other possibly more convincing explanations, suggest that '*amalaita*', as a corruption of English, was used either as a metaphor for energy and violence or as a word to announce membership of a gang.¹⁶ While the origins of the term are unclear, there is less

¹⁴ NA, Durban Corporation Letterbooks (DCL), No. 548, R.C. Jameson before the First Natal Municipal Conference, 22 September 1904.

¹⁵ NA, Superintendent of Police Report Books, (PRB) 6, 6 March 1900.

¹⁶ Various referred to as '*laitas*', '*lietas*', '*lietis*', '*amalayita*' or '*olaita*'. Bryant defined the '*ulayita*' as a 'Native street-desperado or Hooligan, given to going about the towns in bands at night molesting and robbing other solitary Natives'. See *Zulu-English Dictionary* (Mariannhill, 1905), p. 352. For a similar explanation see *Ipepa lo Hlanga*, 20 November 1903 quoted in van Onselen, *New Nineveh*, p. 56. G.M. Sivetye who was in Durban shortly after the Bambatha rebellion suggested that '*amalaita*' derived from the fact that 'when you hit someone you light a fire'. See University of the Witwatersrand (UW), African Studies Institute, Oral History Project, Tape No.93, Interview with Rev. G. Sivetye by T.Couzens and A. van Gylswyk, Groutville, 23 Oct.1978. An equally plausible explanation of the term is that it derives from a corruption of the English 'I'm all right' — a phrase used to indicate membership of a gang. See CAD, K373,

doubt about the nature of gang organisation and activity. Official reports suggest that *amalaita* ranks were filled predominantly by domestic servants between the ages of 14 and 20. Back rooms on their employers' premises (somewhat ironically referred to as 'kyas')¹⁷ could serve as a base for their occasional petty thieving on white households. The gangs signalled their presence in the streets by playing mouth organs¹⁸ and took part in 'pitched battles' with other gangs, usually after the 9 pm curfew. African policemen, in particular, were singled out as targets for their violence. Their weapons, at least in the early 1900s, were limited to light fighting sticks (*izinduku*), stones and, sometimes, sand-filled bottles.¹⁹

Stunned by this *amalaita* onslaught,²⁰ Superintendent Alexander traced his woes to the migration of Zulu refugees, who had been liberated from Johannesburg's gaols, into the backyards of Durban's white population. Certainly, as van Onselen has indicated, many of the thousands of Zulu-speaking 'houseboys' on the Rand had been in contact with the criminal networks of the Ninevites during the 1890s.²¹ It is likely that many of these youths and men were hidden in the ranks of 7 000 predominantly Zulu workers who were, ironically, escorted back to Natal by J.S. Marwick — the future Manager of Durban's Municipal Native Affairs Department — at the outbreak of the South African War.²² In 1901 a second wave of black refugees from the Witwatersrand broke in Durban. This time it comprised mostly young 'houseboys' who had abandoned jobs in the face of declining wage-levels on the Rand.²³ Clearly, then, many of those black refugees who found work or swelled the ranks of the 'dangerous' unemployed in Durban, were bearers of newly-acquired forms of criminal organisation and cultural codes which had been forged in the prison-compound complex of the Witwatersrand.

Yet there is evidence to suggest that patterns of youth activity in Durban, remarkably similar to post-1900 forms of *amalaita* activity, predated the arrival of the young 'thieves and sharpers' from the Rand. It seems that in the period after the

Evidence before the Commission appointed to Enquire into Assaults on Women, 1912, Col. W.J. Clark, p. 32. Hattie Colenso, a fluent Zulu linguist and perceptive observer of Zulu society, supported this interpretation. (Thanks to Jeff Guy for drawing this to my attention). My use of the word '*amalaita*' is an attempt to convey the contested interpretation of the term.

¹⁷ 'Kya' is derived from the Zulu word for home or dwelling — *ikhaya*.

¹⁸ When and why the mouth organ was appropriated as a central symbol of African migrant youth is unclear. For the use of the reed flutes, such as the *igemfe* and *umtshingo* & c., by rural youth, see P.R. Kirby, *The Musical Instrument of the Native Races of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1968), pp. 112–20.

¹⁹ NA, PRB, 6, 6 March 1900, 28 January 1901, 7 June 1901, 7 November 1901, 6 January 1902, and 6 July 1902.

²⁰ In 1900, 1000 of the 6600 arrests made on Africans were for breach of the peace, which shortly thereafter became known as 'lieta offences'. Arrests for Vagrancy increased from 1356 in 1900 to 1676 in 1901. A marked increase in arrests for housebreaking and theft was recorded in 1901. NA, PRB, 6, 7 January 1901, 5 August 1901 and 6 January 1902.

²¹ See van Onselen, *New Nineveh*, pp. 54–55; and for Jan Note's Ninevites pp. 171–201; and esp. 177–8 for the impact of the war on black workers.

²² Marwick's report on this remarkable episode includes a suggestive description of 'Natives marching thirty abreast with concertinas playing the most popular Native tunes'. See Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban (KCAL) Marwick Papers, Ms Mar 2.08.5, KCM 2745.

²³ NA, PRB, 6, 6 March 1901.

outbreak of the South African War we are seeing the transformation of existing forms of youth organisation. Indeed, Detective R.H. Arnold of Durban's CID, claimed that *amalaita* gangs originated in the Point area of Durban around the early 1890s, and only subsequently spread to the Rand with increasing Zulu migrancy.²⁴ In order to periodise these transformations we need to, firstly, explore the impact of industrialisation and dispossession on rural society in Natal, and secondly, examine domestic service in relation to the age structure of migrancy and the availability of forms of rural social and cultural organisation within the context of urban wage labour.

The relative economic independence of African rural cultivators in Natal and Zululand during the 1860s gave way in the post-1890 period to an increasingly bleak struggle to retain access to land and to meet the requirements of taxation. The Natal Midlands and Southern Zululand bore the brunt of a jagged process of rural dispossession and proletarianisation.²⁵ The accelerated commercialisation of white agriculture placed increasing pressure on land and the web of kinship ties constituted around the African homestead. The destruction of chiefs' power on white-owned farms was paralleled by the general weakening of chiefly authority, the erosion of the *amabutho* system and the undermining of the position of homestead heads. The loss of chiefly and homestead head control over women and youth most vividly illustrated these centripetal forces acting on African society.²⁶ While uncontrollable women were seen both by chiefs and colonial officials to be responsible for the creation of 'dangerous' social institutions such as *itimiti* and *oshisanyama* (innovative kinds of beer-gatherings), there were numerous indications of the increasing independence of rural youth in the face of the erosion of patriarchal authority. The development by rural youth of independently organised dances such as the *umqongo* and their increasing involvement in faction-fighting and beer-drinking were, by numerous accounts, forms of youth association and activity unknown prior to the 1880s.²⁷

This transformation of social relations in the countryside was accelerated by a series of natural disasters: locust plagues in 1896, followed by drought and then a cataclysmic outbreak of rinderpest. By the turn of the century thousands of Africans had been forced into wage relations with commercialising white farmers or were impelled to seek employment on the goldfields or in towns such as Durban. During

²⁴ CAD, K373, Det. R.H. Arnold, p. 10. Arnold, who went on to assume a key role in police intelligence work in Durban, claimed that 'there was no such thing as the Amalaita gang' in the Transvaal when he was a Detective there between 1900 and 1904. It seems unlikely that forms of ethnic migrant youth association which were to subsequently earn the name '*amalaita*' were absent from the Rand, although it is quite plausible that the term *amalaita* was first applied to the cultural formations of Zulu migrant workers. On the Witwatersrand the term *amalaita* only seems appear in official records around 1908 when gangs were reportedly 'spreading all over the country'.

²⁵ See S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion* (Oxford, 1970), Ch. V for an incisive account of these processes.

²⁶ See J. Lambert, 'Africans in Natal, 1880-1899: Continuity, Change and Crisis in a Rural Society', unpublished Ph.D, University of South Africa, 1986.

²⁷ See P. la Hausse, 'Drink and Cultural Innovation in Durban: The Origins of the Beerhall in South Africa, 1902-1916', unpublished paper, 1989.

the early 1900s it was generally the younger, unmarried sons of homestead heads (*abanumzana*) who were forced into the colonial labour market in order to generate the cash incomes needed to lighten the economic burden on homesteads. These youths, sometimes as young as ten, had witnessed the dwindling of their fathers' stock together with the erosion of their duties at the cattle-posts. For them, 'life changed suddenly'.²⁸

If impoverishment determined the position of the Reserves as the main labour exporting areas,²⁹ less easy to map are the social patterns which appear to have regulated migrant workers' access to different sectors of Durban's labour market. There is evidence to suggest that by the turn of the century certain smaller sectors of Durban's labour market had become identified with individuals from particular ethnic groupings and localities. Durban's ricksha-pullers were predominantly from Mahlabatini, while the three hundred African members of the Borough Police hailed from Mapumulo. Similarly, *Amabhaca* carved out an economic niche for themselves as the town's sanitary workers.³⁰ It also appears that the Qwabe section of the larger togt workforce also defended and controlled their jobs on the basis of such rural identities.

Yet if ethnic ties were important in weaving the social fabric of Durban's labour market, so too was age. By 1904 possibly as many as 6,000 youths, some of whom were as young as twelve, were employed as 'kitchen *umfaans*' — general domestic servants who bore the brunt of domestic work in Durban's white households.³¹ For a first generation migrant worker his first point of entry into the town's labour market was invariably through the service sector. Finding work as a 'houseboy' marked the first of a number of possible subsequent forms of employment, usually on the basis of six-month contracts. The identification of African domestic service with very young workers (between the ages of 12 and 20) appears to have been the result of a complex process of negotiation between colonizer and colonized. While domestic work served to induct youths into the world of the white employer in which they learned the language of their mistresses (*isingisi somesisi*), young unmarried males were also potentially more exploitable than older men with wider social and economic responsibilities. Moreover, it is quite likely that despite the erosion of the regimental system, many workseekers entering Durban did so on the basis of age-sets of migrants from particular rural

²⁸ See Interview with G. Sivetye.

²⁹ In 1904 67% of Durban's African workers came from Natal and 29% from Zululand. In Natal, the Reserves had the highest migrant populations together with Eshowe, Nkandhla, Mahlabatini and Nqutu in Zululand. See *Natal Census Report* (Pietermaritzburg, 1904); and Hemson, 'Dockworkers', p. 56.

³⁰ Interview with G. Zungu by P.la Hausse, H. Matiwane and I. Edwards, Clairwood, 3 August 1986. The genesis and development of ethnic-based sectors of the labour market has still to be periodised. For differential accommodation of workers on ethnic lines see, NA, DCL, No. 547, Superintendent of Police to Town Clerk (TC).

³¹ The figure of 6000 is a rough estimate. In 1904 there were 30 100 Africans in domestic work in Natal. By 1909 5% of all working males in Natal were under the age of fourteen years. See NA, Secretary for Native Affairs (SNA), 477, 3566/1910. For the corporate nature of the domestic service sector nineteenth century Durban, see Atkins, 'Cultural Origins', pp. 250–60.

areas.³² In the case of domestice service, it appears that elements of Zulu social structure were reinforced from above by whites with well-developed ideas about the importance of age hierarchies in Zulu society,³³ and from below by older workers themselves. The notion that domestic service was a form of labour appropriate only to women or youths appears to have been a common sense idea popularly held by African men from at least the turn of the century.³⁴

It was in the context of this corporate sense of identity amongst domestic servants (welded by age and possibly rural origins) that *amalaita* gangs were formed. As one white burgess of Durban noted: 'These leita gangs are not merely groups of turbulent *umfaans*, they are organised bands having for their object the terrorising of the police and the defiance of authority'.³⁵ The limited evidence for the early 1900s makes the task of disaggregating the gangs — especially in terms of their inner structure and workings — extremely difficult. It is possible, however, to periodise and suggest their broader patterns of rebellion. In noting the occurrence of stick-fighting between *amalaita* gangs Durban's Superintendent of Police could not help noticing that their 'game' was similar to that 'practised by older warriors the other side of the Berg'.³⁶

With the destruction of the Zulu kingdom in the decade after 1879, the cohesion of Zulu society, based on vertical and horizontal loyalties constituted by the Zulu king and age-regiments respectively, collapsed. It was in this context that *umgangela* — a large organised and highly-ritualised inter-district stick-fight — emerged as a mechanism to cope with increasing antagonisms along horizontal lines. Some parts of Natal, at least, witnessed the emergence of similarly ritualised forms of stick-fighting.³⁷ It seems possible that the Superintendent of Police was in fact alluding to the mobilisation of elements of the *umgangela* by youth in Durban. Certainly the ritualised nature of *amalaita* activity, as suggested in a number of sources, indicates that this probably was the case. In more general terms, however, stick-fighting (*ngcweka*) between youths of the same age-set was a central aspect of socialisation amongst Zulu youth. Interestingly stick-fighting was also known as *ukudala ngenduku* ('to play with sticks'). It was governed by strict codes and conventions, particularly the rules of 'fair-play', and organised internally along lines of age and degrees of competence ranging from the very young who

³² The *isibalo* system relied on the mobilisation of elements of the regimental system. See Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, p. 43. By 1910 youths were fleeing to Durban or the Rand to avoid *isibalo*.

³³ See, for example, NA, DCL, No. 583, Chief Constable (CC) to TC, 20 March 1908; and PRB 7, 1 March 1906. In 1904, R.C. Alexander warned: 'It will be a bad day for Natal when the old men die'.

³⁴ See, for example, CAD, K373, C.C. Nyawo, p. 32; and Interview with H. Kuzwayo by P. la Hausse and E. Mbele, Oqaqeni, 11 January 1989, for an account of the humiliating experience of looking after a younger sibling whilst peers were herding cattle in Kranskop around 1912.

³⁵ *Natal Mercury*, 3 July 1902.

³⁶ NA, PRB, 6, 7 June 1901.

³⁷ See J. Clegg, 'Ukubuyisa Isidumbu — "Bringing back the Body"'. An examination into the ideology of vengeance in the Msinga and Mpfana rural locations, 1882-1944' in P. Bonner (ed), *Working Papers in Southern African Studies*, Vol. 2 (Johannesburg, 1978), pp. 167-9. The Tembu variant of *umgangela* was known as *uphenge*.

fought with *izinswazi* (switches), to the senior *izingqwele* — champion stick-fighters who controlled the youth group as a whole.³⁸ Despite the highly competitive nature of stick-fighting, as the one description of *ukuqagulisana* suggests,³⁹ death was seldom the result of such encounters. Indeed informants who were young boys in Natal in the 1910s testify to the codes of conduct associated with stick-fighting.⁴⁰ As a central feature of a more general way of life structured around *ukwalusa* (cattle-herding), stick-fighting was also importantly constituted over territory. While individual competition revolved around the establishment of rank within an age-set, collective stick-fighting was often fuelled by conflict over the grazing rights of cattle in particular localities.⁴¹

Seen in these terms, then, the presence in Durban of 'small forces' of youths aged between 16 and 24 who, armed with sticks, 'beat any other native they came across', has an obvious resonance with the stick-fighting of rural youth.⁴² The cultural continuities between town and countryside should not, however, mask the ways in which *amalaita* activities represented an innovation on forms of rural youth association — activities which, when refracted through the eyes of local officials, came to be seen as 'wilful, malicious and premeditated' acts demanding prosecution under criminal law and not breach of the peace bye-laws.⁴³

In a town where age had definite prescriptive powers in the workplace it is conceivable that the £1.10s a month earned by some domestic workers ('four times the amount they are entitled to') was, at least after the economic boom of 1902-03, more the exception than the rule.⁴⁴ The differential experience of wage-labour along age lines, together with the social solidarities of youth, encouraged the formation of youth gangs and might have established 'judicious thieving' as a part of their activities.⁴⁵ The depression of 1904-09 clearly did, however, force some of the youth groupings living in Durban's backyards and slum areas into adopting new

³⁸ James Stuart, *Studies in Zulu Law and Custom* (Durban, 1903); and Interview with F. Zondi by P. la Hausse and M. Marrengane, Maqadini, 25 February 1987. Also cf. P. and I. Mayer, 'Socialisation by Peers' in P. Mayer (ed) *Socialisation: The Approach from Social Anthropology* (London, 1970), pp. 164-72, for the role of stick-fighting amongst 'Red Xhosa' in an extended process of youthful induction into the world of adults; and Delius, 'Sebatagomo', pp. 584-589.

³⁹ This was a form of 'stick-fencing' possibly current in the late nineteenth century. It, too, was governed by strict codes of conduct and began with a challenge (*ubedu*) from one individual to another. Samuelson, *Long, Long Ago*, pp. 373-4; and Stuart, *Studies*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ Interview with F. Zondi, 25 February 1987. and Interview with S. Ndhlovu by P. la Hausse and E. Mbele, Durban, 27 February 1987.

⁴¹ For a herd-boy *ingoma* (dance-song) whose lyrics reflect the fiercely territorial nature of cattle-herding, see H. Tracey, *Lalela Zulu*, (Johannesburg, 1948), p. 12.

⁴² NA, PRB, 7, 2 May 1904. As G. Sivetye recalled: 'They ('houseboys') wanted exercise and the exercise they knew quite well was hitting (with sticks)'. Interview with Sivetye.

⁴³ NA, *South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-05*, Minutes of Evidence, Vol. 3, p. 645.

⁴⁴ NA, PRB, 6, 28 January 1901. The average monthly wage of domestic servants was probably £1.00 with food and accommodation.

⁴⁵ Petty theft, particularly of agricultural produce, was an integral part of rural youth activities. See KCAL, Oral History Collection, KCAV 378, Interview with T. Dhlamini by B. Mkize, KwaMashu, 31 August 1981. and cf. Delius, 'Sebatagomo', p. 585.

patterns of criminality. Some workseekers covered their entry into town by taking out a tog badge and proceeded to 'prowl about on the look out for plunder'. By 1904 deaths were being reported after *amalaita* clashes. Small wonder, then, that with large-scale unemployment amongst domestic workers after 1904 'idle vagabonds' under the age of twenty, having recently been released from prison, could be found wandering in Durban's streets, impervious to the threat of re-imprisonment. Driven violently off Durban's pavements by white males and frequently fired without notice by employers, it seems likely that young 'houseboys' adapted the 'country stick-fight' to suit the exigencies of their situation in a racially-oppressive colonial town. In short, 'they learned to hit anybody'.⁴⁶

If the solidarity of the youth group in general, and the *amalaita* in particular, represented ways of shoring up the social dislocation which proletarianisation and dispossession carried in their wake, white officialdom came to associate the creation of a 'multitude of ne'er-do-wells' and the 'the notorious 'leita' gangs' with the 'loss of identity'. In a town where the contours of master-servant relations seemed to be threatened at every point, the anxieties of Durban's white population found expression in myths of social pathology. Of particular concern was the dissolute 'town boy' — 'the irresponsible ... younger generation of 20 years and under who have grown up since the Zulu War of 1879 (who have) no conception of our justice or our might'.⁴⁷ Paradoxically, the ways in which youths in town attempted to cope with the ways in which migrancy skewed rural social solidarities and *ukubuthwa* (the traditional means of initiation into manhood), was seen by whites as distinctly threatening.

White perceptions of African youths' loss of the 'proper control or good influence of the old men', was endorsed by the most prominent member of Durban's African *khulwa* (Christian) elite, Rev. John Dube. In the columns of *Ilanga* he commented:

You find youths ... wandering about playing concertinas, smoking cigarettes being insolent and defiant ... and then you behold the foundation stone for good in a race which was established by Tshaka, long since crumbled.⁴⁸

This heightened concern over uncontrolled youth can be traced to the immediate aftermath of the Bambatha rebellion in 1906. Not only did the poll tax strike at the fragmented population of farm and Reserve dwellers in Natal and Zululand, it placed an additional economic burden on younger men who were already responsible for earning income for their fathers' hut tax. For many of these youths the possibilities of accumulating money for the purposes of *lobolo* must have receded

⁴⁶ Interview with Sivetye.

⁴⁷ NA, SNA, 367, 1116/1907, Report of Magistrate, Umlazi, 1907; and Report of Magistrate, Alexandra Division, 1907.

⁴⁸ *Ilanga lase Natal*, 4 January 1907, (Translation).

into an ill-defined future.⁴⁹ Certainly, by 1912 complaints about homestead-heads' loss of control over youths who 'spend their own money', 'forget all about their kraals', and who returned to the countryside bearing little more than concertinas, became endemic.⁵⁰

In 1907 the first report which attempted to disaggregate the 'large number of Native thieves and vagabonds' in Durban appeared. It outlined the existence of three types of gangs: firstly, at least nine criminal gangs each having appointed leaders and most of which operated from some of Durban's over one hundred shebeens — representing the most fiercely contested space in the town; secondly, a large number of gangs comprising many unemployed seven to twenty year olds who lived off 'sneak thieving and gambling'; and thirdly, a group of gangs which was differentiated from others by the name *amalaita*, an ability to 'wage war against another gang' and the presence of domestic servants in their ranks.⁵¹

These distinctions provide vital clues to the making and transformation of youth organisation in Durban during this period. The distinction between the criminal housebreakers — *isigebengu* (probably containing a strict hierarchy within their membership) and youth gangs, was one which had been alluded to previously.⁵² It would seem reasonable to suppose that the *amalaita* gang led by Msuluzana Ngongoma, a hunchback from Mapumulo, displayed a form of criminal organisation akin to that of the Ninevites or *isigebengu*.⁵³ Yet the more general location of the *amalaita* on the boundary separating youthful rebellion from professional criminal activity confirms an interpretation of the *amalaita* gang as a traditionalist form of youth organisation born of the experience of migrant labour.

The broader strength of youth-based rituals and the solidarities of the age-group in the urban setting to which the report of 1907 alludes, was rarely captured in other official accounts of the *amalaita*. Indeed, in Durban the custodians of public order and racial discipline seldom attempted to differentiate between what were, in all likelihood, relatively discrete forms of African association in town. There can be little doubt that those groupings which were described as being led by 'captains and officers', whose members were 'boys who have run away from their homes' who were 'town boys living by their wits', corresponded to a particular reality on the ground in the turbulent post-war reconstruction period.⁵⁴ Yet from a close reading of available evidence, particularly that gathered by the 1912 Commission into

⁴⁹ The Natal Code of Native Law stipulated ten head of cattle as the maximum payable for wives. During 1897–8, however, up to six-sevenths of African owned cattle died. See Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, p. 128.

⁵⁰ See, for example, CAD, K373, P. Magidi and J.T. Mqwambi, p. 25.

⁵¹ NA, SNA, 361, 197/07, R.H. Arnold to Chief Magistrate (CM), 14 January 1907. Arnold claimed to have located six *amalaita* gangs with an estimated strength of a least 150. The number of youth gangs appear to have been indeterminate.

⁵² Superintendent Alexander was deeply concerned about the criminalisation of youth through imprisonment. See NA, PRB, 7, 1 August 1905; and *Ilanga lase Natal*, 11 January 1907.

⁵³ Ngongoma was remembered by G. Sivetye as the 'chief of the amalaitas in Durban' around 1906. See Interview with Sivetye. For forms of Ninevite organisation, see van Onselen, *New Nineveh*, pp. 182–6.

⁵⁴ See CAD, K373, *passim*.

Assaults on Women, it is possible to construct an account of the *amalaita* in the pre-Union period as a form of migrant association through which a tightly-bounded sense of rural identity was expressed and defended in the urban context. Prominent features of African youth's presence in town such as running four abreast through Durban's streets, the beating of lone youths by gangs armed with sticks at night, the collective confrontation of black women by youth groups (*qomisa*), spoke more eloquently of the world of rural youth than that of urban criminality. Indeed, the fact that such groups of youths never stole from the victims of their attacks is a recurrent theme preserved in popular memory.

Perhaps more than anything it was the struggle by migrant youth for control over urban space which bestowed upon the *amalaita* their distinctive identity. During a period of intense conflict between white residents and migrant workers over private and public space the 'raw Zulu houseboy type' found himself at the centre of these struggles.⁵⁵ Subject to new forms of etiquette and discipline (particularly at the hands of white women) and often accused of indecent assault in the intimate space of the white household, young domestic workers responded to the cultural misunderstandings, conflicts and isolation characteristic of domestic service through gang formation and, most significantly, the appropriation of streets at night. In the case of some gangs which began to reflect particularly novel identities and styles, their appearance in the streets could be dramatic:

Some of them have become members of Layita gangs with big pants, high-heel boots with their hats placed on the side of their heads, *ebusengi* (thin wire rings usually worn on wrists, upper arms or below the knee) and beads hanging all about their clothes.⁵⁶

The public identification of migrant youth with urban male criminality did, however, have important consequences. Every year hundreds of youths convicted of 'leita offences' (breach of the peace) were sentenced to several months hard labour and over ten lashes.

Clearly, then, there was no automatic graduation from youth group or gang to the ranks of *isigebengu*. Youth organisation (particularly that of the *amalaita*) was locked into rural economies and the ability of the family to absorb the young migrant worker into communities through marriage. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that patterns of behaviour created in town could sometimes be transposed back into the countryside. Whether the beatings which the *amapolisa esibalo* received at the hand of 'bands of older "young-men"' (*izinsizwa*) called out to perform forced labour on roads owed anything to forms of youthful organisation forged in town is difficult to say. More suggestive of the emergence of forms of urban youth organisation in the countryside were the reports of outbreaks of youth violence in areas where the erosion of chiefly authority and the fragmentation of rural communities following evictions and rapid proletarianisation had been particularly acute. The generational and class animosities underlying attacks by

⁵⁵ See CAD, K373, for the moral panic over the 'houseboy'.

⁵⁶ *Ilanga lase Natal*, 2 August 1907.

'leita' on policemen at Sikaleni, near Colenso and on *amakholwa* in Weenen between 1906 and 1908 were to become a feature of the *amalaita* in Durban in the following years.⁵⁷

'Lawless Bands of Youth': *Amalaita* Organisation and Consciousness, 1916–22

In 1918, the manager of Durban's Municipal Native Affairs Department noted with some uneasiness that 'the gradual disintegration of tribal conditions, and the attachment of some of the Natives to industrial habits, are influences which tend to give an element of permanency to the Native urban population'.⁵⁸ It was a concern shared, but for different reasons, by chiefs and homestead heads. Illegitimacy and the loosening of parental control over young wage-earners in towns deeply threatened production relations based in the homestead. Moreover, at a time when cattle for *lobola* payments were scarce, unmarried young men were reportedly refusing to pay off debts to the fathers of those women by whom they had had children — a development which precipitated demands from chiefs to reinvigorate customs such as *bophela* and *ukuhlala*.⁵⁹ If prostitution and illegitimacy came to symbolise the erosion of family ties and homestead authority, so too did the perceived disintegration of those youthful codes of behaviour and identities which underpinned economic and social relations associated with the homestead. In Durban itself the *amakholwa Iso lo Muzi* (Vigilance Committee) came to define the disciplining of youths who directed 'bad language' and 'unfit words' at African women, as one of its major duties.⁶⁰ Linked to the aggression of the *amalaita* gang, such challenges may have appeared more threatening. Certainly, between 1916 and 1921 there was an apparent resurgence of *amalaita* activity after a period of relative quiescence.

The First World War ushered in an era of industrial expansion in South Africa. In Durban the size of the black workforce employed by local industry increased from 7,530 in 1915–16 to 15,940 in 1919–20.⁶¹ By 1918 local industry was capable of

⁵⁷ See, for example, NA, SNA 367, 1116/07, Report of the Acting Magistrate, Alexandra Division, 26 January 1907; NA, SNA, 360, 72/07, Record of Proceedings at the Enquiry into an Assault on two Native Constables, 5 October 1906; and NA, SNA 392, 472/08, Magistrate, Weenen to Under SNA, 21 January 1908. It seems appropriate that militant rural youth gangs emerged in this area in the later twenties. See H. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa 1924–30* (Johannesburg, 1987), pp. 46–7. Youth groups known as the *amashologovana* also emerged here in the 1940s.

⁵⁸ J.S. Marwick, *Natives in the Larger Towns* (Durban, 1918), p. 1.

⁵⁹ NA, Chief Native Commissioners (CNC), 199, 205/1915, Proceedings of a Meeting held at Verulam, 23 February 1915.

⁶⁰ Between 1912 and 1916 Rev. C.C. Nyawo attempted to gain recognition for the *Iso lo Muzi* without much apparent success. For example see NA, DCL No. 635, C.C. Nyawo to TC, 19 September 1912; and cf. the Salvation Army initiative to establish 'bands and Boys Brigades' to 'mitigate the *skebenga* nuisance'. NA, CNC, 381, 3461A/19.

⁶¹ For more general indicators of industrial expansion in Durban during this period, see *Report on Industries in Durban 1915/16–1922/3*, Office of Census and Statistics, Special Report No. 28, Pretoria, 1924.

absorbing increasingly large numbers of landless or impoverished rural Africans. After 1910 the ability of local government to limit the size of Durban's African population to the labour needs of employers was considerably strengthened by the introduction of new labour registration bye-laws in 1916. Backed by penal sanctions, these bye-laws considerably tightened up procedures for work registration, pass and curfew laws and contracts of service.⁶² Despite the massive housing revenue generated by the municipal beer monopoly only about a quarter of Durban's nearly 30 000 African workers could be formally housed. Sometimes paying exorbitant rents to landlords and receiving wages which probably ranked amongst the lowest paid to urban workers in the Union, Durban's African workers experienced the post-1916 period as one of acute economic hardship. Then, in 1918, steep price rises and post-war inflation precipitated workers into strike action.⁶³

It was in this context that reports of the resurgence of *amalaita* activity after 1916 began to appear. The editor of the *Natal Mercury* angrily pointed to the 'menacing and violent behaviour of these bands of native hooligans' whose activities were 'visibly going from bad to worse'.⁶⁴ While admitting to 'a re-appearance of this lieta gang nuisance' and to weekly arrests of youths for playing mouth organs and congregating, a defensive Chief Constable denied that the gangs were organised. 'They are', claimed one police officer, 'more of a 'clique system (of) small umfaans working close to one another' whose activities were continually broken up by the police.⁶⁵ The fragmentary Durban Criminal Records together with oral testimonies provide some basis for understanding not only intensified *amalaita* activity during these years, but also the nature of *amalaita* organisation, structure and activities.

In 1919 four youths appeared in a Durban court on charges of 'congregating in a body armed with sticks and acting in a manner likely to cause a breach of the peace'. The accused shared their youth (three were eighteen years old and one was fifteen) as well as a common occupation in the same suburb.⁶⁶ Less apparent from the record, however, is the relationship between the subterranean ties and identities of migrant youth and the structure of the labour market. For it was at their point of intersection that the *amalaita* came into being.

In 1921 the first official figures reflecting the size of Durban's African domestic worker population put their numbers at 8 944. At least 7,590 of these were males, perhaps 75% of whom were below the age of twenty.⁶⁷ One man whose early job experiences might have been fairly typical of a new generation of migrant workers

⁶² *Mayor's Minute*, 1917, p. 15.

⁶³ See Hemson, 'Dockworkers', pp. 161-91; and la Hausse Ch. 2.

⁶⁴ *Natal Mercury*, 15 March 1916. Also see NA, Durban Magistrates' Correspondence, (DMC), 506, 4/14/1037/16, CM to CNC, 14 September 1916.

⁶⁵ NA, Durban Town Clerk's Files (DTCF), 3/DBN, 4/1/2/1341, 605, CC to TC, 15 March 1916; and J.F. McArthur to TC 18 March 1916.

⁶⁶ NA, DCR, Court B, Rex versus Makasonke Mbambo and 3 others, 17 November 1919.

⁶⁷ See *Census*, 1921, Part VIII, U.G. 40-24 and R.H. Smith, *Labour Resources of Natal* (Cape Town, 1950), pp. 65-8.

during this period is Gwazabantu Zungu. Having been compelled to seek wage labour at the young age of fifteen he found work as a domestic servant at Seaview in 1918, earning 15s a month. It took him at least four years to move out of domestic work into the world of store hands. Dragooned into the service sector young domestic servants ranked amongst the worst paid of urban workers.⁶⁸

The solidarities of the age group (*intanga*) and the sinews of rural home networks were not necessarily shattered by urban wage labour. Paradoxically, they often found fiercer expression in the urban setting. Not only did groups of workseekers bearing such ties attempt to find jobs as domestic servants in close proximity to one another, but their access to such jobs was frequently determined by pre-existing patterns of employment in each suburb.⁶⁹ With the high turnover of jobs in the service sector it is also possible that over time domestic work in particular suburbs became identified with youths from the same rural districts (*abakhaya*). Yet elderly men stress the importance of occupation and suburb in determining the constitution of gangs. Indeed, *abakhaya* working in different parts of town having been compelled, under threat of violence, to join up (*joyina*) with local gangs, could find themselves opposing *abakhaya* in inter-gang clashes. In this way the *amalaita* might have facilitated the creation of a more broadly-based, Zulu ethnic identity in town. Perhaps the *amalaita* served to continually, but unevenly, resolve these two apparently contradictory trajectories of youth association. It seems more likely, however, that various gangs reflected these tendencies to differing extents, depending on the level of proletarianisation, experience of wage labour and the intensity of the rural attachments of their members.⁷⁰ Either way, the *amalaita* were an expression of these existing youth solidarities in particular suburbs and even streets. Moreover, their mobilisation appears to have been part of a broader struggle which involved the utilisation of accessible cultural repertoires and ritual forms to defend the integrity of the group in the face of competition from 'outsiders'.

One court case is especially illuminating in this regard. In 1916 eighteen stick-wielding youths led by Mapandhla Dhladhla were arrested and charged with public violence. Eleven of the sixteen found guilty hailed from Ndwedwe, all were between the ages of sixteen and eighteen and most were subjects of Chief Kamanga. The evidence also suggests that most, if not all, bore the mark of domestic service: a red-trimmed calico uniform.⁷¹ Clearly, for many newly-proletarianised workers the potential depredations and loss of identity which accompanied wage labour could be partially met through an aggressive affirmation

⁶⁸ Interview with G. Zungu, 5 June 1987. In 1920, on average togt workers received 18s per week, domestic servants £2 to £3.10 a month, with food and lodging, ricksha pullers up to £6 a month and store workers £2.10s to £4 a month.

⁶⁹ Not least because 'home boys' swapped passes freely and returned to rural areas only after having organised a friend or kin member to replace them. See Interview with A. Tshabalala and C. Kumalo by P. la Hausse, Durban, 28 August 1986. For an early recognition of this tendency see CAD, K373, M. Barron, p. 10.

⁷⁰ For the primacy of territory in determining patterns of conflict in the countryside, see See Clegg, 'Ukubuyisa Isidumbu', p. 189–91.

⁷¹ NA, DCR, B Court, Rex versus Mapandhla Dhladhla and 18 others, 3 January 1916.

of regional ethnic ties which many *amalaita* gangs embodied.⁷² When welded along suburban lines and defined against similarly constituted groups the *amalaita* might have appeared more as 'street armies' than 'houseboys who disappear like rabbits the moment the police appear'.⁷³

Today some elderly men remember, with the animation of youth, the seemingly arbitrary violence of the *amalaita* — a number of whom suffered bruised bodies as a result of gang attacks.⁷⁴ Yet what is also apparent from their testimonies are the *amalaitas'* codes of behaviour and patterns of organisation. Gangs could number anything between ten and fifty members. While they do not seem to have evinced the elaborate hierarchies of criminal gangs, authority of the groups was vested in individuals whose physical appearance and stick-fighting skills set them apart from their followers. Leaders or *manqoba* (victors) were also responsible for mobilising the groups through *izingoma* performed with the aid of a mouth organ. The conflicts between *amalaita* gangs were most obviously played out over territory. *Amalaita* 'sections' were, it appears forged on distinct suburban lines: Sydenham, Greyville, Botanic Gardens and the Point, all spawned gangs with reputations for violence.⁷⁵ Clashes between gangs up to fifty in strength could be initiated with a verbal challenge or an insult directed at, for example, the poor quality of mouth organ playing by the leader of the opposing gang. Alternatively gang leaders could meet and arrange fights between their respective gangs. Immediately preceding the fights leaders would also engage in an elaborate display of stick-fighting skills (*giya*), an idiom associated with particular rural *izingoma*.⁷⁶ In the *mêlée* which followed, heads might be broken but fatalities were rare — members of *amalaita* who had been beaten to the ground would be left to lie in the streets to fight another night.⁷⁷

Reported 'outbreaks' of gang activity at particular moments tended to coincide with periods of increased economic hardship and the arrival of waves of newly proletarianised workseekers in town.⁷⁸ This in turn intensified levels of police repression. In the five years following 1916, arrests for vagrancy, drunkenness and breach of the peace increased dramatically.⁷⁹ The 'steady stream of arrivals from the

⁷² For possible examples of this see NA, DCR, C Court, Rex versus Hlobolo and 10 others, 25 January 1915; C Court, Rex versus Ngcibi Mtikazeli and 4 other, 17 March 1917; and B Court, Rex versus M. Mbambo, 17 November 1919.

⁷³ NA, DTCF, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/1341, 605, CC to TC, 15 March 1916.

⁷⁴ Interview with C. Kumalo, by P. la Hausse, Bruntville, Mooi River, 1 September 1986; and Interview with Zondi, 3 September 1986.

⁷⁵ Interview with Zungu, 5 June 1987; and Interview with N. Magwaza, by P. la Hausse and E. Mbhele, Umlazi, 27 August 1988.

⁷⁶ See J. Clegg, *Towards an Understanding of African Dance: The Zulu Isishameni Style*, Papers Presented at the 2nd Symposium on Ethnomusicology, 24–26 September 1981 (Grahamstown, n.d.) for the complex relationship between the idiom of stick-fighting and the development of new Zulu dance styles.

⁷⁷ Interview with Zondi; and Interview with Magwaza, 7 June 1987.

⁷⁸ Cf. van Onselen's periodisation of *amalaita* activity on the Rand, *New Nineveh*, pp. 57–9.

⁷⁹ Arrests for vagrancy jumped from 710 in 1915 to 2 411 in 1917 while arrests for breach of the peace increased from 454 to 760 during the same period. See *Mayor's Minute*, for the years 1915–17.

country districts' during this period probably resulted in intensified job competition amongst blacks. The potential threat which this influx could have posed to existing networks amongst 'houseboys' seems to have been met with increasingly violent mobilisation of *amalaita* gangs.⁸⁰ The assertion of age and/or ethnic identities by young first generation jobseekers themselves would have, if anything, increased the possibility of more intense conflict. In Durban's white working class suburbs where young domestic workers might have been driven harder and paid particularly low wages, *amalaitas* appear to have taken on a distinct character. Certainly, two *amalaita* 'sections' located in the poorer suburbs of the Point and Greyville earned a reputation for ferocity which was, possibly, accompanied by a greater willingness to engage in petty theft and incorporate unemployed youth into their ranks.⁸¹

Yet there may be another explanation for the fearsome reputation of what informants remember as the 'Point' and 'Greyville' gangs. Both areas housed large concentrations of dock and railway workers. Interestingly the collective membership of one Point *amalaita* gang, for example, did not clearly reflect the solidarities of either age grouping or rural district ties, but rather the patterns of domination and subordination associated with the workplace. Muhlatovu Zimela, a forty-year old *induna* at Renauds' barracks, was the leader of this gang which appears to have comprised mainly stevedores whose average age was twenty seven.⁸² Zimela's gang sounds much like the *Ingudla*, an '*amalaita*' of 'adult' dockworkers which were active in Durban at this time. That both official records and the testimonies of workers record such gangs as *amalaita* is suggestive of the strength and flexibility of forms of social organisation associated with rural youth. It is also conceivably an indication of extended demands made on the loyalty of members of youth association in adulthood as well as difficulties experienced in marriage.⁸³ Another example of this form of migrant organisation is provided by the case of a gang which Gwazabantu Zungu remembers as 'prominent in the *amalaita* class' and whose activities can be traced in official records. In 1919 the *Ngqolayomlilo* ('Fiery Wagons'), an *amalaita* gang probably from Greyville (comprising railway workers), was involved in a running battle with police.⁸⁴ It appears that the gang had attacked an Armistice Day celebration at which the Municipal Native Affairs Department had organised food hand-outs for workers. At a time when workers were striking for higher wages their action was hardly surprising. Particularly suggestive, however, is the fact that Zungu also refers to

⁸⁰ For reported deaths after *amalaita* clashes, see NA, DTCF, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/1341, 605, CC to TC, 15 March 1916.

⁸¹ Interview with S. Mtshali by P. la Hausse, Umlazi, 26 February 1987.

⁸² NA, DCR, C Court, Rex versus M. Zimela and 15 others, 3 January 1919. Interestingly Zimela's position as leader of the gang was clearly related to his position as an *induna* which itself probably related, at least, to his age. The number of gang members from particular districts was follows: Mtunzini (3), Eshowe (3), Melmoth (2), Ixopo (1), Camperdown (1), Bulwer (1), Nqutu (1), Hlabisa (1) and Cape Province (1).

⁸³ See Beinart's comments on the *indlavini* in 'The Family', p. 4.

⁸⁴ See NA, DMC, 513, 27/551/9, CM to CNC, 8 August 1919.

the *Ngqolayomlilo* as an *ibutho* (Zulu regiment) and certainly their name is remarkably evocative of a regimental one.⁸⁵

As periods of wage labour were drawn out by rural impoverishment or dispossession, it is likely that urban conditions of life, at least for some workers, came to constitute the bed-rock of their experience. One alternative for those who were unable or refused to be incorporated into the more 'respectable' ranks of clerks, messengers, artisans or workers, and who had lost the option of re-absorption into rural society, was to join the ranks of an emerging criminal underclass. One *amalaita* gang which showed signs of having integrated strong elements of urban criminal sub-culture into their repertoire was the Mkosi gang. Its terrain of activity comprised the shebeens and dance-halls of the multi-racial slum areas of Overport where, in 1922, thirty of its number were arrested for attacking revellers, and then policemen, at a 'creole' dance organised by American George — a popular local black boxer and illicit-drink dealer. Court records put the average age of the gang at twenty-three and suggest that membership was confined to domestic workers or the permanently unemployed. Of particular interest however is the fact that over half of the thirty accused shared sixty-four previous convictions between them. These ranged from culpable homicide, house breaking and theft and assault to gambling, desertion, pass forgery and liquor offences.⁸⁶

Ngozi Magwaza, in a remarkable interview, subsequently confirmed my initial speculation that members of the Mkosi gang had come into contact with the Ninevites who were active in Durban's Point Prison at this time.⁸⁷ Having watched British colonial troops slaughter and confiscate the cattle of his father during the Bambatha rebellion, Magwaza found employment with an itinerant gold prospector in his home district of Nkandhla. Around 1912 he made his way to Durban where he was employed initially as a storehand and then as a domestic worker. As a member of the Umgeni Road *amalaita* gang before 1918, he remembers the Mkosi gang as a group of unemployed individuals whose headquarters was a storm-water tunnel near the Greyville race-course. 'The Mkosi', he re-calls, 'were Nongoloza's people'. In testimony which raises some interesting questions about the relationship between criminal sub-culture and migrant youth organisation Magwaza remembers common *amalaita izingoma* in Durban during the period:

The child of Nongoloza is sleeping on the mountain!
Cow of Nongoloza!
Here is the Cow of Nongoloza!

⁸⁵ Interview with Zungu, 31 August 1986. Despite the collapse of the Zulu regimental system, the Native High Court frequently dealt with cases in which chiefs were charged with 'strengthening the army'. See G.W.K. Mahlobo and E.J. Krige, 'Transition from Childhood to Adulthood amongst the Zulus', *Bantu Studies*, VIII, 2 (1934), p. 182.

⁸⁶ See NA, DCR, C Court, Rex vs Matshinga Zulu and 29 others, 28 June 1922.

⁸⁷ For Ninevite activities during this period, see *Annual Report of the Director of Prisons for the Year 1919*, UG 54-'20, p. 48. In 1919 'a Ninevite affair was discovered, wherein it was planned to throw the European warders overboard from the ferry boat while crossing the bay'.

The performance of the following *ingoma* signalled the appearance of the gangs on Durban's darkening streets:

The sun sets!
Boy of Nongoloza!
The sun sets!⁸⁸

Yet Magwaza is careful to draw a distinction between what was almost definitely a Ninevite gang and migrant youth *amalaita* in Durban.

What seems clear, however, is that African youth in Durban came to invest profound symbolic power in a criminal gang whose fearsome traditions had, as Magwaza recalls, already spread widely amongst Zulu migrants. As members of a marginal social grouping whose activities centred around the aggressive assertion, within a peculiarly Zulu cultural idiom of an ill-formed male identity, it is perhaps little wonder that youth in the *amalaita* should have been inspired by the Ninevites. At least in the imagination of youth this largely Zulu criminal gang to have come to embody qualities of strength, power and perhaps even 'hard-heartedness', for by 1916 the term Nongoloza was being used by African youth in Durban to describe an *amalaita* leader.⁸⁹

The comparative evidence from Pietermaritzburg during this period casts useful light on this argument. As in Durban, particular streets in Pietermaritzburg marked finely drawn boundaries between invisible zones of control enforced by different *amalaita* known by names such as *Nkunzemnyama* ('black bulls'). Domestic workers who were the backbone of the gangs enjoyed a close relationship with *imihuqa* ('a wont work group' — according to Qhudení Gumede) whom they often supplied them with food. In Pietermaritzburg too, it appears that during this period migrant youth appropriated certain aspects of the symbolic language of an African criminal subculture, a process which could in part have related to the return of the founder of the Ninevites to Natal.⁹⁰ In the Midlands town it seems that the formations of migrant youth and those of unemployed adult criminals could enjoy the same name the Midlands town could be found followers of Nongoloza who were known as *Inqobashiya* ('he who conquers and moves on').

It is little wonder that in a town where the control of workers was achieved through rigorous policing and criminal sanctions attached to labour repressive laws, many Africans should have been exposed to elements of an emerging criminal sub-culture. Yet unlike the leader of the Ninevites, Jan Note, who claimed towards the end of his criminal career that he had 'long lost all touch with his

⁸⁸ Interview with Magwaza, 7 June 1987 and 27 August 1988.

⁸⁹ Interview Magwaza, 27 August 1988. This might also support the idea that the origins of the name Nongoloza (also rendered as Nongolozí in early reports) can be traced to the Zulu word *ngongolozí* ('hard-hearted person, one who cannot be influenced').

⁹⁰ Mzuzepi kaNomzimana (otherwise known as Jan Note or Nongoloza) as a 'happily reformed character', became a prison warder in Pietermaritzburg Goal in 1916. A month later he was convicted of rape and sentenced to eight years imprisonment. See NA, CNC 265B, 2065/1916; and Interview with Q. Gumede by P. la Hausse and M. Maponya, Umlazi, 24 June 1989.

people',⁹¹ the identity of *amalaita* youth would have been, for the most part during this period, closely bound up with a rural world. Even the Mkosi gang, as their name suggests, perhaps also nourished the hope of a return, in some form, to the land and the homestead. There can be little doubt, however, that many unmarried workers in the post-war period must have experienced a disjuncture between emerging social and economic responsibilities and the possibilities available for their fulfilment.

As early as 1904 the Durban Superintendent of Police had noted that the 'Native Convict' was regarded 'more in the light of Hero than Criminal' by 'his own people'. Even if Christian vernacular newspapers called for a meeting of the 'old men' (*uNdunankulu*) to suggest ways of dealing with uncontrolled *amalaita* activity,⁹² it seems that the gangs had the tacit, if not unambiguous, support of the African labouring poor during this period. There are suggestions that where local government and white townspeople saw 'lawless bands of youth', African workers might have regarded *amalaita* activity as emblematic of the customary freedoms enjoyed by rural youths. Certainly, Fanyana Zondi, an *induna* for much of his working life, did not regard *amalaita* gang members as criminals until the later Thirties.⁹³

Seen in this light it might be tempting to cast the *amalaita* into the mould of youthful social bandits.⁹⁴ But what were the precise limits of the *amalaita* gangs' rebellion? In many ways age was used to reinforce the potential marginality of African youth in Durban. The *amalaita* gang might have provided a refuge from which the young worker could define himself in relation to his exclusion from the world of older married men (*amadoda*), his inability to drink in municipal beer-halls and his potentially demeaning and subservient position as 'Dick' or 'Saucepan' in hot kitchens. There was also a forthright economic basis to such exclusion on the basis of age. In 1918, John Dube, as spokesman for striking workers, demanded differential wage increases based on age.⁹⁵

Moreover, removed from the social constraints of the family and deprived, at least temporarily, of those rites of passage which initiated youth into adult society, young workers were left to develop their own patterns of behaviour in ways appropriate to their new-found status within a particular stratum of urban workers. This tendency towards marginality must have given youth added impetus to affirm their identity in relation to those resources over which they *did* have some control:

⁹¹ See NA, CNC, 265B, 2065/1916, SNA to CNC, 6 December 1916. Also see van Onselen's useful discussion and qualification of the urban, lumpenproletarian nature of Ninevite criminality, *New Nineveh*, pp. 193–5.

⁹² See *Izindaba Zabantu*, 1 May 1916.

⁹³ Interview with F. Zondi. This is a view held almost uniformly by my informants, including the mission-educated.

⁹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm notes that the social bandit will be 'young and single or unattached, if only because it is much harder for a man to revolt against the apparatus of power once he has family responsibilities'. See *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester, 1978), pp. 17–18.

⁹⁵ See CAD, Secretary of Justice (JUS), 270, 4/267/18, Petition on J. Dube on behalf of Native Workers. Interestingly one reason for chiefs' resentment of *isibalo* was that young boys were paid the same wages as older men. See Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, p. 45.

physical strength, sexuality, and domestic work.⁹⁶ Perhaps, too, the frequent consumption of methylated spirits and *dagga* which many re-call as a hallmark of the gangs was another index of this. It is likely, too, that when the particular rituals associated with rural youth were reconstituted in an urban setting they emerged in a form which conferred on inter-youth conflict a novel competitiveness and violence.

Although a great deal of *amalaita* activity focussed on struggles between gangs over territory, the gangs also directed violence at other targets. On numerous occasions black members of the Borough Police were attacked, beaten and sometimes stabbed by *amalaita*. At one level the reasons for this animosity are obvious. In attempting to enforce breach of the peace and curfew bye-laws policemen frequently encountered youth gangs in suburban streets. Black policemen, however, were also known for their ferocity and their 'ignorance' — men who, as Gwazabantu Zungu re-called, 'only spoke with sticks'. For the *amalaita*, in particular, it is likely that these policemen not only symbolised collaboration with oppressors, but also presented young workers with a physical image of their own colonised status. Significantly, black policemen were derided as *aMantshingelana* — 'those who march in a straight line'.⁹⁷ For *amalaita* gangs who drew on fighting idioms rooted in older traditions of Zulu militarism and whose appropriation of the streets was accompanied by the performance of *ingoma* dance, it might have been an especially apposite term.

The consciousness underpinning *amalaita* rituals of rebellion is suggested by the iconography of their dress. In a town where workers' clothes frequently signalled their position within the African workforce, dress could have been made to assume different meanings. Gangs reinforced their control over territory by developing collective symbols of membership. Clothes might be embroidered with different coloured patterns or particular items of clothing could be worn by gangs in specific localities. Thus members of the 'Black Band' gang of Botanic Gardens all wore black-ribboned hats, others displayed the feathers of the *insingizi* (ground hornbill), while Ngozi Magwaza's gang all wore red ribboned headbands, an emblem which he first saw in use during the Bambatha rebellion. Other symbols with a particular historical resonance, such as the *umshokobezi* (ox-tails bound round the head), were worn by at least one gang. The *umshokobezi* was a traditional Zulu war emblem which had also been used by armed rebels in 1906. Unsuspecting workers traversing the terrain bounded by these symbols could be mercilessly beaten.⁹⁸ It was in the face of the recrudescence of gang activity in the post-war period that local government introduced new legislation prohibiting the carrying of a range of

⁹⁶ Cf. J.S. La Fontaine, 'Two Types of Youth Group in Kinshasa (Leopoldville)', in Mayer and Mayer (eds.), *Socialisation*, p. 208. For a richly suggestive discussion of 'liminality' in relation to the rites of passage in the African context, see V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca and London, 1972), pp. 93–111.

⁹⁷ Interview with S.S. Ngcobo by P. la Hausse and E. Mbele, Umlazi, 26 February 1987. An extremely evocative alternative meaning of this word is 'night-adder'.

⁹⁸ See Interview with Kumalo and Tshabalala, 28 August 1986; and Interview with Gumede. Also see *Natal Mercury*, 14 March 1916; and NA, DCR, Rex versus M. Dhladhla and 18 others.

different sticks by Africans. Undoubtedly the weapons of the *amalaita* were the more specific target of this legislation.⁹⁹ Whether the legislation had the desired effect is debatable, for at least one gang substituted their sticks with umbrellas.

The obvious capacity for violence which was displayed by *amalaita* gangs was also, however, rooted in a deep defensiveness. To some extent this is illustrated by the emergence of the *isihabahaba* — groups of domestic servants who appropriated female styles of dress and engaged in homosexual practices. In 1917 it was reported that ‘large numbers’ of *isihabahaba* — mostly ‘very good house servants’ — had emerged in Durban.¹⁰⁰ The relationship between these groups and *amalaita* gangs is unclear, although their tightly knit organisation appears to have had much in common with that of the *amalaita*, not least in the way it served to enforce the rural identity of youth through the generally strict avoidance of sexual contact with the relatively small number of black town women — commonly referred to as *isifebe* (prostitutes). Their use of *hlonipha* vocabulary,¹⁰¹ ‘marriage’ ceremonies and collective funds for the payment of fines all underscore a cultural distinctiveness and defensive autonomy shared by the *amalaita*. No doubt too, the appropriation of wages for these and other purposes by *amalaita* more generally, came to underscore the fears of homestead heads about the loss of control over young migrants’ incomes.¹⁰²

In many ways, then, *amalaita* gangs were inward-looking, conservative groupings which served to reinforce the rural identities of their members. They were social only within well-defined limits outside of which they had a remarkable capacity for youthful aggression. Their rebellion seldom extended further than attacks which were phrased in a language of traditionalism and directed at particular symbols of their oppression. Yet the tight networks and rural social solidarities embodied in the *amalaita* could provide the basis for the elaboration of alternative sources of control and authority amongst youth. In 1916, it was reported that the *amalaita* had established a central meeting place in a building where courts were held and rough justice meted out to individuals, probably for transgressions of youthful codes of behaviour.¹⁰³ Although their identification with the sub-culture of habitual criminals was not unambiguous, *amalaita* activity was for the most part associated with unmarried males who abandoned the youth group with the onset of adult responsibilities, particularly the establishment of homesteads. Nogozi Magwaza recalled leaving the *amalaita* when he began courting his future wife in the countryside (*ngaqala nqaqonywa*) — a time when ‘one should respect oneself

⁹⁹ See NA, DTCF, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/1223, 467B, Natives Carrying sticks — Amendment of General Bye-Law No. 71, 1920.

¹⁰⁰ NA, CNC, 341, 3271/1918, Det. Stevens (SAP) to Pietermaritzburg CID, 2 October 1917. Their sexual practices were similar to *hlobonga* — a form of external intercourse indulged in between male and female Zulu before marriage.

¹⁰¹ As a language of respect *hlonipha* mostly affected women but could also be used by youths in relation to an *ingwele* (the principal amongst a group of herd-boys).

¹⁰² For the collective pooling of wages by *amalaita* members for the payment of fines, see NA, CNC Vol. 250, 1438/1916, Report of Asst. Magistrate 13 September 1916; Interview with Kumalo and Tshabalala, 28 August 1986; and cf. Beinart ‘Origins of the Indhlavini’, p. 23.

¹⁰³ NA, CNC 250, 1438/1916, Asst. Magistrate to CM, Pietermaritzburg, 6 September 1916.

and stop misbehaving' and started 'doing men's jobs'. This was a common experience.¹⁰⁴ For the most part too, it seems unlikely that when youth returned to the countryside, they re-inserted themselves into rural society on the basis of newly-acquired urban patterns of organisation, not least because of the authority of headmen and family head.¹⁰⁵ Yet clearly, too, the gangs also possessed an organisational basis and culture from which more direct challenges to their conditions of oppression could be launched.

'King of the Criminals': Youth Organisation, Violence and Popular Protest, 1925–36

In 1931 Violet Sibusisiwe Makhanya wrote: 'The parental and tribal control of the days of Tshaka, Moshesh, Hintsa and Khama have died a natural death'.¹⁰⁶ It was an observation upon which John Dube elaborated. 'There have arisen', he claimed, 'certain groups of Natives who cannot be re-tribalised again under the system as it was before the white man came.'¹⁰⁷ In a society increasingly characterised by its class antagonisms, Dube found himself ambiguously drawn towards segregationist notions of 're-tribalisation'. His prescriptions for black South Africans, however, hinged on one important premise: that 'detrivalised' Africans — those who were educated, individual land owners, urban artisans or white-collar workers — should be accommodated on differential political and social lines. It was a point which Durban's liberal Joint Council of Europeans and Natives was at pains to make. The Council urged a recognition of the 'difference between the *umfaan* of 16 and 17, the respectable adult kraal native, and the growing class of educated native clerks, teachers, artisans etc.'¹⁰⁸ If this optimistic vision foundered in the face of government intransigence, by the later twenties it was also implicitly challenged from below by the swelling numbers of dispossessed African urban-dwellers frequently 'contaminated with the criminal classes'. Ironically, too, it was from the fractured ranks of Dube's own class that his vision was challenged: from the lower middle class leadership of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union which established branches in Durban and the countryside of Natal after 1925.

The social dislocation which industrialisation in South Africa had carried in its wake was exacerbated after the mid-Twenties by the intensified capitalisation of agriculture. In Natal, the expansion of sheep farming and wattle plantations in particular, led to the mass eviction of labour tenants and the impoverishment of

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Interview with T. Dhlamini.

¹⁰⁵ This was certainly the case with Ngozi Magwaza. See Interview with Magwaza, 7 June 1987; For the absence of rural gangs also see Interviews with Zondi, 25 February 1987; and Interview Zungu 31 August 1986. At this stage it is, however, difficult to generalise about this. Also see Beinart, 'The Family'.

¹⁰⁶ V.S. Makhanya, 'The problem of the Zulu Girl', *Natal Native Teachers' Journal*, X, 3 (April 1931), p. 119.

¹⁰⁷ UW, Church of the Province Archives (CPSA), AD 1438, Native Economic Commission (NEC), AD 1438, Box 12, Evidence of J.L. Dube.

¹⁰⁸ University of South Africa (hereafter UNISA), ICU Microfilm, Reel 1, Extract from Report of Joint Council of Europeans and Natives, June 1930.

many more. These conditions provided the crucible in which the ICU was transformed into a mass movement seeking freedom from worsening conditions of oppression.¹⁰⁹ For those Africans who were pushed into towns, conditions were generally no less bleak. By 1925 Sydenham, Mayville, and South Coast Junction were supporting over 22,000 Africans, three quarters of whom were living as families, and many of whom worked in Durban.¹¹⁰ Unable to find work and desperate for additional family incomes, many female members of these households resorted to the illegal brewing of beer. In Durban itself half of Durban's 40,000 African workers were living in municipal barracks. Even in real terms their wages had barely risen, and in some cases had declined, during the Twenties. Rising levels of worker exploitation were coupled with increasing levels of coercion. The Urban Areas Act and a battery of labour-repressive bye-laws tightened up control over workers' daily lives. It was in this context that the ICU's Durban Branch succeeded in capturing the imagination of workers.

The fierce populism which Union officials succeeded in moulding tended to dissemble the extent to which the ICU *yase* Natal was a vehicle for the class interests of its leadership. Between 1929 and 1930 the Union's leadership was radicalised from below by its increasingly desperate constituency, resulting in fierce riots in June 1929 and a year-long boycott of municipal beer-halls. Yet popular support for the Union remained dependent on the ability of the Union to meet rank-and-file demands for higher wages. It was during the onset of depression and the restructuring of Durban's labour market that the Communist Party of South Africa succeeded in drawing a large section of the ICU's disillusioned and desperate membership into its 1930 pass-burning campaign.¹¹¹

It might be expected that these processes of class formation and mass political mobilisation, combined with new levels of rural impoverishment and depression, should have served to refashion the nature of *amalaita* gang activity. Although it is difficult to trace patterns of gang activity through official records during this period, where the gangs do appear, they do so in two apparently new contexts. Firstly, in the slum communities on the boundaries of the town and, secondly, in the rhetoric, at least, of ICU organisers. Moreover, the *amalaita* gang came to provide a motif for heightened government and liberal concern over the 'demoralisation of the Native' and the 'making of criminals'. The attack by what police called an '*amalaita*' gang on a white man in Mayville in 1924 was probably an unusual occurrence; less so however, was the incidence of knife-assaults by 'ill-disposed and

¹⁰⁹ See H. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*.

¹¹⁰ Sydenham alone supported an African population of at least 10,000 in the later twenties. In 1925, half of Mayville's African population of 8,000 comprised women and children. See NA, DTFC, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/1219, 467, *Report of Health Committee of Durban Joint Council*, 1925.

¹¹¹ For these struggles see P. la Hausse, 'The Message of the Warriors: The ICU, the Labouring Poor and the Making of a Popular Political Culture in Durban, 1925-1930' in P. Bonner et al (eds), *Holding Their Ground: Class, Locality and Conflict in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1989).

habitually idle natives in Durban'.¹¹² By the end of 1925 it was with a degree of nostalgia that police reports invoked the gangs of the immediate post-war period.¹¹³

As the testimony of a number of elderly ex-domestic workers suggests, many young men attempted to secure better-paid jobs after working a few years as 'houseboys'.¹¹⁴ This transition was no doubt related to increased pressure on individuals to accumulate wealth for *lobolo*, remit wages to homesteads and to cover an increased tax burden after 1925.¹¹⁵ Yet many workers must have struggled to effect this transition in a period of increased levels of exploitation, unemployment and depression. One alternative might have been to inject traditionalist forms of youth organisation with the content of urban criminality. As Selby Ngcobo noted, rural youth who brought their 'traditions' from the countryside to Durban did so in a context where some of their number were already 'soldiers' in groups whose emblems had become sjamboks, electric wires, sticks with iron heads and knives, and whose activities included housebreaking.

In 1929 Charles Dube pointed to some of these more complex processes underlying forms of migrant youth and criminal association in Durban. He indicated the existence of three kinds of gangs, all 'well organised'. Firstly, those living off earnings prised out of gambling operations, secondly, 'lieta gangs' composed mostly of *umfaans* and led by full grown men. And, finally, '*skebengas*' who 'if necessary take the life of any person' and 'break up stores and steal'.¹¹⁶ At least some of this gang activity, as Dube acknowledged, was generated by massive social dislocation. Gang-formation must have been one response to conditions where family life was skewed by overcrowding and economic hardship.¹¹⁷ In explaining their membership of gangs some of Dube's informants claimed:

We are required to pay for the Poll tax, lodging and boarding, and if we cannot find employment quick enough, we get arrested and lodged in jail ... when we come out we have to look sharp and try to do something to make a living. The wages as a rule are low and we cannot make ends meet and the next thing we are compelled to steal, gamble, or *gebenga* ... Most of these organisations have funds and are able to assist their fellowmen when they are in trouble.¹¹⁸

Despite the more alarmist reports connecting youth and the *amalaita* with urban criminality, most evidence points to the continued existence of widespread

¹¹² CAD, JUS, 270, 4/157/18, Dist. Comdt., SAP to Dep. Comm., SAP, 21 July 1924; and also see, NA, DTCF, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/1224, 467B, CC to TC, 3 November 1925.

¹¹³ See U.W., NEC, AD 1438, Box 6, Durban Joint Council, pp. 6325–27. for an attempt to construct an account of the juvenile nature of *amalaita* activity.

¹¹⁴ See Interview with Zungu, 5 June 1987; Interview with S.Ngcobo by P. la Hausse and E. Mbele, Umlazi, 26 February 1987; and Interview with Zondi, 3 August 1986.

¹¹⁵ The tax burden on young, unmarried African males increased with the passing of the Native Taxation and Development Act (1925).

¹¹⁶ *The Natal Missionary Conference, Annual Report* (Lovedale, 1929), pp. 15–17.

¹¹⁷ By 1930 most African families must have been struggling to make ends meet. For family budgets see U.W., CPSA, AD 1438, NEC, A note on some Native Budgets, Durban Joint Council, 1928.

¹¹⁸ *Missionary Conference Report*, p. 16.

networks of self-organised migrant youth in the town. Yet, as Gqovala Dhlamini, the leader of the Point *amalaita* gang in 1917 testified, the composition and structure of the gangs were subject to continual change. Speaking as a 'respectable' employee of ten years standing in 1929, he claimed to know 'many of the older Lieta Leaders'. In a climate of intense rank-and-file militancy, however, there were 'many new ones' whom he did not know.¹¹⁹ The formation of an *amalaita* gang by Chief Jono in the later twenties was probably a defensive reaction to increasing population pressure on the outskirts of Durban. If so, it soon assumed the predatory character apparently shared by an increasing number of gangs, and was responsible for 'terrorising' the shack population of the district.¹²⁰

The processes of class-formation which threw urban gangs into being also served to mould emerging urban underclass identities and styles. The *abaqhafi*, for example, signalled their self-conscious urbanism through their dress — wide open shirts, coloured scarves and Oxford bags tied below the knee. Much like the *amagxagxa* (a term used to describe ostensibly rural individuals whose cultural identity was based on a rejection of both traditionalism and Christianity) the *abaqhafi* were an interstitial social grouping. Their particular innovation on the traditionalism of migrant youth, however, related to their structural position as largely unemployed migrants. Reuben Caluza, who wove the *abaqhafi* into the lyrics of his songs, evocatively described them as 'modern men...who misbehave and no longer return home'.¹²¹ Looking in from the polite edges of the urban social order, members of Durban's embattled African intelligentsia characterised the 'heterogeneous mixture of detribalised Natives' as a 'problem within a problem'. Their unease was focused not simply on the rituals and symbols associated with the 'dangerous classes', but on the alternative values denoted by such patterns of behaviour. It was precisely the autonomy of the beer brewer, the restlessness of the *abaqhafi* and the rebellion of the *amalaita* which carried with them the potential for other kinds of collective mobilisation.

Indeed, in 1929 a Natal Native Congress meeting attended by 'several chiefs and respectable Natives' was interrupted by a stick-wielding *amalaita* gang which forced John Dube to make a less than respectable departure out of one of the windows they had smashed. The reason for the attack was apparently related to *Ilanga's* criticism of 'all night dances' and was organised by 'certain leaders and agents'. In short, by the 'riff-raff of the Union' — ICU activists.¹²² Then, a few months later,

¹¹⁹ CAD, JUS, K22, Box 2, Native Unrest in Durban — Affidavits and Statements, No.23, G. Dhlamini, 12 November 1929.

¹²⁰ NA, SNA, 444, 3053/09, J. Dube to CNC, 7 December 1927. Chief Jono was to provide a crucial link between ICU supporters in the peri-urban areas and Union officials in Durban in 1929.

¹²¹ Lovedale Sol-fa Leaflets, 7C, *U Bhungca (ama Oxford Bags)*. A. Vilakazi refers to the *abaqhafi* as the *isotsis* of the Twenties and Thirties who emerged prior to the *amagxagxa*. See *Zulu Transformations* (Pietermaritzburg, 1965), pp. 76–8. According to informants *abaqhafi* means 'drinkers of spirits' ('white man's liquor'). See Interview with Zondi, 3 September 1986; and Interview with C. Khumalo.

¹²² *Ilanga lase Natal*, 5 April 1929.

during the height of the beer boycott, black police informants reported that 'all the Lietas today are in league with the ICU'.¹²³

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which *amalaita* gangs in Durban were incorporated into Union organisation during the turbulent 1929-30 period. Nor is it clear which gangs might have been drawn into the Union. Yet, embedded in the local context are numerous clues which suggest that this mobilisation could have been fairly extensive. As rural refugees, as artisans whose skills had been devalued and as victims of a racially-oppressive society the lower middle class leadership of Durban's ICU was well-placed to identify with the daily struggles of the town's predominantly migrant workforce. Posterity has cast A.W.G. Champion, the Secretary of the Natal ICU, in a variety of moulds: from 'city boss' to upwardly mobile (and corrupt) urban entrepreneur. Yet the considerable cultural skills which he used to mobilise a popular constituency have been largely overlooked.

The success of the Union's populism hinged, at least in the short term, on its ability to create and provide for the expression of a common sense of identity amongst workers. The fiery political message of Union leaders' public speeches was reworked within the confines of the dance-hall. Cultural idioms ranging from ragtime, brass bands and mission choirs to *isicatamiya* and *ingoma* served both to express and disguise emerging class distinctions within Durban's African population. Thus, the self-conscious mobilisation of traditional idioms by young male domestic workers through *ingoma* dance could underscore the populist message of the Union. It is also likely that an *ingoma* song performed by 'houseboys', some of whose words ran: 'Who has taken our country from us? Come Out! Let us Fight!', would have found a deep resonance well beyond their own ranks.¹²⁴ Significantly, too, it was at C.D. Tusi's dance-hall that Champion held secret meetings with *amalaita* leaders, possibly to organise beer-hall pickets.

At times the Union, at least in its public aspect, took on an appearance more in character with a popular militia than an organised trade union. The period after 1925 marked the genesis in Durban of a popular political culture which was strongly authoritarian in nature, deeply infused with the symbols of Zulu militarism and which contained the threat of popular violence. Most Union mass-meetings were stamped with the presence of stick-wielding groups singing regimental anthems (*amahubo lamabutho*) and also militias such as the ICU Volunteers and Women's Auxiliary, who 'dressed in uniform and carried sticks in military positions'. In a town where Union meetings could be postponed because of the inability of domestic workers to attend, it is more than probable that patterns of cultural expression associated with youth gangs were absorbed into this political culture.

There might have also been contingent reasons for the infusion of elements of criminal sub-culture into the Union. In August 1929 six prominent officials of the

¹²³ CAD, JUS, K22, Box 2, Affidavits and Statements, No. 23, G. Dhlamini, 12 November 1929. Also see No. 27, C. Nxaba, 12 November 1929 and No. 34, T. Myeza, 13 November 1929.

¹²⁴ See M. Perham, *African Apprenticeship* (New York, 1974), pp. 196-9.

Union were arrested and sentenced to several months imprisonment for addressing a prohibited meeting. It may have been coincidental, but three months later rumours of an intended gaol mutiny broke out. Perhaps with the memory of a Ninevite combination in 1927 still fresh in their minds, local police took the rumour seriously. Moreover, Union leaders had claimed that if imprisoned, they would 'commence a secret propaganda school' in gaol with the 'object of causing a mutiny'.¹²⁵ Perhaps there was some reason other than personal whim which encouraged Champion to glory in the name 'King of the Criminals' at the end of 1929.

At the time of Champion's deportation from Natal by the Minister of Justice in October 1930 *amalaita* support for the ICU was invoked at mass meetings partially, no doubt, to threaten white authority with their own fears of unbridled black violence and *amalaita* 'criminality'. For example, Hamilton Msomi, a leading local ICU organiser, violently pronounced that: 'Champion was the leader of the Amlieta gangs in Durban and District (and) that in consequence of (his) removal these gangs (will) buy up all knives from the stores in Durban and use them freely'. 'Who', he demanded, 'was there to stop the *amalaita* when he was gone, was he not their head and guide?'¹²⁶ In the same breath Msomi announced that the ICU was 'firmly rooted in all the kitchens'. The extent of *amalaita* involvement in ICU activities which partial evidence suggests, needs to be tempered with a broader understanding of rank-and-file militancy. One cannot help noticing, however, a recurrent motif in the speeches of activists during late 1930: the 'houseboy'. For example, in one of numerous exhortations to domestic workers, Johannes Nkosi, the ex-'houseboy' who became secretary of the Communist Party in Durban, called on these 'slaves to women in kitchens' to: 'carry your puddings to us on Dingaan's Day ... they do not belong to your missus, they belong to you who cooked it ... come out with legs of mutton ... get up early and do not light your stove'.¹²⁷

Of course, there were sound political reasons for appeals directed at domestic workers. Durban's estimated 16,000 'houseboys' were still earning punishingly low wages of between £1 and £3.10 a month. Moreover, many very young newly-proletarianised workers entering Durban during the early stages of the depression must have been forced into the ranks of the unemployed. The local ICU enjoyed substantial support from domestic workers whose sense of rural identity and consciousness were reflected in the content of the local political culture. Yet the evidence does suggest that, as in the case of Kroonstad where the Communist

¹²⁵ NA, DMR, 1/9/2/1, R.H. Arnold to Dist. Comdt, SAP, 30 October 1929; CAD, JUS, 922, 1/18/26, Part 24, Det. Hobbs to Dist. Comdt., SAP 25 November 1929.

¹²⁶ CAD, JUS, 923, 1/18/26, Part 28, Det. R.H. Arnold to Officer in Charge, CID, 6 October 1930. Also see Statement of Det. Andrews, October 1930. Interestingly, the *amalaita* were invoked in the speeches of ICU activists elsewhere in the country. Joel Magade, of the Eastern Cape ICU, offered a criminal interpretation of the *amalaita* at Union meeting in Korsten in 1928. 'In the Transvaal', he claimed, 'we have many amalaitas who kill and rob in order to live. They do so because they are starving'.

¹²⁷ CAD, JUS, 924, 1/18/26, Part 29, Det. Hobbs to Officer in Charge, CID, 13 December 1930.

Party-linked Young Citizens' Association apparently had a Marabi gang wing, where local political movements drew on the organisational strength of youth formations it was usually from the ranks of groups such as the abaqhafi. It was one such group under the control of ICU activist J.M. Ngcobo which revealed the class antagonisms underlying some gang activity in an attack a 'respected' local African taxi-owner in 1932.¹²⁸

If anything *amalaita* gang activity, spurred on by large numbers of youths seeking domestic employment during the depression, appears to have increased in the years following the collapse of popular organisation in Durban at the end of 1930.¹²⁹ The activities of 'gangs of kitchen boys in kitchen suits carrying sticks and setting upon a poor unfortunate native who does not belong to their particular clan and attack him' remained a ubiquitous feature of suburban labouring life.¹³⁰ Whether such attacks often resulted in deaths, as this official claimed, seems debatable, although the reconceptualisation of African youth association in urban South Africa during the course of the Thirties began to provide the basis for a more sophisticated differentiation between criminality, delinquency and forms of migrant youth organisation. Between 1929 and 1935, for example, the Natal Native Affairs Department attempted to institute an ultimately abortive scheme to 're-patriate' a growing number of homeless and unemployed African youths from Durban in order to bring them under chiefly control.¹³¹ There were, however, larger forces underlying this new conceptualisation of African youth sub-cultures in towns which served to significantly alter patterns of youth association in South Africa in general and Durban in particular. The reasons for this can only be briefly outlined here.

From the early Thirties local authority in Durban combined with representatives of liberal opinion and embarked on an extensive program to depoliticise African popular cultural expression. In a series of initiatives which recognised processes of class formation and forms of cultural identity thrown up by industrialisation, local authority established the Bantu Recreational Grounds Association, a Bantu Men's Social Centre, a Native Advisory Board and a Native Welfare Office between 1930 and 1933. While some of these strategies sought to provide a frustrated African elite with a political voice, others were concerned with the formal recognition of particular cultural practices of workers through the provision of urban space for their expression.

For migrant workers the most of important of these was the sanction and support which both employers and Native Affairs Department officials provided *ingoma* dance. Over a relatively short period of time an elaborate network of both workplace and ethnic-based dance groups, controlled by an association of *amagosa*

¹²⁸ See *The African Leader*, 15 October 1932; and 18 February 1932.

¹²⁹ For the rising number of youths seeking domestic employment and the worsening conditions of domestic workers, see U.W., CPSA, AD 1438, NEC, Evidence, pp. 6325–28, 6302–442, 6516–26; and Box 12, Memo on Child Service.

¹³⁰ CAD, K80, Police Commission of Enquiry, Minutes of Evidence, Box 6, Vol. 63, p. 4857, Lt. Col. Lewis, 18 March 1937.

¹³¹ See NA, CNC/PMB, 109, 94/14.N.7/15/3, Part I.

(dance-leaders), were involved in sponsored dance competitions.¹³² Significantly, the *amalaita* as a relatively discrete form of migrant association but which shared with *ingoma* troupes the expression of common Zulu idioms and symbolism, received no such recognition in Durban. Elsewhere in the country, most notably amongst the Pedi Malaita in Pretoria, the activities of equivalent migrant youth associations were officially-sanctioned and formalised to a remarkable degree by the Thirties.¹³³ By contrast, in Durban the elaborate system of badges and certificates which *ingoma* dancers were obliged to carry, represented an attempt to extrude the reported presence of *amalaita* organisation in the ranks of dancers, and control the outbreak of violence at dance gatherings.¹³⁴ While on the one hand the conservative aspects of migrant association were reinforced through the re-modelling of *ingoma* dance from above, on the other, the *amalaita* were subject to increasingly efficient police proscription following a qualitative change in the nature of police control in the town. The takeover of the Borough Police by the South African Police in 1936 and the introduction of the notorious police 'pick-up' vans, witnessed intensive and successful efforts to drive *amalaita* off Durban's streets. Then in 1937, new legislation which provoked mass protest meetings amongst African in Durban, established a set of new controls over the the carrying of sticks by Africans in Durban — legislation which the South African Police enthusiastically enforced.¹³⁵

It was not simply these measures alone which served to importantly transform patterns of African cultural association in general and migrant youth gangs in particular. Between 1935 and 1940 the service sector of the local labour market underwent important restructuring.¹³⁶ As increasing numbers of African females entered domestic work thousands of young African males were forced into secondary industry or unemployment. It was in the years after 1938 that the *amakhawa* (cowboys) appeared on Durban's streets. As Fanyana Zondi recalls, it was the violence of the fist-fighting, and sjambok- and knife-wielding *amakhawa* which brought about the demise of the *amalaita*.¹³⁷ It is unlikely that this transformation of youth culture was as dramatic as Zondi suggests.

¹³² See la Hausse, 'The Struggle for the City', Ch. 6.

¹³³ See Delius, 'Sebatakgomo', pp. 582–84. For a later description of municipally-controlled 'boxing' amongst Pedi youth in Pretoria, see CAD, CNC, Northern Areas, 18, 22/26, HNK 1/14/3, Naturelle Wedstryde: Bantule Lokasie, 27 June 1949. (Thanks to Isabel Hofmeyr for this reference.)

¹³⁴ In 1954 it was claimed that in the early 1900s Chief Constable Alexander attempted to organise *ingoma* dance as an alternative to *amalaita* activity. While I found no evidence of this, it does suggest the close relationship between the idioms of dancers and youth gangs. H.J. Thomas, 'Ingoma Dancers and their Response to Town: A Study of Ingoma Dance Troupes among Zulu Migrant Workers in Durban', unpublished MA, University of Natal, 1988, p. 151.

¹³⁵ NA, DTCF, 3/DBN, 4/1/3/1695, 467B. For the the impact of the 'pick-up' see CAD, K80, Vol. 58, Box 5, p. 4380, H.C. Lugg; and Interview with Zondi, 3 September 1986. Many black spokesmen blamed the increasing incidence of knivings to unfair stick legislation. See *Verbatim Report of the Proceedings of the Natives Representative Council Held at Pretoria in December 1937*, Evidence of Crs. Ndhlovu and Mshiyeni, pp. 215–16.

¹³⁶ See Smith, *Labour Resources*, p. 60. Between 1935 and 1940 the proportion of Africans entering domestic service dropped from 28% to 19%.

¹³⁷ Interview with Zondi, 3 September 1986; and Interview with Khumalo and Tshabalala, 4 June 1987.

Yet it does seem likely that the period during which the *amakhawa* emerged, also witnessed the important transformation and marginalisation of forms of migrant youth organisation which had characterised the streets of Durban for over three decades. No doubt many young domestic workers who were driven from the streets with increasing efficiency, who were deprived of their right to carry sticks and who no longer enjoyed easy access to the domestic service, joined up in the *ingoma* troupes of well-known *amagosa* such as Mameyiguda Zungu. For others the independence of migrant youth networks were retained through the *amakhawa* whose identity was moulded in a context where the cultural repertoires of African youths in Durban were being challenged by a world increasingly constituted around the four-inch blade of a clasp knife. It was these groups who, in a language laden with the imagery of the stick-fight and *ingoma* dance, unsuccessfully appealed for space for their 'teams of boxing players' to 'play Boxing Matches' in the Forties. It was perhaps these groups, too, which provided a cultural bridge into the world of urban youth who formed the *tsotsi* gangs during the same period.

Conclusion

The rise of the *amalaita* as an identifiable form of migrant youth organisation in urban centres can be traced to the massive social and economic dislocation experienced by many African societies during the period 1896-1902. At present it seems likely that the resultant precipitation of thousands of African youths into urban labour markets together with an at least temporary erosion or loss of chiefly and homestead control over youth, generated the *amalaita* as a particular form of youth self-organisation which served to reinforce the rural identities of their members.

Clearly, as a tool of analysis the term '*amalaita*' is a blunt one, not least because it has invariably been infected with notions of criminality. The term has a complex, and at particular times, ambiguous resonance in the language of officialdom and, more significantly, within popular memory itself. As the above discussion suggests there is little doubt that the most historically resonant usage of the term is in relation to gangs of up to thirty migrant youths employed predominantly as domestic workers in the same urban locality and organised along suburban lines — although other similar groupings could be forged more tightly along lines of *abakhaya* or ethnic allegiance. The term *amalaita* could be used, especially in the pre-1930 period, to describe other distinct kinds of African urban association each of which, in common with migrant youth gangs, shared certain social forms and cultural meanings but which were mobilised for relatively discrete ends in response to the exigencies of urban life. Of significance in this regard were, firstly, those groups of older males working as manual labourers in single-sex compounds who carried over the solidarity of the youth group into an adult world and, secondly, groups of older youth who shifted in between the ranks of the employed and unemployed and who were differentiated from other *amalaita* by their more conscious involvement in criminal activities. Such gangs existed on the

permeable boundaries of gangs with a more elaborated infrastructure and institutionalised criminal procedures such as the Ninevites.

While the composition of gangs was susceptible to continual renewal, the movement of individuals between different types of gangs was always a possibility. Conceivably, the existence of distinctive youth identities and styles such as the *abaqhafi* provided a cultural bridge from one form of organisation to another. Although there is evidence to suggest the transposition of *amalaita* forms of organisation back into the countryside, it appears that this process was uneven and varied over time and region. Yet at present no evidence for the emergence of rural gangs such as the *indlavini* in Pondoland can be found in Natal or Zululand. The reasons for this no doubt need to be sought in changing patterns of youth socialisation, family structure and rural political authority inscribed within a more complex understanding of the regional political economy and patterns of migrancy. These are obviously crucial issues which this study can only broadly outline at present.

Yet as a partial picture of forms of youth organisation in early industrialising South Africa this study argues that the *amalaita* were associations forged within the context of urban labour markets in response to new, and usually punishing, conditions of life. It was also in this context that the customary practices of rural Zulu youth found innovative expression through the *amalaita* and in the process were subject to criminalisation.¹³⁸ Against the broad background of transformations in rural society it is to a set of questions constituted around the specifically urban dimensions of the *amalaita* that this article begins to call attention.

¹³⁸ Much of the more recent comparative literature on crime has drawn out those processes whereby customary practices and rights have been transformed into crime. See, for example, D. Crummey, (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (London, 1985).

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⁹ **Sebatakomo; Migrant Organization, the ANC and the Sekhukhuneland Revolt**

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