

Mdukatshani Annual Report

2011

PAY DAY

It has always been difficult getting wages to the farm on pay day. Whether the money is drawn from banks in Weenen or Greytown, all the routes home have a history of hold-ups, and the possibility of ambush is real.

In the 1980's, during a period of conflict, the Weenen and Tugela Ferry police took turns escorting Mdukatshani staff to and from the bank, and sat in on the pay-out. In the 1990's Mdukatshani rode to the bank with three gunmen on the bakkie – a token resistance, for an armed man on a vehicle stands little chance against an AK47 blockade on the road (something a neighbour encountered, two kilometres from our gate). There were regular reminders of the dangers of carrying money, living in earshot of gunfire on the causeway, a well-wooded area near our boundary, where one man was killed for his takings, selling milk, and others were shot and injured passing through.

CAP's trips to the bank for wages stopped suddenly in June 1999 after a warning phone call from the Weenen Police. They had received tip-offs, first from informers at a Richard's Bay shebeen, then from farm workers at Eshowe that the Alcocks at Weenen were due to be attacked in a "hit" or armed robbery. The wage money was mentioned as a motive.

For the next ten years crafters collected money themselves, taking it in turns to travel to Weenen by taxi, each woman carrying a cash cheque that covered the wages of a group. The women became a familiar sight in the village, sitting patiently in a long queue outside the FNB Agency, which was open three mornings a week. The bank had its own share of hold-ups, however, and in October announced that the Agency was "not profitable" and would be closed from the end of the year- a decision that affected the little people, like our crafters, who didn't have the taxi fare to Escourt.

In March we covered the extra fares, set some rules on the hazards of town, and saw the first contingent set off for Escourt to cash their cheques without incident. So far, so good.

In May Nyelisile Sithole and Celiwe Kumalo travelled to Estcourt together to cash R6 717,00 for their group, and they were walking back to the taxi rank when somebody brushed against Celiwe, leaving a black mark on her arm. But what luck. There were helpers at hand, friendly passerby who said her money had been bewitched, and would have to be cleansed of harmful *muthi*. And there was a man who knew just what to do. That plainclothes policeman parked at the kerb in a red Venture.

Minutes later the envelopes were empty, and the Venture had gone – together with the friendly helpers.

It would always be a risk, sending the women to collect wages in town. We needed a system that kept them closer to home, at either Weenen or Tugela Ferry, and in July started the long, slow process of opening Mzansi Post Office accounts for every crafter. Mzansi accounts are designed for “small people” who do not have the means to open bank accounts, and while the most diffident crafters have now learnt to withdraw their money on their own – the exercise cost us just over R 10 000,00 in transport, deposits, photocopies and food, a cost we could ill afford in a year of recession.

In the longterm the accounts can only be beneficial – assuming the women can learn a little reticence, and not ululate so loudly every time they draw their money that they are openly cheered on the street.

The Crafters

In 2001 and 2002 a grant from the Masibambane Trust enabled us to provide a craft training for 50 local women. None of them had ever been to school, so the training was formal, two-days-a-week for a six month period, and emphasised the discipline of delivery.

We already had 70 crafters at work, some of them mothers of the new intake of *makotis*, but we were in need of extra hands because of the huge demand for our copper eggs, which were then a novelty on the market. In the years since the eggs have been copied by groups around the country, and while our range of products has diversified, the recession has been hard on our customers, with businesses folding, and shops closing down. It is therefore just as well that the craft group is down to 61 crafters, 33 of them widows. What has happened to the rest?

12 have died

5 have married

4 now live in town with their husbands

5 were dismissed for theft (shortages)

1 is in jail for armed robbery

6 fell away for poor quality work

3 are too ill to work (HIV-TB)

Of the 50 trained, 27 are still working and some of them are “stars”. Most of the remainder are veterans with spectacles who have now been doing crafts for 35 years.

LEAP ... and CLARA

The LEAP project moved towards finality this year, with organised training and information sessions, and the analysis and write-up of research data.

As a result of the interest – and questions – aroused by the project, Bongani Kumalo was asked to visit the Mchunu and Mthembu Traditional Councils to provide training on a number of legal issues affecting tribal areas, including marriage and inheritance laws. Bongani is well qualified to help. He comes from Nqutu, a rural area, and is Manager of the Community Outreach programme at the Centre of Criminal Justice, which is affiliated to the Law School at the University of Natal.

Bongani and members of the Traditional Councils met up again in October when they attended a workshop on the research findings of the project. A draft report on the land laws of Msinga was presented for discussion by researcher Donna Horny, and Professor Ben Cousins of PLAAS (Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies at the University of the Western Cape).

One of the underlying reasons for the research was the contested Community Land Rights Act (CLARA) with provisions that will affect the estimated 21 million people living under traditional leadership. There was therefore jubilation when the week after the workshop Judge Aubrey Ledwaba of the Pretoria High Court ruled that sections of the Act were unconstitutional.

The case now moves to the Constitutional Court.

A DISTINCTION

Msinga is the worst local municipality in South Africa, according to a study by independent research group, *Empowerdex*, released in October. The countrywide assessment included all 231 local municipalities, 46 district municipalities, and six metropolitan municipalities which were scored on provision of housing, water, electricity, waste removal and sanitation.

The rating made Msinga headline news – but was it fair? Msinga is a notoriously difficult area for services, with scattered populations on steep, rocky hillsides. Water has always been a priority, and for the past four years excavators have been at work uprooting trees to clear vast pipelines across the district, while blasters have used dynamite to clear solid rocks on the hills. In July the miracle occurred. Water arrived in the communal taps on Koornliver on our boundary. There have been a few hiccups since. Burst pipes. A dry day. Gradually, however, the miracle has become routine. No longer do you see girls climbing hillpaths before dawn, carrying drums of water on their heads. No longer does our bakkie do duty as a watercarrier, sagging with the weight of drums on the back. We are grateful.

A DEATH

The Nomoya children live more than an hour's walk away from the primary school of Nkaseni. They walk in a group, down hillpaths, and along the well-wooded road near the river. In summer, when it's hot, they lag, hoping for a lift with a passing bakkie. It's a long walk for small children.

Noxolo Xulu (9) lived further away than most, and was climbing the hillpath home one afternoon in May when a snake reared up and bit him on the thigh. Although he managed to reach home, he died before a vehicle could be found to take him to hospital.

His death haunts the valley

THISTLE GARDENS

In March police helicopters arrived in the valley to spray the dagga crop. Again. It was the fifth spraying operation in three years, and this time discouraged growers made no effort to replant. The summer had been an ordeal, so hot and dry they had had to water by hand, women and children working long after dusk, carrying containers on their heads from the river. Despite the watering, the plants were parched, a shrivelled crop, shrivelled in the heat, soon finished off by the spraying.

“We know where you are,” the police had repeated six months before. The gardens were certainly not hidden. They stretch in an almost continuous line along both banks of the Tugela River. Many are openly visible from the road, terraced beds, inside palisade fences, this year abandoned to thistles. Have the growers given up? Or are they having a rest?

The helicopters were back in September, for more than a week nosing among the hills, but this time in search of stolen cattle.

A STAMPEDE

It was election year, and before voting in April, president-elect, Jacob Zuma, paid several goodwill visits to Msinga to distribute food to the disabled, widows and orphans.

His visits were little publicized, but word spread fast, and there was a large crowd waiting at Kumalo's Store, Jolwayo, when he arrived a little late to sing *Umshini wami*. (Bring my machine gun.) Two lorries had already offloaded mealie meal, rice, sugar and tinned fish, which, Zuma explained, hadn't come from government funds “but out of my own pocket”.

After a short speech he departed for another distribution in the Bomvu area – and the crowd moved in on the food. Khalisile Mvelase was there with her cripple daughter, Dingo, and when she saw the trouble coming, she ran. “I could see my daughter was going to get hurt,” she said.

They got out just in time. In the stampede that followed the old and frail were knocked down and trampled as fights erupted over food. Soon the ground was covered with the contents of spilt packets, and mealie meal rose like dust in the air. Khalisile would giggle, describing the debacle afterwards. They hadn't got food, but they hadn't got hurt, unlike her two widowed sisters-in-law, who were among those treated in hospital for their injuries.

A FAMILY SPLIT

For when, about AD 1550, the Nguni moved south-eastwards from the Transvaal region, the Thembu clan divided itself into two sections...

(A. T. Bryant: The Zulu People).

While the one section of the Mthembus moved to the Cape, the other section stayed in KwaZulu-Natal, settling in the area now known as Msinga.

In August, about 450 years after the divide, the Cape and KwaZulu Mthembus donned their traditional best for a reunion rally in Durban. It was a happy celebration, with singing, dancing and plates of good food – widely publicized in the press on TV. Opinion remains divided on the purpose of the gathering. Was this a first step towards appointing a paramount who would rule over both the Cape and the Zulu Mthembus? And what did this say about the position of the Zulu king?

“We couldn't always hear what they were saying,” admitted one of the crafters who paid R100,00 to attend. She was among the many from Msinga who strained to understand the Xhosa speakers. They might all be cousins, but they spoke different dialects, which made most of the speeches impenetrable to their ears.

THE POTTERS

More than 1,000 years ago, Early Iron Age potters were working with clay to produce pots with distinctive decorations. You can pick up the shards today, tiny fragments of a forgotten past that keep archaeologists guessing. What influenced the minds of the potters to conform to the designs of the age? And why did the Later Iron Age potters show “a complete break in ceramic tradition”?

There are several Early Iron Age sites on Mdukatshani – and there are local potter families still modelling clay, making a living out of traditional clay pots. The continuity of tradition was of special interest to three Canadian researchers who used Mdukatshani as a base in June, while they worked with, and observed, our local potters at work.

Kent Fowler has been researching the ceramics of the Tugela Valley since 1997, when he was a student working on excavations at the ninth century AD site, Ndongdwane, on the lower Tugela. Now assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Manitoba, he is looking at the development of agricultural societies and social complexity – with Nguni ceramics a large part of his work. His two companions on the June trip were Emma Middleton, a post-grad university colleague, and P.J. Anderson, a professional ceramicist on her first visit to Africa.

The team followed the potters through the manufacturing process, from the journeys to fetch clay, to the firing in open pits – a method that has hardly changed in the past 1,000 years. The potter families enjoyed the attention, and have glossy albums of photographs to remember the visit, and to record every detail of their work.

Bridging a Distance

There is a vast distance between the hills of Msinga, and Parliament's corridors of power – distance Mdukatshani tries to bridge through collaborative partnerships with outside groups who have influence closer to Cape Town. While we have continued to work closely with PLAAS, this year partnerships were extended to CASE, the Community Agency for Social Enquiry, and the Law, Race and Gender Unit at the University of Cape Town

A 1,000 Household Survey

In May Aninka Claassensm Sibongile Mgweba, and Delanie Williams visited Mdukatshani to discuss the details of a questionnaire survey aimed at the many questions around womens' access to land. CASE was planning three surveys nationwide, one at Msinga, one at Keiskammahoek in the Eastern Cape, and one in the North West province, each survey to cover a sample of 1,000 households.

After Mdukatshani had introduced CASE to the Mthembu and Mchunu traditional councils, Sibos spent a month selecting and training 40 local fieldworkers – and by September the survey was done. When all the results have been collated, and analysed, there will be a published report.

How to Register a Customary Marriage

It ought to be easy to register a “customary marriage.” In reality, however, officials at the Department of Home Affairs have not been willing to follow the provisions of the 1998 Recognition of Customary Marriages Act which was supposed to make like easier for rural women, like the majority living at Msinga.

Women from the Mchunu Traditional Council had already approached Mdukatshani for help with their difficulties when, in May, the Department published a draft bill that contained restrictive new amendments, contrary to the spirit and intention of the Act.

Mdukatshani approached LRG for advice, and in July Diane Bailey arrived at Msinga to record the case histories of three Mchunu women., Diane was already familiar with the law around customary marriage after doing research on the Act for LRG, where she was working as an intern from Stanford University in the USA. Diane's reports on the interviews are being used in efforts to have the new provisions amended or withdrawn before the draft bill is tabled in Parliament.

Tribal Court

In September Sindiso Mnisi met Mdukatshani staff to discuss her interest in studying the work of traditional courts at Msinga. Sindiso had recently returned from Oxford, where she had completed a doctorate on the interface between living customary law and South Africa state law – a subject that affects the lives of millions of rural South Africans who take their grievances to tribal courts.

Her interest was more than academic. Currently employed as a senior researcher at the Law, Race and Gender Unit at the University of Cape Town, she is among the critics of the

controversial Traditional Courts Bill, which is considered a threat to the rights of women. Although the Bill arrived in Parliament in 2008, there has never been due consultation, and the LRG is among many groups pushing for public hearings, particularly in areas accessible to rural people.

What makes a chicken walk backwards?

Deborah Ewing has been part of the lives of local children ever since early 1998 when she helped to initiate and run a series of workshops for “childrens' voices” at Mdukatshani.

Her contact since has been almost continuous. In September 1998, soon after the workshops ended, two 11-year-old girls were raped at gunpoint coming back from school, and for the next four years Deborah sat alongside them, following the case through the courts until the rapist was sentenced to life. (Her dossier on the case, “Stolen Childhood- Rape and the Justice System” was published by Children First in 2003).

In 2006 she was back at Msinga to do the fieldwork for a study on the causes, conditions and consequence of children working in agriculture. The study was prepared for the Human Sciences Research Council, and involved children aged 12 to 16. (A report on the study was published in 2007)

Deborah has drawn on this background for her latest collaborative project with Mdukatshani – an animal health programme for 90 Grade 5 learners at the Mathintha and Ncunjane Primary schools. A born storyteller, and author of six childrens' books, Deborah has devised a series of interactive lessons that provide support, training – and fun. *The adventures of Siphon and Nosiphon* affirm and value what the children already know, while giving them a manual to deal with the livestock problems which are part of the daily routine of the home. Funds for the project have come from the Belgian Organisation, Broederlijk Delen, and copies of the course are available on request from Mdukatshani.

Oh yes – and what makes a chicken walk backwards? It's one of the symptoms of Newcastle disease.

Night Calls

Mqithi Mbatha was not at home when her phone rang in the dark. She fumbled to find it, half asleep. Who would phone in the middle of the night? She was in a room full of mourners, keeping vigil at the body of a boy who had died in a car crash that week. She listened to the phone, confused. What she heard didn't make sense.

She handed her phone to her daughter. The call had been disconnected, but a man laughed when the girl rang back. “Come home,” he said, “and tell your mother to bring a blanket.”

A blanket covers a body that is dead. The two women walked home alone in the dark to find Mabele Mbatha (50) had not died alone. Five young men had died with him: Thengakuhle

Mbatha (20), Senzo Mbatha (21), Thembisio Mbatha (29), Mandlawapheli Mbatha (25), and Bongani Sokhela (24).

The story made headlines across South Africa. Police superintendent, Henry Budrham, said unknown gunmen had arrived at the homestead about midnight, and after forcing entry “ordered their victims out of the hut and instructed them to lie on the ground next to each other, before being shot execution style.”

Although there have been arrests, the case has yet to get to court.

Mxolisi Majola was visiting his girlfriend one night in September when his phone rang at about 10 p.m. “My friends are here – they're calling me,” he said as he walked outside into volleys of gunfire that gave the valley a wakeful night. The details of the story remain unclear. Majola came from the Mhlangane areas, and although he had family near Mdukatshani, he was not a local man. His friends took the dying man to hospital. There have been no arrests.

A Hold-Up

In January at about 3 pm, four armed men stopped a vehicle on the road between Mdukatshani and Tugela Ferry. Nobuhle Sithole, and Mdukatshani fieldworker, was one of the passengers who was relieved of cellphones, bank cards and cash. Nobody expects trouble on an open road on a sunny afternoon. Nobuhle is still in a state of shock.

Our Principal

Ngakelephi Mkhize was short and round – and had an affinity for metal. It was a gift she discovered in middle age. She could ease kinks, straighten bumps, and make hard wire fluid. The gift surprised her, and she used it well. She had never had a chance to use her mind, and now she applied it to questions of precision, and her need to make the world immaculate. It was a strange need, if you considered her lethargy. She was heavy and slow and prone to depression, lying slumped in her shabby hut where the light slanted in through a hole in the roof that she never got around to fixing. Was she aware of her own contradictions. The artistry of a critical mind – the sloth and the defeat?

Her woven copper bowls were flawless, and even her bundles of copper scrap were tied and trimmed with such an eye for perfection, they couldn't be consigned as scrap. “Our principal” the crafters called her. She was a reference point. A judge. Long before a crafter brought her work to the scale, it was offered to MaMkhize for a verdict. Her verdicts were sharp and dismissive. Shoddy work implied you hadn't consulted her – which she considered a personal affront.

She probably guessed she was HIV positive when eruptions started on her face. She was a pretty woman, and she dreaded the disfigurement, checking her appearance in a piece of broken mirror she kept tucked in the folds of her *bhayi*. She needed the pretence of dignity, and when she started treatment, she tried to keep it hidden, refusing to acknowledge she had picked up the infection in a period of longing that had followed her husband's death.

She died quite suddenly in December, an unexpected death when she had completed Christmas orders, and we thought at last she seemed to be getting well. We hope she was in earshot of the crafters who spoke at her funeral, women in tears, who had had no ability, until she had guided the work in their hands. She was at her best as a teacher – serene, gentle, patient, kind, lit up with the confidence of knowing she was needed- as she is needed now, every day, when there is nobody here to replace her.

Three Kudu

In June a kudu bull crashed through the garden with a pack of dogs on its flanks. It plunged into the river and submerged, only its head visible above the water. A lasso was fetched, and it was pulled to shore, where it rested in the sun, covered in a blanket, while we phoned around for advice on what to do to help. The answers were not hopeful. Kudu are extremely sensitive to shock, and although our kudu stumbled towards the cliffs, it never recovered, and the following afternoon died.

It was the first of three kudu chased into the river in the weeks that followed. One drowned at Sahlumbe, just upriver from the farm, the other drowned in a pool in front of the house after a chase on the far bank. We have never seen kudu in our bush before. Did their appearance have something to do with drought? An increase in the population of kudu? An increase in the population of dogs?

It was a hard year for cattle as well as wildlife. Rain was scarce, grass shrivelled, and with nothing in the fields, the reedbeds were grazed to stalks. Rainfall from March 2009 to February 2010 was 414,60 mm – well below average.