

Female
'African'
Thirties
Academic/Administrator
Originally from the Eastern Cape

WHAT IT ALL MEANT!

I was eight years of age when I started hearing about them, again and again; around the fireplaces, at school, and on the local radio stations. “Abargrogrisi/abanqolobi! [the terrorists] They’ve jumped the Lesotho borders and are threatening our peace. Some have been arrested in Mozambique! Frelimo! NPLA! All criminals! We despise them! They should not be allowed to live”. And oh, how I hated those cruel ‘terrorists’ who killed ‘innocent’ people and rendered the country ungovernable!

It was also during those days that I proudly shouted, “Aardrykskunde” (Geography) and “Geskiedenis” (History), although I did not have a very good understanding of these subjects then. Anyway, I thought of myself as bilingual or shall I rather say multilingual as, in addition to the indigenous languages I spoke fluently, I also had, I thought, the ‘honour’ of speaking the white man’s all-important languages – unlike my friends in the rural areas. Then I noticed the impact that this language had on my mother, a teacher. She was forced by the school authorities not only to use Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, but was also expected to teach it. The one word (amongst many) that never leaves my mind whenever I think of those years is *aandete*, which means dinner in Afrikaans. Due to her limited knowledge of the language and the fact this was not one of the languages she regularly spoke, she pronounced the word as ‘andete’. A young white Afrikaans-speaking boy from a neighbouring farm was most entertained when he heard her using this word. Later, however, he ‘corrected’ her pronunciation. This episode caused me endless embarrassment at the time. The irony however was that my mother, perhaps in an endeavour to cover up for this ‘deficiency’, simply did not want to part with the few Afrikaans words she had managed to acquire. Consequently, she regularly used them with pride in conversations.

It is in this rural context that my brothers and their friends were once pushed into the boots of the farm owners' cars, driven by the latter's sons at excessive speed – deliberately hitting the rocks – and for miles in the heat. This was to teach these young boys that they had to heed the orders of the *kleinbase* ('little masters'). My brothers and their friends were expected to run when invited by the young man inside the 'masters' homes. However, they had to take turns entering the house, since a big group of young black men gathered in a small space would leave a smell. It did not bother them to stand in the heat, waiting for their turn to enter, as they would at least have something special to report later. They would also be punished if they crossed the farm fields on their way to or from school.

I also remember the luxury enjoyed by the light-skinned friends who were offered the privilege of playing with *Sussie* ('little sister'), the young white girl. The rest had to be content with the smell of privilege when passing the door of her big home. My privileged friends however had a duty to ensure that *Sussie* did not eat our funny food cooked in the *storesh* (workers' quarters) lest it made her ill.

We were on our way to Matatiele during one of the March holidays. My mother was carrying my younger brother on her back, heavy bags in her hands, pulling me and my other brother while trying to board the departing train from Dordrecht to Matatiele. A white train guard saw her struggling and with unexpected generosity invited her to enter one of the first-class coaches of the train. We were obviously highly excited by this and felt very special. Rushed, my mother pulled us and shouted at us for dragging our feet when we were being accorded such a favour. What she did not realise at the beginning was that a white man always expected something in return for any favour done to a black person. The word *ubuntu*, never mind the meaning thereof, hardly featured in his mind. He instructed my mother to leave all of us children in one of the other compartments and join him in the other. The reason for his inexplicable generosity then dawned on her. We were all sent packing from the first-class coach to the third-class coaches at the rear of the train when she refused to obey his commands. The indignant complaint, "Stupid kaffirs spoiling my day" was tossed at our retreating backs.

I found my first job in Umtata, in the then Transkei homeland. Approximately three per cent of the town's population was white. Thus, this did not look like a town to me at all. I wanted to see *umlungu* (white person). At the time *umlungu* signified civilisation and civilised standards.

It was in Umtata however where things started making sense to me. I was friends with some Kubukeli girl whose relatives were constantly being detained for political reasons. I must admit that initially I saw them as problematic. However with exposure and after starting a political studies course at university I understood what being black and African in South Africa meant. It actually meant that the system wanted to ensure that people remained blind forever, that we hate our brothers and remain the slaves of *umlungu*. My involvement in politics when I joined our trade union, which did invaluable work in those days, brought me closer to causes of the likes of Nelson Mandela, young Bathandwa Ndondo, Joe Slovo, and the liberation movement. I hated myself for not having clearly understood the politics of South Africa during my childhood. However, I made a commitment to become part of the fight against the apartheid system thereafter and not count lost time.

It was at that time that I realised why my father, an employee at CDA (now Daimler Chrysler) and a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was hated so much by his employers. He was essentially hated for his involvement in the liberation struggle. The arrest of my elder brother and the expulsion of my uncle from Freemantle High School in Lady Frere in 1976 now made sense. Before that I had perceived their behaviour as irresponsible.