

# a letter from transkei

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OMAR BADSHA — AFFRPIX

It will be hard to do justice to how it is *lemaXhoseni*. Life here is lived at many levels: the beauty of Transkei, the warmth of the people, the generosity of the poor, the poverty, the oh-so-many ambiguities . . . and one learns, with time, to operate at these many levels, and to live with these many ambiguities.

Rains this season have been unprecedented in their abundance: the hills are soft and green, the grass long and lush. Around where we are, on the edge of Umtata, are spaces of endless open green. It's wonderful and good — so good for growing, energetic boys. With the convenience of a large town behind us, our situation, domestically speaking, is ideal, almost.

Yet the disturbing ambiguities hover. A few days ago I was in the local supermarket as usual, but with a different purpose — this time to buy a cake to bring to the Transkei Council of Churches office — all six staff members had just been released from detention — happy occasion, sobering reminder . . .

During our time here we have made many journeys, *en famille*, into the interior. Parts of Pondoland's sub-tropical lushness contrast sharply with Mount Ayliff's harsh scrub and Mount Frere's thin, poor eroded soil. Are we ever to forget Matatiele at the foot of the Maluti Mountains? 'Sweet Matat,' they say, 'where Jesus was nearly born.'

Our journeys have taken us to all sorts of places. I think of sitting down to evening prayer in Mvenyane, north-west Transkei, and that great extended family of Magadla — nineteen people, in flickering lamplight, singing some old, melodious, Xhosa hymns — a nightly event before supper. It was a supper which delighted our children, Siphos and Thabo, because they had helped to chase and catch that chicken and witnessed its quick slaughter, defeathering, cleaning of innards and roasting.

And Lusikisiki — what a journey to get there! Swivel, skid, slide on those wet, soft mud, dirt roads — nice canyons falling below us on either side — never mind, we're on a bus route. But we reach our destination — a mission station in the forest, verdant, lush, sub-tropical, misty, humid forest full of animals of many kinds — the local people knowing them only by their Xhosa names. The vervet monkeys come cheekily and frequently into the yard near Mhlauli's house where we were staying, to help themselves to a chicken or two, thus diminishing the income from the fowl being reared for selling!

It is a humbling experience, beyond anything I can ever describe, to be hosted in these little known places — the endless care taken to provide for our comfort and total, warm acceptance. Separate water is provided for teeth, apart from the pail of cold water and the pail of warm water for washing. And then

*Things here ... go their own way. They are swerving and not going straight.*

the lamps, candle lights, and the many touches of care and much trouble taken at mealtimes ... lovely practised hosts.

And what is the other reality of these picturesque villages of round, thatched huts, nestling in soft valleys, lovely to the eye, warming to the heart — like Embhukuqweni, in the Xora district of the Eastern Transkei? Who has heard of Embhukuqweni in that wildly beautiful part of the country? Like many another unknown *lali* (small village), babies and very young children die there of hunger and hunger-related sicknesses.

Sikalazo Nqankqolo's family circumstances would typify an *umzi* (homestead) where hardship and hunger are daily visitors, not welcomed, but endured in a numb pain, with resignation. Sikalazo was born here in September 1968. His father spends much time in *iGoli* (Johannesburg) unemployed. His baby brother and baby sister, born in 1970 and 1972 respectively, both died before they reached their first birthdays.

By the time attractive, strong-featured Sikalazo (his name means 'complaint') was ten years old he was so malnourished and weak through years of prolonged hunger that he was sent to live with his mother's sister, Vetyetye, in another village, Cefane, to have some share in their *nunqubo* (usually samp, beans, veg. and gravy, and occasionally meat). Meantime, his mother worked in Umtata, Sikalazo lived under some hardship because Vetyetye's husband is a bad-tempered man.

Two years later his mother returned to Embhukuqweni, leaving her back-breaking, R20-a-month job of breaking stones: it was killing her. Hearing of his mother's return home, Sikalazo took his opportunity, and, by stealth, one night, fled back to his mother — and back to hunger.

By 1985, having reached Std 4, his education, such as it was, fell by the wayside and the young lad had now to become, at seventeen years, the family's breadwinner, responsible for paying sister Pumpum's school fees and for her few books, as well as for fighting off hunger in their small hut in the hills.

At this time, Nonqukumfa, his mother, had one sheep and one lamb. The lamb died. So terrible was this loss in 1985 that the wrath of Tswi, the father, descended upon his wife and son in a violent way. The fragile structure of the Nqankqolo family was shattered over the death of a lamb.

Shortly after this incident, an *umlungu* (white man) arrived in the vicinity of Embhukuqweni in a bakkie. He loaded up the back with young lads capable of work and took them off to a tea plantation in Natal. Along went Sikalazo. This work, which lasted from May to October of 1985, brought the family R50 a month.

Sikalazo then tried his luck in Umtata. For days and weeks on end the refrain was 'No work'. At last, in March 1986, weary and hopeless, he found a job in a garage, for R15 a month, cleaning car-parts and the garage workshop generally. Exhausted from long hours and hard work, with so little pay, the 18-year-old did what surprised even himself. He walked out of the job — and with no prospects whatever of another one.

To make a long story short, his mother's brother, old Dlamini, took him under his wing, and today, Sikalazo has a garden job earning R100 a month. This is a help for one *umzi*, not too far from the much celebrated Transkei Wild Coast.

Recently we visited Ngqeleni, 30 km east of Umtata. In a homestead we learned that Mr Skoko, an elder of the *umzi* had, by wonderful chance, a job waiting for him in Umtata. The problem of getting there turned out to be a major one. He needed R3 for the bus to Umtata. Unfortunately we had no money with us. 'Perhaps someone could lend you R3?' we ventured. Heads hung and shook from side to side in the dim, soft light of the round mud-hut, and there was silence. A tawny kid goat scuttled across the dung-smear floor, and our children laughed at the sight of it and chased it under a bed.

'No, no one can lend money here'.

'No one? In the whole village?'

'No, your child can be sick or it can be something as serious as that, but no one can lend money'.

And out of the silence that followed came the solution of sending someone down to Ngqeleni from Umtata on the following day, with the R3 in order to enable Mr Skoko to take the job as a watchman.

Because of the near total absence of cash in the whole village, it cost R6 and five hours journeying on buses and in taxis, in order that one man could take up a job.

It is thus, time and again, that the great question 'What can be done?' is thrust upon us. As one man from Lusikisiki said, 'Things here, therefore, go their own way. They are swerving and not going straight'. That is one way of putting it. And, clearly, there are no easy answers. This is grim, brute poverty in which the rural poor seem to be forever trapped. It is their reality — as they wake and rise to face the day — every day. Clearly, whatever happens in the future of our land, the realities facing poor people in the rural areas have to be a central concern of the churches and the wider society.

Greetings to all friends. Every good wish and all strength to the Black Sash in your efforts to let the truth be known.

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