

PART 1

*"But the question still remains: 'Has the complete object been caught in the net?'
I would say, 'Decidedly not!'"*

(Suzuki, 1986)

The writer

It is customary in African culture not to start talking before introducing yourself. The custom goes deeper than this. This is how I found out.

I wanted to invite the *Inkosi* (Chief) to our science festival in Chibini. We had designed some formal invitations. 'No! You can't just send an invitation – just like that.' The principal, Mr Mkhize, remonstrated.

What to do? As often happened, I needed guidance. Mr Mkhize and I sought the intervention of the *Induna* (Headman). This required going into the valley to his homestead and waiting outside. It is bad form to hoot or call. So after a long wait the *Induna* came walking down the path. After lengthy discussions he took us to the *Inkosi's* kraal. We drove the only road: long and winding into the heart of the valley. This time on approaching my two companions called out loudly – salutations, praise songs and greetings. Eventually a young woman opened the gate and led us to the traditional round hut. We stepped into the cool dimness and sat silently. In some way we were being presented to the ancestors. Only then did we continue to the main house to wait for the *Inkosi*. Although we removed shoes, we did away with the old tradition of full prostrations. When the *Inkosi* entered I sat silently as the *Induna* introduced us at length: who we were, family names, place of origin, finally why we were here.

My name is Moyra (throughout this project I used only my first name – just one of the disjunctions between my culture and that of the rural community). I work at a University in Johannesburg and have lived in South Africa all my life. For many years I worked in Kwa-Zulu Natal with students and teachers, teaching science and in the holidays taking

students away into the wilderness. I also spent occasional time at the Buddhist Retreat Centre – right at the research site. (My supervisor at Wits laughed at the ‘co-incidence’ when I announced my research plans!) I am an English speaking (only) city dweller, mother, teacher and from a private school background. I have never carried water on my head nor been a pupil at a rural school.

Does it matter who I am? This is how I realised it does:

At an early meeting with the community at the school a staff member from a neighbouring property arrived to ‘make an announcement’. Without a greeting and without introducing himself he said: ‘Your goats are coming on to our property and eating the flowers. If this happens again the goats will be locked up and you will pay a fine to get them back.’ By now I was used to introductions, opening prayers, greetings. I heard myself thinking: ‘Who is this?’ (Even though I knew.) Well how does the meaning of his words change if he is a landowner, herd-boy, lunatic? It would have been helpful to know which of these he was! At one point a principal (in a possibly cynical-hostile moment) asked if I’d ever stayed in a rural village before. I was told it was time I spoke Zulu. Other mothers asked me about my son. Teachers who were studying asked me about my studies. A hitch-hiker drew me into a long discussion on theology and Buddhism! I missed out on many collegial suppers at KFC in Ixopo preferring to have soup at the Centre. Personal characteristics shape, limit and open up experiences.

It is also customary in rural South Africa to start with a prayer. Can I write a prayer into a research report? Or is the numinous purged in the sanitised clinic of the research academy? Well, here it is, the traditional opening prayer:

May all people in the rural areas, especially in Chibini and Ifafa have a better future, have enough to eat, gain in confidence, and have meaningful – wonderful learning experiences so that their knowledge and culture is a resource for all. May I become more of a person here.

Christianity and African religion is a strong aspect of rural life. African worldview is permeated by religious ideas, (Mbiti, 1969; Oladipo, 2002). This worldview divides life less into binaries: secular – sacred; pre-logical – logical; magical – scientific (Biakolo, 2002). Further, avoiding philosophical and religious questions ‘should be counted as positivism’ (Kruger, 1995). This avoidance fits neither with my interests nor my research paradigm.

Rural culture encourages a more holistic examination of phenomenon. My own philosophical inclination is suited to this orientation. Non-city life has always drawn me. Laurens van der Post (1982:67) explains-complains “We are the greatest civilisation of know-alls that has ever been created.”, and in this advancement we have lost some of our humanity. Again, in conversation with Jung, he said: “For all our pose of all-knowing, we ourselves had utterly lost the feeling of being known.” (van der Post, 1978:104).

The word ‘Ixopo’ derives from the onomatopoeic description of the cow’s hoof pulling out of the thick wet fertile mud. In the Ixopo valley I love the space, rolling hills, wild river places, pretty goats, open fires, slow pace and vast open sky. I would not love being cold, hungry, beaten at school and having least say as a girl. I would not enjoy chorus-style classrooms that lead to no jobs. I would like my work (our work) to make a difference to the students here, to help rural culture contribute its knowledge to the wider democratic and academic discourse. I do not know what this may be but it would have to have something to do with education and science. And, of course, I want to learn: What matters here? What other ways are there of understanding the world? What does this teach me about myself?

I am conscious of the Hountondji’s (2002) remonstrance against presenting another’s truth and interpreting their experience as well as expropriating knowledge (Mazrui, 2002; Osaghae, 2002). I have attempted to include other voices to mediate this. Ultimately, however, I create here a story of my view and my learning. It is one of a number of stories – but it has not been created in isolation. At times in the narrative I use the first person: some opinions, experiences and interactions are mine alone. At other times I use ‘we’ to acknowledge the participative aspects and that much of the activity involved others. This is not about a sample population: this is about my neighbours and me.

Figure 1 Moyra with secondary school students



Figure 2 Inkosi Ndolvu and Moyra

