

Cleansing and Reconciling in Southern Africa Today

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VULINDLELA/KwaZulu-Natal, 7. November 2010 - Shortly after sunrise young and old from the homesteads in the six communities in Vulindlela in the district of Pietermaritzburg along the road between Edendale and Elandskop (between iNadi and kwaMpumuza including kwaZongwane, kwaShange, eShowe), dressed in festive attire of various styles and designs, are moving in smaller and larger groups towards the stadium. This Sunday, the 7th of September 2010, had been agreed upon on their initiative as the day on which they as survivors of the violent conflict, that ravaged their homesteads and villages between the early 1980s and mid 1990s, would make an attempt to “meet halfway in order to proceed together” (*ukubuyisana*) and bury the hatchet. Their descendants, neighbours, well-wishers from distant places and representatives of local and provincial government, the King and the president of the country had accepted the invitation and are expected to share whatever this unique event is intended to give. The hosting communities have prepared to entertain round about twenty thousand mouths and stomachs today!

Even the weather seems to be rejoicing with the growing crowds and promises a good day.

What had happened?

Trails of blood, ashes and tears and countless orphans, mourners, wounded and maimed civilians some of whom had managed to flee as far as they could and would still not dream of returning home ... - almost sixteen years long were the people in this rural district around Pietermaritzburg at loggerheads, the “Seven Days War” and the “KwaShange massacre of September 25, 1987” (>> [Two Incidents: 1987 and 1991](#)) being only two of the many horrible episodes in that civil war which cost thousands of lives and left behind even more uprooted, maimed and traumatised. Historians have on record, that this storm of violence was the worst experienced in any one region of South Africa since the revolt of 1976-1977. In the Natal Midlands it was probably the worst since the ‘Bhambatha rebellion’ of 1906. (John Wright: [Background to political violence: Pietermaritzburg region 1987-1988](#)).

The attacks and killings since 1987 is said to have involved on the one hand the “*iNkatha yeNkululeko yeSizwe*” (founded in 1975, based in the KwaZulu *bantustan*, renamed “*Inkatha Freedom Party/IFP*” in 1990) and organisations opposing and resisting *apartheid* on the other including the “*United Democratic Front/UDF*” (founded in 1983, proscribed by the apartheid-regime in 1988) and the “*Congress of South African Trade Unions/COSATU*” (launched in 1985), generally held to be the ‘inland wing of the then banned “*African National Congress of South Africa,/ANC*” (founded in 1912, proscribed by the apartheid-regime in 1960).’ The historical record holds: In the period from September 1987 to February 1988 some

500 people were killed in the fighting. Two-thirds of the victims whose political affiliations are known were supporters of UDF-linked organizations, and one-third of *Inkatha*. By contrast, very few, if any, *Inkatha* supporters were detained, and in spite of a series of court injunctions against them, the vigilante leaders were allowed to remain at large and active.

Cleansing and Reconciling

The “Cleansing Ceremony” in the hands of religious leaders from the six communities involved lasting up to the early hours of the day for reconciling brought the survivors and their descendants together and accorded them the opportunity of grappling together finding words and gestures to express their feelings of grief, shame and remorse, exchange experiences of mourning, distress and trauma, solemnly articulate their longing for forgiveness and pledge their commitment to healing, restoration and reconciliation. How kind of them to have allowed me participate as their guest!

My memories flash back up to early childhood: Narratives on ceremonies of *ukuHlambulukelana* and *iHlambo* (‘coming to terms with each other once more’; cleansing, restoring spotlessness and respectability) that my fore-bearers are said to have performed in similar instances, in order to get rid of the invisible depressing shadow and be relieved from the night-mares resulting from human-blood on their hands since the attacks and combats they had have to go through. They would, so I was told, under the supervision of an acknowledged healer (*inyanga*), undergo treatment including *izintelezi* (medicinal mixture particularly for expelling and keeping at bay certain evil spirits), *imibhemiso* (medicinal mixture for inhalation), *imbiza* (medicinal mixture for internal cleansing by way of vomiting and letting out unhealthy substances) and *amakhubalo* (herbal remedies recommended for a variety of situations of healing, recovery or prevention of ailments and evil spirits). They would engage in conversation among themselves and with *abaphansi* (‘those down there’ = the ancestors) to whom they speak as if they were physically present and, by so doing, embark onto a new basis of ‘living in community beyond the disruption their relations had undergone’. I guess some of these or similar motives might be underlying the cleansing and reconciling ceremony in Vulindlela as well.

When King Zwelithini and the Royal House set foot on the site of the ceremony and the recitator started setting the occasion in the ceremonial framework appropriate to it by recalling certain moments of the history of this part of the world in the words of the *izibongo zeNkosi uShaka* (eulogy to King Shaka), it dawned to me in a very impressive way just how significant the endeavours of the people of Vulindlela are and can be for the people of the province of KwaZulu-Natal today, home of the largest population-group and one of the most diversified sectors of the country’s and Southern Africa’s population. The words the Zulu monarch found in his address later on to affirm the good intentions expressed by the hosting communities, to admonish and spur young and old, reprimand grumblers and troublemakers and encourage the reconciling communities to continue steadfastly and sustainably, were taken heed of by over twenty thousand attentive participants in and around the stadium. President Jacob Zuma, KwaZulu-Natal Premier Dr Zweli Mkhize and iNkosi Zondi of the hosting community underlined and emphasized in their statements the deeply felt commitment to *ukubuyisana* conclusively and in very

convincing terms. “*Nkosi sikelel’ iAfrika!*” - a more fitting anthem could not have been found to embrace this get-together with its many dimensions, facets and perspectives in the spirit of belonging together even beyond the atrocities endured.

Even in view of the extensive security measures employed to ensure safety and good implementation of the programme, happy faces and colourful costumes of various styles and designs prevailed throughout and characterised the crowds walking, singing, dancing or just sitting around at some distance and watching in amusement the event embracing them. The “*uMbimbi lweziNsizwa*”, the nucleus of survivors from all the six communities that initiated the ongoing attempt and today’s event, responds friendly to the call to come forward, be seen and be thanked for their engagement. Standing ovation!

It was the six representatives of religious communities including *inkolo yendabuko* (ancestral religion), post-missionary indigenous faith societies (*AbakwaShembe* - the Nazarene Baptists), post-missionary mainstream religious traditions (Christianity) as well as the Islam and Hindu religions, who through their presence and the short but touching opening prayers brought vividly to mind, how diverse the peoples of Southern Africa especially in KwaZulu-Natal have become and what a significant role religion plays in their lives. The sermon by Dr Khoza Mgojo, one of those that had been tirelessly engaged in this region in intervening, mediating and healing throughout the tumultuous decades, laid ground for a get-together that could be joyous and fabulous without becoming less rooted and future-oriented.

“Ceremonial weapons” today and in future

That the “*uMbimbi lweziNsizwa*” and the many other male celebrants in and outside the stadium carried each - matching to their festive attire - “ceremonial weapons” (a thin stick and a cow-hide shield) might, in view of the theme of the day and the intention underlying the event as such, at first have seemed contradictory and inappropriate; I, however, learnt during the course of the event to rediscover the difference between a thin stick strictly for symbolic and festive use and a thicker or sharpened one for use in encounter and defence. Whether people in post-conflict communities would ever learn again to look at and go about with weapons in a similarly differentiating way, I dare doubt. Female celebrants radiate refreshing joviality and impressive dignity - totally unarmed!

The fifteen tractors that the government presented to the six hosting communities in support of their effort to *ukubuyisana* and *ukukhumelana umlotha* are seen by most as a source of encouragement and an important reminder to the fact that “the success of a reconciliation process lies in the many daily endeavours people undertake to breathe, work, eat and grow together”. Cultivating land and producing food could be the most appropriate framework for worthwhile struggles in growing together, said one of the initiators from *uMbimbi weziNsizwa*.

Returning home and going to school and to work the following day the celebrants of that event will already be walking beyond the point of unresolved conflict as part of a reconciling society. They will hopefully inspire even those who, like some of the key persons in one of the conflicting parties of those days, *iNkatha*, had failed

to honour the invitation to Vulindlela, to follow suit and be part of the ongoing process of “meeting halfway to proceed together”.

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