

Marikana and the Subaltern

The Politics of Specificity

CAMALITA NAICKER

This article addresses recent debates around the strikes and the massacre of the mine workers at South Africa's Lonmin Platinum Mine in Marikana from 2012 onwards. It argues that there is a failure to delve deeper into the culture of people who come from Mpondoland in the Eastern Cape of South Africa and to link culture to the political in the way workers' actions have been reported and understood. Culture has been used as a way to explain away an aberration rather than exploring the use of cultural political tools within the strike. The article offers an analysis which takes seriously the political implications of culture.

Almost three years have passed since the Marikana Massacre in South Africa. The strike wave along the "Platinum belt" is now the longest strike in South Africa's history.

The families of the men who lost their lives during the strike as well as community members in the Nkaneng shack settlement in Marikana want government and London Mining (Lonmin) to construct a memorial site at the koppie, the place of the massacre. It is not unusual for people to honour their dead and to acknowledge the place at which they died, especially in such extreme circumstances.

However, this process is complicated for the people at Marikana who are frequently told by their local government officials, and traditional leaders, that they must erect memorials in the Eastern Cape Province from where they come. They tell them that this land is for the Tswana people, and not for the amaXhosa. The Royal Bafokeng Traditional Authority supports this view, so does the government. Lonmin, who pays the traditional authority for mining rights on what is traditional trust land, remains silent while ethnicity becomes a way of policing and silencing democratic forms of participation in a post-apartheid society.

In May 2014, when thousands of workers had to return to their homes in the rural Eastern Cape as they awaited the outcomes of the strike there were reports of the company sending private smss urging workers to return to work. These messages defied the bargaining structures and policies of the new majority union—the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) (Moatshe 2014). It also ignored requests for them to "stop sending out the confusing sms communication to mine workers and shut down temporarily" (Stone 2014). There were also reports of the company refusing entry to trucks taking the miners food from the Gift of the Givers Foundation, as they entered the fourth month of their unpaid strike (Gift of the Givers 2014).

At the same time, as Lonmin refused to engage with the workers' committees directly, or to heed AMCU's policies, they had been meeting with traditional leaders from CONTRALESA (Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa) since before the massacre and for the three years subsequently. What is most interesting about this sustained engagement, even while negotiations have broken down several times between Lonmin and the workers, and Lonmin and AMCU, respectively, is that it amounts to a public acknowledgement of the bifurcation that still exists in the South African state today. It is clear that

Camalita Naicker (camalita.n@gmail.com) is a doctoral student at the Unit for Humanities and the Department of Political Studies at Rhodes University, South Africa.

Lonmin and the State still view the workers, most of whom come from the rural Eastern Cape, as belonging to a different sphere of politics compared to urbanised South Africa, a sphere in which ethnicity plays a large role.

For example, it is not uncommon for local government officials in KwaZulu-Natal Province to say, when refusing to give people from the Eastern Cape public housing, “go back to the Eastern Cape” or to characterise people from Mpondoland in the Eastern Cape as violent traditionalists in order to de-politicise their attempts to access citizenship rights in the urban space (Tolsi 2009).

The Ethnic and the Cultural

Since 2012, there has been an obsession with the “ethnic” and “cultural” features of the strike, in particular, the use of *muti* (traditional medicine) and *knobkerries* (traditional fighting sticks) on the mountain at Marikana, which has captured the limited imagination of the South African media and some intellectuals in the elite public sphere. Jane Duncan (2012) found that out of 153 newspaper articles written directly after the massacre, in only 3% of the articles were mineworkers interviewed. More disturbing however, was that,

Of these miners, only one miner was quoted speaking about what actually happened during the massacre, and he said the police shot first. Most miners were interviewed in relation to the stories alleging that the miners had used *muti* to defend themselves against the police's bullets, as well as the miners' working and living conditions.

Limiting worker's subjectivity to the use of *muti* was not just a form of silencing and delegitimation adopted by mainstream media but also by the State itself. For example, in November 2012 the police called on anthropologists to “explain the use of *muti*” at the commission of inquiry (City Press 2012). The introduction of anthropologists to the commission to translate people's cultures into a language “understandable” to the modern world is indicative of the form of narrow and reductive modernist discourse, which has typically been employed in the analysis of Marikana. In Chatterjee's formulation (2004: 5), when (capital)

...encounters an impediment, it thinks it has encountered another time—something out of pre-capital, something that belongs to the pre-modern. Such resistances to capital (or to modernity) are therefore understood as coming out of humanity's past, something people should have left behind but somehow haven't.

The idea that the traditional forms of organisation and preparation for the strikes could be the entry point into a greater discussion of how we understand the complexities and nuances of culture and ethnicity in post-apartheid South Africa today, and how we recognise forms of politics outside of the urban civil society, does not seem to be part of the discussion, in both liberal and Marxist conceptualisations.

The primary way in which the “ethnic” has functioned in the public discourse around Marikana does not enable an illuminating useful conversation aimed at trying to think through and understand the implications of ethnicity for democratic post-apartheid South Africa. This article attempts to generate discussions about alternate modes of organisation present at

Marikana which, often function alongside dominant and statist modes.

The Revolutionary Agent

In their December 2012 edition *Amandla!* magazine, a South African publication which describes itself as a progressive magazine standing for social justice, devoted a section to the massacre. Spliced in between the humanising stories of mine-workers and their lives in Marikana were articles written by *Amandla!* correspondents and other contributors. Many of the articles take a very formulaic approach. In fact the overwhelming presence of words like the “working class” and “working class power” give an uncomfortable feeling of writers' often crude attempts to fit empirical evidence into already existing theoretical frameworks. In an article entitled, “Embryos of Working Class Power and Grassroots Democracy in Marikana,” Thapelo Lekogwa and Luke Sinwell (2012: 24), begin by stating, “The formation of a workers' committee is an act of power by the working class. It has shaken capital by advancing far beyond trade union bureaucracy.” Yet, they go on to add (2012: 25),

At the risk of being ultra-critical of their exercise of working class power, their main demand has been for more money, not less capitalism or the formation of a workers' party...The Challenge posed to anti-capitalist forces is to embed their ideas within the consciousness of the strikers while simultaneously enabling the strikers to lead them.

The portrayal of mineworkers as representatives of working-class power allows the easy objectification of people who are seen as needing to be injected with a certain kind of consciousness, rather than understood as rational agents living, working and struggling in their own social, economic and political contexts. It is not untrue to say that workers went beyond trade union bureaucracy, however the article does not explore what that means, and in what ways the workers' political praxis is informed by modes of politics drawn from outside of trade union experience. Rather, it is attributed strictly to “class consciousness,” even if, by their own admission, the workers themselves were not articulating a Marxist/socialist position.

The authors of this article, in fact, also authored a book with Peter Alexander, Botsang Mmope and Bongani Xezwi. The first book to appear, merely two months after the massacre, *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer*, is an example of how uncritically applying narrow and reductionist Marxist frameworks of class analysis to any protest can go awry. The triumphalist tone taken by these authors in the book gives the impression that the writers were led, not by people's daily lived experiences and the context from which they make life decisions, but by a pre-given Marxist theory which provides a linear trajectory of workers' struggles as universal historical fact. For instance they note (2012: 9),

But not all has been bleak. While we have been saddened, we have also been inspired. The strike at Lonmin symbolised, as much as ever, raw working-class power—unhindered by the tenets of existing collective bargaining and middle-class politics. The workers developed their own class analysis of the situation at Lonmin and, instead of being silenced and falling back when the steel arm of the state mowed down 34 of their colleagues, they became further determined, and more workers united until all of Lonmin came to a standstill.

Two pages later they write (2012: 11):

The workers' agency and leadership is no obscure radical rhetoric or theory of ivory tower academics or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Rather, it is the unfettered praxis of the working class—which could not be contained, even with national security, the ANC, NUM, and the ideology of the ruling class pitted against it.

There are two assumptions here. First, there is an idea that there is something to be gained learned or celebrated from the killing of a total of 43 people. That in fact, rather than a horrific event which should have never occurred in the first place, we should celebrate the “unfettered praxis of the working class.” The use of the word “unfettered” is troubling for various reasons, not least because of the way it evokes the clearly colonial image of black workers needing only the right moment of provocation to unleash their inner barbarism. It re-inscribes the liberal idea that this kind of collective action cannot be organised, thought-out and well planned; that it must be due to the inherent “nature” of people like mineworkers who are outside of realm of “civil society” to behave as, in the disturbing words of Peter Bruce (2012), at the time the editor of *Business Day*, “a 7,000-strong band of armed and angry miners”. Second, it assumes it was the intention of the workers, acting as the “working class” to “smash capitalism” or to realise a socialist ideal knowing they had the “ideology of the ruling class pitted against it” rather than people demanding a decent living wage.

It is clear that this kind of rejoicing is not only indicative of the ways in which dogmatically adhering to theory can limit one's understandings of an historical event, or even allow one to ignore the myriad other narratives and experiences present, but it also categorises and objectifies people to such an extent that death becomes a victory rather than a tragedy.

Reification of the Rural

Suren Pillay outlines the limitations of the sort of labour historiography that employs a narrow and reductive form of Marxist analysis to understand the kind of politics that culminated in the massacre at Marikana, and tends to view workers, as a “consciousness waiting to be sublimated.” He rightly points to the inherent Eurocentrism in this type of thought which does not view time as heterogeneous and tends to view pre-colonial African culture as premodern, backward and archaic. He also outlines how this colonial conception of the modern/traditional binary has been replicated in the literature on mine-workers. He asks that we think seriously about theorising mineworkers as migrant labourers, as part of a community and culture, and not just as a universal worker subject as some Marxists would have it. For Pillay (2013: 37),

In that sense, the political subject that remains inadequately theorised here is the migrant worker. A more appropriate theorisation calls upon us to think more concretely about the migrant worker as the embodiment of indirect rule and apartheid, and not only as the archetypical figure of capitalism with fetters, or a consciousness waiting to be sublimated. The migrant worker has always already conditioned South African politics—even if it is not always a politics we like.

There are a few points that are of interest here. Pillay is invoking the idea of the rural sphere being relegated to the margins of a national public political sphere and being under-theorised

in accordance with an enduringly colonial spatial and political order. However, Pillay follows Mahmood Mamdani in conceptualising the rural sphere in the bifurcated state as politically homogeneous. This is clear from the last sentence of the article: “...even if it is not always a politics we like.” This seems to imply that Pillay sees the rural as the manifestation of an authoritarian corrupt “tribal” system of colonial indirect rule that oppresses its “subjects.” In fact, when he says, “For political unionism, the worker in South Africa was also an African subject ascribed to a community, but stripped of political rights and had to be acknowledged as such” (2013: 33) which is the view of many labour historians, he does not show any disagreement with this hypothesis.

Yet, it was not so much that people were stripped of political rights in the “native reserves” than that the space for political subjectivity was circumscribed and defined within a crystallised and, as Govan Mbeki (1964: 42) described it, “bastardised system,” which functioned in a particular space.

This is central to understanding how culture and tradition are crystallised in these spaces and how, often, people who come from former Bantustans are culturally essentialised and seen as outside of modernity. It is, also, what allows commentators on Marikana to refer to striking workers as “muti-crazed” criminals. There is a profound difference between attempts to culturally fix people as products of geography who remain outside of the modern and opening up the way in which the idea of modernity is conceptualised and circumscribed.

I want to argue, that both forms of dealing with the cultural and ethnic “artefacts” at Marikana, one of which is to ignore it completely and think only of the worker devoid of context and community, and the other, to acknowledge the cultural and ethnic only insofar as they function to explain away what is otherwise an aberration in the construction of the political subject, have their limits. One way in which we could begin to take the subaltern politics that preceded the subaltern massacre seriously would be to look more closely at the historical, cultural and political context of the subaltern. The Mpondo revolts of 1960, a peasant insurrection, which remains outside of most mainstream narratives of resistance to colonialism and apartheid, provides a useful historical context for the subaltern sphere of politics that exists, and I will argue, has always existed on the mines in colonial and apartheid South Africa.

It is well known that the majority of the rock drill operators who started the strikes at Lonmin in 2012, as well as many other mineworkers who joined them, came from the Eastern Cape area and more specifically Mpondoland, which has been one of the historic labour-sending areas in South Africa. As Marion Lacey noted more than 30 years ago, the Employment Bureau of Africa, “an institution (previously) owned by the South African mining industry, has historically recruited large numbers of people from the former Transkei, the highest number of people recruited for the mines consistently coming from the Cape Province” (Lacey 1981: 196).

If we are really to politically theorise migrant labourers as people, culture does not only make an entrance into the urban political sphere as an aesthetic phenomenon, but also through

modes of organising politically that may take a different form to those more readily comprehensible in the standard liberal or Marxist imagination. It is completely inadequate to see the migrant labourer as the embodiment of colonial indirect rule alone, and to view African culture as outside the realm of political, or as having no capacity for political praxis in itself. These assumptions deny the political subjectivities of many people in the former reserves who were practicing politics under apartheid albeit as, to borrow a phrase from Ranajit Guha “outside of the official domain.”

The history of the Mpondo revolts provides an alternative lens for understanding the Marikana massacre because it is rooted in the cultural, social and political context of many mine-workers’ home-context. Understanding how Mpondo society was organised in precolonial times, as well as the political tools used during the Mpondo revolts of 1960, reveals a subaltern sphere of politics, which is often silenced in nationalist historiography and ignored by most liberal, Marxist and elite nationalist analysis, for different reasons. In fact, it challenges liberal and Marxist analysis, both of which have a particular teleology of development that are inherently modernist and productivist, at the heart of which is the notion that labour is what is required to be fully human (Pithouse 2014). It is also a challenge to elite nationalist discourse, and the way ethnicity functions to create differentiated systems of access to the public sphere allowing some people’s inclusion in “civil society” and “modernity,” while others are still locked into spaces of exclusion imagined to be constituted via a static conception of “cultural authenticity.”

Resistance to Tribalisation

In fact, in Mpondoland by the late 1800s, traditional authority was a loose association of district chiefs usually recognising a paramount chief according to lineage; people chose their allegiance on the basis of the area that they occupied. Size, solidarity and custom of a “tribe” varied according to the extent of outside threats and the personality of the paramount (Hunter 1961: 379). While there was no standardisation in Mpondoland, chiefs were usually the commanders of their respective armies, responsible for the allocation of land, and the arbiters of district disputes (Hunter 1961: 392). The mutuality of the relationship between the chief and his people was measured by generosity of the chief. People were called upon to work together to build huts and cultivate land and the chief, who was always expected to live and work amongst people, would also have to provide refreshments and hear the grievances of anyone in his district who called at his kraal (Hunter 1961: 394).

The reintroduction of “tribal” authority in its static, codified form and the use of African chiefs to impose betterment and later “Stabilisation” in 1954 on African people is largely seen as the reason for the Mpondo revolts in 1960s (Mbeki 1964; Hendricks 2011; Ntsebeza and Kepe 2011) in which ordinary peasants revolted against the corrupt apartheid—imposed system of “re-tribalisation.” The power of the chiefs, who previously enjoyed a relative measure of legitimacy, was attacked from two directions: the government and the people. At first, as Mbeki (1964: 42) describes, many chiefs bought into the Transkeian

territorial authorities, because they thought they could really achieve self-government, autonomy or a relative stake in the government of the union of South Africa. However it was soon clear that the chiefs who formed part of the United Transkeian Territories General Council (UTTGC), derisively referred to in Xhosa as *Utata woj’ inj; emsini*, (father has had dog’s meat blackened with smoke), were just puppets of the state who would later vote in the Bantu Authorities Act (Mbeki 1964: 33). The once relatively inclusive and constantly shifting and changing tradition of chieftaincy was now being crystallised in colonial “tribal” law, and the chiefs paid by the South African government, were being made to subtract all kinds of taxes from their subjects who were forced into migrant labour as a result.

People all over Mpondoland and the rest of the Transkei opposed betterment fiercely. Fence cutting was a popular form of resistance and took place in Witzieshoek, Lusikiski, Sekhuhuneland, Gwili-Gwili, Mtakwu and the Mbau area (Westaway 1993; Mbeki 1964). In Wolf River the resistance was most fierce and collective. One man was forced off a cliff for being pro-betterment, and people collectively disrupted government meetings that tried to disenfranchise squatters (Westaway 1993: 100). In Tokazi in Zululand opposition to rehabilitation was so strong that clashes between the peasants and police occurred when Chief Dinizulu accepted the betterment scheme. Thereafter, the whole community was ordered to move. Those who did move were attacked by peasants for being collaborators (Mbeki 1964: 46). The government responded with even more terror and brutality. In 1960, 4,769 men and women were arrested and 30 Mpondo people were sentenced to death (11 were reprieved). There were 22 deaths in all, and hut burnings were widespread, especially the huts of chiefs, headmen and collaborators or people who spread government propaganda in support of betterment (Mbeki 1964: 117). Lungisile Ntsebeza claims that I B Tabata, a participant in the uprising in Pondoland, author of the pamphlet *Rehabilitation: A New Fraud*, is actually the first theorist of what Mamdani later called the bifurcated state in *Citizen and Subject* (1996).

A big part of the Mpondo resistance is mired in discussions about the role of traditional kinship in the mountain or hill committees that organised the revolt and were sometimes also referred to as Ikongo or the Congo. The mountain committees, so named because men usually met on a mountain or a hill, were significant because mountains were spiritual places where the ancestors were said to dwell and where rituals were performed. They provided protection during wars, and were places where people could meet undisturbed (Drew 2011: 76).

The Khongo (another way of saying Ikongo and Congo) was said to have branches in towns like Bizana, Lusikisiki, Thonduke and Dundee and was represented by R M Tutshane at the AAC annual conference in 1948 (Drew 2011: 70). They were known for their resistance to Bantu Authorities as well as setting up of people’s courts, the boycotting of grave-digging and funerals for immoral leaders and, most importantly, the diverting of taxes away from the state to a collective fund for the poor (Mbeki 1964: 134).

There are various interpretations about the committee as manifestation of a subaltern politics where people critiqued

the state “and gave voice to a politics at the centre of which lay the ancient and enduring problem of authority and social health (Pieterse 2011: 60). Mbeki stresses the discipline, rationality and humanity of the mountain committees: even in the face of the brute force of the state, most people were asked to leave their huts before they were burned down and when violence and death did occur it was at the height of the revolts when people were scattered, disappeared, exiled or arrested and could no longer take collective decisions (Drew 2011: 79).

Legacy of the Mpondo Revolts

The Mpondo revolts reveal that ultimately no one party, no one group, was able to take responsibility for leadership or to substitute itself for the will of the people. The revolts were organised in this “other domain,” where popular resistance is framed by moral codes and custom and what Guha (1997: xviii) describes “as idioms derived from the communitarian experience of living and working together.” The Mpondo revolts cannot be seen merely as a revolt against betterment schemes and state policy, since there was a whole sphere of complex nodes of resistance that coalesced around questions of dignity, the right to be heard and against the enclosure of the commons. The emphasis was on a form of democratic praxis strikingly different to liberal democracy. People felt that their access to democratic praxis, which they had enjoyed before it was curtailed by the imposition of indirect rule in the form of Bantu Authorities, was not a revolt against the entire form of traditional political organisation. On the contrary it was a struggle over the meaning of tradition. It is equally clear that people were not calling for incorporation into “civil society.” They were certainly not imagining emancipation as something that required full proletarianisation.

The Mpondo revolts remain outside of the dominant narrative of resistance, and excluded from most discussions, because they took place in the rural sphere and were organised outside of the political sphere constituted by elite nationalism. But while this history is often silenced it is important to note that the peasants acted independently and that migrant workers played a large role in mountain committees. It is clear that the rebels were, however influenced, organising themselves outside of the elite nationalist framework that the ANC was using to wage its own battles in the urban centres. In fact when approached by the rebels for support the ANC failed to respond to pleas for financial help for legal fees (Beinhardt 2011: 110). The gulf between the Mpondo rebels and the ANC deepened after that. By 1981 Rowley Arenstein, a Durban-based lawyer and activist, who aided the rebels and referred them to the ANC, pulled away from the organisation saying he did not think the ANC took the rebels seriously and spoke down to them despite the scale and depth of their organisation (Beinhardt 2011: 111). Perhaps this was because the ANC leadership, largely dominated by elites, was rooted in the urban space and that peasants in the rural areas appeared to them as backward and still beholden to the kind of traditionalism from which they were trying to distance themselves at the time. Or perhaps it was because, as one organiser of the Mpondo revolts,

Leonard Mdingi said, it was never about changing the government but rather it was about having the government listen to and respond to its people.

This stress on consultation and participation often supercedes nationalistic interpretations of liberation struggles, especially in rural areas, which are often marginalised by urban politics and movements. In many ways the Mpondo revolts were the local praxis of custom and tradition which shares points of connection with many groups of dispossessed people in the global South, who use their common resources and local political practice to influence a larger system, from which they are excluded and in which they feel they should have a stake.

This is important for two reasons. The first is the incredible impact the Mpondo revolts had on Mpondo migrant workers in the urban areas, as Ntsebeza and Kepe (2011) have shown in their book, *Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years*. Dunbar Moodie (2011) and Ari Sitas (2011) trace the influence that the modes of organisation that had characterised the revolts, which stressed democratic consensus; collective action and respectable leadership, had when Mpondo people went on to join trade unions or organise protests in the urban areas (see Moodie 2011). Lindela Figlan, a leading figure in the urban shack dwellers’ movement—Abahlali base Mjondolo—who is from Mpondoland, and whose father participated in the revolt in 1960, sees important lines of connection with current forms of urban organisation and protest (Figlan 2013). It seems that similar lines of connection can be traced from the modes of politics apparent in Mpondoland in 1960 to mineworkers’ struggles after that revolt, including the revolt at Marikana.

The Dominant Narrative

Yet in contrast to this, many have stressed that the massacre was primarily the outcome of a union rivalry between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), who have historically been the majority union on the mines and the newcomer AMCU and more generally consequent to a crisis of organised labour in South Africa. While it is true that workers broke with union bargaining structures, the discussion in the South African media has been largely about which union rightfully represents the workers, yet most men on the mountain were NUM members at the time of the massacre and AMCU only came to dominate membership on the mines months after the event. Furthermore, this narrative does not explore how the mode of political organisation workers used at Marikana is different to trade union organisation and what the roots of this mode of politics are.

The African Mineworkers Union (AMWU) organised African mineworkers from the early 1940s until 1946. But from 1946 until 1984, when the NUM was formed African workers were not permitted to form or join unions (see Moodie and Ndashe 1994; Van der Walt 2007; Buhlungu 2009). The period between 1946 and 1984 is sometimes presented as a political vacuum on the mines during which the national liberation movement led the struggle against white supremacy.

For many labour historians, who rely on unionism as the basis for worker action and progress, the history of the labour movement then focuses on these two periods, and there is

usually a lull between them. Dunbar Moodie (2007: 164) makes this point well in his review of the three volumes of *A History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa*, commissioned by the NUM and written by Vic Allen, which remains a foundational text on labour history because of the lack of a comprehensive history of the NUM and mineworkers more generally:

If one insists, as Allen seems to, that organised worker resistance can be expressed only through a union, one ends up unable adequately to explain the 1922 strike and is left to scramble around for every little tidbit one can find to exaggerate the importance of the AMWU in 1946. The second volume deals with the 'interregnum' between 1948 and 1982. There were no unions on the mines during this period, so Allen takes a detour into more general South African history, dealing especially with the rise of independent unions and the Soweto student uprising, to move his reader from the 1946 strike on the mines to the establishment of the NUM in 1982.

Moodie (2007: 163) also critiques Allen's reliance on purely structural understandings of mineworkers' lives, even after having done extensive research with NUM ordained access to informants, which meant in Moodie's own words that "the significance of the life histories of his informants was lost on him; to ask the right questions, one needs to know the specificities of events." Thus, the daily struggles of people in the compounds and the social and cultural contexts of their lives outside of it "are reduced to the monotonous uniformity" of miners' lives "over the last 90 years" (Moodie 2007: 163).

Forms of Organisation

What are the possibilities for understanding the way in which workers organised before the entrance of the NUM on the mines? Perhaps a starting point is the striking continuity between practices of collective action and the demand to be heard directly by the authorities. People in Mpondoland and workers on the mines placed great significance on appearing in person to meetings and to address gatherings, they were often suspicious of people who brought letters which was stressed by the more educated trade unionists who came to the mines in 1946, not only because many were illiterate but because voting was not the favoured mode of democracy in large meetings and appearing in person to discuss concerns was viewed as far more important than the formality that letters and voting represented (Beinhardt 2011: 105). This is again reminiscent of the importance placed on *izimbizo* (mass district meetings) in Mpondoland where, "consultation," "means discussion until some measure of agreement is reached. In accordance with custom in law courts and traditional meetings no vote is taken, rather the matter is thrashed out until some compromise is reached" (Hunter 1961: 26). This was characterised by the proverb, *Isaala kutyelwa siva ngolophu*, which meant, "He who refuses to take advice hears by a hot wind" (Hunter 1961: 26).

When electing leaders on the mines it was consensus that was stressed, often people would talk for hours until they agreed on a leader, if there were two favourites and no one could decide on one, often, a third candidate whom everyone agreed on was chosen to avoid factions (Moodie 1994: 260). This seems somewhat in contrast to Buhlungu's (2009: 92) claim that most commentators on union democracy have tended to stress "formal" aspects like elections and attendance

at meetings, rather than more "substantive" aspects. For him, "this preoccupation with formal aspects of union democracy fails to comment on the growing instrumental orientation of current practices of union democracy, namely, that union activities more generally tend to focus more narrowly on collective bargaining" (Buhlungu 2009: 92). Yet the evidence which Moodie (1994) provides is that the stress on meeting attendance and elections (with democratic consensus not voting) presented organic forms of democracy which Mpondo miners were already accustomed to from home. This more horizontal mode of democratic praxis occurs in a subaltern sphere of politics which is missed by modernist interpretations of worker action because it takes place in different forms from those in what Guha describes as the "official domain." Recognising these different forms not only allows for an understanding of how they function to deepen democracy but also provides a critique of the kinds of labour historiography which assumes that mineworkers were unpoliticised and inactive during the period between 1948 and 1984. Or, further, that they were introduced to democratic practices and ideas of worker control exclusively through the unions.

What started in rural Mpondoland was carried over to the mines in a different form yet consensus was the dominant mode of interaction. Often when people felt their grievances were not taken seriously by the *induna*, (who was the mine-appointed official representative of workers: one for each ethnic group) whom they felt was already illegitimate because he was not popularly elected, they would inform their room officials or *izibonga* (Moodie: 1994: 88). People would gather, sometimes in thousands, outside the compound manager's office, sit and wait until he noticed and sent someone to talk to them and hear their grievances. This usually happened quite promptly since compound managers dreaded such meetings because they would bear the wrath of the mine manager if workers were unhappy or not at work (Moodie: 1994: 89). Like the chiefs in the Mpondo revolts, the manager would have to come and speak to them as an equal within the bounds of the moral economy. Often the *isibonga* would be the spokesperson, they avoided choosing leaders and would rather have someone air the grievances of the group. In this way, what was most important to the workers, like the peasants in the revolt, was to be listened to. Similar forms of organisation and political expression have been described in contemporary urban struggles in Durban (Patel 2006).

The persistence of this mode of politics on the mines contrasts with the picture Buhlungu (2009) paints in which union democracy gains momentum and popularity in the 1970s, because of state repression. In fact the appearance of the five *madodas*¹ [men] on the koppie [hill] at Marikana once again proves not merely the lack of faith in top-down style leadership, but also the need to have representatives of the people and not decision-makers on behalf of the people as well as continuity with the politics of the moral economy rather than union democracy. It was also a way of protecting themselves against management who may victimise leaders of a strike. This moral economy is also evidenced by the way in which chiefs were expected to provide their subjects with land and protection in

return for work and allegiance, which was in no way uncontested if chiefs were seen to be neglecting their end of the bargain (Hunter 1961; Guy 2013; Mayer and Mayer 1961).

The Moral Economy of the Workers

This collective memory is not exclusive to migrant labourers at the mines. Many Mpondo people who left home after the revolts remember them, through personal experience or oral history as being a definitive moment in their political education. Ari Sitas (2011: 180) recounts interviews with former Transkeians who had become migrant labourers in Natal who felt that what was significant was not the material defeat of the Mpondo revolts but the gain of pride in themselves. In fact, fellow non-Mpondo workers said that they “were stubborn in their hope for freedom” and “shared a common trauma based on the brutality of the experience” which later influenced their engagement in trade unions and union organising (Sitas 2011: 180). The Mpondo came to dominate mine politics because of their strong organisational abilities and home-networks, but, more importantly, because of the compound system, which made organising easier since people from the same ethnic groups lived together. Although there is also strong evidence that people also organised on the basis of their work teams which were often made up by people who were from different ethnic groups (see Moodie 1994).

In the extensive interviews on the strike and consequent massacre in Marikana available in Peter Alexander et al *A View from the Mountain*, there is much evidence of the organising tools employed during the constitution of the worker committees along the lines of the old moral economy and by extension the precolonial cultural political tools used before and during the Mpondo revolts. In various interviews, people involved in the strike and those who were present on the mountain noted that,

The leaders were elected on the basis of their historical leadership in recreational spaces, the community and the workplace. Mambush, or ‘the man in the green blanket’, one of the leaders who was killed during the massacre, had obtained his nickname from a Sundowns’ soccer player named ‘Mambush Mudau.’ He was chosen since he had organised soccer games and always resolved minor problems in the workplace. He was particularly well known for having a mild temperament and for his conflict-resolution skills both at the workplace and at his home in the Eastern Cape (Alexander et al 2012: 10).

In fact, in Crispin Chingono’s interviews, when speaking about the language they used during the strikes, the workers said they chose to use *fanakalo* (which is a mixture of language used by mine management, who often could not speak any African languages fluently, to overcome language differences amongst workers). For the NUM officials (often more educated) the use of *fanakalo*, was racist and a marker of inferiority and poor education, but for the workers, who are mostly illiterate, “The committee used *fanakalo* because they are in touch with what’s happening on the ground. Unlike NUM, they are in touch with reality. They know what is happening. The interim committee are people who are coming from within us...they are part of those doing the hard work...they know what is appropriate for the workers” (Chingono 2013: 25). This stress on electing people who were familiar with the workers and their

way of doing things, as well as the emphasis based on integrity and home—networks is extremely important in understanding how the subaltern sphere of politics functions at the mines. For one mineworker, “on the mountain, they had been eating together and making fire together, and it was like home” (Alexander et al 2012: 33). Many said leaders were chosen because they had previously dealt with emergencies that occurred in their communities back home and took responsibility for things like informing family members of the death of mine-workers, ensuring that the body goes home and is transported to the funeral as well as collecting donations for the family of the deceased (Alexander et al, 2012: 22).

A further key responsibility of the worker committee (which was reconstituted a few times after people left, were intimidated, or murdered), was the ability of the elected representative to maintain peace and order and a commitment to the kind of leadership founded on the principles of negotiation and “keeping one’s cool” (see Alexander et al 2012: 2; 10; 11; 22; 104; 131). There are clear links here to the way in which chiefs chose their counsel in the 1800s–1900s, to how mountain committees functioned during the Mpondo revolts and later how mineworkers in the ethnically segregated hostels elected izibonga or room officials. Furthermore, the stress on the ability to maintain peace and order is consistent with Mbeki’s stress on the ethical morality of mountain committees and their insistence on as little violence as possible (Drew 2011: 79).

While the committees elected representatives of a certain caliber, the RDO decided that they would approach management all together on the 11 August to avoid intimidation and to protect each other and when it came time for negotiation, the elected officials would speak, since, as one person said, “We can all sing, but we can’t all speak at once” (Alexander et al 2012: 1). The representatives could also be rotated at any point, depending on their “negotiating capability and who they were speaking to” (Alexander, et al 2012: 2).

The commitment to this style of engagement that prefaced the need for a flexible politics of inclusion and dynamism is reminiscent of the old moral economy rooted in a subaltern sphere of politics that allows for an open dialectic of experience where, people “make the road by walking it.” The appearance of the five madoda at the mountain in Wonderkop is testament to this principle. While one person said that it was the police who asked for five elected representatives, the same person also remarks, “You see my brother, the *five madoda*, the word used by the police, they said they wanted the *five madoda*, that is the language they used. And that is the language we use in the mines” (Alexander et al 2012: 104). The five madoda were elected from the already existing committee, and could be rotated at any time, they were the negotiators and on the 14 August they requested the employers come to the mountain to speak to them, but if necessary they would go to them (Alexander et al, 2012: 31), this was never fulfilled.²

The mountain however, remained a (gendered) space for equality, negotiation and consensus. Chingono (2013: 27) makes the point that the move to the mountain, in itself signalled a community in crisis and all the men from the community,

regardless of whether you were a mineworker or not, were required to be there to show their solidarity. The outrage the men on the mountain expressed, when NUM National Chairperson, Senzeni Zokwana, arrived in a police hippo (armoured vehicle) and refused to get off and address the crowd, as an equal, is reminiscent of the disgust people associated with Botha Sigcau, a corrupt Bantustan leader who was known as one of the main “chiefs” in Eastern Mpondoland, who arrived at the mountain in a helicopter during the Mpondo revolts refusing to speak to the people to whom he was supposed to be accountable. The hill committees, like the worker committee in Marikana and in earlier years on the gold mines, did not elect leaders but rather messengers and organisers, so they could avoid replicating the hierarchical structures of the chiefs (Wylie 2011: 203). The respect workers had for the five madoda, their counsel and elected representatives, is marked by workers kneeling 20 metres in front of police vehicles as the five men went forward to negotiate on behalf of everyone, this has become a hallmark feature of the visual representation of the Marikana strikes.

Mambush and the Five Madoda

The emblematic image of Mgcineni “Mambush” Noki, standing above thousands of seated men with a raised fist above his signature green-blanket clad shoulders and a stick in his other hand, minutes before he spoke to police, demonstrates not only the reverence people had for him, but also the faith that, through days of counsel together, he would carry their demands to police and their employers so they could finally leave the mountain. Minutes after he spoke to police, however, he was killed in a shower of bullets that marked the beginning of the massacre. At the one-year commemoration held at the mountain this year, Luke Sinwell and Simphiwe Mbatha (2013) recount how,

at about 3 pm on 15 August 2013, 30 workers crouched down as if they were again under attack by the police. This time, however, they were not – and instead of carrying the machetes and spears that they gathered after being shot at last year by their own union, NUM, they now carried small sticks as symbols of their defence and resistance. The workers were attempting to connect to the spirit of the men who died on the mountain. At the centre of the workers’ reflection was a man who has since become an icon of the struggle in Marikana and also a working class hero: Mgcineni Noki, ‘The Man in the Green Blanket,’ or ‘Mambush’—as the workers affectionately call him.

The appearance of the five madoda at Impala Platinum mines in neighbouring Rustenburg, during a six-week strike in 2012, shows obvious links to other spaces of action. The workers’ committee at Implats was part of a broad strike that quickly led to the demise of the NUM at the mines. Here too, people had elected representatives to negotiate on behalf of them outside of union structures and the reverence workers showed for the five madoda at Marikana was clearly neither unique nor isolated. Journalist Kwanele Sosibo (2012) describes his own experience at the strikes: “The machismo with which the committee carries itself can be seen, for instance, in how workers caution me to approach it with respect as I head in the wrong direction in the vicinity of Number Eight hostel, where AMCU’s southern branch office is situated.” It was the Implats strikes in February 2012, which was organised through independent

worker committees led by the RDos and the five madoda and not the unions, which started the action on the platinum belt. The news spread to Lonmin through home-networks, which people still sustained and it was these home-networks that brought the news of the fall of the NUM. A striking resonance with the way in which peasant insurgents called for corrupt chiefs’ huts to be burnt down during the Mpondo revolts is visible also in the songs used by mineworkers at Implats. “*Watsh’ umuzi ka Zokwana* ([NUM president Senzeni] Zokwana’s house is burning)” is an example of a refrain used to denote the continued downward slide of the NUM at the mine” (Sosibo 2012).

Where the NUM enjoyed a relative measure of legitimacy before the strikes, the workers were no longer interested in what, in their view, had become a “sweetheart union” which became more and more alienated from its constituency. In 1984, the giant that was the NUM took the mines by storm and slowly the old moral economy started to fade and a new mode of politics in the form of political unionism took over. While Pillay is right in saying Marikana did signal a break with unionism on the mines, it also revealed the sediments of an older, perhaps more reliable, mode of political organisation.

Pillay’s (2013: 37) assertion that the migrant labourer has not been adequately theorised is true. However perhaps rather than the notion that there is work to be done, perhaps it would be better to understand it, as a history that needs to be revisited, a subaltern sphere of history and politics, which already exists, which is silenced and marginalised, that remains to be made visible. In the Marikana Massacre, culture and tradition have largely been viewed as a way in which to explain away a peculiarity that Marxist analysis cannot.

Crispen Chingono, a researcher at the Society, Work and Development Institute (swop) in South Africa, one of the few people, who discusses the cultural context of mineworkers at Marikana at length in his working paper titled, *Marikana and the Post-Apartheid Workplace Order* does so in a way that ignores the political. While he includes a discussion about the cultural significance of the “koppie,” and the traditional beliefs of the workers who used muti [traditional medicine] and carried traditional weapons and consulted *sangomas* the discussion does not give these “cultural artefacts” any further significance beyond traditional practice. When Chingono (2013: 28) outlines that sangomas are consulted for various reasons: for instance to help overcome opponents during times of warfare, or that gathering on mountains represents a moment of crisis for a community, there is a failure to delve deeper into the culture of people who come from Mpondoland in the Eastern Cape and to link culture to the political. Here, it appears that culture functions as a way in which to clarify the obscure features of what should, otherwise, be considered a modern strike. Cultural analysis is a way of explaining away an aberration rather than exploring the use of cultural–political tools within the strike. While trade unions are used to explain “worker action” and political decisions, “culture” is galvanised to make symbolic gestures more palatable to the reader who would otherwise struggle to explain or rationalise such beliefs through Western/Euro-centric or modernist discourse.

The Politics of Culture

Seeing the rural as a space of absolute despotism or embodying only colonial indirect rule is inadequate as framework if we have to think beyond the limit of narrow forms of “modernity.” In fact, we also need to think beyond the limit of “ethnicity” and culture” in the way it is currently galvanised by the ANC-led government. Traditional authorities, currently codified and bastardised, are not the only form of political practice people in the rural areas have access to, nor does it represent any kind of “pure” history of political organisation, which we know was not as despotic as it now appears. The critique of Marxism cannot be that it fails to recognise the specificities of ethnicity, race, or culture, but rather that it employs one specific race, ethnicity and culture as universal.

E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* is rooted in a specificity: English culture and custom. Even if we are able to draw universal insights about the rationality of poor and marginalised people from essays like *The Moral Economy of the Crowd in the Eighteenth Century* the particular events from

which these universal insights are drawn are not devoid of “cultural artefacts.” Thompson does not attempt to divorce culture from its political implications. In the case of Marikana there has been an attempt by some to separate the two so that culture is not seen as implicitly and explicitly political or as constituting a matrix through which a particular mode of politics can be expressed.

We must also, however, take account of the pitfalls of the debates and conversations around culture and ethnicity in South Africa, and elsewhere, which will endure in our public discourse if not addressed adequately and directly. We may be unable to make real progress in understanding the modes of actually existing resistances on the mines, and elsewhere in our society, including the shack settlement, if we do not look beyond the overly narrow conceptions of political modernity and democracy which are still generally understood within the structures of a western framework that cannot recognise modes of political agency that cannot be easily reduced to liberal and Marxist currents of thought.

NOTES

- 1 These were five representatives of the mine-workers who were selected to speak. Chosen on the basis of their wisdom and ability to negotiate and organise these representative were often rotated and the idea of “elected leadership” was rejected.
- 2 The practice of rotational leadership during negotiations, as well as the stress on accountability and honour is also evident in urban struggles with some rural roots, notably *Abahlali base Mjondolo* in Durban.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, P T Lekgowa, B Mmope, L Sinwell and B Xezwi (2012): *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer*, Jacanda Media: Auckland Park.
- Beinhardt, W (2011): “The Mpondo Revolts through the Eyes of Leonard Mdingi and Anderson Ganyile” in L Ntsebeza and T Kepe (eds), *Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years*, UCT Press: Cape Town.
- Buhlungu, S (2009): “The Rise and Decline of the Democratic Organisational Culture in the South African Labour Movement, 1973–2000,” *Labour Studies Journal*, Vol 32, No 1.
- Bruce, P (2012): “The Thick End of the Wedge: The Editor's Notebook,” *Business Day*, available [online]: <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2012/08/20/the-thick-end-of-the-wedge-the-editors-notebook>
- Chatterjee, P (2004): “The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World,” Pauls Press: New Delhi.
- Chingono, C (2013): “Marikana and the Post-Apartheid Workplace Order,” *Working Paper 1: Society, Work and Development Institute*.
- City Press (2012): “Cops to Call Anthropologist to Testify about Marikana Muti Claims,” *CityPress*, available [online]: <http://www.citypress.co.za/news/cops-to-call-anthropologist-to-testify-about-marikana-muti-claims-20121122/>
- Drew, A (2011): “Govan Mbeki's in the Peasant's Revolt: A Critical Examination” *Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years*, L Ntsebeza and T Kepe (eds), UCT Press: Cape Town.
- Duncan, J (2012): *The Role of the Media in Perpetuating a Divided Society*. Presentation at the Steve Biko Annual Seminar, hosted by the Umtapo Centre and the Durban University of Technology, Durban University of Technology, 21 September.
- Figlan, L (2013): “Time to Stop Feeding the Parasites,” *Daily Maverick*, available [online]: <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2013-08-12-time-to-stop-feeding-the-parasites/#.UqCSa4oWEy4>
- Gift of the Givers (2014): “Lonmin Prevents Distribution at Wonderkop Stadium,” *Gift of the Givers*, available [online]: <http://www.giftofthegivers.co.za/disaster-relief/south-africa/927-2014-disaster-relief-sa/north-west-platinum-miners/4011-lonmin-prevents-distribution-at-wonderkop-stadium>
- Guha, R (1997): “Introduction in Guha, R (ed) *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, Oxford University Press: New York.
- Hendricks, F and J Peires (2011): “All Quiet on the Western Front: Nyandeni Acquiescence in the Mpondoland Revolt,” *Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years*, L Ntsebeza and T Kepe (eds), UCT Press: Cape Town.
- Hunter, M (1961): *Reaction to Conquest*, Oxford University Press: London.
- Lacey, M (1981): *Working for Bokoro: The Origins of a Coercive Labour System in South Africa*, Ravan Press: Johannesburg.
- Lekgowa, T and L Sinwell (2012): “Embryos of Working-Class Power and Grassroots Democracy in Marikana, Amandla! Magazine,” No 28.
- Mbeki, G (1964): *South Africa: The Peasants' Revolt*. Penguin: Middlesex.
- Moatshe, R (2014): “Amcu Takes Lonmin, Amplats to Court over SMS Campaign,” *Mail and Guardian*, available [online]: <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-05-14-amcu-to-lonmin-amplats-court-over-sms-campaign>
- Moodie, D T with V Ndashe (1994): *Going for Gold*, University of California Press: London.
- Moodie, D T (2007): “Review: The History of Black Mineworkers in South Africa by V L Allen,” *African Studies Review*, Vol 50, No 1.
- Moodie, D T with H Phundulu (2011): “Hoyce Phundulu: The Mpondo Revolts and the Rise of the National Union of Mineworkers” in L Ntsebeza and T Kepe (eds), *Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years*, UCT Press: Cape Town.
- Ntsebeza, L and T Kepe (2011): *Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years*, UCT Press: Cape Town.
- Ntsebeza, L (2011): “Resistance in the Countryside: The Mpondo Revolts Contextualised” in L Ntsebeza and T Kepe (eds), *Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years*, UCT Press: Cape Town.
- Patel, R (2006): “A Short Course in Politics at The University of Abahlali Basemjondolo,” *Centre For Civil Society Research Report No 42*.
- Pieterse, J (2011): “Reading and Writing the Mpondo Revolts” in *Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years*, L Ntsebeza and T Kepe (eds), UCT Press: Cape Town.
- Pillay, S (2013): “The Marikana Massacre: South Africa's Post-Apartheid Dissensus,” *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 48, No 50.
- Pithouse, R (2014): “Pers Communication,” Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 14 March.
- Sinwell, L and S Mbatha (2013): “Commemorating Marikana: The Spirit of Mambush Lives on,” *Amandla! Magazine*, available [online]: <http://www.amandla.org.za/amandla-magazine/current-issue/1794-commemorating-marikana-the-spirit-of-mambush-lives-on>
- Sitas, A (2011): “The Moving Black Forest of Africa: The Mpondo Rebellion,” *Black Migrancy and Black Worker Consciousness in Kwa Zulu Natal, in Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years*, L Ntsebeza and Kepe (eds), UCT Press: Cape Town.
- Sosibo, K (2012): “Emboldened ‘Five Madoda’ Issue Fresh Wage Demands,” *Mail and Guardian*, available [online]: <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-09-28-00-emboldened-five-amadoda-issue-fresh-wage-demands>
- Stone, S (2014): “Community Asks Lonmin to Close,” *Business Day*, available [online]: <http://www.bdlive.co.za/national/labour/2014/05/15/community-asks-lonmin-to-close>
- Tolsi, N (2009): “Kennedy Road Olive Branch a Sham”, *Pambuzuka News*, Issue: 453.
- Van der Walt, L (2007): “The First Globalisation and Transnational Labour Activism in Southern Africa: White Labourism, the IWW, and the ICU, 1904–34,” *African Studies*, Vol 66, Nos 2–3.
- Westaway, A (1993): “The Formulation of Modern Power Configurations in the Keiskammahoe District of the Ciskei from c 1948 to the Present,” MA thesis, Rhodes University.