‘(Re)discovering the Correct History’: Tradition and Custom, the Archival Record and Identity in Contemporary KwaZulu-Natal

Grant McNulty

On 9 June 2012, I drove southwards along the N2, one of the main freeways that connects Durban to the rest of the country. While this had become a near mandatory part of my research trips to Umbumbulu, the journey on that day was different. It was a Saturday morning, my father had decided to accompany me and we were en route to a high-profile Mkhize ceremony. I took the turnoff, crossed the bridge over the freeway and immediately noticed the traffic. Whereas previous visits to Umbumbulu had entailed driving along quiet, semi-rural dirt roads, the ceremony had attracted a large number of visitors.

I navigated my way through a swathe of fancy German cars, mainly Mercedes-Benzes and BMWs, in some cases driven by shirtless men wearing t-shirts, headbands made of animal skin. While this might not seem too out of place in KwaZulu-Natal, the day’s activities were to prove more intriguing. I had been invited to the event by Inxosi Kusakusa Mkhize, one of the Mkhize amahlakho in Umbumbulu.” He described the event to me as an “umasheni senukuzi Zikhulu”, which suggested ritual “work” (umasheni) related to Zikhulu, one of the most important amahlakho in MZ history. “What I encountered was far different and quite unexpected.

On previous visits to what Inxosi Kusakusa Mkhize described as his kraal, which comprises three rondavel houses and an animal pen, I encountered about six people in total. When we arrived at the kraal at about 10:15 a.m., there were at least a few thousand people, a number of whom were wearing Mkhize T-shirts with different images of Zikhulu’s face on the front and slogans such as “Umbawula wamahlakho” (The History of the Mkhize) or Zikhulu’s praise poems on the back. The kraal was dwarfed by an enormous white marquee and surrounded by more police and police vehicles than I had

Figure 3 (opposite): Programme for the event of 9 June 2012 overlaid on photograph of rows of seats awaiting arrival of guests. Photograph: G. McNulty

1. Terms such as ‘traditional leaders’, ‘traditional authorities’ and ‘chiefs’ are contentious and are the focus of contemporary public debate. During this event, the English term ‘chief’ and umasheni (shish) as well as the English term ‘chief’ and its African equivalents are used by the various subjects of my study, including government officials, local residents and interviewees in these positions.

2. The term ‘Mkhize’ (shish) and the term ‘Kusakusa’ are used interchangeably throughout this essay. Mkhize is used for the numerous Mkhize descendants that emerged when the Mkhize reached southern Natal after fleeing from Drakensberg during the 1880s. ‘Mbashu’ is the British-based term for the umasheni (shish) and umasheni (shish) appears in the titles of all the officers addressed as the Mbashu.” In the British base, Zikhulu’s office is the “Chief of the Amahlakho.” The Amahlakho of KwaZulu-Natal includes the KwaZulu-Natal Land tenure, which is the subject of this article. See 1920-1942 (South African National Archives) 1973, 1975. Kusakusa’s kraal and the place of the Mbashu, in KwaZulu-Natal.