Culture as cure: civil society and moral debates in KwaZulu-Natal after apartheid

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Abstract
The paper addresses the nature of ‘really existing’ civil society and the workings of the public sphere in informal urban settlements on the outskirts of Durban. It focuses on debates over morality and the health of the community, which have emerged locally in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and highlights the positions taken by different African Initiated Churches – Zionist, apostolic and evangelical churches as well as the Shembe Church. Besides these are placed varieties of virginity testing that have become prominent in the last decade, and the significance of disagreement between the different cultural programmes represented is examined. The paper argues that in these situations of urban informality, poverty and unemployment, there is a richness of debate, cultural invention and entrepreneurship, which needs to be recorded and understood in order to appreciate ongoing dynamics of political development and struggles over notions of rights. Finally, it is argued that the recording of discussion within and between popular cultural institutions is significant as a resource for future memorialisation and debate around the transition from apartheid to democracy.

My research in KwaZulu-Natal since 1998 has focused on the changes civil society has been undergoing in poor urban African areas in the aftermath of apartheid – the impact of the new political dispensation on the interaction between civil society and the state at the local level, and the significance of this for the consolidation of democracy (cf. Kaarsholm, 2005).

The transition from apartheid to democracy involved the ‘demise’ of civil society as it used to be commonly understood – the ‘vibrant’ civil society of NGOs mobilised in the anti-apartheid struggle. This civil society of resistance included institutions which had been seen by some as foreshadowing those of a new democracy of all-inclusive representation – such as civic associations and development forums. Instead of ‘taking over’ as government during the transition from apartheid, such bodies tended to be sidelined and emasculated by the new elected institutions of local government in 1994-96 (cf. Seekings, 1996 and 2000; Glaser, 1997; Cherry, 2000).

The demobilisation of resistance civil society led to worries over the prospects for democratisation and the development of new notions of citizenship combining rights and obligations, as active local democratic participation would seem to presuppose a balance of engagements between state and civil society institutions, which appeared to

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have been weakened in the transition. Recent research has therefore been keen to trace newly emerging forms of civil society in the shape of social movements – township protests around payment and disconnection of electricity and water services, the provision of a ‘basic income grant’ for all citizens, the Landless People’s Movement, the Treatment Action Campaign and its challenge to the ANC government’s stand on HIV/AIDS, and so on (see, for example, Hart, 2002; Habib, 2003; Bond, 2004; Mbal, 2005).

But the whole idea of a ‘demise of’ or ‘crisis for’ civil society has paid insufficient attention to the importance of local cultural institutions as ingredients in ‘really existing civil society’ – as articulators of positions, identities, agendas and grievances, as well as providers within and between them of spaces for debate and contestation (cf. Kaarsholm & James, 2000). As institutions, they are important constituents of a locally available public sphere, and the debates and dialogues carried on within them and between them are forms of public culture that represent, I would like to argue, significant resources for democratic development. In the areas where I have been working – in Amaoti or Bhambayi, urban informal settlements in Inanda on the outskirts of Durban with very high unemployment – such a public sphere is in fact extremely active with a large number of self-organised institutions of various kinds in operation. People have a lot of time on their hands and seek self-respect and identity through these organisations, engaging very actively with what goes on in society, both locally and at other levels, and keeping a watchful eye on the ways in which the local state administers its powers and resources. What strikes one most on entering Amaoti or Bhambayi from the morning onwards, is the vast number of young people in particular who hang around in the open, often smartly dressed and with little to do but to spend time in discussion with one another. With no jobs or money for school fees, people have a lot of time on their hands – ‘leisure’ would be the wrong word – to debate, perform and ponder the meaning of what is going on.

Discussions around the challenges represented by the HIV/AIDS epidemic are a good example of this trend, because the epidemic – whose proportions began to be realised at approximately the same time as the transition to democracy – has become indicative of a more general sense of moral crisis. Like the issue of crime – which falls heavily on local residents – the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in urban African areas like these is experienced as a new and complex challenge to moral orientation, which has come about since 1994. Democracy and the liberation from apartheid have been accompanied by new confusions and insecurities, which – in order to come to terms with them – call for new explanations and a reconsideration of cosmologies of right and wrong (cf. the discussion of witchcraft and ‘spiritual insecurity’ within post-apartheid Soweto in Ashforth, 2000 and 2005).

Disagreements of this nature have taken on an openly political dimension in the confrontations between President Mbeki and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) around the government’s HIV/AIDS policy, provision of treatment and the causal relationship between HIV and AIDS. Here the President’s reluctance to acknowledge a causal linkage has attempted to ‘free’ HIV/AIDS prevalence from association with patterns of sexual behaviour that have been represented as being of special significance within ‘African culture’, and by implication therefore potentially compromising ‘patriarchal’ aspects of such an ‘African culture’, which might reflect negatively on the idea of an ‘African Renaissance’ as envisioned by President Mbeki.
The response of Mbeki and the ANC government has also been directed at forms of donor discourse and media reports which have advocated very high-handedly the need for ‘culture change’ as a prerequisite for making headway against the epidemic. In extreme cases, this discourse has even involved arguing against making treatment with anti-retroviral drugs available, because – given ‘cultural habits’ – this would allow patients to carry on transmitting for a longer period. Against such thinking, President Mbeki has been insistent that the problem is one of poverty and not of culture, and that the relation between HIV and AIDS is disputed by ‘science’ (Mbeki, 2002:196f). In this context, the TAC’s challenge to the President and the government in this field – despite having been quite subdued in many ways – has been significant. Similarly, the response of the ANC government in supporting as an alternative the National Association of People Living with AIDS (NAPLA), a more docile NGO, may have provided a demonstration of how the state would prefer to be able to mould the kind of civil society it must interact with.

But debates and disagreements set off by the epidemic have been much richer and much more complex in local environments, and have been articulated and conducted through a wide range of cultural institutions and mobilisations, among whom churches have been particularly prominent. In these debates, strategies for prevention have been more prominent than treatment, with celibacy and condom use either representing strongly opposed alternatives or coming together within pragmatic notions of ‘dualism’ – i.e. advocating abstinence, but tolerating condom use as an emergency life-saving measure. Churches, however, generally underline the issue of HIV/AIDS as one of ‘the health of the community’ in a broader sense, rather than ‘just’ of science, biology or physical health, and use the occasion of the epidemic to formulate visions for the regeneration of individuals, families, local communities and the nation.

Looking at this landscape of debate in a particular local setting gives us an idea of how the local public sphere is structured and may be mapped (cf. Habermas, 1989; Negt & Kluge, 1993). It also provides insights into the ways in which debates are conducted, how articulations are made and regulated, how regulations can be challenged, and what encouragements and obstacles for dialogue are active – in short, how the ‘field’ functions as one of ‘public culture’ (cf. Bourdieu, 1996; Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1995).

The landscape of debate around HIV/AIDS in Amaoti and Bhambayi comprises a wide array of institutions, organisations and voices, as represented by schools, clinics, government campaigns and NGOs from LoveLife to Youth for Christ, churches and cultural groups not affiliated to churches. I shall concentrate here on churches and on cultural groups which focus on a regeneration of ‘tradition’ as a remedy for moral crisis.

The ‘old churches’ – i.e. those with roots in Europe and with African histories going back to colonial times like the Anglicans, the Catholics, the Methodists, the Baptists, etc. – have been losing ground steadily over a long period to the African Initiated Churches and, more recently, to new evangelical and ‘born-again’ church ‘fellowships’. In spite of attempts to catch up – Catholics by adapting ‘dualism’ and
Anglicans by sponsoring their own virginity tests\(^1\) – they are referred to in my interviews and discussions not only as ‘old churches’, but also as ‘the churches of old people’.

In Amaoti and Bhambayi, the most popular congregations are, on the one hand, the Zionist churches (of which more than 30 are represented in Amaoti alone), apostolic churches such as St John’s Faith Mission (which has a huge healing centre with premises next to the police station in Amaoti), the Shembe Nazarite Church – *Ibandla lamazaretha* – which has the headquarters of its two divided fractions in Ebheleni and Ekuphakameni not far away within Inanda (for background on St John’s, see Sundkler, 1976:79-84; on Shembe, see Vilakazi, 1986). All these churches include strong elements of ‘traditionalism’, i.e. syncretic incorporation of African cultural practices related to ancestral religion and fertility rituals, including the healing of sickness and the cleansing of the effects of witchcraft and of bad relations with *amadlozi* and the world of spirits.

On the other hand, there is a growing body of new evangelical and ‘born-again’ churches, some of them related to Pentecostalism and some of them with inspiration and backing from the USA and Australia. The churches aim at a specifically ‘modern’ appeal: They mobilise particularly energetically among young people, use rock music instruments (or at least a small electronic keyboard) for their services and can be quite business-like in appealing to young ‘achievers’ within the locality. An example of this is the Grace Fellowship Church in Amaoti, which was begun as a private venture by white evangelist entrepreneurs, but has now been taken over by black residents led by the Australian-trained Rev. Samson Bheki Mabazo.

Sometimes competition between the churches can be dramatic, for example when more than one church shows up at a private home for funeral rites and celebrations (one church, perhaps, a Zionist one to which the widow is affiliated, another an evangelical church representing sons or daughters). The evangelical church fellowships tend to be ‘modern’ in the sense that they are critical of healing, the powers of ancestral spirits and witchcraft beliefs, and tend to see conversion to Christianity as involving a radical break with African cultural tradition. This disavowal includes polygamy and sometimes even *lobola*, whose persistence as an institution is remarkable, with young church members blaming the costliness of *lobola* – normally equivalent to something like eleven cows – for ‘our not being married’ and seeing the inability to get married as a prominent feature in the moral crisis of the community.

In Amaoti and Bhambayi there is also a significant presence of Islam, which makes itself felt in moral debates and is represented in the landscape by a number of small mosques, catering in particular for people with a Malawian background. Competition and debate between churches are moderated through the Amaoti Ministers’ Association, chaired by the Zionist Rev. Mavuso, which also tries to organise ecumenical collaboration in the face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, interacting in this field with Youth for Christ and other church-based NGOs.

\(^1\) Personal communication from Mark Hunter, November 2003, who encountered Anglican virginity testing during his field work in Mandeni on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal (cf. Hunter, 2004).
Debate often centres on different visions of the moral crisis and different strategies for moral regeneration and on the meaning of ‘healing’—in what sense can Zionist churches, St John’s Faith Mission or the Shembe Nazarites claim to be able to heal HIV/AIDS? In an interview in November 2003, I was told by Mr Simamisa Mkhize from the Nazareth Baptism Church that healing in this case does not necessarily involve being physically cured, but rather means making peace with God and being able to die cleansed of sinfulness. This involves sincere penitence for sinful and impure behaviour, which has brought about the illness as punishment. So HIV/AIDS is indeed a stigma and a sign of impurity, but it is one that can be removed through penitence. Zionist church members have been more equivocal about their capacities to heal HIV/AIDS, the extent to which it may be induced by spirit obsession like other maladies, and whether ‘Western’ medicines should be avoided in this case as in that of other diseases according to Zionist belief. Many Zionist ministers are also sangomas and offer varieties of muti to supplement healing, or sanctified water as in the case of the St John’s Apostolic Faith and a number of smaller churches which have broken away from St John’s. The latter includes the South African Church in Christ, led by Archbishop Joshua P. Khanyile, which seceded in 1990 and was one of the few churches in Amaoti and Bhambayi to come out openly during the Emergency period preceding the fall of apartheid in support of the struggle of the ‘comrades’, the United Democratic Front and the illegal ANC (Khanyile, 2005).

The Shembe Church is respected for its strongly regulated organisation of community and family life. The church forms an elite group within the world of urban informality in terms of purity and is strongly patriarchal and in some respects ‘anti-modern’. Supporters from other churches would claim that Shembe people objected to the introduction of Blair toilets, and thus resisted hygienic upgrading of the locality. This view is certainly prejudiced, but there is no doubt that Nazarites pride themselves vis-à-vis evangelicals for remaining in line with African and Zulu ‘tradition’. In this sense, the prominent role of virgins as incarnations of ritual purity within the Nazareth Baptist Church represents an incorporation into Shembe cosmology of elements of belief in Nomkhubulwana, the virgin goddess, and of links between virginity and fertility (Muller, 1999). In the whole calendar of Shembe life—the annual pilgrimages to Mount Nhlangakazi, the July festivals, the Sabbath services, and weekly group meetings—celebrations of the purity of virgins figure prominently and the formal social division between virgins and married women—to whose group a ‘fallen’ woman will be transferred—is an important measure of moral discipline (Nzama, 2004). Virginity testing is well-established as a practice within this moral cosmology, and the rigorousness of this and the respect for ‘tradition’ it implies have provided strong inspiration within the more recent movements of revival of virginity testing, a point I shall return to below.

By contrast, the Grace Fellowship Church sets itself against ‘tradition’ as represented by notions of witchcraft and spirit obsession as a ‘cause’ of HIV/AIDS infection, ideas supported in more ‘traditionalist’ African Initiated Churches. The fellowship is also against the brutality of Zionist healing, where people are beaten to drive out the evil which has been put inside them. At the same time, however, Rev. Mabazo disapproves of dualism and condom use—HIV/AIDS must be combated by prevention in the form of premarital celibacy, monogamy, faithfulness and pure living. Interestingly, virginity testing in the neotraditionalist forms of revival that have recently come about, and which I shall return to below, are not condemned by Rev.
Mabazo and his Church, if not recommended very loudly either. The threat from the epidemic seems to be so powerful that it is a sign of health in the community that attempts are made to counter it and provide protection for young girls through virginity testing (Mabazo, 2003). This contrasts with the ‘modernism’ which is otherwise a characteristic of the Church which draws its members from the ‘achievers’ in the informal settlement population. Grace Church gatherings are held in the new Amaoti Community Hall which is expensive to rent, and services may at times be like performances with members of the congregation paying entry fees of up to R10 to join. On occasion, Nkosi FM disc jockeys and other popular culture celebrities have been present as ‘stars’ of attraction. But church members are not purists of lifestyle and association, and are capable of living with very lively and staunch oppositions within their cultural worlds. Being ‘modern’ evangelicals themselves, people are capable of strange and wonderful combinations and, for example, may well live more or less harmoniously with parents who are Zionists, or live together informally and have children with a man who is a sangoma – as was the case with the woman through whom I became acquainted with the Grace Fellowship Church.

Debates around issues of culture, tradition and modernity have been intensified in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and in KwaZulu-Natal very poignantly in disagreements about virginity testing, climaxing in the controversial move to introduce a Children’s Rights Bill, which will make the practice illegal (SAPA, 2005; Barnes & Seabi, 2005; Mzomi, 2005; Ngcobo, 2005). Fiona Scorgie, who has done pioneering research in the field, has described virginity testing as representing a ‘Revival’ of tradition and Nomkhubulwana rites (Scorgie, 2003:10), and has analysed in detail how controversies around it involve a clash between different notions of human rights – of individual rights and cultural rights (Scorgie, 2005). In my own research, I have tried in much the same way as Scorgie to make sense of virginity testing rites and discourse as representing programmes for moral regeneration, but I have focused more on diversities between different practitioners and organisations, and on disagreements and political debate within the ‘Revival’, rather than seeing it as one unified movement. I have tried to argue that different ‘schools’ of virginity testing are important cultural institutions alongside churches within this landscape of debate, and that they help to define the particularity of local public culture in the settings of urban informality that I have studied. I have tried to differentiate and define the peculiarities of some of these ‘schools’, as represented by the virginity testers Nomagugu Ngobese (who has herself written a dissertation about the ‘Revival’ and whose work Fiona Scorgie has analysed in depth), Sibongile Khumalo and Jane Chiwambere Phewa (Kaarsholm, 2005:146-150). In this paper, I shall concentrate on another impressive women and virginity tester – in many ways the mother of all post-1994 virginity testers in the greater Durban area – Andile Gumede, whose work has also been discussed by Fiona Scorgie, but in an earlier phase of her activity. In 2001, Andile married a prominent Chief and IFP national MP, Nkosi Wellington Mhlabunzima Hlengwa, and moved to live with him in his Thoyana (Mfume) tribal area near Umagababa, bordering the Durban municipality area on the South Coast. In 2004, Mhlabunzima Hlengwa became a member and the Deputy Speaker of the KwaZulu-Natal Legislature, and was a leading figure in the KwaZulu-Natal organisation of Traditional Leaders against HIV/AIDS. After her marriage, Andile moved her headquarters from KwaMashu to Thoyana, where I had two interviews with her in November 2003.
In an earlier paper (Kaarsholm, 2005), I contrasted the elaborate invention of tradition unfolded in Nomagugu Ngobese’s Nomkhubulwana festivals at Bulwer with the almost technocratic nature of the testings conducted by Mrs Phewa and her fellow health workers in Amaoti, and described the former as leaning towards the Inkatha Freedom Party – the IFP – and the latter towards the African National Congress – the ANC. My richest and most original material on virginity testing, however, related to a third ‘school’, represented by Sibongile Khumalo. When I met her in 1998-99, she worked during the week as a servant in a white household in Durban, but at weekends she was transformed into a poet and preacher who, with her colleagues in the Sivuselela Amasiko (cultural revival) group, conducted virginity testing ceremonies all over the Durban townships and urban slums. Sibongile’s programme for virginity testing was documented with rare detail in a manuscript book of sermons, poems, practical instruction, images, etc., which she lent to me and I had translated from Zulu into English. In Sibongile’s writings, a broadly Africanist discourse, in some ways reminiscent of Black Consciousness, emerged, a type of Zulu ethnic nationalist message which sees the HIV/AIDS crisis as expressive of deeper challenges to African identity, culture and self-respect. In her analysis, the epidemic is making its impact felt, because African families are in disarray, the respect of the young for parents has been lost, and young girls no longer know how to protect their virginity (which should be like “the kraal of their fathers”), and the lobola they bring home to their parents ends up being a coffin (Kaarsholm, 2005:148). The use of condoms and contraception encourages this family dissolution, and in her sermons, Sibongile repeatedly contrasts the vulnerability of Africans in this respect as compared to “those other nations”, and in particular the Indian community in South Africa:

Have you ever seen those other nations flocking to contraceptive clinics with an aim of acquiring those pills? Just widen your minds. It is you, the black people, who keep the injection and pills business going. By contrast, were it to be suggested ‘that an Indian girl be taken for vaginal inspection where maidens are congregated, there would be a cursing scream’ – Indians have been privileged and principled enough to stay faithful to their culture: They never have sex before they have passed the stage of youth and passed the rites. Even if they get married, they adhere to all that is pertaining to their culture. Just know you are a joke, you maidens, when you show up at contraceptive clinics, wearing your school uniforms (cited in Kaarsholm, 2005:148).

For Sibongile, the use of condoms constitutes a sign of moral and cultural weakness; the preservation of virginity through testing and the moral rearmament of families effected through this represent the respectable alternative.

When I interviewed Andile Hlengwa in November 2003, I started by asking her if she knew Sibongile Khumalo and her book, and what she thought of Sibongile’s approach to virginity testing. Sibongile, who had recently died, Andile said, had been a bit of a sangoma, and sometimes she went over the top in her poetry. As to virginity testing, she was “one of those young people who thought they could do it in their own way, and have their own ideas” (though Sibongile could hardly have been much younger in years than Andile who was born in 1973). Andile claimed that her own authority
came from her having founded the Izivivane organisation in the early 1990s. She had now left Izivivane, which continues as a major Zulu cultural organisation, but she is still invited to travel “all over the region” to explain the correct practices of virginity testing and its cultural background. Also, she continues to keep a register of all virginity testers “in the region”, meaning KwaZulu-Natal, who in their turn keep registers of all girls tested. In this way, she is in control of a powerful archive of moral information.

As to condom use, Sibongile was wrong: Andile’s present organisation Izinto (which means ‘our things’ or ‘the things of blacks’), like the organisation of KwaZulu-Natal nkosis (traditional leaders) of which her husband was a prominent member, supports condom use, and free condoms were distributed from Andile’s Ikhambi (‘the remedy’ or ‘cure’) resource centre at Thoyana. Andile said that it would be illusory to think that you can stop young people having sex, so condoms must be made available as a means of immediate life saving. On the walls of the Ikhambi headquarters building, several ‘Love Life’ slogans had been painted, not in order to advertise the work of the well-known and very modern-oriented HIV/AIDS NGO called ‘LoveLife’, but rather to indicate that Ikhambi was situating itself within the same ambit of modernity, and to cut across the rural/urban boundary on which the centre was physically situated.

But more far-sighted strategies were needed to counter the fundamental impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which Andile said was an onslaught against Africans and African culture in particular – “an African disease” – which has spread since 1994. Everything was different before 1994, she said: There was no crime like today (and life in the countryside according to Andile is no healthier in this respect than city life), people had work unlike today when everyone is “whimpering and shouting about ‘employment, employment!'”. HIV/AIDS attacks African people in particular because their culture has been weakened. Andile remarked to me that “with you in Denmark” the epidemic is under control, while in South Africa “all blacks will be dead by 2010” from HIV/AIDS if a drastic change does not come about (Hlengwa, 2003).

Durban and KwaZulu-Natal are hit particularly badly – they have the highest rates of prevalence and incidence in the whole of South Africa. Why is this? Why is Durban hit more badly than Johannesburg or Cape Town? In Andile’s reckoning, the first reason is because of the sea, of being by the ocean: The ocean brings sailors, sailors produce prostitution. Secondly (and this explains the difference from Cape Town), Durban is a predominantly Black African city, while Cape Town has many Coloureds and Whites – HIV/AIDS is an African disease, punishing Africans in particular, and exploiting the weaknesses which have developed in African culture.

Andile’s and Izinto’s programme for virginity testing included big annual festivals as organised also by Izivivane and by Nomagugu Ngobese at Bulwer (cf. Kendall, 1999; Scorgie, 2003; Kaarsholm, 2005). The festivals would take place on the South Coast, near Umgababa, and include a pilgrimage to “the top of a mountain” – an ingredient which seems to have been inspired by Shembe and the Nazareth Baptist Church,

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2 ‘Izivivane’ refers to ‘a pile of stones by the roadside’, onto which each passing traveller must throw a stone – thus symbolising the slow and gradual building of community.
3 Andile was referring here to statistics which showed KwaZulu-Natal to be the province worst affected by HIV/AIDS in South Africa. These statistics have since been disputed (see Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2002).
whose ‘strictness’ and cultural discipline Andile admires. But in this case, the ‘mountain’ or hill is also one of the many locations in KwaZulu-Natal where King Shaka is said to have dwelt or rested – Shaka was the great founder in the 1820s of the Zulu state and nation, the epitome of Zulu manliness and political power, and a rallying point for the IFP and contemporary Zulu nationalism: On the mountain, according to the scenario outlined for Andile’s festival, “one is close to God, and also to Shaka”.

We have here, I think, an outstanding example of cultural entrepreneurship which, apart from virginity testing and HIV/AIDS counselling, also involved setting up a ‘cultural village’ at Thoyana and craft production with a view to attracting tourists to the area and generating income. We also have a programme for virginity testing which is elaborately unfolded and in significant respects different in its political direction and cultural underpinnings from those of Nomagugu Ngobese, Sibongile Khumalo or Jane Chiwambere Phewa referred to above. As revealed in the 2003 interviews and in the practices of the Ikhambi centre, Andile’s programme was very much a Zulu revivalist one like that of Nomagugu Ngobese and of the Izivivane organisation, and close in its efforts to those of the Inkatha Freedom Party. But in important respects it was also more ‘modern’, syncretist and dualist in its combination of re-invented traditionalist ritual and advocacy of condom use – recognising the changing lifestyles among the young in both the city and the countryside. In this, Andile as a woman was challenging the male intellectuals and academics, who have a strong say in Izivivane (Ntshangazi, 2004).

But Andile’s new programme also seemed to reflect the new emphasis on HIV/AIDS policy within the IFP, with which it has been challenging the ANC and President Mbeki, and which has involved Chief Buthelezi talking openly about his son being HIV-positive and proposals to introduce HIV/AIDS tests for couples before marriage (Segar, 2005). In this she was collaborating closely in 2003 with her husband, Nkosi Mhlabinzima Hlengwa, who played a prominent role as a traditional leader and as a member of first the national and later the KwaZulu-Natal provincial parliament in promoting this new policy emphasis within the IFP and mediating between national, provincial and local politics.

The energy and success of Andile’s work as a female cultural entrepreneur and of her fund-raising within this field, however, was not without complications, and a certain level of competition seems to have developed between her efforts and those of her husband. After Nkosi Hlengwa’s unexpected death on 17 March 2005 (Mncube, 2005), Andile found herself increasingly isolated in Thoyana and surrounded by hostility, as local micropolities turned against her. When her Ikhambi ‘cultural village’ caught fire and burnt down, she decided to return to town and to continue her work as a virginity tester and an HIV/AIDS counsellor from her house in Mount Edgecombe, at the entrance point of the highway from Durban into the township and the informal settlements of KwaMashu and Inanda. When I interviewed her again on 2 May 2005, I asked her if these experiences of hers as a female cultural entrepreneur had not made her disillusioned with Zulu tradition, to which she answered: “I have not lost my faith in our traditions and culture, but I have learnt not to trust men” (Gumede, 2005).
As I hope I have demonstrated through the examples above, the ongoing debates in the urban informal settlements and townships around Durban regarding moral and cultural issues are carried on with great intensity and do not represent simply a confrontation between outlooks that are ‘modernist’ and ‘traditional’. Instead, the attitudes and discourses given voice in the debates – as exemplified above by the different churches and schools of virginity testing – are of great variety and testify to the liveliness of debate and energy of cultural imagination and entrepreneurship. It is noteworthy how issues of ‘Africanness’ – what it means and involves to be an African and an African community in the post-apartheid situation – are central to contemporary discussions. This seems to reflect the challenges of the new urban geography, which is being tried out through planning and the redesign of electoral wards and which aims at breaking down the Group Area boundaries between, in this case, the African constituencies of Amaoti and Bhambayi and the Indian-dominated wards of neighbouring Phoenix. This is a far more complicated matter of redesigning political space and changing the meaning of locality than many people expected, and involves controversy and rethinking of notions of identity and community (cf. Kaarsholm, 2005:153).

As this happens at a time when the pluralism of institutionalised politics in the environment is limited, the importance of cultural institutions and discourses for the articulation of differences and debate has been intensified, and one could argue that in significant respects the ‘real’ political disagreements and debates within this important period of transition are carried out through cultural debate rather than those designated formally as ‘political’. In any case, the debates carried out through popular cultural media and institutions constitute a local public sphere of great intensity and diversity. It will be essential for the historical memory of the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa that these debates are recorded, analysed and given space in the archives of the future, and that a local archive is made available within the environment itself for people to consult and use in discussions to come.

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