

SOUTH AFRICA: A LAND OF CONTRASTS

OBSERVATIONS FROM A TOUR OF A TOWNSHIP IN KNYSNA

South Africa is a land of great contrast: between the mountains and the sea; between its history and its present; and between those who have, and those who have not. At times, these contrasts produce unspoilt beauty and majesty. Other times, these contrasts produce great suffering and poverty.

In April of this year, Sam, Nesha and I were chosen to represent UNSW in the 2012 International Pictet Competition held in South Africa. We planned our journey throughout South Africa with excitement, as we were to travel the country for two weeks after the competition finished. For most of our month long stay, we lodged in five star luxury. But we only had to lift our eyes above our hotel terraces, to see that the majority of the population lived in radically more basic circumstances.

In our last week we found ourselves in Knysna, a seaside town and popular tourist destination on the Western Cape. An opportunity to visit a township arose there. These are the shanty-towns that house the largely black population, with a history entangled with South Africa's colonial mining industry, and then institutionalised by Apartheid.¹

I was staying at a backpacker's lodge and it offered tours of the local township. Although Sam was busy with work, I managed to convince Nesha to come on the tour of the Township with me.

On the agreed morning, Jay, the owner of the lodge, picked us up in his 'Adventure Van'. He was a soft-spoken English expat, who had operated his lodge and tour business for many years. On his t-shirt was a marijuana leaf emblazoned with 'iPot'. He had a shaved head that was softened by his girth. He took us on-board with his patient manner of explanation.

We drove out of Knysna CBD, along the highway out. The country was that of rolling hillside and rivers, with rainforest flanking both sides of the road.

The outpost of the Township soon appeared. Single tin shacks stood roughly scabbled onto sloping bare patches. As we drove farther, they began to thicken, gathering in clumps, with an occasional dirt path connecting them. At the point that these shacks populated an entire hillside, Jay turned off in their direction, and into the Township proper.

From the paved smoothness of the highway, we drove into the dusty openness of the Township. We drove slowly, and threaded our way between the traffic of running children and men carrying tools and scraps of wood.

We stopped inside the yard of a mechanic. Jay greeted the mechanic, who started washing our van. As we got out, we spotted two other backpackers, led by another tour guide, whom Jay greeted. We then walked past the local hairdresser, which was inside a shipping container.

It was still morning and the air was still crisp when we first surveyed the Township. Shacks, huts and houses sprouted out of its green hills. Most were do-it-yourself affairs of scrap timber, brick, concrete, and corrugated iron roofs, built without regard to uniformity of colour or shape. The men that we saw carrying timber were performing some weekend renovations with materials foraged from the nearby forests.

“So, sewage is a problem in the area. You see that?” Jay said, pointing to an outhouse. “They dig a hole in the ground for the toilet, and when it gets filled, they simply move the whole shack to another place with a new hole underneath.” Jay pointed in another direction, at rows of small concrete houses arranged in a classic suburban grid with electricity lines feeding into them. “These are the government built houses.”

Part of the welfare policy of the new South Africa was to build as much public housing for the population that did not have permanent accommodation. The problem was that demand far outstripped supply, and some areas would receive construction before others. This turned the policy into a basic living necessity lottery.

For those that did not win in this lottery, they provided themselves with ‘informal housing’. Townships now mushroomed all over South Africa wherever it was economical to do so, which was near cities and towns. The government have some land reform policies to



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formalise ownership and title in these Townships² but they struggle to keep up with the reality that most black South Africans are still disadvantaged.

As we walked the hills of the Township, a few stray dogs followed us. Nesha made sure that Jay and I walked between her and the dogs. A local boy also followed us. Nesha was then beset with the constant urge to take photos of all the Township children around her. “They’re sooo cute!” she explained.

This boy was no older than thirteen, and was something of an apprentice tour guide to Jay. He wrestled with the boy intermittently, and

corrected his use of pronouns, whenever he talked about “her sisters” and “her school.”

Jay was going to take us to a local high school with our little guide. However, it was closed today, as it was Freedom Day, the annual holiday celebrating the birthday of new South Africa. In the era previous, the policy of Bantu Education gave the black population schooling insofar as it would equip them to serve the white population with manual labour, without teaching any subjects seen as practically useless, such as humanities, mathematics or the sciences. These schools were kept perennially underfunded and overcrowded.³

In the new South Africa, education had been reformed to be non-discriminatory, with more funding⁴ Nutrition programs were included as part of their curriculum. As a result, most of the children of the Township attended school. If they didn't have a government bus for transport, many would walk the distance.

Instead of the local school, our little guide took us inside a local grocery store. It was a larger hut, with reinforced roof and walls. It was no bigger than a living room of a typical Australian house. On its wooden shelves were lined various necessities, such as maize, tobacco, and shampoo. With the prompting of Jay, our little guide took down a bag of maize to show us, and explained what meals could be made from it.

There was a scattering of small businesses like this in the township. Economic opportunity was not amiss. It had even attracted the first Chinese family to emigrate over 12, 000 km to open a larger grocery store on another hill in the Township.⁵

We left the store with our little guide, and drove further into the Township. We saw the various signs of flourishing on the houses: proudly paved driveways with parked cars still shiny with newness, and small satellite dishes modestly blooming from concrete rooftops. Jay pointed out that many of those shiny new cars belonged to teachers, who were well

respected members of the community. To my surprise, we even saw some McMansions, constructed in the timeless suburban style, standing among its more humble neighbours.

Our next stop was the Knysna Rastafarian Village, a little outpost of Reggae, Bob Marley, and World Peace. It now numbered over 140 members, and was the largest community in South Africa. Jay told us that the level of crime was lower in the area, and that they operated a local childcare centre.

We drove up to a wooden draw gate. Behind it waited a small and wiry black man. In one hand he carried a Rastafarian Rainbow flag, and in his other a long and dirty white sack. Jay motioned to Nesha and I to approach him. He was hunched, and looked earnestly at the ground. “Welcome to the Kingdom of Rasta, my Brudda, my Sistah. My name is Brudda Zebs, and I am most honoured to have met you today”, he said. He raised his eyes, and then fist towards us. We bumped it, reverently.

“You will see, that I am a RASTA. And I have been one for a long time now, yeah. As you can see, we are a peace loving peoples, and we wish to UNITE for World Peace, as led by our eternal emperor, HAILE SELASSIE”, said the Good Brother, with a preacher's emphasis.

“And as a proud Rasta man, we follow the ways of PEACE. We are vegetarian, for we do not believe in the killing and war.” Brother Zebs had not moved a step, and we stood listening intently to his gospel. “And as a proud Rasta, I wear the colours of Rasta” he said, pointing to his beanie, which was knitted with the colours of the rainbow. And I also grow my hair as Rasta.” With a flourish, Brother Zebs pulled down on the white sack he was holding. Thick, long black dreadlocks matted and twisted like many strands of canvas rope cascaded from the sack to his feet. My eyes widened. The dreadlocks were at least a metre and a half in length.

Beside the Brother was a concrete mural, painted with scenes of Rastafarian history and

theology. We walked alongside as he outlined the significant events. All the scenes were rendered as a watercolour analogy of the stained glass found in a church. Brother Zebs stopped before a picture of a single cannabis leaf. Beneath it was a quotation from Genesis that justified the use of the plant. “And this is the seed of PEACE, called the cannabis. It is to be placed here on earth to relieve our troubles, to talk the high and mighty, and to solve WORLD HUNGER.”


As Nesha and I nodded along to Brother Zebs, a Rasta teen roller-skated past us with long, slow motion strides. His dreadlocks had already grown to shoulder length. This prompted Nesha to ask Brother Zebs when the children of the community would partake in the Rastafarian Rituals. He looked at the ground, mumbled, and told us it was “for the parents to decide”.

Brother Zebs then took us to their administration office. Inside he proudly showed us the tourism awards that the Rastafarian community had won, and also articles showing the local environmental work the community did. The Rastafarians were experts in clearing out foreign vegetation from the local bush.

“You see, there weren’t very many Bruddas and Sistahs, and we were spread out. It was sometimes hard to keep our way of life. So we decided to UNITE. We decided to become a group. And so we applied to the Council, and we got permission. So we became the FIRST Rasta community in the world”. This point seemed to be confirmed when I saw a news clipping reporting the recent visit of Bob Marley’s daughter to the village.

Beside this office stood the community Tabernacle. It was a hexagonal chapel with an open fireplace next to it. We were not allowed to step inside this chapel, and could only peek inside, at the chairs and speaking platform. Nesha was allowed to take a picture.

Brother Zebs pointed at the fireplace, where music was played, through the drums, and also where the communal imbibing of the seed was

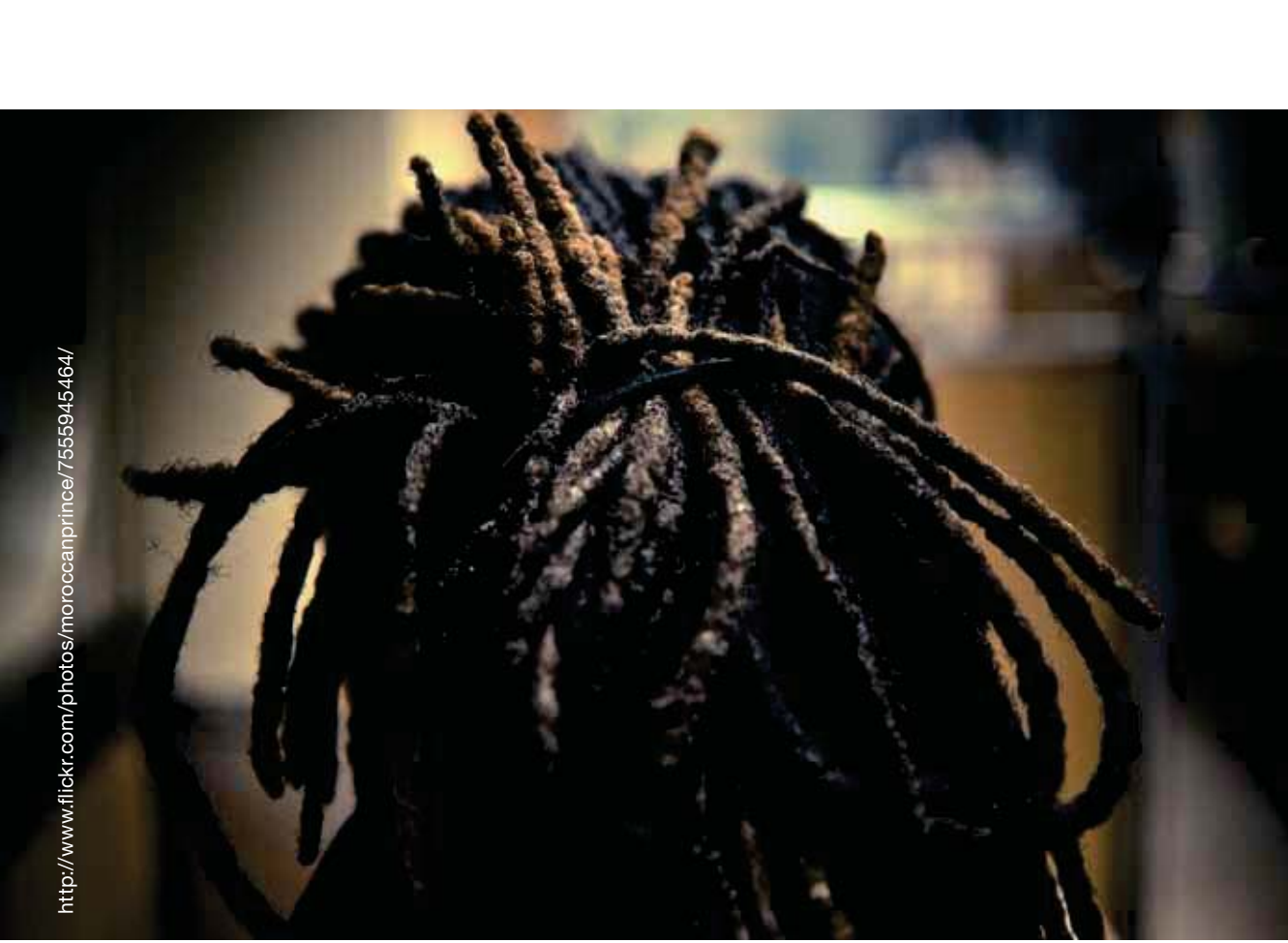


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performed. Apparently, the local police did not mind such activities, so long as consumption was not excessive, and the plants were not grown in plain view.

Our tour was almost over. Brother Zebs took us to one last location: the Rastafarian gift shop. It was a small market stall, wooden and rickety, lined with the handcrafts of the community. Out of politeness, I purchased a pair of bongo drum key rings. A visitor’s comments book was produced. I thought for a moment, and could only decide to write that the whole experience was all “too interesting!”

Nesha and I walked back to Jay, who was waiting beside the Adventure Van. “Interesting, yeah?” he asked. “More questions than answers”, replied Nesha. “Ah yeah. You’ll notice too that Brother Zebs actually has native facial features. He’s descended from the native Sami tribes that have lived in this area before Apartheid, and before



colonisation”, Jay added. “And you know, now after Apartheid, they’re the worst off. Now instead of whites being at the top, it’s the blacks that are in political power. The whites are second, cause they’re still needed to run the country, and the infrastructure. So that’s where all the jobs and opportunities go. The actual natives of the land are still left out at the bottom.” “Politics. Its crazy”, concluded Jay.

Reaching noon, we headed to our last destination. It was a local nightclub, and was perched on another hill. It had claimed a spectacular view of Knysna lagoon. We could see the CBD spread below like a patchwork quilt. The nightclub was divided into two levels. The lower floor was mostly for the blue-collar workers. The top floor, which could be accessed through a cover charge, were the white-collar workers, who were mostly better educated. Separation made social and business sense.

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We went upstairs, and sat at the balcony that afforded us the best view. The club was empty at this time, and so we could only imagine its lively atmosphere. Jay grew expansive. “Yeah, so this was near where I stayed for six months, when I decided to live in the Township. So I found a house with a great view, and talked to the lady that owned it, to rent it to me.”

“Why did you want to live here?” I asked. I had wondered what Jay’s story was. “Well, I wanted to get away from it all, you know. I had just lost a lot of money from my business. Just before that, everything had been going really well in tourism, back in ‘05, ‘06. There was a boom, and I was doing adventure tours and I made a lot of money. I was driving around in a Mercedes, and a BMW. Then it slowed down, and I lost everything. Had to sell off my cars. Decided then to move here.”

“And how did you find it?” asked Nesha. “Difficult. I soon found out that I missed a lot of creature comforts we take for granted: heating and insulation, for example. The houses here are hand built, not to any standards. So when I was sleeping at night, I could feel the wind blowing through the gaps in the walls and it brought the chill right inside. There wasn’t any hot water either. That made me come appreciate all the very basic things in life, you know. You slow down. I hung around the Township a lot. Got to know a lot of the people who went to this nightclub.”

“In fact, there was one night when I was hanging out on the lower floor, that one of the regulars came up to me asking for a cigarette. Now around here, it’s no big deal to give someone just one, cause you might need one too one day. But, this guy, he kept asking me for more cigarettes. By the third or fourth time, I refused. Right there and then, the guy got angry and spat on me. So right there and then, I had to make a decision. Either I had to stand up for myself, or back down. I could feel that the whole room was watching.”

“So I decided to punch him. I had to do something. I thought that I was going to be knocked



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out, or kicked out. But in the end everyone came to my side. They threw him out of the club that night, cause they had seen what had been going on. “So you know, people here, they make up their own minds about things. It’s not what you always expect.” Listening to his story, I could agree with the last point.

“But you learn a lot of other things too, when you’re around here long enough. Like it’s sometimes quite difficult to run a business here. When I rented the house, I also made an agreement with the owner that she would do some housekeeping for me. The first few weeks it worked out, but after that she kept on asking for time off, and demanding more money. I couldn’t see the point of paying more, so I stopped dealing with her, and also renting from her.”

“And it’s even worse with the men. A lot of them don’t work at all. Almost half of the men you see here are unemployed.⁶ It’s in their culture, when they back with their tribes. The men sit around doing nothing, whilst the women do all the housework and chores. So at the backpacker’s, a lot of the people I hire are from other parts of Africa.”

As we sat there, Nesha and I noticed that the view was probably one of the best in Knysna, almost better than anything from inside the ‘white’ part of the town. Jay followed our gaze. “Yeah, it’s a great view here. In fact it’s my dream to build a backpacker’s here, with this kind of view. I’d set up some volunteering activities for the community, traditional dance nights, cultural tours. But I’ll have to buy this place off the owner who’s a bit difficult to deal with. He’s all smiles one day, and abusive the next. It’s making people leave this place for another nightclub”.

Jay’s stories kept us so engrossed that we didn’t notice that it was afternoon. Glancing at his watch, he remembered he had to pick up some other guests who had gone canoeing around the rivers that fed the lagoon. As we left, he offered to take Nesha and I to Knysna Heads, a mandatory scenic spot for all that pass through.

After picking up the guests, we parked and climbed up a narrow passage through bush that took us to the spot hundreds of meters above the ocean. When the view appeared, our eyes were seized by the sudden majesty of the formation below us. Two sandstone monoliths stood guarding the lagoon from the sea, allowing only a narrow passage of raging eddies that folded into the lagoon. All were silent before this sight, where the water met the hills, the forest and the river. We stood there grasping onto the rails, looking over Knysna, and its people, pondering over its contradictions and its potential.

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- 5 Later that day I made first contact with this family. I was the first visitor to their store to speak mandarin with them, since they had settled two years ago.
- 6 24.9% of South Africans are unemployed. Statistics South Africa, *Latest Key Indicators* (2012) StatsOnline, <http://www.statssa.gov.za/keyindicators/keyindicators.asp> at 4 August 2012