



Forging Identities in an Uncertain World: Changing Notions of Self and Other in Early Colonial Natal

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Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.¹

While subordinate people do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine in varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for.²

Studies of indigenous identities in early colonial societies tend to focus on dominant social relations and political formations, rather than the efforts of individuals and marginalised sub-cultures to forge a sense of self in an uncertain world. For this reason, those who, in the face of pressures to conform, developed new and often very novel or inventive ways to resist the social and institutional constraints placed on them by either colonial or indigenous authorities, or both, are easily overlooked. In a perceptive comment on the agency of people struggling to negotiate identities in times of change, Ulf Hannerz notes: 'Where there is strain between received meanings on the one hand and personal experiences and interests on the other, and where diverse perspectives confront one another, cultures can perhaps never be worked out as stable, coherent systems; they are forever cultural "work in progress".'³

In this essay a number of case studies are used to highlight the role sartorial and other styles played in the efforts of particular individuals and sub-cultures to forge a sense of self in the face of the rapid changes that engulfed present-day KwaZulu-Natal after the arrival at Port Natal of traders in the 1820s. Followed by missionaries in the 1830s and progressively large numbers of settlers in the 1840s and 1850s, this influx of outsiders forced indigenous communities to renegotiate entrenched relations of power and the patterns of interaction that had been established through them. In the process, local notions of exchange, the symbolic value attached to indigenously manufactured prestige items and the Zulu kingdom's practice of extracting tribute from exploited tributaries, gave way first to a barter and, later, a cash economy that depended on the wage labour and, by extension, the purchasing power of these African communities. As

Figure 1 (opposite).
'Zulu Dandies, Showing the Modes
of Wearing the Hair' (28 x 41 cm).
Illustrated London News, June 1879

1 K. Mercer, 'Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics' in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by J. Rutherford, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, p. 43.

2 M.L. Pratt, 'Arts of the Contact Zone', *Profession* 1991: 33–40.

3 U. Hannerz, 'The World in Creolisation', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 57(4), 1987: 546–59.