

Article

Culture, Politics and the State

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Introduction

This paper is an extract from an ongoing PhD project about the politicisation of culture in post-Apartheid South Africa, and the social and political implications of this phenomenon, specifically on the understanding and practice of citizenship. The politicisation of culture is by no means a new phenomenon, here or anywhere in the world, however, this project starts from the understanding that ideas about culture have entered the domain of the political in new and unprecedented ways in contemporary South Africa, ways which warrant investigation if we are to begin to understand either the political landscape, or the complex ongoing processes of identity-formation - both individual and collective - that South Africans are engaged in.

I will not attempt to cohesively summarise the extensive and ongoing debates about the nature of culture in the discipline of anthropology more generally, but will try to restrict this discussion to a working definition of culture in the post-Apartheid South African context in which my research occurs. Perhaps the most obvious way to try to disambiguate this term, in the context of South African anthropology and politics, is to examine and compare two major attempts to do so - one in 1998, and the other in 2009. The texts I am referring to here are Emile Boonzaaier and John Sharp's *South African Keywords* (1988) and Steven Robins and Nick Shepard's *New South African Keywords* (2009). Both these books arose out of the difficulty faced by anthropologists of having to deal with many competing and contradictory definitions for the concepts that constitute the heart of their discipline - such as culture, ethnicity, heritage, tradition. This is a difficulty that challenges practitioners of the discipline anywhere in the world, but it is arguably most politically charged here in South Africa, where the reification of culture and ethnicity was most brutally and tragically enforced by

the Apartheid state. The sensitivity to this abuse of the notion is reflected in the 1998 Keywords discussion, which warns that

Virtually everywhere, from all sides, in law and politics, in the press and from the public channels of communication, we hear that South Africa is composed of many cultures, and that these cultures are the products and properties of different people or volke. These commonplace notions distort the nature of culture. They need to be corrected in order to understand what culture is and what it does.¹

Sharp goes on to offer a very clear definition of culture, one which is indicative of South African anthropologists political intentions to discredit any essentialising notions of culture: “Today, culture is best thought of as a resource. Like other resources, such as energy, sunlight, air and food, it cannot belong exclusively to any particular individual or group of individuals.”² The implications of this approach to culture for South African ethnography are discussed elsewhere, but it is evident from the narrowness of this definition, that anthropologists in South Africa under the Apartheid state were not able to explore more nuanced understandings of culture which involved collective and individual meaning making, beyond purely instrumentalist motivations.

Understandably, this narrow approach has proved frustratingly restrictive and unproductive in understanding the nuances of post-Apartheid South African society, where, surprisingly, despite the demise of the state taxonomy of ‘cultures’, cultural identity has by no means ceased to be significant:

Whereas during the anti-apartheid struggle, Left intellectuals and activists believed that outmoded ideas about ethnic and cultural difference would give way to modern, socialist understandings of working-class consciousness and solidarity, political life in post-apartheid South Africa continues to be animated by discourses on ‘African tradition’ and ethnic difference.³

Whilst the 2009 Keywords entry on culture offers a somewhat different kind of discussion of the term, they begin from an almost identical premise: that culture, or ‘culture-talk’, is everywhere:

The recent resurgence of culture - both as a an authorising platform for the performance and practice of everyday life and as an explanatory

category in academic discourses - has been one of the truly remarkable developments of the contemporary moment. Culture has become a ubiquitous category, invoked in both everyday speak and intellectual analysis. When a young woman or man donning a particular dress or sporting a specific hairstyle tells you that they are doing this because it is part of their culture and they are proud of it, then we know that we are witnessing the use of culture as authority for a lifestyle choice. When social relations between groups and patterns of behaviour previously explained in the language of economics, employing the grammar of class, are suddenly accounted for by recourse to culture and difference, then we see that culture is being invoked as a medium of intellectual analysis. Culture is suddenly everywhere - from the smallest event of everyday life, to the most rarefied fields of academic analysis.⁴

It is the practice of invoking this 'ubiquitous category' in a political context which is the central focus of this research. In this paper, a series of events are reviewed, ranging in scale and nature from the rape trial of President Jacob Zuma, to the debate over the ritual slaughter of a bull, to my own experiences of trying to enforce financial accountability in a state-funded project. In each of these vignettes, a behaviour, practice or idea is accounted for as 'cultural' - in such a way as to imply three things: firstly that this behaviour, practice or idea has always existed and is known by a definable group of people (e.g. Zulus, Africans etc.), secondly that this practice, behaviour or idea is accepted universally by this group of people, and thirdly, because of this, this practice, behaviour or idea is constitutionally protected by South African's right to 'their culture' - whether or not this practice, belief or idea contradicts other parts of the constitution.

The terms 'heritage' and 'tradition' are subsumed in this 'ubiquitous category'. Even in official documents, it is difficult to discern a clear distinction between what South Africans mean when they say 'heritage', 'culture' and 'tradition'. Nick Shepherd argues that the term 'heritage'

...hovers uneasily between individual and collective conceptions of history. It also sits uneasily between past and present. Is it a surfacing or imaging of the past in the present? Or is it more in the nature of a projection, from the standpoint of the present, of an idealised past? In addition to this indeterminacy around past and present, the notion of heritage is also divided between the material and the intangible. In one familiar aspect, it refers to buildings, monuments, landscapes and

artefacts, but it can also refer to values and ideas held in common, bodies of memory, even personality traits.⁵

The terms culture, heritage and tradition, are for the most part, especially in popular and political discourse, used almost interchangeably, and, whilst the actual content to which they refer can vary dramatically in nature and scale - from circumcision rituals, to hierarchical divisions of labour, to dictates about sexual orientation to styles of building or dress, or ways of greeting elders - these words signify the same key concept - that a practice, idea, behaviour or the use or creation of an object, are an inherent part of a coherent, unchanging system of widely known and widely held beliefs, a system which is specific to a particular, identifiable group.

Garuba and Radithlalo (2009) offer a definition of culture as a “set of practices by which meanings are produced and exchanged within a group”⁶ but argue that this definition which has become more or less widely accepted in the social sciences, has been complicated by specific developments in postcolonial studies. Specifically, drawing on Mamdani⁷ and Fanon⁸ the authors argue that under colonialism, culture became a form of resistance: “The colonised turned culture into an instrument of political resistance by affirming their exclusive proprietorship of this domain and asserting its fundamental value beyond the denigrations of colonialism.”⁹ This, and a note that globalisation has brought about the commodification of culture itself, are their major deviations from the 1998 entry on culture (Sharp). However, despite a nod in the direction of ‘meaning - making’ practices, in the end, Garuba and Radithlalo offer an almost identical definition of culture to Sharp’s declaration that the best way to understand it was ‘as a resource’:

Though the term ‘culture’ tends to present itself as existing outside the temporalities of history as ontology and essence, what we should always watch out for whenever the term is evoked is the historical context in which the specific usage is embedded. For ultimately, it is the specificity of its historical production and usage that gives culture its meanings.¹⁰

Thus it is clear that South African anthropologists are still fundamentally committed to an instrumentalist, constructivist interpretation of culture. My

research focuses not so much on the mobilisation of culture, but on the implications of this mobilisation for people's relationship to the state. The contemporary political scene in South Africa is witness to a wide array of such mobilisations - both by politicians and by voters, and whilst Garuba and Radithlalo note the power of cultural identity to generate and unify resistance to oppression, this research questions whether the mobilisation of cultural identity in post-Apartheid South Africa, like a snake eating its tail, has instead begun to play a kind of silencing, disenfranchising role. Furthermore, this paper explores the dangerous implications of 'culturalist' arguments, and argues that within African Studies and in the eyes of the media, South Africa is no longer immune to these.

The case for a re-engagement with culture

In the decades between what Hammond - Tooke termed 'the Golden Age of Ethnography'¹¹ in South Africa - the 1930's and 1940's, and today, state abuses of the notion of 'culture' led South African anthropologists to all but jettison this idea altogether, in an attempt to discredit the faulty logic of separate development. In this paper I will argue that anthropologists must re-engage vigorously with the concept of culture in South Africa for two reasons. Firstly, the changing political scene in South Africa means that the protective shield of the world-famous 'political miracle' is cracking and it is no longer immune to the kinds of culturalistic analysis of the African state and politics that, until now, have largely tended to exclude South Africa. Secondly, within both national political discourse, and daily South African life, the mobilisation of 'culture' as an explanatory mechanism is increasingly prevalent, and the consequences of this are problematic, and will be discussed in detail below. Both these trends – the analytical, theoretical one and the political discursive one have real repercussions for South Africans, for the way they are understood in the world, and for the way they relate to their state. In both cases, the abuse of culture as a concept to explain political, social and economic actions results in disempowerment, disenfranchisement and the obfuscation of real and meaningful understandings of the forces which shape people's lives. Whether or not anthropologists in South Africa are still uncomfortable with the word 'culture',

politicians and analysts feel no such qualms. These qualms of South African anthropologists are not misguided. They have witnessed first hand how the original subject of their discipline, when sent out uncritically into the world, can quickly become a powerful intellectual undergirding for oppressive ideologies and political practices. But, as evidenced by the discussion below, anthropologists can no longer sidestep the question of culture.

The State in Africa: South Africa's Introduction to an Old Debate

The debate about the relationship between culture and politics in Africa usually emerges out of an attempt to answer two related questions: Why has democracy failed in post-colonial African states and why are so many post-colonial states plagued by comparable issues of authoritarian leaders who cling to power for prolonged terms, high levels of militarization, and corruption? This is a controversial area of political thought, and the contributions from various disciplines have taken a number of approaches, but broadly speaking, they can be divided into two opposed camps: On the one hand there are those who claim that African states have failed to achieve state-hood, in the Weberian sense of the term, and democracy in the mythological "Western" sense of the term because of a basic cultural incompatibility with the political values required for these. According to these analysts, democracy is an alien political system, borne out of Western social values, and therefore wholly unsuitable as a governing mechanism for African societies, whose social values are radically different to those of the West.¹² In opposition to this approach are those who locate the origins of a highly militarised, corrupt and authoritarian state not within traditional 'African culture', but with that other common denominator of independent Africa – the colonial state.¹³

Situated somewhere between these two poles, are theorists who have attempted to understand the relationship between culture and politics (or economics) in a more nuanced way. Arguing, as Bayart does that "there is no activity, even of an economic nature, that does not immediately produce meanings and symbols. Understanding a social, economic or political phenomenon amounts to deciphering its 'cultural reason'..."¹⁴ anthropologists such as Ferguson¹⁵ have

analysed issues of power and wealth as socially embedded and locally meaningful. Bayart¹⁶ has made strong arguments for understanding the nature of the African state in terms of local cosmologies, articulated through idiomatic expressions.

This debate, about the nature of the relationship between politics and culture in Africa, has largely tended to exclude South Africa. Chabal and Daloz ignore South Africa in their analysis of the nature of the state in Africa claiming that it has “a history so distinct as to make comparison difficult at this stage.”¹⁷ Matte and Shin¹⁸, evaluating the suitability of South Africa as a site for measuring the impact of cultural values on democracy, note that it is “the most developed country on its continent” and is “seen as the most successful example of ‘Third Wave’ democratisation in Africa”, and that “if modernization theory is correct, [South Africa’s] relatively advanced level of development would mean that citizens are less likely to possess traditional values than their less developed neighbours.”¹⁹ Added to these conceptions of the radical difference between South Africa and the rest of the continent were some other factors. To begin with, when the outlines of this debate began to emerge, South Africa was ruled by a white settler government, so it was not possible to ask questions about the influence of “African culture” on the state and its practices. Even after the transition, the secular-saint status of Nelson Mandela and the mythology of the liberation struggle immunised the South African state against the same level of suspicion that political analysts regarded other African states with. This was considerably bolstered by the African National Congress’s shying away from radical redistributive programmes and strong leanings towards neoliberal policies – for all intents and purposes the New South Africa promised to be the exemplary liberal democratic state, with the much lauded “most advanced constitution in the world” and a persuasive national discourse which (on the surface) appeared to decry ethnicism and embrace unity²⁰. The ANC’s liberation doctrine of non-racialism and non-tribalism also contributed to it being exempted from the kinds of interrogations other African states were subjected to: nobody asked questions about the way in which ‘indigenous South African culture’ was

shaping the nature of the new South African state, no-one suggested that this 'culture' may be incompatible with the democratic project. At the time of the transition, that seemed an irrelevant and irreverent question. To be sure, it is still an irrelevant question - one based on severely flawed assumptions about the existence, coherence and significance of 'indigenous culture', but recent events in South Africa mean that it will no longer be taboo to ask these questions, and to seek culturalistic explanations for them. Indeed, politicians themselves are increasingly mobilising culture in a variety of contexts. The relationship between culture and politics has come to the fore in contemporary South Africa.

In 2005, Afrobarometer published Matt and Shin's report, entitled "The Democratic Impact of Cultural Values in Africa and Asia: The Case Studies of South Korea and South Africa" The report is instructive in the logic and 'science' of culturalist approaches to politics:

Traditional cultural values have long been seen by scholars as a significant obstacle to political and economic development in the postcolonial world, especially in Asia and Africa. Publics which prioritize things like the collective good of the family and community over procedure and individual rights, grant uncritical respect to authority and social hierarchy, and identify themselves primarily as members of sub-national kinship groups rather than modern nation-states, are said to be particularly inhospitable places for representative democracies and market economies to take root.²¹

The data for this report was collected by surveying the opinions of South Africans with a questionnaire that "measured African values"²² based on the following understanding of the four major influences on these "African cultures:"

Firstly, until relatively recently, Africans have traditionally lived in small-scale villages. Second, again, until relatively recently, Africans have governed themselves through a usually patriarchal system largely of hereditary, unelected traditional leaders that, at the same time reputedly featured significant amounts of participation in village council discussions. Third political rule was rarely exercised on the scale of the modern state, often only extending to the boundaries of the village, and beyond that only indirectly in loose confederation with other villages sharing tribal, clan or linguistic similarities. Fourth, Africa's modern political topography often bears little resemblance to the continents ethnic or tribal makeup as colonial mapmakers divided and recombined

Africa's homogenous agrarian and herding communities into heterogeneous national societies.²³

Working from this basis, a set of corollary assumptions are presented:

...the emphasis on communal good means that producing just outcomes, even if it requires the use of violence, may be valued more than procedure and rule of law...the emphasis on communal good and the history of traditional rule leads people to think and act as clients dependent on patrimonial relations, and later, neo-patrimonial 'big men' to provide for their welfare...the patriarchal nature of many African polities means that women are seen as inferior and unequal...the emphasis on consensus may breed intolerance of dissent (Owusu, 1992)...people with strong group-based identities may be more likely to develop antipathies towards 'others' and less likely to accept a democracy that necessarily includes competing groups and finally, the lack of national identity may deny young democracies the necessary "political glue", turning every element of political contestation into a zero-sum, group-based conflict.²⁴

The respondents were asked to respond with answers between 'strongly disagree' and 'strongly agree' to a range of questions meant to reveal the impact of their cultural values on their ability to engage as democratic citizens. The questions were posed as two opposing statements, one 'traditionalist' and one 'modernist' - so by claiming to strongly disagree with the 'traditionalist' statement, you were claiming to 'strongly agree' with the 'modernist' one. Some examples from the survey are:

A married man has a right to beat his wife and children if they misbehave
OR
No one has the right to use physical violence against anyone else.

It is better to have wealthy people as leaders because they can help provide for the community
OR
It is better to have ordinary people as leaders because they understand our needs.

The report, whilst acknowledging that 'traditionalists' are in the minority in South Africa, concludes that "traditional cultural values do shape popular attitudes towards democracy"²⁵ and notes that Afrobarometer needs to take this into account in all future studies. It is clear from this report that South Africa is

no longer considered to have a history so distinct as to preclude meaningful comparison, or a population so different to the rest of Africa as to warrant exemption from culturalist analysis. A number of factors have contributed to a shift in the way that the relationship between culture and politics in South Africa are understood. In 2005, the same Afrobarometer report noted that South Africa appeared to be ‘experiencing problems with the new democracy’ – identifying official corruption, centralised decision-making and deep social cleavages manifested as racially divided voting as some of the indicators of a democracy that was not consolidated.²⁶ Since then, a series of dramatic political events have appeared to undermine the state of democracy in South Africa.

The Arms Deal, aptly described as “the poison chalice of South African politics” (Gevisser: 2008) brought official corruption to the centre stage, and threatens to implicate great swathes of ANC leadership,²⁷ including former president Thabo Mbeki and President Jacob Zuma – the latter of whom almost stood trial on several counts of corruption relating to this deal. Jacob Zuma’s aborted corruption trial and his public rape trial in 2006 have resulted in an interpretation in some political quarters that his rise to political power is a serious threat to the constitution and democratic practice²⁸. The uncovering of Chief of Police Jackie Selebi’s illegal connections to a major organised crime leader, Glenn Agliotti, at a time when the country’s crime levels caused one commentator to describe it as “a country at war with itself,”²⁹ caused massive haemorrhaging of faith in the state. This was greatly exacerbated when then President Thabo Mbeki fired Vusi Pikoli, the head of the National Prosecuting Authority, for issuing a warrant for Selebi’s arrest, in what looked very much like an unhappy violation of the Separation of Powers. The Eskom crisis, which quite literally plunged South Africa into darkness, bringing industry to a halt and significantly disrupting daily life, caused a further flurry of loaded speculation about the ANC’s inability to manage a state.

In May 2008, the worst violence since 1993 swept through South Africa, aimed at immigrants – Africans from the rest of the continent who, since 1994 have

made their homes in South Africa. Images of public necklacing and military troops in the township, scenes most South Africans had hoped never to see again, were once again on the front pages of the news. The xenophobic attacks, which left approximately a hundred thousand people homeless, hundreds wounded and nearly one hundred dead, horrified South Africans and the world. Predictably, the conflict provided an opportunity for essentialist tropes to emerge in public discourse - much reporting of this violence described it as 'ethnic', some even going so far as to say 'tribal', but some analysis also looked to the underlying political and economic causes of the violence – rising food prices, lack of service delivery and massive unemployment. Whatever the understanding of the causes of the violence was, a common refrain in reporting at this time was the idea that South Africa had reached 'the end of the Rainbow'. In the political imagination of South Africans, it was perhaps these events, rather than any of the political high drama recounted here, that signalled the end of the dream of South African exceptionalism. At the time, former Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: "South Africans do not deserve to use the word ubuntu." Given the primacy of the concept of ubuntu in the mythology of the miracle of the peaceful transition, Tutu could not have found a more powerful way to express the sentiment that South Africa had failed to be different to the rest of independent Africa.

The final event in this series of political blows to the Rainbow Nation myth came when, in another moment of high political drama, Thabo Mbeki was forced out of the presidency, by a group of dissidents within the ANC, dramatically shifting the political status quo in South Africa and raising eyebrows about the highly irregular and unprecedented event that led to the President stepping down. The subsequent split in the ANC, and the formation of the Congress of the People (COPE) as the first potentially serious opposition to the ANC could be seen as a sign of a strengthening democracy, but the Presidency of Jacob Zuma, and all that he has come to symbolise, continues to feed suspicion that South African politics are moving away from a liberal democratic goal.

In the background to the high drama of the last two years, two critical failures of the Mbeki government continued to damage the image of the ANC as a progressive ruling party: Mbeki's disastrous policy of 'quiet diplomacy' with Mugabe and his persistent HIV/AIDS denialism, both of which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, and both of which were justified by Mbeki in terms which thinly disguised a culturalist logic – African Solutions for African Problems. This too will be explored in more depth below.

The collapse of neighbouring Zimbabwe in a spectacular caricature of the failed African state played a significant role in shifting the discourse around 'state failure' in Southern Africa. Already analysts and commentators have begun to refer to corruption, nepotism and criminality in the South African government as 'the Zanutification of the ANC' – this being a shorthand for a collection of state characteristics such as the centralisation of power, the blurring of the divide between the party and the state, intolerance of dissent and criticism, erosion of parliamentary and judiciary independence, corruption and a general undermining of democratic institutions, practices and norms.³⁰ But the term "Zanutification of the state" does not only refer to what happened in Zimbabwe - it is also a synonym for the Africanisation of the state. Mugabe and Zanu PF have become symbols of the stereotypical postcolonial African despot – he is frequently compared to Amin and Mobutu, and the mobilisation of his name in the context of South Africa is not simply a comparison between two states – it is the articulation of a deep fear, often heard on the lips of both rapidly emigrating white South Africans³¹ and cynical black South Africans – that South Africa is destined to 'go the way of the rest of Africa' – an inevitable retreat to barbarism and the deformations of the state that occur when democracy is attempted by those who are culturally indisposed to it:

Nothing has actually broken yet, but we all know where it's heading. If you drop an egg, it breaks, okay? And if a sub-Saharan African country achieves independence, it turns into a basket case, nine times out of 10. The Zimbabwean egg bounced anomalously for a decade or so, but now it too has smashed, and that leaves us.³²

Although we have not yet seen an explicit argument that these political developments are manifestations of an inevitable cultural influence, that is how they have been explained in other African states, and given analysis of the kind presented by Afrobarometer in 2005, it can surely not be long until we see these political events explained in just these terms. Southern Africa, previously the awkward exception to culturalistic political science models of the African state, has begun to prove ‘the rule’.

Bayart, noting the poverty of this kind of argument, says “the culturalist argument is always a substitute for a demonstration. However it has perhaps never been so in fashion as it is today.”³³ The pervasiveness of culturalist arguments in and about South Africa is easy to demonstrate, but in order to prove their paucity a more complex analysis is required. The following section does two things: first it looks at a series of vignettes which illustrate the way in which culturalist explanations operate both at a national and a local level. Second, I will begin to suggest some retort to these culturalist arguments, by building a repertoire of resistance to their seemingly commonsensical ‘explanations’ for the state of South African politics.

The rise of culturalist logic in popular discourse in South Africa

The Director of the African Peer Review Mechanism Programme at the South African Institute of International Affairs, began a recent guest column for the occasion of Human Rights Day, 2007:

What is the right balance to strike between African traditional values and constitutional rights? Are constitutional principles that were not invented in Africa illegitimate? Should they be subordinated to or qualified by African values?”³⁴

The specific incident which prompted these questions was the comment made by the head of South Africa’s public broadcasting company (SABC) in response to a public debate over the right of the press to publish details about the Health Minister’s alcoholism and a previous accusation of theft. The head of the SABC condemned the publication of these details, saying that freedom of speech should

be tempered by the traditional African values of respect. Asante-Darko and Herbert responded to this by pointing out that this kind of reasoning has serious implications for governance and constitutional practice in South Africa and beyond. This is however, only one example amidst many where the same questions could be asked, and illustrates a growing sense that there is a disconnect between the constitution, and the ill-defined nebulous set of ideas signalled by the words ‘African’, ‘traditional’ and ‘cultural’. No single person has embodied this alleged clash of values than ANC president, Jacob Zuma, whose mobilization of culture in order to justify, explain and legitimise a range of practices and ideas which are more or less opposed to the spirit of the constitution has earned him a massive following, and the nickname “100% Zulu-Boy”.

Xolela Mangcu begins his latest book “To the Brink – The State of Democracy in South Africa” (2008) with an anecdote which illustrates how these broad political tensions manifest in daily South African life. He describes a confrontation between a white woman and a black woman in a queue at the German Embassy in Pretoria. The white woman objected when a black security guard told someone that their child may not sit on one of the chairs in the queue, at which point “a prominent African Woman journalist told the white woman that it was ‘un-African’ for a child to sit while adults stood. ‘It is our culture’, she insisted.”³⁵ For Mangcu, this incident clearly represented what he believes to be the central dynamic of Thabo Mbeki’s rule – the demise of the ANC’s long legacy of racial syncretism and the rise of

racial nativism – the idea that the true custodians of African culture are the natives. The natives are often described as black Africans, and within that group the true natives are those who participated in the resistance struggle. And even amongst those natives are those who are on the side of the government. By dint of their authenticity, these natives have the right to silence white interlopers or black sell-outs.³⁶

My own interest in these matters began when I was challenged by a group of such cultural gatekeepers. I was working on a project in the Eastern Cape for the Department of Land Affairs. The project involved a massive amount of fieldwork which had to be conducted in isiXhosa, and so we had assembled a

team of about 20 fieldworkers, most of whom were undergraduate students at Fort Hare University. The team was entirely black, mainly men, and about half South African and half Zimbabwean. During our final meeting before going into the field, I was explaining the logistics of the fieldwork. We were to stay in local hotels, where we would be provided with breakfast and dinner. Our petrol and mobile phone costs were to be covered, and we were all receiving a generous daily rate. We were to receive a lunch budget of R50 per day, and I mentioned that we would need to bring slips and change for this. It was at this point that the team mutinied – they point blank refused to return any change from the R50. I was surprised, as R50 was clearly a lot of money for lunch – it would actually be very difficult to spend this amount on one meal in the areas where we were working. I argued that the DLA was not giving us R50, they were paying for our lunch, so whatever was left over, we had to return to them. The conversation quickly became confrontational, and eventually, one of the men turned to me and said, “Its simple – you cannot understand the African way of dealing with money”. I was furious, because it seemed to me that there was consensus around the table that the “African way of dealing with money” was fraudulent and expedient, an idea which I had heard before from prominent political scientists who wrote pessimistically about the ‘fate of democracy’ in Africa, and an idea with which I was deeply uncomfortable. Nonetheless, I was silenced, unable to argue from my position of ‘cultural ignorance’. And despite my arguments that not returning the change from our lunch money, whilst it may seem insignificant in the context of a R3 million project, was essentially stealing, not a single slip or cent was returned during the course of the project.

Xolela Mangcu’s experience in the German embassy, and my naïve attempts to enforce financial accountability in a state project are not isolated or unrelated incidents. South Africa has always been a place where ‘culture’- whatever that means - matters. Whether it was the British colonial powers dividing and ruling, the grand inventions of Afrikaner nationalism, the mythology of the Zulu nation, African resistance leaders mobilising a sense of identity with which to resist oppression, or the Apartheid state, classifying and categorising the entire

population into definable ethnic groups – South Africans have always lived with, invested in and believed in cultural boundaries, whether or not they were really there. So the prominence of ideas about culture in the public sphere is not necessarily new, or interesting, nor is the rise of cultural gatekeepers. But what is interesting is the new power of these gatekeepers, and the power which culture has claimed in the political sphere recently. Whilst Jacob Zuma is certainly the most prominent and confrontational manifestation of this – there is no shortage of other examples of high-ranking officials using ‘culture’ as a framework for directly or indirectly challenging the political foundations of the constitutional democracy of post-Apartheid South Africa.

Thabo Mbeki’s infamous framing of the standard position on HIV/AIDS as embedded within “centuries-old white racist beliefs and concepts about Africans”³⁷ and his persistent position as an AIDS dissident can be understood in the context of his belief that biomedical positions on HIV/AIDS derive from a particular cultural paradigm – i.e. Western, white and ‘non-African’. Aside from all the other destructive and alienating impacts of the President’s denialism, this colouring of the debate with a cultural overtone has been particularly divisive. Of course, in the trajectory of the AIDS epidemic the culture card has been played on all sides – the construction of HIV/AIDS as a ‘plague’ brought down to punish promiscuous, animalistic African sexuality is an insidious yet pervasive trope within the discourse. But to a certain degree, through his stance, Mbeki has succeeded in at least paving the way for arguments against safe sex, against openness about HIV status and against adherence to the complex and challenging medical regimes which treat the virus, to be ‘culture’- based.

Mangcu (2008) locates this shift towards the politicisation of culture in South Africa firmly within the Mbeki presidency, and from his inaugural speech, Mbeki has indeed moved away from the Rainbow Nation inclusiveness of the Mandela era, and heralded the dawning of what he called “The African Renaissance”. For Mangcu, Mbeki’s pervasive narrative of a return to a great African past, thinly disguises an exclusive and damaging ethos of ‘racial

nativism’, a political and ideological practice which is in direct violation of the ANC’s history of “racial syncretism”:

By syncretism I mean the dynamic processes of identity formation that have always underpinned black people’s encounter with European modernity. The condition of being native or African or black was always a product of bargaining and contestation of the often derogatory definitions given by colonialists and missionaries alike. There was no essentialised African identity that was pure and untouched by the cultures with which one interacted. Black political leaders from Tiyo Soga to Steve Biko – wrote extensively about the importance of choice, identification, consciousness and values in these processes of identify formation. ... Racial nativism by contrast, harkens to purist, essentialist conceptions of identity.³⁸

Unsurprisingly, in the same way as the essentialist cultural definitions of the Apartheid state had relatively random and arbitrary requirements for ‘belonging’ to one or another group – these new essentialist arguments about culture are also based on external, ‘non-cultural’ factors. Thus, it is possible, according to Mangcu, for Zulu-speaking black South Africans to be excluded, and considered non-native, because of their political views, or their historical non-involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle.

During the drawing up of the constitution, 11 000 submissions were made, suggesting ideas, principles and values that South Africans wanted enshrined in the highest law of the land. The suggestion that the rights of animals be protected in this document was made, but it was never included. However, there are lesser laws, which protect animals in South Africa. When former ANC chief whip, Tony Yengeni, was released early after serving only a few years of his sentence for corruption, his friends and family celebrated with a ‘traditional cleansing ceremony’ in his Cape Town home. This involved slaughtering a bull in his backyard. As part of this ritual, Toni Yengeni stabbed the bull before it was slaughtered, in order to make it ‘bellow in pain’. The SPCA and concerned animal rights activists spoke out against this, and Toni Yengeni was threatened with being charged with cruelty to animals, a criminal offence which carries a jail sentence or a hefty fine. The backlash was immediate and strong – the message being – ‘this is our culture, no-one, not even the law, has any right to

comment or criticize'. Sandile Memele, spokesperson for the Minister of Arts and Culture released the following statement: "This is definitely not an SPCA matter, because it is not about cruelty to animals. Instead, it is about man's search for meaning, purpose and the redefinition of the relationship with the cosmos, God and his ancestry". Shortly after this incident, the Minister of Labour invited the SPCA to attend another such ceremony:

I invite the SPCA to join us as we will be slaughtering the bull without euthanasing it. We want that bull to bellow. We will ask them to come into the kraal to share in the feast. And then we will sing the praises of our ancestors. The SPCA should be told clearly that we will continue to slaughter cows like this.

At the same time, Minister Mdladlana chastised traditional leaders for failing to defend Yengeni when the SPCA had threatened him, saying that their ancestors had died fighting colonists so that they would be able to live freely and practice their cultures today, and as the custodians of tradition in South Africa, it was their duty to defend these practices against attacks such as this.³⁹ Apart from the obvious conflict in world-views here – the clash between those who were disturbed by the manner in which suffering was inflicted upon the ritual animal and those who saw this as insignificant in light of the cultural meaning of the event, what is extremely telling about his event is that an official government document was released, clearly labelling an established law as an attack on African 'culture', and called on traditional authorities and the population in general to resist this law. Here, once again, the idea that the body of liberal laws which govern South Africa are somehow hostile to 'traditional African culture', and vice versa, is articulated very clearly.

On the 6th March 2006, President (then vice-president) Jacob Zuma began his trial, accused of raping a family friend, known to the public as "Khwezi". He was eventually acquitted, largely on the basis of Khwezi proving to be an 'emotional' and 'unreliable' witness. The trial garnered massive publicity, and despite the widespread condemnation of his actions and statements leading up to and during his trial, eventually elevated Jacob Zuma's popularity to an

unprecedented level. Several times during his testimony in court, and his statements in public, Zuma used a concept of Zulu culture to explain his actions:

He spoke in isiZulu throughout his cross-examination and repeatedly drew on traditionalist idioms and "cultural rules" to buttress the defence's argument that he had consensual sex with the 31-year old woman accusing him of rape. For example, he spoke of how in Zulu culture "leaving a woman in that state [of sexual arousal]" was the worst thing a man could do. "She could even have you arrested and charged with rape," he told the court. He addressed the judge as 'nkosi' - yenkantolo (the king of the court) and referred to his accuser's private parts as isibhaya sika bab'wakhe - her father's kraal. He also conceded that he entered this kraal without ijazi ka mkhwenyana - the groom/husband's coat, or what non-Zulu-speakers would call a condom. These translations of isiZulu idioms are usually associated with "deep" rural KwaZulu-Natal. To those attending the Johannesburg High Court hearing, and millions of others following the trial through the extensive media coverage, these words signified that Zuma was indeed a "real" Zulu man: "100% Zulu boy" as his supporters' t-shirts put it.

It was in his discussion of lobola (bridewealth) that Zuma publicly displayed his Zuluness most vividly. In response to questions about two "aunts" who had attempted to initiate lobola negotiations with the complainant, Zuma answered that he would have "had his cows ready". He claimed that it was not unusual in Zulu custom for a woman who had not had a love-relationship with a man to start lobola negotiations for him. As he put it, "Lobola is an issue between the girl, for instance, and the family. Should she had told these two ladies that 'Yes, I want Zuma to pay lobola', I would definitely do it." Lobola, and patriarchal conceptions of women and sexuality, became the site upon which this claim to Zulu authenticity was played out.⁴⁰

This mobilisation of a particular notion of Zulu culture, was coupled with his singing of an old struggle song "Awulethu umshini wam" with the large crowds of supporters outside the courtroom. The song, which translates as "Bring me my machine gun, you are delaying the process", became his trademark during this time, and was sung by crowds of supporters (a large proportion of whom were women) wearing t-shirts emblazoned with his newly earned nickname "100% ZULU BOY". Despite his acquittal, there is no doubt that Jacob Zuma's testimony clearly revealed an attitude towards women which is in direct violation of the spirit of equality and respect embodied in those aspects of the constitution which deal with gender equality. The massive support which he received as a result of his cultural justifications for his actions once again poses the question:

is there a serious rift in South African society between the political values embodied in the constitution and those of a significant proportion of the population?

The idea that black women who wear short skirts are contravening cultural norms and need to be taught a lesson, is not new in South Africa. Mkhwanazi (2008) discusses a series of incidents of sexual violence which involve men publicly gang-raping women and justifying it by saying that these women were dressed in ways inappropriate to 'African culture'. The most recent of these events is almost identical to the ones preceding it, except that this time, Jacob Zuma's theme song was invoked by the perpetrators:

On the 17th of February 2008, 25 year old Nwabisa Ngcukana was sexually assaulted by taxi drivers at the Noord Street taxi rank in the Johannesburg CBD for wearing a mini-skirt. Some taxi drivers poured alcohol over her face and yelled obscenities at her, while others inserted their fingers into her vagina. The taxi drivers said that they were teaching her a lesson. A crowd gathered and cheered. A few days after the incident 600 commuters marched to the Johannesburg CBD in protest. The protesters were met by a group of taxi drivers who screamed at them that women (who wear mini skirts) need to be taught a lesson. Confronted by protesters dressed in mini skirts, the taxi drivers 'striped naked in retaliation' and sang the song made famous by Zuma supporters during his above mentioned rape trial, 'Awuleth' umshini wami' (bring me my machine gun). Older women hawkers interviewed about the incident sanctioned the actions of the taxi drivers saying that mini-skirts are against culture.⁴¹

The use of Jacob Zuma's song in this context clearly demonstrates a link between the ideas publicly normalised during his trial and the way in which violence against women it is understood in the public imagination.

Jacob Zuma managed to avoid standing trial on charges of corruption, but his triumphalist evasion of the trial has left a lingering suspicion about his innocence. In interviews conducted in 2007 in the Eastern Cape, I asked ANC supporters what they felt about the possibility that the leader of their party, and likely future President was guilty of corruption. The following answer was typical of the responses which I received:

Comrade Zuma is an important man. If he was a chief in the village, people would bring him cows, and then he would look after them. It's the same with where he is now – there is nothing wrong with taking gifts when you are in his position – you need to be able to look after your people.

The interviews which I conducted were by no means representative or exhaustive, and so I can make no claims about this exemplifying a general attitude towards corrupt politicians. However, the fact that Jacob Zuma's support has not waned despite fresh charges, and the unlikelihood of his innocence, strongly suggests that there is a degree to which the use of public office for self-enrichment is not only condoned, but also expected. This, along with some of the findings presented above, seems like compelling evidence for the theory put forward by Afrobarometer. But to assume that this is 'evidence' for that argument, we must overlook the unverified assumption that the ideas and values being put forward here, in this case about the use of public office for self-enrichment, are indeed 'cultural'.

A rift between popular political values and constitutional political values is neither unusual nor dangerous, in itself. Whilst much of the rhetoric and political spin regarding the political miracle of the 1994 transition mythologised the South African constitution as a grand reflection of the true will of the people, the pinnacle of hard-won democracy, constitutions in history have not usually held this position. Already, in its brief life the South African constitution has several times had to act not as the will of the people made law, but rather as a muzzle upon the will of the South African people.

In 1995, a case was brought before the Constitutional Court, which essentially required it to rule on the constitutionality of the death penalty. Despite common acceptance that the majority of South Africans would support it, the court ruled against capital punishment because it was 'against the spirit of the constitution'. During the case, Ms Davids, arguing on behalf of the Black Advocates Forum who participated as an amicus, expressed the view that the court should not rule against capital punishment without taking into account the various cultural positions on the matter which were represented by South African society: "In the past, she stated, the all-white minority had imposed Eurocentric values on the majority, and an all-white judiciary had taken cognisance merely of the interests of white society."⁴²

Judge Chaskalson acknowledged this point, and agreed that the matter needed to take cognisance of all historical and cultural positions on the matter. In attempting to ascertain whether or not capital punishment had been practised in pre-colonial South African societies, he ascertained that whilst extra-judicial killings for witchcraft and in military contexts occurred, “it would appear that the relatively well-developed judicial processes of indigenous societies did not in general encompass capital punishment for murder.”⁴³ In fact, when consulted, the historical record showed that capital punishment was better understood as a colonial tool of oppression than an indigenous African practice which colonial powers had attempted to eradicate.

Judge Chaskalson’s judgement in this case contains prescient insights into the question of ‘traditional African values’ and how to interpret them in terms of the spirit of the new constitution:

In seeking the kind of values which should inform our broad approach to interpreting the Constitution, I have little doubt as to which of these three contrasted aspects [two varying practices within pre-colonial African societies and colonial practices of capital punishment] of tradition we should follow and which we should reject. The rational and humane adjudicatory approach is entirely consistent with and re-enforcing of the fundamental rights enshrined in our Constitution; the exorcist and militarist concepts are not. We do not automatically invoke each and every aspect of traditional law as a source of values, just as we do not rely on all features of the common law. Thus, we reject the once powerful common law traditions associated with patriarchy and the subordination of servants to masters, which are inconsistent with freedom and equality, and we uphold and develop those many aspects of the common law which feed into and enrich the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution. I am sure that there are many aspects and values of traditional African law which will also have to be discarded or developed in order to ensure compatibility with the principles of the new constitutional order.⁴⁴

This is an important case, because Justice Chaskalson here mobilises one of the classic weapons against the vacuousness of cultural essentialism: history. The case also however, raises some difficult questions. In this example, the historical record happened to support the spirit of the constitution, even if it contradicted the majority of contemporary South African’s beliefs about the death penalty.

But what if the historical record had indeed shown something different, and pointed to a strong tradition of capital punishment in pre-colonial times? Would Justice Chaskalson have had to rule differently? Nonetheless, despite these unanswered questions, the case demonstrated how the use of history to interrogate sweeping claims about culture can force these arguments to be accountable to the groups which they claim to speak for.

Conclusion

Clearly then, there is a complex relationship between culture and politics in South Africa, and it is becoming increasingly important to understand the nature of this relationship. In the situations described above, the relationship is characterised as an antagonistic dichotomy between two paradigms – traditional and modern, indigenous and foreign. By exploring the historicity of ‘culture’, the changing of cultural practices over time and the dissenting voices which contribute to the ongoing process of identity-construction, anthropologists should heed what McAllister identified as Hammond Tooke’s wish for anthropology: “South African anthropologists should stick to their last and continue to probe to deeper levels of social and cultural reality in an attempt to reveal and interpret the values, interests, and above all, the meanings, held by their informants.”⁴⁵ It is only by attempting to do this, that we can avert the dangerous mobilising force of culturalist arguments, whether they are wielded by condescending Eurocentric political analysts, or by African politicians. In so doing, we can begin to find a way to analyse these events and practices which we are informed are ‘cultural’, and which gain increasing prominence in the political domain, and in so doing, answer the questions which Bayart poses about such phenomena:

How should we understand such cultural practices, which are often exuberant and constantly changing, without reifying them in a series of clichés regarding the economic and political mentalities of a people? How can we stop seeing the encounter of civilizations as an inevitable ‘clash’? How can we avoid thinking of acculturation and globalization as a simple zero-sum game in which adherence to foreign representations and customs inevitably leads to a loss of substance and authenticity? We can sum up [these questions] thus: how can we formulate the relationship between culture and politics without being culturalists?⁴⁶

My own attempts to begin to answer these questions are the substance of my fieldwork and my PhD thesis. As it stands, this paper poses a question which it does not answer, but lays out the reasons for the need to find a new approach to questions of culture, an approach which I hope will transcend both the instrumentalist and primordialist explanations for behaviour, ideas and practices in South Africa, which people understand as ‘cultural.’

Notes

¹ J. Sharp. ‘Culture’, in Boonzaier, E and Sharp, J, (eds) *South African Keywords: The Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts*, (David Philip: Cape Town, 1988) p. 17.

² *Ibid*, p. 24

³ S. Robins & N. Shepherd. ‘Introduction’ in Shepherd and Robins (Eds). *New South African Key Words* (Ohio University Press and Jacana: Athens and Johannesburg, 2008), p.7

⁴ H. Garuba and S. Radithlalo. ‘Culture’ in *New South African Key Words*, p.35

⁵ N. Shepherd ‘Heritage’ in *New South African Keywords*, p.116

⁶ R. Williams. 1976: 233 in Garuba, Harry. 2008, p.39

⁷ M. Mamdani. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*, (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1996)

⁸ Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, New York, 1963)

⁹ Garuba and Radithlalo, 2009, p. 41

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.45.

¹¹ W.D. Hammond-Tooke. *Imperfect Interpreters: South Africa's Anthropologists, 1920-1990* (Johannesburg: WITS University Press, 1997)

¹² P. Chabal, and J.F. Daloz. *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. (James Curry:Oxford, 1996); Chabal and Daloz. *Culture Troubles: Politics and the Interpretation of Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Mattes, Robert and Shin, Doh Chull. *The Democratic Impact of Cultural Values in Africa and Asia: The Cases of Korea and South Africa*, (Afrobarometer, Working Paper No. 50, 2005)

¹³ Mamdani; 1996, F. Cooper. *Africa since 1940: The past and the present*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

¹⁴ J.F. Bayart. *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*. (C. Hurst & Co: London, 2005) p. 9

¹⁵ J. Ferguson. *Global Shadows Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006)

¹⁶ Bayart, 2005

¹⁷ Chabal and Daloz, 1996, p.xxi

¹⁸ Matt and Shin, 2005

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.2

²⁰ The inherent contradiction of the Rainbow Nation metaphor – that a rainbow is made up of several discrete and internally homogenous units – was lost in the fervour of nation-building, but the consequences of insidiously affirming difference whilst espousing sameness, are deep fissures and confusions in South African identities today.

²¹ Matt and Shin, 2005, p.1

²² *Ibid*, p. 7

²³ *Ibid*, p.7

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.11

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.23

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.2

²⁷ A. Feinstein. *After the Party: A personal and political journey inside the ANC* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2007)

²⁸ Zuma's role in the unravelling of the South African political scene over the last two years, and the particular symbolic significance of 'Zuluness' which he mobilises, will be explored in more detail below.

²⁹ A. Altbeker. *A Country at War with Itself* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2008)

³⁰ C. Bundy. 2008, "Shift to the Left, Thermidor or Business as Usual", Paper delivered in Oxford, 3 November.

³¹ Australian government statistics estimate that 75 000 South Africans permanently relocated to Australia between 1995 to 2005, and statistics released by the South African High Commission in the United Kingdom indicate that in 2006, between 750 000 and 1,4-million South Africans were living in London alone. In the month after Jacob Zuma's election as president of the ANC, four local emigration agencies in Johannesburg reported that the number of applications doubled, with people citing Zuma's political ascendancy and the Eskom crisis as their major incentives for leaving (Mail & Guardian, The New Chicken Run, 21 April, 2008).

³² R. Malan. 2009, Nothing Has Broken Yet, But..., <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-02-23-nothing-has-broken-yet-but> (Accessed: 23 February 2009)

³³ Bayart, 2005, p.10

³⁴ Asante-Darko and Herbert

³⁵ Mangcu, 2008, p.2

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.2

³⁷ M. Gevisser. *Thabo Mbeke: The dream deferred*. Johannesburg (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2007)

³⁸ Mangcu, 2008, p. xiv

³⁹ Official statement from the Department of Labour, January 2007

⁴⁰ S. Robins. 'Sexual Rights and Sexual Cultures: reflections on the 'Zuma Affair' and 'new masculinities'' in *Horizontes Antropológicos*, 12 (26), 2006

⁴¹ N. Mkhwanazi, 'Mini skirts and Kangas: the use of culture in instituting postcolonial sexuality' in Darkmatter, <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/05/02/miniskirts-and-kangas-the-use-of-culture-in-constituting-postcolonial-sexuality/> (Accessed: December 2008) p.1

⁴² Chaskalson. Ruling: Constitutional Court - The State vs T Makwanyane and M Mchunu, Heard 15 February to 17 February 1995, Delivered 6 June, 1995. p.359

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.381

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.381

⁴⁵ W.D. Hammond-Tooke. 1997, p.2

⁴⁶ Bayart: 2005, p.6