From the mid-1980s to its transition to democracy in 1994, South Africa experienced intense violent political conflict. Around twenty thousand people, mostly black, were killed, while many others survived physical violence, mental trauma, and the destruction of their homes and property. Often not known by those unfamiliar with South African history during this period is that the source of most of the violence resulted not from direct confrontation between the South African government and the anti-apartheid movement, but rather from a low-level civil war between two rival anti-apartheid political factions: the African National Congress (ANC), the leading anti-apartheid organization and current governing party of the South Africa, and the Inkatha movement.

Founded in 1975, Inkatha was a Zulu cultural organization formed and led by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, chief minister of the apartheid-era KwaZulu bantustan. While the ANC and Inkatha were initially allied, disputes over policy directions and power dynamics led to a break between the two organizations in 1979. By the mid-1980s, continuing antagonism eventually led to all-out violent conflict between Inkatha members and supporters of the pro-ANC United Democratic Front (UDF).[1] In the 1980s, the fighting between the UDF and Inkatha was mainly confined to KwaZulu and the neighboring communities of Natal Province.[2] Supporters on both sides of the fighting were primarily Zulu, reflecting the ethnic demography of the region.

Between 1990 to 1994, amid ongoing negotiations between the South African government and the newly unbanned ANC over the country's democratic transition, the conflict evolved into a fight between ANC supporters and supporters of Inkatha’s newly established political party, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The 1990s also saw conflict between pro-ANC and pro-IFP forces break out with equal ferocity in South Africa’s Transvaal province, especially the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging (PWV) region, South Africa’s economic heartland. It is also generally accepted that throughout the fighting in the 1980s and 1990s, the Inkatha movement received tacit military support and training from government security forces, which saw Inkatha as a conservative counterweight to the more radical ANC.

Mxolisi R. Mchunu’s book, Violence and Solace: The Natal Civil War in Late-Apartheid South Africa (2020), provides an in-depth analysis of the conflict as it occurred in one area: the rural community of KwaShange, located in the Natal Midlands. Mchunu’s book is an ambitious work, providing firsthand narrative (Mchunu was born in KwaShange and survived the violence as a child
and teenager), a historical construction of the conflict derived from formal interviews and documentary sources, and an anthropological analysis of the cultural dimensions of the conflict. The stated objective of his work is to illustrate how violence affected the KwaShange community and how the trauma residents experienced has continued and evolved in the ensuing years since the fighting came to an end.

The first six chapters include a first-person narrative of the conflict in KwaShange (in chapter 1) and an analysis and timeline of the conflict as it occurred in both KwaShange and the KwaZulu-Natal region as a whole. In these chapters, Mchunu provides an important contribution by presenting original research on how the conflict played out in KwaShange, along with an overview of the history and social dynamics of the community. His account of the conflict is also refreshing in that it lacks the blatant pro-ANC or pro-Inkatha political bias that has marred earlier works on the topic.

These first few chapters do have some issues. The narrative is occasionally disjointed and repetitive at times, and while his focus is on the conflict in KwaZulu-Natal, he neglects to mention that the fighting spread beyond this region, especially to the townships of the PWV.

The second half of Mchunu's book is much stronger than the first, and provides important contributions missing in previous literature on the conflict. In chapters 7, 8, and 9, Mchunu gives an anthropological study of how belief in magic and spiritualism, rooted in traditional Zulu culture, played an important role in the fighting. As Mchunu notes: “Generally, people who lived in areas affected by the violence were susceptible to fear of the mysterious or unknown. They had become used to ‘normal’ war, where Inkatha and UDF were fighting, but they were defeated by the supernatural, where ‘strange things happened.’ They believed in the effects of rituals and ‘medicines’” (p. 176).

In these chapters, he draws mostly from interviews with KwaShange residents. Particularly noteworthy is chapter 8, which focuses on so-called muthi killings that were committed during the conflict. In traditional Zulu culture, muthi is a traditional herbal medicine prepared by izinyanga (traditional healers) and izangomas (diviners). During the conflict, fighters on both sides ingested muthi that was believed to give its user supernatural protection from harm. More “powerful” varieties of muthi, which included human body parts that had been ritualistically removed (sometimes while the victim was still alive), were also utilized during the fighting. Despite being an understandably taboo subject within Zulu society, Mchunu was able to get remarkable data from his interviewees on this subject, including from (anonymous) perpetrators of muthi murders.

Chapters 9 and 10 concern how KwaShange residents processed the trauma and memory of the conflict in the years since it came to an end. In chapter 9, Mchunu again makes an important and unique contribution by giving a Zulu cultural perspective on the mechanisms individuals can use to process their trauma, in contrast to Western psychological approaches. He highlights the importance of ritual cleansing ceremonies for individuals involved in the fighting as an effective means for them to overcome the violent actions they experienced or committed. In chapter 10, Mchunu explores how KwaShange residents remember and contextualize the conflict, importantly noting how contemporary South African political realities have affected and altered people’s memories of the conflict. This chapter should be of interest to scholars interested in postconflict societies.

Given the important role of interviews in this work, I wish Mchunu had included a more substantial methodology section or appendix on how they were carried out. Scholars interested in interview methods would have benefited from a description of the author’s interview format (e.g., semi-structured or unstructured) and his methods.
used to recruit interviewees (snowballing, purposive sampling, etc.). It was also unclear whether Mchunu sought to interview a representative sample of KwaShange residents or how many interviews he eventually conducted.

In sum, Mchunu has provided a fascinating micro-level account of how the ANC-Inkatha conflict unfolded in one small community. His analysis of the cultural dimensions of the conflict in particular provides illuminating insights into the political violence during this period.

Notes

[1]. During the 1980s, the ANC was banned in South Africa. The UDF, a national confederation of various anti-apartheid groups, was considered aligned with the ANC, which was then based outside South Africa’s borders.

[2]. Following the end of apartheid, both regions merged to form the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

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