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Ndabethwa lilitye: Assumption, translation and culture in the testimony of one person before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Assumption, translation and culture in the testimony of one person before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The second week of the first round of hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission took place in Cape Town. On 2 April 1996 four

mothers testified that Security Forces killed their sons during an incident that became known as the Gugulethu Seven. One of them was Mrs Notrose Nobomvu Konile. Of the four mothers she testified last and presented a testimony that seemed largely incoherent with very little detail about her son. Using the original Xhosa testimony the authors try to understand Mrs Konile. This essay focuses exclusively on her description of what the authors refer to as the "rock-incident". The essay uses the original narrative with its embedded cultural contexts as well as a new translation to trace some of the different stages and places where incomprehension had been created. **Key words:** Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), translation and interpretation, oral narrative, Gugulethu Seven, strangeness.

Introduction

A black woman lifts her hand to take the oath before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The date is 2 April 1996. She testifies about the death of her son, Zabonke. Large parts of her testimony interpreted in English are incoherent. Later, on the website of the TRC, there will be no trace of her name in the index. Under the heading of the Gugulethu Seven incident, her surname will be given incorrectly as "Khonele".¹ Of all the Gugulethu Seven mothers, she appears without a first name. The name of the woman, who testifies, is Notrose Nobomvu Konile. But even in her official identity document her second name is given incorrectly as Nobovu. Is it possible to understand this un-mentioned, incorrectly ID-ed, misspelt and incoherently translated woman?

The Gugulethu Seven Incident

In the middle of the 1980s, seven men had been lured by askaris – guerrillas who secretly changed loyalties and spied for the South African Police Force – to receive

military training inside the country in order to join Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC). Early on the morning of 3 March 1986 the security police ambushed and killed all seven men during their first mission. Eyewitnesses from a nearby hostel saw how some of the young men came out of the bushes with their hands in the air. Russian hand grenades and guns were placed on their dead bodies before a television news crew of the state broadcaster, the SABC, was called to document the killing of “terrorists” (TRC Report 1998b: 451). This incident became known as the Gugulethu Seven.

One of these young men was Zabonke Konile. During the very first TRC hearings held in Cape Town, his mother testified with three other mothers, Cynthia Ngewu, Irene Mtsingwa and Eunice Thembiso Miya. The TRC could not trace the families of Themba Mlifi and Zenneth Mjobo. Of all the mothers, Mrs Konile testified last.

To begin at the beginning

In this essay we look at one single paragraph in the testimony of one person who testified before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1996–1998.

We hope that firstly, our contribution will caution against any conclusion that does not take into account translation aspects, as well as transcultural and philosophical knowledge and contexts.

Secondly, we try to re-constitute the sensibility of one witness, Mrs Konile. It is easy to misrepresent her and other people’s testimonies in a way that perpetuate cultural and racial stereotypes of black rural woman in South Africa.

Thirdly, we hope to show how using indigenous knowledge can sometimes bring one to a completely different, or sometimes even opposite, conclusion to one arrived at via more usual channels.

Fourthly, we want to underscore the importance of the original version of testimonies. We are pleading that all the original versions of the South African TRC should be transcribed. Currently researchers can only rely on the official English translation on the TRC website. By having the original version available, testimonies could contribute not only to intercultural knowledge, but also to finding more appropriate routes to understand typical and a-typical testimonies.

Lastly, we regard our study of this testimony as a small contribution to the “restoration of human and civil dignity of victims of gross human rights violations” as stipulated by the TRC legislation (TRC Report 1998a: 128). To ignore the oral narratives that had been created and delivered at a very high emotional price is, for us, a perpetuation of the former neglect victims had been exposed to.

Methodology

The methodological considerations in this project have been as important as our analyses. The project began with us coming together to discuss the official version of Mrs Konile's testimony which, like all the other testimonies, is to be found on the TRC website. For this essay we concentrated on the following paragraph:

After that I was so miserable. I had nowhere to go, I wanted that house, that shack, it was very difficult. Something told me to go and pick up coals, it was on a Thursday. I was knocked down by a rock, and this big rock hit me on my waist. I tried to move so that I can get some air, it was at eleven at that time, but they could only get me out of that rock around 5 pm. When I woke up, I felt like I was just getting out of bed. And there was a continuous cry that I could hear. It felt like I was going down – down – down. When I looked, I was wet – wet – wet – I was wet all over the place. I asked for water, they said no we don't have water. I said – I was talking to one of the women who was with me. I said please – please urinate on a plate so that I can drink, she did and I – then regained consciousness, I woke up. When I was awake they put me into a van and I was taken to hospital. The doctors said to me I must just go away, I must go back under those rocks where I was before, I am no-one – I am nothing, what is ANC, what is ANC. (TRC Official Transcripts)

We arrived at a shared conclusion that Mrs Konile's testimony was largely incoherent. This paragraph in particular was strange and hard to comprehend. Among the possible explanations were bad interpretation and/or an unintelligible witness, which in turn begged another question: was Mrs Konile unintelligible because she was unintelligent and/or traumatized, or because she simply did not understand what was happening to and around her? Antjie Krog presented a reading to the group of how she could not "hear" Mrs Konile and indicated some of the problems she encountered when analysing the testimony.

The research group then decided to order a copy of the original Xhosa version from the South African National Archives. We used our different disciplinary, linguistic, racial, geographic and cultural backgrounds to gradually devise a way to "hear" Mrs Konile. Nosisi Mpolweni-Zantsi transcribed Mrs Konile's Xhosa testimony, making it one of the few Xhosa testimonies to be transcribed in full. Together with Kopano Ratele she re-translated the testimony into English. It soon became evident that incomprehension had been created at different stages of the process towards an official version. There were ordinary interpretation mistakes, transcription mistakes as well as a third category that we called cultural transferral mistakes – in other words cultural codes and references that did not survive the interpretation process. The process we engaged in was rather like an archaeological excavation – every weekly session unearthed a new reality closer and closer to a multifaceted and complex original.

An example

Mrs Konile's official version on the TRC website starts as follows: "I am Ms Khonele (sic) from [*indistinct*] I have three children [...] etc". What word was indicated by "*indistinct*"? The TRC hearing was held in Cape Town, the Gugulethu incident happened in Cape Town, all the other mothers who testified, lived in Cape Town, Mrs Konile herself mentioned Cape Town repeatedly in her testimony, so we assumed that she was also from Cape Town. We assumed that the "*indistinct*" word(s) was Cape Town.

But the rock incident was incomprehensible within a Cape Town context. There was no coal digging activity in and around the city. Was she referring to picking up coal in a coal yard? But where would a rock come from that could pin her down for five hours?

When we listened to the original Xhosa on the cassette, Nosisi Zantsi picked up that Mrs Konile was pronouncing the Xhosa for "mortuary" and "comrade" in a way that was peculiar to rural Transkei. We returned to the beginning of the testimony. The word "Indwe" was then recognized. Mrs Konile obviously said: "I am Mrs Konile from Indwe. I have three children [...]". It was correctly interpreted, but the TRC transcriber, perhaps not being familiar with this small hamlet near Queenstown, could not distinguish the word.

The discovery of the word Indwe was an example of how a transcription mistake in the English version could be detected through pronunciation peculiarities in the original sound text. The revelation of a rural Eastern Cape context radically changed the whole way in which we listened to and approached our analysis of the testimony.

In preparing this essay the authors took responsibility for writing separate sections. We report our readings as individual responses to our interactions with the text and its contexts: Antjie Krog wrote "Reading the official TRC transcript", Nosisi Mpolweni-Zantsi contributed the section on "Translations and culture" and Kopano Ratele discussed the final section on "Psycho-cultural rupturings". Each author reached a set of sub-conclusions in his or her section and all three authors contributed to the overarching conclusion to the article.

Reading the official TRC transcript

I now had knowledge that much of what was previously incoherent about Mrs Konile's testimony, could be explained through the material fact that she lived in Indwe. This allowed me to explore her testimony in other ways than merely focusing on what I perceived as inconsistencies and incoherencies. My "new" knowledge led me to a much freer exploration of the text which now was demanding its own ways of being comprehended. At the same time I felt that I could now go back to the official transcript (instead of our own new transcript) because it was completely sufficient for the kind of analysis that I intended to do.

Narrative structure

The task of the TRC's Human Rights Violation Committee dictated the form of victim narratives. The beginning of a testimony usually consisted of some biographical detail, leading to the middle part about the circumstances and content of the violation. After clarifications, the desire and/or needs of the victim would be established upon which the commissioner, chairing that specific evidence, would conclude the interaction.

Testifying last, Mrs Konile, found herself in a complex narrative situation. She had to deliver her own personal narrative within the framework of four other narratives: personal, communal, regional and national.

Firstly, her testimony had to give voice to her personal experience out there in Indwe as well as her deepest pain. One can assume that she had certain personal expectations of how and what she would present.

Secondly, her testimony formed part of those of the mothers of the Gugulethu Seven. One can assume that the other mothers expected from her that her testimony should fit in, verify and broaden theirs.

Thirdly, her narrative formed part of the Western Cape hearings on human rights violations. The Western Cape TRC office selected the Gugulethu Seven incident to form part of its very first hearings as emblematic of what happened in the region.

Fourthly, her narrative formed part of the bigger narrative "gathered" by the TRC in order to arrive at a national picture "as comprehensive as possible" of the wrongs of the past.

Mrs Konile was to form part of what Geoffrey Bennington (1990: 121) called the "narration at the centre of the nation: stories of national origins, myths of founding fathers, genealogies of heroes", all those things providing a country with a history, a boundary and a name. She was however not very successful in steering her story within this four tiered context. She tried to tell a personal story, but it seemed to get lost among nightmares, seeing goats, being pinned down by a rock and collapsing. She also tried to link herself to the other three mothers ("We were four mothers, then we were told to go to the mortuary."), but found it hard to produce a story fulfilling regional Western Cape and national expectations. In contrast to Mrs Miya, Mrs Konile produced no formulation of any meaningful relationship with her son nor did she project a sense of innocent victim versus brutal state. Not once did she recognize the purpose of the TRC, or mentioned the political significance of her son's death.

Characteristics of oral narrative

"Oral narrative," says Isabel Hofmeyr (1993: 106, 109) "is largely shaped by the prerogatives of oral memory and its need to create mnemonic systems" as core images to enable the narrator to fulfil his or her task. The mnemonic systems may include "a plot that is more episodic than climactic, [...] and the use of formulaic images through which story segments can easily be retrieved". In the four Gugulethu Seven narra-

tives presented to the TRC there were indeed obvious mnemonic or core moments that were narrated by more than one mother:

- last contact between son and mother (Ngewu, Miya, not Konile)
- hearing of the news of the death (all four talked about it)
- seeing the body of son on television (Ngewu, Miya, Mtsingwa, not Konile)
- identifying the body in the mortuary (Ngewu, Miya, Konile)
- funeral (all four talked about it)
- harassment and inquest (Ngewu, Miya, Mtsingwa, not Konile)

Mrs Konile missed out on three of the most important core moments: last contact between mother and son, seeing the incident on television and the inquest and further harassment by police. Not having had access to three powerful core moments must have influenced Mrs Konile's testimony in significant ways. With her rural background she must have been acutely aware that her own narration was in danger of not doing justice to her own and her group's experience. I want to argue that she used the rock to affirm the other mothers' stories, while simultaneously using it to strengthen and foreground the severity of her suffering.

Richard Wilson (2001: 50–51) reminds us that seemingly irrelevant information is often a key event upon which whole segments of narrative hang. "Sometimes they can seem quite bizarre and expressive of states of extreme psychological dissonance. They are the personalized symbols upon which the structure of the narrative hinges and emotional associations tend to pivot."

Mrs Konile matched the core elements of especially the testimony of Mrs Miya with the "seemingly irrelevant information" of the rock:

Mrs Miya	Mrs Konile
<i>saw son live</i>	<i>saw son dead</i>
<i>at station</i>	<i>at mortuary</i>
<i>his clothes</i>	<i>bleeding body</i>
<i>last words of son to her</i>	<i>last words of son to policeman</i>
<i>TV</i>	<i>rock</i>
<i>harassment</i>	<i>urine</i>

Between a rock and a hard place

The television news broadcast of the killing of these seven young men provided the main core moment of the Gugulethu Seven incident. In fact the SABC's news footage came to "brand" the Gugulethu Seven hearings and featured prominently in two documentaries about the Gugulethu Seven. (Francis Reid's *Long Night's Journey into Day* and Lindy Wilson's *The Gugulethu Seven*.)

The broadcast itself must have confronted Mmes Miya, Ngewu and Mtsingwa with a bizarre mix of horror and post-modern elements: sitting in front of a television

set seeing one's dead child used as a prop in a staged killing which was presented as "reality"; it was news, on television, had footage and was therefore "true". Many clues might have warned them that the whole incident had been staged, except that the young men, their sons, although used as props in a make-believe event, were really dead. Mrs Konile did not see the news broadcast, because she didn't own a television set; her poverty and isolation rendered her doubly deprived.

So how could she effectively bring her suffering in rural isolation across to this TRC audience? How could she explain her marginal television-less life in isolated Indwe? How could she convey that her life had become part of the margin itself? Hofmeyr (1993: 35) suggests that the fantastic resides at the centre of oral memory. I want to suggest that within the small space left to her by the other three testimonies, Mrs Konile had no choice but to resort to a technique of the fantastic in order to do justice to her part in this group testimony. She created her own core image. She used the rock of metaphor and fantasy to do justice to her very different experience, while, at the same time, strengthening the main narrative of the mothers.

While the other mothers could move around looking for their sons, she was pinned down by a rock. While they were catching trains, leaving at specific times such as 04:20 am, she was pinned down by a rock – specifically from 11 o'clock until four (translated by interpreter as five), she said. While the other mothers were attending an inquest where Afrikaans was a noise in their ears, she was hearing a continuous cry, lying under the rock. While they were safe and sound in their houses, she found herself drenched and so thirsty that she had to beg for urine to stay alive. While they were involved in commemorating their sons as political heroes, a doctor was taunting her: what is ANC? What is ANC after all?

By identifying the rock as a core image, opened up the metaphoric quality of this scene. The poetic rhythm and words captured her despair and loneliness like few other sequences in the broader Gugulethu narrative:

And there was a continuous cry that I could hear.
It felt like I was going down – down – down.
When I looked, I was wet – wet – wet – I was wet all over the place.
I asked for water, they said no we don't have water.
I said – [...] I said please – please urinate on a plate so that I can drink, [...]
I am no-one – I am nothing, what is ANC, what is ANC.

I am not suggesting that Mrs Konile was imagining these things or was making them up in a competitive spirit so that her listeners could "travel [her] imaginative and emotional landscape" (Coplan 1994: 205), but rather that she was clustering particular incidences together in order to form her own core moment in her own narrative of desperate isolation and poverty. Instead of the television moment, Mrs Konile put forward her life immobilized by a rock.

But was there really, physically a rock?

Even if there were places for elderly women to dig coal in Indwe, where would a boulder big enough to pin a person down, come from? But of course, that was the wrong question. Mrs Konile focused excessively on the rock as it became the expression of her state of “extreme psychological dissonance” (Wilson 2001: 50–51). The image of urine flowed directly from this. Urine comes from the orifices. The orifices were often regarded as the most marginal parts of the body – where outside and inside converged. According to Mary Douglas (2002: 149) anything oozing from these vulnerable points, blood, milk, urine, faeces, was transgressing the boundaries by making them messy and smelly. According to Freud, man was being socialized to be revolted by the ejections from other peoples’ bodies (Komrij 2006: 14). In several human rights violation hearings victims testified how warders and police often urinated or shat on detainees in order to humiliate and torture them. Begging to receive the rejected fluid of another body, Mrs Konile was saying: I’m so marginal, so rejected, devastated, give me urine to drink, let me make humiliation, devastation and torture part of myself. Let me internalize my completely degenerated life.

But one could also focus not so much on the fact that urine was asked, but on the thirst that was expressed. According to John and Jean Comaroff (1992: 82), thirst is sometimes a key signifier of affliction in black religious communities. It “connotes dissipation by means of very general images of physical depletion, images that imply an imbalance in relations between person and context”. To be thirsty means to be “desiccated by the disruption of the regular, fluid interchange between one’s being and the world”. Mrs Konile desperately wanted the connection between her and her world to resume its previous flow. She felt depleted and desiccated after her son’s death. No wonder she used the word “wet” six times in a row.

By creating her own core images that had absolutely nothing to do with the TRC’s core image of being-the-mother-of-the-hero, Mrs Konile especially and effectively undermined both the regional and the national frameworks imposed on her during the TRC hearing.

Conclusion

I could only have come to this reading after my co-researchers found the Xhosa testimony to be coherent and dignified with some slippages in the simultaneous interpretation and transcription. The place name “Indwe” removed all spatial incoherency and re-contextualised the narrative. With this barrier out of the way I could analyse the rock incident in terms of oral narration which revealed such evocative and poetic beauty that my initial misgivings changed to respect and empathy. The input from my colleagues via translation, indigenous cultural and psychological practices restored the coherency, sensibility and dignity of Mrs Konile. It was only after that had been done, that I could come to the awareness that her testimony was a narrative of exceptional power.

Translations and culture

One cannot understand Mrs Konile's testimony without the context of her socio-cultural background. Aspects that helped my "reading" of her included Xhosa linguistic and paralinguistic information: repetition, direct speech, exclamations, crying, sighs, and pauses.

Socio-cultural background of Mrs Konile

Mrs Konile is a mother from a rural area called Indwe, a village situated near Queenstown. As a person who comes from the rural areas, she is closely connected to a traditional way of life. This was reflected right through the testimony. In the original version we learnt that Mrs Konile wanted her son to be buried at Indwe but the security police refused, because, according to them, he "had bombs". They resisted her request so fiercely that her son Zabonke was buried with the other members of the Gugulethu Seven in Cape Town. It is important to note that after she had told the TRC about the police's refusal of an Indwe burial, she used the following words: "Kwabe ke ngoku ndiyancama" (*I gave up.* Added emphasis.) This emphasises that not even a hero's burial with many comrades participating, was more important to her than that he should be buried in Indwe. "I gave up" happened not after her son's death, but after she learnt about his burial place.

Wanting to have her son buried at Indwe, has crucial cultural foundations. According to traditional Xhosa culture, it is important for one to be buried near one's ancestors. This is seen as a way of safeguarding the channel of communication between the deceased and the ancestors. The belief is that the ancestors will protect the deceased person. For Mrs Konile, this also meant that the bond between mother and child would be kept intact, because she could visit her son's grave. But more than that: her own bond with the ancestors would not be broken. Her unsuccessful attempts must have left her with a deep wound.

After the funeral Mrs Konile returned to Indwe. (This was not clearly indicated in the official version.) On her return, she found life very difficult. The loss of her son was compounded first by a disturbed relationship with the ancestors, and second, by the loss of her only financial support – even the house that he had left her was never given to her. According to Jansen (1987: 4), the misfortunes and complaints of women who were left behind as a result of death, war, migration or desertion seem to symbolise at once dislocation and poverty. Mrs Konile was no exception. The death of her husband, left her a widow – but with a son. The death of her son left her destitute. The burial of her son in a far away town left her without any recourse. Even access to a house became impossible. Her desperation is reflected in her halting words: "[...] andi-akukho cebo, ndiyayifuna la ndlu, ela bala. Ndadedisw' umva." ("[...] I – I don't – there's-no plan – and I want that house, that site. I was driven back.")

Only males in apartheid South Africa were entitled to own houses. This meant that the absence of her son had plunged her deeper into poverty. She exclaimed, "Eyi! Akusenzima! ("Eyi! It's hard!")

In the official TRC version this exclamation is missing. This omission toned down the severity of her plight. Her desperation became even more evident in her decision to go and dig for coals. One could say that she resorted to digging coal in order to sustain her sense of hope. This reminded me of a Xhosa folktale about an impoverished grandmother who was looking after grandchildren, keeping them happy by telling stories while they were sitting around the fire. Since there were times when they had nothing to eat, she managed to sustain life by keeping a pot of water on the fire. The children would stay filled with hope that food was coming as they saw steam coming from the pot. Gradually the children would fall asleep.

But in the case of Mrs Konile her attempts to sustain a sense of hope seemed to have failed, because instead of finding warmth she got hit by a rock and lost consciousness. At this point in her testimony Mrs Konile started to cry, but the official version did not reflect that she was no longer in control of her emotions. Her original Xhosa testimony followed by my translation runs as follows:

Ndabethwa loo mini, kwakungoLwesine. Ndabethwa lilitye, wabuy' umgod. Kancinci, okokuba mawungandigqumeleli. Wahlal' es' nqeni... Ndabethwa ngoleveni, ndakukhutshwa... ngo... fo. Ndathi mabandiph' amanzi, kwathw' akekhw' amanzi. Ndathi mna, "Tsho kweny' inkosikazi endikunye nayo apha nakula madoda, a – a –" Ndathi – ndathi kwamna, ndathi, "Chama ndisele, uchamel' epleytini le sikhupha ngay' amalahle." Ndasela, ndaqabu – ka (*walila cwaka okwethutyana, isingqala*).

I was hit by a rock on that day, it was a Thursday. I was hit by a rock, the rock fell on me. I was nearly buried by the rock. The rock landed on my waist... I was hit at eleven and was recovered at fo... ur. I asked for water, they said there's no water. I said, "Ask from one of the women who are with me and from the men out there." I said... I said, I said, "Urine in the plate that we use to dig coal so that I can drink." I drank, I recover... red (*pause, crying, deep breathing*).

The rock seemed to symbolise a visible illustration of her sense of pain and powerlessness to the extent that in order to crawl out of her misery, she had to drink urine to regain consciousness. In Xhosa culture in particular, urine is associated with healing.

In the original version, Mrs Konile gradually regained consciousness, but then heard a persistent cry, "Yho! Yho! Yho!" This cry seemed to symbolise her pleas for help. She also mentioned that she found herself soaking wet and this obviously shocked her, because she repeats it six times: "[...] ndathi ndawujonga, ndajonga, ndimanzi, ndimanzi, ndimanzi, ndimanzi, ndimanzi. Ndimanzi ndonke" ("[...] when I looked, I saw that I'm wet, I'm wet, I'm wet, I'm wet, I'm wet. I'm wet all over.")

The omission of quotation marks

After her recovery she was taken to hospital only to face a further challenge. In the official written version it seemed as if Mrs Konile herself asked in despair: "What is ANC? What is ANC?" It could also be an indication that she had regained consciousness. In the official version this information was also missing. But from the original Xhosa tape it became clear that the doctor, who turned her away, were told that her deceased son belonged to the ANC (perhaps in an attempt to convince him to treat her?) In response the doctor asked: "What is ANC (anyway)?: "Xa ndifik'esibhedlele ndagxothwa ngugqirha. Wath'ugqirha MANDIHAMBE, ndiye phants'kwamatye kulaa ndawo bendikuyo. Bendingengom-nto yanto kakade, 'yintoni iANC? Yinton' uANC?" ("When I arrived at the hospital I was chased away by the doctor. He said I should get OUT! OF! his SIGHT!, I should go back under the rocks where I was. I am nothing! 'What is ANC anyway, what is ANC?") The official transcription omitted to indicate that Mrs Konile in her retelling of her experience was quoting the doctor. The lack of secondary quotation marks made one assume that Mrs Konile didn't know what the ANC was. By adding the quotation marks the question is rendered differently: rather than a politically naïve utterance from a distressed woman, it is rendered as a question by a third party, the medical doctor.

This is an example of how incomprehension was created through several layers towards the official translation. Mrs Konile told the story. The interpreter translated it without indicating by either voice, or any other marker that the doctor spoke these words. The reader of the official transcript assumed that an ANC activist had a mother who didn't know what the ANC was.

Mrs Konile narrated the rejection of the doctor, his remarks about the liberation movement her son gave his life to, in an effort to tell the TRC about how terrifyingly vulnerable she had to live.

Conclusion

The coal story, the episode of the rock and the urine were real manifestations of her dire poverty, her sense of loss, helplessness and the state of despair that she found herself in. Since her son was her only source of support, the depth of her personal devastation seemed to know no end. And this was the biggest obstacle the official transcript presented: it effectively removed the extent of her poverty and its subsequent vulnerability from the narrative. In contrast to the other mothers, Mrs Konile suffered extreme circumstances of poverty and despair, but it could only be picked up in her rural references, the points in her testimony when she cried and her cultural remarks. Hardly any of it manifested in the official English translation. The omitted information impacted negatively on Mrs Konile's testimony. Instead of conveying her material impoverishment she was rendered incoherent. In coming to grips with the extent of this person's testimony we could not solely rely on the official translated version, but had to consult the original Xhosa version in order to arrive at informed conclusions.

Psycho-cultural rupturings

Unable to always follow her testimony with ease, I found myself asking, why could I not readily understand Mrs Konile? This question sat at the bottom of my engagement with her. In addition to *why*, I also asked *what* was it that I could not understand. What prevented me from readily apprehending her sense of things – her relationship with her son, the commissioners and audience, with herself? Was it because she was psychologically disturbed? The answer to that was negative; she did not seem to suffer from any recognizable psychopathology.

Mrs Konile was indeed an average woman of rural Xhosa background.

Badly concealed in my desire to effortlessly apprehend the testimony of Mrs Konile was a terrifying sense of misunderstanding, an incomprehension that terrorized one for what it suggested about a shared history of oppression, African culture and understanding itself. Provoked by her lack of being readily graspable, what could be retraced was what might be loosely called “a psycho-cultural rupturing”. This rupturing staged the tear between the multiple truths of Mrs Konile and the truths recorded by the TRC; indeed between the psyche of Mrs Konile and the psyche of a body commissioned to hear her truth.

The TRC acknowledged the problem of dichotomizing truth into objective and subjective, and instead opted to differentiate between four notions of truth – forensic, personal, dialogical and healing truths (TRC Report 1998a: 110–114). If one accepted these four notions, one would hear how Mrs Konile moved from the one to the other. For example, Mrs Konile said: “Ndabethwa ngoleveni, ndakukhutshwa... ngo... fo.” (“it was eleven at the time, but they could only get me out of the rock around 4 pm” This should remain forensically under suspicion until one knew whether any of the women around her during the rock incident had a watch. When it came to the other kinds of truth though, whether she was under the rock for about 6 hours was not the point really.

Entrancing confusion

Mrs Konile made the work of her audience and subsequent readers hard. Commissioner Boraine asked her to “tell us where you come from, where you’ve been, about your family before you tell us what happened in 1986?” In the official translation she responded:

I am Mrs Khonele (sic) from [*indistinct*] I have three children the fourth one who was shot, they are all daughters, they are all married. The one I was living with was my son, because I didn’t have a husband, he was the one who left us, he passed away quite early. I was living with my son, just the two of us.

Note how Mrs Konile connected her deceased spouse with her son. “The one I was living with was my son,” she said, “because I didn’t have a husband [...]” She was not

saying that she had children outside of marriage, but that her husband died a while ago and that she was a widow. Even with this little bit of biographical information Mrs Konile made it hard for us to follow her.

Let me insert a methodological point here. My one co-researcher seemed to have no major problems in “hearing” Mrs Konile. Her Xhosa cultural embedded-ness enabled her to access the way rural women talk. My other co-researcher, after some input from us, departed from what we could label “a white place” and seemed also not to have further problems “hearing” Mrs Konile.

In contrast to them, I had problems. For me there was both a familiarity and a stunning strangeness to her testimony. What did she mean “something told her to go and pick up coals”? Was that a common way of talking among rural people? Or did it indicate that within her world Mrs Konile oriented herself “irrationally” by perceiving (rather than rationally, by judging); her preferred mode of adapting being sensing and intuition (over her thinking and feeling)? (Jung 1971) Similar questions were likely to be provoked by “I woke up (under the rock), I felt like I was just getting out of bed.” It was inexplicable how getting out from under a rock could be like getting out of bed. How should we explain all the going down, the wetness, the continuous cry? To read Mrs Konile’s truth literally did not deliver much.

These sentences had a dreamlike quality, of magic and hallucination. Was it indeed about magic elements in real life, the fantastical used to render the everyday explicable, liveable? The rock was at once literal, metaphorical, and metonymic. It referred to and stood in for the burden of a reduced life and living without a son (and husband and daughters). It did not really matter that it did not make ready and immediate sense. It was one of the truths – Mrs Konile’s personal truth. She went digging for coal because of her impoverished circumstances, was felled and covered by a rock, then released.

How should one explain with the necessary force such a trite, yet painfully material fact of loneliness, poverty and suffering? This, it might be said, was another truth, where language became too common, and one needed to find other means of communicating.

Botho ke tiro: Living with the strange

One often assumes that the story by somebody who looks or speaks like oneself would be easier to understand than a story from somebody in a completely different culture. Although there are clear dangers to this assumption, it has serious grounds to exist. It owes its terrorizing undertone to our familiar history, including the historical racial-cultural positions found within the South African disciplinary inquiry. I suggest that history holds only a small part of “salvation” (Kritzman 1988: xi) and that culture on its own, too, does not imply understanding. We need to find other ways to examine the truth of testimonies. What ways could they be? Given our history, any attempt to

analyse the past or the present by anybody who values intercultural understanding, must assume that a subject from another cultural group is both familiar and strange.

Even more significantly though, I want to argue that even subjects from one's own cultural group are both familiar and strange.

Let us then re-approach the testimony of Mrs Konile. Let us seek in her story a personhood that was as habitual as it was estranged. It was precisely in how she went about telling us of her life in the curious way that she did, that the possibility of her psycho-cultural wholeness lay. It was out of her strangeness and ordinariness that we were able to re-suture her self-in-culture wholeness, as well as her Xhosa-ness.

To paraphrase what Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) said about Botswana, I went and found again how *botho ke tiro*: how personhood was fabrication in progress. To rephrase A. C. Jordan on *ubuntu* (in Sanders 2002), the task of the intellectual is to be an advocate for that which is strange. Strangeness is not such a terrifying thing. In spite, or because, of the difficulty of following Mrs Konile it was ultimately her elusiveness which achieved that point: that another person, regardless of her group or belonging, was always strange to some extent. Indeed, when looking at an "African self", an intra-African-ness strangeness need to be part of it. In the face of intransigent stereotypes fostering exclusivity, Africans need to re-accept that we have always been strange to one another. This should instruct us to be much more cautious about what we claim to know about each other, about what we say Africans are or are not, and what African culture is or is not.

Conclusion

One of the specific tasks of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to begin restoring the personal dignity of victims. In the light of how black people in South Africa and Africans in general were (are) treated and perceived before, during and after colonialism, this was in many ways an impossible task.

The African, says Achille Mbembe (2001: 3), stands for "a headless figure threatened with madness and quite innocent of any notion of center, hierarchy, or stability," and he/she is usually portrayed "as a vast dark cave where every benchmark and distinction come together in total confusion, and the rifts of a tragic and unhappy human history stand revealed: a mixture of the half-created and the incomplete, strange signs, convulsive movements – in short a bottomless abyss where everything is noise, yawning gap, and primordial chaos."

However difficult, a small step towards reconstituting the sensibility of Mrs Konile and the restoration of her dignity, was to allow her to testify in her mother tongue so that she could sound as dignified, articulate and wise as she inherently is. A second step was to interpret these mother tongues (and not leave them un-interpreted as mostly happen for example with *imbongis*), as if to say: we thought that what you had

to say was important. But true restoration could only really come about if the testimonies were “heard” and fully “understood”, also and especially those that fell outside the norm.

In order to avoid the accusation of Mbembe (2001: 7–8) that recent academic output had rendered sub-Saharan Africa into a “cloak of impenetrability” and a “black hole of reason”, it was important to deal precisely with those texts that seemed to beg these kind of descriptions. Mbembe says further: “Instead of patient, careful, in-depth research, there are off-the-cuff representations possessed and accumulated without anyone knowing how.” We suggest that it was important to deal extensively with the roots as well as the “ground” of TRC testimonies before submitting them to various theories. For example, one could have regarded the question “What is ANC? What is ANC?” as sufficient ground for a whole series of existential, alienation and/or liminality theories, while the presence of quotation marks would have rendered it into an ordinary sceptical and/or nasty remark.

We have to re-emphasise therefore the importance of our working and our writing method. We think it has radical and new implications regarding the study and presentation of TRC testimonies. We have specifically grouped ourselves together around particular knowledge and research skills that deal with the context in which Mrs Konile finds her: Eastern Cape, Xhosa, female, TRC. We did our own individual research, but immediately exposed it to the rest of the team. The effect, or non-effect, of this exposure also forms part of our essay. We are doing research, while at the same time we keep on deconstructing the so-called scientific basis of our research. Not to make a point about deconstruction, but rather to make the point how difficult and complex analysing texts from marginal communities are and how dangerous to draw conclusions based solely on theories from dominant cultures or studies done on first world testimonies.

It is not for nothing that *Multilingual Matters*, a market-leading publisher in the field of marginalised discourse communities, launched a new journal and puts forward the following reason: “if and when data from non-Western cultures are analysed, it is usually the Western paradigms that are employed, often without enough attention paid to local, particular contexts, including the concepts, concerns and intellectual traditions of those contexts.” (*Multilingual Matters*)

After the completion of this essay, we went to visit Mrs Konile at Indwe and in a subsequent essay we shall re-visit the rock-scene. We shall compare our theoretical conclusions, based on our theoretical knowledge and accumulated experience, with what we found on, or in the case of Mrs Konile, what we found “in” the ground.

The main consensus in this essay, however, was the importance of the audible original text. It meant that we could distinguish pronunciations, exclamations and other traces of high emotion. We could transcribe the Xhosa and contribute to a verification of the official translated text. All of this enabled us to analyse the official

text with greater sensitivity and a more accurate focus that was not caught up in incoherencies. Using a “clarified” version enabled us to arrive at a much clearer and more rounded “re-membering” and “hearing” of Mrs Konile.

Krog realised that it was only after the official version was “hallmarked” and “x-rayed” by the original Xhosa that she could start determining appropriate analytic processes, identified by Isabel Hofmeyr, to unlock what seemed to be an “unusual” and “irregular” testimony.

Mpolweni-Zantsi concluded that most of the cultural references linked to poverty and vulnerability did not successfully cross the interpretation bridge. The missing information deprived listeners and readers of the context necessary to access and comprehend the full sensibility of Mrs Konile.

Ratele’s conclusion had two phases: he had to verify whether Mrs Konile’s strangeness was authentically hers or was she “made strange” by the TRC’s framework, incompetent briefing and/or simultaneous interpretation. Only the original Xhosa version of the testimony could verify for him whether or not Mrs Konile was embodying the idea of Heidegger as quoted by Mbembe (2001: 187): “The colonized does not exist as a self; the colonized *is*. In the same way as a rock *is* – that is, as nothing more. And anyone who would make him/her express more finds nothing. The original Xhosa version established for him that, despite some slippages, her strangeness was entirely her own. Mrs Konile was coherent but strange. The second phase was to embrace the strangeness, because the self was a work in progress. Through Mrs Konile one can learn to advocate for that which is strange. By accommodating strangeness one contributes to the spaces, first opened up by the TRC, by articulating a nuanced South African-ness that speaks of tolerance and diversity.

Finally, we wanted to point out the importance of bringing to the fore marginalised or irregular testimonies delivered to the TRC. The reasons are manifold. Not least the fact that Mrs Konile expressed delight when, during our recent visit, we started quoting verbatim parts of the testimony she delivered ten years ago. “Am I really written down like that?” she asked.

Another reason is that these “strange” testimonies can teach us to refrain from “unstrange-ing” the strange, to allow it to be strange – but within its original logical and coherent context. Accommodation of their ‘strangeness’ would keep the spaces of tolerance open for many people emerging from contexts of conflict and estrangement.

It could also provide an opportunity for the ideas, techniques and issues from non-Western communities to become part of intercultural exchange and genuine scientific innovation.

Note

1. In this article we prefer the new Xhosa orthography “Gugulethu” to “Guguletu”, the official spelling of the township’s name, although in the case of Lindy Wilson’s documentary film, *The Guguletu Seven*, we have retained her original title.

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