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# “This is what black girls do”: lamenting the bruised *umntu* and resisting dehumanisation

## ABSTRACT

*This article seeks to analyse the infamous urine incident that happened at Stellenbosch University in May 2022. This analysis will be done in relation to space, language, and belonging. The question is: To what extent does the urine incident relate to the issues of space, connection through language, and belonging at Stellenbosch University? Indigenous storytelling methodology is employed to answer the above question. The metaphors of amaXhosa (umntu ngumntu ngabantu<sup>1</sup> and endleleni<sup>2</sup>) are used to find a connection and pave the way forward.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Suffering sprouts a spirituality of resistance ... Refusing to be shamed by the violence on oneself. Telling when the telling itself is taboo, speaking it out is half the resistance, for it reveals that one is alive to one's full humanity (Oduyoye 2001:75).

To reflect, lament, write or not about the recent incident of the violation of a student's dignity by another student at Huis Marais was not even a question. Rather, the question is “how?”. The writing is talking, lamenting, reflecting, and resisting, as Prof. Oduyoye asserts in the above quote.

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1 I am because you are.

2 Loosely translates as “on the road”.

An incident that sparked outrage in May 2022 at Stellenbosch University, after a White student was captured on video urinating on the belongings of a fellow Black student, is one of the vilest and extreme forms of racism and dehumanisation ever observed. He was uttering these words in English: “This is how the white boys do” – hence the title of this article. The student in question urinated on the laptop and textbooks of the fellow student. This is symbolic: The laptop and the textbooks are the most important tools to the young Black man to create a better future for his entire family and he chose to better that future at one of the most prestigious universities in the world. The urination is telling and is directed at the core of who this young Black man is, destroying what he is trying to build.

Excuses were made by some students that the perpetrator was drunk. Yes, that is true. However, as the saying goes: The actions of the drunk man are his sober thoughts.

As mentioned earlier, this article analyses the incident and relates it to the issues of space, belonging, and connecting through language at Stellenbosch University (SU). This article seeks to find a space where all SU family can meet each other and, in the process of doing so, find the role of the *endleleni* metaphor. This article first unpacks the historical issue of space and belonging in South Africa; it then links the space, connectedness, and belonging with the incident. Thereafter, the article plots the implications of this incident for the Black community; for the perpetrator and his community; it traces the movement of God in-between these spaces, and plots the way forward, using the metaphors.

It is noteworthy to mention that a strong communal sense influences the telling and writing of stories in Black communities. If a person comes from a background where s/he is inherently part of the communal, that perspective will affect how that person tells the story. Hence, we speak of Black women interchangeably with Black South African people in general. This article focuses on Black Africans, not on other previously disadvantaged races.

## 2. SELF-LOCATING

Who are we? We are both Black African women. One South (African) and one born in South Africa, her father from West (Africa) and her mother a South (African). Our relationship has a power imbalance in that one of us is a lecturer, and the other a student. We emerge in this article as Black women who experienced oppression threefold: being Black, being women, and being affected by systemic poverty. As Black women, we are the face of poverty and are, therefore, expected to be poor, powerless, and not able to articulate and to be needy. Oduyoye (quoted in Penxa-Matholeni *et al.* [2020]) puts these

expectations about a Black woman so well. She asserts that, when she (a Black African woman) behaves herself according to prescription and accepts an inferior position, benevolence – which becomes her “poverty” – she (a Black African woman) is assured, and she is deeply and humbly grateful for this. However, when she (a Black African woman) becomes, for some reason, self-confident and claims a footing for equality, she is frowned upon. She is viewed as a victim who somehow is developing unexpected power and resilience that might be a threat to the erstwhile strong. She bulldozes the box that is created for her and steps into the territory that is not made for her (African woman). In other words, a Black African woman is not expected to be anything more than what apartheid prescribed to her in South Africa. Therefore, one is expected to drop the ball and metaphorically kneel for help.

We are both experiencing the above to different degrees and, therefore, we are either misunderstood or viewed as a mystery, rude or an angry woman who builds a wall around herself. We share the experience of the young Black man’s humiliation; our belongings were also urinated on. Furthermore, we are the SU community because of our affiliation with the institution. We emerge in this article as fellow Black African girls. This article will thus be interpreted from the viewpoint of our world and from our own experiences as authors of this article.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This article uses the indigenous storytelling methodology. Penxa-Matholeni (2022a) asserts that stories are essential in the lives of Black Africans. We tell stories differently and in different ways. Oduyoye (2011) asserts that the approach that characterises African women theologians is to tell a story and then to reflect on it. Carter (2003:40) agrees, stating that our stories are our theories and methods. Kovach (2009) emphasises the interrelationship between knowledge and stories. The relevance of the suggested indigenous storytelling methodology for this article is that it recognises and acknowledges ways of knowing and local experiences in a context that has been submerged, hidden, or driven underground, and that is of relevance to the authors. This article thus examines the urine incident at SU, using stories and storytelling, which is congruent with indigenous methodology (Chilisa 2012; Penxa-Matholeni 2022a).

#### 4. HISTORICALLY RACIALISED SPACE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

To put our analysis of the incident into perspective, we briefly sketch where we come from as South Africans, by giving a concise picture of South Africa pre-1994. Makhubu (2016) uses the term “buffer zones” in the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1950 in South Africa, and how this altered the spatial morphology of the country and its people, resulting in a fragmented society. This was to ensure a smooth transition of White people into the more economically powerful positions. H.F. Verwoerd, Minister of Bantu Affairs in 1950, proposed an act that restricted the movements of non-Whites in and out of the city, using the so-called “*dompas*”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a redesign of South African cities became necessary. The Group Areas Act required ethnic groups to be forcefully evacuated, resettled, and separated from one another (Makhubu 2016).

In the late 1950s, in the Cape Peninsula, the Group Areas Act saw to it that all non-White races were forcefully removed from the “Whites only” areas, and relocated to specific townships. The most hostile period of forced removals ended in 1966. What was left were the official townships of Langa, Gugulethu, and Nyanga, collectively known as Lagunya (Lee 2009, quoted in Penxa-Matholeni 2021).

In 1994, South Africa embarked on the journey of transforming its communities from the divide caused by the apartheid regime. The sad reality is that the majority of Black South Africans are still living in inhumane conditions – exactly where they were pre-1994. The Western Cape is still geographically racialised, as is evident from the following:

- The White citizens of South Africa in the Western Cape are still by and large living apart from the other races in the predominantly White areas.
- The so-called “Coloured” people, on the other hand, still inhabit the Cape Flats.
- Black South Africans, who represent the vast majority of the population, are still occupying the townships, where they were forcefully placed in the 1960s (Penxa-Matholeni 2021). As a result, South Africa became a place of paradox (Cilliers 2017), with an extreme gap between the rich and the poor.

The above provides the background to where it all began. The issue of space and language thus becomes paramount when analysing the incident in question (see South Africa Gateway).

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3 Only Black South Africans carried this identity document.

If we disconnect language from the issue in question, while involving SU, we will not do justice to the analysis of the incident. Even though the perpetrator did not use Afrikaans, traditionally his name and his surname are associated with Afrikaans-speaking people. Therefore, by virtue of having that, he is representing the language in the eyes and minds of many Black South Africans. Language is more than words; it is also embodied. SU is an embodiment of Afrikaans as a language that was previously used to exclude others and/or to control.

The language issue has a historical background. It is noteworthy to trace how Afrikaans was used to control. The best example is the class of 1976. On account of the 1976 uprising, Madikizela-Mandela paints a sad picture of 16 June 1976:

I was there among them; I saw what happened. The children picked up stones; they used dustbin lids as shields and marched towards machine guns. It's not that they don't know that the white man is heavily armed; they marched against heavy machine gun fire. You could smell gunfire everywhere. Children were dying in the street, and as they were dying, the others marched forward facing guns. No one has ever underestimated the power of the enemy. We know that he is armed to the teeth. But the determination, the thirst for freedom in children's hearts, was such that they were prepared to face those machine guns with stones. That is what happens when you hunger for freedom, nothing else seems to matter (Pohlandt-McCormick 2000:609, quoted in Penxa-Matholeni 2022b:15).

That historical day was about the language, and the intention was to control. The 1976 class were resisting the forceful implementation of Afrikaans as a language of learning in the majority Black community. However, this article seeks to show the power the Afrikaans language carried. Whether it is spoken or not. Whether it is still used as a medium of learning or not. This is not the point of this discussion. The point of this discussion is that we have a history, and that history left the legacy of wounds.

Consequently, language can be used to mark the boundaries and separate those who do not belong or are not associated with the language. In the Western Cape, for instance, speaking Afrikaans immediately communicates a certain level of power. If Black non-Afrikaans-speaking persons are present when the Afrikaans language is used, they are placed in an inferior position and are at a disadvantage. In other words, one is not part of this conversation and/or one does not belong and has no power. That is what is communicated to a Black non-Afrikaans-speaker.

Some of the Black students and some of the Black staff at SU do not speak Afrikaans and are thus unable to connect fully in the SU community. Allow us to elucidate what we mean by not connecting with the Afrikaans-speaking peers. Language has another important component; it has the power to connect people on the level of the heart. When someone speaks or tries to communicate with the language of another person, part of the wall between them crumbles and one can hear each other’s heart, not only the words. Does that mean that one cannot connect with each other on a heart level, except when speaking the same language? Absolutely not, that is not what we are saying. The point we are trying to make, is that, if one language is viewed as superior to another language, then this language cannot break the wall down and allow others to enter through that language. The superiority of this language is tied up with the power and the identity of the speaker. The speaker needs to come down to the heart level of others, in order to connect with them. Language is in the hands of the speaker, not in the policies.

There is a connection between space, power, and language. Moreover, language has the power to either uphold or deconstruct social injustices. The above narrative illustrates that power, when people are forced to use the language of the oppressor, is a method of putting the knee metaphorically and literally on their neck and to exert control. Dube (2006:147) calls this

the areas of mental colonization, where language(s) were/is the greatest tool of colonial alienation; distancing oneself from the reality around and encouraging identification with something external to one’s own environment.

This is what and how the apartheid government tried, but failed thanks to the class of 1976 in Soweto.

## 5. CONNECTING THE SPACE WITH THE URINE INCIDENT: “*THIS IS WHAT WHITE BOYS DO*”

The above quote by the perpetrator is loaded. We will attempt to analyse the above in relation to space. The notion of space is multidimensional; it is linked with territory, power, identity, and the concept of gender. Power cannot be exerted without space and identity; furthermore, one needs space to implement power. The identity lies in-between power and space. Therefore, space, like language, has the power to uphold and/or deconstruct social injustices. One can establish one’s territory in a space.

Historically, SU was not for Black students. The geographical location, as well as the language of teaching and learning used, tell that story. The buildings, the statues, and the paintings tell a story of who belongs and who

has power. When the perpetrator uttered the words, “This is what White boys do”, he was marking his territory and claiming it. Whiteness is displayed powerfully, and White supremacy is reinserted (Bowers-Du Toit 2022).

The young Black man is a first-year student and thus younger than the student in question. However, even if the young Black student were older, his skin colour would automatically place him at the bottom. To demonstrate the above point, allow us to take you back to pre-1994. Our fathers, uncles, big brothers, and so on were called “boys” and our mothers and aunts were and still are called “girls”. The White children they raised, called them by their names. The Black man was never a “man” in the workplace; he was a boy. The Black men were, and may still be, emasculated and the Black women were, or are, weakened psychologically and otherwise. Moreover, both Black women and Black men were given “Christian” names, thus diluting their identity. The issue of names in Black communities will be briefly explored later in the article.

The fact that the perpetrator went out of his way to urinate on his fellow Black student’s space, screams power, territory, and belonging. As a White student, he felt that this is his territory, that he had power over this Black student, who does not belong here, or who is a stranger.

That action of the perpetrator sends a powerful message of who owns the space and who belongs to the space (in isiZulu, *kukhala isicathulo sakhe*<sup>4</sup>), territory and power. Historically, SU was not for the previously disadvantaged non-Whites; hence, my assertion above.

## 6. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE INCIDENT FOR THE STUDENT IN QUESTION AND HIS COMMUNITY

Tswana philosophy, known as “*Botho*”, denotes that our humanity is only demonstrated or measured by our capacity to respect, welcome, see, and empower the other. When we fail to do so, we demonstrate our inhumanity, according to *Botho*. The student in question dehumanised himself, White people, and the community of SU at large, including the authors of this article.

As a result, the authors of this article are affected threefold by this incident, because, we are, first, the community of SU; secondly, the Black community in SU, and thirdly, the Black people who are transported to the pain of the past because of where the incident took place.

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4 What he says and does, goes.

We therefore cannot divorce ourselves from both the young Black student and the perpetrator. As SU community, both Black and White staff and students, we failed to empower both parties involved. As a result, we demonstrated our inhumanity, just like the student in question. As a Black community in SU, and the Black community at large, we collectively bear the pain, humiliation, and violation of the Black culture.

Dube (2009) argues that *Botho/Ubuntu/Buthu* can be used as a process of earning respect, by first giving it, and gaining empowerment, by empowering others. This can be applied to all problematic relationships. The unhealthy or broken relationships that do not empower or respect certain members of society would be re-examined. The concept of community, the *Botho/Ubuntu/Buthu*, is the cornerstone for propounding the African philosophy of justice and liberation, by constantly revisiting what it means to be community and live in community, what violates community and how to live in community in the new and hybrid 21<sup>st</sup>-century contexts. Being a community is not something that is determined. It is a process that must be continually cultivated by its members. Relationships should be constantly assessed. Oppressive relationships should be reviewed. Manyonganise (2015) concurs with Dube, in that *ubuntu* as much as it is an African philosophy gives an understanding of us as human beings in relation to the rest of the world.

## 7. “OTHER”: *UMNTU NGUMNTU NGABANTU* PHILOSOPHY: THE IMPLICATION OF THE INCIDENT FOR A BLACK COMMUNITY

Let us begin by explaining the concept “*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*”. This simply means “a person is a person through other people”. However, this loose interpretation does not fully capture the true meaning of this metaphor. *Umntu* means “a person”. The definition of “a person” is a human being, an individual. However, in isiXhosa, this understanding is extended even further. Perhaps a brief explanation of “*umntu, ngumntu ngabantu*” will provide the necessary background, in this instance. This phrase means that one is an individual, until one sees and is seen by another person. Both then become *abantu* or *umntu*. What one sees in each other, is the community, clan, and one’s “self”, in which one strives to be *umntu* around and through other *umntu/abantu*. That also implies that my community creates “me” and I create my community. For this reason, I cannot be *umntu* without another *umntu*. Hence, the incident in question affects not only the young man, but the entire Black community and SU community (Penxa-Matholeni 2022b).

In the vast majority of Black African cultures, to urinate in one's backyard is frowned upon, and leads to dire consequences. In isiNdebele, for instance, "*uchamele impahla yam*".<sup>5</sup> In other words, you disrespected me; you dehumanised me, and violated my human dignity. In Nigeria, the Edo people, for instance, believe that urinating anywhere incurs the wrath of gods, and people are usually warned not to urinate near the King's palace. In isiXhosa: *wophule isidima sam*.<sup>6</sup> In other words, you do not see me and have broken my dignity. One can look at you, but it does not necessarily mean that you are seen. It suggests you do not see my humanity and as far as you are concerned, I do not exist.

According to Vellem (2010), it is rather strenuous to define human dignity outside of *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*, because dignity is intricately linked to relationships, which include the living and the living dead. Briefly, this dignity that is violated, is beyond this young Black man; hence, God, in the image of this young Black man, is violated and disrespected.

The image of God is intact in a young Black man and in the Black community at large. It cannot be dented because it is guaranteed by the image of God-self. However, the incident in question is a great disrespect to God, the Creator, in whose image every individual is created. Therefore, it will never be destroyed, for it is guaranteed by God's image.

Is *umntu* lost? *Umntu* is not lost; it is bruised. The connectedness that thrives in the "us", which makes the fellowship meaningful, is bruised. That connectedness is what makes *umntu* being alive. Therefore, *umntu* is alive and well, but bruised. The relationship between this young White man's community and the young Black man's community is bruised. The relatedness and the connectedness that is based on being human beings, have been bruised.

The image of God and the African spirit in every Black community is alive. *Umntu* symbolises the spirit of Africa, as does the coral tree, on which flowers bloom even when there are no leaves. The budding reveals the hidden resilience that represents the African spirit of Black women/men who continue to fight beyond the grave (Penxa-Matholeni 2022b:3). Therefore, nothing that is done, or is planned to be done by anyone can reduce the worth of Black women/men. This brings us to the God of African women. Before we move on to the God-Christ of African women, the question we are pondering in this reflection is the one raised by the musician Joan Osborne:

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5 Urinated in my property/asserts.

6 Loosely translates as "you broke my human dignity".

If God had a name, what would it be?  
 And would you call it to His face?  
 If you were faced with Him in all His glory,

what would you ask if you had just one question? [...]  
 What if God was one of us?  
 Just a slob like one of us.  
 Just a stranger on the bus  
 trying to make His way home.

If God had a face, what would it look like.  
 And would you want to see [...]

If seeing meant that one would have to look at a stranger? If God was one of us in that little space of this young Black man, who would God want to be?

## 8. THE GOD WHO WALKS IN-BETWEEN: THROUGH THE EYES OF BLACK GIRLS

In the words of Oduyoye (2010), “What does an African woman say about God-Christ?”. According to Oduyoye, Christ for African women is Jesus of Nazareth, the Servant who washed the disciples’ feet, the Good Shepherd who leads to “green pastures”, to the kingdom of God, who in fact comes after us to draw us back to God. Christ seeks to save. Jesus Christ is “Lord” because Jesus of Nazareth was a servant, meeting the needs of humanity in obedience to the will of God, even to the point of dying that we might be freed from the fear of physical death.

In an African context, we are not meeting the God-Christ on Sundays, on Christmas, or during the Easter weekend. Mthethwa (1996, quoted in Louw 2015:37) encapsulates this as follows:

One of the most remarkable and tangible dimensions of African spirituality relate[s] to the unique notion of communality and collective solidarity that the African society exhibits in all spheres of life. There is a profound sense of interdependence from the extended family to the entire community. In a very real sense, everybody is interrelated, including relations between the living and those who have departed.

This God-Christ moves between dwellings, between days of the week, between events, between the messiness of life, and between messy and broken relationships. This is the God-Christ who literally meets with African women *emlanjeni*.<sup>7</sup> Africans require a holistic view of life, observes Oduyoye (2010).

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7 By the river.

This demands a Christ who affects the entirety of life and who shows that there is nothing that is none of His business (Amoah & Oduyoye 2010). This relevance of Christ in the business of living now and in the immediate future is demonstrated in the naming of children, places, and even churches by African women. The children's names tell the story of God-Christ's involvement in daily struggles, life, birth, rituals, death, joys, sorrows, and so on.

The following names testify to the sacredness of everything and every day in an African context:

- Me Gye Fo (Redeemer, in Twi, one of the most spoken languages in Ghana).
- Nkosikhona, in isiZulu (the Lord is present).
- Mkhuleko, in isiZulu (prayer).
- Musa WenKosi, in isiZulu and isiNdebele (mercy of God).
- Thembelihle, in isiZulu and isiXhosa (beautiful hope).

The God-Christ of African women meets with them at the birth of a child *efukwini*,<sup>8</sup> *emlanjeni*, while fetching water, while on the way to the initiation school for Black boys, among others. Therefore, African women experience God-Christ 24/7 in the minute details of their living. In the Bible, Christ literally constantly met with women "*endleleni*". He met with the women *emlanjeni*, as told in the Gospel of John, Chapter 4. Okure (2009:409) explains the commonalities between Jesus and the Samaritan woman:

Jesus and the Samaritan woman in their different contexts have revealed that they share the experience of rejection, prejudice, and isolation. Jesus is rejected in Judea by his own people and goes, either by necessity or as part of his divine mission, to Samaria (4:4) where he finds a hearing and hospitality. The woman, living on the fringe of her society, goes to the well as part of her daily assigned chores and is welcomed by Jesus and placed at the center of his missionary efforts there.

This shows that there is nothing that is not Jesus' business in African women's theology. This is what I call, a township theology. Jesus met the woman often referred to as "the woman with the issue of blood" (Luke 8:43-48) and consequently had contact with the messiness of life. He fed thousands with one loaf and five small fishes in Matthew 14:13-21. That is the Christ in the African villages. There are no boundaries between Sunday and the other days of the week with God-Christ and African women/people. They have hope in the midst of despair, poverty they live on every day, with the hope that the

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8 The space of birth in the amaXhosa homes.

the God of the Magnificat is believed to be a living God who is doing a new thing, making a new world and a new humanity that will live with the justice and peace (Oduyoye 2011:116).

## 9. *ENDLELENI*: HOW DO WE GO FORWARD WITH THE GOD WHO MOVES IN-BETWEEN?

We mentioned earlier the issue of space, power, identity, and language. Allow us to elucidate the concept of *endleleni*. This word comes from the isiXhosa proverb:

*Amaqobokazana angalala endleleni yazini kunyembelekile. Amaqobokazana* means ‘young maidens’. They are called *amaqobokazana*, not because of their age, but because of the importance of the mission they are embarking on (Penxa-Matholeni 2022b:3-4).

The proposed metaphor of *endleleni* expresses the notion, not of place that brings us to the end, but one that invites all fellow travellers (Penxa-Matholeni 2020; 2021; 2022b). This liminal space brings people, even strangers, together. This brings us all into the circle and into the space that belongs to no one. The *endleleni* metaphor calls for continuous change and reposturing. This metaphor means that no one holds the power; we are all strangers and vulnerable *endleleni*. We have not arrived yet! We are a community that keeps changing, that keeps meeting strangers. Therefore, home is not home and our position changes from being in control, or having power, to giving power away. *Endleleni*, life is an experience of becoming whole through ongoing learning and healing. Franks and Meteyard (2007:216) sum this up:

A sense of displacement, that sense of being in no man’s land, where the landscape appears completely different, there is no discernible road map, and where the journeyer is jolted out of normalcy.

This is where communality thrives; but it is now in displacement, in a danger zone, where liminality represents a highly creative space, forging new forms of living and possible new relations (Cilliers 2016). In this context, this space will be the space of repentance and reconciliation with each other at all levels, including race, ethnicity, gender, class, and disability, as well as Mother Earth.

The *endleleni* metaphor holds in-between spaces of paradox, as Cilliers calls it. It is both a dangerous space and a safety space. In terms of the former, dangers can arise any moment, from anywhere, and from any direction. The fact that there is no discernible road map to reach one’s destination puts the community in a vulnerable space. In terms of the latter, it is safe in that this is a

community of people with whom we can see ourselves. As an individual, I am also fully human, because I am this community – I am not in it, I am it. This is the origin of safety and comfort. I see my God in yours, and you see your God in mine. Therefore, together we embody the Spirit of God. This is probably where we can start to reclaim and build the bruised relationships *endleleni*, by forging the new routes that do not dehumanise others; new routes that make all of us guests; no one is the host; we are all hosted by and in *endleleni*.

## 10. CONCLUSIONS

This article reflected and reflection is just that, a reflection. As Cilliers (2022:41) puts it:

Reflection reflects the 'real reality', but indeed a reflection, nothing more, and nothing less. Reflection is, a view, an insight, offered to us. A reflection cannot reflect nothing. Nothing is nothing; not capable of being reflected.

This article called us to a certain type of reflection that is not outside of either of us, but within. This kind of reflection is challenging because it calls on us to dig deep within, in order to point out our own limitations as an institution that was in the advantaged position pre-1994. We had to open our wounds caused by the position of our institution. As a result, we had to reposition ourselves both as perpetrators and as victims of the urine incident.

This reflection took us to the issue of prejudiced spaces in the history of South Africa. We had to reflect on the implications of the incident to the perpetrator and his community and to the "victim" and his community. Furthermore, the language was briefly reflected on a powerful tool to either deconstruct or uphold social injustices.

The amaXhosa metaphor of *umntu ngumntu ngabantu* was used as a framework that can assess and build each other. The *endleleni* metaphor, as a framework and as liminal space, was used to pave the way forward as SU community. "*Forward together, Saam voorentoe, Kunye siya phambili*" (SU slogan).

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*Trefwoorde*

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*Umntu*

Image of God

Beeld van God