

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST IN MAPUTALAND

by Ilana van Wyk

I DID my first proper anthropological fieldwork nearly 20 years ago in a place that was then widely known as Maputaland. The name was a colonial hangover from 1854 when a certain Captain Owen of the British Navy named the area thus.¹ This name had a stubborn afterlife in post-apartheid South Africa even though none of the locals knew what it meant. Much more descriptive was the local word for the area, Mhlab'uyalingana or flat earth. Indeed, the most notable geological fact about this piece of coastal plain was that the average altitude seldom reached more than 100 metres above sea level.² Locals knew Mhlab'uyalingana as an area with poor soil, unpredictable rainfall and diseases, and pests that impeded intensive agriculture.³ Their views were often in diametrical opposition to those of the conservationists who protected the area's natural World Heritage Site⁴ and of tourists who flocked to its nature conservation areas. If nature lovers or environmentalists had a say in naming the area, they would have reached for such hoary clichés as Paradise or Eden, words that often cropped up in outsiders' descriptions of the region. In newspapers and tourist brochures, on websites and in books on the area, countless observers have celebrated the region for its virgin beaches, protected marshes, coral reefs and indigenous forests that were home to rare and endangered species.⁵

As a rather naïve young scholar, I entered this place of many names on nothing more than an invitation from a professor in my department. I was casting around for a funded Master's

project because my Calvinist parents believed that financially supporting anyone over the legal working age of 16 encouraged lifelong idleness. My search coincided with the professor's award of a prestigious American grant focused on community-based conservation in Maputaland; or at least that was how he explained it.

Prof (as he liked to be called) was a conservative Afrikaner who had been trained in *volkekunde*, a politically deeply compromised branch of ethnology.⁶ He was rumoured to have been a Broederbond member and at the time of our acquaintance was teaching applied anthropology, something approximating development studies. As a confirmed liberal who read the *Vrye Weekblad* and who wrote tortured poetry about the violent injustices of South Africa's past, luckily never published, this was an unlikely alliance. But I was broke and there were no other projects going in the department. I figured that I could fulfil his project's minimum requirements while doing an unfettered MA on a project of my choosing.

Prof wanted a study of the social dynamics and resource utilisation of informal traders who sold their crafts at the Ubumbano craft market in Sodwana Bay National Park. He introduced me to the Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife (KZN Wildlife) officials who had to approve my residence and work in the park. They were enthused about the research and offered me cheap research lodgings that were within walking distance of the market. They also suggested that I employ a research assistant to help with the interviews and, crucially, to smooth the way with the

Ubumbano craft committee and the Mbila (Zikhali) Traditional Authority in Mbaswana.⁷ The craft committee was happy for me to do the research but we had to return to the Traditional Authority three times before we were given an audience with Chief Sonto Zikhali and his councillors. I had the distinct impression that the chief and his councillors were hoping for someone with a bit more substance and with money to invest. But in the end they allowed the *ntombazana* (girl) to do her 'school work'.

Figuring out the natural resource use at the Ubumbano market seemed straightforward enough. I just needed to ask the women how much wood, reed, palm leaves or grass it took to make each craft item and then make an inventory of items on display and in storage to get a rough estimate of their total use. And to verify, I observed the actual collection of natural resources and the making of each type of craft.

At first, the survey, inventory and enumeration work were tedious. All the stalls looked alike and sold the same narrow array of goods at the same prices. But as the women grew used to my presence at the market, and I ventured a few questions beyond the number and types of craft they sold, a complex social world unfolded. Despite the impression of uniformity, I quickly learnt that there were enormous disparities between crafters and that these disparities mapped onto female social networks of reciprocity. Only the very poorest of crafters were not included in these networks. These women could only rely on the help of their young daughters and occasionally daughters-in-law to harvest raw materials locally, to make the crafts to sell at the market at Ubumbano. More successful craft

stall owners had large social networks that stretched beyond local towns to Durban and Swaziland (where most of the finished crafts came from) and encompassed an array of economic activities that ranged from subsistence agriculture and barter, to a variety of trade, *stokvels* (rotational credit associations) and loan sharking. Their extensive networks meant that they did not have to harvest raw materials but could buy them from other women, that they could give these materials to young women to make crafts for them, and that they did not have to man their stalls; all labour-intensive and poorly paid tasks. By outsourcing much of the labour associated with the craft trade, these women could concentrate on more profitable income streams such as the selling of pineapples or reselling Swazi crafts in regional markets.⁸

Surprisingly, many successful women also continued the back-breaking work of subsistence agriculture. It was on this point that the economic models of linear business development seemed to falter; successful businesswomen invested in a wide variety of income streams and livelihoods rather than in a single business. This was not due to a lack of business acumen: over more than 200 years local women have learned to deal with the extreme risk of being on the margins of ecological, market and development nodes.⁹ They have repeatedly faced the uncertainties of poor harvests, disease, inexplicably low tourist numbers, craft agents who disappear with whole consignments of baskets, developers who invest and withdraw, suppliers who fail to deliver and the catastrophic costs of unexpected family misfortunes; of funerals, illnesses, layoffs in the far-off mines where many local men worked,¹⁰

teenage pregnancies, accidents and the drawn-out costs of suspected witchcraft. The only bulwark against such uncertainties lay in diversifying income and banking favours with other women.¹¹

This was why supposedly astute business owners employed young women to sell crafts at Ubumbano, an expense that guaranteed very marginal returns on the stalls. The owners were not 'eating their profits' as some speculated, but investing in the young women's future abilities to secure jobs at local hotels and lodges, contacts that could be leveraged to secure more permanent jobs for family members.¹² And while this was a slim hope, having a young woman at a stall throughout the year guaranteed one's inclusion in local development projects geared towards crafters and women serving the tourism industry.

The women at Ubumbano agreed that these projects were, for the most part, useless, sometimes even farcical. Almost without fail, craft development projects would teach women who survived on very meagre incomes to budget, to set more profitable margins on their crafts, and to produce the finer, organically-dyed *izichumo* (beer baskets) that tourists loved. The women knew that tourists did not want to pay more for crafts and that they would never recoup the enormous amount of time that went into the production of *izichumo*; a small *isichumo* dyed with organic roots and bark could take anything from a month to three months to make and would not command anything in excess of R200. Synthetically dyed, brightly coloured paper baskets, of which the women could make three or four a day, sold for R20. While the women knew that the technical content

of these workshops were pretty useless, they sat through weeks of workshops knowing that some developers would take on the difficult and costly task of marketing and distributing local crafts to urban markets or to more exclusive art markets. These middlemen-developers would buy whole consignments of crafts and often paid more per item than local tourists. They also covered the transport and marketing costs with funds that were not deducted from the prices paid for crafts. In one such project, the Lubombo Spatial Development Initiative (LSDI) paid for a group of women to take their crafts to Durban to sell on the beachfront, put them up in a hotel and paid for their food. The lucky participants marvelled that all their crafts had been sold, but were not surprised when the LSDI could not afford more such outings. Jabu Mdluli explained that these kinds of trips were unsustainable because 'the money of transport and hotels will eat the money of the crafts'. It was nevertheless a windfall for the participants and one they hoped would be repeated if they sat through otherwise time-consuming development workshops.

As I became more involved with the lives of local women crafters, I became increasingly critical of local development practice. Apart from its often useless and at other times unsustainable interventions, local development projects reproduced Western gender stereotypes of women as caretakers and housewives tied to the private sphere. Women were typically included in low-cost, low-turnover projects focused on nursing, subsistence agriculture and craft making and were not included in the more political projects where men were interacting with local developers to turn communal land into

nature conservation areas and tourist attractions.¹³ In the process, local men became cultural brokers for whole communities of people and ensured large sums of money for their services, money that seldom trickled down to their communities or to women.¹⁴ However, central to the men's brokerage work was a re-traditionalisation narrative that emboldened more development projects to focus on the production of 'real Zulu' *izichumo*. Women who refused to participate in these initiatives were excluded from other development projects and thus from potential windfalls such as the Durban project. But in making time-consuming crafts such as *izichumo*, women crafters could not spread their risks or participate in reciprocal women's networks so essential to survival in this drought-prone area where the turnover in developers was higher than President Donald Trump's tweet controversies. This type of development exacerbated existing gender tensions in the area and worsened women's survival odds.

Prof did not like what he considered my unnecessary criticism of development practice in the area. As an evangelist of sustainable, eco-friendly, community-based development, Prof had a couple of oars in the local development game. Most of his projects, though, veered towards the farcical. In an area slightly north of Sodwana, he had one of his other students implement a project inspired by a book on urban, eco-sustainable community development. The book showed urban dwellers with little outdoor space how to repurpose empty 2 litre Coke bottles into hanging gardens. Inspired, Prof and his student bought (real) Coke in Pretoria, drove it down to Maputaland

(over 1 100 kilometres both ways), emptied the liquid, and filled the bottles with local soils in which women could plant their crops. They apparently did not consider purchasing the bottles locally (perhaps even from the women), buying cheaper sodas, or giving some of the cooldrink to the women. A month after the project's launch, I saw no evidence of the hanging plastic gardens anywhere in the area. Their second project was even more of a farce. The hapless student spent weeks with local women harvesting reeds to make eco-friendly natural cages for locally caught *ivondwe*. Prof had read somewhere that these animals were a local delicacy and decided that breeding them would be the answer to a local diet deficient in protein. He did not know that these cane rats were named for their main food source and that they did not breed in captivity. There was little time for the latter as their first 'crop' chewed through the cages within a day.

I had kept my distance from Prof's projects but could not escape his greedy involvement in local developments. As my project expanded beyond the Ubumbano craft market, I became involved with a group of traditional healers who had agreements with nature conservation authorities to harvest bark, roots, bulbs and other natural materials in the parks for their medicines. Despite my most vehement objections, Mr Ngubane, the leader of the group, had declared that the ancestors had called me to become a *sangoma* and that I should be his trainee. In this role, I quickly became the group's unofficial secretary, driver and general dogsbody. But before long, Prof started talks with 'my' healers about a possible development project that

would benefit them. As a lowly student to both Prof and Mr Ngubane, I was not included in these talks or the workshops that Prof held to distil bottom-up local needs. As a young woman, I had to make sure that the food and drinks were served on time while the men talked.

A few months after the workshop, Prof returned from Pretoria with architectural plans for a traditional healers' hospital complex. I was surprised because I knew that the healers wanted a hall with a small kitchen on neutral ground where they could occasionally meet without their ancestors 'fighting'. Prof's complex had individual rooms for each traditional healer to consult with (mostly HIV-positive) patients, wards where patients could be admitted, a craft market for the tourists that would visit this complex, and a platform where *sangomas* could 'throw the bones' for curious tourists. Prof had obviously gone off-piste with this one. I was appalled and deeply embarrassed that he had got it so wrong. I also feared that word of this project would get out to other anthropologists and that I would be implicated in its building. Apart from the fact that healers could not heal in the same place, the idea of having tourists gawk at people who were desperately ill while shopping for local souvenirs and being entertained by an exotic healer-performer left me aghast. This was the kind of nightmare stuff that anthropologists have been critically writing about for ages.

Not long after he unveiled his plans to the healers, Prof phoned me from Pretoria instructing me to inform the healers that the project would not go ahead after all. I was selfishly relieved that this monumental folly would not

be built, but was also extremely worried. Through my crafting network I had heard that a local mob had killed a developer because they had apparently grown tired of his promises that he would pay for a consignment of crafts. As my contacts said, people were getting fed up with the developers' unrealised promises and were taking matters into their own hands. I knew that a group of locals had resettled in Ndumo Game Reserve and there were rumours of more invasions of nature conservation land further south.

I called a meeting with the healers and in a trembling voice explained that Prof's promises would come to nothing. The tension in the room was unbearable until Mr Ngubane stood up to declare that he and his colleagues knew from the start that Prof was a 'witch'. Why else would he be so interested in their potions and plans for the future? (Prof's wife was a keen gardener and often tried to engage the healers on this topic whenever she accompanied her husband to the area.) And why would he send a young girl to give news that he knew could get her killed? My heart clenched. The other healers nodded in agreement and one after the other listed other suspicious behaviour; Prof's ridiculous projects had other, more obviously sinister intentions. I had no reason to disagree and gratefully submitted to the group's protective charms before I headed home, away from this dangerous flatland.

NOTES

- 1 Ilana van Wyk, "'Elephants are eating our money': a critical ethnography of development practice in Maputaland, South Africa" (MA thesis, Pretoria University, 2003), p. 34. Owen's original Maputaland stretched from Lourenço Marques in the north to Lake St Lucia in the South and from the Pongola River to the Indian Ocean, but later

- only referred to the area south of the South African border.
- 2 A. Mountain, *Paradise under Pressure: St Lucia, Kosi Bay, Sodwana, Lake Sibaya, Maputaland* (Johannesburg, Southern Book Publishers, 1990).
- 3 D. Taylor, 'Agricultural practices in Eastern Maputaland' *Development Southern Africa* 5(4) 1988, pp. 465–481.
- 4 In 1999 a complex of protected areas in the region covering 239 566 ha was declared a World Heritage Site (<http://www.rhino.org.za> 2002).
- 5 D. Larsen, 'A paradise at the centre of controversy' *Natal Witness* 29 November 1999; N. Moore, 'Trouble in paradise' *Natal Witness* 25 July 2001.
- 6 John S. Sharp, 'The roots and development of *volkekunde* in South Africa' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 8(1) 1981, pp. 16–36; R.J. Gordon and A.D. Spiegel, 'Southern Africa revisited' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (1993), pp. 83–105.
- 7 Although the people living in the Sodwana Bay area were still referred to as Mbila, the chief and his council objected to this, referring to their historical subjugation of that group in 1820. They preferred to be called the Zikhali Traditional Authority (Van Wyk, "'Elephants are eating our money'", p. 32).
- 8 Van Wyk, "'Elephants are eating our money'", pp. 147–165.
- 9 A.B. Cunningham, 'Commercial craftwork: balancing out human needs and resources' *South African Journal of Botany* 53(4) 1987, pp. 259–266.
- 10 In 1999 alone, 10 000 local men had been retrenched from work on the mines in Gauteng and returned to Maputaland with few job prospects.
- 11 Van Wyk, "'Elephants are eating our money'", pp. 160–167.
- 12 Young women who had gone to school and who could speak English had a much better chance of employment in local lodges.
- 13 Van Wyk, "'Elephants are eating our money'", pp. 102–131.
- 14 Ilana van Wyk, 'Land claims and corporate imitation: brokering development in Maputaland, KwaZulu-Natal' *Anthropology Southern Africa* 26(1/2) 2003, pp. 63–71.