Journal of Southern African Studies

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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2011.640073

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Zulu Masculinities, Warrior Culture and Stick Fighting: Reassessing Male Violence and Virtue in South Africa*

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Zulu soldiers are renowned for decimating a British army at the Battle of Isandlwana in 1879. This military victory not only entrenched a legacy of merciless conquest long attributed to King Shaka, but also sensationalised the idea that Zulu men are natural-born killers. We reassess this stereotype by scrutinising the ‘Shakan’ version of martial culture and its reputed links to the formative encounters of Zulu men. One such experience involved boyhood exploits in stick fighting, a mostly rural sport associated with fearsome warriors and masculine aggression in South Africa. Using a gendered framework, we identify the customary obligations and homosocial allegiances shaping hierarchies of patriarchy which regulated stick fighting in a regional hotbed of competition, the Thukela Valley of KwaZulu-Natal. Focusing on a century of dramatic transformations (early 1800s to early 1900s), we examine overlooked vernacular expressions of stick fighting that reinforced the importance of self-mastery and ‘honour’, metaphors of manhood that bolstered kinship obligations during social turmoil. We also highlight the sport’s sometimes unforgiving outcomes, including ruthless retribution and painful ostracism, which combined with encroaching forces of white domination to change rules of engagement and propel young men from their traditional upbringing into labour migrancy. However, the ethos of stick fighting – namely learning restraint – remained vital to the socialisation of boys.

Introduction

In South Africa stick fighting has long been a popular form of peer-based male socialisation. Zulu boys in the countryside are among the keen exponents of this martial recreation, which moved with migrant labourers into urban areas by the twentieth century. Many stick fighters, particularly those in rural communities, revel in a sport that evokes the challenges of future manhood and glories of bygone battlefields.¹ Yet this pastime that has shaped generations of men has not been assessed in historical terms. This article initiates such an examination by constructing an

*We dedicate this article to the memory of the late Glenn Cowley, a champion of scholars, publishers and ideas. We thank Mike Mkhulu Kirkwood and Dingani Nkunzi Mthethwa for their early interventions and deft editing. Others contributed valuable expertise and support, namely Johnny Clegg, Malcolm Draper, the late Monica Fairall, Sipho Mchunu, the late Richard Nxumalo, the late Felix Nzama, Betsy Schmidt, and John Wright. Finally, we express our gratitude to the National Research Foundation for financial support and the anonymous readers and editorial board of JSAS for their incisive criticisms.

analytical framework from diverse scholarship. We incorporate studies of manly honour and multiple masculinities alongside research debunking the myths of ‘Shakan conquests’. Much of the latter was published during escalating ‘black-on-black violence’ in South Africa that, for many, revealed the disturbing legacies of ‘invented tradition’. It is tempting to assume, as some of these valuable examinations do, that recreation in Zulu society predicated on intense clashes entrenched a culture of war-mongering. We distance ourselves from this supposition and emphasise instead the governing functions and normative restrictions of stick fighting.

This article begins with an evaluation of stereotypical views of Zulu men in the light of reappraisals of Shaka kaSenzangakhona’s early-nineteenth-century warrior feats, which supposedly triggered a murderous phase of state building called the mfecane, or ‘disruptive scatterings’. While academic scrutiny of the mfecane has exposed the limits of power and cruelty in Shaka’s kingdom, this path-breaking critique has done little to overturn ingrained conceptions of Zulu masculinity and its formative practices such as stick fighting. Indeed, this sport continues to be seen as a primordial conduit for the patriarchal aggression fuelling South Africa’s high rates of violence. There are at least two reasons why such a reading has proved seductive. First, the notion of ‘invented tradition’ has bolstered an argument that combat-ready Africans embraced lethal nationalism, even as they were cynically manipulated by traditional authorities and white officials. In twentieth-century South Africa these leaders reinvigorated exclusive ethnic identities like Zulu chauvinism in hopes of influencing colonial divide-and-rule policies. Second, news coverage of the bloody interregnum between the ending of apartheid and advent of democracy (1990–1994) has left a marked impression, particularly after reports of attacks spotlighting the return of Zulu men ‘on the war path’ made world headlines.

While recognising the significance of these scholarly and media portrayals, we move beyond them to situate stick fighting within a gendered framework that investigates the forms of masculinity this sport promoted in Zulu societies and the relationships between violent intra-community clashes and stick fighting. Our research encompasses political upheaval and consolidation in nineteenth-century Zululand and Natal as well as industrialisation and urbanisation in twentieth-century South Africa. How these transformations affected Zulu boys and young men is illuminated in archival documents and oral testimonies, which suggest that stick fighting long adhered to rules of competition that privileged rhetoric, honour and defence. Such virtues of physical restraint, in turn, imbued Zulu masculinity with an ethos of self-control that sustained family homesteads buffeted by royal Zulu fratricide, colonial land appropriation and the dislocating effects of labour migrancy. During these turbulent periods, displays of deference remained a key element of Zulu manhood in a repertoire of masculine behaviours. While prominent Zulu men would typically obey a superior, for example their king or chief, they would also demand respect from juniors. People failing to demonstrate proper reverence – such as unruly youths – risked being punished as ill-disciplined outcasts who invited the wrath of lineage ancestors, a dreaded fount of misfortune.

2 M.R. Mahoney, ‘The Zulu Kingdom as a Genocidal and Post-genocidal Society, c. 1810 to the Present’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 5, 2 (June 2003), pp. 251–68. This study promotes the idea that the early Zulu state eradicated rival chieftdoms.


But, as Mxolisi Mchunu’s scholarship illustrates, if honourable behaviours were an indispensable part of manly deportment, expressing their related attributes, discipline (inkuliso) and respect (inhlonipho), was more discretionary – for they reflected evolving relationships of power, as when assertive young men and women chafed at senior authority that curtailed their autonomy. In particular, conveyed meanings that illuminate both the sources of generational tensions and the rules of martial arts. It entailed the strict requirement that youths honour elders through uncompromising practices of social avoidance, making vigilant restraint a vital part of their advance to adulthood. In addition inhlonipho included the injunction that personal ego be subordinate to homestead hierarchy, which quarantined toxic conduct in tightly regulated peer activities and gender obligations.

Our argument draws insights from John Iliffe’s sweeping survey of honour, ‘the chief ideological motivation’ guiding African men to the ranks of heroes and householders. Heroic honour, Iliffe writes, embodied the drama, scruples and bravery of warriors. Householder honour, by contrast, was more quotidian, combining ‘patience, sobriety, wisdom’ with duty to kin and cohort. The dynamics of pre-colonial Zulu society exhibited, or perhaps bridged, the two sides of Iliffe’s dichotomous model. While (heroic) prowess was celebrated, the well-being of Zulu society depended on the reciprocal bonds supporting (householder) agriculture in chieftdoms. The amabutho (regiments), a critical state institution, illustrates this point. These military units trained some soldiers to safeguard the royal house but exhorted most conscripts to maintain the discipline and respect that fostered work in homesteads. To this end, the guiding idioms of the Zulu kingdom promoted subsistence – not ‘man-slaying’ – with one particular metaphor, isibuko sikababa, inspiring herd boys (the proto-stick fighters) ‘to mirror’ the ‘gravitas’ of their father who oversaw homestead production.

Iliffe’s understandings of honour dovetail with Raewyn Connell’s notion of plural masculinities, an explanation of gender formation that informs how we contextualise stick fighting. Connell’s idea of masculinity assumes male identities are fluid and not dictated solely by biology. This approach not only challenges sex role theory which fixes, ahistorically, the range of acceptable gender behaviour, but also allows for simultaneous (and competing) ways in which men exert authority over other men and over women. Connell’s

10 Carton, Blood from Your Children, pp. 38–39. Isibuko sikababa appears in oral and written records: Testimony of MgidiIana, 5 June 1921, file 56, notebooks, James Stuart Papers, Killie Campbell Library, Durban; Annexure A, Deyi v. Mbuzikazi, 1 July 1897, SNA Minute Papers, 1/1/278 1962/97, 1/SNA, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR). The more contemporary phrase for isibuko sikababa is isithombe sikababa.
premise that masculinities have many features, including ancillary and oppositional variants, has intensified scholarly debate over the true fount of male oppression. Some of these disagreements focus on whether men instinctively subjugate women; or whether ‘hegemonic masculinity’, prescribing appropriate male conduct, is a negotiated position entailing the complicity of women. The controversies have been illuminating, if not determining. We enter the fray through a social constructionist line of inquiry, arguing that men’s aggressiveness is nurtured early on in martial play known by the cliche ‘boys will be boys’.12

There is no disputing that martial play was integral to stick fighting, a favourite activity of Zulu herd boys who fenced with cattle switches to while away time in pastures (see Figure 1). But as Ndukwana kaMbengwana, an oral historian of the Zulu kingdom pointed out in 1903, a boy who received his original stick knew he held more than a weapon or switch. His stick epitomised a customary obligation to shield his lineage resources from any harm, especially the cattle his patriarch sacrificed when propitiating the ancestors (amadlozi). Ndukwana elaborated on the dimensions of male socialisation underlying this responsibility: ‘Boys. (Little boys) [sic] would go out with boys who herded calves, and so learn. Even a small boy carries his stick – grows up with it. It would be cut for him by his elder brother’.13 Hence, the stick served as a signifier of generational deference and homestead security; only under certain fleeting circumstances did it symbolise something martial. Indeed, our evidence indicates that from the beginning of the nineteenth century the sporadic sparring sessions of herd boys conditioned them to labour – as opposed to battle – for patriarch, chief and king; and later during white rule to work as ‘farm boys’, ‘dock boys’, ‘houseboys’, ‘mine boys’, and ‘police boys’. With such emasculating paths to maturity, entrenched by settler power in the twentieth century, it is surprising that Zulu men are still spoken of as preternatural warriors. The reason may hinge on consistent depictions of their masculinity, obsessively highlighting the traits of a bloodthirsty fighter.14

‘The Zulu Nation is Born out of Shaka’s Spear’: Warrior Masculinity in South African Historiography and Liberation Politics

A stock figure in representations of Zulu culture is the merciless, spear-wielding tribesman in combat. His caricature splashed across Victorian broadsheets following the massacre of Queen Victoria’s forces at Isandlwana in 1879. Rapidly, he came to embody what many Europeans feared most about the Dark Continent, an encounter with the natural-born killer.15 After the British defeat of the Zulu kingdom another image, implying partial domestication of


warrior manhood, began to circulate as well. Shorn of his blade, this stock figure was portrayed as a half-lunging young man sporting the only martial symbol that white authorities permitted in the post-conquest order, the weapon of a competitive stick fighter (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

This embedded, multi-faceted stereotype of the Zulu warrior was jolted by an academic controversy in the 1980s that overturned conventional knowledge of the mfecane ‘devastations’ attributed to the rise of Shaka. At the centre of the controversy, historian

Figure 1. Colonial photo of herd boy in ceremonial dress, ca late nineteenth century. Source: Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR), South Africa, Photograph #C6735, Miscellaneous Photo Collection.
Julian Cobbing rejected the concept of the *mfecane*, which he called an alibi for white racists professing to save South Africa from the Zulu ‘man-slaying war-machine’. Cobbing sourced details of Shaka’s ‘carnage’ to the fictitious accounts of early nineteenth-century white writers who concealed evidence of European mercenaries trafficking in guns and, possibly, slaves.\(^\text{16}\) Other scholars traced *mfecane* upheavals to African chiefs outside Zulu control competing for territorial supremacy and Griqua frontiersmen kidnapping people and seizing livestock.\(^\text{17}\) In a similar vein, John Wright’s scholarship disputed the monstrous impact of Shaka, arguing that the Zulu king assassinated some rivals but respected most allies and even enemies who migrated away.\(^\text{18}\) Wright revealed that the trope of the death-dealing warrior obscured complex relationships that buoyed Shaka’s power. This political process was the subject of Carolyn

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Hamilton’s research, which again challenged the notion that Shaka was a far-reaching terror. She illustrated that the Zulu state depended on a hierarchy with the top *Amantungwa* élites rewarded royal cattle obtained in raids on chiefdoms just beyond the kingdom’s periphery.\(^{19}\) The bottom layer consisted of the majority of subjects, many of them denied Shaka’s patronage and disparaged as *Amalala*, ‘dishonourables’ with ‘dirty habits’.\(^{20}\) But unlike the sceptics of the *mfecane*, Hamilton did not dismiss Shaka’s reputation for authoritarianism; she exposed his harsh gender regime which imposed heavy burdens on girls and women. Since single-sex

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regiments (amabutho) largely served the royal house as agricultural workers, Hamilton reasoned, Shaka’s real authority hinged on the production of followers, with males tending cattle and females tilling fields. The latter shouldered the most onerous tasks, growing the food that fed the kingdom. Hamilton borrowed elements of a theory of women’s oppression elaborated by Jeff Guy in his materialist study of ‘social formation’ in Southern Africa. He posited that homestead patriarchs dominated Zulu society through their control of labour by determining when daughters could marry and when wives could reproduce.

By the 1990s, this notion of domesticated Zulu masculinity, coupled with critiques of Shaka’s ‘empire-building’, seemed set to recast a notorious chapter of South Africa’s past. But at this juncture such revisionist ideas were overshadowed by bloody turmoil threatening negotiations to end apartheid. South African and international journalists – many of whom were unaware of this historiographical turn – revived the mortally wounded warrior stereotype. They depicted the internecine rivalries of the 1990s as a horrific throwback. In the media (re-)rendering, vengeful Zulus and their modern Shakan representatives, Mangosuthu Buthelezi’s Inkatha Freedom Party, were pitted against ‘age-old’ Xhosa foes aligned with the African National Congress (ANC). Pretoria’s security forces either stoked the hostilities or refused to intervene, especially when Inkatha ‘impi’s’ in townships drilled for war with ‘traditional weapons’. Even the Weekly Mail, which avoided sensationalising civil conflict, described the impi in cultural-biological terms. They were a mob of mindless marauders, the newspaper reported in 1991, quoting an Inkatha man who boasted: ‘The Zulu Nation is born out of Shaka’s spear. When you say “Go and fight”, it just happens’ (see Figure 4). Around this time the headline ‘black-on-black violence’ came to stand for something atavistic that ‘just happens’, a spontaneous effluent of Shaka’s volcanic birthright. Some scholars countered by identifying another factor igniting martial Zuluness: the hidden hand of colonialism which (re-)invented ethnic prejudice to blunt the forces unifying African resistance. One cited example of this chauvinism was Inkatha’s version of Zulu pride. With research elsewhere on the continent questioning the idea that men naturally repressed women, gender analyses of South Africa were inflected by a liberation struggle that linked Zulu patriarchy to settler ‘divide-and-rule’ policies. Perceived through this lens, academic studies of Zulu masculinity were considered naive flirtations with a reactionary conspiracy hatched between white Natal élites and the house of Shaka. This collaboration in the 1920s had invigorated the Zulu monarchy and its fledgling organ, Inkata kaZulu, to rally support for what scholars in the 1980s called backward-looking tribalism, a platform aimed at stemming the radical ANC’s appeals to the working class.

24 Impi means war, but in the 1980s the term was a synonym for Zulu nationalists who killed opponents of Inkatha.
This incisive top-down reading of invented tradition in Natal and Zululand obscured how Zulu men moulded their identities from below, as recently demonstrated by the work of Paul La Hausse de la Louvière.29 William Beinart, for his part, surveyed the conditions under which African men resorted to violence and why their stereotypical martial societies reluctantly turned to confrontation in defence of sovereignty.30 Beinart urged scholars to reassess the dislocating processes of industrialisation that propelled black men to become more aggressive as they were emasculated by racism, migrancy and urbanisation. Catherine Campbell undertook a correlative study set in Zulu-speaking townships racked by apartheid repression and civil strife. She chronicled the fraying relationships between rural-born fathers and their sons who joined the United Democratic Front (UDF), an organisation associated with the ANC. The older men embraced Inkatha, which repudiated ‘militant’ youths for advocating constitutional equality and abandoning Buthelezi’s support of Zulu gerontocracy.31 Soon after the 1994 democratic election, other studies of African masculinities concentrated on city-bound black men: their life in compounds, gangs and politics.32

Figure 4. Inkatha impi with ‘traditional weapons’ in Johannesburg-area township led by man performing ukugiya before South African security forces, ca early 1990s. This photograph was taken by T.J. Lemon; it appears in L. Meintjes, Sound of Africa! Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2003). The authors thank Louise Meintjes for permission to reproduce T.J. Lemon’s image.

Waetjen, for instance, examined Inkatha’s appeal to ‘blood brotherhood’ which enabled Zulu men in townships to exert dignity in the face of labour exploitation.\textsuperscript{33} Taken together, this diverse scholarship highlights gender relations in stages of urban transformation.\textsuperscript{34} Yet more attention needs to focus on formative masculinities and their rural practices, especially sports like stick fighting which taught Zulu boys to contain violence.\textsuperscript{35}

**Stick Fighting: Languages of Sport, Questions of Analysis**

Unlike their neighbouring Xhosa and Sotho counterparts, Zulu boys did not enter manhood after a painful rite of teenage circumcision. Instead, they crossed another ‘ceremonial’ threshold over a longer period of time through cohort-based, rule-bound competitions like stick fighting.\textsuperscript{36} The customary importance of stick fighting certainly appealed to Zulu kings (ca 1810–1879). They conscripted male youths who had honed in the pastures of childhood the fencing skills, ukungcweka or ukubiya, needed for stick fighting and, later, national service (see Figure 5). But it should be noted that many new recruits in amabutho entered the army with little experience battling an opponent to death with a spear; this weapon was forbidden in ukungcweka and ukubiya. Boys who fenced tended to use the umthisha and ibhoko, the striking stick and blocking stick, respectively. Moreover, their pre-military sparring accentuated risk-averse simulations such as parrying blows, exercising ‘pure’ restraint and revering ‘fair’ play. To wit, enfolded in the verb ukungcweka was the noun ngcwele, denoting something pious such as a truthful virtue commonly recognised by the exclamation Ngqo! which rejoiced in pure or straightforward deeds. In more mundane terms ukubiya meant to ‘ward off’.\textsuperscript{37} It is not surprising then that Zulu leaders swiftly intervened after the ‘habit grew up’ among stick fighters ‘of sharpening one end of the Umtshiza’ and flipping ‘round the sharpened end… [to] jab the opponent in the eye… King Cetywayo passed a law prohibiting this practice, as a piece of cowardice and unfair fighting, under the death penalty, or very heavy fine, according to the seriousness of the hurt inflicted, and eventually the practice ceased’.\textsuperscript{38} Similar royal decrees had barred the assegai from stick bouts. ‘This was a regulation observed in Tshaka’s as well as Dingana’s and Mpande’s reigns’, according to Ndukwana in 1900, for ‘[i]t was thoroughly well-known… [i]f one… were to break his stick on his opponent, he would warn him that he had no stick but only assegais left. He would ask him for one of his sticks with which to continue the fight; if no


\textsuperscript{35} Morrell, ‘Of Boys and Men’, p. 620. Alegi’s Laduma! stands out as an exception.

\textsuperscript{36} Such social principles of combative male sports are discussed in Connell, Gender and Power, p. 85.


\textsuperscript{38} R.C.A. Samuelson, Long, Long Ago (Durban, Knox, 1929), p. 373.
stick were given the man might use his assegai to ward off blows’ but that was all because handling a spear precluded offensive moves.  

Therefore, we do not presuppose that the recreation of herd boys who transitioned into warriors sharpened homicidal instincts in Zulu society. In fact we question this line of reasoning. Stick fighting tested and preserved the body by reinforcing norms of inkuliso. Moreover, integral rules of the sport underscored the vitality of kinship, not the destruction of it. When stick fighters competed, they were ‘playing with others’, on a sanctioned pitch that elevated champions and shamed losers. For example during the Zulu kingdom, if a young soldier was taunted into sparring with a rival of another regiment but chose to ‘remain in silent discomfort (nyatela), i.e., refrain from taking up the bet’, the quiet one could be labelled a ‘coward . . . [and have] his meat dipped in cold water’. As punishments

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went, this sanction was hardly a total disgrace.\textsuperscript{43} Lasting humiliation, however, could dog those frequently beaten in organised stick bouts; they could be derided as effeminate boys (\textit{amagwala}, a synonym for cowards) and hounded into ‘exile’ as labour migrants who preferred urban anonymity to local shame.\textsuperscript{44} Simply put, stick fighting enhanced homosocial bonds which, in turn, reinforced peer ranking that inevitably set some boys apart.

The sport was potentially hazardous, as well, to participants and others, when hostilities surged beyond the sporting ground to threaten observers or the passersby. This danger explains why over the past two centuries stick fighting occurred well away from homesteads in a designated open space. Depending on the mood and moment, a casually arranged bout could mushroom into an attention-grabbing tournament. Nowhere was this more likely than during weddings or young women’s coming out ceremonies (\textit{umemulo})\textsuperscript{45} (see Figure 6). Exalting in fertility, these rituals attracted courting adolescent boys and young men who hankered for a stick fight on the fringe of festivities. They hoped not only to win a match before a mixed gender crowd, but also yearned to create a public stage on which they could distinguish themselves as proper ‘favourites [plural \textit{amasoka}; singular \textit{isoka}] among the girls’.\textsuperscript{46} As Mark Hunter notes, the meanings of \textit{isoka} have changed historically in ways that illustrate the compelling significance of the terms ‘proper favourite’ in both sporting and courting arenas. In the early to middle twentieth century the pejorative adjective dirty, or \textit{amanyala}, was appended to \textit{isoka}. The \textit{isoka lamanyala} came to represent a disreputable young man who lustily promised love to an excessive number of girlfriends, spawning rancour and ruin in the process. Thereafter a sharp distinction divided the dirty \textit{isoka} from the proper \textit{isoka}. The former evinced no self-control or concern for others, while the latter embodied disciplined virility and deference to communal well-being.\textsuperscript{47}

The association between a proper \textit{isoka} and proper sportsman illuminates the importance that female admiration held for stick fighters hoping to impress, with prowess and restraint, their watching sweethearts.\textsuperscript{48} Here, the role of older girls and young women in stick fighting should not be underestimated. To a certain extent, they legitimised the sport by actively attending bouts and bestowing attention on their favourite contestants.\textsuperscript{49} Yet female agency had its limits in martial play that motioned more ominous intentions, as when a stick fighter’s desire to lash out extended to the adolescent girl who declined his amorous overtures.

\textsuperscript{45} Author interviews: R. Nxumalo, 19 November 1992, 23 December 2002, Makhabeleni; S. Ntuli, 20 February 1993, Nkandla; KwaZulu (KZN); personal communication with D. Mthethwa, 6 April 2006, Washington, DC, USA; personal communication with J. Clegg, 7 April 2011, Hanover, NH, USA. Metaphorical praise for the stick fight on the fringe of festivities. They hoped not only to win a match before a mixed gender crowd, but also yearned to create a public stage on which they could distinguish themselves as proper ‘favourites [plural \textit{amasoka}; singular \textit{isoka}] among the girls’.\textsuperscript{46} As Mark Hunter notes, the meanings of \textit{isoka} have changed historically in ways that illustrate the compelling significance of the terms ‘proper favourite’ in both sporting and courting arenas. In the early to middle twentieth century the pejorative adjective dirty, or \textit{amanyala}, was appended to \textit{isoka}. The \textit{isoka lamanyala} came to represent a disreputable young man who lustily promised love to an excessive number of girlfriends, spawning rancour and ruin in the process. Thereafter a sharp distinction divided the dirty \textit{isoka} from the proper \textit{isoka}. The former evinced no self-control or concern for others, while the latter embodied disciplined virility and deference to communal well-being.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{46} Bryant, \textit{A Zulu–English Dictionary}, p. 595.
\textsuperscript{47} M. Hunter, \textit{Men and Masculinities} (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010), pp. 51 & 220. By the age of AIDS, \textit{isoka lamanyala} had become synonymous with lethal illnesses linked to HIV.
\textsuperscript{48} Though rarely, Zulu girls could (stick) spar, particularly when they herded for a patriarch with no sons to tend his livestock. During the Zulu kingdom, young women also learned martial skills in the few female \textit{amabutho} with combat roles. See Ndlovu, ‘A Reassessment’, pp. 112–13.
Whatever the motivation and wherever the contest, stick fighters consistently learned to give and take punishment in matches umpired either by a stick-fighting champion (ingqwele; plural izingqwele), a headman of young men (induna yezinsizwa), or ‘war captain’ (igoso or umphathi wezinsizwa). Most referees ensured that each competitor protected himself with some kind of long blocking stick, ubhoko, and the umsila, a short stick slid through the back of a cowhide shield (serving as a handle). While this repertoire signalled intent to do battle, the purpose was not to slay an opponent. Once two fighters faced each other, they tapped sticks or one another’s shield; sometimes they launched in with the umshiza, landing chopping blows that could blind an eye, break fingers, or crack the skull. Permanent marks on elbows, ankles, and the scalp were seen as badges of honour, especially the scar (ingozi) on the head, which was named idiomatically, inkamb’ beyibuza, ‘wherever you go people ask, what’s that from?’

The diverse evidence we consulted suggests that clashes were brief, lasting just minutes. In the heat of the moment referees invariably commanded a combatant to pull back after wielding a decisive blow, or if his opponent crumpled to the ground. Stick fighters knew the

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dangers, which made solid defence as essential as potent offence. Risking disapproval, some competitors could pummel a fallen foe, despite the referee’s cries of ‘Maluju-wethu!’ and shouts from the crowd of ‘Khumu!’ ‘Enough! ‘That’s it!’ But the former stick fighters we interviewed were quick to insist their ‘fiercest anger’ (unolaka) was often delivered verbally, according to linguistic conventions that alternated between the scripted and idiosyncratic, subtle and profane. Right before a contest, opponents could convey their zeal by issuing ‘polite’ challenges (inselelo) that cloaked belligerence, such as ‘I won’t let so-and-so [calling the so-and-so by his ancestral praise name] kick dust in my eyes’; or they could sing amahubo, regimental ballads naming lineage patriarchs known for their valour. As further barbs were traded, one stick fighter might leap into an ukugiya performance, combining energetic dancing and loud praises that extolled the heroic (iqhawe) honour of a patriarch. Ukugiya (or ukugida) routines could also climax in a stomp that evoked a bull’s fury, displaying just how rapidly the pendulum could swing from gravitas to aggression.51

This pendulum was propelled by a range of gender forces that need to be questioned further by scholars. Did stick fighters purposively develop skills that enabled them to impose their will on others? Did stick fighting encourage (or drive) participants to express their frustrations beyond the sporting ground, where they punished non-combatants? The historian Anne Mager has engaged these issues in her investigation of youth socialisation in twentieth-century Xhosa-speaking communities.52 Mager’s evidence documenting rape in the 1940s illustrates how competitors’ ability or inability to dominate a rival led to an increase in sexual assaults, particularly in the absence of sanctioning male elders who were mobilised to support British military efforts in the Second World War. Yet in other African societies where martial traditions survived colonial encroachment, as Suzette Heald argues in her study of the Gisu in Uganda, manhood and morality played out differently. Becoming a Gisu man required circumcision, a ritual operation that reminded adolescent initiates of the painful trials they would face as adult men. Significantly, this rite of passage is celebrated with stick-fighting bouts that reaffirmed what was appropriate or inappropriate aggression. During these spectacles, young Gisu men were said to tame their ‘violent power’ by proclaiming after combat, ‘[t]he good man is one who is his own master, and can master himself well’.53 These contrasting scholarly perspectives have shaped our understanding of how Zulu masculinities embodied social dimensions of stick fighting over the last two centuries, beginning with the emergence of the Zulu kingdom and extending beyond its destruction by imperial troops in 1879. By the late nineteenth century many coming-of-age Zulu rituals had eroded but some persisted such as stick fighting. From the post-1879 period into the early twentieth century, white rulers, bent on restricting martial


socialisation, expanded opportunities for rural-born wage-earners to continue their stick fighting culture far from home in urban worlds of labour migrancy that melded modernity and tradition.

‘A Small Boy Carries His Stick’ and the ‘National Practice of Eating Up’: Change and Continuity in Stick Fighting

Historical examinations of pre-colonial and early colonial African practices face the challenge of finding evidence. To expand the pool of available primary sources, we interviewed ‘retired’ stick fighters and consulted archived oral testimonies that discuss this martial art. Such a mix of sources generated problems of verification, with exaggerated recollections of bygone competitions only one of many shortcomings. The brief references to stick fighting in nineteenth-century European accounts of the Zulu kingdom introduce other methodological concerns, particularly the tone and omissions of these ethnocentric observers. Of all relevant and reliable data, archaeological findings offered the most useful details with which to construct a sketch over the longue durée, illuminating the life of stick fighters in homesteads.54 Since at least the sixteenth century, these homesteads (imizi) were the focal point of production, with one patriarch regulating a domestic hierarchy that subordinated women to men, and juniors to seniors. Raising livestock (mainly goats and cows) was largely the domain of males, while crop cultivation was mostly the responsibility of females. Boys watched over herds, passing the time by sparring with sticks. Thus, rearing cattle afforded the space for male youths to master the customary norms of inkuliso and inhlonipho that underpinned ukukhonza, loyalty to political authority.55

In the Zulu kingdom and surrounding regions stick fighting was an everyday occurrence that did not carry the prestige of initiation. At the turn of the nineteenth century, martial activities amongst older boys took on greater significance, as male circumcision was phased out by chiefs like Shaka who enrolled cadets and their local commanders, izingqewele (respected young men with stick-fighting expertise), in the amabutho system.56 Regiments trained in the deployment of lethal weapons raided cattle of Zulu rivals and scattered the inhabitants of chiefdoms that refused to give loyalty, ukukhonza, andtribute to Shaka.57 By the mid-nineteenth century, when Mpande kaSenzangakhona and Cetshwayo kaMpande reigned, the amabutho had to curtail campaigns because Zulu territory was hemmed in by British colonial Natal to the south, the Boer Republic to the west, and the Swazi kingdom to the north. This was a time of relative peace, with bodies of soldiers summoned to labour for the king a few times a year. Oral history testimony indicates that while they brought sundry weapons from their homestead, when they arrived at royal barracks they adopted a defensive posture by holding onto their sticks and laying down their spears (in conveniently located piles

57 After a decade or more of periodic service, veteran members of amabutho were demobilised on the king’s order and allowed to wed with bridewealth cattle supplied from royal herds. This ilobolo gift established a powerful link between stick fighting, military service, and patriarchal standing: Alegi, Laduma!, pp. 9–10; P. Colenbrander, ‘The Zulu Kingdom, 1828–79’, in Duminy and Guest (eds), Natal and Zululand, pp. 96–109.
that afforded fast retrieval if called to battle).\(^{58}\) Young Zulu men also maintained their military preparedness in national ceremonies that exemplified metaphorical elements of stick fighting. For example, during the annual umkhosi, ‘first fruits’ festival recognising the sanctity of the Zulu lineage, cadets participated in the umzimba wenkunzi (bull’s body) celebration. An oral historian named Mshanyankomo, whose father was Mpande’s court poet, recalled ‘umkhosi ceremonies in the Zulu country’ that involved the king dispatching older boys to capture a ‘fighting bull, pitch black in colour [inkunzemnyama]’. Unarmed, they dragged the beast to a royal enclosure where they dismembered and roasted it. Hours later they ate their nemesis, feasting on more than its meat.\(^ {59}\) With the king looking on, they consumed the bull’s chest, the body cavity in which the stick fighter’s essence was thought to be lodged.\(^ {60}\)

Perhaps to release the energies ingested during the inkunzemnyama, cadets were also encouraged to spring into raucous ‘war dancing’, ukugiya. Ukugiya could accompany another form of dance competition, ngoma, in which regimental teams timed their gestures to mimic stick fighting. While these routines were dramatic, they were also ephemeral. Songs like (amabutho) ballads known as amahubo were also performed to dramatise morality tales of peer rivalries gone awry.\(^ {61}\) One ballad lamented how two princes (and stick fighters), Cetshwayo and Mbuyazi, collided over their father Mpande’s mantle and incited civil war in 1856.\(^ {62}\) In the early twentieth century a ‘Country Zulu’ band named Inkumba Emfece, popular with stick-fighting migrants in Durban, incorporated the amahubo genre. The band’s songs such as ‘Sokushaya Isangquma’ augured heaven-sent destruction if stick fighters, eager to win at any cost, ignited deadly factional strife. One set of lyrics warned: ‘Imikhombi iyenana. Sokushaka isangquma. Lezonduku zonanana.’ (A bad turn deserves another. You will be struck by hailstones. These sticks of yours will meet ours stroke for stroke).\(^ {63}\)

The ability of the Zulu state to foster unity through martial ballads and ritual theatre like inkunzemnyama was continually misconstrued by imperial authorities in South Africa and London. By the 1870s British officials were increasingly demonising the performance cultures of amabutho as the restive machinations of a feral ‘man-slaying war machine’. Some of these distant bureaucrats conspired to destroy Cetshwayo’s sovereignty over a subsistence-oriented kingdom and weaken his regiments in order to swell the movement of able-bodied workers to the Kimberley diamond fields. White settlers in Natal, for their part, vented fears that the Zulu

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58 Several ‘traumatic’ incidents involving deadly clashes between amabutho reinforced the need to maintain this defensive posture, with weapon-handling prohibitions that incorporated stick-fighting regulations. One of these traumatic incidents is detailed in: Testimony of Baleni, 14 May 1912, James Stuart Archive, Volume 1, pp. 31–32. See also Testimony of Mshanyankomo, 20 January 1922, James Stuart Archive, Volume 4, p. 133.


60 In rural Zulu life this criterion of bull-like strength is as well-recognised today as it was a century ago. The lithe contender could also inflict swift blows, a skill useful during the seizure of inkunzemnyama. Author interviews with R. Nxumalo, 19 November 1992; 23 December 2002; M. Cele, 24 December 1997; S. Ntuli, 20 February 1993; personal communication, with J. Clegg, 6 January 2006, Makhabela; D. Mck. Malcolm, Broadcasts/ Talks on the Bantu, 292 (8), c. 1940s, Daniel Mck. Malcolm Papers, Killie Campbell Library, Durban. In the 1930s and 1940s, Malcolm visited rural Zulu communities as Natal Chief Inspector of Native Education. For a study of the symbolism of the male sporting body in South Africa with reference to Zulu warriors see: D. Booth and J. Nauright, ‘Sport, Embodiment and Race in South Africa’, in J. Nauright, A. Cobley and D. Wiggins (eds), Beyond Boundaries: Race and Ethnicity in Sport (Little Rock, AK, University of Arkansas Press, forthcoming).


army was destined to eradicate them.\textsuperscript{64} In 1878 the British High Commissioner for South Africa Bartle Frere promised to deal with the ‘savage threat’. He coined the phrase ‘man-slaying war-machine’ to characterise his enemy, believing he described the desire of Zulu manhood, nurtured since its stick-toting childhood to value the ‘national practice of “eating up” … i.e., slaughtering’, to kill or be killed.\textsuperscript{65} In January 1879 British forces invaded Zululand, but early in the campaign suffered a stunning setback at Isandlwana. By mid-year, however, they had overrun the kingdom, deposing Cetshwayo and disbanding the amabutho system.\textsuperscript{66}

During the next two decades, as British officials extended wider control over their newly conquered territory, the Natal colony to the south appropriated more African land for European commercial farmers.\textsuperscript{67} Yet, despite these incursions, crop production and livestock husbandry remained central to the lives of most Africans.\textsuperscript{68} Believing such agricultural activities offered too much autonomy, white authorities tried to limit traditional sporting behaviour by compelling homestead patriarchs to send adolescent sons to work on public projects such as building roads. New laws, meanwhile, placed restrictions on young men’s martial recreation.\textsuperscript{69} By 1900, the carrying of sticks was more closely monitored, with only one permitted to be held in public. Furthermore, policemen were conducting more surveillance of older boys who attended festivities attired as both reveller and stick fighter. (See, Figure 3, for example)\textsuperscript{70} Magistrates also halted wedding dances like imijadu, around which groups of boys gathered to giya on ground set aside for stick fighting.\textsuperscript{71} Yet given the growing colonial anxiety, Natal government officials never banned stick fighting as such – perhaps recognising, despite all reservations, that the martial art remained an important medium through which boys developed the grammar of honourable restraint.

Indeed, the rhetoric of honourable restraint animated the founders of the ANC in 1912. The political organisation initially accommodated non-violent objectives expressed by an emerging African middle class and traditional leaders, mainly chiefs. Particularly amongst traditionalists, stick fighting held considerable appeal. For example, Pixley Seme (1881–1951) tapped into idioms of stick fighting to inspire, as the one-time ANC president, an anti-colonial vanguard during an era of few mass confrontational campaigns against white rule.\textsuperscript{72} Seme alluded to the fortitude of Zulu herd boys as compared to children enfeebled by
bourgeois settlers: ‘He [the Zulu boy] does not need to be taken visiting all the time, like the child of a white person, which is always having balls and carts bought for it’. Europeans coddled their offspring, Seme all but scoffed, while the sons of Zululand traversed pastures forging an esprit de corps with ‘their own izinduna, the izingqwele, who gave them orders, like soldiers, and who were obeyed by all the other boys’. Herd boys learned to become men without the toy soldiers and fake guns; they relied on one another to release their aggression in sanctioned spaces, where they would be less likely to incite greater violence. ‘If boys fought with one another, if they disputed over the grazing-grounds of the cattle’, Seme recalled, ‘these matters were not interfered with by older people. For boys did not fight at their homes; they fought out in the countryside (endhle), where they were in charge’. Here stick fighting provided Seme with a coolly reserved yet fiercely independent approach to confronting the emasculating forces of segregation. To this end, his political strategy drew on the training boys underwent as stick fighters, who when provoked learned to control their reactions in order to live, compete, and contribute another day.

Seme’s romantic ode to stick fighting barely addressed the anxiety experienced by Africans moving between soil and pavement. By the early and middle twentieth century, fewer and fewer Zulu-speaking males were living year-round in their designated reserves. Worsening landlessness and poverty pushed them into occupations as servant and stevedore in Durban, and menial positions in Johannesburg’s factories and mines. In wage labour they were infantilised

Figure 7 ‘North Zululand’ ngoma dancers, Johannesburg area, ca 1930s. Source: Edgar-Carton Collection, Derwin World Tour Album. American ‘world-tour’ travellers, Mr. and Mrs. Derwin, visited the Transvaal and Natal; they were the parents of California big-band leader, Hal Derwin.

73 Testimony of Seme, 18 May 1925, James Stuart Archive, Volume 5, pp. 275–76.
74 Ibid., pp. 271–72.
by paternalistic employers who spoke of ‘my boys’, conveying the emasculating form of proprietary fondness.\textsuperscript{76} Alarmed by the influx of migrant workers, segregationist authorities, in turn, enforced draconian measures such as stricter pass laws to ‘protect’ whites-only residential areas from ‘detribalised natives’.\textsuperscript{77} Yet in leaving the homestead, young Zulu men were not abandoning their ideals of manhood. They brought stick fighting to cities, adapting its manoeuvres to pursuits like \textit{ngoma} team dancing and around their labour compounds.\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ngoma} attracted a range of youth groups such as \textit{amalaita} ‘gangs’ which revelled in stick-fighting culture, drilled with their \textit{izingqwele} and took names like \textit{Nkunzennyama}, the black bull.\textsuperscript{79} On weekends, \textit{amalaita} members and \textit{ngoma} enthusiasts gathered at municipal ‘Native Grounds’ dressed in a mix of combat regalia and town haberdashery, brandishing sticks on cue from their ‘war captain’ (\textit{igoso}). In performances the \textit{ngoma} teams occasionally choreographed movements to the rhythms of \textit{amahubo} and syncopated lyrics of herd boys’ songs.\textsuperscript{80} More dramatic foot work could also imitate the \textit{ukugiya} prelude to a stick fight\textsuperscript{81} (see Figure 7).

By the 1920s and 1930s, \textit{ngoma} dancing had become popular entertainment for Zulu-speaking Africans in Durban (and Johannesburg). Rather than bar \textit{ngoma} from the city, Durban politicians, employers, and compound managers tried to ‘domesticate’ the recreational form, much as rural Natal magistrates had regulated stick use in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{82} In the 1930s and 1940s high-profile championships were arranged for settler crowds in colonial venues such as Durban’s Kingsmead cricket ground. At these spectacles, commercial sponsors distributed programmes advertising wholesome ‘national’ entertainment and the ‘full gala kit’ of ‘Zulu troops’. And while a table of judges could feature prominent provincial and municipal officials, Zulu élites such as Charles Mpanza (Secretary of the Zulu Society, an organisation of intellectual cultural nationalists) were also included in the panel. They met with \textit{ngoma} ‘captains’ to establish how the jury would evaluate the ‘intricate’ criteria reflecting ‘coordination of movements’ familiar to stick fighters’ ideals of contained masculinity, from ‘Deportment…[and] Poise…[to] Leadership’.\textsuperscript{83}

A remarkable, if not unexpected, parallel development occurred in rural areas profoundly affected by labour migrancy. As in the city, stick fighters in the countryside faced growing colonial encroachment, which compelled them to modify their proving ground of manhood and involve senior men in a young peer-based sport. These traditional elders helped to reframe rules of engagement that aimed ultimately to safeguard communal values. Around

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  \item \textsuperscript{76} Morrell, ‘Of Boys and Men’, p. 616.
  \item \textsuperscript{79} La Hausse de la Louvière, ‘“The Cows of Nongoloza”’, pp. 88, 89–91 & 98. Needless to say, \textit{ngoma} alarmed segregationists because it was seen as a practice of (\textit{amalaita}) gangs that robbed whites: Erlmann, ‘Horses in the Race Course’, pp. 265 & 267.
  \item \textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ngoma} spinoffs with stick-fighting dimensions (such as the \textit{isishameni} dance, for example) had links to martial competition: Clegg, ‘Towards an Understanding of African Dance’, pp. 8–14; personal communication with J. Clegg, 7 April 2011. \textit{Ngoma} contests troubled Native Affairs officials and ‘enlightened Bantu’ (that is to say African Christians) critical of displaying too much ‘raw tribalism’: Erlmann, ‘Horses in the Race Course’, p. 268; \textit{Third Annual Natal Native Dancing Championships} (Durban, A. Fishwick & Co., 1941). \textit{Ngoma} could stir challenges to segregationist order. For example, at the end of one dance in the 1930s some competitors and black onlookers marched into a whites-only commercial zone of Durban and clashed with police: Correspondence, Chief Constable to Town Clerk, Durban, 11 October 1934, Durban Town Clerk, File 6, 467, DAR.
  \item \textsuperscript{82} \textit{Umteteli wa Bantu}, 2 March 1935; Erlmann, ‘Horses in the Race Course’, pp. 267–68.
  \item \textsuperscript{83} \textit{Third Annual Natal Native Dancing Championships}.\
\end{itemize}
the turn of the twentieth century, more and more young men in crowded reserves clashed over scarce pasture. The barren territory of Msinga district was one epicentre of conflict. There, herd boys saw the prospect of supporting (bridewealth) cattle – and their hope of gaining in patriarchal standing as married men – decline as ineluctably as the pasture around them. This eroding existence, Jonathan Clegg writes, amplified the stakes between stick fighters who envisaged victory in sport as one of the last ways to achieve recognition before facing the grim uncertainties of manhood. The consequences of taking a beating heightened too; defeated young men could feel acutely humiliated and, instead of waiting to compete again in a refereed contest, they might muster cohorts and assault the winner’s homestead. Such incidents ignited revenge attacks (ukuphindisela), which magistrates glibly called ‘faction fights’. The arsenals deployed in these reprisals ranged from sticks and shields to bevelled clubs (the iwisa or knobkerrie) and spears. Msinga’s prominent homestead heads responded to this violence by arranging inter-district stick fights (umgangela) at a designated spot and time, thus affording a venue for young male rivals to release their volatile frustrations in competition.84

Today, similar contests are holiday affairs for rural-born Zulu men who work in the city. Around Easter and Christmas they leave Durban and Johannesburg for family homesteads in the chieftdoms of KwaZulu-Natal. In the midst of week-long beer drinks, stick fighting is a main event, as it has been for decades in Makhabeleni, a remote district in the Thukela River valley. There, returning migrants mix with Makhabeleni’s school boarders residing in townships, where stick fighting is not standard recreation. Having grown up enjoying ukungcweka, these students ache to compete again and coach some of their city-born classmates, the ‘inexperienced location boys’ as they are dubbed in Makhabeleni, who visit the former homelands during school vacations on a ‘quest to rediscover tradition’ through stick fighting. Although these urban visitors might know just a bare sketch of the ethos of stick fighting, they are nonetheless quite familiar with the sport’s codes of heroic and householder honour, as Crispin Hemson’s research makes clear. In his study of young Zulu men employed by the Durban municipality to save swimmers on city beaches in the 1990s, Hemson observed how these lifeguards learned to endure the pummelling sea by drawing inspiration from ‘protective’ discourses of vigilant restraint and self-mastery (ukubekezela, to be patient and forbearing, and ukuzithemba, to trust oneself).85 In stark contrast to the ‘inexperienced location boys’, a few ruthless amashinga might also arrive in Makhabeleni with the homecoming crowd. Amashinga are itinerant stick fighters notorious for deviating from virtues of honourable masculinity by pulverising every foe, even if he is lying face down and unconscious in the dirt. It is no exaggeration to say they are widely known for the pain and havoc they spawn, and for their mercenary adventures in the world of martial arts. Indeed, their one saving grace in Makhabeleni appears to be the speed with which they depart rural districts for urban destinations such as the amashinga-only tournaments in hostels of Johannesburg, where gamblers bet on the outcome, standing champions win cash prizes, and some losers might die in the round.86


85 The lifeguards’ ability to use their bodies in protective and affirming ways enabled them to earn the respect and wages of a male provider; this accomplishment connected them, as well, to an earlier history of masculine (recreational) socialisation in which mastering the rigours of stick fighting was a necessary part of becoming a patriarch: C. Hemson, ‘Ukubekezela or Ukuzithemba: African Life Savers In Durban’, in Morrell (ed.), Changing Men, pp. 57–73.

The *ukuphindisela* and *amashinga* dimensions of stick fighting reveal the sport’s potential for explosive violence, a subject requiring further research. In African communities neighbouring Natal such as Transkei chiefdoms, Anne Mager has found that both winners and losers of stick fights sometimes went on to assault more vulnerable people. She documents mounting cases of rape in criminal courts that ‘curb[ed] the excesses of masculine aggression’ at a time when apartheid oppression increasingly made Xhosa young men ‘well aware of the difficulties they faced in attaining formal manhood through a homestead, land and cattle’. In tracing how male youths displayed ‘excessively aggressive behaviour towards girls’, Mager suggests that their preferred martial art led to the ‘extract[ion of] feminine obedience literally through the wielding of sticks’.  

The most relevant colonial documents and court dockets (from Thukela Valley magisterial divisions) do not reveal a similar pattern between the 1880s and 1920s, but we establish no firm conclusion from this paucity of records. We know from interviewing former stick fighters that ‘bad behaviour’ was not uncommon; but we did not glean more about such transgressions, even after pressing for elaboration. It is tempting to assume that boys and young men, impassioned by contact, would likely expand their array of targets to the opposite sex. But, as Sarah Hautzinger argues, that would be to take an instrumentalist view of male violence. Men are not genetically programmed to violate women; nor, for that matter, do Zulu boys emerge from the womb as ‘man-slaying war-machines’. A more apt understanding could posit that men behave violently because, as Hautzinger contends, certain contingencies and dynamics cut them off from models of ‘respectable’ (contained) masculinity.

Conclusion

In KwaZulu-Natal, stick fighting is popular because it represents a life-affirming practice for generations of rural-born boys. They have long recognised the communal value of testing their mettle in a refereed arena that remained a refuge of recreation in an unremitting storm of change. Indeed, stick fighting enabled competitors at a nascent stage of their masculine formation to pursue the heroic feats of a martial art without abandoning, in the words of Iliffe, the priorities of householder ‘honour’ that sustained kinship. These priorities were regulated by senior authority; they upheld domestic hierarchies by emphasising that displays of idiosyncratic rhetoric and manly vigour were ancillary to idioms of communal respect and patriarchal gravitas. From at least the battle of Isandlwana onwards, however, colonialists presented a different perspective of stick fighting. They essentialised the sport as ‘warrior’ savagery, too ubiquitous to stamp out but not invulnerable to legal restrictions. Arguably, proponents of white supremacy who, among other things, channelled the theatrical elements of stick fighting into public entertainment like *ngoma* dance, did more than most to project, deep into the twentieth century, an image of weapon-wielding Zulu men as relentless purveyors of aggression and chaos.

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Footnote 86 continued


88 In encouraging future enquiries we point to sources that offer leads, for example, ‘indecent assault’ and ‘seduction’ cases which magistrates attributed to weakening homestead patriarchy and ‘savage’ young men whose libidinous bloodlust had to be monitored at all times: Administrator of Native Law Criminal Record Book, 1898–1903, Mahlabathini Magistrate, 1/2/1/1, PAR; Report Secretary for Native Affairs, August 1900, 22, 1430/1900, 1/1/290; Statement of Ziboni, 25 October 1905, p. 5, 985/1905, 1/1/328; 1/SNA, PAR.

Yet stick fighting was and is predicated on degrees of belligerence. Even more so, the sport embodied past military exploits, particularly those of the amabutho. It also could be unpredictable, when rules of engagement failed to thwart eruptive energies that placed vulnerable people at risk before and after a bout. Yet these factors should not lead to the conclusion that the formative experiences of stick fighting drove Zulu men into bloodletting, for example, during the civil conflict that nearly derailed South Africa’s first democratic election. On the contrary, this martial art expressed the grammar of honourable restraint, the very language that the ANC adopted in strategies of non-violent protest to white rule. Stick fighting also cemented bonds between men because it valued robust masculinity. In this regard the martial art contributed to homosocial relationships that not only shaped male hierarchies, but also attracted different audiences, including adolescent girls and unmarried women, who sought to participate in something more lasting than ephemeral sport, namely the creation of family itself. In fact the spectacle of stick fighting provided an exciting arena in which heterosexual lovers might meet and ‘proper (male) favourites’ might construct an isoka manhood that offered prowess, restraint and, above all, the promise of providing. Whether stick fighting is understood in political terms, gender relationships or a combination of these and other power dimensions, we should challenge the assumption that it invariably stoked aggressive masculinity and violent criminality in South Africa.

Finally, the future of stick fighting does not seem to be in doubt, but its purposes may very well be. To wit, the sport remains an expression of defending the body and connecting personally and collectively with forces of kinship. But remarkable changes appear to be afoot. While national trends in democratic South Africa still determine the geography of stick fighting, hemispheric currents may be directing where and how it will be practiced in years to come. If new developments in stick fighting offer any indication, this martial art is beginning to move from community to commodity. With high unemployment (near 40 per cent countrywide and endemic now for a decade), stick fighting may no longer be preparing rural young men for the rigours of wage-supported patriarchy. One might ask, then, with jobs vanishing from industrial and manufacturing sectors what economic processes are likely to transform stick fighting? Such a question might focus on the opportunities embraced by post-apartheid elites as they hustle to lure overseas investors. The fastest growing segment of South Africa’s neo-liberal economy is the hospitality industry; it receives significant injections of foreign capital and packages the country’s top ‘brands’, among them wildlife safaris and heritage tourism. Besides game parks, one of the prominent destinations is the ‘tribal’ resort, offering visitors from across the world a chance to participate in ethnographic dramas of the ‘real Africa’. For example, a few years back at Simunye Zulu Lodge near Melmoth in KwaZulu-Natal daily entertainment included stick fights. After watching a simulated bout, guests are invited to try combat with sponge-padded umshiza and ubhoko under the command of a Zulu-speaking lodge employee playing igoso, the ‘war captain’. In Simunye (once an appendage of Protea Hotel’s great attraction, Shakaland) a sport enjoyed by Zulu male youths takes place in an arena of intense commercial activity. Indeed, a boy growing up in the shadow of a ‘cultural village’ who tests himself against peers might, if he is lucky, secure employment as a mock ‘warrior’.90

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