



SIMO NGUBANE



LINA MTHEMBU

It's a hard life in a paradise under pressure

IN MAPHUMULO Prison, near KwaDukuza (Stanger) on KwaZulu-Natal's North Coast, Makotikoti Zikhali finds his bright orange prison uniform, with its circular imprint "corrections", demeaning – even embarrassing.

"I don't belong in his place," he told us. "Here I am with murderers, rapists and gangsters. They were not convicted for mistakes."

"These are people with no conscience, who I now queue alongside for food every day."

Zikhali misses a favourite meal from childhood: mangrove crabs, skewered on a stick, cooked over an open fire. "But here in jail, even if an angel were to come, or if cutting boards full of meat were brought, it would not make me happy," Zikhali said.

He is also worried that his 95-year-old mother, Mthaba, might die before he's released on early parole. "If she hears something bad, that her last surviving son is in jail, her heart will rise and kill her."

It turns out that Zikhali told his mother he had gone to look for a woman, who had deserted him, to bring back his 11-year-old son, Malandela.

While Zikhali's case is now legendary in Kosi Bay's coastal communities, his misfortune does not resonate with the people of KwaDapha (Bhanga

Neck) or Enkokuveni, both areas where Zikhali had become known as a turtle poacher.

In Bhanga Neck up to 16 people in the community are employed as turtle monitors every nesting season. Strong feelings exist about protecting turtles. Turtle nesting is one of the greatest tourism attractions in the area with international tourists booking turtle tours months in advance.

"I say keep him in jail for 10 years," said Senzo Mthembu in heated discussions outside the Bhanga Neck shop and she-ben.

Sympathy

"He's right," said Gilbert Ngubane, a local nduna. "If turtles get wiped out, there will be no tourists."

But having also grown up eating turtles, Ngubane had some sympathy for Zikhali, saying there needed to be better environmental education to prevent poaching.

We saw evidence of this on our second day in the area when we came across two children jumping up and down in a turtle's nest, 400m away from a KZN Ezemvelo Wildlife base and research station.

Chatting to 15 children at KwaDapha primary school, we discovered that only three of them had ever seen a turtle. None had ever taken part in an

organised turtle tour. Although supportive of the turtle conservation programme, the 39 KwaDapha families are bitter about the complex bureaucracy and regulations surrounding the setting up of tourism camps on land they own.

The building of unlicensed camps dates back to the late 1980s when a group of anti-apartheid activists, environmentalists and anthropologist David Webster encouraged residents to resist relocation from the coastal reserve and start eco-tourism enterprises to help promote conservation efforts.

Twenty-two years on, and 17 years into democracy, little progress has been made in translating this vision into reality: no fully licensed community tourism camps operate in the area.

In Enkokuveni, closer to where Zikhali was arrested, people also had little sympathy for Zikhali's plight.

"Don't come talk about this outsider in jail for killing a turtle, when people here are eating monkeys," said Simo Ngubane, gesturing angrily into the trees of the dune forest, not far from where Zikhali was arrested.

Enkokuveni, home to 19 or so families, is the most isolated community at the iSimangaliso world heritage site, where various species of trees are still

used to mark grave sites. It is a thin 5km strip of land, practically an island, stretching from Bhanga Neck to Kosi Bay Mouth with the Indian ocean on one side and the Kosi Bay lake system on the other. It is here that Thonga fish kraals are still found, dating back to the days before Vasco da Gama first sailed past in the late 1400s.

Ownership of these fishing traps – unlike any others in the world – is still passed from generation to generation.

We are told that in Enkokuveni there are graves of ancestors of the Ngubane, Mthembu and Tembe clans dating back 800 years.

Some say Enkokuveni should be the crown jewel of the world heritage site, but it's far from that.

It does not exist in history books and has fallen off the map of development plans: a poverty-stricken paradise.

"There is nothing here – no work, no road, not even a camp for tourists. When we try to build one, we are told not to," said Ngubane. "We feel we are being starved off our land."

With no road access, people of Enkokuveni have to walk across the shallowest parts of the Kosi Bay lakes to reach the closest shops in Manguzi – a two-hour walk away. Ngubane told us bags of maize meal



PARADISE UNDER PRESSURE: The Kosi Bay area in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park is an important conservation area. It is also the home and burial ground of families who have resided here for more than 800 years. With no road access, people wade across the lake system every day.

falling off women's heads on their return trips.

Ngubane occasionally ferries people across the lake in a canoe to supplement his income as a subsistence fisherman.

Although laws on subsistence fishing make provision for selling fish, perceptions exist out here that this, and also building fences to protect crops, are among prohibited activities, like gill netting.

"When we catch fish, we are told we're not supposed sell them! So how do we get money to buy things? Steal, like they do in Manguzi?" asked Ngubane.

Ngubane also told us about

fishing with three-sided hooks becoming unlawful, pythons eating chickens and hippos destroying crops.

"And they tell us we can't kill these animals!" Ngubane cursed. "These world heritage site people and the people from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife who bring these rules are people who have never set foot here. They do not know how we live from day to day – like guarded prisoners on our own land, in our own village."

"Yes," agreed Lina Mthembu, sister-in-law to the late Enkokuveni nduna, Mshwayiso Mthembu. "Hippos have more rights than people of Enkokuveni. And you must see

what that hippo did to one boy, Zulu Mthembu. It chopped him, like an axe. His family had to pick him up piece by piece."

We were told that in days long past, people killed hippos. "The meat tastes better than beef," we were told.

We also learnt of ancient folklore that protects turtles. It is said that if you approach a nesting turtle it will get angry, take you under its flippers and out to sea, never to be seen again.

"This is what our elders told us as they had also been told as children," said Thulani Ngubane. "It stopped us from interfering with the turtles. When they come on to land to

nest they are vulnerable. So this outsider, he must not come here and kill turtles."

We also heard further myths about turtles: that if you mix turtle eggs with chicken feed or break the yolk into drinking troughs, fowls will lay more eggs and livestock will multiply. Smear turtle fat under the tail of a cow, and bulls will chase it. Eat turtle meat and you will live long.

We discovered that it was such myths that Zikhali had plugged into, plying his trade in turtle fat and meats. And in the world of muti magic, we discovered that such myths spread far and wide, transforming into other wondrous cures for all manner of ailments and situations – including promiscuous wives.

A traditional healer in Durban's Warwick Avenue Triangle, calling himself Zungu, said:

"You can use turtle fats to 'lock' your wife. A man rubs it on his penis as an ointment before having sex. After that, if another man tries to penetrate her, his penis will stay cold. It will not erect."

Through a snap survey, we learnt that turtle fat, meat and eggs were in demand among Durban's muti traders with turtle fat the most valuable, apparently fetching up to R200 for a matchbox-size portion.

Out of 20 muti traders surveyed, three said they already had supplies of turtle meat, fat and eggs; six said they would be interested in buying. – Additional reporting: Joel Burton and Sandile Gumedede.

From 'little bride' to poaching – the life of Makotikoti

AN HOUR after Jabulani Makotikoti Zikhali was born – 5am, January 10, 1957 – his father, Masofaye died.

His three elder brothers chose the name Jabulani, hoping he would bring joy to their mother, Mthaba, despite her grief at losing her husband. An aunt, enamoured of how much the newborn resembled her, added the name Makotikoti (little bride). The name was soon rolling off the tongues of everyone who met him.

Zikhali caught his first fish aged six. Although it was finger size, he proudly brought it home to share with his family. By the time Zikhali was in primary school, he was already a family provider. At 14, he was the first in the Zikhali family lineage to be allocated a fish kraal.

Sarah Khumalo, Zikhali's cousin, took us to where the family's homestead had once stood in KwaHlomula, surrounded by many fruit trees.

We learnt that Mthaba Zikhali had battled to support her entire family. Her three eldest sons left home before completing school to find work as far afield as Johannesburg, regularly sending home what money they could. They have all since died.

"We practically grew up as orphans, but we were never hungry," says Wabushashu Gumedede, Zikhali's sister.

"Hayiee, Makotikoti, he could run on the water like lightning, faster than any fish, chasing it until he caught it."

"Natsho!" (that's the way), Makotikoti would exclaim after spearing a fish.

when water levels in Kosi Bay were high, they could catch as many as 50 fish in their traps, selling some of them, to buy new shorts.

During *umkhawu* (half moon), they would catch fewer than 10 fish.

"Whoever ended each day with less fish would get teased, but we were family, so we would always share," says Ndlovu.

Turtles too, during the nesting seasons, were eaten.

"It was actually overseas tourists who told us turtles provided good meat," says Ndlovu. "We were all quite shocked. When we actually ate it, we were surprised by the taste. It was good."

"At that time, people called turtles *ufudu lwasolwandle* (tortoise from the sea)," recalls Ndlovu. "Soon after they started eating it, this name *isilingosi* was invented. Our grandparents said: 'This thing is innocent. It provides us with good food. We cannot call it *ufudu*, because everybody has a strong dislike of the tortoise.'"

"But pooh-pah, *isilingosi* stinks!" says Khumalo. "The smell can remain on your hands for a month. I remember my mother telling me that if you ate turtle, you did not eat it at home or in the yard, that you have to go to the bush to eat it."

Away from the beach, Zikhali loved *indlamu* – a traditional Zulu dance in which the dancer lifts one foot high over his head and brings it down hard with each strong drum beat.



MOTHER: MTHABA ZIKHALI



SISTER: WABUSHASHU GUMEDE



SANGOMA: SILWANE GUMEDE

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bique. He returned on the back of the biggest boy.

"At first I thought it was very funny because it was how he had always carried me," says Khumalo.

But Zikhali was semi-comatose. It was believed he had an allergic reaction to "a shark-like fish" he had eaten. He was taken to a local nyanga.

"When I woke up, there was all this skin from my body beside me. I had shed it like a

snake. It was burnt and some of it buried," recalls Zikhali. He says he has suffered periodic headaches ever since, particularly on hot days.

Zikhali left school after Standard 5 (Grade 7). Besides not having money for school clothes, exercise books, or even pens, "education after primary school was useless back then", says Khumalo. "For boys, there were better ways to improve your life."

When the fish kraals were empty, Zikhali would *kwatshisha* (hustle), looking for "piece jobs" with tourists.

"Sometimes they only earned 5c or 10c for a job," says Khumalo.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the government incorporated areas around Kosi Bay into the Kosi Bay coastal reserve. Families were offered R15,000 to move.

"The offers were tempting," says Joseph Zikhali. "That was a lot of money back then, but it did not last long, particularly here around Manguzi."

But not everyone moved, and some, like Ndlovu, also ran into trouble with the law, accused of chairing a community meeting where villagers were incited to resist relocation from the area.

Amid this conflict, the Zikhali family moved to Manguzi.

Zikhali continued to tend to his fish kraal, but distances covered on foot became onerous. In 1980 he went to work in mines in Carltonville, but lost this job in 1982 after unions went on strike demanding higher wages. The same happened after he got work at a bakery in Mkhuzo from 1987.

Here, he joined a popular *isicathamiya* group and coached his own football team, Mjay Independent.

On losing his bakery job in 2001 Zikhali returned to what he knew best, surviving off what he could catch from the ocean.

But with his fish trap often empty, he took to turtle poaching and also gill-netting.

"Authorities no longer permit people to fish in the lake with nets, but they do it anyway, at night," says Khumalo.

Zikhali also spent a lot of time in Mseleni, 54 km south of Manguzi, helping Wabushashu look after their ailing mother. Wabushashu makes a living selling sugar, salt, shoes and clothes from a makeshift roadside stall. Like other informal traders, she follows the mobile pension and social welfare payout points around the district "because that's when people have money to spend".

Wabushashu is married to Silwane Gumedede, a sangoma.

"He can even help you win the lotto," says Wabushashu.

In the sandy driveway of Silwane Gumedede's home stands a tall pole with bull horns, rope and a plastic bottle mounted on top. In the middle of the yard is a modern suburban home. In the opposite corner stands a lopsided hut, adorned with all manner of objects, from bottles, bulbs, roots and shells to animal furs, skulls and teeth.

"Yes, Makotikoti was training under me," Silwane tells us.

"I use mostly herbs from the bush. Makotikoti would grind them and mix them into medicines. He even took consultations in my absence."

"If he had not gone to jail he would already have his own practice by now," adds Silwane. "We didn't think the case would take him."

We meet his mother, Mthaba. She is 95 years old.

She tells us that she lives in a zone where memories and dreams are indistinct from one another, that her ears don't work, that she can only see vague shadows in front of her.

"What's this *isilingosi* thing people are talking about? I don't even know what it is. What must I say? Every day and night, I pray that Makotikoti comes back, but God does not answer. I don't know what prayers to say any more. The only thing I think of now is the day of my death."

In Maphumulo prison, Zikhali tells us of his plans on leaving jail.

"I see the youths here get new clothes to wear when they come out. I will not do that," he says firmly.

"I am going to leave in the clothes I came in, even though they are very old. They will be burnt, a goat will be slaughtered, and I will be washed with *umsvani* to cleanse away the bad luck of jail."

Umsvani is the stomach content of goats. It is believed that a mixture of plants and grass from a goat's stomach has healing and cleansing properties.

"I will just thank my maker if I find my mother alive," adds Zikhali.

"I do not want other people to point out where she will lay (be buried), where I and my children will also eventually lay so we can rest peacefully."