



## 'Licking the snake' – the *i'khotane* and contemporary township youth identities in South Africa

Simon Howell & Louise Vincent

To cite this article: Simon Howell & Louise Vincent (2014) 'Licking the snake' – the *i'khotane* and contemporary township youth identities in South Africa, South African Review of Sociology, 45:2, 60-77, DOI: [10.1080/21528586.2014.917883](https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2014.917883)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2014.917883>



Published online: 11 Jun 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 478



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

# 'LICKING THE SNAKE' – THE *I'KHOthane* AND CONTEMPORARY TOWNSHIP YOUTH IDENTITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

**Simon Howell**  
Rhodes University  
simon.howell@uct.ac.za

**Louise Vincent**  
Department of Political and International Studies  
Rhodes University

## ABSTRACT

The *i'khotane* youth subculture is a relatively new phenomenon that has emerged in some of South Africa's townships. Characterised by the rampant consumption of certain goods, such as expensive clothing, the subculture is unique in that it is also defined by the destruction of these goods in performances known as 'battles'. Demonised by the media, we set out to explore what makes these practices meaningful to the participants themselves. On the basis of in-depth interviews conducted with the members of one group, we bring to the academic literature a scarcely analysed phenomenon that is nevertheless an acknowledged element of popular youth culture in contemporary South Africa. We attempt to place the practice of *i'khotane* within the context of the patterns of conspicuous consumption that have emerged in (a highly unequal) post-apartheid South Africa. While the practice of burning expensive consumer goods in public may seem alien, especially in contrast to the impoverished surroundings within which the *i'khotane* live, there are discernable and understandable reasons why the subculture has gained both popularity and notoriety. We show how the practice of *i'khotane* is a potent means of articulating youth identity in settings seemingly left behind by the 'new' South Africa.

Keywords: *i'khotane*, consumption, townships, subculture, poverty, youth

## INTRODUCTION

The *i'khotane* youth subculture is a relatively new phenomenon that has emerged in some of South Africa's poorest townships. Loosely translated as 'licking the snake', the practice revolves around the conspicuous accumulation and consumption of expensive material items, such as branded clothing. These items are then destroyed, most

frequently by burning them, in ritualised confrontations or 'battles' (Nkosi 2011). Used as both a noun and a verb, the phenomenon first rose to prominence in the impoverished townships surrounding Johannesburg (Bambalele 2012). The subculture has, however, now expanded, with a number of groups or 'crews' 'representing' many of South Africa's major urban centres (De Kort 2012: 1–3).

*I'khotane* group members interact with other groups in ritualised confrontations, the purpose of which is to both display one's dancing prowess and to parade and importantly destroy venerated material possessions such as a pair of Gucci shoes or a Ralph Lauren shirt. The destruction of these expensive items of clothing is done in the name of 'respect' and 'having fun' (Interview 19 June 2013). As we explore, the display and destruction of coveted material possessions are a means of both garnering power and displaying specific understandings of taste and identity. Those who are willing to destroy the most expensive item of clothing, or literally tear up or burn the most banknotes (Bambalele 2012) win the confrontation, and in the process also win respect from the audience and other crews.

Variably described by community leaders and local politicians as criminal or morally problematic, the *i'khotane* have been vilified by the media (see, for instance, Petrus 2012: 2). However, relatively little attention has been given by the academic literature to understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of those who practise *i'khotane*, even though there have been numerous articles focusing on it online (see, for instance, Hayes 2012) and in the print media (see, for instance, Ndabeni 2012: 4–5; Petrus 2012: 2–3; Pongoma 2012: 6; Jordaan 2012: 4–5). Indeed, it is precisely because so little has been written on the phenomenon that we have had to frequently rely on media reports and articles to further qualify our claims. Furthermore, while there have been a number of very useful works on post-apartheid youth consumption (Moodley and Adam 2000: 51–69), materialism (Bevan-Dye, Garnett and De Klerk 2012: 5578–5586), and youth identity in South Africa (Dolby 2007; Swartz 2009), very little of this literature has been applied to the *i'khotane* phenomenon. The article aims to bridge this analytical gap.

With this in mind we have undertaken, in the first instance, to provide a thick description of the phenomenon derived from qualitative exploratory interviews conducted with a local crew. Secondly, and upon this basis, we have attempted to understand the rise, importance and meaning of *i'khotane* in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Here we argue that the prominence of 'black diamonds' – the professional, powerful and extremely wealthy few who have benefitted disproportionately from South Africa's economic redistribution efforts – have provided symbolic role models for the youth, most of whom have consistently been excluded from South Africa's economic development. As Swartz, Tyler and Verfeld (2013: 27–28) have noted, 'In the "New South Africa", overcoming past racism and enduring present inequalities constitutes the experience of being South African for the majority of black South Africans.' The practices of the *i'khotane* are one such means of experiencing what it is to be a young

and poor South African. The celebrity of the likes of Kenny Kunene, the ‘Sushi King’ (known for eating sushi off the bare bodies of young women in his nightclubs) and Julius Malema, one time leader of the ruling party’s youth wing (and known for his love of fine suits and Rolex watches) have glamourised the ideal of a material identity encased in fine clothing and expensive shoes. The *i’khothane*, by ‘showing they can afford’ (Interview 19 June 2013), pay homage to an understanding of post-apartheid black masculinity that must be seen as materially successful and sexually competitive. We explore this meaning with reference to the context of the emerging economy of South Africa and the high levels of inequality that still remain in the country.

There are a number of different crews in the country, practising *i’khothane* in somewhat different ways. While we make observations about some of the general features shared by different crews and how they are made meaningful within the larger context of South Africa, the article is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with a single crew in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. As such it makes no claim to a larger representivity, but rather hopes to shed light on the moral and consumptive universe that the young men in our study inhabit.

## THE STUDY

The conspicuous consumption of material objects, and especially clothes, has become an important identity marker for post-apartheid South African youth (Oliver 2007: 180–181). Indeed, in the ‘moral ecology of the township’, Swartz (2009: 41) has noted that ‘for impoverished young people branded clothing is perhaps even more important than for their wealthy peers, since their contexts provide few opportunities for enhancing self-esteem – such as acquiring socially desirable jobs, property, or cars’. The *i’khothane* highlight this importance by taking consumption to its logical extreme – they are defined and consciously define themselves by the clothes they wear and destroy.

While many objects can be adopted as or become *i’khothane*, from the hiring of expensive cars to the feeding of one’s dog with Kentucky Fried Chicken or the wasting of UltraMel custard, the focus on brand-name clothing is an essential way of displaying one’s membership to the subculture (Mabandu 2012). We focus on two core themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. In the first section, the study focuses on the importance and context of clothing, the structure of the crew and the ‘battles’ they engage in. In the second the study focuses on the meaning of ‘respect’, ‘having fun’, and the construction of young black citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa. While neither section is mutually exclusive, their analytical division is a useful means of interpreting how the myriad symbols and subjects relate to one another.

The article gives voice to those who participate in *i’khothane* through their first-hand accounts of the practice. To this end we conducted in-depth interviews with seven members of an *i’khothane* group, both as a group and with selected individuals, including the leader of the crew, ‘King Bhenga’ (hereafter KB). We also conducted an interview with a young man who had left the crew. All participants chose their own aliases. The

interviews were conducted in English, with an isiXhosa translator present in order that the interviewees could fully describe themselves. All the participants spoke good English and felt comfortable speaking in English. The translator clarified the meaning of specific words and phrases in an ad hoc fashion, and reviewed the transcripts in order to ensure they faithfully reflected what was said in the interviews. As such, there were no difficulties in translation, and the participants were happy that their views had been faithfully recorded and reflected by the transcripts. The interviews were structured in the manner outlined by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000: 57–74) and entailed four phases – initiation, the main narrative, questioning, and closure of the interview. This method was used as it places emphasis on and provides participants with a setting in which they are encouraged to draw on their own experiences and memories. This provides them with the opportunity to narrate their experiences in their own terms, allowing them to drive the direction and content of the interview. The third stage, however, allows the researcher to engage the interviewees in specific aspects of their experiences, thus allowing for focus to be drawn to those features of their narratives that feature prominently.

In analysing these interviews we have drawn on the work of various authors writing in the traditions of consumption, cultural and township studies.<sup>1</sup> In drawing on the work of these theorists, the study's intention is to not only provide an analytical context or framework in which the *i'khotane* phenomenon can be understood, but to provide a critical analysis of the reasons why these young men engage in the practice. While some commentators, especially in the media, have constructed the practitioners of *i'khotane* as the latest incarnation of 'immoral' youth activities enveloping post-apartheid South Africa, we question this discourse and its assumptions. Indeed, as Swartz (2009) has consistently shown, township youth have a firm understanding of morality, and are not simply 'empty-vessels' mindlessly following their idols' fashion statements or (im)moral sensibilities. We see the participants as portraying an *embodied morality* (Swartz 2009: 65): 'morality is not only about what you do (a morality of action) but also about who you are and who others are to you'. An embodied morality plays an important role in determining the unique set of choices and conditions that make human beings unique – their identity. In this vein, we understand their identity as a product that, in part, is articulated through such performances as clothing, dance and ritualistic consumption. We explore these assertions throughout this article.

There is a growing dissonance between the rights and freedoms safeguarded in the Constitution of South Africa and the lived reality of many of its citizens (Vincent and Howell 2014: 75–90). This dissonance finds expression in the microcosm of citizens' lives, and is mirrored in the way that the *i'khotane* both idealise the political elite and have yet also constructed for themselves their own means of consuming in a conspicuous manner. Understanding the context in which these young people make meaning in their own lives, as we shall argue, needs to be interpreted against the backdrop of spiralling unemployment, violent crime and (often) inescapable poverty.

## BATTLES, CLOTHING AND CREWS

The subculture of *i'khothane* is defined, on the one hand, by the conspicuous consumption of material objects, and on the other, by the ritualised destruction of these objects. The very name *i'khothane* – ‘licking the snake’ – points to the importance of clothing to the crew. As KB noted:

It is the term we use when we gonna battle with clothes against other crews .... So this guy from other crew we call him a snake so one of our crew must lick the snake. And in some instances “licking the snake” is not about battling because some shoes we wear are made of snakeskin so we specifically mean the dude must lick the shoes in order to be seen that it is a snakeskin (Interview 1 August 2013).

The forms of consumption that the *i'khothane* have adopted are, however, of a specific type – they exhibit certain *tastes* for different material objects that are a result of the process of contextual socialisation. This is in line with Woodruffe-Burton’s (1998: 302) argument, which, although conducted in a very different context, speaks to the process: ‘Through the socialisation process the consumer learns not only to agree on shared meanings of some symbols but also to develop individual symbolic interpretations of his/her own.’ For instance, KB described his taste for specific brands thus: ‘If ever I am wearing a Louis Vuitton shirt, everyone knows that it is more expensive than Levi’s .... I must burn it so that other people can see I afford that shirt’ (Interview 19 June 2013). There is, in other words, a weighted system of values that gives meaning to their patterns of consumption that is itself only explicable within the economic and social structures of post-apartheid South Africa.

Crews are structured hierarchically. To become a part of the crew requires that the individual shows his allegiance to the philosophy of *i'khothane* through the purchasing, wearing and destruction of expensive clothes. Some groups may have particular initiation practices, however the group that was interviewed did not. New members were rarely inducted, and were chosen by the group as a whole. As KB notes below, the leader maintains the discipline of the crew. Continually bringing ‘disrespect’ to the group may result in the individual being expelled. All the members interviewed argued that they were members ‘for life’, however it is possible for an individual to renounce their membership. The groups are loosely structured – no member has a specific duty other than the upholding the respect of the ‘crew’. A group’s size and composition will thus vary over time. Battles and other confrontations are ritualised and undertaken as a group. As far as can be ascertained, groups will not fight over individuals – to do so would be to undermine the respect of the group as a whole by showing weakness. The crew that was interviewed for this paper had no intention of growing in size. This may, however, not be the case in large cities that are home to far more groups competing for resources such as clothes and ‘girls’.

The most controversial act that the *i'khothane* undertake is the ritualised burning of expensive items of clothing in their battles. As described by the interviewees, battles can

occur for a number of reasons – women, territory or simply to 'have fun'. Chiefly, the reason for a battle is 'respect'. A battle will involve one member of a crew antagonising another member of an opposing crew – described by the participants as 'making someone dirty' (Interview 19 July 2013). The disrespected member will begin a dance aimed at showing off his 'style' and flaunting his 'tag'. The two opposing members will then attempt to outdo one another through a series of choreographed dance routines and by destroying ever more expensive items of clothing. While battles are central to the *i'khothane* subculture, they are not unique. As one member reminisced, the schoolyard battle for respect would follow a similar form: 'I want to battle with that guy, because that guy wears a toughies [a brand of school shoe], and I am wearing all-stars [a brand of casual shoes]' (Interview 19 July 2013). The *i'khothane* have centralised and refined the rituals surrounding battles, ensuring that there are clearly defined rules (and winners). The disrespect of another group or individual can be achieved through as little as a conversational snub or as much as a physical fight.

The member of the crew who destroys the most expensive item of clothing, with the most amount of style, is declared the winner and thus earns respect, as does the crew to which he belongs.<sup>2</sup> These are not violent confrontations, although they are physical, and are conducted by a strict code of conduct enforced by the mutual respect of the two crews. One might describe them as ritualised confrontational dances in which, while the outcome is not determined, symbolic practices structure the encounter. Should a member of the crew not conduct himself in a respectful manner, he brings the entire crew into disrepute, for which there is a system of discipline in place. As KB noted, 'I discipline them because if anyone of us fights, he knows that for sure, next week, next weekend, the booze is on him, he knows that. That's how we discipline them' (Interview 19 July 2013). The purpose and need to battle with other crews occupied an ambiguous position in the minds of many of the crew we interviewed. The battle was seen as important but also recognisably wasteful and therefore problematic. As 'King Loshika' (hereafter KL) notes, in hoping for a better future, 'It can happen if we work together as *i'khothane*, we don't battle, we don't disrespect each other, we don't force respect from one another and we don't waste' (Interview 19 July 2013).

For the *i'khothane*, expensive clothes, sparkling jewellery and wads of brand new notes point not only to literal wealth, but also a symbolic wealth. This symbolic wealth finds currency in a system of meaning in which specific understandings of post-apartheid black identity have been articulated. As Swartz et al. (2012: 34) note:

*Ikasi style* [the more general articulation of the context in which young *i'khothane* find themselves] is therefore as much a discourse of inclusion as it is a style that creates subjects who are already excluded from the "New South African" narrative. Advertising billboards throughout the townships indicate this pathway to inclusion by peddling middle class products with the tag line "*Ikasi* for life".

The consequence of glorifying these consecrated items, as we explore below, is an increase in social mobility, a delimitation of the economic and social boundaries inherent in the politico-spatial design and isolation of the township from the formal economy, and an increase in ‘respect’ – the most important asset for an *i’khotane* to possess. At the same time, the burning of items of clothing worth more than the average weekly income of many of the homes in their communities was recognised as ‘wasteful’.

The ritualistic practice of accumulating and then destroying expensive items of clothing in ‘battles’ can be seen both as a form of yearning for, and mockery of, conspicuous consumption in post-apartheid South Africa. It is a yearning in that these young men will go to great lengths and extraordinary effort to obtain the items of clothing that garner them respect, and which allow them to emulate their idols, such as Kenny Kunene. However, there is also a sense of mockery in the idea of ‘showing I can afford’ – a mockery of themselves and capitalism in the ‘trauma’ of their own wasting of valuable resources. In lieu of substantive changes in their lives post-1994, they enact their dreams of ‘real’ conspicuous consumption by accumulating these wardrobes. Yet in destroying them they transcend this system of meaning, if only briefly – not even Kunene, it is assumed, would take a match to his most valuable items of clothing.

For the *i’khotane*, the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986: 46–58) signified by an item (and that can thus be embodied by the wearer) is a function of its perceived rarity, glamour and expense. KB articulates this perceived hierarchy by making reference to both the price and name of the items of clothing that he wears: ‘I must not wear an item below R500, it must be over R500 so then I could qualify, so I went to buy, I bought it, it was R1800 I bought a Carvella [a pair of shoes] at Spitz [a well-known clothing brand shop in the city] in Port Elizabeth’ (Interview 19 June 2013). The collective cost of all of the apparel worn as one outfit is known as the ‘tag’ – it is for this reason that expensive shoes are so highly prized, as they frequently contribute the largest percentage to the tag. The tag functions as signifier of, and demand for, respect. As KL notes, ‘If I am wearing, my tag for the night is 4 000 [Rand] something, and his tag is 2 000 [Rand] something, he will respect me’ (Interview 6 July 2013). Brand-name items of clothing signify that which the context in which the *i’khotane* live is not – internationalism, glamour, wealth, and materialism idealised by the popular media.

While Louis Vuitton, Ralph Lauren and Gucci were the most commonly cited and sought after clothing brands, each individual member had their own unique style. This style was defined by the individual’s identity, by the clothing and particular brands that he commonly wore and were associated with his own unique dance. Individual members of the crew thus both looked similar and yet different – similar in that they were clearly all wearing expensive clothes, different in that each had tailored those clothes and their arrangement to his own style. KB conceptualised the process of reconfiguring the clothing, as signifiers, as a form of vandalising – ‘We impress girls and people with our clothes, we don’t like vandalising – we vandalise the fashion industry’ (Interview 19 June 2013). Rather than buying into consumerism as a form of display, in



these instances, their display is the annihilation of the accoutrements of consumerism. Paradoxically this *is* a form of consumerism – their oppositional stance is nihilistic rather than avant-garde. In this sense, and as they themselves note, they truly 'vandalise' fashion by not only producing meaning in a context not typically attributed to catwalk fashion items, but by also rearranging those garments in unique ways that define their individual styles. As one of the crew noted, 'sometimes we design our clothes. I can make it myself, take it to the factory, someone will sew it there and maybe make some kind of flowers, kinda new. That's how it is' (Interview 19 June 2013).

Carvela shoes were the most highly prized item by all members of the crew, both because of their price and because of their 'cosmopolitan' style (Niehaus 2012: 42). They are also one of the first items to be destroyed in battles, usually by burning or drinking alcohol out of them (or both). Because the participants did not always have access to those brands of clothing that would be seen as the preserve of the elite and of those whom they wished to emulate – Gucci, Polo, and so on – they reoriented their perception of what constituted an elite brand to conform to the limitations of their socio-political and (impoverished, provincial) economic environment. Thus, for instance, Markhams, Truworhs and Edgars brand clothing (all larger South African chain stores that do not have the same cachet as recognisably international brands such as Hilton Weiner) and certain local stores (such as Spitz's) all took the place of these more recognisable brands as relatively expensive and therefore worthy of display and destruction. As KB notes in this regard, 'I go to PE (Port Elizabeth) and look for clothes, I maybe go to Green Acres [a local shopping mall] and maybe there is a girl that sells rejects from Jo'burg and I go there and order some clothes, and I come back and say "guys I saw this other trouser there and it was awesome. Would you like to have one? It is R350 or it is R500"' (Interview 19 July 2013). The *i'khothane*, in their quest to obtain and display brand-name clothes, have become participants in an informal economy that itself relies on specific references to global consumerism.

The *i'khothane* can thus be described as 'cultural omnivores' (Snowball, Jamal and Willis 2010: 467–483), reconfiguring the received wisdom about the products they consume, and adapting their tastes and modes of consumption as they 'vandalise fashion' in a context described by Leslie Banks (2002: 631–649) as existing at the nexus between South Africa's turbulent history, the economic stagnation of the present, and a hope for a better future. In the same way, as Bourdieu (1986) describes, cultural capital can be seen as existing in an 'embodied state' – that is to say written on the posture and ways-of-being-in-the-world of the body – the *i'khothane* experience their identity as permanently written on their bodies. As KB explains,

when I grow up I want to be a CA, a chartered accountant. But if ever that happens I can be an *i'khothane* at the same time, because *i'khothane* is in my blood, it is flowing through my veins, no one can change that, even my mother. even the pastor from church, even the sangoma, because *it is in my blood*, I live it (Interview 19 July 2013, emphasis added).

While *i'khothane* prize consumer fashion objects because of their expense, their clothes are also used to convey a specific and symbolic language (Hall 1997). This language is not only used to articulate their individual and group identities, but is also used as a frame of reference by *i'khothane* groups to define themselves in relation to one another, the larger community, and post-apartheid society as a whole. However, the point of the clothes and their display and destruction is not to emphasise the impoverishment of the community, or its lack of cosmopolitan airs and graces, but are a form of defiance, a means of re-articulating a consumerist identity that simultaneously embraces and negates consumerism – in many senses a perfect summation of the contradictory psychosocial space the participants inhabit. ‘To show I can afford’ is a powerful statement of resistance in the context of a community that has largely been left out of the economic development of the country. It is a conscious form of resistance to economic isolation born of the historical economic stratification of white and black access to capital. It is perhaps for this reason that the clothes garner respect – their wearers vandalise not only fashion but also the construction of what it means to be young black men living in a township in contemporary South Africa. As ‘King Madaba’ sums up, ‘It [*i'khothane*] has grown my self-esteem, it has groomed my ability to face people and it has groomed my confidence because if you are *i'khothane* you see lots of people that you must show what you are made of, you must be confident in yourself’ (Interview 19 July 2013).

The *i'khothane* crew that we interviewed had a hierarchical structure, determined by the length of each member’s involvement in the crew. KB, as the founder was also the leader, and was responsible for choosing a particular name and style for the crew:

The thing is that the group I started is called Moshwana, the difference in words instead of that Z, there is a S. Actually the structure is, us we do not do all those things that *i'khothane* do, all those battling, all those kinds of shit. What we do, we promote having fun while you can (Interview 19 July 2013).

Asked what ‘having fun *while you can*’ meant, an interviewee, King Pantsula, who had left the crew argued that ‘it [*i'khothane*] is bad for our health. I mean like guys, criminals, will see that we have got a lot of money, so they will take advantage of us. And they can come and kill us and take the stuff away’ (Interview 19 July 2013). South Africa has one of the highest rates of violent crime and is one of the most unequal societies in the world. All the crew members had experienced forms of violent crime, and were thus very conscious of the fleetingness and fragility of their lives. It is perhaps for this reason that the immediacy and satisfaction of ‘having fun’ and the buying and burning of expensive clothes – rather than, say, traditional capital accrue through the investment of money in savings accounts – are so important to the *i'khothane*. Living in violent and impoverished communities the immediacy of the present is far more important than long-term investments – whether fiscal or cultural – simply because the future may not always be there. This understanding of their lives have led the *i'khothane* to seek out the pleasures of the present, and this structures the cultural capital associated with different acts, places, and brands.

The leader's duties are not simply limited to the organisation of the crew, but extend to actively creating what he termed the 'standard': 'I must make sure there is money for this weekend. That everyone has R50 or a R100 for the weekend, the outfits are to standard, that the spot where we are going to this certain weekend is nice' (Interview 19 July 2013). What is 'nice' and 'standard' is a function of their desires, shaped by the politico-economic context in which they live, and articulated as 'having fun'. For the *i'khothane* there is a clear hierarchy of goods, acts and places that constitute varying degrees of cultural capital – Louis Vuitton is superior to Ralph Lauren, while certain local nightclubs are considered superior to others and are therefore frequented more often.

The participants were mute as to where exactly they obtained the money for their clothes, although as noted below, at least some of it is garnered from their parents and relatives. Young black women and the elderly are also some of the most vulnerable members in contemporary South African society (Moffet 2006: 142). Thus while the participants would not speak to the topic themselves (most probably for fear of incriminating themselves), previous evidence has pointed to a strong link between the accrual of capital and the continuing patriarchal nature of South Africa's townships where, in the context of very high unemployment, government social grants constitute the main source of income for many communities.

*I'khothane* crews are split along heteronormative gender lines – the crew that we interviewed consisted only of men, and although all-female crews are emerging in the larger cities, the practice is still largely male-dominated. These sharp gender distinctions in the informal spaces of township life are not unique to the *i'khothane*, as has been noted by a number of authors (see, for instance, Wood and Jewkes 1997: 41–46). While women were not allowed to be a part of the crew, they were still passively integral to the performance of being *i'khothane*, especially during the battles – not only would some battles be about or for women, but the women themselves form a circle around the battle, providing the framework in which the meaning of the battle is made. As one crew member noted, 'I must make sure that there are girls that are accompanying us, and then I have to make sure everyone is there that night, that we must go and have fun' (Interview 19 July 2013). 'Having fun' requires that young women accompany the crew.

The participants in the interviews articulated their understanding of gender (and indeed their own gendered identity) through a reiterative heteronormativity – women or 'girls' were to be impressed, were to be chased or pursued, to be protected from other men and crews. The more beautiful a girl, the more respect the crew would earn by having her associate with them, the ultimate aim of which would be sex. As one member notes, 'If you buy expensive clothes, drink booze, having girls around us, then we hire cars, then you host parties, it's all about having fun' (Interview 19 July 2013). From the above interviews it is clear that women are considered placid and receptive – 'everywhere girls would fall for me' (Interview 19 July 2013) – with men being seen as proactive and having to 'earn' the woman's respect through the consumption or

destruction of clothing items, or through dancing or disrespecting other crews. Sex is seen as a consequence or reward for a successful battle or evening, a reward for respect.

## RESPECT, HAVING FUN AND THE QUEST FOR CITIZENSHIP

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2003: 446) argue that '[t]he generic citizen of postcolonial South Africa may be the rights-bearing individual inscribed in the new Constitution; also the rights-bearing individual – typically urban, cosmopolitan – presumed in much mass-mediated discourse'. Contemporary South Africa is awash with images of ideal forms of consumption – from the large highway billboard advertising the latest car to the glossy magazine highlighting the latest gadget for convenient urban living, the country is now very much a part of the global consumerist economy. The rise of a culture of consumerism can be represented by a congruent rise in the number of consumers with 'impaired debt records' – 9.53 million according to the latest report from the National Credit Regulator, or just under a quarter of the country's citizens (Strydom 2013). However, while the *discourse* of consumerism may be ubiquitous, South African society is still one of the most unequal in the world, with people living in the vast townships still playing only a marginal role in the formal economy. It is at this nexus that *i'khotane* stand – torn between the dreams of consumerism and the economic reality of post-apartheid South Africa. As Swartz, Tyler and Verfeld (2012: 33) graphically conclude:

In this context, the presence of the dream itself functions as currency in the symbolic economy of the "New South African" myth. By dealing in dreams, young people in the country's townships appear to be writing themselves into the nation's narrative by constructing their own sense of opportunity and, thereby, belonging.

The lived reality of this dissonance became visible in two instances – when we asked the local crew who their role models were, and when they defined themselves as a 'good' crew. Speaking to the former, the one role model that was mentioned above all others was Kenny Kunene, the 'Sushi King'. One of the few 'black diamonds' in the country, the businessman has created an empire of nightclubs and business interests, and is frequently seen in public surrounded by young women, known as his 'girls' (Cilliers 2013). While constantly courting controversy, he has become seen by the *i'khotane* as the ideal model for both clothing and a specific form of consumption. As one member, King N'zee (hereafter KN), puts it:

Kenny doesn't wear clothes from South Africa, he wears clothes from outside South Africa and outside Africa. So that's why now I see Kenny Kunene as my role model in the *i'khotane* world. Because we do have a world of *i'khotane*. Us we live in our world, the world of fame, the world of good things, goodies (Interview 19 July 2013).

The 'world of fame and goodies' is of a specific flavour – it is a cosmopolitan and international dream played out in an impoverished community in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. One can view the tension in the *i'khothane* worldview by looking at the second most cited role model, that of Nelson Mandela – the crew's desire for international fame and fortune is still marked by a conscious understanding that citizenship, the symbolic work of Nelson Mandela, is yet to come.

The second instance in which it is possible to see the dissonance between the dreams of the *i'khothane* and their reality is in their articulation of what they saw as 'good' and 'bad' practices. As one member noted, 'There are two types of *i'khothane*, those that waste money and do disrespectful things, you know those ... that buy booze, a lot of booze, spend money and girls, and then there are those that depend on their parents incentives' (Interview 19 July 2013). The 'good' *i'khothane* would be 'not about wasting money, and buying expensive clothes and having fun' (Interview 19 July 2013). There is a palpable tension here between the desires and prescription of the *i'khothane* and their understanding of good citizenship. Not wasting government grants and incentives is considered good and responsible, yet 'having fun' requires expensive clothes and money for alcohol and parties. KB was perhaps the most upfront about how he negotiates this tension:

My foster parent doesn't know that I am an *i'khothane*, "he is wearing this and that today, but he doesn't ask money from me, the money I have for the groceries, and all the expenses I have in the house. Where does he get this money?" I call my family from PE, they give me money every time I ask it, they give it to me .... I work every time. Month end I buy something new. I layby, I buy (Interview 19 July 2013).

Thus even though the crew have a specific understanding of moral citizenship, the needs and desires, which are a product of their involvement in *i'khothane*, can supersede their understandings of responsibility and good citizenship – something KB offhandedly remarked as 'traumatising'.

*I'khothane* have mostly been framed by the media in a negative and criminal light (see, for instance, Bambabela 2012; Hayes 2012). The participants were very conscious of this, and while they did make some references to criminal behaviour, they constantly differentiated between 'bad' and 'good' *i'khothane*. While the distinctions were often ambiguous and terse, the participants nonetheless all had firm understandings of right and wrong, as has been documented in a different context by Swartz (2009). While the contrast between the grinding poverty of many of South Africa's townships and the conspicuous burning of R100 notes may be newsworthy, one must question whether these reports do not assume an understanding of the township male youth as intrinsically deviant, immoral or criminal (Seekings 1996: 103–125; Perrow 2004). The crew that we interviewed acknowledged that some of their practices were wasteful, the memory of past battles appeared painful, yet for them the need for respect superseded this waste. Swartz (2009) has shown that the perceptions of the moral capabilities of

township youth are heavily biased. Indeed, township youth often portray an embodied morality (Swartz 2009: 65), which lends credence to an understanding of their identity articulated through such performances as clothing, dance and ritualistic consumption. While the use of grant money is morally questionable, it does not necessarily follow that the practitioners of *i'khothane* are somehow inherently criminal. Considering the weight that our participants placed on the notion of respect, it becomes possible to at least understand their desire to perform their identity through clothing, dance and 'having fun'.

The concept that seems most central to the *i'khothane* is that of respect. Indeed, the concept of respect is used as a justification for many of the practices, rituals and symbols that make up the *i'khothane* worldview. Placed in the context of the need for and display of forms of conspicuous consumption, 'showing that I can afford' by both buying and destroying items of clothing is a potent means of configuring a post-apartheid identity. Respect becomes a means of discerning one's place within that system of meaning – respect, in this form, is a dominant form of cultural capital that guides the patterns of consumption and gives structure to the rituals. 'Everyone knows you first of all, everyone respects you, everyone looks up to you, it may be a little boy that the other day or the other night I impressed' (Interview 19 July 2013). Respect can be lost, through a lack of discipline for instance, and won through having a more expensive tag than a rival. Respect is symbolically portrayed through the clothes that the *i'khothane* wear and ritually enacted through the battles and burning of the clothes: 'If I ever I afford a lot of new, for sure then you will respect me. If I burn more clothes that other night, you will respect me' (Interview 2 August 2013).

Respect is also a form of belonging articulated through the markers of clothes and practices – it is a form of symbolic wealth in communities that have been left powerless since the advent of democracy twenty years ago. The participants, in their daily lives, are politically and economically marginalised, facing an uncertain future. Lacking tertiary education, social services, and living in communities in which violent crime is a daily occurrence, respect becomes the symbol through which a new identity can be constructed. With no recourse to the conventional structures through which respect is earned, they have found new arenas, new paths, and new traditions upon which to build their identities. While clothing and battles are the *vehicle*, it is ultimately respect that it desired. Respect becomes power and wealth in the face of powerlessness and poverty. Much like South Africa itself, this process is very much hesitant, sometimes problematic, and without recourse to any foundation but itself. The *i'khothane* are a product of this negotiation as much as proponents of it. 'Vandalising the fashion industry', in this context, is a unique means of creating a meaningful identity in communities that, however framed, have not radically changed since the apartheid era. For the *i'khothane* that were interviewed for this article, like Swartz et al.'s '*ikasi* youth' (2012: 33), material wealth is a 'key marker of belonging and respect'. But here the idea is taken to its logical extremity – belonging and respect through (symbolic) material wealth. In the words of one of the crew, 'that's

what keeps me going' (Interview 19 July 2013).

## CONCLUSION

*I'khothane* crews have emerged as a response to the cultural emphasis on the conspicuous consumption of expensive goods as a means of articulating black post-apartheid identity. In contrast to the communities they operate in, their destruction of expensive goods may seem wasteful or perverse. But in communities where there is so little, 'to be able to afford' is a potent means of defining oneself, of performing an identity as a form of resistance to (often) all-encompassing poverty. With the above in mind, it is possible to see the practice of *i'khothane* as a means of garnering agency in a context that is largely devoid of it. While the crew that we interviewed were concerned with specific brands of clothing, the respect that they had, and the need to 'have fun', one must ask *why* they had articulated their identities in this manner. The answer, it seems, is that the *lifestyle* of *i'khothane* provides familiar and measurable markers, imbued with understandable forms of cultural capital, that allow the members to express their agency and subjectivity in the context of their own exclusion from the 'New South Africa'. The lifestyle of *i'khothane*, much like Swartz et al. (2012: 34) have documented, is one of inclusion in the face of exclusion – the practices, rituals, and symbols provide a familiar framework in which meaning, and thus agency, can be articulated and felt. As described by KB,

Now everyone will see that *i'khothane* are wrong people, you see, *i'khothane* are not bad people. I preach that, and I want to make sure that that stays in everyone's minds. *I'khothane* are entertainers, by showing off our clothes, by dancing, by having fun. And having fun is our priority, our number one, because we just have fun. We are not bad people (Interview 19 July 2013).

There is a tension in KB's assertion, between being seen as wrong and yet wanting to have fun. With little recourse to what might traditionally be seen as 'useful' ways of having fun, the construction of an identity through the conspicuous consumption of material objects is as much a product of the *i'khothane*'s political-economic position as it is a desire.

There are finally two important concepts that Swartz et al. (2009) introduce that are key to understanding the position of the *i'khothane* in post-apartheid South Africa: that of their lives as 'dreams deferred' and 'woundedness'. Speaking to the former, Swartz et al. (2009: 33) argue that '[i]n a nascent democracy such as South Africa where the transition from Apartheid brought with it enormous optimism and endless promises of change, dreams of possible futures are perhaps also the process of conceptualising the nation and one's inclusion in it'. While these dreams and promises had political capital during the transition, 20 years later many of these dreams are unrealised and have become deferred. This is not to say that the youth of today do not have dreams of

a better future, but that the immediacy of the poverty and violence in which they live have constrained and stunted those dreams. It is in this context that the *i'khothane* live and dream and it is for this reason, perhaps over any other, that they have resorted to garnering respect that is by its very nature ephemeral and momentary, a temporary, fleeting agency emulating what is represented by the 'black diamonds' who are the literal embodiment of the fantasy. The symbolism of this success, its simulacrum, has become the only choice in a sea of poverty, the transient replication of the dream is the only real option left.

There is then a certain woundedness (Swartz 2012: 36–37) to the unrealised dreams and lives of many young black people in South Africa: 'Township youth are amongst those most wounded, most excluded, from the new South Africa' (36). Shaped by a historical narrative that consistently excluded black people from the economic and political processes that shaped their lives, and confronted by a reality that has not seen radical change since then, it is no wonder that the *i'khothane* have shifted their gaze to the few that have achieved, that can 'show they can afford' and whose presence garners respect and status. The *i'khothane* are a product of this discourse as much as they play a role in shaping it, their intense longing for respect a sharp reminder of its lack.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Similarly, there is also an analytical heritage to understandings of consumption in the anthropological work of Thorstein Veblen (1899), Daniel Miller (1987), and the various debates concerning the potlatch phenomenon (see, for instance, Aldona Jonaitis's *Chieftly Feasts* (1991)). There are numerous congruencies between the Potlatch phenomenon and *i'khothane* – the use of symbolism as a basis for social order being perhaps the most prominent. A direct comparison is, however, beyond the scope of this article.
- 2 For further examples, search YouTube for 'Ikhothane' or Izikhothane [the Zulu derivative of the word].

## REFERENCES

- Bambalele, P. 2012. Izikhothane tear up R100 notes. *Sowetan* 15 November. Retrieved from <http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2012/11/15/izikhothane-tear-up-r100-notes> (accessed 23 July 2013).
- Banks, L. 2002. Beyond red and school: Gender, tradition and identity in the rural Eastern Cape. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 28(3): 631–649.
- Bevan-Dye, A., Garnett, A. and de Klerk, N. 2012. Materialism, status consumption and consumer ethnocentrism amongst black generation Y students in South Africa. *African Journal of Business Management* 6(16): 5578–5586.
- Bhenga, K. (pseudonym). Grahamstown, 19 July 2013. Participant in focus group with local *i'khothane* group.
- Bhenga, K. (pseudonym). Grahamstown, 1 August 2013. Participant in focus group with local *i'khothane* group.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook for theory and research for*



- the sociology of education*, 46–58. New York: Greenwood Publishing.
- Cilliers, C. 2013. Inside the Sushi King's sexy Sandton harem. *City Press* 7 April. Retrieved from <http://www.citypress.co.za/entertainment/inside-the-sushi-kings-sexy-sandton-harem/> (accessed 6 August 2013).
- Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. 2003. Reflections on liberalism, policulturalism, and ID-ology: Citizenship and difference in South Africa. *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 9(4): 445–473.
- De Kort, F. 2012. Respek: 'n duur paar verbrande skoene. *Rapport* 29 January: 1–3.
- Dolby, N. 2001. *Constructing racialised selves: Youth, identity, and popular culture in South Africa*. Stellenbosch: Suny Press.
- Hall, S. 1997. Representation, meaning and language. In S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* 15–63. London: Sage.
- Hayes, S. 2012. Izikhothane: A new word for a old fashion? *Kanye* 14 August. Retrieved from <http://khanya.wordpress.com/2012/08/14/izikhothane-a-new-word-for-an-old-fashion/> (accessed 23 July 2013).
- Hunter, M. 2010. *Love in the time of AIDS: Inequality, gender, and rights in South Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jewkes, R. and Morrell, R. 2012. Sexuality and the limits of agency among South African teenage women: Theorising femininities and their connections to HIV risk practises. *Social Science and Medicine* 74(11): 1729–1737.
- Jonaitis, A. 1991. *Chiefly feasts: The enduring Kwakiuti Potlatch*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Jordaan, M. 2012. Koperdiewe voer Izikhothane leefstyle [Copper theft feeds Izikhothane lifestyle]. *Volsblad* 30 May: 4–5.
- Jovchelovitch, S. and Bauer, M. 2000. Narrative interviewing. In M. Bauer and G. Gaskell (eds.), *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound: A practical handbook*, 57–74. London: Sage.
- Loshika, K. (pseudonym). Grahamstown, 19 July 2013. Participant in focus group with *i'khothane* group.
- Loshika, K. (pseudonym). Grahamstown, 1 August 2013. Participant in focus group with *i'khothane* group.
- Mabandu, P. 2012. Brash bling and ghetto fabulous. *City Press* 6 October . Retrieved from <http://www.citypress.co.za/lifestyle/brash-bling-and-ghetto-fabulous-20121006/> (accessed 6 August 2013).
- Madaba, K. (pseudonym). Grahamstown, 19 July 2013. Participant in focus group with *i'khothane* group.
- Miller, D. 1987. *Material culture and mass consumption*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Moffett, H. 2006. 'These women, they force us to rape them': Rape as narrative of social control in post-apartheid South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32(1): 129–144.
- Moodley, K. and Adam, H. 2000. Race and nation in post-apartheid South Africa. *Current Sociology* 48(3): 51–69.
- Ndabeni, K. 2012. Youths rip pricey togs in show-off challenges: Even grant money used to buy

- clothes for competitions, says foster mother. *The Herald*. 28 May: 4–5.
- Niehaus, I. 2012. From witch-hunts to thief-hunts: On the temporality of evil in the South African lowveld. *African Historical Review* 44(1): 29–52.
- Nkosi, L. 2011. Burn swag burn. *Mahala* 4 July. Retrieved from <http://www.mahala.co.za/culture/burn-swag-burn/> (accessed 23 July 2013).
- N’zee, K. (pseudonym). Grahamstown, 19 July 2013. Participant in focus group with *i’khothane* group.
- Oliver, D. 2007. South Africa poised to become a loyalty marketing gem. *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 24(3): 180–181.
- Pantsula, K. (pseudonym). Grahamstown, 19 July 2013. Participant in focus group with *i’khothane* group.
- Pantsula, K. (pseudonym). Grahamstown, 1 August 2013. Participant in focus group with *i’khothane* group.
- Perrow, M. 2004. Youth development in transition, 1999–2004. In L. Chisholm (ed.). *Changing class: Education and social change in post-apartheid South Africa*, 367–392. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Petrus, D. 2012. Strut your wealth – Squirt custard. *Express*. 31 October: 2.
- Pongoma, L. 2012. Plans to uplift youth, root out Izikhothane. *The New Age* 7 June: 6.
- Seekings, J. 1996. The ‘lost generation’: South Africa’s youth problem in the early 1990s. *Transformation* 29 (1): 103–125.
- Snowball, J., Jamal, M. and Willis, K. 2010. Cultural consumption patterns in South Africa: An investigation of the theory of cultural omnivores. *Social Indicators Research* 97(3): 467–483.
- Strydom, T. 2013. South Africans are drowning in debt. *TimesLive* 19 June. Retrieved from <http://www.timeslive.co.za/thetimes/2013/06/19/south-africans-are-drowning-in-debt> (accessed 6 August 2013).
- Swartz, S. 2009 *iKasi: The moral ecology of South Africa’s township youth*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Swartz, S., Tyler, R. and Verfeld, A. 2013. Emotion as opportunity: Reflections on multiple concurrent partners among young men in South Africa. *Gender and Behaviour* 11(1): 5197–5219.
- Veblen, T. 1899. *The theory of the leisure class: An economic study of institutions*. New York: Macmillan.
- Vincent, L. 2008. ‘Boys will be boys’: Traditional Xhosa circumcision, HIV and sexual socialisation in contemporary South Africa. *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 10(5): 431–446.
- Vincent, L. and Howell, S. 2014. Embracing racial reasoning: The DASO poster controversy and ‘race’ politics in South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40(1): 75–90.
- Wood, K. and Jewkes, R. 2001. Dangerous love: Reflections on violence among Xhosa township youth. In R. Morell (ed.), *Changing men in Southern Africa*, 317–336. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Wood, K. and Jewkes, R. 1997. Violence, rape and sexual coercion: Everyday love in a South African township. *Gender and Development* 5(2): 41–46.
- Woodruffe-Burton, H. 1998. Private desires, public display: Consumption, postmodernism and fashion’s ‘new man’. *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management* 26(8): 301–310.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Simon Howell** is the corresponding author. He was, at the time of writing, a postdoctoral research fellow with the Critical Studies in Sexuality and Reproduction research unit at Rhodes University. He completed a Ph.D. at the same institution in 2012. He has published in the fields of critical sexuality studies, race and gender, maintaining a particular interest in how these phenomena intersect with crime and drug use in South Africa. He has since taken up a research position at the Centre of Criminology at the University of Cape Town.

**Louise Vincent** is Professor in the Department of Political and International Studies at Rhodes University in South Africa. She completed her M.Phil. and D.Phil. degrees at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. Since then her research has focused on questions of the intersections between the body, particularly women's bodies, and social power. She has been interested over the last five years to read South Africa's democratic transition through the lens of the corporeal. She has published widely in the fields of race, gender, critical sexuality studies and women's reproductive health. She now heads a large research group studying higher education institutional cultures, equity and transformation.