Tertius Kapp

# The Epic and the Anti-epic

## Myth-making in South Africa's Number Gangs*

*Abstract* – This study considers the status of the narratives of the South African Number gangs. These gangs, who are dominant in South African prisons, are currently extending their influence into communities outside of prison. They also feature increasingly in popular films and music. Such representations are often made with no awareness of the complex history of the Number gangs. Their origins can be traced to late nineteenth century mine gangs known as the Ninevites, created by a visionary bandit called Nongoloza. He is also the main character of their origin myth, which is the focus of this analysis. This paper follows a trans-disciplinary approach, focussing on a social-anthropological and ethnographic phenomenon in order to open up its linguistic manifestation to literary analysis. This is achieved via Halliday's concept of the anti-language and the anti-society. The goal of this study is to link these concepts to the literary phenomenon of the anti-hero, and to explore the possibility of a category to be called the anti-epic.

### 1 Introduction

The Number gangs[1] are active in most prisons throughout South Africa, but have a power base in the Western Cape province, where prisons such as Pollsmoor, Brandvlei and Victor Verster all have representative groups of 26s, 27s and 28s, usually in control of different wings. Broadly, it can be stated that the 26s are supposed to rob, smuggle and con, the 27s are the 'justice system' between the 26s and 28s, and the 28s are 'warriors' who fight to protect all the other gangs. In practice, many of these functions overlap and become distorted. The different Number gangs share several features, of which the most important to the current study is an origin myth explaining their ethnogenesis and current position in the gang landscape. Much of the rest of this article will focus on the properties of this narrative.

A major shift is happening in the gangs at present, driven by the boom in the drug trade, especially in Cape Town. This has given an obscene amount of power to gangsters, who are able to corrupt the traditions and practices of prison gangs. As a result, strong links can now be found between gangs inside prison and their counterparts outside. The Number gangs are also becoming ever more prominent in popular culture, where they often serve as a subversive yet alluring anti-social marker, e.g. in the music of *Die Antwoord*, or in a film such as *Four Corners.*

Most of these popular appropriations do not explore the cultural depth of the Number gangs, which can be traced to Johannesburg's late nineteenth century mining gangs, with a complex history of re-appropriation and demographic shift-

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1 Following a common convention, this is shortened elsewhere in the text to 'the Number'.

ing during the twentieth century.[2] Perhaps the most iconic appropriation in the Number gangs is the character of Nongoloza, a Zulu man born in the nineteenth century, who is the founder and also mythical father of the Number. He is represented most clearly in the 'Number myth',[3] although his presence can be felt throughout the semiotic space of the Number mythology. While many studies have been conducted on the historical Nongoloza (most notably by Charles van Onselen), for the current study it is important to focus especially on the myth-making aspect of the narrative. It is hoped that this will cast light on the signification desires of current users of the narrative. As historical facts are adapted into narrative, it is possible to note some of the choices that determine genre, in this case specifically that of the epic.

## 2 Coloured Identity

The Number gangs do not exclude membership based on race (Weyers 2008: 126), but the fact that the coloured[4] presence in the gangs is dominant, especially in the Western Cape with its majority coloured population, can not be denied.[5] This is to say that the majority of Number gang members are coloured, and the impact of the gangs is felt most severely in 'coloured areas'[6] which has prompted special research in the fields of sociology, anthropology and criminology.

Today, 8,9% of South Africa's population is classified as coloured. Without suggesting a reduction of identity to ancestry, it is worth considering the origins of the coloured people in order to dispel some common misconceptions. Those not familiar with the South African context sometimes hold the mistaken view that the coloured community are the descendants of inter-racial relationships between ('pure') white and ('pure') black parents, a view that rests on misplaced ideas of racial purity, with 'coloured' supposedly representing some simplistic admixture of the two (Erasmus 2001: 21). This obscures the complexity of coloured identity, in both its cultural and biological sense. To start with the latter, the coloured population is probably one of the most genetically diverse groups of people in the world, with ancestry from Africa, Europe, and Asia (De Wit et al 2010: 145, 152).

The main genetic origins of this group are

- the Khoi and Bushmen;
- relations between European men and Khoi women, whose descendants formed groups such as the Basters, Griqua, Oorlams and Koranna;
- slaves brought from areas such as Java (Indonesia), Bengal (Bangladesh), Angola, Mozambique, Madagascar and other areas where the Dutch East India Company held interests;
- relations between European men and these slaves (De Wit et al 2010: 145-146, Hendricks 2001: 36).

2 These processes are currently being examined in more detail and results will be published in later work.
3 This origin myth is presented in summary in section 3.
4 This term is not evaluated negatively in South Africa, as opposed to its use in the U.S., for example.
5 Based on prison visits and the researcher's engagement with this topic over the past few years.
6 Such as the Cape Flats and the northern suburbs of Port Elizabeth.

Up to the mid nineteenth century, several factors contributed to the rapid growth in (what would later be called) the coloured population. The first major factor was the large imbalance of European men to women at the Cape. The European women imported by the Dutch East India Company number in the mere hundreds, compared to several thousand male employees of the company, and even more male settlers. On the other hand, more than 15 000 slave women were imported into the Cape between 1652 and 1808 (Shell 1994: 290, quoted in Hendricks 2001: 37) and of course numerous Khoi and San groups inhabited the interior. Thus, according to Hendricks, 'circumscribed, gender-specific, "interracial" sex was permitted, even encouraged, as long as it did not destabilise colonial interests' (Hendricks 2001: 32).

Another important factor is the financial gains miscegenation held for slave owners. The uterine descent rule determined that children of slave women inherited the legal status of their mothers, which is to say slaves remained slaves, while Khoi children were not slaves, but 'bonded to the employer of their parents for a period of service in lieu of the supposed costs of bringing up the child' (Hendricks 2001: 38). After the prohibition on importing slaves in 1808, this 'self-reproduction' became a way to renew the labour force (Hendricks 2001: 38).

Out of these varied origins, the concept of a coloured identity only began to evolve in the second half of the nineteenth century, and was constructed politically at the turn of the twentieth century. The 1904 government census saw the classification of coloureds as a separate group (Goldin 1989, quoted in Hendricks 2001: 30) which would enjoy varying levels of restrictions and 'privileges'[7] during the course of the twentieth century.

Laws such as the Immorality Act (1928), Mixed Marriages Act (1948) and Population Registration Act (1950) consolidated coloured identity and also formalised its marginality. After 250 years of being shaped by 'inter-racial' relations, the coloured population would, for the second half of the twentieth century, be reproduced mostly (but by no means exclusively) through relations inside the boundaries set by the Population Registration Act. This law classified citizens as either White, Black, Indian or Coloured. However, the coloured classification shared a porous boundary with every other group, leading some academics to describe it as a non-group – intended for those who did not fit any of the others (Petrus & Isaacs-Martin 2012: 90-93). According to Wicomb, being defined negatively as 'not a White person or a Black,' binds the coloured identity to a 'pervasive shame [...] recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame' (Wicomb 1998: 92).

Coloured people have experienced various versions of cultural liminality in relation to the changing sociopolitics of Southern Africa.[8] After 1950 the limited rights the coloured community were accorded before were systematically eroded. At a very practical level, the forced removals of the 1960s onwards caused major

7 The word 'privileges' is used discerningly here to indicate a common conception of the political position of the coloured population in the twentieth century. While these were less than current basic political rights, it is important to note that, from a black perspective, such limited rights were constructed as privileges.

8 I.e. Dutch and British colonial forces, the rise of the Boer republics, the South African war, post-war union, the rise of apartheid, the liberation movement and post-apartheid liberation, etc.

upheavals in coloured communities, upsetting social structures and hierarchies and creating vacuums eagerly filled by violent new orders.

Although apartheid played a major role in the formation of these identities, it would be a mistake to think of coloured identity as 'simply an apartheid label' (Erasmus 2001: 16):

> Coloured identities were formed in the colonial encounter between colonists (Dutch and British), slaves from South and East India and from East Africa, and conquered indigenous peoples, the Khoi and San. This encounter and the power relations embedded in it have resulted in processes of cultural dispossession, borrowing and transformation. The result has been a highly specific and instantly recognizable cultural formation – not just 'a mixture' but a very particular 'mixture' comprising elements of Dutch, British, Malaysian, Khoi and other forms of African culture appropriated, translated and articulated in complex and subtle ways. These elements acquire their specific cultural meaning only once fused and translated (Erasmus 2001: 21).

Erasmus describes the nature of engagement with coloured identity as 'reclaiming and living with fragments of origins and entanglements with whiteness, Africanness, East Indianness in the process of creating new cultural forms, practices and identities which do not have to be coherent and/or complete' (Erasmus 2001: 25). This entanglement and the identities it produces are marked by 'fragility' (Erasmus 2001: 23). Coloured subjectivities then become 'encounters with difficulty – encounters which remain entangled with the political history of being coloured' (Erasmus 2001: 25).

It seems clear that coloured identity must be understood as creolised. However, it should not be considered 'the celebration of cross-cultural formations' (Erasmus 2001: 22). It does not exist 'between European and African identity', but rather disrupts the idea that 'creolization results from a "mixed" *category* between two "pure" categories [and] questions the notion of "purity" as such' (Erasmus 2001: 22).

This study implicitly shares Adhikari's view of coloured identity, which can be described as social-constructivist/post-modern creole. Coloured identity is seen to be a result of cultural creativity and selective appropriation from various cultures in specific conditions of marginalisation (Adhikari 2008: 95), resembling what Bhabha describes as 'strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (Bhabha 1994: 2).

On the one hand, the symbolic richness and various appropriations evident in the Number gangs should be considered an example of this cultural creativity. At the same time, the mostly young men who enter the Number gangs should not be considered representative of coloured identity at all. In fact, many are rejected by their families and ostracised from their communities. Prison then necessitates new identificatory relations to negotiate their changing futures. It is in this context that the pseudo-military and symbolically overpowering hierarchy of the Number offers possibilities for promotion, dignity and respect.

In prison, the Number gangs, and their mythology infused with the character of Nongoloza, become one of very few alternatives. The promise of fraternal belonging offers a new society and future to the recruit. This situation bears an inter-

esting resemblance to that of the disillusioned migrant worker in late nineteenth century Johannesburg, isolated from the community that raised him, confronted by a seemingly all-powerful enemy and in desperate need of new ways of signifying. This was the time which saw the rise of Nongoloza.

## 3 The Historical Nongoloza

Nongoloza is the name a young man called Mzuzephi Mathebula took for himself[9] when he was building his network of mining gangs. Historian Charles van Onselen is one of the chief authorities on this topic, which is extensively described in *New Babylon New Nineveh* (1982), and more specifically in the short biography *The Small Matter of a Horse* (1984). The latter title refers to a dispute over a horse on a farm in the Natal Colony, which led to the young Mzuzephi leaving for Johannesburg, where gold was discovered in 1886. He quickly realised that the fate of a mineworker was exploitation and death, so instead he learnt the 'art of banditry' from four Irish bandits, two of whom we know by name – 'Tyson' and 'McDonald'.

Already we are tempted to interpret Nongoloza in the mould of Hobsbawm's 'social bandit' whose cause is just in the face of the evils perpetrated by the authority he opposes. In fact, Nongoloza personifies much of the critique on Hobsbawm's theory. For the social bandit it would be 'unthinkable […] to snatch the peasants' (though not the lord's) harvest in his own territory, or perhaps even elsewhere' (Hobsbawm 2010: 20). While Nongoloza's career and mythology display an undeniably anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial thread, he robbed indiscriminately, both from wealthy mine companies and oppressed mineworkers (Van Onselen 1984: 21).

In early 1890 he established contact with leading figures of the local black underworld, notably Nohlopa and Nhlaka. They based themselves in caves and disused mineshafts in the Klipriviersberg south-east of Johannesburg. Over the next two decades, thanks to the rapidly expanding mining industry, agricultural failures, political unrest and exploitative labour conditions, a steady flow of new recruits was delivered to their ranks by economic migration. In 1892 Nongoloza ascended to the leadership and oversaw a militarisation of the organisation under a succession of names laden with signifying weight: *Umkosi Wezintaba* ('The regiment of the hills'); *Umkosi we Seneneem* ('The regiment of the jailbirds'), *Abas'etsheni* ('The people of the stone'), and the *Ninevites*[10] (Van Onselen 1982: 368-389, 1984: 17-24). Nongoloza himself reported in a 1912 interview:

> The system I introduced was as follows: I myself was the *Inkoos Nkulu* or king. Then I had an *Induna Inkulu* styled Lord and corresponding to the Governor-General. Then I had another Lord who was looked upon as the father of us all and styled *Nonsala*. Then I had my government who were known by numbers, number one to four. I also had my fighting general on the model of the Boer *vechtgeneraal*. The administration of justice was

9 After taking the name 'Jan Note' earlier.

10 Ninevé is best known as Jonah's destination before he was swallowed by the whale. Nongoloza chose this name because the Ninevites turned their back on God.

> confided to a judge for serious cases and a *landdrost* for petty cases. The medical side was entrusted to a chief doctor or *Inyanga*. Further I had colonels, captains, sergeant-majors and sergeants in charge of the rand and file, the *Amasoji* or *Shosi* – soldiers (South Africa 1913: 237).

At the height of his power, Nongoloza commanded an 'army' of more than a 1000 Zulu, Shangaan, Swazi, Xhosa and Basotho men (Van Onselen 1982: 182). Various factors would contribute to the growth of his gangs. One major factor was the aggressive policy of the post-war Milner government. In 1903 about 60 000 indentured Chinese labourers were imported to get the Reef gold mines running again. This temporary solution was seen as an opportunity to 'fashion the necessary instruments of legal coercion which would ensure that the mining industry was served by a tightly bound supply of cheap black labour once the indentured labourers had completed their contracts' (Van Onselen 1984: 29). These included new pass laws, recruitment regulations, and the large-scale fingerprinting of workers, leading to an increase of over 200% in the prison population between 1903 and 1905 (Van Onselen 1984: 30).

Needless to say, Nongoloza and his recruits were represented more than adequately in these statistics. Conditions in pre-war prisons were certainly not conducive to prisoner rehabilitation, but after 1903 they worsened considerably, due in part to massive overpopulation. Another important step came in 1905, when the Milner regime established hard labour practices that allowed black prisoners to be used in mines at even cheaper rates, formally linking the prison system with the labour-repressive capitalist system outside. This contributed to Nongoloza's rise and esteem. The man greeted with shouts of 'Bayede' in prisons across the Witwatersrand became not only the leader of a gang of bandits preying on both weak and strong, but rather, at least to his followers, the champion of a rebel cause answering violence with violence (Van Onselen 1984: 32-33).

Prison paradoxically provided a space where Nongoloza could exercise much stronger control over his network of gangs: the partitioned spaces of prison provided few alternatives to his 'army'; control over the secret means of smuggling and communications with the outside world was the key to power; large groups of young men ejected from society were the perfect disciples for his new creed. To ensure loyalty, recruits were ritually initiated into a hierarchy where they were to find their new identity. Nongoloza's mythical allure grew accordingly.

This criminal empire of resistance would grow in the name of Nongoloza, even without his knowledge. The Ninevites' reach extended throughout prisons, mining compounds and townships. For instance, when sent to an outlying prison on the Natal border in 1908, Nongoloza was informed by one Ben Cronje that a local group had started up in the area, and they would help him escape (Van Onselen 1984: 39). This they did, and Nongoloza was on his way to Swaziland before being arrested again. He was initially sentenced to 15 years' with hard labour, after which the state took their time to build a comprehensive case. In 1909 he was sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour for the rest of his natural life.

The following year a new director of prisons, the visionary Jacob de Villiers Roos, took a special interest in Nongoloza. Roos was different from his predecessors in his genuine desire for prison reform. He appointed the sympathetic warder

Paskin to take charge of Nongoloza, hoping to eventually deploy him in his own efforts against the Ninevites. After a few years, Paskin's soft approach and command of Zulu led to an apparently radical transformation. In 1912, with Paskin's help, Nongoloza gave a lengthy account (one hesitates to say confession) to Roos about his life of crime and the role the authorities themselves played in strengthening his influence.

In 1914, under Roos's guidance, Nongoloza became a warder himself, tasked with dismantling the Ninevites (Van Onselen 1984: 45). The experiment provided mixed results. It would seem that by this time the mythical Nongoloza had long superseded the actual man, and even the *Inkoos Nkulu* had little power over the organisation he created. He retired to Swaziland, but returned to the Transvaal some years later as an orderly at Weskoppies mental hospital. Trouble followed the ageing Nongoloza, and he gradually returned to his old habits. In 1930 he was convicted of raping sixteen-year-old Miriam Ntshoanana, and handed an indeterminate sentence (Van Onselen 1948: 48).

His final prison sentence was not dramatic. No conflicts or escape attempts are recorded. The elderly man with bad eyesight apparently spent most of his time weaving baskets (Van Onselen 1984: 51). Ten years later he was released on probation, and besides intermittent employment as night watchman he survived on a more or less hand-to-mouth basis until September of 1948, when he was admitted to Pretoria General Hospital with advanced tuberculosis. He died on the 11th of December, at the age of eighty-one (Van Onselen 1984: 53).

## 4 The Mythical Nongoloza

A major critique on Hobsbawm has been his uncritical focus on the myth of the bandit without attention to the processes by which it was formed. He goes as far as saying that '[t]heir names and the details of their exploits hardly matter. Indeed, for the bandit myth, the reality of their existence may be secondary' (Hobsbawm 2010: 10). Clearly, he is correct in that the myth is intricately linked to the bandit's ability to operate, or perhaps even its precondition (Wagner 2007: 358). Yet the largely unstudied relationship between myth and historical persona is crucial to our understanding of the same myth.

From Nongoloza's own account, it is clear that he saw the value in a symbolically motivated hierarchy, tapping into the esteem associated with the military structures of the British and Boer armies. In developing a military order and court procedures to mirror those of the state, Nongoloza was building what Anderson would describe as an imagined community. In fact, if one were to take the mythological aspect seriously, one could even say an imagined *religious* community, which Anderson describes in the following manner:

> A vast horde of illiterate vernacular-speakers provided the dense, physical reality of the ceremonial passage; while a small segment of literate bilingual adepts drawn from each vernacular community performed the unifying rites, interpreting to their respective followings the meaning of their collective motion (Anderson 1983: 56).

As leader and one of only a handful of literate members, Nongoloza played the main role in developing a gang mythology which provided an origin, a semiotic space within which new meanings could be assigned and by means of which the present could be interpreted. He drew on various sources: the biblical Old Testament, Nguni rituals, the news and popular culture of the day. This mythology has proved so enduring that it is still dominant in prisons a century later. Although there are many variations to the Number myth, a basic version can be condensed which is universal enough to be recognisable in different parts of the country. The 26s, 27s and 28s would each have their own specific expansions and additions, but Nongoloza is the main or at least the second main character in all versions.

To give some indication of how it is told in practice, a short verbatim transcript of the first few sentences can be given here. Prison language, or Shalambom, consists of an Afrikaans base with input mostly from the Nguni languages (isiZulu and isiXhosa)[11] and some English (this fragment corresponds more or less to the first paragraph of the translation below).

> Jare terug skangaka[12] in 'n kraal in Mampondweni[13] was 'n wyse man met die stalala[14] Pawule Mambazo en sy nozala.[15] Sy nozala was al by die vedala[16] en was nie meer skangaka om te jikijela[17] vir wat hulle sterk maak nie. Daai nobangela[18] het hy gekyk om daai sterk maak te jikijela. Gcwala[19] soos hy by die jikijela gewees het vir sterk maak het hy hom wys raak mapoeza[20] van die myne kom skangaka om mense te phezula[21] vir die slasluka[22] van die myne (Parker-Lewis 2006: 145).

It should be clear that this language would be as incomprehensible as intended to any outsider. A more complete summary of the myth can be given in translation, although it should again be stressed that it has a modular character, in the sense that there are episodes and details that can be added at different points within the narrative.

> Many years ago,[23] a wise old man called Pawule Mambazo[24] lived in a kraal[25] in Mpondoland. His parents were still alive, but were old and would die soon. There were no young men in the kraal. He knew the reason for this was the mine officials who visited the kraal every year, apparently fetching the young men for a short while. Yet they never return.

11 For the benefit of readers familiar with Afrikaans, these words are footnoted. It must be kept in mind that some of these words have undergone major shifts in meaning and speakers of isiZulu or isiXhosa should not be surprised if recognisable words have unexpected meanings.
12 present/ready
13 Mpondoland
14 title, name
15 parents
16 dead
17 look
18 reason
19 listen
20 officials/authority/police
21 take
22 work
23 This is sometimes placed around 1812. As large-scale mining in South Africa only started in the 1860s, this date is impossible. This displacement is not trivial, as will be argued later.
24 also called Po, Pomobasa, Nkulunku(t)
25 homestead/small village

All the people from the surrounding area come together to discuss this situation. They request Mambazo to go to the mines and investigate.

He travels to Johannesburg and announces himself at the mine. He is inspected by two officials and considered suitable for work. He is given a pickaxe, a spade and a khaki uniform. Deep down in the mines he meets another, older man, called Madala-One,[26] and a corps of mineworkers speaking a confusion of tongues. Mambazo and Madala-One set themselves the task of designing a new language[27] everyone would be able to understand.

As the years go by, Mambazo works himself up to a trusted position in the mining company. He works above ground as an official. By now he has learned what happened to the young men – they were either worked to death or died of disease in the compounds. But he is still biding his time. At the opportune moment, he and a few accessories grab some gold, money and the book with the name of all the dead, and escape the mine.

He returns home to find his parents dead. He decides to settle in a cave (the cave of Kelomba) on the way to the mines, and recruit the young men before they are lost to the exploitation of the mines. He sits, smoking his pipe, waiting.

The first to pass is Kilikijan.[28] Mambazo convinces him not to go to the mines, and he agrees to stay in the cave. The next to pass is Nongoloza. He is also recruited. So it continues until they are 15. Mambazo teaches them the art of banditry. They ambush horse carts and mine workers, timing their robberies to target either white mine bosses carrying profits or black mine workers carrying wages. Nongoloza and his 7 are known as the 2-8, Kilikijan and his 6 as the 2-7. Mambazo writes up the laws of their new society on a large stone, which Kilikijan is assigned to guard.

One day, as a test, Mambazo sends Kilikijan and Nongoloza to a farmer called Rabie. There is a bull, a fierce and ugly creature that has already killed many who did not obey the farmer's rules. His face is full of scars, his ears full of holes, and he has a ring through his nose. They are to buy Rooiland and bring him to the cave. However, Rabie refuses to sell. They murder him and steal Rooiland.

In the cave, Mambazo slaughters Rooiland. The bandits have a great feast, and important parts of the carcass are used in ritual fashion. Mambazo takes one of the horns and pours a mixture of gall and blood into it. He offers it to Kilikijan, who tries to drink it, but spits it out, saying: 'Die bloed salute, maar die gal salute nie'.[29] Mambazo offers it to Nongoloza, who empties the horn, shouting 'Gonqo!'[30]

Mambazo ensures that specific parts of the bull are kept: the hooves, the legs, the eyes, the tail, and the hide. He takes the hide and presses it onto the stone, making a (reverse) imprint (or 'halfskynsel') of the law.

A crucial incident takes place later, when Kilikijan's followers, assigned with carrying the stone, accidentally drop it down a valley. It splits in two, with one half disappearing into the 'Moliva' river. This means that the law is now incomplete: Kilikijan has only half the stone, Nongoloza has a reversed imprint.

This becomes crucial when one of Kilikijan's followers, a younger boy named Magubane, is ill and does not go out with the group of bandits. Instead, he stays behind and rests along with Nongoloza and his followers. Kilikijan returns to find Nongoloza having sex with Magubane, and is enraged.

**26** 'old man one'.

**27** This language would appear to be a lingua franca rather than an argot. Nevertheless, it is considered the source of Shalambom. Indeed, this would suggest links between Fanakalo and Shalambom.

**28** Also known as Ngilikityane.

**29** The blood is good, but the gall is not good.

**30** The meaning of this expression could not be determined with certainty. One interpretation (by a speaker of isiXhosa) is that it could simply mean 'It is drunk!'

> The two leaders draw their 'kapsabels' (sabres) and fight. The fighting continues until they are ankle-deep in blood. At this point they decide to call a truce. They decide to go their separate ways, each gang according to its own laws. This is known as 'die dag toe die hemel en aarde geskeur het' (the day heaven and earth were torn apart).
>
> Some years later, by chance, they end up together in Durban's Point prison. Another prisoner, Grey, and his 5 followers, are crouched in the corner of a cell, gambling with 'spykers' ('nails' – coins). Nongoloza and Kilikijan discuss the possibility of starting another division of the gang, in charge of procurement. When both are sent to solitary confinement, it is Grey and his followers who keep them supplied with food, tobacco, and marijuana. Thus the 26s are born (adapted from Steinberg 1998, Weyers 2008, Parker-Lewis 2006).

This myth serves several functions. First, it explains why the aggressive, masculine 28s are the 'soldiers' of the Number, while the 27s (the carriers of the law on stone) constitute the justice system, and the 26s are in charge of procurement.[31] Second, it is used as a measure of seniority within the gang: it is told to new initiates by senior members, and only the most senior leaders will know it in its full version, including all the gang-specific episodes and expansions. A member sent to a different prison would have to tell his version in order to prove his rank, thus defining and confirming a self that is embedded within the hierarchy of the gang. Third, the myth is central to various other linguistic phenomena in the Number. In the most general sense, it demarcates a semiotic space within which metaphor action can take place.[32] Finally, other narratives rely on it for their own meaning. So, for instance, the so-called 'Huis-toe kom verhale' (coming-home narratives), in which each individual gang member describes his initiation in symbolic terms, make little sense without knowledge of the Number myth.

For the current study, the focus must fall on the protagonist, and specifically on the shift that myth-making has brought about in his character. It should not be surprising that this can be a tricky process. When does Mzuzephi Mathebula change into Jan Note, or rather, when does Jan Note change into Nongoloza?[33] It can be said with certainty that the myth knows nothing of Mzuzephi Mathebula, although history certainly knows all three.

Focussing on characteristics seems more productive than tracing his various pseudonyms. Some aspects of the mythical Nongoloza were not apparent in the historical Nongoloza. Invented or embellished events emphasise specific characteristics, such as his tenacity when drinking the gall of Rooiland, or his sexual aggression in claiming Magubane. Needless to say, there are also omissions. It is no surprise that his betrayal is not represented – nor is his death.[34]

**31** Currently the 27s are in decline and the 26s in ascendance, due in part to the rise in the drug trade over the last 20 years.

**32** We find various general metaphors or metonyms in Shalambom that only make sense in the context of the Number myth, e.g. 'kapsabel' (sabre) for any sort of blade (usually a small shiv-type knife).

**33** Even the meaning of the name he took for himself when he became king of the Ninevites is disputed. Van Onselen gives the meaning of 'Nongoloza' as 'the man with the piercing eyes' (Van Onselen 1984: 378), while Parker-Lewis defines it as 'an elevated person, one who hands out or hands down the laws' (Parker-Lewis 2006: 39).

**34** In fact, none of the protagonists of the Number myth die. The only explicit death is the murder of the farmer Rabie. Pawule Mambazo simply goes quiet, and unlike Nongoloza or Kilikijan,

Some of Nongoloza's supernatural characteristics are common to various anti-colonial narratives. A typical example is the ability to make bullets harmless by turning them into water or making them bounce off him (Steinberg 1998: 34), a belief also found in India, Australia, South America and various parts of Africa (Smart (1999), Wentzel (2010)). This can apparently be traced to an incident in 1904, when he recovered exceptionally after being shot (Van Onselen 1984: 35).

Nongoloza's innate courage is demonstrated by a story from his childhood. As a small boy he kills a mountain lion with his bare hands, thereby proving himself 'ndoda' (true man) (Weyers 2008: 158). He does this to protect his people from the lion, a situation later echoed when the 'lion' would become the police or prison authorities, and the Number his 'people.' This role is epitomised in the events in the cave of kelomba. During the slaughter of Rooiland, Kilikijan can not stomach the bull's gall. Nongoloza drinks the horn empty. This could be interpreted as his ability to stomach the warders, to deal with them aggressively. In a sense he is almost immune to their poison (Weyers 2008: 165).

More than just a protector, he is also a care-taker and provider. The 28 version of the Number narrative states clearly that the reason he allows Grey and his followers to join the Number gang structure is so that the 26s (who specialise in smuggling and accumulating wealth) can provide for his wives (Weyers 2008: 253).

His organisational characteristics are ritualistic and authoritative. Even before the 'dag toe die hemel en aarde geskeur het', Nongoloza is in some sense the dominant member over both the 27s and 28s. After the slaughter of Rooiland, Pawule Mambazo appears to have surrendered leadership to the diarchy of Nongoloza and Kilikijan. The myth describes a ritual of dipping recruits' boots in different parts of the bull's body, assigning their positions based on their colour afterwards. Nongoloza presides over this ritual (Weyers 2008: 235). It seems his supernatural abilities include powers of divination which could be compared to those of the *sangoma* in Nguni societies.

Legends and epics often feature a very intimate relationship between character and object – specifically the epic hero and the sacred or enchanted object. One could even call this an overlapping of character and object. We ask ourselves: what is Arthur without Excalibur, what is Cú Chulainn without Gáe Bulg? The enchanted object, often a weapon, is as much or more part of the character as other properties like appearance or intelligence. In the case of Nongoloza, the hide of Rooiland is the object which serves as an ambivalent extension of his character. The reason for this ambivalence is the doubts around the authenticity of the law. Nongoloza insists on his interpretation, so much so that he will fight Kilikijan, if needs be to death, for his right to take wives from the young recruits. However, at some point, when this fight has gone on long enough, he is prepared to choose division over destruction. We see a conciliatory aspect to his character at the 'Wal cross' as he draws a 'red cross' in the sand with his sabre, naming the site the 'grond van Waarheid' (the ground of Truth) as he and Kilikijan form a pact

his name is not invoked as symbolic fortification in the present. We understand that he must be, not only literally, but also figuratively, 'witbiene' ('white bones' – dead). On the other hand, the name of Nongoloza is frequently used in an active sense, as if he were still alive: in tattoos, in the designation as 'Nongie boy' (28) and in other parts of the Number mythology.

to respect each other in future, and commit themselves to mutual consultation (Weyers 2008: 165).

What do we learn about Nongoloza? He does take Magubane, who was too sick to accompany Kilikijan, and gave no indication of consent, for sex. Or did Magubane give consent, and is this what angered Kilikijan? We do not know. The voice that is missing here is of course that of Magubane. In the misogynistic prison culture, 'women' have no right to speak. Instead, he is represented by another 'protector', Kilikijan. As far as Nongoloza is concerned, however, the law is not open to negotiation. It is this dual nature, both protector and aggressor, lawmaker and -breaker, renegade and reconciler, which leads Steinberg to describe him as a 'Janus-faced monster: horrible, because he was undiscerningly brutal, enticing because he showed that even the poor can inspire terror' (Steinberg 1998: 34).

## 5 Alternative Realities: Anti-society and Anti-language

The linguist Michael Halliday's terms 'anti-language' and 'anti-society' are well suited to the Number gangs. The anti-society is defined as follows:

> An anti-society is a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it. It is a mode of resistance, resistance which may take the form either of passive symbiosis or of active hostility and even destruction (Halliday 1976: 570).

It is no accident that the anti-languages Halliday considers all derive from the criminal underworld, e.g. Polish prison gangs' 'grypserka' or thieves' cant in Britain. These groups are naturally oppositional to society. It should also be clear from the discussion so far that this definition must also include the Number gangs. Specifically, the Number gangs' relationship to society would be located somewhere between passive symbiosis and active hostility. The lore of the Number gangs never features anything more than resistance: the actual destruction of the society it opposes is never imagined. Nor could it be, as there is no such thing as banditry without a society on which to feed. It can not opt out of society, in fact it is dependent on it, economically, socially, and politically (Hobsbawm 2010: 7, 91). The fact that the Number myth, for all its metaphorical richness, makes no real revolutionary claims reveals a paradoxical reticence, perhaps even honesty, in these bandits.

The fundamental element of an anti-society is its anti-language. In fact, the alternate reality in which the anti-society operates is fully maintained by conversation – very seldom are anti-languages represented in writing. Halliday's definitive properties are:

- The simplest form taken by an anti-language is that of new words for old: it is a language relexicalised.
- The principle is that of same grammar, different vocabulary.
- Effective communication depends on exchanging meanings which are inaccessible to the layperson.
- The anti-language is not just an optional extra, it is the fundamental element in the existence of the 'second life' phenomenon.

– The most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation. All who employ this same form of communication are reality-maintaining others (Halliday 1976: 570).

The anti-language offers two major benefits to the anti-society. Obviously it allows for secret communication, only intelligible to the initiated. More interestingly, Halliday emphasises the reality-creating property of language. He quotes Berger and Luckmann's description of this property:

> This reality-generating potency of conversation is already given in the fact of linguistic objectification. We have seen how language objectifies the world, transforming the panta rhei of experience into a cohesive order. In the establishment of this order language realises a world, in the double sense of apprehending and producing it. [...] Thus the fundamental reality-maintaining fact is the continuing use of the same language to objectify unfolding biographical experience (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 172).

In the case of the Number gangs, the anti-language is called either 'sabela' (by the 27s) or 'Shalambom(bo)' (by the 26s and 28s).[35] Shalambom, with its metaphors and the narratives told in the anti-language, offers an alternative reality and new self to the new recruit. What sort of reality is this and which characters can inhibit it? Is it only oppositional, in the sense of inverting the values of the society against which it is set up? Is it comforting, recognizable and familiar? Or can we say that it is an epic reality?

## 6 An Epic Anti-Epic?

Steinberg's description of the Number myth as an 'odd hybrid of Homeric and Talmudic tales' (Steinberg 1998: 54) might seem to impose Western-Hebraic categories on an African narrative. However, several elements of the myth do suggest that at least the second category is a fair imposition: the law on stone, the ritual sacrifice and the feuding brothers are all suggestive references to the Pentateuch/Torah and other parts of the Old Testament. We can of course add to this the name of the Ninevites, the historical counterpart to the mythical founding gangs.

By describing the Number myth as Homeric, Steinberg places it in the category of the epic. Is this valid? Harmon and Holman's standard and authoritative definition of the epic describes it as

> a long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in adventures forming an organic whole through their relation to a central heroic figure and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race (Harmon & Holman 1986: 177).

35 According to Glaser, the word 'Shalambom(bo)' might be derived from the isiZulu term 'shala' (to turn away) and the expression 'mbo-mbo' (to cover or turn away) (Glaser 2000: 50). Clearly, this name already suggests anti-language status. There is much to be said about Shalambom's metaphorical nature, lexical focus, and sociolinguistic status. However, the present study seeks to examine genre and character, literary elements which certainly overlap with linguistic effects, but for the present purposes the relationship between linguistic and literary effect is regarded via the reality-creating property of the anti-language. See Stone 2002 for more on Shalambom/Sabela.

The Number myth is no standard narrative poem, even if the style in which it is delivered does suggest elements of performance poetry: it is delivered as a 'staccato' recitation at 'break-neck speed' (Parker-Lewis 2006: 7, 21). Interestingly, the speaker is apparently only able to recite it from beginning to end, in serial. When asked to repeat any specific part, he would have to start again at the very beginning:

> [W]hen the information is *only* in your head, you cannot jump in anywhere. You must return to the starting point as if you are reciting a poem or a play. And indeed often they did act out the piece – getting up, striding around, acting out all the roles with lots of expression and many hand gestures. It is magnificent drama and I enjoyed it as such (Parker-Lewis 2006: 7).

While this is perhaps not the classical style of the traditional epic, it is certainly distinct from everyday discourse and might even in the modern era have been influenced by the styles popularised in rap music. Whether this is the case or not, the style is distinct and unique to the delivery of the Number myth.

The second issue in applying this definition would be the qualification that the characters are of high position, which in the Western tradition would usually mean nobility. Some might hesitate to accept Nongoloza into this category. However, recall that he crowned himself[36] *inkoos nkulu* or king, a name which is still sometimes used when referring to him. Nongoloza is nothing less than royalty in the Number gangs.

The final challenge with this definition could be that it considers only nations or races, and the Number gangs are neither. This issue cuts to the core of the present argument. Can an anti-society produce an epic, or is this nationalism's exclusive right? And if an anti-society can produce an epic, should we follow the naming convention and call it an anti-epic?

The prefix 'anti-' implies not only opposition, but also derivation. An anti-society would not and can not exist without the society it opposes. By the same token an anti-language has an ongoing relationship with the language it opposes. What would an anti-epic be, if there is such a thing? Would its hero have to be an anti-hero? Which oppositional relations would determine its anti-status? As with the anti-language and the anti-society, the anti-epic would have to be logically dependent on its inverse. If there is to be such a thing as an anti-epic, we would first have to determine the epic against which it is defined.

This is surprisingly easy. After all, the colonial narrative, in its most general sense, is distinctly epic, with heroes representing civilisations and the colonial project as its mission, occasionally requiring divine intervention. Considering Harmon and Holman's 'ten characteristics of an epic' (1986: 177), we can identify most characteristics easily:

1. Begins in medias res.
2. The setting is vast, covering many nations, the world or the universe.
3. Begins with an invocation to a muse (epic invocation).
4. Begins with a statement of the theme.
5. Includes the use of epithets.

36 Of course he had to crown himself: he was the first king in this lineage!

6 Contains long lists, called an epic catalogue.
7 Features long and formal speeches.
8 Shows divine intervention on human affairs.
9 Features heroes that embody the values of the civilization.
10 Often features the tragic hero's descent into the Underworld or hell.

There can be no doubt that the Ninevites, and specifically Nongoloza, would have been exposed to this sort of epic rhetoric in various forms – both the British and Boer narratives about South Africa are epic in nature. In fact, the pervasive and powerful antagonist in the shape of the colonial-industrial authorities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fits the epic genre perfectly well. The gang leadership's ability to create for their members a coherent and powerful origin myth to counter this, demonstrates an understanding of narrative and its role in shaping collective identity that is seldom associated with economically-minded bandits.

It is perhaps curious that the time and distance between the current Western Cape stronghold of the Number and the northern setting of the myth would have so little impact on its content. After all, the South African sociopolitical landscape has changed dramatically during this time. And yet, as demonstrated by twenty-first century labour unrest,[37] the strong arm of government displays a remarkable continuity, protecting the interests of international mining conglomerates against those of mineworkers. In fact, the Number myth, when compared to the historical actions of its antagonist,[38] is less violent than one would anticipate.

The fact remains that most of the current Number gangsters have never been close to a mine. Could the continued focus on the injustices in the mining industry be ascribed to unusual insight into the mainstay of the South African economy? Or perhaps to the growing popularity of the Black Consciousness Movement among coloured activists in the second half of the twentieth century? Why is there such strong identification between two situations so far apart? A satisfactory answer to these questions would have to look closely at the factors contributing to the changes in the Number gangs during the 1950s, when large numbers of coloured men join the gang,[39] boosting its numbers and effectively changing its face (Stone 2002: 389).

The protagonist of the Number myth is not a simple character either. Parker-Lewis (2006) and other writers comfortably call Nongoloza an anti-hero, and it is indeed a tempting classification. Yet it is not unproblematic. Historically the anti-hero can be traced as far back as Homer and the Greek drama (Steiner 1973: 198), and is also to be found in some Renaissance texts, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost.*[40] In most instances of the anti-hero, he is confronted with an all-powerful

37 Most notably at the Marikana massacre on August 16, 2012.
38 It is also considerably less violent than for instance the Táin or the Iliad
39 Lötter and Schurink (1984: 27) document warders' interviews on a group of black prisoners moved from Boksburg's Cinderella prison (a historical stronghold of the Ninevites) to prisons in the Western Cape. By the end of the century, according to these warders, the Number had established itself in most prisons in the province. This goes some way to explain the Number's spread to the coloured prison population of the Western Cape (but not its popularity as such).
40 It is significant that Milton's early anti-hero is Satan himself.

opponent – either a godly force or an entire society. Unlike the more universal moral hero, the anti-hero is a product of the era in which he lives. He lives in 'a period of transition more hysterically hurried than its immediate predecessor at least' (Walker 1985: 26). In other words, the anti-hero is caught in an accelerating history. He can look back at a past that was calmer, less chaotic, more stable. The world has caused him psychological trauma, and he has little hope of ascending to a position of power within it.

The mythical Nongoloza possesses many characteristics of the anti-hero: 'passion, great talent, lack of respect for rank and privilege (although possessing both), distaste for society and social institutions, rebellion, exile, an unsavoury secret past, arrogance, overconfidence and, ultimately, a self-destructive manner' (Stein 2009: 19). However, many of his characteristics are also at odds with the anti-hero – his protection of his comrades, for one, and his law-making abilities, to name another.

A careful consideration would admit that we are operating with a double perspective here, attempting to judge his status in the narrative from a position where we are not the primary reader (or listener) of the narrative. Thus, regarded from outside, Nongoloza is an anti-hero who does not represent the values held high by a society to which the current researcher and reader probably belongs at least in some sense. However, from within the gangs, he is closer to the traditional epic hero: he shares the values of his community, he is a protective leader and moral, in the sense that he takes the law very seriously (even if others might disagree about the details of that law). In fact, this apparent contradiction represents a very important moment in the journey the new recruit is undergoing. The anti-hero is transformed, in the mind of the listener, and by means of the initiation process, into an epic hero.

Northrop Frye argues that the rise of the anti-hero indicates a shift in the heroic ethos from feudal aristocrat to urban democrat, which he links to a shift from epic to ironic narrative (Frye 2002: 34-35). It is perhaps worth noting that what Bhabha would call the 'ironic compromise' (Bhabha 1994: 86) seems inherent to the colonial situation. Even in its epic imagining of a mythical origin, the Number myth is derived. If the aim of the epic is to provide a mythical origin in a 'truer' reality, this reality can not be one created by the antagonist. It must predate the arrival of the antagonist.[41] But in the case of the Number myth, or any anti-society, this is logically impossible. Hence the Number myth remains, in its most epic moments, deeply ironic.

This ironic aspect might well be the defining aspect of what we can call the anti-epic. The central thesis of this paper, that there is such a thing as the anti-epic, and that this is a proper category for the Number myth, comes down to a measure of irony. What is the status of a founding myth that is clearly derived? What is the function of a hero when he dare not fulfill his quest? The Number myth can never escape the irony of its own existence. As anti-language stands to language, as anti-society stands to society, and as anti-hero stands to hero, so the Number myth, doomed to derivation even at its most epic moments, stands to the colonial narrative.

41 It is no wonder that the start of Pawule Mambazo's story is moved to the historically impossible date of 1812, perhaps in an attempt to predate the arrival of its antagonist. Although this does not make logical sense, the earlier date does lend weight to the narrative.

## 7 Conclusion

This article argued that the origin myth of the South African Number gangs should be considered epic. It was argued that, given the specifics of the narrative context, it is valid to extend the concepts of the 'anti-language' and the 'anti-society' to genre description, thereby creating the speculative category of the 'anti-epic'. Within this genre, care must be taken not to assign seductive labels such as the 'anti-hero' too freely. In fact, the anti-epic displays many of the typical features of the traditional epic, which is not surprising, given the mirroring features of the anti-society. However, the anti-epic is distinguished by its ironic aspect. This irony is generated by its claims to origin in the face of an overtly derived nature.

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## Adres van de auteur

University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa
tkapp@ufh.ac.za