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UNSOCIAL BANDITS: THE STOCK THIEVES OF QUMBU AND THEIR ENEMIES

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AFRICANA

AWS 33

UNSOCIAL BANDITS: THE STOCK THIEVES OF QUMBU AND THEIR ENEMIES

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Few concepts in social history have caught the academic imagination to the same extent as Eric Hobsbawm's image of the social bandit, "peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes."[1] A number of efforts have been made to reassess African crime in the light of social banditry, most notably in Donald Crummey's collection, Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa. Although Crummey admits that "our contributors found plenty of ordinary bandits, but .. few social ones", he is reluctant to abandon the concept altogether because "most popular violence is a response to state or ruling-class violence."[2]

A similar thread runs through the limited South African historiography on African crime. Although Charles Van Onselen's classic study of the Ninevites concludes that the South African experience "produced not social, but profoundly anti-social bandits", he nevertheless pays tribute to the Ninevite achievement in constructing a social and ideological alternative

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[1] E.J. Hobsbawm, Bandits, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.17. The social bandit made his first appearance in Hobsbawm's Primitive Rebels (Manchester: University Press, 1959).

[2] London: James Currey, 1986, pp.1,7.

to an unjust society. And, in presenting their "participant's perspective" of MaRashea, Guy and Thabane cannot but be impressed by their protagonist's success in triumphing "over a world which by its nature means to bring him down."[3]

Although Hobsbawm himself was careful to distinguish between "social" and "common" banditry, it nevertheless remains true that "social banditry" has dominated the academic agenda. "Common banditry" and "rural criminality" are, after all, not so much analytical categories as intellectual trashcans into which all bandits other than social bandits can be dumped. Little progress has been made thus far in analysing the nature and implications of African crime, more particularly when crime is directed not against the state but against fellow-Africans. And so far as South Africa specifically is concerned, nothing whatsoever has been done to elucidate the nature of organised crime in the black rural areas, where the targets are not ethnic strangers but one's own neighbours and relatives.

This study of the stock thieves of Qumbu takes its cue not from Hobsbawm, but from his most trenchant critic. Thirty months of

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[3] C. Van Onselen, New Babylon, New Nineveh (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1982), Vol II, p.195. J. Guy and M. Thabane, "The Ma-Rashea: a Participant's Perspective" in Class, Community and Conflict, ed. B. Bozzoli (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987). I am aware that much more has been published on African criminality, particularly in the urban context, but it is beyond the scope of this paper, not to mention my present capacity, to give an exhaustive bibliography.

fieldwork in western Sicily motivated Anton Blok to note that:[4]

> Rather than actual champions of the poor and the weak, bandits quite often terrorized those from whose very ranks they managed to rise, and thus helped suppress them.

Qumbu is not in Sicily, and there are pertinent differences between Transkei and Italy which will be explored in due course. Suffice it to say that the heroes of this paper are not the thieves but the anti-thieves, who genuinely embody the democratic will and popular norms which some academics have mistakenly sought in the guise of bandits. The paper is dedicated to the memory of my friends, Sindiso Siyotula (d. Feb. 1992) and Mark Dyasi (d. Jan. 1993), assassinated by the stock thieves of Qumbu.

From Raiding to Theft

Cattle-raiding was one of the most prominent aspects of precolonial Xhosa warfare. "One now hurries to pursue the conquered enemy close at heel," wrote Landdrost Alberti in 1806, "and mainly endeavours to seize his cattle ... A great quantity of the captured cattle are immediately slaughtered and consumed."[5] Even during peacetime, it was regarded as perfectly legitimate for bands of raiders to cross into the territory of

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[4] A. Blok, "The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered", CSSH (1972); A. Blok, The Mafia of a Sicilian Village (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).

[5] L. Alberti, Account of the Xhosa (1811). Ed. and trans. W.Fehr. (Cape Town: Balkema, 1968), p.91.

neighbouring chiefdoms and lift their cattle. This was called *ukunyangaza*; and the chief's approval of the proceedings was signified by the fact that he accepted a share of the spoil.[6]

During the dying years of the independent Xhosa kingdoms, the *ukunyangaza* tradition threw up recognisably social bandits, especially among the Gcaleka Xhosa, who had borne the brunt of the Frontier Wars and lost most of their lands and cattle in the process. Thieves such as Beja and Sidubulekana raided the black auxiliaries of the colonial forces and bore away cattle and guns. Their feats were celebrated in anecdote and song, and they were regarded as heroes by their beleaguered fellow-countrymen. Nor did they steal for themselves alone. "Is it not Beja, the man who enriched you all and never came back with empty hands?" mourned King Sarhili, when he heard the news of the hero's brave and inevitable demise. And Sidubulekana "collected a number of destitute women and children and supported them for a long time in rugged and well-wooded country", before the colonial forces gunned him down in 1878.[7]

For commentators such as John Henderson Soga, there is a world of difference between such heroes and those whom he styles petty thieves and pilferers.

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[6] V.P. Ndamase, Ama-Mpondo: Ibali neNtlalo (Lovedale: n.d.), p.56.

[7] W.T. Brownlee, "Sidubulekana the Gun Thief" and "Beja's Last Raid" in Reminiscences of a Transkeian (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1975); J.H. Soga, The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs (Lovedale: n.d.), pp.358-67.

> The courage, cunning and resource requisite for the prosecution of so dangerous a trade, wherein the raider stakes his life against the cattle, arouses interest and a feeling akin to sympathy for the robber ... The petty thief and pilferer, on the other hand is anathema.

The element of panache carried over into the high colonial period, and helped to mask the transition from social bandit to something worse. This is evident from the fictionalised autobiography of Ntsukumbini, a Transkeian cattle thief, as rendered by his indulgent magistrate, Frank Brownlee.*

> There was something sporting in the way these people carried out their operations. The poor, as a rule, were not robbed; toll was taken from the fat herds of the rich. I have reason to know that thefts were sometimes carried out merely for the purpose of demonstrating skill in stealing.

Ntsukumbini felt no moral qualms about his activities, and he took pride in outwitting and outfighting the slow and stupid people from whom he stole. But, heroics aside, Ntsukumbini cannot really be termed a social bandit. His thefts were not approved by the Great Place but were carried out purely for the benefit of his immediate household. They constituted a family secret, and were not explicitly discussed even within the family. Ntsukumbini's father initiated him into the fellowship of thieves by instructing him to steal a sheep from his maternal uncle, a remarkable breach of kinship morality especially inasmuch as "there was harmony and friendship between my father and my little father (uncle)". Ntsukumbini's mother was burned out as a witch. Though Ntsukumbini professed to be surprised by this ("my mother

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*Ntsukumbini: Cattle Thief (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), p.12.

was a person full of kindness and kindly acts"), it does not say much for the esteem in which the Ntsukumbini household was held in its immediate neighbourhood.

Ntsukumbini: Cattle Thief also provides us with several insights into the practices and techniques of thieving, many of which have persisted into the present day. Space precludes all the details, but one must point to the deference shown even then by thieves towards duly constituted authority in the persons of magistrates and chiefs. "It is the custom of chiefs," Ntsukumbini's father advised, "to be kindly disposed towards those common folk who know how they should comport themselves in the presence of their superiors." And, even during the high colonial period, thieves were well able to employ white lawyers in order to evade punishment. Far from being hostile to the colonial legal system, thieves were well able to exploit its limitations to their own advantage. This also is a continuing feature of the history of Qumbu district, to which we now turn.

The Qumbu Context

Qumbu town lies about 60 kilometres east of Umtata. The district is bordered west and east by the Tsitsa and Tina rivers, to the south by Mpondoland and to the north by the mixed Sotho/Hlubi district of Mount Fletcher. The northwest corner just touches the "white" farming district of Maclear. These are the slopes of the Cape Drakensberg, and the north of the district is fairly rugged. Though it can hardly be termed impenetrable, north Qumbu's

combination of secluded valleys and inadequate roads make it ideal for the harbouring of cattle. Lookouts can be posted on strategic hilltops to give ample warning of approaching trouble. The proximity of Maclear provides a convenient channel of the disposal of stolen stock. Such conditions are not unique to Qumbu, and the other districts on the southern fringes of the Drakensberg - Engcobo, Tsolo and Mount Fletcher - are likewise afflicted with the problem of chronic stock theft.

Economically, there is little to distinguish Qumbu from the other 27 districts of Transkei. It is neither especially rich, nor extremely poor. The population of the district in 1985 was 117,291, of whom only 20,802 (37,4% of the economically active population) were in formal employment.* 92,2% of these were migrant labourers mostly on the Witwatersrand, but access to employment has become increasingly difficult since the Native Recruiting Corporation office in Qumbu closed down about 1987. The district is overwhelmingly rural, with less than one percent of the total population living in Qumbu town, yet only 38 males describe themselves as employed full-time in agriculture. In other words, the people of Qumbu are not independent peasants but a displaced proletariat, marginalised and lacking even the opportunity to engage in wage labour.

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*Statistics are taken from the Transkei Population Census 1985, Vol VI, undertaken by the Institute of Management and Development Studies (University of Transkei), for the Department of Commerce, Industry and Tourism.

Qumbu has a long history of anti-colonial struggle.[10] The best-known incident in Qumbu history occurred in 1880, when Chief Mhlontlo of the Mpondomise engineered the murder of his magistrate, Hamilton Hope The colonial authorities suppressed the Mpondomise chieftainship and confiscated large tracts of Mpondomise territory. They imported Hlubi, Bhele and other Mfengu but, far from proving co-operative, these Christianised elements soon took the lead in setting up independent schools and churches. In the 1920's, Qumbu became a stronghold of Garveyite and "American" movements. Localities such as Lower Qulunca were "noted for continued opposition to the headman, whoever he may be". Overly co-operative headmen were liable to find their sheep stabbed or their cattle poked up the anus with a spear.[11] Middle Tyhira locality was the home of Elliot Tonjeni, formerly a renowned Communist militant in the Western Cape.[12]

The dominant traditional leader in Qumbu between 1931 and 1949 was the Regent Isaac Matiwane. Isaac's concept of political strategy was to "wash away the blood of Hope" by utter

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[10] For the early history of Qumbu see W. Beinart, "Conflict in Qumbu" in W. Beinart and C. Bundy, Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), Ch.3.

[11] Cape Archives. 1/QBU 70 S. Matiwane - RM Qumbu, 6 March 1939. CMT 3/1471 File 42B RM Qumbu - Chief Magistrate Transkei, 6 June 1939.

[12] On Elliot Tonjeni, see, for example, E. Roux, Time Longer than Rope (2nd ed, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp.232-243.

subservience to the authorities.[13] He loyally signed up for the South African Army during World War II, and when the rehabilitation scheme was introduced to Qumbu, he did not shirk his duty.[14] But when Sigidi Matiwane, Isaac's ward, came of age in 1949, he sought to make his presence felt by overturning the "progressive" measures of his guardian.

"What have I been installed as chief for?" asked Sigidi. "Are we compelled to accept rehabilitation scheme tricks drawn before [by Isaac] in spite of our opposition to the scheme?"[15] Headmen who had supported rehabilitation were mocked and jeered at Mpondomise gatherings. Sigidi demanded the right to allocate land and nominate headmen. "I am against rehabilitation," he said, "because I do not see the Pondomise land which I was told I was to rule."

Sigidi's chieftainship came to an end very abruptly in April 1954. He was observed driving, very drunkenly and without a license, along the road from Sulenkama to Qumbu. When the police approached the vehicle, Sigidi and his companions resisted, and one companion was beaten up to the extent that he actually died.

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[13] Transkei Archives. Box 163, File 3/19/2/3, has got full details of the long struggle to restore the Mpondomise chieftainship.

[14] On rehabilitation, see especially F.T. Hendricks, The Pillars of Apartheid: Land Tenure, Rural Planning and the Chieftancy (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, No.32, 1990).

[15] Transkei Archives. Box 163, File 3/19/2/3 for the story of Sigidi Matiwane.

800 Mpondomise gathered at Middle Tyhira, and Sigidi promised to lead them into Qumbu town the very next day. But when the police brought in reinforcements, including six Sten guns, from all over Transkei, Sigidi was too frightened to do anything more than meekly pay his fine. The authorities dismissed Sigidi, overlooked his younger brother, and reappointed the faithful Isaac as Regent under the Bantu Authorities Act.

The Makhuluspan

The Mpondomise chieftainship had fallen, never to rise again. The popular movement in Qumbu, which had briefly rallied around him, quickly recognised that Sigidi was a drunkard and Welsh, his younger brother, was even worse. At the same time, they were not willing to accept the reimposition of colonial authority in the form of good-boy Isaac Matiwane. They cut loose from the Mpondomise royal family, and with it, they also abandoned the backward-looking and narrowly tribalistic (that is, anti-Mfengu) outlook which Mpondomise traditionalism would necessarily have entailed. The will to resist was there; it only required a vehicle through which to express itself.

The first sign that something entirely new was about to happen came in the form of a series of anonymous letters to the Chief Magistrate of Transkei and the Secretary of Native Affairs. These letters focussed on rehabilitation, and condemned the Qumbu Magi-

strate and the collaborating chiefs. The tone was mock respectful, and more than a little threatening:'*

> The magistrates have forced rehabilitation. We did not accept it. We don't want to go behind you [Chief Magistrate], and do things you don't know. We tell you this thing, and we will not tell you again. Next time you will just hear the sound. Because we don't want the Magistrate coming around us and putting up the fence. We are quite satisfied with whatever might happen next.

This letter was written on 17 September 1956. Three months later, the people of Qumbu began to burn out suspected stock thieves.

There is no conclusive proof that the anti-rehabilitation activists, who had formerly supported Sigidi Matiwane, were also the force behind the anti-theft movements which convulsed Qumbu for the next three years. But the probability is overwhelming. The English word "COMPANY" is almost certainly a translation of the Xhosa word "ibandla", meaning the followers of a chief. In the absence of a viable chieftainship, it acquires the sense of "community". The word "ibandla" was also generally used by the people who constituted the anti-theft courts to describe themselves.''

'* Transkei Archives. Box 163. File 3/19/2/3 Company - Secretary of Native Affairs, 23 April 1955; Company - Chief Magistrate Transkei, 17 Sept. 1956.

''Cape Archives CMT 3/1481, File 42/19/ Statement of C.F. Scheepers, Officer Commanding Sulenkama Police Station, 2 May 1957.

As soon as the anti-theft movement commenced, it became the sole focus of politics in Qumbu district, and little more was heard thereafter concerning either Sigidi Matiwane or rehabilitation. Although the Makhuluspan ("big team")[18] did not mount a direct challenge to the authorities, it implicitly defied the colonial monopoly of law and order, and substituted a framework of popular institutions and popular justice for the illegitimate institutions and ineffective justice of the official courts.

Oral tradition remembers nothing of a connection between the anti-theft movement and broader political issues. It is possible that the Makhuluspan might have originated outside Qumbu, in the neighbouring Mount Fletcher district where the Tshisa-tshisa ("burn-burn") anti-theft movement commenced about the same time.[19] Alternatively, the Makhuluspan might have been a reaction to an undoubted increase in stock theft. Police statistics clearly indicate a sudden upsurge in stock theft between 1950 and 1956. The number of cattle reported stolen at Sulenkama police station increased from 7 in 1950 (2 cases) to no fewer than 188 in 1956 (82 cases), and the number of stolen sheep and goats increased from 19 (3 cases) in 1950 to 773 (68 cases) in

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[18] I use this term throughout for the sake of convenience, but it is worth noting that it first appears in 1958, that is more than a year after the first manifestation of the movement.

[19] Cape Archives CMT 1480 H.J. Du Plooy - Bantu Affairs Department, 3 July 1958. Tshisa-tshisa is very poorly documented. Mount Fletcher is an enormously complex district which warrants further research.

1956. Fewer than half of these cases were brought to trial, and only half of these secured a conviction.[20] According the Chief Magistrate of Transkei,[21]

> The thieves either cannot be convicted or escape conviction when prosecuted: Qumbu criminal roll is so heavy that cases are often not concluded until months after the first arraignment. The accused gets bail, and by the time the trial takes place, witnesses have disappeared and good evidence has deteriorated.

Some of the alleged thieves were extremely wealthy by Transkei standards. Joseph Mphomane of Ngqayi Locality owned 75 head of cattle, 375 woolled sheep and 67 goats. He was twice prosecuted for stock theft, but was never convicted. Stock thieves had become so bold that they made open demands at beer-drinks and rural ceremonies, ironically referring to themselves as the "abatshana" or "nephews" ("you know that when your nephew comes to visit you, you have to give him something.") Many homestead-heads paid regular protection money to known stock thieves to avoid

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[20] Cape Archives GSC 1/2/1/797 Case 337 of 1957. Crown versus Klaas Memani and others. Statement of Sergeant C.F. Scheepers. I would like to thank Clifton Crais for generosity well beyond the call of duty in supplying me with this and the following GSC references.

[21] CMT 3/1481 File 42/19 Chief Magistrate Transkei - Secretary of Native Affairs, 14 March 1957. Mr Theo Berrange, the Qumbu attorney who defended first the thieves and then the anti-thieves, shares the popular opinion that the Makhuluspan began because too many known stock thieves were being acquitted in the Magistrate's court. Interviewed Cape Town, January 1993.

being robbed.[22]

The problem was not, therefore, to identify the thieves but to get rid of them. Oral tradition records that the first thief to be killed was Tutselana of Nkwenkwezi locality.[23] The earliest documented case of burning was against Headman Heathcote Sinxeke of Lower Tyhira, an admitted thief who had already been called before the Magistrate to explain the prevalence of theft in his locality.[24] The attacks spread from locality to locality, and between January and March 1957 more than 400 huts were burned and at least seven people were killed.

Each of the affected localities had its own Makhuluspan committee, consisting of representatives of the various sub-localities, and usually including a Judge and a Secretary or Treasurer. The latter official was responsible for recording fines, and collecting contributions from the people to pay for the legal costs of defending Makhuluspan activists in the colonial courts. Some committees even paralleled official institutions to the extent of creating positions such as Prosecutor, Attorney, Detective and Constable. There can be no

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[22] N. Fadane, "Unrest in Tsolo in 1957-61", B.A. (Honours project, University of Transkei, 1992); W.D. Hammond-Tooke, Command or Consensus (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), p.106; CMT 3/1481 File 42/19 CMT-SNA, 8 May 1957.

[23] Fadane, "Unrest in Tsolo".

[24] Cape Archives 1/QBU 70 file 1/9/1 Joyizana Mamoza-SAP, 21 Jan.1957; SAP Qumbu - RM Qumbu, 23 Jan.1957; CMT 3/1481 File 42/19 CMT-SNA, 14 March 1957.

doubt of the popular legitimacy of such committees, as even the police admitted that they were made up of the most respected community members, indeed the very individuals who were most helpful to the police in normal times.[25]

Hut-burnings were ordered by the committee after preliminary meetings which identified and discussed potential targets. Huge posses of 100-300 men armed with spears, swords and the occasional gun swept down on the homesteads of the alleged thieves, burned their huts and took their cattle. In a few cases, the suspected thieves were deliberately sought out and killed, but, more frequently, they were warned in advance and enabled to escape. Women and children were not attacked, and they were sometimes given an opportunity to remove their household goods before the thatch was set alight. The spoil was divided up among the sub-localities, and was usually slaughtered to prevent it ever being restored to the thieves.[26]

After the initial wave of hut-burning, the authority of the <u>ibandla</u> expressed itself more and more in the form of something resembling people's courts. Mass meetings were held on secluded hills, which everybody was forced to attend lest they be labelled as thieves. Suspected thieves were interrogated, and usually

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[25] Cape Archives 1/QBU 70 SAP Qumbu - O/C SAP Transkei, 22 March 1961; GSC 1/2/1/797 Case 337 Crown vs K. Memani, Judge's remarks.

[26] CMT 3/1481 File 42/19 RM Qumbu - CMT, 2 May 1957; GSC 1/2/1/797. Case 337 Crown vs K. Memani.

beaten on the buttocks until they confessed and agreed to compensate their victims and pay a fine to the court. Once they had confessed and paid, they were regarded as "cleansed" and returned to the "company of honest men". The white magistrates and the police feared that the Makhuluspan was misusing the anti-theft campaign "to pay off old grudges", and several of the suspected thieves later claimed that they had only confessed to avoid being beaten.[27] Available evidence suggests, however, that the Qumbu Makhuluspan rarely directed itself against innocent individuals though more serious abuses did occur in the neighbouring district of Tsolo.[28]

Chiefs and headmen did not participate in the burnings or the people's courts, though there are indications in some instances that they were consulted and approved the proceedings. Chief Sofonia Moshesh of Ngqayi, for example, allowed a posse of Gqukunqa men to enter his locality and attack one of his subjects, a noted stock thief. And Windus Ludidi, the headman of Qotira location, did not protect his subject, Willie Siyotula, although Willie was a fellow-Hlubi who stole only Mpondomise cattle.[29] The anti-theft campaign, indeed, did much to unite

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[27] CMT 3/1481 File 42/19 CMT-SNA 14 March 1957.

[28] The Tsolo cases are fully documented in the Cape Archives, especially CMT 3/1482 File 42/22, and reveal aspects which neither Fadane nor Hammond-Tooke op cit suspect.

[29] GSC 1/2/1/797 Case 336 R. vs. Ntshebe Macamba; GSC 1/2/1/799 Case 354 R. vs. Captain Siyotula.

Qumbu district across ethnic lines. The Magistrate of Qumbu noted that the Mpondomise and the Mfengu "have not formed separate factions, and kraals of both tribes have been burned."[30] Unfortunately, this situation was not repeated in Tsolo, where the senior Mpondomise chief was heavily involved and an ethnic element was certainly present.

The colonial authorities could not tolerate the people taking the law into their own hands, and the police cracked down. From September 1957, there was a wave of court cases in which anti-theft activists and committee-men were sentenced for arson, assault, extortion and murder. The movement disappeared temporarily, but revived in July 1958 in a slightly different form. It was active in fewer localities, with much less overt violence but much more highly organised. Nine localities met in July 1959 and attempted to secure recognition from the state. They addressed a typed letter to the Magistrate of Qumbu, signing themselves openly as representatives of their localities, and stating inter alia that:[31]

> The African people have devised a method of dealing with such people [thieves] and would request the government to play blind, and let our organisation called Makhulu-span grapple with all forms of theft in her own way... We are confident that if the government will give us a period of, say, five years, we shall destroy theft. Would the

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[30] Cape Archives CMT 3/1481 File 42/19 RM Qumbu - CMT, 31 Jan.1957; CMT - SNA, 14 March 1957.

[31] Cape Archives 1/QBU Illegible (Sec. of Makhuluspan) and 18 others - RM Qumbu, 17 July 1959.

> government please note that our organisation is not one of murderers but of peacemakers.

Government's response to this overture is not recorded, but as rural Transkei burst into rebellion in 1960 in the wake of the Mpondoland revolt, the Makhuluspan too began to turn its attention to the collaborating chiefs, Sandy Majeke and Isaac Matiwane. Isaac complained that he was finding it difficult to distinguish between "the so-called Makhuluspan" and "the subsequent cruel all-out rebellious-minded, treason-minded Bantu gangs whose secret weapon has been discovered to be 'Away with the Government-appointed Chiefs and Away with all Progressive Laws." Secret meetings plotting to kill the two chiefs were undoubtedly held, and they were provided with special constables entitled Home Guards for their protection.[32]

The authorities hit back, and the Makhuluspan strongholds were "combed out" by special police acting under the provisions of the notorious Proclamation R400. At least 48 known Makhuluspan leaders were detained between February and June 1961, and some were deported. Attempts were made to revive Makhuluspan in 1962, but the reaction had already set in and the movement petered out.[33]

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[32] Cape Archives 1/QBU 70 1. Matiwane-Bantu Affairs Commissioner [BAC] Qumbu, 3 March 1960 (sic. might be 1961); CMT 3/1471 BAC Qumbu-CMT, 4 March 1961.

[33] Cape Archives CMT 3/1470 BAC Qumbu-CBAC Umtata, 18 May 1962, 5 Dec. 1962.

The Thieves and the Communists

The dissolution of the Makhuluspan did not bring about the end of stock theft in Qumbu district. As has already been pointed out, theft is endemic in mountainous border districts where the majority of people are very poor. Anti-theft outbreaks flared up sporadically, for example in Mvumelwane village in 1971.[34] But the violence which erupted in Qumbu in 1990, and which still continues up to the present day, absolutely dwarfs the disturbances of the Makhuluspan era and can by no means be explained away as the simple culmination of long-standing tensions. More men died on 28 September 1992 than in the whole of the Makhuluspan period, and the death toll in the Qumbu violence probably already exceeds fifty persons. The focus is much less on the capture and recapture of stolen stock than on the physical elimination of the opposition. The present explosion is directly and indirectly linked to the situation in South Africa as a whole, and to the attempts of the old order – doomed perhaps, but still full of fight – to preserve its position in the face of forces working for radical change. The events of 1990–1993 also remind us, *pace* Hobsbawm, that unsocial bandits are, in fact, a conservative force, partnering the reactionary state rather than seeking to overthrow it.

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[34] This was led by Gwele, the village headman. Information from M.K. Kondlo, March 1994.

During the Bantustan governments of Kaiser and George Matanzima (1963-1987), which immediately followed the period of the Makhuluspan, the thieves of Qumbu settled down into a cosy relationship with the state. Thieving was unchallenged, but it was also limited in scope.[39]

> Before this investigation of thieves happened, people looked on them with respect. They regarded them as Mhlekazi. They took them into their houses - out of fear. The attitude was don't interfere with them, try and be friendly with them, then they won't touch you. Be on the safe side.

People were quite willing to marry their daughters to known thieves. Thieves were rich, and one's family stood to benefit by the marriage. Even if the thieves did steal your property, all was not lost. Thieves were always quarrelling with each other, and they often told stockowners where their cattle were hidden. Alternatively, one could engage a thief to bring back one's cattle for as little as a bottle of brandy.

The thieves patronised the more politically influential chiefs and headmen, and the Transkei police, freed from the control of their white officers, were quite willing to be accomodated by them. Although it might be going a little too far to accuse the Matanzima brothers of benefitting personally, it could be noted that K. Magidigidi, a close business associate of George Matan-

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[39] Interview with Comrades T.T. Tonjeni (SACP), Matyobeni and Mfamela (Youth), Qumbu town, 7 Sept.1992. "Mhlekazi" is a term of respect, usually reserved for chiefs and high government officials.

zima, lived right in the heart of the mountainous area. But the Matanzimas prized social stability above all else. They might have turned a blind eye to the thieving, but they did not allow it to get seriously out of hand. "Matanzima's police were better than these," Qumbu people say.[38] "Before, if you handed stock thieves to the police, they jailed them. Now they let them go after one or two days."

The modus vivendi between the stock thieves and the people of Qumbu was shattered towards the end of 1989, when General Bantu Holomisa first began to reveal his political sympathies, and allowed democratic organisations to operate more freely. Up to that point, Mass Democratic Movement structures had not existed in Transkei, but now they made up for lost time. Qumbu youth were in the forefront, and the first Transkei congress of youth organisations was held in Mvumelwane, a large peri-urban settlement just outside Qumbu town. The youth soon turned up the heat on the more unreconstructed headmen of the district. And they told the people that times were changing, and that they no longer needed to tolerate stock thieves.

Thieves were operating all over Qumbu district, but they had two strongholds in particular. One was at Mzuzanto, near the National Road to Mount Frere. The other was at Gqukunqa locality in the mountainous region between Sulenkama village and the white town of Maclear. About 1988, Walter Zamuxolo ("Nomarayisi") Matiwane

[38] Interview with men of Shawbury, 13 Oct.1992.

had taken over as headman of Gqukunqa. He was not thought of as a stock thief before his elevation, but once in the seat he began to publically demonstrate his affinity with the thieves. Qumbu migrants had long-standing links with ISCOR and the hostels of the Vaal Triangle, and it seems from trial records that the thieves made contact in the Transvaal with certain white vendors who were supplying these hostels with meat.[37] It is also strongly rumoured that the thieves were encouraged and trained by Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) militants resident in Maclear. In any event, the thieves acquired not only the means to export stolen cattle out of Qumbu district, but also the contacts and the money to buy automatic weapons and hire professional hit men. Not for nothing was the Great Place of Nomarayisi known as "*Inkundla yeemphati sbam*" (the court of those who carry guns).[38]

When cattle go missing from the grazing lands, it is not automatically assumed that they have been stolen. In November 1990, eleven men of Caba went out searching. They had heard that their cattle were in Gqukunqa, but they could not find them. As they were returning, they were accosted by a group of twenty men headed by the notorious thief Mkhandlela Sgijimi. The thieves ordered the Caba men to throw down their rustic weapons, but,

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[37] State versus W.A. Coetzee and others, Qumbu Magistrate's Court, 3 July 1991. Transcript in the possession of the author.

[38] Interview with Fani Ncedani, Mzaxiwa Fodo and other men of Caba, Umtata, 17 Sept.1992.

before they could do so, the thieves opened fire and killed Fikile Mankayi and Masidebelele Fente. These were the first victims of the new wave of Qumbu violence.[38]

After the shooting, Nomarayisi complained that the Caba men had entered his locality without permission. But when the Caba men approached Chief Sikhumbuzo Mativane, the head of the Northern Mpondomise Tribal Authority (which includes both Caba and Gqukunqa), the Chief refused to grant a permit. And when the Caba men obtained a letter from the Qumbu District Commissioner, Sikhumbuzo simply tore the letter up. The District Commissioner referred the Caba men to Police Headquarters in Umtata, and Police Headquarters referred them back to the District Commissioner. And so it went.

Altogether, there were five sub-localities in the south of Gqukunqa who refused to participate in stock theft. Nomarayisi called them to a meeting in February 1991, and proposed that Gqukunqa people should not fight with each other but that they should raid the cattle of other localities. If the people of Mrolweni and Luxeni sub-localities refused, they would be attacked and driven into Caba. The thieves were present in force, heavily armed. "What sort of Great Place is this?" Nolente Sontshalabe bravely asked. "We don't want to be part of a Great

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[38] Umtata Advice Office. Statement of Mzaxiwa Fodo, headman of KwaNkancolo sub-locality, Caba, 17 Sept. 1992.

Place that steals."[**] From that point onwards, the leaders of the Gqukunqa anti-thieves started to sleep in the bush.

About this time, Mr Mathubeni Macamba, a migrant worker in Cape Town returned to his rural home in Luxeni sub-locality. Mathubeni had joined the ANC in Cape Town, and thought that forming an ANC branch might improve the situation. He went to Qumbu town, and brought back forms and cards. Everybody in Caba joined the ANC, but Nomarayisi and the thieves did not. On 19 June 1991, the thieves attacked on the pretext that a certain boy had been killed by the anti-thieves. Mathubeni came out of his house to see what was happening, and was shot dead by Lungisani Macamba, his own nephew, who had been forced out of Luxeni due to his thieving propensities.

Similar incidents occurred along Gqukunqa's northern border with Ngqayi locality, where the anti-thieves mobilised under the leadership of Charlton Ntuli, a veteran of the MK underground, and Mark Dyasi, a local shopkeeper. On 3rd January 1992, the Gqukunqa thieves arrived at Ramatiya sub-locality in broad daylight and drove away the cattle. The men of Ngqayi counter-attacked right into Gqukunqa, and recovered their cattle with some extras to boot. The following day, Mkhandlela himself appeared in Ngqayi and demanded the return of his cattle. This was agreed, but Mkhandlela fled when they tried to search him

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[**] Umtata Advice Office. Affidavit of Malayisha Joseph Macamba, 21 Oct.1992; Interview with Fani Ncedani and Mzaxiwa Fodo, Umtata 17 Sept.1992.

for firearms, he fled. In the course of the pursuit, the Ngqayi men were led into two separate ambushes and five were killed.[41]

The massacre of September 1992 was even worse.[42] On the 26th of the month, the thieves appeared at the Mpaxa grazing lands and openly drove away cattle, sheep, goats and a horse. Their owners followed at a distance, but were turned back by the sight of the thieves, massed and heavily armed, shooting into the air and shouting "*Yizan' okuzithatha*" [Come and get them!]. Representatives from eleven anti-thief villages met on the following day. Again the thieves were waiting for them, and again they turned back. On the third day, a party set out to report the matter to the headman of Tyume sub-locality and the Sulenkama police. This time, the thieves did not show themselves but they opened up with AK47s and R4s, killing nine men. Not satisfied with that, they hacked the bodies with pangas and mutilated them in the most grisly way imaginable. Among the dead was Nolente Sontshalabe, he who had so bravely challenged Nomarayisi at the thieves' Great Place.

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[41] Umtata Advice Office. Affidavit by Charlton Ntuli, 30 April 1992.

[42] Affidavit of Malashiya Joseph Macamba, c.21 Oct. 1992; and interview with men of Caba and Gqukunqa, 20 Oct. 1992. The massacre was reported in the press with the usual absence of meaningful detail. See Daily Dispatch 30 Sept., 2,6,7 Oct. 1992.

This massacre took place on a public footpath, about 5 kilometres from Sulenkama police station. The police set off when they heard the shooting, but soon turned back when they realised that the killing was still in progress. Later that week, when all was quiet, they swooped on the villages concerned and arrested 86 suspects, thieves and anti-thieves, with a fine impartiality.

Closer to Qumbu town, the struggle between the radical youth and the Mzuzanto thieves was more clandestine in its nature. Assassination and counter-assassination occurred from December 1991, and it was rumoured that the thieves had a hit-list of activists. The death of Sindiso Siyothula, a leading youth militant and SACP member, may serve as an example. On 29th February 1992, Siyothula attended a funeral and then made an unscheduled stop at his grandfather's place in Qotira locality, far from his normal place of residence. He was just sitting down to supper when there was a knock at the door. A man in a balaclava came in and, without saying a word, killed Siyothula with a single shot. The murderer has never been identified.[**]

It is not only comrades who have died. Thieves have also died, mostly under interrogation. It is not possible to enter too deeply into this topic, as a number of court cases are still pending. It can be said, however, that there are certain points of continuity with the old Makhuluspan tradition, including the

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[**] Umtata Advice Office. Affidavit of Zukile Isaac Siyothula, 30 April 1992.

holding of community meetings and the collection of money from the community to help meet the legal expenses.

It is no secret, however, that the South African Communist Party has played the leading role in the struggle against the thieves of Qumbu. There has been a long association between the SACP and the District going back to the time of Elliot Tonjeni. T.T. Tonjeni, a younger relative and ex-Robben Islander, was the first Chairperson of the Qumbu SACP. Charlton Ntuli, the MK veteran of Ngqayi locality, joined the Party at the time of the 1946 mineworkers' strike.** He even managed to convert his Chief to Communism, before the latter was "swallowed up" by Matanzima. After his release from Robben Island, Comrade Ntuli ran an underground railroad, smuggling youths across the Lesotho border for military training. Most powerful of all was Comrade Nancy Xathula, a schoolteacher and the mother of eight children. The oldest, Leo Xathula, was an MK operative in Bizana in 1988. He was shot dead by the Transkei Police after he had already surrendered himself.**

Ever since that time, Comrade Nancy has been at war with the Bantustan state, its police and its corrupt institutions. Her determination has not been affected by General Holomisa's manifestation as a "good" Bantustan leader. Her sons have been

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** Interview with Charlton Ntuli, Umtata, 16 Aug. 1993.

**Daily Dispatch, 3 March 1993

constantly harassed and assaulted by the police, her home has been attacked by the police and elements of the Transkei Defence Force, and she herself faces a stack of criminal charges.[**] But nothing and nobody has succeeded in intimidating Mrs Xathula. Like Harry Gwala in the Natal Midlands, Comrade Xathula cannot fight herself. But her fiery spirit has inspired others to fight.

Other political movements have not distinguished themselves in the present struggle. Not only in Qumbu, the ANC has preferred to distance itself from anti-theft movements. The main reason seems to be that anti-theft movements tend to break the law, and the ANC does not want to be implicated as an organisation. It prefers to view the burning and the beating of stock thieves as "the custom of the country" and to leave it to informal organisations. In certain districts such as Tsolo and Mqanduli, high-profile ANC members have played a leading role in anti-theft campaigns. In Qumbu, however, a leading ANC member Phumzile Majeke, son of the late chief Sandy Majeke, had, in his capacity as an attorney, defended Nomarayisi Matiwane and a number of other stock thieves. This undermined the image of the ANC in Qumbu and, although most SACP members are also ANC members, it is the Party not the ANC which is the dominant political force in the district.

The PAC, on the other hand, is regarded in Qumbu as the party of the thieves. Few incontrovertible facts are available. At the time of the unbanning of the organisations in February 1990, the

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[**] Daily Dispatch, 11 April 1992.

PAC had only a handful of members in the district. However, due to the strength and the radicalism of the ANC/SACP alliance, the tendency arose for any faction which felt threatened to align itself with the PAC. The followers, for example, of the deposed ex-headman of Mvumelwane, who were initially ANC members, joined the PAC en masse when the ANC refused to support their cause. In one of the early clashes between the comrades and the thieves, a certain M. Ladlokova was killed on the side of the thieves. The PAC thereafter claimed that Ladlokova had been killed not because he was a thief, but because he was a PAC member.[*7] Ever since, there has been a natural tendency on the part of the anti-thieves to associate the PAC with thieving. Nomarayisi's tribal secretary, Lucas Sulelo, was also the Secretary of the PAC branch.[**] When Nomarayisi attempted to normalise his relationship with his neighbours, he expressed this in terms of a desire to join the ANC (see below).

The Thieves and the State

As the conflict between thieves and anti-thieves escalated, it became clear that the Transkei police were part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Not only had the local police long been colluding with the stock thieves (see above), but the regional leadership of the Transkei Police had been out of

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[*7] This incident occurred about January 1992. More information is needed. See, however, Daily Dispatch 4 Feb.1992.

[**] Interview with men of Caba, Umtata, 20 Oct.1992.

sympathy with Holomisa's left turn, ever since the General had given permission for the reburial of ANC exile and martyr, Paramount Chief Sabata Dalindyebo (September 1989) against the strenuous objections of the Transkei Police. Holomisa responded by lowering the age of compulsory retirement to 55 years, thereby consigning the entire top leadership of the Transkei Police to instant oblivion.[48] But the police remained unhappy with the new dispensation, and their attitude to the comrades did not improve with the progress of time inasmuch as youth comrades in places like Lusikisiki became increasingly confrontational towards the police, and even necklaced some of them.

Throughout Transkei, therefore, the police ranged themselves on the side of the established order and, in Qumbu, that established order happened to include the thieves. One incident out of many may serve to illustrate the nature of their collaboration.[50]

During the youth offensive against the thieves of Mzuzanto, the comrades set a trap for the thieves. They went to Umtata and arranged with a certain Colonel Ngxabane (one of the occasional honest policemen) to send reliable policemen to Qumbu on 22

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[48] Confidential information.

[50] Another famous incident occurred in early February 1992, when a police unit sent out to track down the thieves, but made common cause with the thieves and attacked the comrades instead. This was reported in the Daily Dispatch, 4 Feb. 1992, but the report is incomprehensible without background information.

December 1991.[51] They also made it known to the thieves that they were coming to attack them on that day. On the 22nd, the comrades arrived at the thieves' place with the reliable policemen concealed in their midst. As the thieves were about to open fire with their R4s and their AK47s, the police revealed themselves and arrested all of them. They also confiscated a number of police uniforms that the thieves used from time to time. The Umtata police then handed the thieves over to the Qumbu police, who released them on a free bail the very next day. Not only that, but they returned their firearms. Among those so released was the notorious thief, Makalanyana Ratazo. On his way home, Makalanyana saw Gebelele Dumezweni, one of the comrades involved in the trap of the previous day. He shot him dead at the Qumbu taxi rank in full view of everybody. When it was reported to the Qumbu police, they refused to do anything, suggesting that the comrades should contact "your Colonel Ngxabane".

Colonel Ngxabane died in a car smash a few months later. Nobody thinks it was an accident. Makalanyana, on the other hand, continued to flaunt his apparent invulnerability. A few days later, he seized a horse from its owner and threatened to shoot him. He "kidnapped" a young married woman, and took her to his place. Both cases were reported to the police, who refused to act. They said they "did not have a vehicle." But, on more than

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[51] Umtata Advice Office. File Q 4192 Qumbu violence. Affidavit of Kokose Mbombo, 30 April 1992; Affidavit of Makorinte Mzamo, 30 April 1992.

one subsequent occasion, the comrades saw the police giving the thieves lifts in the very vehicles that they denied having.

It is impossible to exaggerate the ineffectiveness of the police, or their unwillingness to confront the deteriorating situation in Qumbu. On 17 September 1992, I personally accompanied a delegation of reputable, middle-aged men from Caba locality to speak to the Minister of Police and the Deputy Commissioner in the Botha Sigcau building, Umtata. It was clear that something was in the air, and that Nomarayisi Matiwane was planning something big. The high officials were very sympathetic, asked a lot of questions and promised to send in a special anti-riot unit to clean up the whole area and stay in it. But they did nothing and twelve days later, nine men of Caba and Gqukunqa perished in the worst massacre ever to take place in Qumbu district. Once or twice, in response to public pressure, certain policemen were withdrawn from Qumbu, but those who replaced them were just as bad. Small wonder that the residents of Qumbu, in an official meeting with Minister of State A.T. Sigcu, asked for the complete removal of all police from Qumbu district, "stating that they were sick and tired of the way the police were working together with the thieves."[52]

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[52] "ABemi bakuQumbu abafuni nokuwabona amaPolisa [the residents of Qumbu don't want even to see the Police]", Isolomzi (Umtata), June 1992.

The malaise of the Transkei police was echoed in other organs of the state. There is something in the law of Native Administration that enables blatant murder to be excused as faction fighting. After the September massacre, in which nine men were shot dead by automatic weapons from a distance of more than 100 metres while walking along a public road leading to a police station, both factions were arrested and charged with "fighting" as if they were equally culpable. The thieves were defended by prominent lawyers, and legal delays did much to keep them out of jail. Nomarayisi Matiwane, for example, was convicted of stock theft in July 1992, but at the time of writing (April 1994), he is still out and free, pending his appeal. Despite the peremptory powers at their disposal, the Transkei government is still unable to effectively dismiss Nomarayisi from his Acting Headmanship. When an official from the Military Council came to Qumbu to suspend Nomarayisi, the Magistrate of Qumbu and the District Commissioner were so afraid that they absented themselves from the meeting, which therefore collapsed. In Umtata, they say that Nomarayasi has been dismissed. But that's not the way it looks in Gqukunqa.

Defining the Thieves

A full explanation of theft and anti-theft movements in Qumbu would obviously require extensive social and economic profiles of the two factions. This could only be achieved after an extended period of fieldwork, which is simply not possible at the present time. One is therefore reliant on the perceptions of the anti-

thieves, which are not only biassed but limited in analytical depth.

Communities are unanimous in asserting that people do not become thieves out of necessity, just because they are poor.[93] Thieving is a moral defect embedded in the personality of certain individuals. It arises out of greed. Thieves want to be rich in cattle, sheep, horses and motor cars. Some want to start their own businesses. Thieving is not confined to any particular ethnic group. One finds thieves equally among the Mpondomise, Hlubi and the Bhele. In each and every locality and sub-locality, one will find three or four homesteads of thieves. There are certain nuclear families which specialise in thieving, but an honest man can have several sons and one of them will turn out to be a thief just because of the "thiefness" (*ubusela*) that is in him. Thieves are not bound by generally accepted rules and moral values. "He has no compunction in stealing from his own relatives." They are, in the words of one Chairperson of the Transkei ANC. "the outcasts of society".[94]

From my own limited observation, I can confirm the truth of many of these statements. It is certainly true that the question of thieving is not an ethnic one. Indeed the problem of stock theft has done much to unite the people of Qumbu across the Mpondomise/

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[93] For example, interview with men of Shawbury, 13 Oct.1992.

[94] Comrade David Ndawonde, speaking at the funeral of Comrade Mark Dyasi, assassinated by thieves, January 1993.

Mfengu ethnic boundary established at the time of Hope's War. It is also true that thieves and anti-thieves can be found within the same family, often with tragic consequences. Willie Siyothula, a thief, was murdered during the Makhuluspan period at the instigation of his cousin, Ambrose Siyothula, but it seems as if the thieving Siyothula's have now settled the score by the murder of the anti-thief Sindiso Siyothula in 1992. Another example is that of Mathubeni Macamba of Caba, murdered by his nephew, Lungisani Macamba who had been forced out of the village "on account of his bad habits."[55] In all the fighting between the thieves and anti-thieves of Gqukunqa, members of the Macamba and Ncedani families have been found on both sides.

At the same time, once cannot simply explain thieving in terms of the badness of a particular person's character. One needs to see it in the context of Transkei's place in the political economy of South Africa as a whole. First and foremost, it is a marginalised region of the country, a dumping ground for displaced proletarians who cannot make a living out of agriculture and cannot hope for employment in the industrial

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[55] CMT 1481, File 42/19 Letter from G.T. Matiwane (Willie Siyothula); Umtata Advice Office File Q/492 unsigned statement [K.Mbombo], c.April 1992 (Sindiso Siyothula); Interview with men of Caba and Gqukunqa, Umtata, 20 Dec.1992 (Macamba).

sector.[**] There is no socially acceptable way forward for the young and the ambitious, and they are therefore easily co-opted by the prospect of quick riches. The current weakness of the Transkei state has proved a fertile ground for co-operation between the thieves and disaffected members of the security apparatus. These factors affect the whole of Transkei, and indeed stock theft is on the increase throughout the region. But in Qumbu, the position is aggravated by a long tradition of stock theft, the mountainous nature of the terrain, and the connivance of AWB-style elements operating out of Maclear.

I began this paper by complaining about the undue attention which social history pays to the "social bandit". Emboldened by the absence, to my knowledge, of any substantial treatments of the "unsocial bandit" within the field of social history, I would therefore like to venture some general comments on the basis of the Qumbu example. My major point of comparative reference is Anton Blok's The Mafia of a Sicilian Village. Certainly there is a world of difference between Qumbu and Blok's village of Genuardo, most notably the fact that the mafia phenomenon in Sicily is rooted in a semi-feudal land tenure system that is entirely unknown in Transkei. But it is the very magnitude of the underlying differences which make the similarities so striking,

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[**] This is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the political economy of the South African homelands. Suffice it to say that I believe that analysis should start with A.Q. Obregon's almost forgotten article, "The marginal pole of the economy and the marginalised labour force" in The Articulation of Modes of Production, ed. H.Wolpe (London:RKP, 1980).

and leads me to hope that the following characteristics of unsocial banditry may be widely applicable.

* Unsocial banditry occurs in marginalised geographical areas or social sectors in which there is no way out of poverty within the parameters of community moral norms.

** It flourishes where the state is so weak that it is unable to routinely implement its own decisions, let alone present itself as the voice of a national consensus, and where the principal concern of a corrupt bureaucracy and its associated security apparatus is to ensure its own self-enrichment and self-perpetuation.

*** The thieves and the state apparatus share a common interest in preserving the status quo. They constitute a reactionary rather than a progressive force. This is true not only of 20th Century Qumbu and 19th Century Sicily, but also of 18th Century France, concerning which Richard Cobb has written:[97]

> The habitually violent, like the habitually criminal, do not normally constitute a threat to the established order, of which they form a semi-recognised part. Like the police, they have a stake in society. We do not expect to find such people in the ranks of the revolution ... Their conservatism does not readily accept new institutions, unfamiliar authorities, and judges with unknown faces.

**** Far from sharing the value systems and aspirations of the community from which they spring, unsocial bandits defy community

[97] Quoted in Blok, Mafia, p.100n.

norms in favour of their own self-aggrandisement. This tendency expresses itself in overtly aggressive behaviour designed to inspire fear in the guise of respect and to flaunt the bandits' apparent immunity from retribution.

***** Unsocial bandits are, however, more vulnerable to attack by radical democrats than are other elements of the corrupt social order. Because their activities are illegal they cannot gain the public support of the nominal defenders of law and order. They therefore provide a convenient surrogate target for radical movements which are too weak to undertake a head-on collision with the conservative state itself. The 1957 Makhuluspan which targeted thieves rather than rehabilitation projects is almost a classic example of this. Unsocial bandits are even more vulnerable to a state which is growing in strength and wishes to appeal to popular sentiment without sacrificing its conservative orientation. Mussolini's Sicily is a good example of this, as is Lord Cromer's Egypt.[**]

****** It is not, therefore, the thieves but the anti-thieves who constitute the vanguard of a peasant society marginalised by the dominance of industrial capitalism. The term "anti-thieves" is, however, much too narrow to describe the aims and objectives of the mobilised community known, in the Qumbu case, as the *ibandla* It is clearly not possible to unpack the *ibandla* concept in the

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[**] Blok, Mafia, pp.182-9; N. Brown, "Brigands and State Building: the Invention of Banditry in Modern Egypt", CSSH (1990).

present paper, and to tease out all its connotations and implications. But it is pertinent to note that because the thieves are a marginal element within the dominant class, any popular movement that concentrates exclusively on anti-thieving will either collapse or, worse, degenerate into vigilante or criminal organisation itself. This almost happened in Tsolo during the Makhuluspan period, and it might be happening in Qumbu at this very moment. But if the popular movement begins with the thieves, who are the most obvious and vulnerable sector of the reactionary forces, and then broadens its aims to take on the allies of the thieves, then anti-thieving might indeed become a genuine vehicle of popular change and social renewal.

Denouement

In January 1993 Mark Dyasi, a shopkeeper who had taken the lead in mobilising the anti-thieves on the north side of Gqukunqa, was holding a meeting at the local primary school.** Two balaclava-clad men appeared out of nowhere and started shooting. Everybody ran away but Dyasi, although unarmed, stood his ground and attempted to talk to the thieves. They killed him anyway, and carried on shooting bullets into his body long after he was dead. Shortly after the funeral, Dyasi's neighbour, who

** Information related at Comrade Dyasi's funeral, Gqukunqa, January 1993. Much of what follows derives from personal conversations in Qumbu and Umtata.

was regarded as the thieves' informant, was assassinated in revenge. The professional nature of this assassination panicked the thieves to such an extent that they themselves went into hiding.

By this time, the Transkei government was deploying troops in the district and taking some few ineffective steps to end the violence. Joint army and police operations in Qumbu yielded more than 300 stolen animals and more than 80 stolen motor vehicles.[10] An extremely able magistrate, Mr P.S. Nangu, was transferred to Qumbu, and he transformed his office into neutral ground where thieves and anti-thieves met on occasion to discuss their differences. New police officers were assigned, and it is rumoured that certain notorious thieves were very badly beaten up. Nomarayisi still ruled in Gqukunqa, but his legal prospects were not looking that good.

All of these factors were beginning to tilt the balance of forces in Qumbu district against the power of the thieves. However, I like to think that the turning point came at an ANC/SACP rally held at Sulenkama to commemorate June 16th 1993. Nomarayisi was absent, but the rally was attended by Chief Sikhumbuzo Matiwane, the senior chief of the area and long considered to be a fellow-traveller of the thieves. The keynote speaker was the venerable Comrade Charlton Ntuli.[11]

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[10] Daily Dispatch, 4 Feb. 1993.

[11] Interview with Charlton Ntuli, Umtata, 26 August 1993.

> Up there [Ngqayi] we are not afraid of coming here. People are remarking that they want to revenge themselves, but we refuse because we think that it would be a shame to be seen by our enemies fighting our brothers, and we are not afraid of you. It can only take us half a day to crush these people [the thieves] because they are few. They may have many guns, but these stones of ours are more than those guns. That's what you should know.
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> And you must tell them [the thieves] that what they are doing is a bad thing because you see the land is not being harvested. Because cattle have been taken and given to the people who are feeding the Mangopes and the Buthelezis and the AWBs in the hostels. They are feeding them with our cattle, which are your brothers' cattle. And while they are giving away our cattle, your brothers, your fathers, your sons are dying of hunger.
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> Fifty percent have died through tuberculosis because they eat nothing, and in the young ones it is thirty percent living out of one hundred percent, and they are weak because there is no milk to feed them. You are selling their cattle. You are not even selling them, you are giving them away. It is a shame to thieve.

Shortly thereafter, Nomarayisi communicated with the SACP, and asked them to send a representative to Gqukunqa. One of the party organisers went, and after a few points had been clarified, Nomarayisi admitted that they, the thieves, had been wrong. He expressed his wish to make peace, though he warned the comrades that they had trained up some "hunting dogs", whom they would find difficult to restrain. After that, several of the thieves joined the ANC, and Gqukunqa has enjoyed a fragile peace ever since.

The Mzuzanto thieves, however, remained recalcitrant. Some time in September 1993, they assassinated Comrade K. Mbombo of Mzuzanto,

the Chairperson of the SACP in Qumbu district. But the Vaal Triangle connection, which had done so much to spawn the thieves, now proved to be its own remedy. Comrades from Thokoza, steeled in battle against Inkatha, returned to their rural homes and commenced an all out offensive against the thieves. Makalanyana Ratazo, the notorious thief who shot down Comrade Dumezweni at the Qumbu bus rank in December 1992, was kidnapped from his home and has never been seen again.[**] The thieves fled from Mzuzanto in December 1993, leaving their houses smouldering behind them. And in January 1994, they arrived en masse at the Botha Sigcau building in Umtata begging the Government for its help as their victims had done before them.

It is still too early, much too early to predict an end to the wave of violence which has wracked Qumbu for the past four years. Not all the "hunting dogs" have been accounted for, and Third Force elements might yet be lurking in the secret places of Maclear. Above all, poverty and despair still continue to destabilise the district of Qumbu. As long as they continue to exist, it can only be a matter of time before the problem of stock theft will once again raise its ugly head.

[**] Daily Dispatch 29 Jan.1994.