

South Africa: Village thinking at a national level

Chris Mann (<https://web.archive.org/web/20161207033646/http://mg.co.za/author/chris-mann>) 08 Feb 2013 00:00

 Jacob Zuma has mastered the skill of switching between being a small-time and a national leader. (Gallo)
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Listening to President Jacob Zuma being interviewed recently on Ukhozi FM, I was struck by how relaxed and confident he was. Speaking an eloquent isiZulu, he displayed the *inhlonipho* (dignified courtesy) of a humble leader of the people. He outlined a number of the ANC's achievements, in particular the government's payment of social grants to 15-million people.

This was everybody's *umkhaya* (homeboy) speaking, the barefoot *umalusi* (shepherd) from the rural heartlands who had risen to lead the struggle against the colonial *abelungu* (whites).

He reminded me of the peasant leaders who challenged the rule of the Roman Empire but eventually become provincial governors within a wider economic hegemony. Initially considered outlaws by Rome, such leaders retained the allegiance of the peasantry by espousing indigenous rural culture.

Zuma, by calling on black South Africans to avoid becoming dog-pampering whites, follows that tactic. His support of the Bill that extends the powers of "traditional" courts, his polygyny, his expansive rural *umuzi* (homestead) and his politics of patronage are examples of aspects of Nguni small-scale culture writ large.

For far too long the discourses of politics, race and economics in South Africa have obscured another significant reality: that described by the social anthropologist Monica Wilson as the change from a collection of small-scale societies into a large-scale society.

Small-scale rural societies in Nguni culture, for example, are typically governed by *amakhosi* (hereditary leaders), assisted by *amabandla* (councillors), many of them kin and all male.

Transnational lingua franca

The amakhosi deploy land and power through patronage, administer customary law and officiate at religious ceremonies that venerate the ancestors. Women and children have subordinate roles and are at a significant social distance from men. Rituals such as male circumcision and the negotiations of lobola affirm these roles, creating a complex *ubudoda* (machismo).

Deference to the amakhosi and the dominance of collective values trump individualistic and entrepreneurial behaviour. There is, on the other hand, considerable interpersonal intimacy and a sense of belonging to a group.

People who live in large-scale urban societies, by contrast, experience a much wider range of relationships, but these relationships are impersonal rather than familial: the shop assistant, the neighbour. Roles are specialised and formalised: the magistrate, the teacher, the nurse. Village time, seasonal and personal, is replaced by linear, impersonal, international time.

The indigenous village language is threatened by a transnational lingua franca.

The bartering of the localised economy gives way to money. Large-scale religions such as Christianity and Islam draw increasing numbers of converts. Enforced taxation, the bright lights of capitalist culture and the collapse of the rural economy force villagers to sell their labour in cities and towns.

Transformation requires each citizen to identify with a large-scale, multiethnic state still in the making. This is much more difficult than identifying with a particular kinship group, a political party, a trade union, a football team or a church.

It also means that previously small-scale citizens have to make an enormous number of changes to their personal values and daily behaviour. Newly appointed civil servants, for example, be they village councillors or political party cadres, are expected to move on from their previous loyalties and to become impartial employees of a large-scale abstract state.

Those civil servants who retain their small-scale cultural values can identify only superficially with the state or the hundreds of regulations and the difficult administrative language of their impersonal employer. Their country remains their kin. This type of small-scale loyalty, combined with thwarted material ambition, ordinary avarice and simmering memories of past injustice, rapidly turns into widespread nepotism and income-generating corruption.

Party-political

Patronage has been carried forward into the new South Africa. It is embedded in the closed-list electoral system that favours party-political loyalty over direct accountability to the electorate at local, provincial and national levels. This is a serious structural mistake.

Leaders such as Zuma, like the peasant rebels of the past, soon discover the gains to be made by adroitly switching back and forth between the roles of a small-scale and a large-scale society leader.

When he appears on TV in overalls, sitting on his haunches, swirling and swigging a pot of umqombothi (home-made beer brewed for rituals), Zuma signals solidarity with the culture of the working class and the rural peasantry. When he appears in a suit and tie in Parliament, nodding approval during the presentation of the national budget, he symbolises control over what all large-scale society leaders require - a nation of compliant taxpayers.

While continuing to cherish our different cultural identities, we will have to confront the political leaders who wish to subordinate aspects of an increasingly large-scale, cosmopolitan and egalitarian society to small-scale cultural values. The alternative is the affirmation of traditions such as ukuthwala (the abduction of young women by men of power), as endorsed by Nkosi Mandla Mandela.

As citizens of a large-scale, democratic society, we must be fiercely committed to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the rule of law. Not shirking the problems of redress, we will also have to challenge two of the falsehoods that populist politicians exploit: the myth of the golden pre-colonial past and the fallacy of the just and equitable peasant society.

Citizens of a large-scale democratic society cannot play a double game.

Chris "Zithulele" Mann is poetry professor at Rhodes University. He worked for 15 years in rural development

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