

Nyanyadu in northern Natal is an old place, a pretty famous place in fact. The name of the place is taken from that of the enchanting Nyanyadu Mountain, nearby. If you are travelling to this place, either from Durban in the south or Johannesburg in the north, the best route to take is one that goes straight to the town of Dundee. In this town you would board the bus to Nyanyadu that goes once a day – on Sundays there is no bus at all. The bus leaves Dundee at lunchtime, zigzags through the white suburbs until it exits the town. Then you will see it blowing up the winds beside the legendary Mpathe Mountain which is believed to harbour money left by ghosts at its summit. It will keep on travelling, stopping only to let some passengers alight. Some would have come to Dundee by the buses from Zululand, others would have come by buses from Msinga. Many would have come to town by bus to do their grocery shopping and various errands. Now, everyone is on the way home. The bus keeps on picking some up along the way. It carries on until it reaches the black township of Longlands. When it leaves Longlands it is already on its way to its depot at Ngisana store.

When people alight temporarily at the store it is because they have to buy a few items that they forgot to buy in Dundee. Some get off to check on their mail at the local post office. Some do not enter the store at all. They hit the ground running, immediately they alight, to Devon, Lady Bank, the

nearby tents, some to the Wesleyan Mission and others down to Mzinyathi. For these people, travelling long distances on foot is nothing unpleasant or worth complaining about. Women simply put their luggage on their heads while men use their shoulders. Few are the lucky ones whose reception party consists of a horse and wagon. On some days, the bus goes beyond the store. It passes Lady Bank and Wills on its way to Stein's place, until it stops at the distant Flint's place. Things are much better than in days gone by – there is now a new bus from Hathinga to Nyanyadu.

Nevertheless, the story being told here happened a long time ago at Nyanyadu, long before the arrival of modern modes of travel, it happened in days when people were living miserable lives when it came to public transport. In those days, people's desperation would be most acute if someone was sick – it was virtually impossible to rush that person to a doctor. In those days, people going to Nyanyadu would alight at Dannhauser station, then take a bus owned by an Indian businessman to continue the trip. On getting off, their luggage either on their heads or shoulders, they would finish the last lap of their trip on foot.

Quite a few of the people preferred alighting at Glencoe and taking the Vryheid train that would drop them at Tayside. Tayside is a tiny, one-shop and basically barren station. It is from this station that people would usually proceed to Nyanyadu on foot, horse or donkey carts if they were lucky – some were even met by ox-wagons. Like the spoils of Christmas Day, a car was a rarity in those days.

In those days it was even difficult to collect mail. It was collected three times a week from Tayside. In the morning, outgoing mail would be taken away in the same mailbag that would bring incoming mail in the afternoon. If one had a postal order notice one needed to wait until the next mail day before collecting the cash. The mail days were Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Even telegrams were sent via the mailbag – there was no alternative method for sending them, no matter how urgent it was. Anyone whose letter could not

wait for the mailbag would go on foot, by bicycle or on horseback to Tayside. Life at Nyanyadu was really tough.

One Wednesday afternoon, Nyanyadu resident Mr Zeph Mkhwanazi received a letter in the mailbag from Tayside. It was summer, and most people were busy tilling the soil, often waking up at the crack of dawn, like birds, so that by sunrise they would already have covered a lot of ground. A prominent Nyanyadu resident, Mr Lushozi, was the one who received the mailbag in the area. Mail day was a big day. On this day, girls would dress up in their best clothes, do their hair and rub bath soap on their legs for an alluring shine. As for the boys, mail day was just another day, they would stay dusty and let their khaki shirts hang aimlessly. They usually arrived first at Lushozi's house, often before the mailbag had been brought.

On that day, as usual, by the time the mailbag came, young girls and boys were already milling around to collect the mail. Among them was a young college student, Themba Mkhwanazi, the oldest child of Mr Mkhwanazi and his wife maNtuli. He was almost 20, no longer so young really. Although he was not tall, his muscular build made up for it – he was clearly a well-fed young man. He even wore long trousers, as college boys often did in those days. His light complexion was attributable to his maternal genes. Themba had also come in search of his family's mail. Indeed, as soon as he found it he went straight home.

The Mkhwanazi home was modern, with a big lounge, four bedrooms, a kitchen and a dining room. A verandah on both sides of the house also helped enhance its beauty, although the windows were rather small for a house that size. Like most old houses of the time, the Mkhwanazi house had the obligatory pillars on the verandah. The red corrugated iron roof was rusty and leaking. Unlike most houses in Nyanyadu, which were essentially mud huts, this house had green-brick walls that would have only needed firing in a kiln to make them red. Numerous pictures hung on the walls and some had faded over time. These were mainly pictures of the

Mkhwanazi family and their relatives. One was of Mkhwanazi and maNtuli on their wedding day.

It wasn't surprising that the pictures were dusty, since no one bothered to clean them regularly. Nailed to the wall in the dining room, there were also pictures of factory workers in uniform. Nothing hung in the other rooms, except clothes in the bedrooms.

Outside one of the rooms was an old, dilapidated and useless water tank that had resisted all efforts to repair it. Consequently, they fetched water on their heads from the well on the hill above the house, using small drum containers. The house was painted, although the paint was wearing off in places. The Mkhwanazi house was undoubtedly among the finest in Nyanyadu.

The yard was big, and fenced. The fence was old, and crumbling here and there. At times – even if the fence was supposed to be standing – donkeys would simply encroach on the yard as they pleased. There were two gates, the small one at the front and the big one at the back used by carts and ox-wagons. Next to the house, outside the gate, was a cattle and sheep shed. There was also a wagon and tool shed for the head of the household. In the yard, there were countless chickens and a few black pigs. It was clear to all that the household was relatively well off, and headed by a strong man. The garden had two peach trees and a *hananadi* tree that chickens often used as shelter on hot sunny days. In one distant part of the garden there was a *halibhoma* plant.

Among the letters Themba had brought, one had a Pietermaritzburg stamp – it was for his father. When Mkhwanazi studied the envelope before opening the letter, he couldn't make out the handwriting at all. He tried hard to think of who the writer could be, but to no avail. He finally opened it to find out who had written to him from Pietermaritzburg, for he was not a regular traveller, and even Pietermaritzburg was not that familiar to him. The place he knew well was the Mzinyathi district. He would usually only go as far as Dannhauser and Dundee and even nearby

Newcastle was as Johannesburg to him, as he considered it very far away.

Mkhwanazi was without doubt a fully grown man and his beard in the fashion of Napoleon the Third, said as much. He was strongly built, though average in height. The coarseness of his hands was proof that this was a man who worked hard with his hands. He liked to wear a khaki shirt and trousers. The sleeves of the shirt were always rolled up because this was a hard-working man. He would put a leather belt around his waist. He would only wear a coat in bad weather, when he was going to church or to a meeting. When it came to footwear, he preferred boots for doing physically demanding work in the fields. He would usually wear his shoes without any socks, or put on old ones that exposed his toes. At times he would just hit the road barefoot, and hardly give a damn about it. Since he hardly ever shaved his beard, its scruffiness had become his trademark. He had a dark-skinned complexion.

Nyanyadu was his birthplace, where he had grown up and married a local girl from the Ntuli household, daughter of Mabhozomela. When he told his childhood stories, Mkhwanazi said that when he and other boys were looking after cattle in the fields, they often saw buffaloes grazing along the nearby Mzinyathi River. He said that in those days the grass was extremely high – to the point of making a 10-year-old boy walking in the dense grass forest virtually invisible. Today, the same place is barren. Now, huge *dongas* narrate the curse of soil erosion on these lands. These *dongas* resemble wrinkles on an elderly face, a beaten face. Soil is eroded from the walls like rotten meat when it shrinks from the bones. Then heavy rains come and wash it away. He went to school here at Nyanyadu, and since in those days schools went only as far as Standard Four, he stopped schooling at that point. Even though Standard Four was his highest class, he was regarded as a learned and civilised person. He could read isiZulu with impeccable ease, but battled with English. Mkhwanazi regarded himself as part of an educated elite and

felt threatened by those who had attained college education.

As he opened the letter, his eye hurried towards its end. When he read the name he frowned in disbelief, as he had never in his life heard of such a name and surname. The sender had signed himself as Mr C.C. Ndebenkulu. It amazed him to learn that there were people whose last name was Ndebenkulu, or 'the one endowed with long lips'. He couldn't quite work out the tribe or clan of the Ndebenkulu people. He decided to continue reading the letter.

*2 Blue Arcade  
High Street  
Pietermaritzburg.*

*Mr Zeph Mkhwanazi  
Nyanyadu School  
P O Tayside*

*Mr Mkhwanazi,  
Inasmuch as you do not know me Mr Mkhwanazi so it is the case with me, I do not know you either. Be that as it may, in the event you are an avid newspaper reader, you probably have read about me and the work I do to uplift my people. Here in the big cities there are just too many ways in which people get help, they are just too many to count. On the other hand, people in rural areas continue to live in abject poverty because no one in the big city has the interests of rural people at heart. It is precisely for this reason that I have seen it my duty to come to the rural areas and bring progress to people in these areas as they are after all the most needy and the most neglected.*

*In a conversation with an associate who knows your area pretty well I realised that I could not ignore his sincere appeal that the people of Nyanyadu would benefit tremendously from my benevolence. I had no option but to heed his call. He also gave me your name Mkhwanazi thanks to your intelligence and ability to see things much quicker than most people. I'm quoting his words almost verbatim, his direct words echo in my ears to this day. It is for this reason that I have written to you,*

*Mkhwanazi. My wish is to meet the men next Monday the 13<sup>th</sup>. Do pardon me for putting a fixed date already – hopefully you will understand that had my schedule been less taxing, I would have done things differently. The truth is that no other date would actually be convenient for me. My associate says the best route is to travel to Tayside where you will then receive me. Since there is no train to Vryheid on Sunday, I will catch a train at Pietermaritzburg on Friday evening and alight at Tayside on Saturday morning. I trust that you will manage to organise the meeting on my behalf and to also receive me at the station.*

*The undersigned,*

*C.C. Ndebenkulu, Esq.*

When Mkhwanazi had finished reading the letter he frowned in bewilderment and shouted, "Gracious me!" He then re-read the letter that was the cause of his confusion.

As Mkhwanazi had just come back from the *mielie* fields, his wife maNtuli entering the room, put a pot of sour milk on the table in front of him. MaNtuli was also getting old and her hair was gradually going grey. She was the eldest child of Mabhozomela Ntuli, who was also a resident of Nyanyadu. She was light-skinned and also slightly taller than average, like her husband. She was of normal build and pleasantly proportioned. She was a hard-working whirlwind of a person and barely sat down to rest. As for her temper! She could be a chilli-tempered little monster. At times, even Mkhwanazi was at the receiving end of her rage. Among maNtuli's children, Themba had inherited her temperament. However, when the weather of her mood was calm, maNtuli was chatty and lovable.

"What strange news is this you're telling me, father?" As maNtuli talked she simultaneously laid the table for her beloved husband. She had already taken out of the cupboard a tablecloth that was white in its heyday but was now a shad-

ow of its former self. It had a hole on one edge. She put it on the table and folded it twice to hide the embarrassing hole.

“I swear by the heavens, this is indeed strange!” said Mkhwanazi as if he had not heard maNtuli’s question. MaNtuli asked again: “What are you talking about, father, what strangeness?”

“This letter!”

“And where does this strange letter come from?”

“MaNtuli, have you ever heard of the name Ndebenkulu?”

“What name?” MaNtuli stopped what she was doing and looked at her husband with utter disbelief.

“Ndebenkulu?”

“Father, don’t joke like that,” said MaNtuli breaking into giggles, which she tried half-heartedly to hide. As she spoke she was preparing the table for her husband.

“Read here, if you think I’m taking you a for a ride.” He showed her the name at the bottom of the letter.

MaNtuli had not been educated that much either. When she reached Standard Four, Mabhozomela, her father, had sworn it was enough, for fear that an educated girl might become a promiscuous drifter, and so she and her husband were equals as regards their levels of education. “My God! I never realised that you were telling the truth, Nkwali!” MaNtuli, her hands on her waist, addressed her husband by his clan name.

“Do you believe me now?”

“I do, since I’ve read it for myself. Staying at home too much can make one ignorant of so many things. I’ve sometimes heard of unusual names for people from well-off places like Durban and Johannesburg. Maybe Ndebenkulu could even be a surname from the southern parts of the province. What, then, is this writing at the very end?”

“How am I supposed to know what this strange signature is?” said Mkhwanazi.

“But then, Nkwali, why would Ndebenkulu write to you as if he’s missing you, while you have never even heard of him?”

“Listen carefully, maNtuli. It’s not because Ndebenkulu

misses me. He’s just written to make the strangest request ever to plague my ears, a request I’m struggling to fathom. Kindly lend me your ears, Ntuli.” Mkhwanazi read the letter again, aloud this time, from beginning to end.

“*Hhayi*, don’t joke with me, *baba*, this man is talking woolly stuff. What kind of help does he want, that he’s so mysterious?”

“That’s precisely my gripe, *mama kaThemba*. Actually, I wonder about the identity of his purported friend, who has invited this man to Nyanyadu and even gave him my name as the local contact person. What’s more, whoever he is, he lacked the courtesy to write me a letter and forewarn me about this unknown friend he would be sending to me unannounced. Where the hell does that friend of his know me from? I don’t know anyone who lives in Pietermaritzburg!”

“You know what, *baba kaThemba*? I’m filled with so much pride,” said maNtuli tenderly, flashing her snow-white teeth.

“Really? You find this something to be proud of?” Mkhwanazi echoed her words, trying to make sense of them.

“True’s God, I’m so proud of you. Little did I realise, Nkwali, that you were such a famous person. You’re known even in Pietermaritzburg where you’ve never even set foot. So why shouldn’t I be as proud as a peacock?” maNtuli said with a laugh. “But look at me, now. I’ve been sidetracked by Ndebenkulu’s letter and forgotten the *mielie pap* and a wooden spoon. Hey, Thoko! Kindly bring your father’s *mielie pap* and a wooden spoon. While you’re at it, please also call Themba for me.”

As maNtuli said all this, she was shouting, trying to talk to Thoko who was not in the same room, but in the kitchen, and who now emerged with her father’s *mielie pap* and a wooden spoon. Thoko was a daughter of the Mkhwanazi household. She was born after Themba. The two are the Mkhwanazis’ only children.

Thoko shared her brother’s light complexion but, unlike Themba, did not have a muscular body, and unlike her brother, who was already attending college, she was still at school in Nyanyadu.