

**supporting communities  
affected by violence**

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# **supporting communities affected by violence**

**A Casebook from South Africa**

Craig Higson-Smith



**facing page:** A frightened survivor of communal violence in KwaZulu-Natal, 1994

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**Front cover photograph:** Members of the Imbali Peace Committee, KwaZulu-Natal, 1995  
(Natal Witness)



Natal Witness

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## Preface

This book is an account of work in communities devastated by civil violence in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. While the stories of these communities have their own particular characteristics and specific concerns, at one level they could easily be the stories of many other communities elsewhere in Africa and the developing world. Whatever the particular political and social dynamics that generate civil conflict, the way in which it changes the lives of individual men, women, and children, breaking up families and destroying community, is universal. For this reason alone, a case study of this kind should be useful. If lessons learned from the KwaZulu-Natal Programme for Survivors of Violence are made available to those working for reconciliation in similar situations in other parts of the world, perhaps communities experiencing civil conflict will receive more effective assistance, more swiftly.

How anything is observed and explained to others depends a great deal upon the person doing the observing. The primary author of this work was one of the founder members of the KwaZulu-Natal Programme for Survivors of Violence (KZN-PSV). He has worked closely with the organisation in various capacities, notably as member and chair of the board of directors, and as executive director for several years. The author's perspective reflects his training as a psychologist with specialist interests in social psychology, community psychology, and the related issues of violence and traumatic stress. Current members and staff of the organisation have contributed substantially to this text, especially Bev Killian, Berenice Meintjes, and Zandile Nhlengetwa. They have each contributed their own areas of experience and expert knowledge. Dr Derek Summerfield made valuable comments on the first draft, as did Suzanne Williams and Nigel Taylor of Oxfam, and Denis Hutchinson. Many other people and organisations have contributed their time, energy, expertise, and resources to the work described in these pages. Oxfam GB has provided financial and technical support, as well as friendship, over many years. This book is the most recent chapter in a long history of collaboration. The debt of KZN-PSV to Oxfam GB, and in particular to Nigel Taylor, the Programme Representative based in Pietermaritzburg, is warmly acknowledged.

While this case study hopes to suggest ways of working in other contexts around the world, there can be no substitute for helpers developing an intimate knowledge of the community in which they are working. Universal prescriptions must be viewed with a sceptical eye. The suffering caused by civil conflict may indeed be universal, but the specific details of history, politics, community relationships, geography, and culture remain crucially important to community work. The need for helpers to develop an intimate understanding of community life is a theme which runs throughout this case study. In the case of the work of the KZN-PSV, an understanding of South Africa's history, and the particular history of the province of KwaZulu-Natal, is necessary before we can begin to understand the history of particular communities, families, and individuals.

One of the features of community intervention is that there is very little in the way of theory and models to guide the community worker. For this reason we tend to borrow ideas from other fields. A good example of this is the understanding of communities as 'ecologies': a central concept of much community work. This concept is borrowed directly from the natural sciences. Of course, human communities have some characteristics in common with natural ecologies, but there are also some important differences. It is dangerous to forget that we borrowed the concept in the first place: we start to mistake the borrowed concept for the actual phenomenon that we seek to understand.

One way of thinking about civil conflict is to consider it as a 'trauma' in the life of a community. Here we are borrowing from the field of psychology. Psychologists define a trauma as a life-threatening event which disrupts the usual flow of life, causing feelings of fear, helplessness, and horror. The outbreak of civil conflict in a community has this much in common with individual trauma. Psychologists argue that traumas can change the fundamental ways in which human beings understand themselves. Any community worker who has worked in situations of civil conflict will observe how the fighting damages the sense of unity and identity of a community. People who once thought of themselves as members of a unified whole are forced to identify with a particular faction within the community, and others who were previously friends quickly become bitter enemies.

If there are these strong similarities between individual trauma and civil conflict, perhaps there are some similarities in the remedies as well. Perhaps as community workers we can borrow some ideas from psychology to advance our own work. Something that is extremely important to most individual trauma survivors is the need to reconstruct and tell their own personal story. As it turns out, communities show the same pressing need to understand in detail what happened in their community, and to have that story known to the world at large. Although this is never easy to achieve, it is fundamental to the



rebuilding of communities in civil conflict. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an attempt on a grand scale to explore the country's past, uncover the hidden secrets, and retell the story more truthfully.

There is also a cultural aspect to story-telling. Myths, fables, parables, and other kinds of story are a part of virtually every culture in the world. Although once an integral part of 'Western' teaching and learning, story-telling has sadly fallen into disuse in Europe and North America, and is only recently beginning to regain its rightful place in these cultures. However, this is far less true in the developing world. Many people are very comfortable discussing 'serious' matters through the use of anecdotes and sometimes highly discursive stories. And so, being able to teach and learn through stories may be an appropriate form of intervention for many cultures and may succeed in ways that the more direct and directive 'Western' style of communication may not.

Narratives allow us to understand life more deeply, whether they are ancient myths which contain the heritage of entire nations, personal anecdotes which describe events with special meaning for us, or the histories that explain how we came to be where we are today. These stories play an important role in the lives of us all, and nowhere is this more true than in southern Africa. The universality of story-telling provides a bridge between cultures, a bridge which stands in a place not accessible to either the physical senses or the rational mind alone.

On the surface, this book is the story of a group of people who set about trying to bring hope, healing, and reconciliation to a land at war with itself. It is a story about the people, about the land itself, and about South Africa, a country with a dramatic and continually unfolding tale to tell. And so there are stories within stories, each one serving to bring illumination and deeper understanding to each other. If we are to understand the people of war-ravaged KwaZulu-Natal, we must understand their history and their context. The experiences of people who have survived violence around the world and throughout history tell us how suffering left unacknowledged may be passed on from generation to generation. Examples include families of people who survived the Holocaust or the bombing of cities in the Second World War, and the people of post-apartheid South Africa. South Africa's past is not yet forgotten history: it remains alive in many people's memories. The violence of the past and the present forms layers of experience for many people with whom the KZN-PSV works. One cannot discuss the civil conflict in KwaZulu-Natal without reference to the years of apartheid brutality that preceded it, the years of harsh colonial government before that, and the wars that were fought between Africans, Afrikaners, and British settlers. For this reason, although South Africa's history is well known to many human-rights activists around

the world, the early chapters of this case study are dedicated to retelling these stories in brief. Without these bigger stories, the work described in later chapters is without a proper context and loses a great deal of its meaning.

Stories bring people from different backgrounds together, and as such they have served to help the people involved in the work of the KZN-PSV to reach deeper understandings of each other and of their shared world. In a land splintered by a brutal history and on-going civil conflict, learning to understand each other again is a noble aspiration. Furthermore, stories enable us to grapple with our traumatic pasts. Only when we can look back upon the events that haunt us and see them for the history that they are can we begin to speak sincerely of healing. In a world fragmented by violence, the links which stories provide are invaluable. This case study is a story of hardship and struggle, a story of grief and loss, but also a powerful story of love and survival.

## The story of South Africa

# I

The modern history of South Africa is a story of more or less organised brutality and disastrous social divisions. Of the original inhabitants, the San and the Khoikhoi peoples, few survived the brutality of the early European settlers, who hunted them like animals, or the smallpox which the Dutch, French, and Germans brought with them and to which the native South Africans had no natural resistance. Of those who remained, the vast majority were enslaved by their *boer* (farmer) masters.

The Netherlands, conquered by the French in 1795, ceded the South African Dutch colony to the British empire in order to keep it out of French hands. The first British settlers began to arrive in the Cape within twenty years; eventually slavery was eventually abolished, and English became the only official language of the colony. For these reasons and others, the *boers* became resentful of their British rulers. Several thousand of them trekked north and east into the interior. In so doing, they came into contact with the other peoples who had settled in South Africa and established their own kingdoms. Those who resisted them were defeated. Natal was annexed by the British after a period of bloody conflict with the Zulu people. The British were forced to recognise the independence of both the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In these independent states, the *boers* began to refer to themselves as the *Afrikaner* nation, and Afrikaans became their official language.

When the gold and diamond reserves of the South African interior were discovered, war broke out between the British and the Afrikaners. By the dawn of the twentieth century, not one of the original African nations retained its independence, and the Afrikaners had surrendered to the British. The Cape, Natal, the Orange Free State, and the Transvaal formed the Union of South Africa, which became a self-governing country within the British empire. This country was founded on a constitution which gave people of European descent (as judged by the colour of their skin) virtually complete and unassailable power.

South Africa's connection with Britain, first as part of the British empire and later as an independent member of the Commonwealth of Nations, continued for the next four decades. However, neither African nor Afrikaans-

speaking people were content to be governed for ever by the British. The African National Congress (ANC) had been formed in 1912, with the proclaimed purpose of seeking equality for African people. One year later, Afrikaners established the National Party. They succeeded in having their language officially recognised, which resulted in South Africa having two official languages. Under British rule, the Native Land Act of 1913 began to restrict land ownership by African people, and legislation was passed to create separate services and amenities for black and white people, and to protect the interests of white workers.

## **The apartheid era**

The National Party, with its mostly Afrikaans-speaking support base, came to power in the elections of 1948. Shortly afterwards, the National Party government instituted modern *apartheid* (literally, *apart-ness*), with such notorious legislation as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the Group Areas Act, which created separate residential areas for people of differing ethnic backgrounds. 'Homelands' were allocated to particular ethnic groups. The land allocated in this way was for the most part extremely poor agricultural land and far removed from the cities and industrial centres of the country. Many black South Africans were forced to live and work at great distances from their families and were closely regulated while outside their homeland. The indigenous people of South Africa had become aliens on their own land.

With the establishment of the homelands came the most oppressive period of South Africa's history, when homes and communities were destroyed and many people were forcibly moved to other parts of the country. Land and property taken in this way was in most cases sold to white farmers or white-controlled industry. Townships grew up around all commercial and industrial centres, and here black people lived while working in the cities. In addition, hostels were created in many areas and at the mines, where migrant labourers were housed by their employers in extremely poor conditions.

The impact of these forced economic migration patterns on family life is difficult to measure. For generations, South African families have accepted as normal that at least one parent will be away from the family home for extended periods of time. Those women who remained in the rural communities of the homelands were forced to take on the traditional work of men, in addition to their own responsibilities. Many women have supported their families through subsistence farming, in addition to caring for children and aged relatives, while their husbands are away for long periods in the cities. Women who joined the men in seeking work in the urban areas were prevented by law

from taking their children with them, and had to leave them behind in the care of siblings or other relations.

Even non-violent political protests were crushed by the government, and the apartheid regime's response to political opposition became more and more brutal. Security forces enjoyed enormous powers, including detention without trial; entry, search, and seizure without warrant; restriction and banning of persons; restriction and banning of organisations, campaigns, gatherings, and publications; the imposition of curfews; and immunity from prosecution. The apartheid regime and its security forces were not afraid to use these far-reaching powers to silence all opposition within the country. As an example of their abuse of power, Coleman (1998) reports that from 1960 onwards 75,000 persons were detained without trial, of whom at least 25 per cent were children and young people, and ten per cent were women. Detention might be in solitary confinement and for virtually indefinite periods, often as long as 32 months. There is clear evidence of torture in detention.

Political repression was not exerted only through the formal mechanisms of legislation and legal security-force actions. With an extensive network of informants and spies, security forces monitored and harassed suspected political activists and their families. There were clear links between homeland police, vigilante groups, hit squads, and the security forces.



Natal Witness

**Figure 1** The modern history of South Africa is a story of more or less organised brutality.

## **Resistance and change**

Since the 1960s, the violence implicit in South Africa's social structure has not been limited to a minority group of political activists and the security forces of the apartheid regime. On 21 March 1960, a national demonstration led to the massacre of protesters in the small town of Sharpeville near Johannesburg. Official figures numbered the dead at 69, all killed by members of the South African Police. After almost 50 years of unsuccessful peaceful resistance, the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress sanctioned the use of violence, and *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (literally, *Spear of the Nation*), the armed wing of the ANC, was formed. Nelson Mandela was one of the chief proponents of a move to armed resistance, for reasons described in his autobiography.

... I argued that the state had given us no alternative to violence. I said it was wrong and immoral to subject our people to armed attacks by the state without offering them some kind of alternative. I mentioned again that people on their own had taken up arms. Violence would begin whether we initiated it or not. Would it not be better to guide this violence ourselves, according to principles where we saved lives by attacking symbols of oppression, and not people? (Mandela, 1994: 322)

Sixteen years later, on 16 June 1976, school children in Soweto, a large township in Johannesburg, marched against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. This march ended (according to official figures) with 128 pupils and residents of Soweto dead.

And yet the facts of these crucially important historical events do not capture the day-to-day life of many people living in South Africa. The following extract is an attempt to describe the everyday life of children in South Africa's townships during this time.

The world of the township child is extremely violent. It is a world made up of teargas, bullets, whippings, detention, and death on the streets. It is an experience of military operations and night raids, of roadblocks and body searches. It is a world where parents and friends get carried away in the night to be interrogated. It is a world where people simply disappear, where parents are assassinated and homes are bombed. Such is the life of the township child today. (Chikane 1986: 336)

During this time, the struggle against apartheid involved entire communities and was not restricted to a small group of 'politicised' men. When the youth of Soweto marched in 1976, they did so *en masse*, and when the forces of the apartheid regime responded, they did so against the whole community. During this time, with the leadership of the ANC either in exile or in prison, the Women's League of the ANC rose to prominence. Although it was not until very recently that South African women began to organise themselves to challenge gender-related injustices, women's action against the apartheid State has a proud history. With the racial struggle in South Africa reaching its conclusion, the struggle for the emancipation of women is far from over.

During the 1980s, resistance to apartheid continued to grow within South Africa and in many countries around the world. In 1990 the regime realised that change was inevitable, but that its form could still be influenced. The ban on the ANC and many other resistance structures was ended in that year. Within a month Nelson Mandela was released from prison, after almost 26 years, and millions of South Africans dared to dream that real change might eventually become a reality. When change came, it came swiftly. In 1994, all South Africans went to the polls for the first time ever, and the African National Congress swept into power with Nelson Mandela at its head. Since then the country's constitution has been rewritten to protect all its people from unfair discrimination, and the nation is struggling to come to terms with its violent and divided history.

### **The search for reconciliation**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has spent several years investigating and documenting the seemingly endless lists of brutalities which characterise South Africa's recent history. And yet, in many ways the TRC is a limited medium for reconciliation. Most importantly, it was necessary for the work of the commission to be confined to a very particular period of time in the country's history, namely from 1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994. Events before and after these cut-off dates (which include some important events in the KwaZulu-Natal conflict) fall beyond the brief of the TRC, and as such have received little or no attention. Nevertheless, people everywhere in South Africa are searching for ways to reconcile individuals and groups with each other. South Africa is still beset by many problems, not least of which are the problems of crime and violence. The important difference is that today, *all* South Africans share the right and the responsibility to try to solve those problems.

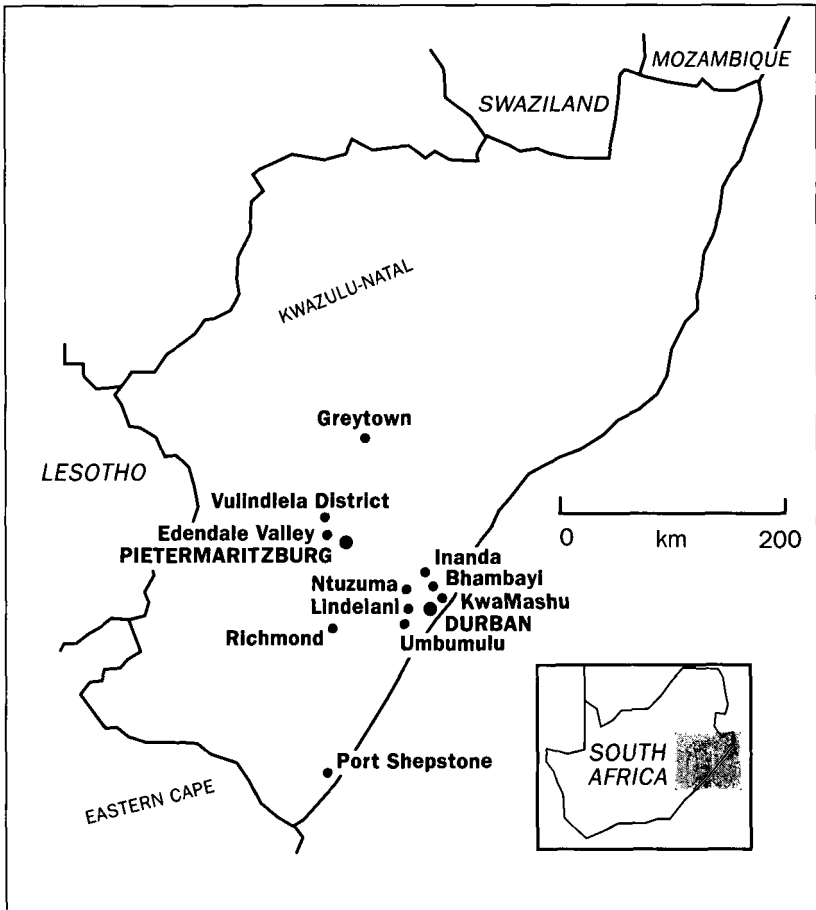
## 2 The story of KwaZulu-Natal

KwaZulu-Natal, a sub-tropical land of rolling green hills, lies on the eastern seaboard of South Africa. The province covers only seven per cent of the country's land mass but is home to roughly 21 per cent of the population. With nearly two-thirds of the province's nine million inhabitants living in rural communities, KwaZulu-Natal contains the most densely populated rural areas in South Africa. The large numbers of people living in rural communities, together with a range of other factors, make KwaZulu-Natal in per capita terms one of the poorest provinces in the country. Rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal are characterised by high levels of unemployment (often more than 50 per cent of the working population are unemployed), extreme and widespread poverty, high levels of abuse of alcohol and other substances, and high levels of criminal, sexual, and domestic violence. But the most distinguishing feature of KwaZulu-Natal in recent decades is that it is the province with the greatest incidence of civil and political violence in South Africa. In line with estimates that about 75 per cent of casualties of modern warfare are civilians not directly involved in the combat, much of the violence in this province has taken place at homesteads, in schools, and on the streets.

### The rise of the Zulu kingdom

This area was first settled by dark-skinned *nguni* peoples from the north about 2000 years ago. They established various small tribal kingdoms, which shared similar customs and language. For the most part the *nguni* peoples lived in peace and prosperity. Any battles consisted mainly of skirmishes, characterised more by taunts and threats than by extensive killing. In most cases one or other army would be driven off, and the victor would take the others' cattle and capture their women and children. In many cases the victorious tribe would return some of the captured cattle, so that not even enemies would be allowed to die of hunger – in stark contrast to the way in which European settlers who were pushing north and east from the Cape colony were to treat their enemies. Traditional *nguni* culture is highly patriarchal. Even today, families are controlled by the father and his brothers; although there have been female traditional leaders, this is extremely rare.





**Figure 2** Map of the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, showing places mentioned in this book.

When the *boers* left the British-governed colony in the Cape of Good Hope, they began to settle in lands which until that time had been entirely under *nguni* control. One of the stronger *nguni* kingdoms was that of the Zulu people. Among the Zulu a powerful military leader arose in response to the growing pressure from the European invaders. This leader was Shaka, who changed the face of society in the region forever and prepared the *nguni* people for war with both the *boers* and the British. He established a standing conscript army and drew the various *nguni* clans into a regulated and peaceful confederacy, strategically strengthened by arranged marriages and alliances.

The relative power of the *boers*' weapons and the extraordinary mettle of the army forged by Shaka are demonstrated in the Zulu nation's most disastrous defeat: