

Please, Mr. Judge Man

Resisting Apartheid With Song and Dance

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“We are coming.” The voice on the phone was Zulu, accented and clandestine. “We will meet you outside your apartment in five minutes.”

It was 2:15 A.M. on Sunday morning when Shelley and I found ourselves in the back seat of a taxi accompanied by two rough-looking Zulu men. Ten minutes later, through dark and winding streets we were at the Beatrice Street YMCA somewhere in Durban to judge the weekly Isicathamiya song and dance competition. The Traditional Music Association of Durban sponsored the competition and required an independent judge to forestall any chance of cheating or preferential treatment.

When I first met Paulus, the director of the association, he told me how that he preferred white judges—especially foreigners who did not know Zulus—because it limited the likelihood of favoritism for any of the dance groups. The short, tough-looking Paulus, with a sideways boxer’s nose, wore a natty three-piece suit and broke into a broad victorious smile when I told him I had never seen Isicathamiya performed.

“You don’t know any of the groups?”

“No.”

Commented [JH1]: Will

Commented [JH2]: Consider: Will newbie readers like myself want to know immediately that you're in South Africa?

Commented [BL3]: Do you want to explain how you came to meet Paulus, and/or what brought you to Durban at that time?

Commented [JH4]: If the point is simply that Paulus chooses white judges, use THAT. If, on the other hand, you want to continue to recount his stories proceeding from this point, use HOW>

“Very good, because we take our competition very seriously. It is important you are honest and very fair. Very fair is important. And you are an American, the people here love Americans for how you helped the black man in South Africa.”

It was May 1992, and the last of the Apartheid laws were slowly melting into the darkness that created them. Apartheid means “apartness” in Afrikaans, and that is what it did this philosophy; brutally enabling-enabled the white minority of about twelve percent of the population to control and exploit the majority of the population rest. The forty-four years of government-enforced racism had made an indelible mark on the consciousness of South Africa’s blacks, Indians, and mixed race “coloureds,” leaving a legacy that will live on for generations to come. Spring 1992 was a time of great hope, uncertainty, and anxiety for freedoms of future unknown.

The taxi made its way to the YMCA located in an Indian commercial trading area near downtown Durban. It was a district seldom frequented by whites, and straight out of film noir. Dimly lit litter-strewn streets led to warehouses, wholesale depots, light industrial shops, outdoor markets, and large open-air bars where Zulu workers, mostly men, sat at rough-hewn tables drinking large quantities of Ijuba, the preferred and affordable porridge-like beer.

The night brought little comfort from the heat of the day. Even the generally cooling Indian Ocean breeze was a wave of warmth. Sweat-glistened drunken workers swayed and staggered through the night’s sticky humid haze and streets full of shadows. Some sang as they walked arm-in-arm, while others stumbled and slumped. The night seemed out of focus, blurry and confused. For most, Saturday night was their only night of release after a week of ten- and twelve-hour days of physical labor. Workers who lived outside of town would catch a “black

Commented [JH5]: I hear you saying that Apartheid succeeded in establishing the society it aimed for. DO "Do" ("did") is grammatically incorrect here--Consider my edit as one way of making your sentence more concise.

Commented [JH6]: Sounds a bit like the U.S. 1% I've been hearing about. "Majority" and the second "population" seem redundant. OK?

Commented [JH7]: Should this read "44 years" like 25 feet (Re: Judge Island)

Commented [JH8]: Should forty-four be written 44

Commented [JH9]: Use the adjective rather than the noun form of this word.

Commented [JH10]: Excellent description. Suggest reversing the two phrases connected by "and"--the haze and sweat/drunken elements reinforce each other if placed first and last: "staggered through the streets full of shadows in the night's humid haze."

taxi”—a small van usually packed with up to 23 people—back to their township. Many were from rural areas and lived in nearby workers’ dormitories with hundreds of other Zulu men. Far away from their women and families, they were restless, horny, and homesick.

The taxi rolled up to the illuminated façade of the YMCA, where dozens of men and women dressed in their Saturday night finest milled around, chatting and smoking. An oasis of relative civility as insects swarmed through long shadows cast by the entrance lights.

Members of the singing groups were easy to spot because of their matching and stylishly trimmed purple, red, or white jackets and slacks. Several were outside getting some air, languidly socializing and smoking, their jackets open, shirt collars undone. Some had two-tone shoes, others had groomed their hair with oil; the scent of cheap aftershave tickled the air.

Rehearsing in unison, men moved ~~rehearsing in unison,~~ in and out of the shadows of the building; concentrated, rhythmic, animated, stylish. Bodies in flashy red jackets, white pants, and yellow shoes worked out dance routines, their arms extended minstrel-like, then hands held together as in prayer, a call from their leader, and they spun around.

Paulus opened the taxi door and greeted Shelley and me with a slight bow. With a grand wave of his hand, the burly man who accompanied us in the taxi adopted a serious “don’t mess with me” face” as he grabbed each of us by the arm. Those on the sidewalk paused.

Conversations stopped and people turned, some moving towards us for a closer look. They knew we were the judges. Paulus in the lead, the crowd parted and we were quickly led in; I felt like a rock star or politician or criminal. Paulus escorted us into the empty first-floor auditorium where a few men were setting up the last of several hundred wooden folding chairs.

Commented [JH11]: His face is saying "don't mess with me"--put only these words in quotes.

“The judging will start soon,” Paulus said as he rushed off, leaving us in the hollow, echoing auditorium.

From another part of the building Isicathamiya singing could be heard, followed by applause, clapping, foot stomping and occasional shouts of exaltation. It sounded like a cross between a tent revival and a wild party. The evening’s activities ~~began~~ had begun hours before our arrival. Saturday nights at 10 P.M. the groups gathered and performed for the public. As judges we were not allowed to participate in these earlier presentations, which were more relaxed community events-cum-religious celebrations with audience participation.

Isicathamiya has its origins in the 1920s when it evolved from a special type of Zulu wedding song that men sang to women. The male-only style of a cappella Isicathamiya singing ~~was~~ rooted in the Zulu love song tradition ~~and~~ was re-shaped by the gospel singing style introduced by white missionaries. Lyrics expressing love for a woman were transformed ~~intorecast~~ to express love of God and Jesus. When rural Zulus migrated to the townships on the outskirts of South Africa’s major urban areas of Johannesburg and Durban to seek employment, they brought the nascent tradition with them. With the advent of apartheid in 1948 and the imposition of limits on public assembly, Isicathamiya incorporated several traditional Zulu dance steps, a subversive act of defiance in the face of oppression.

Many of their dance steps and arm movements originated from traditional Zulu warrior dances. However, in Isicathamiya the sharp, aggressive warrior-like steps were given a softer form. With the incorporation of traditional Zulu dance movements, Isicathamiya became a politicized religious expression, and became an act of political and cultural resistance occurring

Commented [JH12]: Chicago Style recommends lowercase p.m. or small capitals P.M.

Commented [BL13]: Maybe add something about the etymology of this word?

Commented [BL14]: What do you think about adding a single footnote about this history, for readers who are curious?

Commented [JH15]: I hear you chronicling the development of this art form. The parenthetical commas improve sentence flow.

Commented [JH16]: I think you're saying that the lyrics were made to serve a religious purpose. If the lyrics remained the same,

Commented [JH17]: Avoid starting this paragraph with the pronoun "their." Consider naming the group: "Isicathamiya" and then using a pronoun in the next sentence.