

Asinamali! Then and Now

David Hemson
Department of Sociology
University of Durban-Westville

Review Article

*The Moon is Dead! Give us our Money!:
The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic,
Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900.*

by Keletso E Atkins

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1 Introduction

Travelling along Maydon Wharf just after 5am recently, I was flagged down by a casual docker desperate to make the call and *bhala* (sign on) for the day. His anxiety not to be late and fear of not getting work for the day is conclusive evidence of the distance travelled by *rogt* (day) workers in time and space between 1843 and the present. In time past African workers asserted their right to daily contracts free from the coercive contracts of the time—now there is a formidable battle to be able to win permanency and some security in the 1990s deregulated world of work. The strike against casual labour conditions on 2 February 1995, which involved the mobilising of some 1 000 workers throughout the port, unlike the practice of the nineteenth century, was not mentioned in any of the newspapers, black or white.

The question of the work ethic of African workers in Natal in the nineteenth century is the stuff of Atkins' original and in many ways, controversial study. This is a challenging work, vigorously expressed in a dense style, which at times appears to take on the flavour of the English of the colonials of the time. It is a discursive exposition: the first full scale discussion of the master-servant relationship in South Africa in its multifaceted social and racial form.

On its cover it is stated by an American historian that the book 'unfolds at the center of the new cultural history of South Africa' and that it will become a classic for scholars working on 'labor and the colonial encounter'. These are strong claims to our attention, raising as they do questions of the intersection of culture and history in the South African context, and they will be examined in this extended review. Has Atkins really broken with an existing orthodoxy in the study of colonial relations and launched an Afrocentric alternative paradigm?

1 The frontier: Certain autonomy to culture?

Social or 'racial' relationships in colonial Natal were, in comparison to the rigidities of segregation thereafter, quite fluid. Somewhat of a frontier situation existed. Even though the colony was not directly built on conquest, disintegrative processes were at work both within and from outside Zulu

society: the threat of white settlement in Zulu areas. The world Atkins describes is one of settlers anxious to be able to secure African labour, of independent day labourers, of domestic servants frequently making use of courts to complain against their masters, and of heated arguments among settlers over the best way to secure long-term labour supply. In many ways colonial Natal internally, and in its relationship with Zululand, replicated a frontier situation. In the words of John Rex (1970:35),

two groups with unequal technological and educational standards confront each other but the superior group has not yet imposed its rule on the inferior one.

As in the Cape Colony the stronger group did not have absolute power over the other. The two social systems were in competition; as a capitalist productive network was established there was an internal proletariat within its borders and an external proletariat-to-be¹ with the technologically 'inferior' group gradually becoming enmeshed with the trading and social system of the 'superior' group, while retaining a formal independence. Eventually the 'barbarians' are defeated, the frontier ends in conquest, and they are 'incorporated in the civilised society only on its own terms'. A debate about the nature of civilised society then begins; can there be the equality of fellow-citizens or should certain kinds of non-citizens be defined?. 'From the start there is a distinction far more fundamental than any class distinction between the conquerors and the conquered' (Rex 1970:36).

This perspective of a frontier society heading towards the conquest of its internal proletariat (through taxes, land restrictions, and other measures) and of its external proletariat (eventually through war) helps to guide us through the historical processes at work in nineteenth century Natal. In this period of contested social frontiers, when the colonial state was relatively weak, and the non-capitalist mode of production retained a certain vitality and even vigour, the relationship of domination and exploitation was often brutal, but also relatively fragile.

What is clearly brought out in this and other texts is the fact that the European colonist approached the indigenous people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with more than a gun in hand. Crucial to the achievement of domination over the native peoples was, in addition to the material culture, the cultural equipment of literacy; time, religion, numeracy, and a set of values peculiar to the world of material acquisition and control. In the frontier period these aspects of the culture of the dominant achieved a certain influence beyond the borders consolidated by conquest and military domination, but Atkins argues convincingly that the traditional African societies also exerted forms of adaptation to their ways.

Contrary to the racially distorted view of the nineteenth century African worker, Atkins (1993:7) argues the 'most radical finding' she reached was that African men exhibited a

1. Roux (1948:43) employs these concepts in his discussion of the destruction of the independent existence of the Xhosa people.

set of patterned responses, guided by a body of corporate values and shaped by structural practices, that unmistakably constituted an African work ethic.

With the vantage of history she implicitly (and at times explicitly) offers an answer to the colonial problem; the white employers should have been more understanding of the social mores of the African people and more flexible in employing traditional customary practice in labour relations.

Unmasking racism is the task of the historian and social scientist. A thorough-going task is required to show the way in which theories and ideas often falsely portrayed as being based upon biological science, are built into the structure of social relationships. We have to explore the relationship between racist theory and social structure. The matter is complicated by the fact that in South Africa, racism was initially justified on the basis of biological determinism: later it was justified on *cultural grounds*—that black and white had fundamentally different cultures and that this justified a fundamental distinction in law, politics, and society. More than any other factor this has produced a certain scepticism towards culture, to a study of African cultural practices, and to the traditional.

This approach involves more than a simple demystification, of uncovering a motive for the racist utterance; it also involves illustrating the link between the material struggle for the resources of life and the ideological formation of race and class.

Atkins does not follow this logic but sets out as an alternative that racist ideas were in contradiction with the real interests of the white settlers; that the cloud of racist formulations hid the bright light of a strategy for their success. The main implicit argument is that there was a cultural misunderstanding based on whites not listening, and it is suggested at times, that the settlers could have used more appropriate labour management techniques.

Atkins in her introduction describes the Natal colonial obsession with labour shortages and the blame they placed on 'lazy Kafirs' for their predicament. In approaching the question of the 'lazy Kafir' syndrome, the author first sets out to come to an understanding of the complete cultural milieu of Zulu people of the time. This is a considerable task which she attempts to accomplish through reference as far as possible to original texts. She then studies the urban context and argues that the relationships growing in the towns are deeply influenced by the culture of the African people.

While at no time does she engage in an extended discussion of the concept of culture, which Raymond Williams acknowledges as the most complicated word in the English language, it is clear that Atkins is referring to 'traditional' Zulu culture, which she often refers to as an 'ancient' inheritance. In presenting the context of labour in Natal she traverses to some degree or other the entire surface of the nature of Zulu society, a pan-African cultural practice (big men; authority, power and prestige and implicitly the acceptance of African women of the same goals in the domestic domain), the reasons for refugees from Zululand, the sexual division of labour (or non-division as she argues), *lobolo*, the temporal beliefs of the Zulu, etc. Once

this is established, she then approaches the more modest and concrete chapters on *toti* labour and African work culture at the conclusion of the book. In establishing Zulu culture the balance of the book leans to the historic and rural, rather than the urban and civil in which social change is more evident.

2 A method for the study of madness?

In confronting the question of a settler employing class with an almost obsessive preoccupation with the 'Kafir' labour question, a number of alternative methodologies are offered by historians. One of these employed by Elkins (1959:82) is to assume that a distinct type of black slave personality existed because of the frequency with which the 'Sambo' stereotype is portrayed in white literature on slavery. The question then is to explain how such an identity could come about: a stereotype is taken seriously because it could represent an identity within a given historical context, characterised by an extreme juxtaposition of coercive power and powerlessness. The same method could have been employed on the stereotype of the white colonists; maddened by African intransigence and showing all the characteristics of a febrile mentality—alternately panicky and then full of the arrogance of power.

Atkins favours a different method: she denies the validity of the white colonists' stereotype of the 'lazy Kafir' and *inverts* this paradigm to argue precisely the contrary: that the African people of Natal were industrious, hard-working, and *were* actually fully engaged in wage labour.

To demolish the stereotype of the 'lazy Kafir', Atkins (1993:6) follows a method of deconstructing the colonial texts, a strategy which she compares to that of a criminal attorney in defence of client whose case seems hopeless, but who believes that hostile witnesses would eventually betray themselves and provide crucial information. It is with this approach that she reads the diaries, memoirs, missionary accounts, and Zulu-English phrasebooks, and draws out the world of the African worker and even his portrait from the pen of the employer, missionary, and administrator.

Atkins announces a definite political perspective in the introduction; that she is writing a history for a black audience, a history that confirms the humanity of people of African descent. Far from being backward and disorganized, she argues, the African people

almost from their first encounter with the white-dominated economy, reached within themselves and often bested the white man at his own economic game' (Atkins 1993:7).

There are basically two sections to the book: in the first two chapters a survey of social conditions and an assertion of an African work ethic which contradicts the stereotype of the 'lazy Kafir' and includes a reassessment of traditional society to establish the nature of Zulu culture; and then original work on the social history of African labour in the town, in the last four chapters.

In writing this review I have found it necessary to start in the second section, skipping over the first and to return the substantive argument later in

the review. In many ways this is an artificial separation as the question of work culture stretches across the two and themes appear, disappear, and reappear again. On the other hand this approach helps keep a necessary balance in this review between appreciation of the section on work practices and conflicts, and the necessary criticism of structure and logic.

3 Labouring in the town

The strength of the book is, undoubtedly, the fascinating accounts of misunderstandings, conflicts, and concordances between black worker and white master (and mistress) in a period before the cheap labour system took on its later rigid structure. In many ways, despite the oppressive regulations and the racism of the colonists, black labour was not particularly cheap by way of international comparison (in my study of the dock workers I discovered that in the 1870s the dock day labourers were not earning significantly less than London dockers). Black labour, 'as expensive as ever it was', was at times *more expensive* than white workers. In an incident quoted by Atkins a white newspaper columnist complained that black workers were demanding 2s instead of 1s for carrying parcels. Eventually a white worker was prepared to do the work for 1s.

We thought to ourselves that times have indeed changed when a whiteman can be found to do an odd job of this kind for half the sum demanded by a Kafir (Atkins 1993:134).

The wage relationship was fundamentally unequal, but it did not have the crude and despotic authority of later years. The detail that Atkins provides is often amusing with black workers cocking a snook at white employers and authority. There is the wry and irreverent humour of the African worker who is reported to have argued in court that

overwork would never kill a Kafir, but not being paid for it might ... if overwork would kill a Kafir there would annually be a great loss of life in the colony (Atkins 1993:95)!

The book is full of many examples of fascinating insights and discoveries which reveal a much richer and more mature consciousness than previous histories revealed. As early as 1846 Durban workers were demonstrating their independence, and the colonists were concerned that Africans were becoming part of public opinion giving 'very intelligent attention to public [colonial] matters' and following closely the proceedings of the Kafir Labor Commission. It was even suggested that the publication of the official report should be repressed 'in order that the natives may not come to the knowledge of their content' (Atkins 1993:107). There is evidence of workers reasoning about the relationship between the rise of wages and the imposition of a higher hut tax, and otherwise being knowledgeable about economic events. All this pushes back much further the question of an African worker consciousness, and authenticates the view that African workers could come to an understanding of their interests without the prompting of a white person.

From the beginning Atkins argues that the beginnings of trade unionism arose from the practice of the workers themselves and the

brilliant use of pressure tactics (strikes, picket lines, boycotts, and so forth) as well as their collective bargaining skills elicit our admiration and must, once and for all, silence any lingering doubts regarding the early migrant workers' alleged inability to unite around common causes. From first to last, Natal's African laboring population exhibited solidarity (Atkins 1993:128).

Evidence is provided to support this statement, but it is also true that this resistance spurred the white rulers into counter-action of labour repressive legislation and despotic controls, a point which will be returned to below.

It was a solidarity not built around the modern institution of trade unionism (although exhibiting many of its practices) but around the existing material to hand; around the idea of hospitality or *ubuntu* which lay at the 'marrow of a militant, self-conscious working-class ethic' (Atkins 1993:119). It was also a strategy of class action particular to the migrant situation, in which in the words of van Onselen there was 'the pervasive influence of the rural economy on the character of resistance' (Atkins 1993:98). The independence of the African worker is inexplicable without an understanding of the existence of a relatively self-sufficient homestead economy and discretionary participation in wage labour.

It was the intention of the colonial authorities that the African worker should remain a migrant and not become a urban dweller. The early history of Durban which Atkins describes is one of shameful forced removals of Africans from lands around the chief town under the direction of Theophilus Shepstone. The main concern was to remove Africans from centre for fear of uprising. The ten to twelve thousand Africans living around the Umlazi in Dr Adams mission station and the many hundreds in Reverend Grout's temporary village on the Umgeni were, it appears, eventually removed by command and in other cases eviction notices, as the land was sold to white settlers (Atkins 1993:119).

The fruitless debate which lasted well into the 1930s about a place for African people in Durban started surprisingly early. In December 1847 an African township was planned which would be two or three miles away from centre, and provide one acre each for 'the most intelligent and sufficiently advanced natives'. There would be a common cattle kraal, chapel and school; and Africans would be selected to manage own affairs. All this came to nothing as it was stated there was a 'lack of funds' (an explanation which Atkins does not dispute) and fear that its establishment 'would lead to the formation of places of refuge for indolent vagrants' (Atkins 1993:118).

From the beginning the African presence in the city, which probably outnumbered the white population in the 1850s, was impermanent, fragile, and constantly questioned. One of the unexplored questions in the labour relationship is precisely the insistence of white employers on this impermanence of the African workforce, on migratory labour, while at the same time complaining that Africans were not prepared to work for long contracts; the 'lazy Kafir' argument is thus also a demand for a specific form

of wage labour—one not allowing for permanent occupation in the towns but demanding contracts with African men making annual returns to their rural homes.

This was the migrant order later enforced on African people, but for a whole period the character of labour discipline was far from absolute. In my thesis *Class Consciousness and Migrant workers: The Dock Workers of Durban*, I quote a colonist who captures the easy-going atmosphere of the early towns in the following description:

The only fault in our Caffre (sic) labourers arose from their excessive gallantry; for (I should observe) it is a native rule never to allow Caffre maidens to pass within sight without saluting them, or else, intercepting their path, standing quite mute and motionless, while the girls survey them and pass on. Now it frequently happened that troops of girls came in from the Caffre craals (sic) with maize, thatch, milk, eggs, wild fruit, sugar-cane, potatoes, etc., etc., for sale; and, no sooner did their shrill song reach the ears of our servants, than they rushed from their work just as they were ... (Mason 1855:195).

This is a moment in history in which the colonists hide their frustrations and are caught up in the novelty of social experience in the colony. It is a moment of unestablished norms and social exploration.

Atkins chronicles the mutual adaptation of African people and white people to the evolution of a colonial labour relationship; a process which is uneven, contradictory, and yet ultimately resolved in favour of the colonist and employer. She stresses the domination of African values over those of the towns in the wage relationship, an important element in redressing the balance in an assessment of the 'flow' of 'acculturation' between black and white.

But her text, and history itself, provides the data of European cultural practices becoming immediately attractive to African leadership and penetrating deeply into the independent African kingdom of Zululand:

[W]hile Natal's black population may have been, relatively speaking, slow in converting to imported time practices, no corresponding level of resistance was shown toward the adoption of foreign currency (Atkins 1993:95).

Money was rapidly accepted as the medium of exchange as cattle were shown to be at times highly vulnerable to the diseases of colonisation. It also became, at a surprisingly early stage, the element of value in *lobolo* settlements. The Inanda magistrate reported in 1857 that 'money is rapidly becoming the substitute medium in the purchase of wives; ten pounds sterling being the standard value of a damsel of average attraction', and that money was regarded as safer than cattle and saved until sickness passed (Atkins 1993:30).

The lingsickness of 1855 hastened appreciation of the utility of British sterling as a medium of exchange and convenient store of wealth: 'They say it is no use working for years for that which may die in a day'. Mpande, king of the Zulu, saw whites using coins as black people used cattle (Atkins 1993:96).

African society here is shown to be highly adaptable, but in the

direction of integration into the contemporary world economy, with the inevitable result (via the artillery of cheap commodities or conquest or both) of monetarisation of human relationships and the entry into the world of commodities through the 'Gate of Misery' (a concept which Atkins touches on in her introduction, but does not develop). But this is to anticipate a remorseless process which was not seen at that time to be inevitable by either side and a period in which the independent action of human beings as worker or employer had an important effect on the outcome.

Another aspect of Zulu cultural practice was revolutionised by workers overcoming custom (the belief that witches are around at night) and taking to the street after working hours. A curfew was initially considered unnecessary by the white colonists since in Atkins' words 'as a rule superstition and custom operated favorably in restraining Africans from being abroad after dark' but by the late 1850s loiterers and vagrants were evident. Possibly this is rationalised by African workers adopting the understanding noted by Mayer that witches are not present in cities. But in the interests of labour discipline and a public order appropriate to it, a 9 pm curfew was introduced in 1871 in Pietermaritzburg and 3 years later in Durban (Atkins 1993:92). There is a nice irony here in colonial rule and capitalism leading to the breaking of established conventions (the division between day and night) and then trying to re-assert these conventions to limit the mobility and organisational capacity of the working class.

4 The small matter of time

Undoubtedly one of the greatest strengths of the book is the way in which Atkins deals with the question of competing conceptions of time: that of the established custom of African society built around the natural events of day and night, the waxing and waning of the moon, and the seasons on the one hand, and the imposition of a Western and capitalist notion of time according to a watch and calendar on the other. It is clear that this was a major issue in the regulation of the working day and working month which bedevilled the growth of an unambiguous work contract. Labour, like any commodity, is purchased by measure, and black and white had 'disparate notions' of that measure.

According to Atkins, the African workers proved resistant to the Western calendar, and she quotes a colonist who says:

Our initial difficulties in regulating their hours of labour have not yet been overcome, notwithstanding a half a century of experience acquired in prisons, garrisons, railways and mining camps (Atkins 1993:87).

The long process of the rural dweller being turned from an independent being whose life is governed by natural events to one dominated by the machine-time of the clock, the wrenching around of 'common sense' notions of the sequence of daily life, had begun.

The misunderstandings between the migrant worker and colonial master over these questions were numerous. The colonists misunderstood the

word *unyaka* to be the 'year' but in Zulu the word refers to six 'moons' or a season. In African society there was no concept of year; the annual cycle was divided into two distinct seasons of six moons—*unyaka* rainy or field season and *ubusika* the dry or winter season (Atkins 1993:83).

Atkins quotes a Magistrate who states 'it seems as if the Kafir was unable to [perceive] the idea of a longer unbroken term of exertion'; and a relay method was at times adopted with the head of the homestead providing a continuous, circulating supply of labour (Atkins 1993:83).

The month also posed a problem as the lunar cycle did not correspond with the calendar month. In addition, the length of the working day was a matter for contention; whites wanted a regular number of hours throughout the year, while African workers were prepared to start work an hour after sunrise and stop an hour before sunset. This was not a problem in the longer days of summer but in winter colonial employers were determined to get the same hours of work.

In addition the holidays, or breaks in time convention, were markedly different. Africans celebrated the traditional holidays of the 'moon of the new season's fruits', *umasingana*, in March and April; and it was a common practice in the first three or four months to withdraw to the kraals to help with the harvest and eat green mealies (Atkins 1993:89). Colonists had to learn to live with this cycle of African social life.

As Atkins reveals, the problem of seasonality bore particularly sharply on the operation of sugar production. The harvesting and milling work comes in winter, from June through September, when the hours of sunlight were limited. According to newspaper reports in the 1850s there were demands for work to continue day and night without interruption for fear of the cane spoiling, and the planters felt it was 'absolutely necessary to obtain labor of a more settled and suitable character'. But Africans were opposed to night work and work in cold weather and some mills closed for lack of labour (Atkins 1993:85).

The problem of the planters was not in the area of field work which fell in slack season, *ubusika*, when workers were plentiful; the problem was one of extension of work hours beyond the customary active work day in winter during the harvesting (Atkins 1993:84). Such was the sense that the work day was governed by the alternation of light and dark that in 1874, after an eclipse, the *togt* workers insisted on being paid for a second day (Atkins 1993:87)!

Atkins brings back to life Bryant's account of the establishment of the days of the week among Zulu people, and the sense that this arose from the seven-day work regime laid down by the colonists and justified by the church. In traditional Zulu society there was originally no division of time into seven day periods nor any day of rest. The naming of the days was a product of the employers' need to mark off the segments of the week and has none of the charm of the original. Monday thus becomes *umsombuluko* 'the turning out to work day', and Saturday *umgqibelo* 'the completing day', and Sunday *isonto* or church day.

Fascinatingly this division of the month into weeks and the naming of days of the week penetrated into pre-conquest Zululand; as the time culture of the capitalist world in the period of Natal/Zululand frontier extended beyond its borders. This process was obviously uneven, although in another context missionaries managed to get Sunday observance agreed to in an astonishingly short period of time.

The towns become centres for the assertion of capitalist time, for maintaining a standard between the colony and the metropole. The activities of commerce and industry and the minute activities of working people were dominated by the enforcement of time-sounds to regulate the working day, in a world where few people carried watches and where time was not necessarily reliable. A public clock-time was established in Durban in 1860, all necessary signals which 'aided town workers in determining their temporal bearings' (Atkins 1993:87). The time signals did not have a general public service function; they were in a sense commands to work.

The psychological internalisation of capitalist time, the establishment of common norms between worker and employer around which wages should be apportioned, itself took time; 'it is perhaps valid to say that many years would pass before the migrant population truly developed clock consciousness' (Atkins 1993:87). In the interregnum disputes over time flourished, in particular over payment of wages at the Zulu month end.

According to Atkins there were constant complaints by African workers of being cheated of two days; they demanded to be paid after four Sundays, cut notches but sometimes cut two notches for one day to tally with the death of the moon. Some colonists argued that time disputes were 'the cause of Natal's labor crisis'. The *Master and Native Servant Law Act 40* of 1894 laid down an official calendar of twelve months with an equal number of units of 30 days; Africans were obliged to keep a tally cane and paid when the notches numbered 30.

The title of the book *The moon is dead! Give us our money!*, relates to the demand made during a strike in August 1860 when African workmen marched 'like operatives in a factory' to demand their pay (Atkins 1993:146).

The arguments about time took a concrete rather than cosmological form in the towns, where labour-time was the measure of human activity and the basis for its reward. Through the 'process of defining time' and through struggle Africans gained a new sense of time with disputes occurring around weekend and Sunday rest.

While there was resistance to the idea of maintaining a regular working day irrespective of the season and to being paid at the calendar month end, the attitude of workers to the Sunday rest day and to public holidays was rather different. The dock *logt* workers responded to the institution of a Saturday half-day by merchants in 1856 by striking to demand the same conditions, and this was eventually conceded on the basis that daily workers were entitled to follow town custom (Atkins 1993:90f).

This court decision was in the interests of the workers; most were not. It was generally agreed by contemporaries who were not liberal that the

courts, staffed by whites unapologetically sympathetic to employers, did not do justice to African people. Nevertheless, according to sources quoted by Atkins, the workers more often than not initiated legal action against employers, despite the very evident bias of the courts.

5 The *togt* phenomenon

One of the most significant developments in the colonial labour market was the rise of *togt* or daily labour. Nothing was more calculated to raise the fury of the employer and administrator than the spread of day labour from the docks to other sectors of employment in the 1860s and particularly in the mid-1870s. Atkins chronicles how the phenomenon had its rural as well as urban side, as sugar estate workers demanded to be paid daily in the 1860s.

Women workers on the white farms seem to have been seeking daily labour, but it is in the cities that the controversy raged, and the official response marked a turning point in the evolution of African labour conditions in Natal. Prefiguring what was to come, in 1863 the *Natal Mercury* called the practice of day labour 'vicious and disorganizing' and blamed employers taking them on for 'implanting an irregular disposition amongst a population that needs ... to be inoculated with ideas of fixed organization' (Atkins 1993:106).

Atkins describes the variety of occupations which could be clustered as *togt* work: washermen (blamed by colonists for popularising the idea of day labour) brickmakers, wood suppliers, and the dockworkers themselves: lightermen (carrying cargo on barges from ships at sea to the inner harbour), boatmen, stevedores and wharf workers.

In the view of this reviewer the discussion of *togt* labour is, unfortunately, rather confused. After examining the various possible origins of the word (such as being derived from 'dock') Atkins adopts the view that it 'pertains to a trip or journey'. In her note 41 on page 167, she takes the advice of Dr Hauptfleisch that *togt* is an 'obsolete form of the modern Afrikaans word *tog* a journey, trip; moving from one place to another ...'. The form *togt* is still used in South African English combinations such as *togt labour* and *togt labourer* = casual or day labour(er). But she stresses the stated original obscure meaning rather than its common usage:

Thus the word *togt* seems to refer neither to a time unit nor a unit of area, rather it denotes a state of itinerancy (Atkins 1993:167 - emphasis added).

The problem is that this does not solve the problem, it rather adds difficulties which were never there before. The term *togt* (or more usually *itoho*) is still in use today as meaning day labour as in the words addressed to a potential employer: '*Ifuna itoho*' (I want work for the day). Most of the *togt* workers then and now are not itinerants: the washermen and dockers of the nineteenth century had a locale, and the idea of constant mobility, presumably from one job to another and from one place to another, is missing then and now.

Atkins states that

[T]his definition (i.e. itinerancy) amends the notion that commonly associates *togt* almost exclusively with dock work and allows us to extend it to include a variety of other enterprises (Atkins 1993:109).

However, the sense of day labour—which is the only common denominator of the activities discussed—does the same.

6 The brothers in the kitchen?

The rise of *togt* labour has to be considered in relation to the overall development of a workers' culture in the towns, and in particular the relation of monthly to *togt* workers. As Atkins (1993:120) explains, the Master and Servants Act laid down that food and accommodation had to be provided during the contract. No such provision was made for daily workers, and obviously it was never anticipated that daily work would spread as it did in the 1870s. Atkins argues that out of the practical arrangements workers made for food and shelter, associations and solidarity (or 'brotherhoods') grew, and as early as 1856 there was sufficient solidarity for African workers to lay down the minimum wage that Africans could accept.

Migrant workers were

united, self-regulated, and disciplined; moreover, they had recognized rules and approved patterns of behavior to which they expected both the employer and their fellow workers to conform (Atkins 1993:127).

In the smoky cookhouses in the nineteenth century servants worked during the day, and slept at night². During their leisure time this was the only place to entertain visitors, family members and friends. Atkins argues that the lack of accommodation and hospitality of the whites 'must have seemed extraordinarily unnatural to anyone accustomed to the notion of *ubuntu*' (Atkins 1993:120) and she finds evidence of Africans approaching the mayor's wife for support and using abusive language when refused (Atkins 1993:121)!

The argument is well founded, but invites a much wider debate about domestic housekeeping, segregation in the white household, and the question of African housing in the towns.

African workers were sociable and shared the pot; and the day labourer must have tried to find someone in monthly employ and sought clan or other mutual attachments to share food and comforts. Atkins describes the rise of 'kitchen associations' in groups of African workers which seemed to have followed a strategy whereby if one of them found a job, he provided access for the others to food and shelter. She describes a 'generous repast' for the group being prepared from rations for domestic servants (Atkins 1993:123).

White colonists denounced this 'sponging system' as petty thievery but it became near universal in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In getting a job a worker also demanded the right of hospitality to 'unbidden guests' and if denied, a master found himself without servants. The ever reactionary *Natal Mercury* complained:

2. In the twentieth century they were removed to the *khaya* or often squalid domestic quarters, now converted into 'granny flats'.

Their mode of procedure is indeed one of the neatest examples of cool impudence that we know of. Any attempt to eject them is regarded as a personal injury (see Atkins 1993:127).

There were reports of groups of workers gathering at night, shouting and brandishing knobkierries at imaginary foes; smoking dagga, and discussing *indaba*, the affairs of the day (Atkins 1993:124). But the tradition of hospitality also had its monetarised aspect and also incorporated 'the spirit of profit' as monthly workers seemed to have demanded payment for accommodation and food. Despite this Atkins argues that through the kitchen associations workers maintained homeboy networks, and that they were also a testing ground for new ideas (Atkins 1993:124).

Invariably the criticism of the 'sponging system' focused on the *togt* worker, as Alexander the Superintendent of Police complained:

A *togt* kaffir now on being called upon to work will first demand double the amount allowed by law; in addition to this he demands his food and requires you to cook it for him, both of which the employer foolishly agrees to (Atkins 1993:128).

In taking up the criticism of colonists of the 'uproarious singing and merriment' at gatherings around the pot, Atkins suggests that the songs were probably satirical *izibongo* praise poems sung in an 'aggressive, rallying' way, composed to spread praise or heap ridicule on employers. Students of *izibongo* discuss how poetic licence allowed 'insulting epithets' to be woven into their structure.

Surprisingly Atkins doesn't mention the associated practice which appears in colonial texts and which is still very evident today: the naming of employers by African workers using nicknames are adopted which are usually acutely accurate, amusing, and irreverent.

The portrait she presents is of elders among the workers having the labour market almost entirely under their control. These 'brotherhoods', in Atkins' analysis, operated much like modern labour unions; providing mutual support and protection.

Like labor bureaus, the associations were an intelligence-gathering network regarding the availability of jobs and the unsuitability of certain mistresses and masters Seasoned workers, men of long experience, keen observation, and a developed network of contracts, collected facts, ascertained market trends, and guided new recruits into appropriate positions of employment, while steering the unwary away from masters and mistresses of bad reputation (Atkins 1993:125).

In this extended development, she is guided by the points made by colonists and carried in newspaper reports; but the more elaborate construction of the 'brotherhood', the suggestion that workers took the institution of the *isibongo* and adapted it to the modern labour strategy in the nineteenth century, it has to be said, is an act of imagination. Its existence beyond groupings of workers defining 'custom and practice' can only be recovered by building on the incidents which were reported through the eyes of the colonists themselves.

Nevertheless these incidents are certainly vivid and the colonists

themselves compare the solidarity among the workers to 'regular trade unions'. In practice the role of 'brotherhoods' seem to be more that of 'street committees' attempting to control conditions in a specific locale. This is illustrated by the following quotation from the Superintendent of Police in response to Africans 'saying insulting things' to a mistress:

There was a regular trade union among the Kafir boys in that and other neighbourhoods of the town, and if it was learnt that a master was paying his boy a shilling or so a month less than others, the other lads carried on a system of abuse and annoyance (Atkins 1993:127).

The reference to 'lads' seems to imply that this was a social action of the younger workers, although this tends to upset the view Atkins puts forward of older workers striving for power over the labour market.

Although Atkins provides evidence from the 1850s, significantly the 'brotherhood' phenomenon appears both in Pietermaritzburg and Durban in the 1880s. These practices are suggested to be ongoing and permanent, but they could also have been associations formed during the particularly favourable market situations.

This point raises a general problem with the text. One of the intrinsic difficulties in writing about cultural history is that of providing a clear chronology of events and practices to permit the understanding of trends, of early or mature practices, etc.; in short of cultural *development*. A first reading of the book does not reveal these difficulties, but a close reading, necessitated by an accurate review, often throws up awkward juxtapositions and 'readings backwards' from the more recent to the past. For example Atkins argues that 'established practice' was to exclude young Africans and 'men of the houseboy class' from *togt* licences. 'This meant, of course, that only the more mature males were employed as "togtmen" on the docks' (Atkins 1993:91).

This seems to accord with the division of Zulu society into age groupings, which Atkins argues is carried over into the towns and into access to occupations, but the practice was *administrative* and came from the twentieth century (Atkins refers to the file of the Chief Native Commissioner, dated 5 July 1911). The officials may, of course, have wanted to put their stamp on an existing practice to administer the labour market and to ensure labour for the white households. But significantly the age of cargo handlers and porters 'on the beach' (i.e. *togt* workers who were allegedly part of a privileged strata) is estimated in the 1860s and 1870s to have been between 15 and 25 years (Atkins 1993:66). Did conditions change, or was the predominance of older workers in the more prestigious occupations not well established, and an in-novation of the authorities? A clear chronology would lay the basis for con-textualising the cultural practices against the backdrop of the economy in boom or slump or against other conditions. Interestingly the 1904 census reveals that the number of African male workers aged over 40 (about the age of majority in pre-conquest Zulu society) in Durban was smaller than anti-

pated, just over 1 000, and as a proportion of the total, just under 7 percent.³ Probably the distinction between occupations workers was not closely related to traditional categories but to a wider sense of maturity and youth.

Whatever the case, the workers' ability to 'punish through words' is clearly demonstrated and provides a fascinating insight into the setting of work and pay norms in the colonial town.

7 Cultural action and violence

The world which Atkins describes is one of African worker initiative in a variety of social exchanges (often based around traditional values and conceptions), in associations, hospitality, and united social action. Human agency in the Natal towns of the nineteenth century is vividly portrayed. But this extended range of freedom of action and defiance of the cheapening of their labour limited the operation of capital, large and small, and the political strategy of developing Natal as a colony of white settlement.

In frontier Natal the limit to colonial action against the African people, the constraint on squeezing them into ever smaller locations and raising the extent of economic coercion to labour through taxes, was set by the fear of armed retaliation from Natal Africans and war with a formidable military power across the border. Shepstone is quoted shortly before the British invasion of Zululand as stating:

Cetshwayo is the secret hope of every ... independent chief, hundreds of miles from him, who feels a desire that his colour should prevail, and it will not be until this power is destroyed that they will make up their minds to submit to the rule of civilisation (see Etherington 1989:187).

African initiative stood in the shadow of an impasse in state power. But as the colonial economy improved, white migration slowly resulted in a larger white population, and as the infrastructure extended, so did the ability of capital to exercise its power over labour.

The turning point was marked in 1873 as I noted in my thesis (see Hemson 1981), and as Atkins confirms. The relatively free play of market forces in which African initiative flourished was first challenged by the importation of a more subservient workforce (Indian indentured labour) and increasingly squeezed by the structural restraints of taxes, bureaucracy, and the police and army. Indeed from the embryo of *ad hoc* responses to the freedom of action of African workers I trace the origins of a repressive labour bureaucracy which gradually seized the ground of urban labour and built an edifice of controls and oppression over the lives of African people.

African initiative was faced by the constraints of structures ingeniously financed from the very taxes of the oppressed. As freedom of cultural action in the cities widened to form the basis of a colonial civil society, the authorities responded with ever increasing intolerance and force. The apparatus of control was all paid for by African workers out of registration fees and fines. From this intersection of the African worker and colonial

3. Calculated from data in Hemson (1981:58).

administrator arose the first articulation of urban segregation on the basis that the city belonged to the whites and that all Africans in the city were there to provide labour for the whites.⁴ A remorseless struggle was set in motion to curb and control African social activities which made an important contribution to the eventual totalitarian structure of labour and political controls in the high apartheid era.

A number of social theorists have pointed to the fact that over time capitalism brings an extrusion of coercion from the labour market (see Giddens 1981). But the entire development in Natal and South Africa has generally, until fairly recently, been in the opposite direction. This contra-development in South African society has been the contested ground of theoretical discussion for the whole period of the relationship of racial oppression and class exploitation, and the matter is by no means at rest.

Suffice to say that all which went before the establishment of an apparatus of control over African people was in the nature of a recreation and a pleasant diversion. From the 1870s the racial legislation aiming at more effective class exploitation piled up. First there was the vagrancy law in October 1873 which prohibited the movement of African people between 9pm and 5am. Then there was the *Togt Minute* of Theophilus Shepstone and the *1874 Togt Rules and Regulations* which Atkins describes as a

signal document marking the transition in the status of Africans laboring in the towns from that of free to that of licensed worker (Atkins 1993:133).

The *togt* regulations aimed to prevent formation of 'combinations' and discourage 'jobbers'; no African was allowed to live in a Natal borough unless he was a proprietor, a renter or a monthly worker. By bearing the badge of *togt*, an African was given five days to obtain employment. It cost 2s 6d to register, a worker had to wear the *togt* badge, and had to accept the fixed tariff. Contraventions could result in a fine, imprisonment or both and the worker could be banished from town. The washermen, whose history Atkins is the first to bring to light, had special badges (Atkins 1993:133).

Significantly the *togt* workers saw the hidden hand of a 'secret power not previously in existence' behind this 'reform' and protested. Over time they found ways around the system, but the 'secret power' of a state deeply antagonistic to the interests of African workers was creeping into the ascendant.

Atkins displays a somewhat ambivalent attitude to this repressive regulation, commenting that registration procedures were a reminder of the system of forced labour, but also expressing some sympathy for a colonist who 'sensibly pointed out' the need for different badges for different occupations and the need to limit the number of licences issued (Atkins 1993:133). This comment seems to indicate a lack of recognition of the

4. Atkins unfortunately does not take up my argument (see Hemson 1981) that there is a necessary link between the class oppression of African workers and the elaboration of the ideology of urban apartheid. Swanson (1976:159-176) was the first to draw attention to the early development of the ideology of segregation in urban areas in Natal.

fundamentally oppressive nature of the law and the ideological basis behind it. The *10g1* regulations were more than an attempt to regulate casual labour in the manner of town councils in Britain and the United States; they were a foundation on which the edifice of apartheid structures would be built in Natal.

The view of dynamic relations between black and white, with the initiative in the hands of the African workers is, unfortunately, somewhat deceptive. The repressive legislative and administrative apparatus existing in embryo before the turn of the century was accumulating a capacity for extraordinary oppression of the African worker. A migratory labour system evolved which is regarded by some as more cruelly and destructively efficient than slavery.

8 A 'lazy Kafir' in Natal?

This book is in many ways a celebration of traditional Zulu culture and its deployment against the soulless capitalist system imposed by whites; a culture of resistance grows which is based on traditional culture. This is its strength and its limit; because in the last analysis a working class culture has to be in its essence a radical revolt against the authority of tradition.

The core argument of the book is rigorously expressed and supported by evidence; Atkins argues that the 'lazy Kafir'⁵ stereotype arose out of white colonists' racist misunderstanding of African society and did not reflect the real social relations of the time. In reviewing the literature, Atkins found that the labour complaints of the settlers did not ring true but were characterised by a 'surreal quality'.

[A]t the heart of the prolonged labor crisis was an invented fallacy, an idea concocted out of the imagination of the European mind to fit its mode of perceiving things. That is to say, whites created the 'lazy Kafirs' by believing them real Racial chauvinism ... was one leading cause of the countless failures of Natal's colonial labor schemes.

From her argument the white colonists appear trapped in a false consciousness, unaware that African labour was available and ready to work for them under different conditions. Atkins identifies the belief in the 'laziness' of the native as an essential characteristic of colonialism. It is easy to see to what extent this description is useful. It occupies an important place in the dialectics exalting the colonizer and humbling the colonized. Furthermore, it is economically fruitful' (Memmi 1990:145). What has to be established is what specificity there is to Natal colonialism which led to such obsession.

What is certainly true is that the African worker could readily perceive in the longer wage contract the humiliation, subordination and indeed slavery of capital accumulation; that an unequal exchange was taking place between sale of labour power and receipt of the wage as the settler capitalist secured

5. Part of the novelty of the book is Atkins' unapologetic and frequent quotation of 'Kafir' from the colonial texts.

his capital in land and equipment through wage labour. Labour is power *over* individuals.

Originally Zulus considered it a disgrace to work for whites; in their use of 'Kafir', *ikhafula*, they referred to the Natal Africans labouring under the yoke of whites who were their conquerors. As members of an independent African kingdom, they had no reverence or awe of white man (Atkins 1993:71).

A critical issue, which surprisingly is not developed in Atkins' survey of Zulu culture, since she is making a study of work relationships, is the existence of degrading and servile labour among the Zulu and Natal Africans. The word *isisebenzi* refers to work which is of a humiliating and degrading kind (something of the nature of a factotum or a personal servant) such as one paid to look after another's cattle. This servant has to do anything the employer orders him to do, the work is not specific 'nor properly organised' (in the words of a Zulu informant). Such servile labour within the family existed where the only reward is the eventual entitlement to one or more of the *umuzi*'s cattle. The issue here is whether in Zulu society there was a tradition of wage labour or not; apparently there is such a notion of degrading labour and an intense resistance to it.

The issue is somewhat contested as some argue that the term *isisebenzi* arose only with the rise of mission stations and new forms of subordination, and the matter needs further study. My informant mentions a number of forms of servile labour which were accompanied by intense feelings of inferiority, subordination and thwarted ambition.

If the pre-conquest Zulu saw the Natal Africans as underlings and servants, surely these feelings must also have been harboured by the Natal Africans themselves?

There is considerable evidence, documented in Atkins, that African workers were seeking an alternative relationship to the wage contract which renounced any social obligation on the side of the white employer. To some extent this was filled by the Shepstonian system of paternalism and reinforcement of the tribe, but only by creating vastly complex problems for the future. At one point Atkins mentions that white employers were seen as chiefs (Atkins 1993:76); this is precisely the point I am emphasising that a very substantial cultural-political form of servitude (termed by sociologists the extra-contractual aspect) was part of the wage relationship.

Hannah Arendt (1959:731f) proposes a distinction between labour and work and argues that every European language contains two etymologically unrelated words for the same activity; one denoting a craftsman and one referring to those 'who, like 'slaves and tame animals with their bodies minister to the necessities of life'. She argues that the passionate striving for freedom necessarily involves contempt for labouring. Among the Greeks a prime distinction was made between slaves or vanquished enemies who worked in the victor's household, and workmen 'who moved freely outside the private realm and within the public' who could be admitted to citizenship.

This distinction carries conviction in the colonial context and a failure

to distinguish labour and work, in part the dimension between free and unfree labour, makes an account of the extra-contractual nature of colonial labour problematic. The Zulu saw work for the white colonial in a sense as slave labour (of the type in some ways parallel to that of the Greeks employing their vanquished). African people still see (to a lesser or greater extent) in the wage relationship a form of slavery, and the matter needs to be further explored.

Although there is a discussion of the operation of the laws governing the distribution of refugees from Zululand (Chapter 1), Atkins at no time sketches a composite view of the labour market in Natal. At one level this is not necessary, as she is focusing on the question of culture and using the argument that culture determines the pattern of labour relations. The problem arises, however, firstly in understanding why the colonial government decided to bring in indentured Indian labour, and secondly in assessing the division of labour particularly in the white household. Atkins, unfortunately, largely ignores the evidence to the Indian Commissions, and avoids the huge correspondence and statistics on labour shortages in the Natal Archives.

The colonial labour market was structured on the following dualities which often overlaid each other in a complex arrangement of class, race, and gender:

White labour generally limited to craft work	'Kafir work' being untrained, repetitive, unspecific, servile and expenditure of raw muscle power
Free labour constructed around the identity of being white and a citizen	Unfree labour being black and subject
African male wage labour for the white employer	Reproduction of <i>umuzi</i> sustained by African women's labour
Togt labour	Monthly employee
Men's work	Women's work
Work for yourself e.g. as peasant	Work for others e.g. labourer

Atkins is at pains to question the distinction between male and female labour in traditional society, to show that under certain conditions men perform the work bracketed as 'women's work'. She demonstrates that under certain conditions boys were also involved in child-rearing, drawing water, fetching wood; and that Shaka as a boy was made to thresh millet. In reviewing the literature she concludes:

There are no allusions to gender relations in the aforementioned texts; nowhere is there a discussion delineating jobs that fell within the purview of women's work (Atkins 1993:67).

At this point she seems to be *dissolving any gender division of labour in Zulu*

society and offering instead *generational* divisions among males. This begs the question of any gender specific labour undertaken by women.

There can be no doubt that there were strong generational divisions where 'seniority was the very essence of social interaction', but the argument appears to be made in retrospect from the urban context and arises from the idea that the division of labour and other cultural practices in the towns are 'carried over' from the rural areas, and were not imposed by the white settlers.

She argues, for instance, that a problematic aspect of the labour market was that Africans were given work that 'degraded their rank' and insulted them (Atkins 1993:68).⁶

Crucial to her argument that African traditions were carried over into the towns is that there is a direct link between the *izinyanga* who undertook hide or skin dressing and the washermen who emerged in nineteenth century colonial Natal. She argues that the 'guild' was adapted to meet the European need so 'they could enjoy a prominence similar to that attached to their traditional roles' (Atkins 1993:61). This elaborate argument appears necessary to deny that African men in town were doing 'female' labour.

Atkins appears to be dissolving all gendered labour distinctions in Zulu society, in response to the European thinking that washing clothes was an 'unmanly' profession (Atkins 1993:114). If African culture determined work practices in the towns as she argues, how could men be employed (as the European argued) in the 'female' tasks of washing clothes, cooking, child rearing, cleaning, etc.? She answers this dilemma in three ways: by arguing that there was no distinct gender division of labour in Zulu society, that age divisions were paramount and that younger men did this work as they were at times required to do traditionally, and that occupations such as washermen were 'carried over' from traditional practice.

While the miscasting of Zulu social practices has to be corrected, established texts read with contemporary questions in mind, and conventional notions undermined (I, for instance, was cared for—for a time—as a boy with great kindness and concern by an old African man) these explanations fail to account for most of the characteristics and peculiarities of colonial labour market.

A prime distinction has, in my mind, to be made between the continuation of production in the *umuzi* and wage labour; this distinction became increasingly that of 'female' and 'male' labour. Bozzoli argues that the tribe was not entirely destroyed because of the resilience of the women who took over male activities. The position of the black woman on the land was in one sense strengthened by migrant labour as a 'more self-sufficient female world' seems possible when the men were absent (Bozzoli 1983:162).

6. I would argue that humiliation was integral to the wage contract, but that the objections to 'inappropriate labour' could be in part defensive but also a demand for more workers to be employed! More domestic workers would lessen the load of work, and possibly benefit the family relations, of the complaining worker. In countries where domestic labour is a major avenue of employment apparently the division of labour is minute and highly specialised.

In her view the world of the African man became increasingly that of wage labour, and African women were vigorously excluded from urban wage labour through patriarchal controls consciously reinforced by the colonial state. Once the prime distinction has been made between the *umuzi* and the town, then the apparent contradictions between gender typologies of labour are of secondary consequence. The conclusion has to be that traditional Zulu culture, while important to the development of the wage relationship (also in many ways only hinted at by Atkins e.g. in particular forms of paternalism), could not be decisive in setting the basis for gendered divisions of labour in the white household. Women were simply not in the towns in nineteenth century Natal, a very important point which is undeveloped in the book. The colonial authorities were determined that they should remain on the land to preserve the family on the land and stem the pressure of African urbanisation. But there were important contradictions in white consciousness: seeing the utility of employing African women, but fearing the consequences.

The domestic division of labour in the settler household thus results from the overall setting of the political economy. But it is also important to note from a socio-cultural perspective that the tasks involved in maintaining* the white household were considerably different from those of the African *umuzi*: cooking, house-cleaning, etc. for Europeans was a *different* skill from those learnt in African society.

This point is strongly reinforced in studies of domestic labour in other African contexts where often male domestic labour still predominates. In European domestic ideology, it is argued at one level, fear of African women's sexuality takes precedence over the gender-specific nature of the tasks.

African women would remain in their own domestic domain, while African men would enter that of Europeans to work for wages. The European domestic domain thus became the African wider social sphere (Schmidt 1992:254).

Men undertaking domestic labour boast of ability to learn fast, and see the workplace carrying different conventions at variance with those of their upbringing. In one sense it is a different situation, demanding a response 'to which they were prepared to adapt in order to survive'. As one male domestic argues: 'At home all that is done by our mothers. But I didn't feel bad doing it—I wanted to learn so that I could earn some money' (Mujra 1992:254).

In a wider context, that of South East Asia, men have to struggle to take on the apparent gender qualification of being 'nimble' and 'docile', and some argue that this involves gender subordination. But Mujra (1992:258) argues that men can learn this on the job, and that 'class domination is sufficient in itself'.

Skills and ideologies carried into the workplace, she argues, are not a sufficient explanation of gender segregation in the workforce.

Premarket skills and ideologies are not transferred unproblematically to the wage sector, though fortuitously they may sometimes be appropriate. In the case of

domestic service, what women do at work is not simply an extension of their domestic role, because domestic labor is transformed by the terms on which it is carried out. The skills and attitudes appropriate to the wage sector are a product of the structure of relationships (power, hierarchy, solidarity) in the workplace itself, rather than an outcome of processes of gender socialization, especially when the material base of such socialization is marked by class (and often ethnic) distinctions (Mujra 1992:258).

The predominance of male domestic labour in African societies is thus seen by social scientists today as an aspect of the continuing patriarchal order of those societies; only when other wage opportunities open up to men do women move into domestic labour. They also show that the domestic context is profoundly contradictory; men struggling to maintain employment in 'female' occupations, and contradictory responses being made by employers and the state.

This raises a number of interesting issues: at one time women entered the town carrying beer for the male workers. The absence of any mention of this in the book demands some explanation prior to the issue becoming one of contestation in the early 1900s. Did the practice just fade away or were there specific orders given to suppress the movement of women to the towns and the drinking of beer among workers?

9 Culture or political economy?

The discussion of the household economy raises a necessary discussion about the polarisation of approaches and paradigms in Atkins' writing. To a large extent this operates as a subtext, with the sharpest comments being relegated to footnotes; but a close reading reveals another methodology from that of the black lawyer interrogating the Natal colonist. While quoting generously from colonial texts, Atkins is extraordinarily reluctant to give any credence to the radical historians who place capitalist relationships and exploitation at the centre of their analysis. These scholars, termed 'revisionists' by their opponents for 'revising' South African history and placing class rather than race at the centre of South African reality, are generally ignored or reduced to critical footnotes. Not incidentally many of them are white, male, and influenced by Marxism.

She waxes indignant with these 'revisionist' historians, some of whom she argues reproduce the 'lazy Kafir' argument by claiming that African workers did not turn out to work for the whites until forced to do so. She goes as far as to argue that the revisionist historians are gripped by the 'lazy Kaffir' parody which has a 'surprisingly tenacious and perhaps unconscious hold even on the new crop of revisionist South African writers' (Atkins 1993:54). This is an extraordinary statement, bordering on an accusation of racism, yet she does not substantiate her argument beyond a reference to Slater's statement that by the mid-1850s the impoverishment of the Natal African population had not proceeded to the extent that they would voluntarily enter labour relationships.

Atkins' Afrocentric methodology involves asserting a new paradigm by largely ignoring critical historiography, and crafting an account of work

practices and general socio-historical processes from the texts of the original colonists and ethnographers. The international school of social change and political economy which places the cultural and social practices of wage labour in the context of the universal processes of proletarianisation and capital accumulation (in England, Latin America, Africa, etc.) is not confronted but largely ignored and slighted when touched on.

In short, a sharp contrast can be read between Atkins' cultural studies and the analysis of social historians who employ the concept of proletarianisation and mode of production and include the facts and figures of employment, production, and labour repressive measures. At times culture appears to be used to reject a materialist approach. Of course a colonial setting is a fruitful one for every imaginable misunderstanding, but the question is what emphasis to give to 'bad attitudes' and practices, and to violence, the remorseless pressure of poverty, and cashlessness in a monetarised environment.

In a sense it could be argued that in trying to develop an Afrocentric method, it is justified to cut away views which present contradictory theories to simplify a line of argument. But it does expose Atkins to a number of weaknesses which have to be confronted. Not least among them is the question raised and thoroughly developed by Colin Bundy (1988)⁶ and other scholars: that African people responded positively to the development of market relationships in early Natal by *becoming peasants*, that is, by expanding the existing homestead production, and by introducing new crops and other forms of economic activity such as transport operations. This is one course of economic initiative *independent of settler control* on the part of Africans which is passed over, and yet is crucial to an understanding of the alternatives faced by African people in nineteenth century Natal.

Bundy, in a sense, presents his own critique of the 'lazy Kafir' stereotype of Africans who were described by a leading colonist as:

simple and harmless barbarians who might be trained by a vigorous and enlightened exercise of authority, into habits of industry and peace. Like all barbarians, they are constitutionally indolent and averse to labour (see Bundy 1988:166).

He demonstrates that this section of the African population gave severe competition in agriculture to the white farmers and were only defeated through support of white agriculture. Significantly the labour supply was adversely affected. A magistrate in Umgeni complained in the 1880s that the African labour supply

has year by year become more inadequate as the Natives become richer, and yearly cultivate a large acreage with the plough, besides engaging in transport riding on their own account (see Bundy 1988:176).

Atkins says nothing about the political economy in the wider sense, the grand theme of money and profit, whites becoming rich, the logic of African

6. See especially Chapter 6—Natal: Variations Upon a Theme.

immiseration, and the interaction of colonial Natal with the world economy. But without some sense of a black proletariat in the making, of uneven development, and contradiction; the central argument of the book, that African men responded readily to the opportunity to engage in wage labour, does not find sufficient support. The debate extends largely to a reading of the racism of the white mind although, surprisingly, even this crucial theme is not well supported by references.

Whites are presented as of a uniform mind, except for a small group of planters favouring African rather than Indian workers. William Campbell, for instance, strongly opposed the introduction of Indian indentured labour and used nothing but Natal African labour, and his sons carried on the same tradition at Muckle Neuk Sugar Estate (Atkins 1993:166). There were actually different strands of opinion relating to different dominant class interests in Natal, for instance, between upcountry farmer and planter, which needed constant adjudication.⁷

Atkins is unfortunately rather unclear in her argument and this makes an assessment of her work and criticisms of others more difficult. On the fundamental question of the 'lazy Kafir' stereotype and the real circumstances of the time she presents a number of differing and contradictory views. At times there *is* a real labour crisis in Natal (Atkins 1993:3) and the response of Africans to wage labour is indifferent:

Varying reports speak at this time [1873] of crops of sugar, coffee, and cotton lying in the fields, because hands were unavailable to harvest them (Atkins 1993:132).

and in a discussion of piece rates:

But despite such efforts to increase efficiency and attract labor onto the market, the response of Natal Africans was negligible (Atkins 1993:86).

and cultural practices:

[struck] a tremendous blow at the labor supply (Atkins 1993:60).

at another time there is *not* a labour crisis:

The documentation overwhelmingly suggests that Africans were offering their services for hire in very great numbers (Atkins 1993:54).

and there were:

spectacular achievements of labor during this period (Atkins 1993:101).

and:

one explanation that can be promptly dismissed as erroneous is the refugees' utter aversion to working for white people (Atkins 1993:19).

and:

7. These conflicting interests are partially taken up in Etherington (1989:176).

A curious irony is that the 'lazy Kafir' myth crystallized in Natal at time when Africans were dramatically responding to the commercial economy (Atkins 1993:78).

The issue is not only the 'lazy Kafir' stereotype which existed in the psychological depths of the settlers' consciousness but also the common view that African males were (surely not unreasonably) loath to work in the blazing heat, losing more than a gallon of sweat a day, for at least 12 hours a day, seven days a week, when they had women to till the land, cattle to accumulate and the possibility of working on their own account, when in fact considerable vitality still in the *umuzi* (homestead), as a *peasantry*. Atkins attempts to fuse these two views into the 'lazy Kafir' syndrome when in fact they are logically distinct and only a desire to prematurely assign a Protestant work ethic to African tribesmen could lead to denying the second view.

Atkins considers Slater's view that divisions among the whites and alternative economic activities to wage labour strengthened the African community, but declines to assess 'whether the argument is valid or not'. She argues that it is 'irrelevant for understanding the rich pattern of cultural nuances underlying Natal's chronic labor shortage' (Atkins 1993:101). A sharper contrast between the 'new cultural history' and critical historians could not be imagined: she refuses to pass judgment on the material issues and declares them irrelevant to an assessment of workers' culture.

Just what is Atkins losing in ignoring the questions of the political economy? What is missing is a sense of proportion in the weighing up of alternative strategies of African initiative (i.e. the contrast between workers and peasants) and the not insignificant question of another proof of the African contribution to colonial development. Max Weber remarks somewhere that colonialism relies on some form of fiscal operation, in short that colonial peoples have to pay for the oppressive apparatus erected over them. In Natal not only did Africans pay an ever increasing amount of taxes and duties, but these taxes *paid for almost the whole government of Natal*. In 1872 as much as 73% of all revenue was derived from African people and this paid for white education, roads, the armed forces, the salaries of government officials, etc. Africans had to pay hut tax, for the registration of marriages and duties on goods exclusively used by Africans: cotton and woollen blankets, 'Kaffir' picks and hoes, beads, and coarse tobacco.

... when the decision was made to import Indian labour for sugar plantations, the new schedule of tariff charges was known as the 'Coolie tariff'. African workers thus contributed largely to the cost of the importation of their competitors on the labour market (see Etherington 1989:174).

Without some understanding of these extraordinary arrangements it might be possible to accept the argument of 'lack of funds' to lay out an African township in Durban in 1847. As it was the white colonists who profited fabulously from the taxation of the African family and consumption, a fact which provides a crushing refutation of the 'lazy Kafir' argument.

In short, as Etherington points out, while Africans suffered taxation

without representation, white settlers enjoyed representation virtually without taxation (Etherington 1989:175). These are the political and economic realities, the social environment in which colonial culture, a culture of work and of arrogant paternalism, took shape.

10 What form of cultural politics?

Probably at no time in twentieth century history has South Africa faced such controversies in notions of culture and tradition as it does now. Subterranean currents stream to the surface, new and challenging trends emerge in a Rainbow spectrum, only to be accompanied by developments of the greatest crudity and cruelty. In 1988 it could be pronounced that the concept of 'tribe' 'is no longer crucial in South African political discourse' and is a form of 'false consciousness' (Boonzaier & Sharp 1988:68,73). Now students contest the idea that tribes and traditions were invented and a professor can declare that although at one time he was fairly sure what culture really meant to African people, this is no longer the case.

Atkins never discusses precisely what she means by culture; in her use she develops the notion as inseparable from tradition (even in the use of 'culture of solidarity' or 'moral culture') and culture is essentially traditional culture with some adaptations.

She faces a classic problem by maintaining a view of 'two very distinct cultures' and arguing that there was a continuing clash of cultures: how is it then possible to account for new institutions which have little to do with *traditional* cultural practices of the dominant or dominated? The compound, mission stations, the kitchen associations, *togt* labour, master/servant relationships, etc., it has to be argued, had little to do in essence with either European or African culture, they were new institutional practices which were formed in the colony rather than 'carried over' from European or African society. After listing practices under two columns headed 'European' and 'African', there are remaining institutions which have to fall under a third column 'colonial' or later 'South African' practices. The central institutions of exploitation, the long-lasting and peculiarly oppressive set of the compound, the location, and the reserve, could be paralleled to institutions elsewhere but importantly their colonial and South African context is distorted from the original meaning and practices elsewhere.

Atkins argues that what happens in the city is essentially the adaptation of traditional institutions to new concerns:

For these black men clearly believed that through a creative adaptation of indigenous institutions to modern concerns their common grievances as *workers* and the general conditions of labor could be improved or effectively resolved (Atkins 1993:145).

The 'indigenous institutions', it has to be said, may infuse and influence the 'third column' of colonial institutions, but (from a close reading of the text) they are not extant in the town. The culture of working class resistance is something more than 'creative adaptation of indigenous institutions', as it has

to be cultivated from the soil of a rising formation unknown to African tradition: a productive working class with the power to contest the awesome might of the capitalist state. A culture emerges from below, bearing all the marks of its cultural and social origins, but in an order so different from tradition as to beg a new practice: the construction of permanent and modern organisation with the idea (implicit or overt) of contesting and taking power from the ruling class.

African workers have been the bearers of traditional culture and have adapted this in a defensive way in contact with white society. Language and tradition at one level does 'carry over' into the workplace: the dock workers have called themselves *onyathi* since the 1940s or earlier but the meaning has changed over time. From its initial meaning of a robust assertion of muscle power the term has come to mean something else. Meanings are contested. In a current survey of dock labour, older workers tend to see *onyathi* or stevedores as displaying the strength of a buffalo, while younger workers tend to describe *onyathi* as simply 'bucket' (dirty) work. Most stevedores and urban workers generally adopt the latter meaning. Language becomes socially defined; a buffalo becomes a bucket worker (see Hemson 1995:36). A reading of the term *onyathi* in a 'traditionalist' sense would entirely miss the point. African workers finally cannot depend on the adaptation of traditional culture, but have had to pursue, as workers universally, the industrial and political organisations which are appropriate globally.

In the emergence of working class cultures, at times distinct from its origins, at times indistinguishable, and at all times carrying a dichotomy in language (as in the term *onyathi*), the 'lower orders' define their world and make their critique. At times part-revolutionary and part-defensive, the working class moves towards imposing its economic and political sway over the whole of society.

There is in the text an unproblematic and axiomatic relationship between traditional culture and the cultural practices of resistance. At one level this is obvious—the colonial order has as its objective the destruction or perverse transformation of an independent African existence. Defence of the African order implies resistance to the European imposition. But at another level it is deeply problematic as the emerging colonial order works to preserve and even consolidate African customs and chiefly rule precisely to exercise domination (cheaply and effectively) over the African people, and particularly over African women.

There is a deep ambiguity within traditional culture: it is used by African workers in early colonialism as a logic of resistance, but this does not exclude its employment by colonial officials as a logic of control. This question is brought to the surface in the question of the Shepstone policy of administration. Although Atkins is critical of Shepstone's actions she also shows an ambiguous attitude towards his policy of segregation, and misunderstands its practice.

She states that Shepstone moved Africans to locations where they could be 'effectively contained and "civilized", moulded into white men in black

skins' (Atkins 1993:115). Although some of the language of *early* segregation had this flavour, the practice was very different. The last thing that Shepstone had in mind was the 'black Englishman' (the educated black leaders who would later form the leadership of nationalist resistance). This policy was never one of cultural assimilation, in fact the very opposite is shown in Shepstone's attitude to the emerging civil society in the towns.

Shepstone wanted to limit 'acculturation' through segregation and preserve as far as possible the traditional cultural practices which marked off Zulu people as a distinct 'cultural group' as a means of sustaining a despotic, paternalist, and racial, colonial order. This was justified ideologically as maintaining a frictionless relationship between races through a lack of contact. This, of course, was an absurdity, but segregationary practices have contributed not a little to the desperate poverty and inadequate state services in the field of housing, education and health in the region today. They have also provided the socio-structural basis for one side in the ongoing civil war.

Zulu culture was also preserved to deny an African identity to the black people of Natal. During the nineteenth century on the mines the Zulu were employed as policemen to maintain order over African workers. Elements of traditional culture were preserved, adapted, and used by the authorities (for example, the induna system) to dominate the migratory worker. This was the other side of the preservation of traditional culture which has been applauded by white conservatives then and now who see these practices as a bulwark against radical youth, emancipated women, African unity and socialism. A certain innocence about the use of traditionalism and ethnicity misses the construction of a violent cultural response to change.

The Natal town becomes over time a social setting for Europeans but a labour camp for Africans. In the early days of colonialism African workers redefined social relations on their terms through greater or partial resistance. Through the bureaucracy of Native Administration and police the urban space is later defined as a field of social control: the prison, the households, the industrial centres and the docks all come under the all-pervasive gaze of authority.

Simultaneously, however, we witness the rise of civil society. All kinds of permutations appear possible and early working life allows possibility of new freedoms incomprehensible and impossible in tribal life. A culture of the informal, of personal interests, of Africans putting roots down into the cracks in the white granite, is growing. This is not heroic or dramatic, rather it is the daily struggle for a better life; asserted, lost, partially regained, and lost again, only to continue in another round in the future. This civil society is genuinely subversive of the legislative and administrative and gives priority to the economic, the social and practical.

The advantage of an Afrocentric view is an extremely sceptical view of colonial statements, a search in the detail of colonial apologetics for facts of subordination and the echo of resistance.

The difficulties, at least in Atkins' exposition, include an approach to the evolution of culture which does not address the emergence of essentially

new institutions, and a segmental and bounded approach to the parts of colonial society. The African contribution is valuably retrieved but the multiple existence of the working class is not developed and it is difficult thus to regain a sense of the whole from below which approximates the perspective of the ruling class from above. Unfortunately Indian workers and the African/Indian relationships are not explored at all, and only antagonism appears in a few comments made.

There remains an intense problem in theorising the origins of the new South Africa—the multicultural and ethnic evolutions towards a common 'way of life' with its complex cross-cultural possibilities. At times Atkins expresses sympathy for the devil, portrays the gulf of misunderstanding between colonist and African, and adopts a perspective of the colonist in seeing 'labourers incongruously attired in cast-off garments' and

the spectacle of brawny Zulus working on the beachfront, clothed in meal sacks or an old flannel shirt and nothing else (Atkins 1993:142).

These labourers and the destitute are still with us sleeping on the beach and struggling for the scraps of life.

In the detail of contested practices, Atkins succeeds in returning human agency among the common people to the history of Natal. Subjugated knowledges again come to light. A common feeling at times is evoked from the European, who sees in resistance the solidarity and bonds 'worthy of workmen in a manufacturing town in the old country' (Atkins 1993:143). These infrequent acknowledgements unfortunately lead nowhere but they do provide glimpses of imagination as testament to what could have been.

A critical consciousness which acknowledges the need to build networks and structures, works in the wider world as persuasion. Jim Merod (1987:190) argues that traditional academic criticism flounders as the core knowledges and values spanned are too diverse.

This is also where radical critics come apart, emphasizing theoretical differences at the expense of the larger, more profound possibility of intellectual and political partnership that could work persuasively in a world that agrees about such things as the need for hierarchy, patriarchy, commercial growth, marketplace logic, ideological combat, and authority of every kind but the one that speaks for and with the oppressed.

It is in this spirit that radical historians and sociologists have tried to work, to move away from the circularities of text to criticism, text to institution, and criticism to text; to the extended possibilities of text to community, text to social action, and social action to text.

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