

# Sacrifice After Mandela: Liberalism and Liberation Among South Africa's First Post-apartheid Generation

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines sacrifice in a post-Mandela South Africa. Twenty years since the fall of apartheid, South Africa remains one of the world's most unequal societies. From street protests to labor strikes to xenophobic pogroms, dissatisfaction with current socio-economic conditions is being expressed through urban unrest, particularly in townships and shack settlements. This article analyzes an emerging idiom of "sacrifice" among youth activists in response to deaths and injuries sustained during recent street protests. I argue that this idiom draws from understandings of liberation and liberalization, from popular imaginaries of the anti-apartheid struggle, and from processes associated with South Africa's democratic transition. Broadly, I suggest that sacrifice under liberalism reveals the blurring boundaries between "the gift" and "the market" in political life. [Keywords: Sacrifice, violence, policing, race, class, liberalism]*

Nqobile Nzuzwa was considered a “born-free.” With her birthday on the cusp of Nelson Mandela’s 1994 election, she grew up in a democratic South Africa. At 17, Nzuzwa lived with her parents in the shack settlement of Cato Crest while attending a nearby primary school. The settlement is five miles from downtown Durban in the hidden quarters of the city’s leafy middle-class suburbs. On September 30, 2013, just before dawn, Nzuzwa was killed during a street protest over land and housing in the city. She was shot twice in the back with live ammunition. Witnesses say Cato Manor police fired the shots. The police do not deny this fact, but say they feared for their own safety. Nzuzwa was a member of a leading poor peoples’ movement in South Africa called Abahlali baseMjondolo (an *isiZulu* phrase meaning “residents of the shacks”).

After receiving frantic calls from members, Abahlali’s then-General Secretary rushed to the scene. Upon her arrival, Mdalose was arrested as an instigator and accused of “public violence,” a vaguely defined charge frequently attributed to activists. After two weeks, with Mdalose in prison and Nzuzwa buried, city officials called a press conference, declaring Abahlali a “criminal” force bent on “making the city ungovernable” (Nene 2013). However, news of Nzuzwa’s death and Mdalose’s arrest stirred protests in Durban and at South African embassies from London to New York. Prominent academics—including Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Žižek, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Judith Butler—issued an open letter condemning the Cato police and city officials, echoing press statements by human rights groups and church leaders.<sup>1</sup> In mourning and anger, residents of Cato Crest and other settlements called Nzuzwa’s death a “sacrifice.”

This article examines an idiom of sacrifice<sup>2</sup> emerging among Abahlali’s membership in response to the arrest, injury, and death of activists during street protests. This idiom is increasingly expressed through everyday talk within townships and shack settlements, through rites and ritual practices during mass gatherings in South African cities, and through symbolic kinship ties that establish a network of globalized publics.

### **An Emerging Idiom of Sacrifice**

The works of several Cato Crest letter signatories (Butler 2002, Mudimbe 1994, Žižek 2004), along with a growing body of literature in Africanist anthropology (Ferguson 2013, Graeber 2011, Mbembe 2003, Obarrio

2004, Ralph 2013, Smith 2008), explore the distinctions and complex relations between gift giving and commodity exchange in political life. Following Marcel Mauss (1954), who differentiates *homo-economicus* from other forms of debt and social obligation, anthropological writing has emphasized “the gift” as a space and set of relations not wholly determined by market logics, thereby holding the potential for collective justice (Obarrio 2004), political autonomy (Graeber 2011), or economic redistribution (Ferguson 2013). Though “the gift” has done important work in legal, political, and economic anthropology to displace reductive Euro-centric and masculinist notions of exchange (see, e.g., Munn 1982, Sahlins 1972, Strathern 1990, Weiner 1992), I argue that it may still maintain its integrity as irreducible to the market, while at the same time undergo a blurring with other forms of exchange inside market logics and forces. This blurring may best be seen by transposing Hubert and Mauss’s (1899) conception of sacrifice to a time of 21st century liberalism, characterized by an incursion of the economic upon the political. Such a transposition locates sacrifice within emergent historical processes, and puts earlier debates over gift–commodity relations (Appadurai 1988, Bourdieu 1977, Parry and Bloch 1989) into dialogue with new activist networks, crowds, and insurgencies. Contemporary theorists (Butler 2002, Žižek 2004) posit that sacrifice is a sacred exchange with a transcendent “Other,” whether formulated as God or nation—a force beyond the profanity of the market. Sacrifice happens, according to Hubert and Mauss (1899), when one destroys something sacred, or, in extreme cases, gives one’s life in exchange for a communion with the divine.<sup>3</sup> At a time in South Africa when Pentecostal churches and political parties remain promised refuges of spiritual salvation—as well as civic engagement and economic mobility (Comaroff 1985, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991)—it might therefore be perplexing that so many men and women, like Nzuzi, are prepared to lay down their lives, ostensibly in respect to neither God nor nation, especially when there seems to be no common political enemy, no repressive laws to overturn, and no unified organizational banner under which to imagine a certain future. However, Abahlali’s idiom suggests a rich political theology, grounded in African liberation movements and a structural critique of capitalism, animating risk-taking behaviors among the first post-apartheid generation.

## Protesting After Apartheid

I argue that Abahlali's idiom of sacrifice draws from understandings of liberation and liberalization, from popular imaginaries of the anti-apartheid struggle, and from political and economic processes associated with South Africa's democratic transition. Two sets of entwined processes are especially significant. The first is South Africa's widely celebrated *political* liberalization, marked for instance by a de facto desegregation of social spaces and subjects, the opening of a clamped-down media sphere, and the adoption of a new constitution championing expansive social, economic, and political rights (Ballard et al. 2006, Heller 2012, Huchzemeyer 2004). The second is *economic* liberalization often associated with less desirable qualities of South Africa's state transition, marked for instance by the privatization, corporatization, and outsourcing of state functions and the reproduction of inequalities at the intersections of race and class (Bond 2004, Chari 2010, Ferguson 2006, Hart 2014). By calling upon the traditions of liberation movements—and, as I will show, upon the iconic figure of Mandela, in particular—Abahlali's idiom of sacrifice responds to these entwined but contradictory processes that have made South Africa a globalized liberal democracy.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I first outline some of the general principles of this idiom. Then, turning to an Abahlali branch launch and other mass gatherings in Cato Crest, I examine sacrifice through ritual practice, where these idiomatic principles interact with everyday lived experience. Lastly, drawing from narratives of imprisonment and torture, I demonstrate how this idiom translates into concrete life histories of race-based violence in shack settlements.

Since 1994, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has endeavored to demobilize the popular street politics that characterized the late liberation struggle by cultivating participation in formal democratic institutions such as voting, joining local ward committees, or participating in community policing forums. Yet, protests in poor communities like Cato Crest have been on the rise nationwide since the late 1990s (Gibson 2011, Patel 2008, Pithouse 2004, Selmeczi 2011). These protests have focused upon the means of reproducing a viable and secure urban life after apartheid among those who still live in the shadows of the city and, in particular, upon land, housing, work, education, and basic infrastructure. Officials at multiple levels of the state and in various political parties have condemned these protests, while police and private security forces have met activists with routine arrests and violence. That these protests are taking place in

present-day Cato Manor is historically poignant and complex, for the area has become a national symbol of apartheid-era urban revolt and dispossession (Edwards 1994, Freund 2007, Maylan 1983).

Through in-depth ethnographic and historical research, I have tracked this emerging idiom of sacrifice in Abahlali-affiliated settlements in the cities of Durban, Cape Town, and Johannesburg since the movement grew out of mass protests in 2005. Along with participant observation, I analyzed relevant archival materials, including non-governmental reports, court transcripts, texts produced by residents, and statements by officials (especially by local law enforcement, city governments, and the national legislature). Having grown out of historical ANC strongholds, Abahlali's early protests featured ruling party paraphernalia alongside banners declaring, "No Land, No House, No Vote." Now a national movement, Abahlali claims 25,000 supporters in 64 settlements and operates within a transnational network of lawyers and landless affiliates from Chicago to Rio de Janeiro to Port-au-Prince. Along with maintaining their own website, Facebook page, and Twitter account, the movement is regularly covered by print, radio, and television news from *Al Jazeera* to *The Economist*. Its membership notably is comprised of unemployed youth, liberation struggle veterans, and church leaders; the majority are African women, a demographic reflected in Abahlali's elected leadership and community structures.

In dialogue with recent anthropological texts and their referents in classic social theory, I make four observations about Abahlali's emergent idiom of sacrifice in contemporary South Africa. First, sacrifice relies upon longstanding ritual repertoires of mobilization—mass meetings, burning road blockades, and gatherings at court hearings—that are shared between state agents and residents of townships and shack settlements. Second, the idiom responds to what Abahlali's young members, like Mdalose, see as hallmark experiences of their generation: an explosion of unemployment and informal urban dwelling, a proliferation of "rights" and their violation, the rise and fall of elite patronage networks, and an outsourcing of public amenities to a globalized private sector. Third, Abahlali members tend to view sacrifice as sanctifying certain individuals, communities, or territories with a "political" (as opposed to a "criminal") status, enacted through the symbolic condensing of multiple temporalities and scales. For instance, among members, Nzuza's death consecrated her as an activist, anointed Cato Crest as a politically mobilized community, and identified her ancestors who fought in liberation movements—yet again—as

struggle “heroes.” Lastly, this idiom posits sacrifice as the “price paid” for the circulation and consumption of fast commodities under a historically racialized state. Members, for instance, talk about the rich “making the city [into] an ATM” and “feeding upon the poor.”

I will return to these four observations shortly, but want to suggest first that, at least in Abahlali’s idiom, sacrifice is neither reducible to the paradigm of “the gift” (i.e., pertaining to relations either outside or prior to the market), nor to the paradigm of economic exchange (i.e., pertaining to relations inside the market). On the one hand, Abahlali members understand sacrifice to mean giving over one’s body to a sacred collective politics outside of formal state structures and against the privatization of governance. On the other hand, sacrifice is understood as an inevitable outcome of the securitized defense of elite networks of formal and informal political patronage. For Abahlali members in Cato Crest, Nzuza died for a politics whose aim is to redistribute historically segregated land in the city outside and against—but ultimately ensnared by—global forces and the contractual logics of elites.

### **Iterations of Sacrifice: A Branch Launch in Cato Crest**

A branch launch on a sun-soaked afternoon in Cato Crest is emblematic of how Abahlali’s idiom of sacrifice is instantiated through ritual practice. The launch, on July 21, 2013, was less than two months before Nzuza’s death. It was held near Nzuza’s family home in the “Marikana” section of the settlement. Residents named this section “Marikana” to honor the 37 miners shot and killed by police at the British-owned Lonmin mine outside of Johannesburg in 2012. The name “Marikana” linked the racialized endangerment in the mines to that of life in shack settlements.

At the Cato Crest launch, residents were tasked with electing their neighbors to leadership positions in a branch area committee. Abahlali’s branches represent each territorial locality under a “National Executive.” I have attended dozens of Abahlali branch launches since 2005. On some occasions, these launches have been disrupted by groups who view Abahlali as encroaching on turf in settlements, such as members of political parties or local gangs. This time, at the launch in Cato Crest, the dangers of forming a new branch were known beyond Durban’s shack-lands.

As the national news in South Africa reported, Abahlali claimed that its members had become targets of local “hit-men.” On June 26, 2013,

Abahlali leader Nkululeko Gwala, a vocal critic of housing corruption, was shot dead. Gwala had attempted a branch launch in Cato Crest. On March 15, 2013, another Cato Manor community activist, Thembinkosi Qumbelo, was killed. Rumor of a “Cato Manor hit-list” circulated throughout the city of Durban, and became the subject of a highly publicized criminal trial. A year later, outside of Durban, on September 29, 2014, Abahlali leader Thuli Ndlovu was shot dead in her home while watching television. Two ANC councilors were arrested and charged with Ndlovu’s murder.

At the launch in Cato Crest, police stood, weapons ready, atop a hill. Below them were some hundred red-shirted activists, mostly women. The women sang, made speeches, and *toyitoyied*, a militarized dance associated with the liberation struggle. The structure and content of the launch was standard fare: it included a rehearsal of movement history, nominations for each elected position by a show of hands, and a swearing-in ceremony. The hyper-visibility of uniformed officers at such a gathering might appear heavy-handed, overly cautious, or innocuously protective. Yet, with a history of militant protests in Cato Manor (locally known as *Umkhumbane*), authorities took mass gatherings from funerals to women’s elections as potentially provocative. In part, authorities viewed these events as dangerous because of their location in historically racialized—and still criminalized—zones in the city. But authorities and the middle classes also tend to see danger and power attached to black mass gatherings outside of formal state or party structures, for popular mobilizations in these zones of the city are locally understood as contributing to the fall of apartheid. Cato Manor was the site of a notorious forced removal in 1959, a period when thousands were scattered to segregated townships on the urban periphery—where many Abahlali members live today. Resistance to removals in Cato culminated in the killing of eight police officers in 1960; their bodies were dragged through the streets.

On the day of the launch and later, Abahlali would speak of 1959 as authorizing present-day political mobilization. In a public response to Nzuza’s death, titled “Marikana Continues,” Abahlali invoked multiple generations of women’s sacrifice:

Some of our members grew up with the story of the women’s struggle in Cato Manor... We have members whose mothers were part of that struggle... The ANC tells us that the women who led the struggle in Cato Manor in 1959, Florence Mkhize and Dorothy Nyembe, are

heroes. But when Abahlali women demand land and housing, safety and dignity, then they are criminals. We are sure that the apartheid state called Florence Mkhize and Dorothy Nyembe criminals, too. But they lived as heroes in the hearts of the people just as Nqobile [Nzuza]...lives in our hearts as [a hero]. We see a clear connection between the heroes of 1959 and the heroes of today...The [liberation] struggle continues...The women's struggle for Umkhumbane continues. The struggle to make sure that land, cities, wealth, and power are shared fairly continues. (Abahlali 2013b)

As the statement suggests, the criminalization of black popular politics in the post-apartheid period mirrors a blurring between "the gift" of liberation, brought about by sacrifices of a previous generation, and the unsavory market forces that have come to characterize compromises made to the liberation project during the transition to liberal democracy.

At the launch, police were on edge. So were residents, who whispered among themselves during the swearing-in ceremony. For them, scenes of encounter with security forces represented the murky and always potential breakdown between the world of policing and the world of vigilante crime. This was a police force, according to residents, known for its ability to inhabit and exploit the profitable interstices of the underworld in Umkhumbane. Residents associated the expansion of the police's entrepreneurial practices with liberalization.<sup>5</sup> "*Haiybo!*" (an isiZulu expression of surprise and exasperation), exclaimed an Abahlali officiate half ironically, half seriously at the launch as women directed anti-apartheid anthems toward the hill: "The people, they are *teasing* the police, who are meant to protect them. They should be careful."<sup>6</sup> His comment suggested that the post-apartheid security forces might have been reimagined and rebranded as protectors, but they remained figures to regard with suspicion.

Those elected at the branch launch that day—as is typical—had sacrificed directly or indirectly through close kith and kin. During the late liberation struggle in South Africa, being imprisoned or marked by police violence were rites of passage designating leadership.<sup>7</sup> In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes that sacrifice is not a passive activity, but at the core of mobilization:

Struggle was not merely a question of making speeches, holding meetings, passing resolutions, and sending deputations, but of

meticulous organization, militant mass action, and, above all, the willingness to suffer and sacrifice. (1994:104)

Abahlali members view mobilization and violence, both intertwined with sacrifice, as grounded in shared material conditions in shack settlements. As one member said, when your “life is illegal” — living on occupied land, hawking without a permit, illicitly connecting water supplies, and protesting on city streets “where the poor are not meant to be seen” — violence is “part and parcel of struggle [*umzabalazo* in isiZulu].”<sup>8</sup>

### **Symbolic Lineages of Sacrifice: Mandela and His Heirs**

While Abahlali members do not posit an equivalence between democracy and “the dark days of apartheid,” they do emphasize certain symbolic lineages, as they did on the day of the Cato Crest launch. For instance, the leadership origin story told of founding Abahlali President S’bu Zikode concerns his brutalization in police custody by the son of an infamous apartheid-era torturer (Pithouse 2004). These lineages, in spite of the extraordinary violence represented, often are framed in creative, resilient, and playful ways through humor that, at times, disguises a more serious political message. In songs and slogans, for instance, members refer to Zikode as “the next Nelson Mandela.” In turn, they refer to Mandela as “the second Jesus Christ,” who suffered so that all could have “a better life.” The message here is that Abahlali members see themselves as “carrying forward” the messianic project of liberation. The implication is that the anti-apartheid struggle has not been realized through the ascent of the ANC. Abahlali members “carrying forward” liberation harkens back to an ANC — as a liberation movement — under Nelson Mandela prior to its becoming a ruling party. Abahlali members, therefore, emphasize not formal institutional politics, but connections between sacral figures in informal domains.

These symbolic lineages are enacted through ritual practice and spatially assertive performance, particularly through mass gatherings. For instance, following the death of Nelson Mandela — by word-of-mouth, WhatsApp, and Facebook — Abahlali called a meeting to discuss “our own” interpretation of what his passing meant to the country and its members living in townships and shack settlements. Their answer was to hold a street march under the banner, “In honour of the father of the nation uTata uNelson Mandela” (Abahlali 2013c). Here, and during meetings, Mandela

is invoked as “father” (uTata in *isiXhosa*) and as the nation’s first Black President, but also as an icon of a particular brand of street politics popularly imagined to have birthed the nation. Abahlali, by marching, views itself as confirming that lineage, precisely not by seeking state office but by taking to the streets.

I will return to some of the representational complexities of sacrifice within and outside of the movement. But it is important to grasp that the invocation of Mandela as “father” in mass gatherings, in addition to inspiring collective feeling among members, has the ritual efficacy of addressing multiple publics beyond the movement and beyond South Africa. On December 9, 2013, only days after Mandela’s passing, Abahlali branches gathered not far from Nzuzza’s family’s home in the Marikana section of Cato Crest. Carrying signs in both English and *isiZulu*, they marched onto a major roadway flanked by Cato Manor police and an ominous water cannon.<sup>9</sup> Members openly snapped photographs and videos on camera phones to upload onto the organization’s website. By invoking Mandela, both a local and global icon, Abahlali endeavored to speak to those watching Cato Crest from afar, including academics like Butler and Žižek, or activists like those from the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign, as well as middle-class South Africans like the students who protested on their campuses against Nzuzza’s death. But the primary “public” for Abahlali are those in townships and shack settlements for whom Mandela’s ANC remains a revered symbol of liberation. At the Cato Crest branch launch, by contrast, cell phone cameras were discouraged for fear of spies (*impimpi*) reporting to the local ANC. A brief controversy emerged—marked by whisperings and many pointed sidelong glances—when a young woman unknown to area members began recording the proceedings. It turned out that the woman taking video was a particularly enthusiastic new member, who had yet to understand the subtleties of distinguishing one “public” event from another within the movement.

By claiming Mandela as “father” to internal and external publics, Abahlali members seek to conjure his moral authority and that of the diverse movements that made up the liberation struggle. In a press release circulated widely beyond Abahlali’s own website on local and international blogs, the movement announced their march in Cato Crest with reference to Mandela’s legal defense of a shack-dwellers’ movement in Johannesburg. Mandela’s support of Sofesonke (“We Die Together” Campaign) and their illegal land occupations during World War II “helped

radicalize...the struggle against evictions in Umkhumbane [Cato Manor]" (Abahlali 2013c). Abahlali's press release, in this instance, emphasizes political inheritance, noting the arrest of their General Secretary and one of their affiliate lawyers, both of whom were arrested while fighting urban evictions. The lawyer, as it happens, was thrown in jail the same night that Mandela passed away. Through a characteristic transmutation of past and present by means of these symbolic lineages, Abahlali proposes they are answering Mandela's call to return to the streets:

The struggle we are facing today, we were facing it even when Mandela was still alive. The evictions, beatings, arrests, torture, assassinations, corruption, and violation of our rights were taking place when Mandela was still alive...

Nelson Mandela fought for justice, democracy, and freedom for all. He did not say that the poor were excluded...We will continue to take Mandela's struggle forward...The ruling party is fighting for membership and the sustainability of the party rather than addressing the people's concerns...Today people do not volunteer for the party because they want to join the struggle for justice, equality, and democracy. Today people join the party to invest in the party so that tomorrow it will be their turn to eat our future...

Today, as Mandela has passed on, the ANC is an organization that has harmed us and that will continue to harm us. But Mandela lived for us and not for the ANC. He clearly said that if the ANC does to us what the apartheid government did to us then we must not fear to do [to] the ANC what we did to the apartheid government. Nobody can deny that in Cato Crest the ANC is doing to us what the apartheid government did to us.

Madiba [Mandela] always made it clear that there is still a long walk to freedom...It is the responsibility of our generation to continue this journey...This is how we will show our respect for Mandela's struggle...This new phase of the struggle is just beginning. (Abahlali 2013c)

As the press release suggests, by tracing these lineages of sacrifice, which inspire collective feeling and sanctify leaders, Abahlali endeavors to multiply publics that sympathize with the movement. By invoking the aura of liberation icons, its members lend themselves and these publics

moral authority. Abahlali names itself, and those living in townships and shack settlements more broadly, as legitimate heirs to Mandela's legacy.

Abahlali's General Secretary—who has been acquitted on all charges of “public violence”—wrote a “Letter from Prison” widely circulated online and among members, echoing these themes while alluding to the sacred qualities of mass action. Her letter suggests that communion with the sacred is taken in through the body:

My seven days in prison gave me time to think...I had to sit back and ask myself: “Why did I join this movement?” I had a chance to back off, but once something is inside you, once you live it, once it is injected inside you no one else can stop it. *Ubuhlali* [the collective spirit of Abahlalism] runs in my veins. I am unable to distance myself from it any more. I don't need ubuhlali, but my life needs it. It is what I live and breathe...Evictions, beatings, arrests, and murder are not suffered alone if you are in this movement. This makes us strong. And as repression gets worse it drives more people into the movement. It makes us stronger and stronger... (Mdalose 2013)

As the letter suggests, there is a tension between sacrificing and *being* sacrificed by external forces. The politicization of the arrest, injury, and death of activists is a means of shifting agency from these external forces to the internal body, at once individual, collective, and spiritual. Mdalose has since left Abahlali to launch another movement, after disputes with the current Abahlali leadership. In the same letter, Mdalose emphasizes that sacrifice sustains movements, but also implies forms of consumption that deplete them. Resonating with idioms of migrant labor, one member said in reference to the Marikana massacre and Nzuza's death: “the rich are sacrificing the lives of the poor to feed themselves.”<sup>10</sup> As this suggests, again, through symbolic condensation, sacrifice is understood as intimately transmuting between the mine (ostensibly a space of masculine wage labor) and the shack settlement (ostensibly a space of feminine domestic labor). In *The Guardian*, Zikode (2013) said South African cities are like “ATMs,” sites of extraction and circulation, where everyone is taking a cut: the Lonmin CEO, the Durban mayor, and the local “hit-man.”<sup>11</sup> Mdalose sums up Abahlali's emergent idiom of sacrifice by declaring in her letter: “No judgment, imprisonment, or bullet will silence me while we...are being oppressed by those whose daily bread is the poverty and

blood of the poor,” suggesting the centrality of consumption, the body, and its violation as categories of an emergent political theology (Mdlalose 2013; see also Bernstein 2013).

### **The Limits of Sacrifice as Rites of Passage**

While, thus far, I have focused upon highly visible instantiations of Abahlali’s emergent idiom, sacrifices that are politically consecrated but *not* publicized are just as revealing as those that become the subjects of mass gatherings or headline news. Among the many instances of arrest and torture that I documented during my research with Abahlali and other poor peoples’ movements, the story of Sisipho stands out.<sup>12</sup> An arrest may be a rite of passage into leadership, but many just want to put their lives back together again. Those who refuse an elected mantle are treated with reverence and respect within the movement, whether or not they remain active. These narratives highlight how unreported cases of police violence contribute to Abahlali’s idiom.

The first time I talked at length with Sisipho was in a tranquil, grassy park in the middle of the city. Her boyfriend, Bulelani, had been arrested on trumped up criminal charges. He was acquitted, but languished in prison for 11 months. Sisipho and Bulelani first met in 1998, while living in adjacent, rural hometowns. He said his town “ended at the river, where her town began,” which he meant both in the literal, geographical sense, but also as an unconcealed expression of his love for her.<sup>13</sup> After meeting by chance through Sisipho’s sister and dating for four years, they decided to move to the city of Durban together, where the odds of getting a job, however limited, were better than the rural areas. He went first, and landed a series of temporary jobs in construction. He stayed in a shack settlement where the couple both had kith and kin. She eventually followed, but the two were not yet married, so they dutifully kept separate residences next-door to each other. Like many unemployed women, Sisipho opened up a “*spaza*” shop in the settlement to make ends meet. Her shack had two rooms then: one for dwelling and one for selling goods like matches, sweets, crisps (potato chips), and her specialty, *koeksisters* (a treat of sweetened deep-fried dough). By virtue of their work and networks, they were known as “up-and-comers” in the settlement, those who very well could “make it,” if not as middle class, then at least with a security that shack-life did not typically afford.

As Sisipho and I sat talking in the park, she suddenly began trembling and burst into tears. Not only was her boyfriend awaiting trial, her shop had been looted and destroyed as part of an apparent ethnically based “xenophobic” attack, which targeted Abahlali members and those from outside the province. While local and international media coverage of so-called xenophobic pogroms in 2008 focused upon violence targeting “foreigners” in areas such as Kennedy Road, these tensions often manifested in heightened violence between ethnic groups (Chance 2010). However, it was not only the destruction of her shop that made Sisipho tremble. A year later, I found out that she had also been tortured. It all began at the prison, while visiting Bulelani. Police phoned her to say that they wanted to talk with her, and were waiting outside the gate. Seeing no alternative, she met them outside. They put her in a car and took her to the police station near her home. She spoke to a provincial crime intelligence officer known to the community, who told me he had cut his teeth as a policeman during the bloodiest years of the liberation struggle. They brought her into a room otherwise empty, aside from a bench “tightly up against the wall.” According to her, the criminal intelligence officer told the other two police officers to “bring to plastic things,” for which she did not know the name. They are best described, she said, as a 50 kilogram sack, not “the plastic [bags] used for shopping, but a strong one that when you bring it up [over your face and mouth], you breathe in a small space.”<sup>14</sup>

The criminal intelligence officer left, and the two remaining police officers cuffed her hands behind her back. Sisipho said, “Then, they put the plastic.” They began repeatedly suffocating her with “the plastic,” covering her head. She said she kept moving, so much so that one police officer had to hold her down while the other punched her and continued “putting the plastic.” They demanded that she bring them evidence against her boyfriend, specifically clothes with bloodstains or a gun. Although many of the local police officers are recognizable to the community, she had never seen them before, and suspected that they were not from the area. She said she thought, “I was going to die on that day because when I breathed, it kept on cutting and cutting and cutting and cutting.”

After they finished with her, they put her alone in a cell with blankets. She said she was kept at the police station for a total of seven hours. She remained in the cell until the police returned. Without saying anything, they opened the door, and she walked out. She kept walking all the way to the settlement where she lived, only to find the supplies in her shop had

been looted along with some furniture in her home, and both had been chopped with axes and bush-knives. Fearful of what would happen to her if she stayed, she moved with her family to another settlement out of the area. By virtue of the police beating, her ears were blocked and bloody. She could not immediately see a doctor, but later went to a local clinic and a public hospital. The doctor told her that her ear should heal, but she said that, more than a year later, she still felt the injury: “if someone was speaking in a soft voice, I couldn’t hear that person.”

Bulelani found out what happened to Sisipho when friends next visited him in prison. He said that hearing the news was “a blow to the heart.” “First, you are arrested for a case you don’t know [anything about], then you hear someone who is close to your heart has faced such a problem. Then, it was like the sun set during the day.” He said he did not expect to see her again because, after he had been beaten in custody, he feared the police were capable of worse. Bulelani had never seen the inside of a prison before he was arrested. He said during the first three weeks he could not eat, not because of a boycott, but due to a complete loss of appetite. Even when Sisipho or other visitors brought food to the prison, Bulelani said that he had no appetite for it. “Being in jail,” he said, in multiple ways, “was like being a tied up pig. You cannot go here, you cannot go there, and your body will automatically be un-hygienic.” He said that the water inside the prison will not help you without soap, and if you do not have soap, you will get lice and fleas. “When the policeman opens the door for you, even if you are running quick and doing what you are told, he will kick you.” He said you have “no other option but to eat that thing,” by which he meant absorb that humiliation.<sup>15</sup>

In prison, “you sleep uncomfortable, and you wake up uncomfortable.” Some people were stabbed in his presence, which he attributes to the Numbers Gangs, which have a long history in South Africa. Victimized another inmate is a rite of passage, he said.

Often to be promoted to a 26 or 28 gang, you have to poke [stab] someone. Only if you are lucky will you not fall victim to the stabbings...Sometimes you must appreciate that you’ve been in jail, and your teeth are the same number, and your eyes are the same number.

Sisipho and Bulelani saw each other immediately when he was released from prison. They were “very, very, very excited” to see each other.<sup>16</sup>

However, now five years later, they still struggle to find a footing to reestablish their lives. Both of their homes were destroyed, Bulelani lost his job while awaiting trial, and Sisipho lost her shop. They had to stay with family, and still owe money that they borrowed from neighbors. They hope to be able to marry one day, though.

As Sisipho and Bulelani's narratives suggest, sacrifice happens not through the *effects* of individual acts of heroism, but through enduring types of violence that manifest in wounds—and the absence of wounds—which are sutured onto the body, the social, the psychic, the cultural, and the banality of everyday life. Inasmuch as sacrifice is defined by giving over one's body to external forces, and with purpose, sacrifice is often produced by circumstances not entirely of one's own making, and attributed only after the violence is done. Therefore, the distinction between sacrificing oneself and *being* sacrificed is less than clear. In this sense, one's body and one's life is not a "gift," and often is not willingly surrendered. However, for Abahlali members, insofar as endangerment or death can be reinterpreted as political, insofar as it can be politicized and made part of collective history, it also is not defined by market relations.

### **The Politics of Everyday Sacrifices**

Events such as torture and police violence are central to Abahlali's emergent idiom, but equally significant are sacrifices embedded in the quiet routines of everyday life in townships and shack settlements. Occupying land or illicitly connecting service supplies are routine practices that risk injury, arrest, and even death in South Africa. These sacrifices are enacted as a means of securing urban life when ordinary means or economic and political mobility are not available. Because these are commonplace yet criminalized practices, they rarely make headline news and are not entirely legible as politics in the eyes of the law. Abahlali members, however, view these practices, and the sacrifices they entail, as the *raison d'être* of their street protests.<sup>17</sup> Abahlali held a commemorative march, for instance, on the occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the 1976 Soweto uprising, when security forces gunned down school children protesting against teaching Afrikaans. Among those killed was Hector Pieterse, whose lifeless body—carried by his schoolmate in the posture of the Pieta—became a galvanizing image for global anti-apartheid movements. The Abahlali Youth League's statement, drawing upon this history, spoke

to the everyday sacrifices carried by “born-frees” like Nzuzi. In the statement, they stressed education, employment, and other forms of social mobility, as well as toilets, electricity, and access to urban infrastructure in newly desegregated cities:

The poor have to survive as we can...We live in shacks. We live in shit and fire. We are evicted. We have no safe and easy transport. The police treat us as criminals. They beat us if we try to organize. If you are young and poor you are treated as a threat to society and not as the future of our society. Hector Peterson [sic]...and other comrades who died for our Freedom and Democracy did not die for this. We do not respect their sacrifice by accepting that this is Freedom. Freedom and Democracy is not just about voting. It is not about being in nice fancy places [like nightclubs and movie theaters]. It is about being able to think and do things for yourself...It means being able to take responsibility for your own life and your own future. It means building a society in which everyone counts. It means sharing land, wealth, and power. We are the youth of today. We want to continue where Hector Peterson and others have left from. This is how we should respect their sacrifice... (Abahlali 2013a)

As the statement suggests, everyday sacrifices are felt throughout one's life, and through a life cycle distended or cut short. These sacrifices shape youthful political action, as they did for previous generations. Yet, these sacrifices also respond to emergent historical processes. The Youth League statement, for instance, points to recently desegregated movie theaters as key sites of “born free” identity making. Abahlali Youth League members criticize “born frees” who seek individual economic mobility as an end in itself, or to escape poverty through consumption. Youth League members urge “born frees,” instead, to eschew “fancy” things, and collectively right past and present structural wrongs by taking to the streets as community activists.

Everyday endangerment would feature prominently in Abahlali's weekly Saturday meetings, where an idiom of sacrifice was collectively articulated. Typically 50 men and women would attend these weekly meetings, including those elected as representatives of branch areas like Cato Crest. These meetings, on average, lasted six to eight hours. Particularly during branch area reports, Abahlali members would “cough out,” or collectively

share stories of violence. When I asked about the purpose of “coughing out,” members described the narrative experience as therapeutic, but also as a site where politics—whether developing a shared political language or strategically planning a mass action—was articulated and mobilized (Chance 2011). The stories that typified “coughing out” were about injuries to the body and consciousness, individual and collective. These were tales about families and communities undergoing eviction, about walking hours each morning to work for a racist employer, about losing one temporary job after another, about an abusive bureaucrat or neighborhood thug.

Rather than fetishizing or celebrating an individual speaker’s pain, “coughing out” was about collectivizing it, distributing it, and politicizing it—transforming it from “injury” to political agency. Often this politicization came with broad reflections upon wealth inequality in post-apartheid society: “Why, now that democracy has come, is Lonmin mine still owned by the British?” Or, “Why do white ‘bosses’ and ‘madams’ remain in the same well-paid jobs and secure suburban homes?” “Why are police, notorious for apartheid-era violence, still plying their trade in the same police stations?” “Why is the new black middle class, our comrades and neighbors, not redistributing while they enjoy the benefits of corporate or political office?” These questions, like the idiom of sacrifice itself, serve to distinguish a political community, and thereby establish collective identification among members as a racialized poor, premised upon lived, material conditions in shack settlements and townships.

Abahlali meetings sometimes run for multiple days, overnight without break, so that every participant can have his or her say for however long he or she is willing to speak. The movement has been characterized, some members say, as “neurotically democratic” (Cooper-Knock 2009). Even so, in any organization, speech acts and events such as press releases and mass meetings encode certain kinds of internal structural differences. Sometimes members themselves would read these as gendered, racialized, ethnicized, geographical, or age-based. When women in a new branch undergoing eviction complained of their laundry getting dirty as a major concern, for example, this did not feature prominently in a press release. Or, when a Youth League member took issue with an elder woman shaming him for dating too liberally within the movement, he did not fight back or “cough out” his embarrassment at a meeting. These differences, and the ways in which they are mobilized between members, are often more complex than categories of gender and age.<sup>18</sup> The women whose

laundry woes did not make it into a press release belonged to a small and recently adopted, and hence less influential, branch in the movement. The shamed Youth League member had been gaining prominence in the movement, not for his dating choices, but for his respected leadership and influential oration, inspiring jealousies.

That is not to say Abahlali's idiom of sacrifice is only concerned with the injurious qualities of shack life. Even while "coughing out," members frequently spoke of joyous moments too, which inform movement politics, even if they are not reducible to them. Some of these joyous moments stemmed from taking pride in one's community, the social bonds formed among kith and kin, the strides made in organizing a soccer match or beauty pageant, mediating a conflict, or setting up a neighborhood watch. Talk before and after formal meetings usually took up another couple of hours, dwelling upon births and illnesses, romantic relationships and their discontents, friendships formed and gone awry, hopes for children and their obstacles, and other movement gossip. It is here, and in the real grind of everyday life in poor communities, that often untold sacrifices would surface, such as walking for hours each day in search of work, caring for a sick relative who cannot afford much-needed medicine, or rebuilding a shack after a knocked-over candle destroys an unelectrified settlement.

### **Conclusion: Sacrifice Among South Africa's "Born-Frees"**

What I have argued is that Abahlali's idiom of sacrifice responds to liberalization by borrowing from the liberation struggle through ritual practices, symbolic kinship, and producing globally networked publics. I do not suggest that Abahlali's idiom paints a totalizing picture of South Africa's first post-apartheid generation. However, it does lend insight into how sacrifice might be seen as neither wholly entangled in the market nor outside of it. It also points to how "born frees," whom politicians of all stripes have been wooing ahead of national elections since 2014, are taking up the mantle of sacrifice as their own. At the same time, it is important to register Nzuzza's death. Police targeting black youth has become a flash-point in cities across the globe. In the same week Nzuzza was shot, a South African government report estimated a 218 percent increase in police brutality in 2013, including 4,047 cases of assault and 275 deaths in custody (Chance 2013, Evans 2013). The highest number of political killings since 1994 have occurred in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, where Cato Manor is located

(Bruce 2014). What Abahlali's idiom lastly might suggest is that violent policing is not a likely strategy for demobilizing protest. In South Africa, the dramatic hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the hopeful adoption of a new Constitution, and a massive overhauling of the security cluster have signaled an end to some arbitrary functions of state sovereignty. But it is not an end that had been popularly imagined. ■

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>For a complete list of signatories, see "M&G Letter to Jacob Zuma" (accessed from <http://abahlali.org/node/12296/> on April 21, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>I analyze "sacrifice" not as a normative claim, but as an idiomatic term used by Abahlali members and residents I spoke with in townships and shack settlements.

<sup>3</sup>Writing on human sacrifice, Georges Bataille (1991) posits that an offering, through non-productive social and economic expenditure, may acquire the sacred quality of "the gift" in the context of consumer society (see also Peebles 2012 on the anthropological value of Bataille's work). Michael Taussig (2006) argues that expenditure of this kind, as transformative violence, has the potential to sacralize the space of death. However, sacralizing the space of death does not necessarily lead to a dialectical resolution such as proposed by Hegel. For Hegel (1977), the violent confrontation between self and other, posited as a dialectical relation, is resolved in the paradox of recognition.

<sup>4</sup>The award-winning documentary film, *Dear Mandela* (directed by Dara Kell and Chris Nizza) explores the nuances of these themes in visual form. For more information, see [www.dearmandela.com](http://www.dearmandela.com) (accessed on April 21, 2014). I served as an advisor for this film.

<sup>5</sup>For more on crime and policing, see Gillespie (2008) and Hornberger (2013).

<sup>6</sup>Abahlali member, personal communication, July 21, 2013.

<sup>7</sup>It should be noted that similar rites apply in many guerilla and gang contexts (Aretxaga 2000, Feldman 1991, Steinberg 2004).

<sup>8</sup>Abahlali member, personal communication, September 2008.

<sup>9</sup>Signs produced in Cato Crest also are in *isiXhosa*.

<sup>10</sup>Abahlali member, personal communication, July 21, 2013.

<sup>11</sup>"Despite the state's violence, our fight to escape the mud and fire of South Africa's slums will continue" (Zikode 2013).

<sup>12</sup>Both Sisipho and Bulelani are pseudonyms.

<sup>13</sup>Bulelani, personal communication, July 2013.

<sup>14</sup>Sisipho, personal communication, July 2013.

<sup>15</sup>Bulelani, personal communication, July 2013.

<sup>16</sup>Sisipho and Bulelani, personal communication, July 2013.

<sup>17</sup>In contrast to theories of violence that distinguish between the socio-economic and the political, Abahlali members tend to view these as one in the same. Abahlali's idiom of sacrifice, therefore, also falls

into tension with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's framing of violence, which, as Fiona Ross (2003) has demonstrated, emphasized individual bodily injury over collective injury, men's wounds over women's wounds, and the political over the socio-economic.

<sup>18</sup>Some authors who have written about Abahlali have failed to recognize the complexities of gender within the movement, and within relevant theoretical literatures more broadly. Rather than gender being understood as a fixed essence (man/woman), biologically determined (penis/vagina), or uniformly constituting power across times and places (powerful men/powerless women), I approach gender as a relational identity. Often these relational identities take on a fractally recursive character (Gal 2002). Therefore, a young female member of Abahlali may be more powerful than an older man, depending upon their respective positions within the movement. A meeting in which this young woman is speaking and an old man is listening may be misrecognized as an up-ending of ordinary power relations when, in fact, it is the status quo. Where a younger man and older woman disagree in a meeting and hold equal positions in the movement, the older woman's opinion would be deferred to by virtue of her seniority. Therefore, a younger man challenging an older woman in a meeting may indeed be up-ending ordinary power relations, rather than reproducing a deceptively simple gendered status quo.

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#### Foreign Language Translations:

Sacrifice After Mandela: Liberalism and Liberation Among South Africa's First Post-apartheid Generation  
**[Keywords:** Sacrifice, violence, policing, race, class, liberalism]

后曼德拉时代的牺牲：南非后种族隔离时期的首世代的自由主义与解放运动  
**[关键词：** 牺牲，暴力，警务，种族，阶级，自由主义]

Трудная жизнь после Мандель: Либерализм и эмансипация в первом постпартеидном поколении в ЮАР

**[Ключевые слова:** трудности, насилие, полиция, раса, класс, либерализм]

Sacrifício Após Mandela: Liberalismo e Libertação Entre a Primeira Geração Pós-apartheid Sul-Africana  
**[Palavras-chave:** Sacrifício, violência, policiamento, raça, classe, liberalismo]

التضحية بعد مانديلا: الليبرالية والتحرير بين الجيل الأول في مرحلة ما بعد الفصل العنصري في جنوب افريقيا  
 كلمات البحث: التضحية، العنف، حفظ النظام، السلالة، الطبقة، الليبرالية

