

BURNING FOR BAFANA: ON THE SYMBOLIC MICRO-POLITICS OF SACRIFICE AND REBELLION

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*This essay examines a seemingly inexplicable event that transpired in Mamelodi township South Africa in which a crowd celebrating the victory of the South African national soccer (football) team Bafana Bafana, demanded that three local black police “sacrifice” their car – allow it to be burned – in honour of the team. The police refused and in the ensuing melee, several were injured and the vehicle destroyed. Drawing on James Scott’s concept of “hidden transcript” and on Kristeva’s work on revolt, *Burning for Bafana* argues that more than a sports riot, this incident can be understood as a symbolic micro-political act, precisely representing the opportunities and limit of the South African transition, the complexities of the social identity of the black police, and the psycho-political meaning of the proposed sacrificial burning of the car as both rebellion and reconciliation.*

Preface: “Give up car in honour of soccer team”

A crowd attacked three policemen in Pretoria who refused to give up their car “in honour of the South African soccer team.” The policemen were in a private car in Mamelodi on Wednesday, shortly after South Africa trounced Ghana 3-0 in the Africans Nations Cup, when they were confronted by a group of people.

According to a police spokesman, the people stopped the car and demanded that the policemen give it up so it could be destroyed as a sacrifice “to honour our Bafana Bafana”. When the three refused the crowd became aggressive. The driver apparently panicked and attempted to drive away, slightly injuring 11 people in the process. The driver was severely beaten and stoned before he managed to flee. He was found unconscious in a mealie field and rushed to a Pretoria hospital, the spokesman said. A charge of reckless driving has been laid against him. In turn, the three policemen have laid charges of theft, assault and damage to property.

But it seems that the “fans” went ahead with their plan. The burnt-out shell of the car was found later. *Johannesburg Star*, February 2, 1996.

Looking for Hidden Transcripts (in All the Wrong Places)

Go further, go elsewhere, interpret. Interpretation, as I understand it, is itself a revolt. (Kristeva, J., 2000, p. 2)

The struggle between rich and poor...is not merely a struggle over work, property rights, grain and cash. It is also a struggle over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labelled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give partisan meaning to local history. (J.Scott, 1985, p. xvii)

Because something is happening here and you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones? (B. Dylan, 1965)

In the late 1970's James Scott spent fourteen months conducting research in a small village in rural Malaysia, seeking to describe and understand the ways in which the poorest and least powerful peasants resisted domination by and utter subservience to the more affluent peasant class and wealthy land-owners. Scott was troubled both by the romanticized, essentialist narrative of the peasant as imminent heroic revolutionary, characteristic of much 1960's-era accounts on the activist left, and particularly by that "progressive" social theory of that time which posited peasant "false consciousness" bred of presumed hegemonic power and insuperable ideology, that in its path, crushed critical analysis and self-interest, normalizing vast inequity and breeding continuous docility and tranquil acceptance of the status quo. With an ethnographic eye, Scott discovered something else, something hidden from the awareness of the wealthy and powerful in Malaysia, and from the political theorist and the social scientist in the West: continuous, low intensity "class-warfare," every-day resistance by the poor waged with he termed the "weapons of the weak": "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth" (p.29). The world was suddenly a far more complicated and conflictual place.

Scott (1990) reveals a multi-layered social environment where the political is personal; a world of continuous symbolic and material conflict fought along the fault lines of domination and resistance at the very margins of official awareness. It is a conflict both constituted by and recorded through competing narratives: a "public transcript" relating and explaining the world from the partisan perspective of the dominant and "hidden transcripts", alternate accounts, interpretations, hopes and understandings generated and expressed through the lives of the oppressed.

Scott (1990) asserts that the very operation of power relations constructs, as discursive "artefact", both the justificatory public transcript and its antithesis, the hidden transcript of dissent (p.27). The boundaries, the "frontier" between the public and hidden transcripts represents a dynamic zone of contestation over the control of meaning and practice. Here discourse meld and subordinate groups engage in what Scott calls "infrapolitics:" "the circumspect struggle waged daily...like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum." (Scott, 1990, p. 183) Much of this struggle is fought in disguised, symbolic form, often cloaked in apparent deference to the authority and legitimacy of the powerful, a resistance hidden "...in ritualisms of subordination that serve both to disguise their purposes and to provide them with a ready route of retreat that may soften the consequences of a possible failure." (p. 96)

Hidden transcripts represent a coded language of revolt, voiced through symbolic practice, which must bear the intrinsic burden of being both sufficiently explicit to provide succour and solidarity to the weak, while remaining necessarily unintelligible by the powerful; of being both substitute for direct assertion and simultaneously, a form of actual resistance. Scott's catalogue of forms of disguised defiance - the reach of what he is willing to recognize as symbolic political struggle - therefore comes to an attenuated end at the site of infra-political conflicts fought at blurred margins of public awareness.

But, does it make sense to look for hidden transcripts, to interpret as *political*, acts and discourse that are not consciously constructed or experienced as revolt by anyone? Since 1990 I have been engaged – albeit intermittently – in a project to do just that: to identify, describe and understand the ways in which macro-political dimensions of power are articulated and symbolically manifest in discourse, culture and behaviour that is typically labelled by political or professional elites as deviant, dysfunctional or pathological. Can what transpired on that field in Mamolodi in 1996 be understood as a political act?

Sports riots are of course not unique to South Africa, having become something of a globalized phenomenon. In April 2003 for example, despite proactive initiatives to promote calm, remarkably similar riots - characterized by wide-spread destruction of property (including the burning of cars), violent confrontations with police and the arrest of dozens of young people - simultaneously erupted hundreds of miles apart near the campuses of both the winning and losing universities competing for the U.S. college ice hockey championship. The next morning, as smoking hulks of cars were being towed away and panes of plate glass restored, university officials, police representatives, academic “experts” and the young people themselves were hard pressed to offer a cogent explanation of what had transpired, and while the morning-after discourse turned exceedingly serious and sanctimonious, several more candid students were said to be voicing excitement at the prospect of next year’s riot.¹ (Gilyard, 2003; NHPR, 2003)

The 1996 Africa Cup of Nations soccer tournament occurred at an unprecedented time in South African history - a particular moment abundantly saturated with hopes and expectations, anxieties and uncertainties - and the spectacle of the team’s improbable victory came as an easily and richly layered construction adorned with obvious political, social and psychological symbolism ready for instantaneous construction and public consumption. This was still the heady era fashioned through the discourse of the “rainbow nation” - reborn through a supposedly peaceful “miracle” - rejoining and ready to give moral leadership to an adoring global community. For much of black South Africa, after centuries of struggle and domination, this was the long-awaited moment of hope and promise; and for many whites, an unexpected period of relief and even cautious optimism, as they weighed what had been gained and lost in the unexpected transition to non-racial democracy. This was the time when all seemed possible, before it became apparent that HIV infection, violent assault, joblessness and poverty would not easily give way before the optimistic wave of democratic participation, free-market economics and forgiving, non-racialism.

Hosting the African Cup of Nations tournament represented a symbolic return to Africa for a nation long-ostracized by its continental neighbours, much as successfully hosting and winning the Rugby World Cup the year earlier had signalled re-joining the Commonwealth and the broader community of (particularly Western) sporting nations from which it has so long been excluded. But soccer meant more. Like all institutions in South Africa, sport was racially separated. But even more, each major population group seemed to take communal ownership of one of the three major sports: cricket was clearly the sport of the white “Brits”; Rugby assumed huge popularity and cultural meaning amongst the Afrikaner; and “football”, soccer, became the sporting passion of millions of black South Africans who played the game as children on ill-kempt make-shift pitches and wildly rooted by the tens of thousands, blowing vuvuzelas, at key matches between their (mostly black) teams, like the Mamelodi Sundowns, Kaizer Chiefs (“Amakhosi”, complete with a symbol of an American Indian in full headdress) and Soweto’s favourites, the Orlando

1 Explanations of sports riots ranged from the social (creation of an ongoing expectation and “culture” of riots, or lack of sufficient university and police resolve); to the evolutionary/biological (atavistic springtime expression by young males), and of course concepts of “mob psychology” that haven’t shifted much since the writings of LeBon (1960/1895). (Gilyard, 2003; NHPR, 2003).

Pirates (“Up the Bucs”!).

The 1995 Rugby World Cup victory became a site of iconic national significance in the discursive construction of “new South Africa” not because it was held in the country or that the South African team, the “Springboks” emerged victorious, but rather for what President Nelson Mandela did and wore at the final match. President Mandela arrived at Ellis Park Stadium Johannesburg wearing a Springbok team jersey (team Captain Francois Pienaar’s Number 6), a symbol that until that very moment had been widely read within black South Africa as representing Afrikaner racial oppression. And the President not only adopted the symbol, he co-opted and transformed it, embracing the (all white) team, declaring that these are “our boys” deserving of support from the whole South African nation. The seemingly inconceivable image of a jubilant Nelson Mandela in Springbok jersey and cap on the victory podium with Pienaar, instantly constructed and gave substance to the discourse of reconciliation and a common national identity.²

As the tournament approached, the South African national soccer team had no such symbol or mascot or even official name, and judging from its recent history, little chance of replicating the success of the Springboks. But the Rugby victory seemed to generate a popular expectation of another, far more improbable sports miracle and the team – known in Soweto and later nation-wide as Bafana Bafana (Our boys. Our boys!) – were wildly popular.³ This was a racially integrated team with a majority of black players, led by a white coach and Captain: a structural arrangement that accurately reflected the state of national social transformation at that time. A quirky assembly of compelling characters, “our boys”, black and white, were adopted and adored by the black masses, and when they somehow managed to win the cup, to deliver yet another South African miracle, the public was euphoric, partying into the night: a joyous, exuberant demonstration that, with the exception of the sacrifice of one car after the semi-final victory, seemed surprisingly peaceful.

A Latent Vocation

...sacrifice always implies a consecration; in every sacrifice an object passes from the common into the religious domain....(H. Hubert and M. Mauss, 1964, p. 9)

The importance which is everywhere, without exception, ascribed to sacrifice lies in the fact that it offers satisfaction to the father for the outrage inflicted on him in the same act in which the deed is commemorated. (S. Freud, 1950 <1913>, p. 151)

A sacrificial situation is reproduced through which an imaginary power (which is not immediately political but has this latent vocation) is established and activated. Each participant hopes to satisfy the need to confront an authority in his/her imagination....(J. Kristeva, 2000, p. 14)

What was being celebrated in the streets of Mamelodi that summer evening? Why did some group of celebrants choose the sacrifice of a car as a means to honour the team? Through addressing the particulars of that odd event, I hope to understand something more of the masked expression of the political and perhaps even a bit about the personal and social dynamics of revolt.

² Until 1990, it was actually *illegal* to own or publicly display a photo or depiction of Mandela.

³ Not comfortable with Soweto-derived name “Bafana Bafana”, in the weeks preceding the tournament white Johannesburg media, the popular talk Radio 702 and the Johannesburg Star, attempted to organize contests to find a better alternative (although they were careful not to publicly critique the African name of the team). In the end, flooded with painfully awkward if politically correct suggestions, like “Rainbow Warriors”, the media backed off and accepted this, the first name in an indigenous African language for a South African national sports team. They careful to noted that they really hadn’t opposed Bafana Bafana, they were, they asserted, merely encouraging broader input.

The outbreak of festive, collective violence in that South African township can be seen to present a brief political mini-drama - a performance *identical* to that being played out on the national stage - aimed at cleansing, forgiving, accepting and symbolically reincorporating parts of the nation, segments of the national body-politic, that have committed crimes of oppression upon the whole. To understand that moment, one needs to first consider the complex, contradictory social and political meaning of the black police in an apartheid society in which “racial” group membership was absolutely deterministic of life circumstance and opportunity. This was a system without nuance, a society that attempted to police strict categorical boundaries of black and white admitting of no greys, and when they were inevitably found, assigning them a supposed racial category of their own, “coloured” people.⁴ Within this corrupt hierarchical system, within a society that offered black males almost no legal means of employment outside of the mines, the black police, occupied a particularly problematic place. This is a social identity of opposites, simultaneously constructed as member of the oppressed black masses (and the compromises small or large that must invariably be made for survival) and as agent of white domination: a victim, an opportunist, a traitor, a victimizer.

The appearance of three black police at the *very moment* of celebration of the unlikely victory of “Our Boys, Our Boys!” - all of them, now constructed black and white - offered, in fact demanded, the replication the miracle of the sports-field in the immediate political, psycho-social space of the community. The crowd in Mamelodi does not seek to welcome back, to reincorporate the three transgressors through a narrative ritual of confession and forgiveness as famously, if largely ineffectually performed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC),⁵ but rather through another religious process, the communal construction of a sacrificial initiation ceremony that meets the classic definitional criteria established by anthropologists Hubert and Mauss (1964):

Sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned. (p. 13)

As transgressors, the police are offered a role only they can fulfil, to “honour” our boys, the new South Africa, by offering their car to be consumed by sacrificial fire. The car as object-of-sacrifice is not a simple gift for the greater good. The crowd does not demanded the police donate the car to some worthy NGO helping the community, as material assistance, symbolic contrition or form of extra-legal punishment. That is not what this is about: it is expressly not the use of the car for communal good, or the loss of the car to the police, that matters, but rather its *ceremonial consumption/destruction* that is required.

Sacrifice is the means by which the police are offered the chance to redeem their moral standing and rejoin the community. It is a religious process of reconciliatory atonement that works specifically by enabling the police to be “rid of...his impurity” (Hubert and Mauss, 1964, p. 53). What impurity do the black police embody? First, on the social/ political level, they have obviously been tainted through collaboration with the “other,” the apartheid oppressor. The burning of the car symbolically consumes this stain of collaboration, freeing the police of impurity, and thereby obviating the need to physically destroy them. Cleansed, they are now welcome back into the righteous community of the new South Africa.

4 In 1986, 1,624 people applied for racial reclassification, of which 1,102 were successful: 387 Africans became coloured and 35 coloured, African; seven Chinese became white, and eight whites, coloured; 43 Malay became Indian; 16 African became Griqua; 413 formerly coloured hit the racial jackpot, becoming white; and so on. (South African Institute of Race Relations, 1987)

5 For a description and critique of the TRC as performance see J. Statman (2000)

But we can look even deeper to the language and symbols of psychodynamics. Julia Kristeva (2000, p. 20), states that purification is required specifically “when the border between two elements or two identities has not held and thus these elements or identities blur”: a perfect description of the collaborative social/political status of the black police. *Sacrifice* – as distinct from truth-telling, or restitution or punishment - is therefore not called for because the police have harmed the community, but rather as consequence of their transgression of boundaries:⁶

..the modern individual concludes that *the impure is that which does not respect boundaries*, that which mixes structures and identities. Now identity must be kept autonomous and structurally pure in order to insure the survival not only of the living but also of the *socius*. (p.21)

Kristeva understands this blurring of boundaries as feminine, maternal: the “realm of narcissism and the instability of borders between mother and child, in the pre-oedipal mode of the psyche.” (p.21) The ceremony of sacrifice is also famously portrayed by Freud (1913) as male: as celebration and repetition of the murder and consumption by the band of brothers – the boys - of the violent paternal authority: “this memorable and criminal deed which was the beginning of so many things – of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion”. (p.142) The boys of course take on some of the strengths and characteristics of their despotic father, living out a social bond energized through guilt (at the joy of the murder), obedience and repressed homosexuality, worshiping the dead father – now far stronger than when alive – and forever destined to repent and again revolt. (Kristeva, 2000, pp. 12-15)

The sacrifice of the car thus not only restores the soiled members to the brotherhood, re-establishing social boundaries, but further offers the collective opportunity to experience *symbolically* the joy and solidarity of rebellion and the murder and overthrow of the despotic tyrant...apartheid. After all, the great South African “miracle”, was one of *negotiation and compromise*, not of cathartic Fanonian collective rising and violent deposition. For Mamelodi, sacrificing the car may be as good as it gets.

Burning for Bafana

As we know, the police did not offer up their car and in their panic and the crowd’s anger, instantly transformed a moment rife with the symbolic possibility of redemption and inclusion into an instance of mere riot, with perhaps no more or less political content than the hockey riots. The car was not sacrificed, it was simply burned.

We do not know how the police understood that moment: they may have been terrified; they may have experienced the request as a hijacking or a symbolic assault on authority; they may simply have been fond of the car; who knows? But we can perhaps imagine what might have transpired if the police *had* willingly relinquished their vehicle to the sacrificial fire, if they were cleansed of their collaborationist impurity and restored to the moral community of the new South Africa, becoming another one of “Our Boys.” Then what? After the beer and boisterous back-slapping, the dancing and song, the mood might shift to melancholy and an almost imperceptible sense of loss invades the space.

⁶ William Burroughs (1987) who knows quite a bit about transgression, understood this point exactly, creating as hero, “Natural Outlaws” whose very aim is to destroy biological boundaries and smash the “so-called” laws of nature: “The biologic Police bluntly warn: ‘To break down the lines Mother Nature, in her ripe wisdom, has established between species is to invite biologic and social chaos’. Joe says: ‘What do you think I’m doing here? Let it come down.’”(p.32)

Although no one understood it at the time, the uplifting triumph of Bafana Bafana constituted the final chapter, the high water mark of the South African age of miracles, and by the end of the decade, leaden macroeconomic and social realities and the growing abandonment of a revolutionary agenda in all but rhetoric, made clear that the pot of gold at the end of Bishop Tutu's beloved rainbow was probably going to be hoarded and enjoyed by the white captains of industry and their fraternal twins, the new (and newly corrupt) black political and economic elite. The absolutely explicable failure of the South African liberation struggle to truly transform and liberate has pushed the narrative of rebellion into the realm of sentimentality, draining and diverting much of its energy onto the sports and human interest pages, a hidden transcript ever more obscure, even to those created in its discourse.

Kristeva (2000, p.24) asks whether actual revolt is now even possible within the over-saturated context of power that is both omnipresent and vacant, of law that is easily circumvented, of value that is trumpeted and hollow, of spectacle and scandal:

...if prohibition is obsolete, if values are losing steam, if power is elusive, if the spectacle unfolds relentlessly, if pornography is accepted and diffused everywhere, who can rebel? Against whom, against what? In other words...it is the law/transgression dialectic that is made problematic and runs the risk of crystallizing in spaces of repression....(p. 28)

If as she argues, growing, dynamic societies-of-life must be infused by a culture of revolt, how can this happen within a branded, consumerist world, in an age where liberatory ideologies are all but forgotten, where nationalism, conservatism and fundamentalism are on the rise, where:

...on the social level the normalizing order is far from perfect and fails to support the excluded: jobless youth, the poor in the projects, the homeless, the unemployed, and foreigners, among many others. When the excluded have no culture of revolt and must contend themselves with regressive ideologies, with shows and entertainment that far from satisfy the demand of pleasure, they become *rioters*. (p.7, emphasis added)

Kristeva takes - really as an article of faith - that the hidden transcripts of revolt remain, formed from the very structure and meaning of human language and thought: "revolt has taken place, it has not been erased, it can be read and it offers itself to a rootless humanity now governed by the relativism of images as well as monetary and humanitarian indifference". (p 19)

And maybe those young people – the ones hurling bottles, trashing windows and burning cars after the final buzzer and the ones celebrating and burning for Bafana - are in fact reading that very faint, archaic political transcript, they can't quite acknowledge nor understand.

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