

FREE BUT FRAGILE: HUMAN RELATIONS AMIDST POVERTY AND HIV IN DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Dullstroom-Emnotweni is the highest town in South Africa. Cold and misty, it is situated in the eastern Highveld, halfway between the capital Pretoria/Tswane and the Mozambique border. Alongside the main road of the white town, 27 restaurants provide entertainment to tourists on their way to Mozambique or the Kruger National Park. The inhabitants of the black township, Sakhelwe, are remnants of the Southern Ndebele who have lost their land a century ago in wars against the whites. They are mainly dependent on employment as cleaners and waitresses in the still predominantly white town. Three white people from the white town and three black people from the township have been interviewed on their views whether democracy has brought changes to this society during the past twenty years. Answers cover a wide range of views. Gratitude is expressed that women are now safer and HIV treatment available. However, unemployment and poverty persist in a community that nevertheless shows resilience and feeds on hope. While the first part of this article relates the interviews, the final part identifies from them the discourses that keep the black and white communities from forming a group identity that is based on equality and human dignity as core values of democracy.

Keywords: democracy; Oral History interviews; Dullstroom-Emnotweni; South African current history; Southern Ndebele

INTRODUCTION: AIM, BACKGROUND, CONTENTS AND METHOD

Aim

The aim of this article is to retrieve a variety of voices – three white and three black – from the rural town of Dullstroom-Emnotweni, in order to establish if and how relationships between people have changed during the past 20 years of democracy. From these albeit

small number of interviews, the social discourses will be identified that embody the values of democracy, namely equality and human dignity, or keep them from being fully realised in a society that was previously deeply divided along racial lines. Finally, it will be argued that, because equality and human dignity as the main tenets of democracy are not present in the discourses of the community of Dullstroom-Emnotweni, people here are politically free, but remain fragile in terms both of self-realisation and societal relations.

Background

A majority of the people living in Sakhelwe, the impoverished and underdeveloped black township of Dullstroom-Emnotweni in rural Mpumalanga in eastern South Africa, are remnants of the Southern Ndebeles who until a century ago lived on their ancestral land 40 kilometers to the east of what is today known as ‘Mapoch’s caves’. After losing their land in wars against the whites the Ndebeles were reduced to working on white farms, that is, on land they themselves previously owned. Eventually their children and grandchildren came to Dullstroom to work on the railways and as domestic workers in white households. The people of Sakhelwe tell the stories of their forebears who went from being landowners to farmworkers to unskilled labourers... and how they themselves landed up being unemployed and impoverished. Sakhelwe has an unemployment rate of 70% and an HIV infection rate of 75% (Landman 2013a: 45–57).

The white town of Dullstroom consists almost exclusively of restaurants, guest houses and holiday homes for week-end breakaways and halfway stay-overs between Johannesburg and Mozambique or the Kruger National Park. There have always been strong class differences between the still predominantly white town and the poor people of the township. Also, a majority of the town people vote for the Democratic Alliance (DA) which they consider to at least protect white interests, while the township almost exclusively vote for the African National Congress (ANC) (Lello, Interview 1 July 2014).

Contents

The paper will relate stories on human relationships in Dullstroom-Emnotweni (which includes the township Sakhelwe) after the coming of democracy in South Africa in 1994. The stories indicate to what extent democracy – and its secular constitution based on equality and human rights – have influenced the power relations in this community between the powerful and the powerless, between men and women, between the youth and people with cultural seniority, between people employed in highly paid government and municipal positions and the unemployed, and between people in the township and those in the town itself.

The interviews will speak for themselves on the issue of the changing or non-changing of relations. They will be analysed solely in terms of the social discourses

they display, and the effect of these discourses on the change and non-change towards the democratic values of equality and human dignity in this society.

Therefore, after the role-players have been introduced and their interviews related and summarised, the discourses supporting their views on change or non-change will be identified. Finally, a short conclusion on why this community is moving towards or away from forming a group identity will be presented.

INTERVIEWS

Professor Mashilo Molobi, a colleague at the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at Unisa, reacted as follows to my complaint that people in Sakhelwe ‘do not reveal their real feelings about 20 years of democracy when I interview them’: ‘The people in the rural areas are strongly attached to tradition. They are very secretive about their real feelings. They honour their government. They will not open up, not even to a black person’ (Molobi, Interview 26 May 2014).

Keeping the limitations of this research in mind, I present summaries of the interviews I had (with consent) with six people staying in the rural town of Dullstroom-Emnotweni in the week before the general elections of 7 May 2014.

Three of the interviewees are white and live in the (previously) white town of Dullstroom (or neighbouring Belfast). The other three are black and live in Dullstroom’s township, Sakhelwe, a name they no longer favour since it reminds them of the time they have been forcefully removed to ‘the place which we have built for you’, a paternalistic sentiment reflected in the name ‘Sakhelwe’. Although these interviewees are small in sample, they represent a wide variety of views, from outspokenly anti-government to admittedly committed to the ANC tradition, that is, to the liberation struggle of the African National Congress that has reigned South Africa since the coming of democracy in 1994.

The interviewees are as follows:

1. Joost Tryhou, a white man critical of government, living in the white town of Dullstroom.
2. Marianne Holzhausen, a white woman in sympathy with the old and new problems experienced by the black community of Sakhelwe.
3. Sannelie Kruger, a younger white woman torn between white losses and persistent black poverty.
4. Paulos Mnisi, a black man born on Kareekraal, a (white) farm near Dullstroom, critical of current president Jacob Zuma but an ANC supporter.
5. Iris Mphuthi, a black woman living in Sakhelwe and previous counsellor in the ANC led eMakhazeni Municipality.
6. Rose Nomadlozi, a black woman of the ‘human rights generation’, critical of traditional gender relations and employed by the ANC government.

Democracy in South Africa is better than autocracy but not what we dreamt of...

Joost Tryhou (65) has come to retire in Dullstroom, now living in the (previously) white town (Tryhou, Interview 5 May 2014). He speaks passionately – but without racist bitterness – about his journey locally with democracy after 20 years. We have idealised democracy, he says, but we are now suffering because of its bad fruits. Education has moved backwards. Administration, in local and national governments, is totally corrupt. Mother languages have been undermined so that all people now speak bad English and consider themselves as being learned. Votes are bought with promises that are not supported by facts. The consequence of ‘democracy’ is that products of inferior quality are tolerated and even promoted by government on all levels, from service delivery to education to physical products that are put up for sale in shops. Tryhou concludes by saying: ‘Democracy as we have it now is slightly better than autocracy – but it is not what we have dreamt about.’

Empowerment should come with life skills development

Marianne Holzhausen (70) is the CEO of the Mpumalanga branch of Epileptic South Africa which houses 86 people who, apart from suffering from epilepsy, are also intellectually challenged (Holzhausen, Interview 5 May 2014). She has been living in Dullstroom for the past 34 years with a strong civil involvement both in the black and white community. ‘How have things changed in Dullstroom the past 20 years?’ she is asked.

The white people in Dullstroom are not necessarily worse off than 20 years ago, she says, apart from having to make a special effort to keep things together...like everybody else in South Africa. And for the black people there are more job opportunities. However, she feels strongly that job creation should be accompanied by life skills development and good work ethics. The newly employed should be taught not to buy things on credit, and that a job comes with responsibilities and not only with cash. She herself engages in life skills training for people living with disabilities, but feels that an after-school centre should teach learners life skills and that the church should offer workshops in this regard.

She explains that the black community of Dullstroom has grown tremendously the past 20 years, especially in comparison to the white community. In 1994 there were 250 white people residing in Dullstroom, with 2500 black people in Sakhelwe. Now, in 2014, there are 480 white and 15 000 black people living in Dullstroom-Emnotweni.

However, not all things have changed for the better, she says. Many more people are affected by HIV and AIDS than 20 years ago. Openness about HIV infection has not grown, and many people from Dullstroom go to Belfast for ARV treatment. Service delivery has deteriorated. The roads are full of potholes; the water is undrinkable and often completely cut off; corruption reigns at the eMakhazeni Municipality.

As far as relationships in Dullstroom-Emnotweni are concerned, Holzhausen experiences no discrimination against women in her daily contact with local people. She herself feels respected by men and has entered into many trusted working relationships with them. She also testifies to good relations between black and white locally, but points out that the youth feel excluded from the employment market and opportunities – in spite of the fact that Dullstroom’s economy has grown extensively because of an expanding tourist market. ‘Twenty years ago, if it was misty, you would drive through Dullstroom and miss it completely. Today everybody wants to stop over. However, the blacks and especially the youth have not gained from this.’

The youth is indestructible

Sannelie Kruger (45) is a Pam Golding estate agent working in Dullstroom and living in Belfast, 33 km to the west of Dullstroom-Emnotweni (Kruger, Interview 5 May 2014). She points to the resilience and hope of the black youth in a rather hopeless situation. The eMakhazeni Municipality is bankrupt and in spite of the fact that individual residents pay their electricity bills, Eskom (the national electricity provider) is on the brink of cutting off all electricity in the municipality, including that of the black townships who had suffered from the lack of electricity in the long decades before democracy came, twenty years ago. Although Dullstroom remains the playground of the rich from Gauteng, Sakhelwe is peaceful with the youth not engaging in criminal acts such as stealing. ‘The youth is indestructible. They always bounce back. They live with hope. I have been involved with a school for six years now and in this time there was not one single racial incident.’ According to Kruger, it is the hope that democracy brings, and the good relations amongst the upcoming generation, that need to be acknowledged and not the corruption and lack of infra-structure that usually get the most attention.

Voting for the ANC for what Mandela has done for us

Paulos Mnisi (63) was born on Kareekraal, a farm 20 kilometers to the southeast of Dullstroom. He grew up in Madala, the ‘old location’ which was relocated to Sakhelwe in 1980 when the white town wanted to build a sewerage where Madala was. Mnisi’s father was the evangelist of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) in this area. Today Mnisi is retired from Eskom and the leading elder of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, as the DRCA is now called.

Mnisi (Interview 5 May 2014) is from Swazi descent and traditional in his ways. He is critical of some forms of women’s liberation. He feels that women do not respect their husbands anymore, do not look after them when they are ill, and drink too much. ‘They just go their own way.’ However, Mnisi also reverts to the language of equality when needed as is expected from men today: ‘A man must not sit on a woman. They must agree on things.’

The young people too, he says, do not respect the older people. The old people in Sakhelwe suffer a lot while the young ones do not look after them. The young people

drink a lot. Even children walk in the street with bottles of beer. The young men show affection to their girlfriends right in front of the older people.

Mnisi is angry towards the white people in town who exploit black workers and pay them R800 (\$70) per month. White people come from the cities and open businesses in town. They are willing to pay their employees well, but the local white people convince them to pay them badly at the going rate. 'Black workers are not treated as equals,' Mnisi says. 'However, black people must work on their own and should not always look for work at the white people's places.'

Mnisi is critical of the corruption, extravagance and a lack of service delivery attributed to the eMakhazeni Municipality. Municipality workers do not receive overalls. The roads are dangerous with potholes. They have built 550 RDP houses (state-funded houses according to the Reconstruction and Development Programme of the government) which are, however, without electricity and water. The houses are 'skeef en krom' (crooked) with no tarred roads. The counsellors 'eat the money' and entertain themselves with huge parties. He is critical of the ANC government as well. The past 20 years have been a little better for blacks, but Nkandla (the house of president Zuma costing R256 million/\$25 million) was an eye-opener, he says. The EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters) of Julius Malema will take over. 'However, I shall vote ANC for the rest of my life because Mandela has helped us. If it was not for Mandela, I would not have voted.'

Things are better but poverty is huge

Iris Mphuthi (Interview 5 May 2014) has been a counsellor for the ANC led eMakhazeni Municipality for two terms during the past 20 years. She feels that, during this time, things have dramatically changed for the better. Domestic violence is under control. And this is because of government policy and the police. If the wife lays a charge of assault, the law takes its course. There is no more domestic violence in Sakhelwe. There is respect for women now.

The youth too respect their parents, and even share their salary with their parents. They even share with other youngsters who are unemployed. However, the young people are fond of going to the shebeen (the informal drinking place). There are no drugs in the township, and no prostitution. There was a time when young women could be picked up in front of 'La Bamba' (the cafe in the town till two years ago), but that has stopped.

You also see that employers treat their employees well. The clinic also works well, although people prefer to go to Belfast for their HIV treatment because of the stigma. Also, the relationship between black and white in Dullstroom-Emnotweni is much better than 20 years ago. 'We now work together.'

It is just the churches that do not mix. For instance, the Elohim Bible Church (a large independent church in Sakhelwe) do not like people from other churches. It is only when there are funerals that the people mix.

‘But, yes, things are much better than 20 years ago. Much better. It is just the poverty that is big.’

Everyone is free, and everything is transparent

Rose Nomadlozi (39) is from the ‘human rights generation’. She is informed and empowered through human rights discourses, especially discourses on women’s rights. She is working in a state department.

During the past 20 years everything changed, she says. Everyone is free now. At the police in Dullstroom-Emnotweni no rape or abuse is reported. Everything is transparent. We are taught about our human dignity everywhere, on the television, at the schools – it is even preached in the church. The women are definitely better off.

The young people, also, are more patient with the older ones. They used to ask us ‘Did you really live like that in the old days?!’ But now they are trying to understand why older people do not go on strikes or participate in protests like they do. They also recognise that the older people do not use the same technology like cell phones and computers.

The relationship between employers and employees in Dullstroom-Emnotweni is one hundred percent, she says, but unemployment amongst the youth and the men is very high. And the youth does not have money to go and study after matric.

The HIV situation is also better than 20 years ago. We used to bury the children of parents who were HIV positive, but today the children are negative. We all grow in knowledge about HIV every day, she says.

The churches in Sakhelwe are a problem, though. The Elohim Bible Church does not want anything to do with the other churches, especially the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). There is a lot of tension, she says.

But in summary, according to Sindani, Dullstroom-Emnotweni today, after 20 years, is a free community.

IN SUMMARY

The six interviews related in the above represent a wide variety of views on the gains and failures of democracy in the rural town of Dullstroom-Emnotweni which is still very much geographically divided into the white town catering for an upper class tourist market en route to the Kruger National Park, and the black township, Sakhelwe, where unemployment reigns supreme.

Here then follows a summary of the views expressed in terms of the interview schedule presented:

1. How are relations in Dullstroom-Emnotweni between men and women?

Answers varied between women being too free and disrespectful towards their husbands and roles, to women now being truly free and protected against violence.

2. How are relations in Dullstroom-Emnotweni between young and old?

On the one hand the youth is being accused of drinking too much and being disrespectful and radical; on the other hand, the youth is commented for assisting the older people who are not as politically conscious as they are, who are unemployed and not skilled at using internet technology. Drugs and prostitution do not seem to be a(n acknowledged) problem amongst the youth. However, professional training and life skills are lacking amongst them.

3. How are relations in Dullstroom-Emnotweni between the employed and the unemployed?

Unemployment is identified as a massive problem by all the interviewees, independent of their political views and their views on the gains of the 20 year old government.

4. How are relations in Dullstroom-Emnotweni between employers and employees?

All acknowledge that employees are vulnerable because of limited job opportunities and a lack of access to post-school training.

5. How are relations in Dullstroom-Emnotweni between those affected by HIV and AIDS and those who are not infected?

Anti-Retroviral treatment is available from the (one room) clinic in Sakhelwe, but most of the infected go to Belfast for treatment because of a fear of stigmatisation. However, conscientisation and advocacy programmes are successfully presented in Sakhelwe.

6. How are relations in Dullstroom-Emnotweni between blacks and whites?

The existence of racial tension was not admitted by any of the interviewees.

7. How are things in Dullstroom-Emnotweni between the churches?

In spite of all the good relations reported, tension between churches seems to be rife in the township itself where mainline and independent churches compete for members. Historically there are 20 Muslims in Dullstroom-Emnotweni, who have built their own mosque and support a full-time imam (religious leader). The Muslim population has grown extensively over the past year with the take-over of businesses in the white town as well as in the township by immigrants from Pakistan and other African countries. However, no tension between Christians and Muslims has been reported. Although there are no churches where white and black attendance is integrated, this has not been mentioned as an example of failed democratic relations.

THE DOMINANT DISCOURSES ON DEMOCRACY IN DULLSTROOM-EMNOTWENI

According to Social Construction Theory, people are constructed by the social discourses that are dominant in their society, ‘discourse’ referring to a grand narrative that is regarded by society as ‘truthful’ and in return dominates the minds and behaviour of those who believe in it.

The dominant discourse during apartheid times was that ‘people are equal but different’. However, the different ways in which people of colour were treated during these times, made a mockery of them being seen as equal.

What, now, are the discourses in Dullstroom-Emnotweni twenty years after democracy?

Interestingly, democracy discourses do not seem to be divided along racial lines in Dullstroom-Emnotweni, with whites believing that democracy has failed and blacks pointing only to the gains of democracy. ‘Democracy has failed because of bad education, corruption and unfulfilled promises’ is no doubt a dominant discourse in white circles, but so is ‘Democracy works because it gives people hope in a hopeless situation’, and ‘Democracy lets the youth grow up in new and good relations with one another’. Reigning discourses amongst whites are ‘however-discourses’, such as ‘Democracy is enhancing opportunities and good relations, but has failed in sustainability’ and ‘Democracy has good intentions but has not created equal opportunities.’

Dominant discourses on democracy amongst the black interviewees from Dullstroom-Emnotweni oscillate between being outright positive, such as ‘Democracy brings good human relations’, to acknowledging the disparity between the dream and reality: ‘Democracy should be about people being paid equality’ (sic), ‘Democracy should be about human dignity’, ‘Democracy is not protecting us from HIV infection’ and ‘Democracy brings good relations, but cannot alleviate poverty.’

Why, then, in spite of shared views on democracy, on its gains and failures, does Dullstroom-Emnotweni remain a society deeply divided along class and racial lines, as is the experience of this author (Landman 2013a: 45–57)?

Democracy made laws that gave people freedom and equality in the eyes of the law. Nobody may discriminate against women or blacks, otherwise the law will take its course. The surface structure of society, also that of Dullstroom-Emnotweni, has changed. However, in the deep structure where laws do not rule but discourses do, things have not changed much. Discourses that keep strong women isolated and black youth unemployed still dominate this society.

Ultimately the apartheid discourse of ‘equal but different’ has not been deconstructed. Black youth are still differently employed, people are still exposed to HIV infection, and women are still vulnerable in intimate relationships (Landman 2013b: 171–185).

IN CONCLUSION

Six interviews were held with three black and three white people from Dullstroom-Emnotweni, a rural town divided into a prosperous tourist town and a poor township. The interviews focused on the changes in relations in this still deeply divided town brought about by democracy that dawned in South Africa 20 years ago. From the interviews it is deduced that democracy brought laws that freed people from political oppression, public abuse and unnatural social divides. However, in the deep structure of this society, discourses still rule that hold people captive in poverty, HIV infection and vulnerability.

The reason for this is that equality and human dignity as the core values of democracy, have not become part of the dominant discourses of society.

Democracy as equality and human dignity are missing in the dominant discourses of this rural society, both in the 'white' discourses of privileged people and in the 'black' discourses of people who are not afforded the self-realisation of people who are really equal and possess human dignity.

And therefore a majority of people in Dullstroom-Emnotweni are free...but remain fragile.

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