

Portrait of Emlanjeni (Excerpt)

By Tsitsi Nomsa Ngwenya

To reach Emlanjeni village, a community whose history is deeply archived in its sturdy deeds, harvests and echoes of song and the spoken word, one has to plan a three-hour drive from Ematojeni, about twenty kilometres south of Bulawayo. Ematojeni Hills of the famous Njelele Shrine and Matopos National Park, a national heritage site, are on the village's north. You drive on a strip road, curving, turning and meandering around huge rock boulders, past the balancing rocks on the left, till you cross a narrow bridge on Hove River. That is the bridge which causes bus drivers to forbid women and children from occupying the front seats. As the bus descends on the bridge on their maiden trips to Bulawayo, koNtuthuziyathunqa, these fearful passengers let out shrieks which sometimes cause the driver to lose control of the steering wheel. On the eastern side of the road, on huge rock boulders, still lie the remains of Cecil John Rhodes, uMlalankunzi. After the park, the road narrows all the way to Khezi, a small business centre with a court and shops dotted on either side of the road.

The place is dry. One can smell its dryness. Bushes of acacia trees dot the environment. The surface is littered with little, whitish, dusty stones. The whole surrounding area, all the way to Mwewu River, is mostly gullied and just dry, giving the impression of being frequently cleaned by nature's maids. From there the road widens past Maphisa Growth Point, past Bhalagwe Hill, and past the mine dump at the bottom of the hill. Emlanjeni inhabitants and many other travellers look at the Bhalagwe Mine dump and hill with sorrowful eyes. Tears rising to the surface, they remember their children whose bones still lie tied in the big plastic bags they died in, uncollected. Some of the bodies were dismembered. While some of the children were suffocated to death, some were burnt alive, tied in those airless bags. Their voices are heard only in the villagers' hearts like silent drumbeats, echoing disturbing

sounds, crying for their release and freedom. It is about two decades since the atrocities. The anguish of the inhabitants and the villainy of the perpetrators the atrocities linger on. The silent drumbeats echo from the mine dump, sifting their sounds past the leaves of the trees that are dotted around the mine dump, past the rocks, past the rivers and the vast sands in them into Emlanjeni inhabitants' hearts. Sorrow. Fear. Anger.

These feelings, the villagers do not show to strangers. They say nothing to them about the atrocities. When they travel with strangers in the buses or Malayitsha's vans, they look at Bhalagwe Hill, shake their heads, mumble something and shed a tear or two before they look at their hands or laps. The memory of it is always there even if most of the elders who witnessed it are gone. Memory has a way of being transferred from generation to generation, even without being written down. The hill itself looks tormented. It seems to be yearning for forgiveness, for relief, for freedom. Its folds contain too much dark history, a burden that a simple hill cannot carry alone. Yet sometimes it seems to be blaming the irresponsible, incurious, insensitive dump lying at its feet. Villagers talk about the matter in hushed tones or in their mental communion.

Emlanjeni village itself is about forty kilometres south west of the infamous Bhalagwe Hill. Mopane and acacia trees dominate the environment. If one cared to imagine the aerial view of two rivers bordering the village, Simphathe and Marabi, with Kwanike Hillocks on the south, the picture would be a breath-taking one, the kind you find framed in a museum. The sandy loam, some patches of black clay on some areas and red soils hold the ground together. Grass slowly dies of thirst after the February-March rains only to come back to liveliness during the October/November planting season.

If the young men and women of the village had not decided to go and work at eMakhitshini, eGoli, the village would have perished from incurable poverty. Rain is

sporadic here. Crops wilt and die of dehydration before ripening. Most people who worked in the industries in Bulawayo are back home after the factories either shut down or were run by people with no clue about what they were doing. The farming they came back to hardly sustains. The most common forms of transport are Malayitshas' vans, pulling trolleys loaded with groceries in Tshangana bags, bicycles, empty twenty-litre buckets and fencing wires, anything their customers give them to take to those taking care of their children and homesteads. Because of the conditions of the roads, Malayitshas use their own dust roads which run parallel to the main untarred road, branching to some villages far off. Emlanjeni village can be accessed from whichever direction one chooses. From Maphisa-Mphoeings Road, one can turn left after approximately five kilometres from St Joseph's Mission into the old Tribal Line road which separates two chiefdoms. Chief Mlotshwa's Emlanjeni village takes the right side.

Most young boys in Emlanjeni do not take school seriously. Also, the schools are far apart such that pupils walk long distances. Even if some, especially girls, want to pursue education, they fail to because idlers and school dropouts wait for them on their way from school. These girls are persuaded and forced into premature relationships which lead to unplanned pregnancies and hasty marriages. The young fathers then disappear to eGoli with the local Malayitshas. There, some, after failing to get employment, turn to crime. From time to time, villagers gather to bury these young men shot by South African police during cash-in-transit-heists. In some instances, villagers only know that their sons were criminals after their deaths. They die on top of bank notes, their blood staining the precious papers. Still, the young boys do not learn from these shameful deaths. The boys and younger men envy the stolen top-of-the-range cars and the cash which those criminals show off at the local township, especially during Christmas time and other public holidays.

These men, their characters miraculously revived the moment they come back to Emlanjeni, do not lose the sense of community responsibilities when they come back

home. They talk to elders with respect. They attend community events and participate in whatever work needs to be done. With other village men, they cut branches of trees to weave a field wall. They carry stones and mud to rebuild a village road, a dam or a community pre-school. They plough the fields and mend kraals and goat pens. Some are even pastors and prophets in their churches. Congregants believe what they preach, judging by the blessings they display. One such man, who went a step ahead to be the village philanthropist, shocked the village when he was shot dead by the South African police in a botched cash-in-transit heist. He sponsored football and other community-building activities such that those who believed anything had regarded him as a hard-working, humble servant of God. The ambitions of these boys and men are to build beautiful homesteads, own livestock and drive nice cars. Most Emlanjeni men never think of persuading their children to be educated no matter how much money they acquire. No; they do not prize education.

Malayitshas bring groceries in big Tshangana bags, blankets and any other items given to them to take home. Some mothers, upon receiving these parcels, forget their disappointment. Those whose daughters send a Malayitsha frequently are seen wearing beautiful *izishwehswe* dresses, berets and sneakers to village parties and other village meetings. A year or so later, Malayitshas will bring babies, as young as six months, as part of the parcels. These babies are named Amara, Kagiso, Booyens, any name the mothers and fathers find interesting. The grandmothers resume the responsibilities of motherhood again. From time to time, some Malayitshas also arrive on Saturday mornings, pulling trolleys with dead bodies underneath groceries. Some of the bodies are buried as soon as they arrive after enduring over twenty-four hours on the road.

Those are mostly bodies of people who die from a disease called "the disease." The villagers do not say its name. If one asks the cause of death, they are told the deceased had the "disease, *ubelomkhuhlane*." Most die before they are forty, because

of self-negligence. They ignore anti-viral drugs which, if taken regularly, preserve and prolong life. Those who are lucky to be brought home breathing go to queue for the medicines at the local mission-run hospitals where doctors are paid reasonable salaries to enable them to live as the doctors they are. The mothers of the sick become home-nurses, making sure their children eat healthy homegrown foods, not deep-fried meats and fat-dripping potato chips. They do not give them fizzy drinks but home-brewed *mahewu* made from the powder of rapoko and sorghum. Once the patients get better, Malayitshas come for them. Off they disappear, only to forget to take their medicines again. When they return, they too will be in trolleys underneath groceries. In some cases, grandparents look after children of their grandchildren, thereby making it impossible to discipline them. Children do as they like. They become *umhlambikazelusile*. Their mothers do not see this. Those who hear the messages from the children's guardians do not believe it.

South of Limpopo, eGoli, the mothers of those children wake up early, as early as four o'clock, to catch trains and sometimes two more taxis to clean the houses of white women and other educated immigrants, *emakhitshini*. They complain about this. They are much happier when cleaning white women's houses, not their fellow Zimbabweans'. They do not see it as their problem. No. They question why other black Zimbabweans have come to South Africa too and occupied big posts. Why they have bought houses in the former white suburbs. Most of the school dropouts live in Hilbrow, Berea and Jobert Park where they share accommodation with the Congolese, Zambians, Cameroonians, Nigerians and other African immigrants. Some live in Soweto, Alexandra Park and in informal settlements in shacks they call *imikhukhu*. Even if they are aware that xenophobia can strike them anytime, they still stay.

From October to February, it sometimes rains so much that Simphathe, Marabi, and Semukhwe River especially, overflow for days or even for weeks. When the sun comes out, it burns all the grass, and the July winds blow away all the finer particles

of dust from the sand till the grains that remain are so clean that one could pick them one by one. The glare of the sun on the sands affects the girls and their mothers who fetch water from the wells they dig on these vast sands on the riverbeds. Scooping, scooping and scooping sand with enamel plates till mounds of it appear dotted on the river beds, the women talk animatedly, laughing out loud. They share secrets. Some husbands reported their wives to their people about their shaved private parts, a practice that is still taboo to them. Some younger women, ignorant about such matters, wonder at that. They stop scooping water into their twenty-litre plastic containers, hold their tummies or their heads, their mouths agape. They exclaim: "I can never allow him to do that me; it is my body!" Older women justify that the men, pointing out that they are right because that hidden precious part was what the husbands paid cattle for, among other duties. Daughters-in-law also share village gossip: whose mother-in-law is always intruding, whose mother-in-law is a witch, laughing and exclaiming as they do so. Mothers-in-law also share their own gossip: whose daughter-in-law followed her husband eGoli leaving young children with a *geli*, whose wife fell pregnant when her husband had been away for four years, and so on.

During the Emlanjeni spring, when rivers go dry, cattle, donkeys, sheep and goats drink water from ponds along the river. When these also run out of water, villagers dig deeper wells in the riverbed and then collect water which they pour into huge basins for the livestock to drink from. Whose law does weather obey? Sometimes, the sun comes out with a rapture of joy. Cicadas sing when it is visible and Mopane leaves look freshly green. But when the sun withdraws into its cloudy shell, bullied by dark clouds, cicadas stop singing but remain stuck onto the Mopane trees. Young children celebrate the disappearance of the sun. With empty packets of sugar on their hands, they shake the trees with cicadas stuck on them till all cicadas fall to the ground. After picking these insects which are a delicacy to them, they quickly rush

home to roast them in frying pans before their mothers, grandmothers and guardians start preparing evening meals.

During the season of harvesting, scotch carts bulge with mealies, finger millet and sorghum. After all the grains are carried home, the scotch carts carry pumpkins, melons and watermelons to be kept nearer the homesteads. The donkeys pull these carts, sometimes at astonishing speeds when empty. The paths to the fields catch tufts of sorghum, maize, finger millet, rapoko and millet, mostly used for brewing beer, where the scotch carts has passed. Birds line these paths to perk on what corn has fallen to the ground. After harvesting, field gates are left open for cattle to feed on the stalks of the harvested crops. This lasts only a few weeks.

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In the afternoon, after harvesting was over, MaMoyo would sit in the shade talking to MaNcube her mother-in-law, supposing she was not at one of her beer binges. She would darn, darn and darn, her hands moving softly, slowly and carefully. She was so experienced in handwork since she had studied Home Economics before she got married. She also led the women's club in Emlanjeni village. The members of the club did a lot of handcraft. They competed with other women's clubs even at district level. There, they also learnt cooking, sewing, baking and knitting while singing village ditties. During their meetings, men did not want to pass by their club house, built of home-made brick moulded by the women themselves. The house was near the pre-school. There was a huge *umwawa* tree in front of this house. When it was too hot or raining, they sat in its shade. MaSikhosana, despite her age, was also a club member. She and two other women often started singing obscene songs which described sexual performances. Hloliphani Hadebe, MaMoyo's husband and a member of the chief's council, one afternoon whilst on leave, had thought of paying them a surprise visit. He heard a song and saw two women kneel down to dance. He heard two

women say they were going to imitate a mating lion and lioness. MaSikhosana was the lead vocalist:

Be in control, girl; be in control of your life!

Let them see what you have got

Helele ma... helele ma...

But do not let them touch.

Helele ma... helele ma...

Girl, beware,

Sexually aroused men

Can follow a woman

To the public toilet,

Behind a gigantic anthill,

Inside a goat pen,

Anywhere a woman suggests.

Helele ma... helele ma...

Once they ejaculate

Helele ma... helele ma

They forget the girl's name

Helele ma... helele ma

Other women answered, sewing, crocheting, knitting, nodding their heads in rhythm. On hearing that, Hadebe did not dare proceed. He walked backwards, face looking ahead till he could be hidden by a thick foliage. He never mentioned the attempted visit to his wife.

Everyone cycled in Emlanjeni village. Women as old as seventy cycled to church and other village gatherings. Younger women cycled to the baby clinics with babies strapped on their backs. Some experienced women cycled balancing beer calabashes

to village parties. Some cycled to churches, miles away. They were serious about attending these church services where they gave the love they could have been giving to their absent children and spouses. At the local St Joseph's secondary school, bicycles were balanced, piled on trees within the school premises. At the chief's court and anywhere where people gathered, except of course at the dip tank, where men drove their cattle on foot, there were bicycles.

Extracted from Tsitsi Nomsa Ngwenya's 2020 novel, Portrait of Emlanjeni