

‘KAFIR TIME’: PREINDUSTRIAL TEMPORAL CONCEPTS AND LABOUR DISCIPLINE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY COLONIAL NATAL*

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APART from a very few exceptions, South African labour history presents an angle of vision that only allows us to see how external factors – ecological disasters or social controls (devised by capital and the colonial state) – drove labour into the market; or alternatively, they show how the absence of such factors permitted a temporary escape from wage employment. Most students of the period, attribute the self-direction and relative freedom of Natal’s African population to the availability of land which ensured an independent subsistence, as well as to the inability of the small settler community to agree on an effective ‘native labour policy’. Important as these economic and political factors were, such explanations fall short of assessing the rich cultural nuances surrounding the problem, a failing that can only distort our efforts to comprehend the substance of black proletarianization.

What is really remarkable is how precious little we know about the preindustrial African (in this case, northern Nguni) work ethic, about the ways in which such an ‘inner compulsion’ or ethos shaped the African response to the wage economy, determined his work choices and affected his on the job behaviour. A key place in which we might begin to correct this deficiency is by probing more deeply into the changes we can identify in the temporal consciousness of African workers.

As in E. P. Thompson’s article on the temporal reorientation of the English working class,¹ so this piece seeks to examine basic cultural phenomena ordering and coordinating the daily activities of Natal Zulus; it aims to explore changes in time perceptions – the shift from peasant to industrial time – as they were experienced by these northern Nguni-speakers on coming into contact with a society undergoing early stages of capitalist growth; and it concretely demonstrates how Christianity aided the transitional process. This analysis however must be understood in the context of a settler-based colonial regime, in which the master and servant represented totally different social worlds and operated from systems of logic that mutually eluded comprehension. The friction caused by this state of affairs was considerable and may be seen as one of the potent factors blocking Natal’s advancement along industrial lines.

I

Natal was declared a British colony in 1843. Gradually, labour intensive sugar production and shipping came to form the major industries in the economy.

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¹ E. P. Thompson, ‘Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism’, *Past and Present*, xxxviii (1967), 56–97.

While scarcity of manpower was a dominant problem throughout the colonial period, it is noteworthy that initially labour was touted as one of the colony's chief assets; a view shaped as much to the overwhelming numbers of Africans in the District, as by the fact that the indigenous population had from the outset demonstrated their value as peasant producers and, even more significantly, had displayed a willingness to engage in rural and urban wage employment. Thus one of the phenomena that needs to be explained is why the early reports of reliable, diligent workers were by the mid-1850s almost uniformly supplanted with accounts of incorrigible contract breakers who refused to work fully the year round. The concurrent development of Africans insisting on selling their labour on the briefest terms – that is, by the day (or some fraction of that time unit) – was critical in both shaping and reinforcing negative attitudes held by whites of African workers. The matter of concern to us here, however, is not so much to set out the combined causes that made it possible for Africans to sustain this behaviour as to discover the factors which produced it in the first place. Therefore the arguments alluded to above are not strictly relevant to our present theme.

To properly interpret the African response to capital's demands on their labour, archival and ethnographic sources on northern Nguni society have been analysed for pertinent material regarding internalized, entrenched everyday values, especially temporal constraints, not easily assimilable to the new economic needs of the colony. On these issues, direct African testimony for the period is sketchy at best and for this reason settlers' descriptions of local labour have been used. Although this latter body of evidence is largely negative, it was nonetheless found, when checked against the other data, that these records often reflected concrete and surprisingly detailed information about the attitudes of black labourers. Taken together, our sources have enabled us to work up a profile of the peasant worker and to broaden our understanding of black/white colonial labour relations. We begin this discussion with comments made in 1846 by the planter, 'H. W. L.'. His remarks are important because they put the problem into immediate perspective.

I am not one of those, who, when they arrive in a settlement, because they see a number of blacks infer that they have a right to the labour of those persons, and that if they will not work for them they are set down as lazy scoundrels. But I am one of those who maintain that *if a number of Kaffers come voluntarily and offer their service, and accept service at a given rate of money wages, and for a specified time, that I have a right to the services of those persons, until the time expires.* (emphasis added).²

Time was at the nexus of the 'kafir labour problem'. No sooner was a work agreement made than confusion arose from the disparate notions of the white employer and his African employee regarding the computation of time. Otherwise said, the record of persistent desertions from service was in very many instances related to the fact that the terms of master-servant contracts, which were based on European units of measure, did not accord with the African mode of temporal reckoning.

Like most preindustrial people, the Zulu used the moon and stars to keep track of time. The season of cultivation was announced by the *isiLimela*, the star-cluster called the Pleiades. Early star-gazers observed also that the

² 'Labour', *Natal Witness* (hereafter, *NW*), 11 December 1846.

evening star, *isiCelankobe*, appeared when men were asking for boiled maize, their evening meal; and that *iNdosa* rose before the morning star, *Ikwezi*, when night was advanced.³

Inyanga, the word for 'moon', was also the name by which the Zulu called their 'moon period' or lunar month. They computed time by the phases of the moon and the annual cycle was divided into thirteen 'moons',⁴ each associated with ecological changes and social activities that represented time indicators for holidays and seasons. As, for example, *uNcwaba* was the new grass moon, the month in which the land took on a rich, dark green hue; *uMasingana*, the moon of the new season's food, was the time of the annual rites of the First Fruits; and during *uNtlaba* the red flower of the aloe came forth, hence 'moon of the aloes'.

The circuit of the *inyanga* was about twenty-eight days. *Inyanga file* (the 'moon is dead'), that is the interlunary period, 'the moonless day when everyone paid respect to the darkness', was traditionally observed as an unlucky or sacred day of abstinence from work and pleasure seeking.⁵ 'We had no Sundays in Zululand', recalled Mpatshana ka Sodondo, 'what we went by was the waning of the moon'.⁶ When the new moon made her appearance important undertakings were commenced with confidence of success.

Coming as they did from a culture that had adopted and adapted precision instruments and other convenient methods of timekeeping – watches, clocks, solar calendars, etc., the last named containing time units (months) of irregular and capricious lengths (e.g. 28, 29, 30 and 31 days) – whites contemptuously referred to the lunar reckonings as the 'kafir month'. The complications arising from the two systems of time notations were enormous, as this agitated correspondence from 'C.P.', dated (and this is the pivotal clue) 29 October 1846, attest.

This afternoon, because I would not pay a kafir *whose month is up on the last day of the month, I was abused like a thief*. He shook his stick at me, and was so violent that if I could have got assistance, I would have sent him to the tronk [gaol]... [emphasis added].⁷

The following observations made in 1855 by the missionary Alfred Rivett carry more evidentiary weight.

The month of service (their wages are paid monthly) begins with the new moon, but often before it is quite completed, they will come to their master, asking for their money, and although the month is not ended they will declare it is by an appeal to the fact that the moon 'inyanga file' is dead. *They cannot understand there being more than 28 days in a month. It is impossible to make them believe there are 31...* [emphasis added].⁸

³ Henry Callaway, *The Religious System of the AmaZulu* (Cape Town, 1970), 397; A. T. Bryant, *The Zulu People As They Were Before the White Man Came* (Pietermaritzburg, 1949), 251–2.

⁴ David Leslie, *Among the Zulu and the AmaTongas* (New York, 1969), 394–6; Bryant, *The Zulu People*, 254–6; Eileen Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus* (Pietermaritzburg, 1962), 412.

⁵ Bryant, *The Zulu People*, 254–6; Callaway, *The Religious System*, 393–9; R. C. À. Samuelson, *Long, Long Ago* (Durban, 1929), 304.

⁶ Testimony of Mpatshana ka Sodondo, in C. Webb and J. Wright (eds), *The James Stuart Archives* (Pietermaritzburg, 1982), III, 301.

⁷ 'Contracts with Native Labourers', *NW*, 6 November 1846.

⁸ Alfred Rivett, *Ten Years Work in Natal* (London, 1890), 22.

Confusion surrounding this issue led to notable incidents such as the 1858 'Strike among kafir mail carriers'. This involved ten men who had been hired for six months (from 2 July to 2 January) to carry mail between Durban and Maritzburg. Evidently, 'by some process of their own', the postmen 'arrived at the conclusion that their engagement expired on the 28th December'. The situation was made all the worse because of the strikers' stubborn insistence on their 'unwritten and ignorant system of computing time in opposition to the statements of the Postmaster and the interpreter'. To ensure the incident would have no imitators severe punishments rather than fines and light jail sentences were recommended.⁹

What stands forth most clearly is that resorting to summary punishments (including such draconian measures as floggings and extended stretches in the gaol) to discipline preindustrial workers around the question of time, had the effect of driving labour from the market. Yet employers seemed astonishingly slow to learn lessons from this, and were slower still in taking constructive steps to rectify what would prove to be a long-standing problem. Years later, in 1894, a colonist was prompted to suggest that provision be made for 'the boys in town [for] a lecturer or teacher who would, say, once a week, impart free instructions on the European method of computation of time'. This perceptive individual pointed out that,

If it could be explained to them that they are not engaged by the lunar month, it would save much difficulty.... *At present in very many cases, either the master or mistress must give way to the ignorance of the monthly servant, or the native thinks he has been cheated of his time... Many a score of good, hardworking boys found themselves landed in the gaol in consequence of disagreements with their employers, caused in the first instance by their inability to reckon their own time, and then the case is frequently aggravated by the employer being unable to explain matters in the native language... [emphasis added].*¹⁰

Several details arising from this passage merit attention. First, it makes clear the attitude of workers regarding efforts to impose a system foreign to their basic pattern of thought – it was viewed as an attempt to cheat them of their time; secondly, to mollify servants, employers had either to submit to indigenous usages or risk the former's precipitate withdrawal from the market; another point made explicit was the quality of labour – 'Many a score of good, hardworking boys' – alienated from wage employment in consequence of such disputes; and finally, the last raised issue, recognition that mutual inability to communicate needs was a major factor aggravating master–servant relations, we want to examine in depth.

Reverend C. W. Posselt's prefatory comments in his Zulu–English phrase-book published in 1850 'to facilitate intercourse with the natives', catch the blatant mood of cultural chauvinism prevailing in the settlement. Posselt's conviction was that 'mistresses and masters [did] not want to know the barbaric dialect of their servants beyond the small circle of subjects which [had] an immediate reference... to the kind of labour wherein natives were employed...'¹¹ The sentiments evoked by these words no doubt helped

⁹ 'Strike Among the Kafir Mail Carriers', *Natal Mercury* (hereafter, *NM*), 14 January 1858.

¹⁰ 'Monthly Native Servants', *NM*, 25 April 1896.

¹¹ C. W. Posselt, *The Zulu Companion Offered to the Natal Colonist to Facilitate Intercourse with the Natives* (Pietermaritzburg, 1850), 3.

perpetuate a general contempt for Zulu culture. Particularly noticeable was the almost total ignorance of Zulu and the indifference as to acquiring it exhibited by the emigrants.¹² Settlers deigned only to acquire a hybrid version (Fanagalo) of the language.¹³ Rarely was the effort made to learn proper Zulu so as to obtain a clear sense of Zulu terms and phrases. The word 'inyanga', for instance, was translated to conform with European time units; it was not seen as expressive of the lunar-seasonal phenomena of the Zulu *inyanga*. Yet such deliberate perversions or 'mis-translations', as Carl Faye an interpreter in the Native Affairs Department noted, led to most serious consequences and he cautioned that:

It is not advisable, when interpreting, to give the name of an English calendar month as the equivalent of a Zulu lunar month; the two do not begin together, nor do they end together, and besides the Zulu name is expressive in a way peculiar all to itself: then again the seasons themselves are not always identically the same each year, and a mistake in interpreting may have a very important bearing on some question or other and lead to serious consequences. *It is advisable therefore to give the original Zulu name given by a Native, and if the meaning of it be required, to ask the Native himself for it and then give it up in that way* [emphasis added].¹⁴

Problems also arose owing to the absence of a concept in Zulu to denote our 'year'. Take the word *uNyaka* or *umNyaka*. A. T. Bryant tells us that Europeans 'quite mistakenly' assumed this term signified 'year'. However, to the traditional Zulu the word had quite another meaning. Their annual cycle was divided into two seasons of which both had approximately six 'moons'; *uNyaka*, the rainy or field work season; and *ubuSika*, the dry or winter season. The point is *the two were entirely separate and distinct*.¹⁵

Two things seem fairly evident: first, it was no accident that the word denoting the time of greatest activity and importance in the Zulu work schedule was redefined to correspond with the western calendar; and secondly, few individuals were better suited to systematically undertake to corrupt the language than were missionaries who pioneered publishing works in the vernacular, including Zulu phrasebooks, dictionaries and grammars.

Religion is a vehicle for disseminating culture and in carrying forth their civilizing mission the 'soldiers of Christianity' sought, among other things, to inculcate industry, the moral of steady work. 'Our natives will not be anything', the missionary Charles Kilbon observed, 'if they do not feel the propriety and necessity of forming habits of industry and frugality, as their easy going ways do not furnish favourable soil for the Gospel'. Thus we early find individuals such as Reverend Henry Callaway resolving 'to make the Kafirs around [his mission station] feel as much as possible the value of time, labour and skill'.¹⁶ With this plainly being a directed objective, it must have seemed entirely appropriate to stretch the bounds of the preindustrial *uNyaka* to incorporate the notion of a more stable, continuous duration of labour.

¹² Charles Barter, *The Dorp and the Veld* (London, 1852), 223-4.

¹³ D. T. Cole, 'Fanagalo and the Bantu languages in South Africa', *African Studies*, xii, 1 (March 1953), 1-9.

¹⁴ Carl Faye, *Zulu References for Interpreters and Students* (Pietermaritzburg, 1923), 52.

¹⁵ Bryant, *The Zulu People*, 249-51.

¹⁶ American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (hereafter, ABC): 15.4, v. 10. Charles Kilbon to Judson Smith, 21 July 1884; Extracts from the Journal of Rev. Dr Henry Callaway, *Mission Field* (1 October 1859), 37.

How did this exercise in cultural engineering work itself out in practice? Consider a work-seeker being told by a settler-farmer, '*Ngiya kukutola umnyaka wonke*'.¹⁷ Such verbal contracts in fact were constantly entered into if found mutually agreeable. A translation of the arrangement, however, reveals the rub: 'I will hire you for the whole year (twelve 'moons')', was the farmer's version of the contract. But, and this is an important 'but', to the traditional Zulu the above sentence, loosely rendered, translates: 'I will hire you for the whole of the field work season (six 'moons').' This explanation makes more meaningful the following statement (1868) by the magistrate of Alexandra: 'The period of six months continues here to be the maximum term of service, and it seems as if the kafir was [*sic*] unable to [perceive] the idea of a longer unbroken term of exertion.'¹⁸

In other words, often they would be at cross-purposes without their being aware of it. But sensible employers requiring a year round workforce managed to avoid labour difficulties by adopting the relay method. This involved a private arrangement between a colonist and the head of a homestead, the latter agreeing to provide a continuous, circulating supply of labour.

II

A further point of serious contention was the length of the working day. The crisis was most noticeable in commercial agriculture where 'kafir time' had a profoundly adverse effect on the development of sugar plantations.

Aside from the daily passage of the sun (*ilanga*) across the sky and the natural rotation of the seasons, the fundamental tempo and rhythms of life are dictated by, Edward Hall argues, a foundation of unspoken assumptions (primary level culture) accepted as unquestioned reality and which controls everything we do.¹⁹ Hall's very fascinating discussion of this 'other dimension of time', leads us to a wider consideration of northern Nguni cosmography.

Zulu society provides an apt setting for this kind of analysis because their universe was filled with frightening phenomena over which they exercised little control. Intensely real and universally prevalent among the people was the belief in unseen and evil influences. They were habitually occupied with fear of being attacked by *abatakati* (witches or 'evil doers') who went about at dead of night accompanied by familiars, causing sickness and death.²⁰ To avoid meeting these dreaded objects the Zulu conducted their affairs in the safe light of day and refrained from going abroad at night which, we are told, was a great consolation to the small settler community that lived among them.²¹

¹⁷ Posselt, *The Zulu Companion*, 8. J. L. Dohne translates umNyaka as 'Literally – a space of a year; = civil year, a period of a year': *A Zulu-Kafir Dictionary* (Cape Town, 1857), 251.

¹⁸ Secretary for Native Affairs, Natal, File 1/3/18. Annual Report for the County of Alexandra, 14 January 1868; George Russell, *The History of Old Durban and Reminiscences of an Emigrant of 1850* (Durban, 1899), 104.

¹⁹ Edward Hall, *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time* (New York, 1984), 3–4.

²⁰ C. L. S. Nyembezi, *Zulu Proverbs* (Johannesburg, 1963), 113.

²¹ Axel-Ivar Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (Sweden, 1976), 276–8, 286 and 364; Thomas B. Jenkinson, *AmaZulu: The Zulus Their Past History, Manners, Customs, and Language* (New York, 1969), 30; ABC: 15.4, v. 5, Josiah Tyler to Rufus Anderson, 14 February 1853.

Along with sinister spirits, natural hazards in the physical environment posed added constraints on traditional societies. In times past, to secure immunity from fever the Zulu retired to their huts before sundown, emerging in the morning when the dew was off the grass.²² This adaptive response most probably originated in regions where malaria was endemic. Force of habit and continued belief in the efficacy of the custom may account for its eventual spread outside Zululand. But notwithstanding similar preventive strategies, homesteads in the more tropical colonial districts continued to suffer from sicknesses thought to be environmentally related.

It is important to appreciate some of this background because it helps us greatly to understand how the conventions or protective measures taken to deal with these natural and superhuman forces may have operated outside the traditional context and may have ultimately come to interfere with the industrial work regime on commercial sugar estates. Starting in 1849, the whole coastline of Natal was taken up in cane production. The plantation economy during its formative years was essentially a decentralized system which incorporated two productive processes within the ownership of one unit. One such operation was agricultural, based on the cultivation and harvesting of cane. The other was industrial involving the crushing of cane and the boiling and treatment of juice in the mill.²³

Observations made by the successful planter Edmund Morewood raise an important point about the availability of local labour that should not be lost to view. Except at 'crop-time', Morewood asserts, the cultivation of sugar required very little hard labour, and then, as it happened, the best time for taking off the crop fell in the slack season (*ubuSika*) of the Zulu calendar when hands were most plentiful.²⁴ Another point well worth record and attention is that, insofar as the agricultural side of the operations was concerned, no substantial readjustments were required in the temporal bearings or the labour rhythms of the workforce. Where difficulty materialized was around the industrial aspects of the plantation which introduced a time routine that ran counter to indigenous conventions. These are facts not lightly to be minimized. For the pressing concern of Natal planters and other early employers of African labour was *not*, as commonly assumed, 'will the Kafirs work?'; rather, the big question was: *could Africans be persuaded to submit to an extension of work 'hours' beyond their customary active work day?*²⁵

It seems few cane growers understood the rationale behind the peasant notion of a 'fair day's work', yet most agreed that the African's diurnal pattern of 'late' rising and 'early' retirement had a ruinous effect on the nascent industry. Roberts Babbs, proprietor of the Umlass Plantation and an individual reputedly possessing 'extraordinary skill in managing kafirs',²⁶ provides invaluable details regarding the peasant's disinclination to discard their traditional chronology.

²² Captain Walter R. Ludlow, *Zululand and Cetewayo* (London, 1882), 99.

²³ Peter Richardson, 'The Natal sugar industry in the nineteenth century', in W. Beinart *et al.*, *Putting a Plough to the Ground* (Johannesburg, 1986), 136-7.

²⁴ 'A description of the farm Compensation', by Edmund Morewood, Durban, 1853, in Alan Hattersley (ed.), *The Natalians* (Pietermaritzburg, 1940), 89-91.

²⁵ 'Labour', *NM*, 13 June 1856.

²⁶ 'Mr Babbs's letter', *NM*, 5 October 1855.

It is generally known that the Kafir looks to the sun's course to regulate his hours of labour; that 'puma langa' with him, commences about an hour after sunrise, and that 'shuna langa' begins with the same time before sunset. It is difficult either to induce or compel him to work either before or after those periods of the day, which have received his arbitrary definition of sunrise and sunset.²⁷

Essentially the difficulty was this. The value of time fluctuated as the cycle of sugar production passed from summer to winter season. In summer there were sufficient working hours (14 hours of daylight) to perform routine operations such as weeding, and, etc. All the heavy work however came at one time of the year – in winter with the harvesting and crushing. Once the cane was cut it was important to convey it to the mill as rapidly as possible, and then carry out the crushing immediately. Neglect at this stage could ruin the quality of the sugar.²⁸ At the height of the manufacturing process, from June through September when the bulk of the crop would be attempted to be secured, the average of the sun's course was ten and a half hours. Allowing the peasant's definition of a work day (as between sunrise and sunset) meant the loss of two precious daylight hours. According to Babbs, ten hours of 'good efficient labour without including meal times' were needed to perform only 'a moderate day's work'; were labourers left to persist in their habits a day's work could not be performed and a great amount of produce would be jeopardized, if not spoiled. Nor, he contended, was it unreasonable to demand ten working hours per day for in Mauritius fourteen and fifteen hours were not unfrequent, and similar working hours were customary in the West Indies.²⁹

Sobering lessons were drawn from the experience of the Springfield Estate. Writing of the problems plaguing that new operation, the *Natal Mercury* reported that:

The proprietors have secured for the present a sufficient number of Kafirs for *day work*; but it is essential to the perfect success of sugar manufacture that the operations during the season, should proceed night and day, without interruptions; and for this purpose, it will be absolutely necessary to obtain labour of a more settled and suitable character. *The aversion of our natives to night work*, and to any work in cold weather, as well as their peculiar social habits will for a lengthened period render it impossible to rely on their labour alone [emphasis added].³⁰

Three months later in September 1855, the *Mercury's* lead article announced 'The Springfield Sugar Mill [had] been closed for more than a fortnight for want of labour...'³¹ Babbs, in offering a counterview of Springfield's misfortunes and the problems confronting commercial farming in general, emphasized strongly that 'want of labour' was not the only nor the most important factor hampering tropical agriculture. That the industry was undercapitalized (i.e. without up-to-date machinery) and lacked the necessary organizational and managerial skills to cope with the cultural idiosyncrasies of the workforce, were all potent elements in its early failures.³²

²⁷ 'Labour', *NM*, 13 June 1856.

²⁸ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (New York, 1974), 27.

²⁹ 'Labour', *NM*, 13 June 1856.

³⁰ 'A visit to Springfield', *NM*, 27 June 1855.

³¹ Lead Article, *NM*, 21 September 1855.

³² 'The Labour question', *NM*, 5 October 1855.

Here we should acknowledge their attempts to impose an industrial discipline by apportioning 'piece work'. As early as 1852 hiring by the job rather than for stated periods of service was recommended for cane cultivation. The chief argument employed for advocating such an arrangement was that parties undertaking tasks worked more satisfactorily and got through much more in less time than the usual day labour. 'It was no uncommon sight', recorded the Inanda magistrate, 'to see the labourers under this system returning from the fields by noon, or shortly after, having completed their tasks for the day'.³³ Despite such efforts to increase efficiency and attract labour onto the market, the response of Natal Africans was negligible.

The preceding discussion shows most clearly how crucial the struggle over time was for sugar plantations where the time between removing and manufacturing the crop was very short and the sheer drudgery of the tasks put an enormous strain on workers. But what also needs to be kept in view is that an independent workforce was incompatible with sugar, a crop almost invariably associated with repressive labour systems. This is why it became imperative for Natal cane growers to introduce, beginning in 1860, indentured labourers from India.

III

The situation developed somewhat differently in the urban areas. This should not, however, be taken to mean that migrant workers completely discarded their temporal identity or that no traces of it survived in the town milieu. Even in the major European centres Africans 'succeeded in their usual stolid fashion of establishing the custom of a day's work as between "sun up" and "sun down"'. Wrote Russell in 1895, '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.'³⁴ Throughout this period the 'kafir month' also continued to be problematic, forcing government belatedly to seek a legislative remedy. Hence for the purposes of Act 40 of 1894, the Master and Native Servant Law, a new calendar was devised wherein the twelve months were officially given an equal number of units of thirty days.³⁵ The reform however had only a limited impact on the diminution of time disputes. What was especially at issue was the question of cultural conversion.

Several town mission schools had by 1862 informally included in their curricula matters of common knowledge and scientific explanations of natural phenomena. At Lewis Grout's mission formal examinations in basic astronomy were conducted; and, as already noted, Reverend Callaway had determined 'to teach the value of time, labour and skill'.³⁶ But the conversion process was slow. This was partly owing to the migratory nature of the

³³ 'Sugar planting in Natal', *Natal Times and Mercantile and Agricultural Gazette*, 5 November 1852; Resident Magistrate Report Inanda Division, 1880, in *Blue Book for the Colony of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1880), Section JJ, 101.

³⁴ Russell, *The History of Old Durban*, 128-9.

³⁵ Robert L. Hutchins (ed.), *Statutes of Natal, 1845-1899*, II (Pietermaritzburg, 1901).

³⁶ G. H. Mason, *Zululand: A Mission Tour* (London, 1862), 24; J. W. Colenso, *Ten Weeks in Natal* (Cambridge, 1855), 256-7; Henry Callaway's Journal, 37.

workforce; and partly because, as Hall explains, 'one of the principal characteristics of PL [primary level culture] is that it is particularly resistant to manipulative attempts to change it from the outside... Unlike the law or religious or political dogma, these rules cannot be changed by fiat, nor can they be imposed on others against their will, because they are already internalized.'³⁷ As a rule, then, Natal employers learned either to give way to traditional usages such as the lunar month, or do without local labour altogether.

One should not infer from this that the reaction of town workers to the new set of temporal boundaries was uniform. Quite rightly you would expect attitudes to vary from period to period and from one group to another. Hence in centres like Durban and Maritzburg it is possible to discern, one and at the same time, strenuous resistance and quite remarkable adaptive responses as well.

On coming to town the fluctuating workforce found itself caught in (to borrow Le Goff's phrase) 'a chronological net',³⁸ a complex fabric of merchant time, church time, leisure time controls, and so on. Along with new work routines, for example, came the regimentation of organic functions: monthly workers were obliged to alter their meal patterns to authorized intervals of breakfast, lunch and supper, a practice contrary to the traditional custom of eating twice a day, that is around 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. or dusk. Yet they did not readily yield to these efforts by management to co-ordinate job schedules. Strong attachment continued to be shown for the custom of taking meals in common. Labourers steadfastly opposed attempts to rotate meal-times, refusing to eat till all their workmates assembled 'to share in the pot'.³⁹

Mornings in Zululand were ushered in by the rising of the *Ikwezi* star, around 4 a.m. But it was the music of beasts, birds and insects that engaged the immediate attention for the singing or calling was kept up the whole twenty-four hours constituting a day, by various animals, in turn, as their *time* for performing came round. Zulu folktales turned the singing and calling of birds into language. Thus the large black owl, called uMandubulu, was said to say, '*Vuka, vuka, sekusile*', 'Get up, get up, it has dawned'. About the same time the iNkovana owl would be heard to say, '*Woza, woza, woza ngikubone*', 'Come, come, come that I may see you'. And at Zulu homesteads the common cock entered the vocal competition shouting, '*Woza la! Si lapha!*', 'Come over here! This is where we are!' The first cockcrow announced the small hours of the night; the second crowing saluted the dawn.⁴⁰

Man-made signals replaced this natural performance and aided town workers in determining their temporal bearings. Though public clock-time was established at Durban in 1860,⁴¹ it is valid to say that many years would pass before the migrant population developed clock consciousness. Rather devices of a more utilitarian character, the most familiar being the 'time bell', regulated work and various aspects of nineteenth century urban life.

'True local time' was first recognized in 1854 when the mayor semi-officially

³⁷ Hall, *The Dance of Life*, 7.

³⁸ Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1980), 48.

³⁹ Russell, *The History of Old Durban*, 130.

⁴⁰ Samuelson, *Long, Long Ago*, 45-6 and 413-19; testimony of Lunguza ka Mpukane, in *Stuart Archives*, 1, 322; Nyembezi, *Zulu Proverbs*, 60.

⁴¹ Russell, *The History of Old Durban*, 495.

commenced the practice of hoisting a flag on his tall flagstaff at five minutes before nine every morning and lowering it at nine in the evening. But owing to burgessess questioning the accuracy of the time-flag led to it being given up. Under alternative arrangements the Corporation undertook to ring St Paul's cathedral bell every morning, 'precisely at nine o'clock solar time'. The bell began to chime at the hour and continued for two minutes.⁴²

The practice at Maritzburg, the administrative centre of the colony and headquarters of the military, was to discharge a cannon at eight o'clock every morning – the hour when all African servants and labourers were expected to be at their work. Presently, the hour of gunfire was altered to nine but, as local lore has it, workers experienced difficulty phasing their 'inner timing mechanisms' with the new starting hour of labour. In recounting (1881) the familiar tale Bertram Mitford wrote,

[he] still persisted in sticking to the old hour, and from sheer force of habit would go to his master for his daily task. The 'baas', however, would put him off: 'Don't bother me now, come by-and-by when the gun fires!' 'What does he say?' would be the inquiry of an expectant group when their spokesman returned. 'He says "come by-and-by".' Directly the expected detonation was heard nearly every native throughout the city would exclaim 'Haow! Ubain-bai!', and betake himself to his work. The expression stuck, and forthwith the gun became ubain-bai! among the native population of Natal, extending thence to Zululand.⁴³

From Russell's historical ruminations one learns further that, 'all good niggers were supposed to go to their respective places when the camp bugles recalled the military to their quarters at 9 pm'.⁴⁴

Decisive progress towards an industrial regimen came with the imposition of the seven-day work/rest rhythm,⁴⁵ a custom transmitted throughout a large part of the world by Christianity. Sabbath-day observances therefore made it incumbent upon mistresses and masters to teach such useful notions as the 'week', the 'weekend' and the proper time sequence of 'workdays' (euphemistically termed 'weekdays'), for which there were no words in Zulu. Hence Monday came to be appropriately known to servants as 'the turning out to work-day' (*umSombuluko*); Tuesday, as 'work-day the second' (*umSombuluko wesibili* or *Olwesibili*); and so on till Saturday, which became 'the filling up or completing day' (*umGqibelo*). Sunday or 'church day' was *iSonto*.⁴⁶

Influences of the weekly rhythm ran shallowest in remote country districts. Employed labour on small white farms often took advantage of the Sunday proscription to earn a few additional pence working on land occupied by Indians.⁴⁷ One group of sabbath-breakers, reproved for not keeping the Lord's Day, summed up their sentiments with the query: 'Why did not the Lord

⁴² 'Time', *NM*, 7 February 1854; 'Uniformity of time', *NM*, 17 March 1853; Russell, *The History of Old Durban*, 436.

⁴³ Bertram Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country: Its Battlefields and Its People* (London, 1883), 148.

⁴⁴ Russell, *The History of Old Durban*, 495.

⁴⁵ For a wider discussion of the 'week' see Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Seven Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week* (New York, 1985).

⁴⁶ Bryant, *The Zulu People*, 256.

⁴⁷ 'Coolie masters and Kafir servants', *Natal Colonists*, 7 January 1873.

command the monkeys to keep holy the Sabbath and not on that day to rob our gardens?’⁴⁸

The reverse of this can be seen in the towns where the growing experience was towards an outward conformity to these new points of temporal references. There are of course notable reasons for this. The urban centres presented stimulating environments, challenged traditional assumptions, and fostered change. But perhaps of even more permanent significance was the complex nature of the urban economy and the conditions of urban labour. To generalize broadly, a number of practical advantages were to be gained in recognizing the established work-week pattern, the public holidays and other structured time intervals encountered during their town sojourn. All of this and more is indicated in the fact that by 1881,⁴⁹ but the cumulative evidence suggests well before that date, segments of the cities’ black labouring population were perceiving time in discrete market as well as non-economic terms – namely, regular work time, over time and leisure time.

People in the urban areas were encouraged to explore a variety of choices. In this connection it is noteworthy that not a few young men could be found who had learned to ‘mark time’ spent on chores so as to attend with master’s permission or at their own insistence, the one hour’s school each evening in the week. At Maritzburg, St. Mary’s seven o’clock bell tolled the start of classes; and a ‘native’ service was generally held twice on Sunday – one in the afternoon at three o’clock and the other in the evening at seven.⁵⁰ Attendance however fluctuated very considerably owing to various causes, a leading one being the migratory character of the workforce which was a bar to early mission churches having any real lasting influence.

Observance of traditional holidays regularly interrupted the flow of labour; and natural rhythms continued to have an impact on work patterns and social customs. The ‘moon of the new season’s fruits’ (*uMasingana*) was widely celebrated among Natal Zulus. While this annual festival officially opened the season of plenty, the actual abundance of foodstuffs came with the gathering in of the ripe grain from the fields, about March and April. Therefore the common practice during the first four months of the year was for large numbers of Africans to withdraw to their kraals to help with the harvest and eat green mealies. This practice lessened the amount of labour in the towns and threw extra work on those who remained.⁵¹

Before the advent of electricity for general consumption,⁵² seasonal differences in the duration of daylight affected the length of the work day and other

⁴⁸ Methodist Missionary Society: File 317. Extracts from the Journal of Reverend Joseph Jackson, 7 January 1861. As Lunguza ka Mpukane stated, ‘There was no such thing as Sunday or a day of rest in Zululand. We worked any and every day. We knew nothing of Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, etc. We heard of all this in Natal. It was incumbent on every man to work every day. Should he not work he would be asked who told him not to work’; in *Stuart Archives*, 1, 339.

⁴⁹ See, for example, ‘Togt Kafirs again’, *NM*, 11 June 1881.

⁵⁰ United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (hereafter, USPG): Walter Baugh to E. Hawkins, 8 May 1859.

⁵¹ USPG: Report of D. E. Robinson, Missionary at Durban, 30 June 1873.

⁵² Apart from a small electrical plant laid down in the Market Square in 1886, oil continued to be the universal method of lighting until the late ‘nineties. See for example, John McIntyre, ‘From settlement to city’, in Allister Macmillan (ed.), *Durban Past and Present* (Durban, 1936), 51.

areas of social life. Missionaries frequently remarked that school attendance fell off with the brightening of days in summer when the general practice with householders was to put off their tea an hour or more to take a walk, or engage in some outdoor occupation while the daylight continued, a custom that kept servants on the job until between eight or nine o'clock. With the return of the colder season school attendance increased.⁵³

Another factor directly contributing to irregular trends in colonial commerce was the weather. Labour demands at Durban and Maritzburg, for example, fluctuated with the overberg trade. Year after year, prior to the coming of the railways, trade with the interior during the winter came practically to a standstill. Drought, frost and grass fires destroyed the pasturage, making it impossible to work the oxen along the dusty roads. Moreover the business of the merchant middleman was subject to the accidents of wagon transport often caused by heavy rains which rendered roads impassable, thus preventing delivery of goods into the towns. Notwithstanding the erratic nature of these occupations, we are told, in slack spells 'time was by no means frittered away'. One wholesale firm managed to maintain discipline by occupying 'boys' with the job of 'wheeling sand from the billowy heaps in Smith Street to fill up the hollow at the back of the store'.⁵⁴

Port employment was especially at the mercy of the seasons. Violent winter gales caused numerous wrecks on Durban's back-beach and frequently vessels were left riding at anchor in the roadstead because shifting bars and sandbanks blocked the entrance to the harbour. But a busy day at Port Natal usually commenced at 7 a.m. and ended at 5 or 6 p.m. From the 'eighties, and with improved shipping facilities, the industry grew more labour-intensive. During periods of increased trade, operations proceeded round the clock and on Sundays. By 1895 tiers of electric globes illuminated the wharves and permitted workers to carry on with their tasks after dark.⁵⁵ Such conditions not unexpectedly gave rise to labour unrest. That dissatisfaction is vividly seen in the rich record of industrial protest among dockhands of which time disputes were a major grievance. Most of all, the sources convey that it was through the process of defining this as well as other concerns central to their daily existence and in the course of struggling around these issues, Africans gained not only a new time sense but a greater understanding of their role in the workplace. Specifically, the disputes to which we allude were centred on demands for both the 'weekend' and Sabbath rest days.

A usage that crystallized into town custom was the Saturday half-holiday. It came to flourish in full favour at Durban in 1856 when wholesale merchants agreed they would close their places of business at two o'clock on Saturday afternoon.⁵⁶ Subsequently the hour was pushed back to one o'clock. With the early cessation of weekend business activities came the separate social timing of organized entertainment. As, for example, the whole of Maritzburg, men, women and children, black and white, turned out for the great weekly festival conducted by the military band in front of Government House; similar

⁵³ USPG: Walter Baugh to E. Hawkins, 10 October 1860.

⁵⁴ Russell, *The History of Old Durban*, 128-9; John Robinson, *A Life in South Africa* (London, 1900), 188-9.

⁵⁵ J. Forsyth Ingram, *The Colony of Natal* (London, 1895), 91; McIntyre, 'From settlement to city', 51.

⁵⁶ Russell, *The History of Old Durban*, 286.

Saturday concerts were offered by Durban's Volunteer Band on the Market Square.⁵⁷ African workers also made use of the leisure period tending to personal needs or simply relaxing in the company of friends. Of course, it would become a source of provocation when deprived of this, their 'rightful season of rest'. 'Togt' men, that is the day labourers who were heavily employed on the wharves and who frequently were compelled to work through the weekends including on Sundays, raised the loudest protest. From 1881 onwards, it is common to come upon references such as the following:

Employers of Kafir labour experience great inconvenience frequently on account of togt natives refusing to work after certain hours. They seem to be impressed with the idea that they ought not to work after one o'clock on Saturday, six o'clock during the remainder of the week, and not on Sundays at all. Masters are placed at a great disadvantage by the refusal of togt natives to work at these specified times...⁵⁸

Since the laws regulating daily workers did not state what number of hours constituted a day's work – especially with regard to Saturday, how much labourers were entitled to for Sunday work, etc., – strike action around these questions was significant. Although generally conducted on a small scale, several major strikes did occur during this period. Such as in 1895 when 'about 200 natives, led by one over 6 ft high, in the employ of the Union Co., ... marched in a body on Saturday afternoon to the residence of Mr T. S. Alston, the Company's Durban Agent', demanding over-time pay.⁵⁹ Four years later, nine Africans appealed against the magistrate's ruling which forced them to work after one o'clock. A higher court deciding for the appellants concluded that as the 'Togt Regulations' were silent with regard to the hours of Saturday labour, daily workers were entitled to follow town custom.⁶⁰ Clearly this was an important victory for labour – employers were now obliged to pay black workers for half-holiday overtime.

One remaining observation must be added to the arguments and illustrations presented here. But first it is helpful to recall how the Zulu was deterred by fear of the *abatakati* from participating in labour and other affairs after sunset. Consistent with this aversion was their resistance to night work on sugar estates. It is therefore intriguing, given the imposing magnitude of this belief, that unlike their custom-abiding rural counterparts, town workers appear to have overcome their terror of the powers loosed in the night. What special set of circumstances or modifying influences justified the risks implied in breaching this proscription? How did urban labourers reinterpret the ancient norms to suit their altered behaviour?

Two broad categories of night-time engagements were recognized in the municipalities – that which was considered socially permissible and that which was characterized as anti-social. Subsumed under the former was night shift job work made necessary to accommodate periods of increased shipping at the Point. Large monetary inducements tempted servants, monthly employed and working daily, to hire out nightly on the docks. From these efforts by blacks to maximize their earnings, we get complaints from masters that, 'some of

⁵⁷ *Life at Natal a Hundred Years Ago, by a Lady* (Cape Town, 1972), 78 and 127.

⁵⁸ *Natal Advertiser* (hereafter, *NA*), 9 May 1893.

⁵⁹ 'Labour demands', *NW*, 26 November 1895.

⁶⁰ 'Native work on Saturday: Lower Court decision quashed', *NA*, 15 April 1899.

their boys after working in town till 5 o'clock went to the Point and worked till 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock, receiving something like 4 or 5s. for the night and, thus, instead of having a full blown native in the morning they had a half dead one'.⁶¹

In other respects the enlargement of the day to encompass late night activities constituted a problem of growing proportion. Whereas an early Durbanite could write that initially curfews were unnecessary for 'as a rule superstition and custom operated favourably in restraining Africans from being abroad after dark',⁶² before the opening of the 1860s the migrant population had summoned the courage to engage not only in 'legitimate' but also 'questionable' nocturnal pursuits. Recurring throughout the documentation, decade after decade, are reports of loiterers and vagrants who nightly roamed about the towns' residential areas and suburbs. The one huge irony in all this is that the conditions creating this situation were largely of the towns' own making.

Beyond the wages earned for their day's exertion, jobbers could expect no support for their day-to-day sustenance or upkeep. Masters were neither legally committed to the extra expense of supplying rations nor were they bound to provide shelter. And in the early decades of the colonial period, except for the modest efforts of mission churches, there were no eating facilities to speak of, no public resthouses or other accommodations where, say, for a small sum, Africans could refresh themselves and find a hot meal. This was an extraordinary situation for a people accustomed to the idea of *ubuntu* (hospitality), the social quality of neighbourliness which made a *mntu* (a human being). Yet these were the dismal facts of town existence. To satisfy the basic human requirements day workers were forced to deviate from custom and to modify their ideology in a way that allowed them to retain familiar institutions while adjusting to a starkly new experience.⁶³

We do not as yet possess direct African testimony regarding these matters for this period; but it may quite possibly be, as Philip Mayer found much later in his East London study, that migrants rationalized away ancient fears with the explanation that the evil power of witches was largely associated with the community at home, that in the European centres they were safe from the witch's pursuit.⁶⁴

Whatever the combination of circumstances that 'let loose' these men upon the towns, the municipal response was to pass legislation which in effect attempted to colonize the worker's leisure time. The 9 o'clock curfew bell sounded in Maritzburg officially for the first time in 1871; three years later similar measures were instituted at Durban. These laws remain in effect today.

⁶¹ 'Native labour: employers taking action', *NM*, 11 July 1902.

⁶² Russell, *The History of Old Durban*, 495.

⁶³ For a broader discussion of this problem see Keletso E. Atkins, 'The cultural origins of an African work ethic and practices', unpublished Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1986, ch. 6.

⁶⁴ Philip Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanization in a South African City* (Cape Town, 1971), 160 and 163-4.

SUMMARY

This article attempts to understand in substantive terms the nature of black proletarianization in Natal, South Africa. This is undertaken by moving beyond arid explanations of outside agencies to focus on some of the underlying cultural premises that ordered the day-to-day activities of northern Nguni communities. This article examines their temporal perceptions, exploring within the colonial context the shift from peasant to industrial time, and showing the central role mission churches played in the transition process.

Two important disclosures emerge as a result of this study. First, it conclusively demonstrates the existence of a rich history of nineteenth century African labour action (where until now the overwhelming assumption among historians has been that no such activity existed), much of which was related to the struggle over the definition of time. Secondly, it presents a more balanced picture of the migrant worker. One finds groups of labourers who continued to adhere to old attachments, while others adapted in a rather remarkable fashion to the conditions of the industrial workplace. Most striking of all, is that both were capable of dictating the terms of labour, whether they involved demands for the lunar month or the half-holiday and Sabbath rest day.