INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CHIEFS AND DEMOCRACY

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Dear Peter,

In October, South African voters return to the polls to vote for local government in urban and rural areas. Registration began on Feb. 2 and here in the province of KwaZulu-Natal 5.2 million eligible voters have until May 3 to put their names on rolls. Yet, four weeks into registration less than one percent of eligible voters -- a paltry 0.83 -- have registered. Nationwide, the figure is not much better, with less than three percent of voters registered.

Voter apathy has been suggested as a reason why registration creeps along at a snail's pace. "People are not in a voting mood," one politician said. Other explanations include confusion and suspicion. Eighty percent of voters in KwaZulu-Natal -- South Africa's most populous province with 8.5 million residents (seven million of whom are black) -- have never before voted in municipal elections. The procedure for voting in local elections is different, and more complicated, to that of the national and provincial elections in April 1994. For example, last year people did not register to vote in a specific geographical area. However, in local elections voters will only be able to vote in the area where they are registered.

Clearly, voter education is needed. As journalist Denis Beckett put it, "whereas you certainly cannot have democracy without universal suffrage, you do not acquire it simply by announcing that everyone can vote." Still, voter education is neither the only nor major problem standing in the way of wall-to-wall local government elections in KwaZulu-Natal. The real holdup is a "torturously convoluted" political battle for control of tribal areas.

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Basically, chiefs maintain that no local elections will take place in rural areas unless and until their power is guaranteed. An estimated 2.7 million people currently live under the rule of 300-odd tribal chiefs (amakhosi) in KwaZulu-Natal. The majority of the traditional leaders (270) are aligned with the Inkatha Freedom Party, and they believe that "western-style" local government will erode their power and lead to the destruction of traditional rule (ubukhosi). "I will have no land; no people and no control," Chief Wellington Hlengwa, who has about 20,000 people under his control in Umbumbulu on the South Coast said in The Weekly Mail & Guardian. "I will become a councillor to the mayor, and then too I will be one of many councillors. When I die, who on the council will come along to say my son should take over and, if so, to do what?"

The Local Government Transition Act, passed before last year's general election, calls for local elections throughout the country, including rural areas. Provision is made for chiefs to serve as ex-officio members -- without voting power -- on democratically-elected councils in their areas. Or, they can stand for election.

"Busy? Yes, it's really gathering momentum now. You're the second one this month!"

Vote in the Local Government Elections

Get your ID book NOW!

South Africans are going to vote for their respective Local Governments. When you vote, you help decide how local government should be run. If you want to vote, you have to have an identity document (ID). Get one from the Department of Home Affairs office nearest to you, from a magistrate's office, or from a mobile unit.

When you apply for an ID, take the following with you:

- O 2 ID photographs of yourself.
- O A birth certificate. If you do not have one, you can apply for late registration of birth; then you must bring **one or more** of the following:

- A certificate signed by the superintendent or matron of the hospital or clinic in which you were born.
- A certificate of baptism issued shortly after you were born.
- An extract from the register of the school you attended.
- A reference book (or its number).
- Citizens of the former homelands of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda or Ciskei may bring ID or travel documents issued by these former homelands.

If you do not have any documents, take a family member, who is at least ten years older than you and who has an ID book, with you.

What will happen when you apply?

- O You will be given some forms to complete. Write clearly in black ink. If you cannot write, the official will help you.
- O Your fingerprints will be taken for identification purposes.
- O You will be given a receipt. Keep it. If something goes wrong, it will then be easier to trace your application.
- O It will take about two months before you get your ID book. You must fetch it from the office where you applied, or it can be posted to you - please indicate your choice to the official when you apply.

If you can vote, but do not have an ID, apply for one now so that you can register and become part of the process of electing your Local Government. If you have already applied for an ID, but have still not received it, approach the nearest office of the Department of Home Affairs or your local magistrate's office.

The Inkatha Freedom Party wants a special type of local government for rural areas. They want 50 percent of the representatives to be elected by the community and 50 percent appointed by the chief (inkosi). President Nelson Mandela's ANC has rejected this idea, so far. ANC members consider it a ploy by the IFP to get more seats, as well as an attempt to undermine the interim constitution, which clearly states that traditional leaders have the right to serve only in an ex-officio capacity.

There are several other, more complex issues related to the status of chiefs, such as "the constitutional future of the Zulu monarchy and kingdom." What's really at stake -- it's now becoming clear -- is the issue of power sharing between central government and the provinces. The IFP wants a federal constitutional arrangement or, as the IFP's Joe Matthews put it to reporters, "let's cut out all the crap, the issue is autonomy."

As stated above, the political battle is "tortuously convoluted." I lost a few nights sleep trying to understand it all and, mind you, I sleep through earthquakes. Finally, I realized that hardly anyone understands what's going on. Furthermore, the matter is wholly politicized. There are no grays. When I told a museum curator -- mid-20s, black, male -- of my interest in chiefs and the debate over how South Africa intends to recognize them in the new democracy, he asked: "What's your position on this." I told him I don't have a position; I'm here to learn. He stood up from his desk chair and looked me at "sideways" -- my way of saying he became very suspicious. I'm even careful not to spread around that I sometimes work out of an office at the University of Natal, Durban, because some consider the institution anti-Inkatha, a charge that I have no way or interest in verifying or denying.

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I'm attempting to tackle the issue of chiefs and democracy in small, incremental steps, starting with seemingly simple questions, such as "who gets to be chief" and "what do they do." Little did I know, these two questions are in and of themselves a point of controversy. Numbers of people believe that the role chiefs play today differs significantly from the role they played in traditional Zulu society. They believe as lawyer Peter Rutsch does, that "ever since the colonization of Natal by the British in the last century, the amakhosi (chiefs) and the tribal system have been subverted to serve the interests of the colonial masters."

Reference is often made about the abuse of the institution of chieftaincy, first by the British and then by Afrikaners. "The institution of chieftaincy is inherently democratic and was always so until it was abused for political reasons," Chief Zibuse Mlaba, deputy chairman of the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal, said in a Feb. 17 article that appeared in The Natal Witness. "We traditionally had a situation where the chief would never make a decision on his own. People would gather under a tree in an imbizo and make deliberations about whatever subject. The chief would only step in to endorse the decision and make a proclamation. It worked well...until it became abused for political reasons."

Traditionally, the political structure within a tribe worked this way: It started with the homestead or kraal of an extended family. The head of the family, the umnumsane, administered the family, but did so by collective decision making. Several families within an isigodi were linked together under the administration of an induna (headman) and they were linked together, within the tribe under the administration of the inkosi (chief).[1]

Both the izinduna (headmen) and the amakhosi (chiefs) acted, within their areas of jurisdiction, under a collective decision making process involving their respective councils. After the formation of the Zulu nation in the early nineteenth century, the apex of the structure centered on the Ingonyama or King. He also acted under the system of collective decision making, being advised by his council. The head of a family, the induna of an isigodi and the inkhosi of a tribe operated as an organic part of the family, isigodi or tribe respectively deriving their authority from within the unit.[2] The Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe put it this way; Ishe vanhu. Vanhu ishe -the chief is the people and the people are the chief.

That all changed under Theophilus Shepstone, the secretary of Native Affairs in Natal in the colonial era. David Welsh, in "The Roots of Segregation: Native Policy in Colonial Natal, 1845-1910, explains how Shepstone devised a reserve system that corralled Africans, co-opted chiefs and made the Governor the Supreme Chief over all Africans.

Welsch details a case in 1871 in which the regent of a tribe resigns and an heir is installed as chief. Shepstone sends a directive to a magistrate which says, "...inform the young chief and old men of the tribe, that in this colony, chieftainship does not depend upon hereditary succession, but upon appointment by the Supreme Chief...
that the Supreme Chief is always willing to appoint the sons of deceased chiefs, where those sons are found fit for the duties required of them, and he is willing to do so in this instance, but the young man must be made to understand clearly, that if by his conduct he is found unfit for the position of chief, the Supreme Chief will order his immediate deposition and appoint one more trustworthy in his place. He must also be told that the people of whom he has been allowed to take charge, are not his people, that they belong to and are subjects of this government and that he is allowed to take charge of them on behalf of this government. (page 118.)

In effect, Shepstone acted to destroy the system of collective decision making among amakhosi (chiefs) and inzinduna (headmen), instead creating a system where chiefs became "servants to a political master." Shepstone acknowledged that the transfer of powers from chiefs to the Supreme Chief "has entirely changed the political relationship between chiefs and people." Moreover, he recognized that salaries paid to chiefs symbolized the bureaucratic use of chieftainship, and accelerated the process whereby chiefs derived their "breath" from the government rather than from the people. (Welsh: page 125.)

(Incidentally, the payment of amakhosi (chiefs) salaries currently falls within the jurisdiction of the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government, which is controlled by the IFP. Their stipends range from R18,000 a year to R37,170 a year, depending on their level of education. So a chief with a university degree receives more than one who doesn't hold a degree. There's been talk that ANC President Mandela's office wants to handle their salaries and pay them through Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini's office in Nongoma. However, KwaZulu-Natal amakhosi in January passed a resolution rejecting the idea.)

The first legislation to regulate traditional law was the Native Administration Act of 1927. It empowered the State President to recognize or appoint chiefs and it formally granted chiefs their powers, making them accountable to government. The former KwaZulu government, and IFP, legislated the Amakhosi and Iziphakanyiswa Act 9 of 1990, which reinforced state control over the system,[3] leaving some to question why the IFP-controlled KwaZulu government did not take steps to rebuild and support the traditional system of Zulu government.

Despite government manipulation of chiefs, that does not necessarily mean that chiefs did not serve people on the ground, according to Musa Zondi, Inkatha Youth Brigade chairman and Managing Editor of the IFP-owned bi-weekly, Llanga newspaper.

In a January 23 article in The Daily News, he wrote that Shepstone may well have devised a system making the Governor Supreme Chief over all Africans, but that does not mean "the Zulu people then understood amkhosi and izinduna in Shepstone's legal conception."

"I am quite sure that we Zulus would have long jettisoned the type of amakhosi which...had ceased to personify the unity of clans and traditional communities," Zondi wrote. "There may well have been individual amakhosi who sold out the Zulu case, and Zulu history tells exactly what happened to such people..." As for the 1990 act, he wrote that the KwaZulu Government was not a sovereign government and it could not change the apartheid laws of the Republic.

Whether by appointment or hereditary succession, traditional leaders have long been responsible for administration and order in their areas. The KwaZulu Amakhosi and Iziphakanyiswa Act 9 of 1990, for example, gives tribal authorities general administrative duties within their areas of jurisdiction. This includes administering education, hospitals and other agencies. They also enjoy other far-reaching powers. They have the power to arrest, to search and seize, to disperse any unauthorized assembly and to ensure compliance with all laws and orders of a "competent authority." They are entitled to the "loyalty, respect, support and obedience" of every resident of the area for which they are appointed.[4]

Also, in most rural areas a system of tribal courts exist. The presiding officer is usually the inkosi (chief). Chiefs have jurisdiction to try certain civil cases -- between black people based on customary law -- and less serious criminal cases. Examples of the kind of cases heard by traditional courts are disputes over cattle, damage to property, land allocation and minor criminal incidents such as street fights.

South Africa's interim constitution upholds their roles and recognizes customary law but only where these are not in conflict with the Constitution. Not surprisingly, there are several potential conflicts with the Constitution. For example, under customary law it is married men who can get land from the inkosi. Only under special circumstances do single men, or widowed or single women with children, obtain land. Some believe that women should have the same rights to property as men.

Land is crucial to the role of chiefs. In traditional Zulu thinking there is no such thing as property in land. All land belongs to the king, as the representative of the nation as a whole. The amakhosi (tribal chiefs), in turn, have the power to allot land in their district to the people in charge. Land is gratuitously assigned to all, but no man can hold it as his own; he has no power to sell it or negotiate with it.[5]

"An inkosi (chief) without land is no inkosi," induna David Ntombela said in a Feb. 17 feature article in The Natal Witness. "If an inkosi joins an urban council and hands over land to the municipality, he loses control over his land and power. The mayor will now have power to allocate the land, grant title deeds and people can use land as they wish. Commoners will have more power than the inkosi. The entire fabric of traditional Zulu society will disintegrate."

As part of the National Unity Government's program of land distribution, there is a provision to extend property rights to tribal areas. If implemented, just as Ntombela fears, this will have serious repercussions for the ability of tribal leaders to control land.

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The Community Law Centre(CLC) of Durban works with communities in rural KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. The non-profit is six years old and serves a total population of close to two million. This past summer CLC staff and rural paralegals surveyed 53 men and women on issues related to land tenure and customary law. Developed by Professor Peter Sevareid of Temple University, the survey found that most interviewed wanted title deeds for their homes and fields, but they wanted to retain the communal system of grazing, realizing that their cattle are better served by sharing a large expanse of land.

The survey also found "a certain degree of security of tenure in the traditional system." As one man explained, he prefers customary because "if you have no money to buy land, the inkosi will give you land." Janine Hicks of the CLC said the survey findings are being used to develop land reform policies which will be submitted to the Constitutional Assembly. The policy proposals will capitalize on the strengths of both the traditional and freehold systems of land tenure, while eliminating weaknesses and limitations of each system.

How the issue of chiefs and democracy will shake out in the end only time will tell. But just last week, I met someone who visited King Zwelithini at his royal residence to get approval to educate both chiefs and communities about the new democratic dispensation, and I'm told that the King gave his support. When all is said and done, maybe the parties involved will find that chieftaincy and democracy are not mutually exclusive. Zimbabwe, 15 years after independence, is finding that out. There, traditional courts have been reintroduced, and traditional leaders given ex-officio recognition on district rural councils.

In the meantime, the October elections loom. Representatives of three local nongovernmental agencies have told me that one major problem standing in the way of voter education is money; they don't have any to run such campaigns. And the reason they don't have any is because the government hired an advertising/public relations firm to spread the word about local elections. Unfortunately, that money is not trickling down to agencies that specialize in community outreach, particularly in rural areas.

It's not only rural voters who are left in the dark. If this is any gauge, I've "polled" at least two dozen "educated" city dwellers about where they must go to register to vote and not a one could tell me. They returned the question to me, asking "Do you know?"

Last Saturday night I was invited to a dinner party attended by six people, all of whom are actively involved in community projects, such as voter education and peace campaigns. After the meal, one of the people pulled out a board game called Democracy in the new South Africa. No one had played before, except the man who brought it and he couldn't remember the rules.

The rule book for the Democracy game appeared to be about 20 pages and the instructions inscrutable. Anyway, we fumbled along. Each player was given cards designating party leaders, levels of influence, canvassing areas, as well as R10,000 from the game's bank. Separate from the cards held by individuals was a deck stationed on the board, from which we drew, depending on the role of the die. A card might say, for example, that your party leader has been assassinated by a "Third Force," so you lose a province for lack of a leader. Or, a card might say pay the bank R2000 because your corporation has been caught misusing public funds. We started playing about 9:45 p.m. By 12:30 a.m. -- all of us confused and frustrated by the rules, and with no clue as to how to win the game, let alone its purpose -- we decided to call it quits. Democracy, even in the form of a game, is hard to master.

PART II

Peter, what follows is a series of short stories, anecdotes. As I go about my day-to-day affairs here, I learn extraordinary things about the content and character of South Africa. You'll read what I mean.

THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

February 20, 1995 - I sat at the Pine Street terminus today, waiting to catch a 1:05 p.m. bus to the Westville campus of the University of Durban to talk to a professor about rural development, when along came a young black man with soft brown country boy eyes. He sidled up beside me and asked: "Is this where I catch the bus to university."

"Yes," I said. "You're in the right place." He flexed his right shoulder, releasing from it a strap that held a fat green travel bag which appeared to weigh more than the young man, who was short, slight and neatly dressed in a baby blue shirt with matching khaki pants and jacket. "This will be my first time at the university," he said, as he sat down beside me. I said: "Well, it'll be my first time on the campus. So that makes two of us."

He asked whether I am a student and when I explained that I am here on a fellowship, he wanted to know how South Africa compares to America. So we chatted about that a few minutes. He told me that he plans to study commerce, and that he is the first person in his family to attend college or, varsity, as it's known here. "Your parents must be very proud," I said. "Yes, they are proud of me," he said, turning his eyes downward in a show of modesty.

"Have classes started," the young man asked.
"Don't you have paperwork from the university, explaining when classes start," I responded.
"No," he said. "Only a letter in which I was given a student number.I would have come before now but my family, we are poor," he added. " We didn't have the money for me to ride the bus (from the Transvaal to Durban). Yesterday I rode to Johannesburg and stayed with (an aunt) overnight and I left this morning at 7:30 to come here. I came as soon as I could."

When bus number 75 pulled up, I paid the fare -R1.10 (about 30 cents)- and sat two seats behind the driver. The young man handed the driver a bill rather than change and the driver, noticeably annoyed, put the bus in gear and jerked forward, causing the young man to stumble in the aisle. I motioned for the youth to come and sit down.

I gave him the correct change to give the driver and said: "You pay me back when you've finished school and get a good job. OK."

The ride to the campus took a good 30 minutes. On the way there, it became clearer and clearer to me that my companion had left home with few concrete plans. Basically, he had stepped out on faith, with nothing more than a student number "guaranteeing" enrollment. I learned that he comes from a small town in the Transvaal, which is now known as the province of Gauteng. "How will we know where we must get off," he asked. "Well, I think we should look for road signs pointing to the university and we'll probably pass through the entrance of the university. I think we'll know when we get there," I said.

The entrance to the campus sits at the bottom of a hill, and a road snakes around to university buildings perched at the hill's summit. The bus stopped at a point where dozens of students gathered. As we got off, students shoved their way onto the bus. In the confusion I lost sight of my bus companion. However, when I turned around he was at my side, staring at me, his face stricken with fear. "How will I know where to go," he said. I pointed: "See the signs for administration. Follow them, they'll lead you there."

He didn't budge. "Please this place is so big, with so many buildings, maybe you can walk to administration with me," he said. I glanced at my watch, saw that I was uncharacteristically early for an appointment and said, "of course." Plus, the young man reminded me of a younger version of me. On my first day of classes at the University of Maryland, College Park, I stood in the middle of the campus green stricken with fear, overwhelmed by everything around me -the white columned buildings, the masses of rushing students, the depth and breadth of the sky, the reality that my Mama and Daddy were beyond arm's reach. I was lost, literally and figuratively, until a stranger, a young man, appeared beside me and escorted me to my first college class. It is this memory that flashed before me as my bus companion and I began walking through waves of students, his fat bag bumping me every now and then.

After a couple of false starts, we found the building, thanks to two campus security guards. They gave me directions to where I needed to go, and began escorting my bus friend to the entrance of administration. "Good luck," I sat, patting him on the back. "I wish you well in your studies." I then turned and walked away, but long after the young man was out of my sight, I found that he was not out of my mind.

TONGUE TIED AND TWISTED

"That'll be R2.80," said the thirtysomething white woman who works the night shift at a pay phone center where, if you don't have enough money to cover your call, a sign says "leave something valuable."
As I fished for the correct coins in my change purse, the woman said: "Tell me something and tell me the truth. Is there racism in America."
I sighed, and thought to myself "don't start down this twisted road." But I ignored my own good sense and answered: "Yes, racism exists in America."
The woman nodded, affirming my affirmation. "Don't you have reserves over there," she asked next.
"Reserves," I said, shaking my head in confusion.
"Yes, you know, reserves. Your Indians live there."
Realizing what she was talking about and, more importantly, what she was leading up to, I said: "Yes, we have Indian reservations but they're sovereign nations, so to speak, within America. The Indians have their own tribal leaders, their own indigenous laws."
"Right, they're like our homelands, which they just did away with, " she said. "That's what we tried to do."
I stood before the woman, speechless, feeling like a witness whose testimony had unwittingly helped the defense when it was meant to help the prosecution.

TELKOM CALLS

I arrived in Durban on January 9 and five days later I submitted an application for a telephone with Telkom, the government-owned postal and telecommunications service.
"This isn't America," a representative handling my application informed me. "You can't submit an application in the morning and expect service the same day. We're not on a computer exchange system."

"When can I expect phone service," I asked.
The representative smiled. "I tell you what, I'll mark urgent on your application and maybe, if you're lucky, you'll have a phone in a couple of weeks." I smiled back, pleased.
People laughed when I told them I expected to have a telephone in two weeks. "Don't believe it," a chorus of voices refrained. "No one here gets a phone in less than six months. It's worse in Johannesburg."

In fact, 37 days after submitting my application, I got a telephone and only because an intimidating white male voice interceded.
The installer arrived on a Tuesday morning and the first words out of his mouth were: "Who is Mrs. Griffin."
"I'm Ms. Griffin," I said.
"Where is your husband," he asked next.
I paused, wondering: Is he asking because he might assault me? Is he asking because he might make a pass? Or, is he of the mind-set that a man must be behind the edict that pressed him into installing my telephone? I assumed the latter because, with each passing day, I'm finding just how patriarchal South African society is.

As the installer worked, I questioned him: How long have you worked for Telkom? Do you like your job? Did you go to a special school or did the company train you? Does the company have plans to switch to fiber optic cables? Why does it take so long to get a phone in this country!!!

"Yeah, yeah, fiber optics is coming," said the man, squatting on his bony haunches. "But the company has problems. I work seven days a week, you know, because we're so backed up. And theft is a big problem, not so much here in the city but in the rural areas. You know, the people they climb the polls and cut the cables, strip it for the copper. And the violence, in the townships. I feel bad for the people who need phones, but I'm not going back there and not the others (installers). We've had guys killed there. People are shooting at us and you don't even know from where. What's the use!"

An hour and a half after arriving, the installer finished. He packed his tools in a black case, picked up a roll of cable wires and headed towards the door.
"Look, I don't want to go back to the lobby," he said, pausing. "When I went down just now, a man was screaming, 'how come she gets a phone after being here one month and I've been waiting six." The installer added that he feared other disgruntled tenants might have joined the downstairs screamer.

"Gee, I don't know what to tell you," I said, easing him out the door and feeling not the least bit uneasy about sending him to the wolves in the lobby. Indeed, I had completely forgotten about the installer until two hours later when I remembered that I had an afternoon appointment. My mind began to replay the remarks of acquaintances and strangers who lamented their lack of phones, and I began to visualize their contorted faces and the tension in their bodies. That's when I decided to take the path of least resistance, which is to say I took the back stairs, tiptoeing ever so carefully, so as not to slip and fall on the waxed steps.

THE BUS STRIKE

I left my apartment at 7:30 a.m. to walk to a bus terminal to catch the 7:50 a.m. bus to the campus of the University of Natal, Durban. I follow this routine lots of mornings, especially since the start of my Zulu language class on Tuesdays and Fridays.

The driver of the 7:50 a.m. bus is always on time. In fact, the 30-ish Indian man usually arrives five minutes early, giving passengers time to board so he can collect fares and pull off at the designated minute. I've never known him to allow a passenger to board or depart in between designated stops. If you're not in the right place at the right time, too bad. He's a stickler for rules.

As a regular bus rider, I've gained bits of insight into the lives and personalities of some of the drivers. For instance, the driver of the 5:45 p.m. bus from campus to the city is stoop-shouldered because of his bad back. He recently returned to work after a year in which he spent time in and out of a hospital. A driver for 20 years, he wants to retire but he's not old enough to collect a pension. He's a smoker and, on occasion when it's just me on the bus, he stops to take a smoke and stretch. I don't mind, as I'm seldom in a hurry.

I try to avoid bus number 83. It's driven by a mustachioed black man, with beady eyes and a bottom lip that juts out farther than the top. He seldom bothers to button the shirt of his tan uniform and usually a black pen dangles from the crease of his heart-shaped lips. He drives as if he has a death wish, speeding down steep hills that lead from campus. Once he drove so close to trees standing alongside the road that limbs smashed two windows, showering glass on passengers.

I knew something was wrong when 7:50 a.m. ticked by and no bus appeared. The day before 400 striking Durban bus drivers stranded 100,000 commuters in the city's southern areas. The drivers were striking in support of a colleague who was suspended pending inquiry into alleged ticket fraud, according to news reports. What's more, as many as 1,000 municipal workers decided to show their solidarity by joining the strike.

So there we were, the bunch of us -domestic workers with scarves tied 'round their heads, mothers clutching small children, students weighted with backpacks, old women off to market- waiting, waiting, waiting for the no-show drivers.

Everyday it seems that strikes go on somewhere in South Africa. Postal workers in Johannesburg. Bus drivers in Durban. If it's not a strike, it's people refusing to pay their rent or their light bill or their electricity. If not that, it's social workers marching down West Street, demanding raises. Or, it's students at the University of Zululand, demanding that outstanding fees be scrapped and that all final year students be allowed to register, irrespective of academic performance. A week ago the Inkatha Freedom Party walked out of Parliament when it didn't get what it wanted.

Twenty minutes passed. No bus. Another 20 minutes ticked by. No bus. Finally, at 8:45 a.m. bus number 83 pulled up, right on schedule. And there sat "Richard Petty," grumpy as ever, pen dangling from his lips, shirt wide open, ready to roll.

THE COLOR PROBLEM/THE BLACK MAN'S BURDEN

"Hello, Mrs. Sutherland," I said, speaking by telephone to the history department office manager at the University of Natal. "This is Sharon Griffin."
"How are you, dear," she said, sweetly.
"Mrs. Sutherland is Neo there."
"No, he's not here," she said.

"Well, when he comes in, please ask him to call me," I said, anxiously. "He stopped by my apartment yesterday, and the toothless old goat at the front desk harassed him.
"When I arrived home last night, he behaved like a crazy man, frothing at the mouth about how some black man came looking for me, and how he made the man go away. He said: 'What if I had let him come to your apartment and you were in the shower and he came in and killed you.' "

I told the supervisor: "That man is a master's student at the university. I know him. Why didn't you let him upstairs to knock on my door."

My words meant nothing to the old nut, who stood before me bare-chested, dressed in nothing more than light blue shorts and brown mangy slippers. "How am I to know you know him,'" he barked, his lips flapping."You didn't tell me this man was coming here. What if he kills you, then I must answer to the (homeowners') board..."

Before I could say anything more, Mrs. Sutherland stopped me. "Listen, dear, you mustn't worry. We're used to that. We get stopped and thrown out of places all the time. I've been asked to leave restaurants. I didn't argue. I just asked if I could take the meal with me.

"I know they say South Africa is changing," Mrs. Sutherland, a chestnut brown Indian woman, added. "But not so much. Not so much."

When I put down the telephone, I felt worse rather than better, despite Mrs. Sutherland's awkward attempt to console me. I couldn't quite figure out what disturbed me more -the supervisor's Freudian twinning of race and sex, or the sad possibility that things change but "not so much. Not so much."

FOR THE WANT OF MONEY

Credit card use in South Africa is growing by leaps and bounds, according to a recent public affairs show I viewed. The commentator reported that one major food chain received 18,000 applications during the first month it began issuing cards. The show featured a black mother of three, shopping in a large department store for everything from clothing to household items. When she reached the cashier, a reporter asked: "Do you like using a credit card."

The woman smiled broadly and said: "Oh, yes because when the middle of the month comes and I don't have money, I use my card. And I use it when my children want something but I don't have money...because my children are not used to being told they cannot have."

I thought it an unfortunate editorial choice to feature a black woman to seemingly promote credit card use. Joblessness is particularly acute among black females here. Only 27 percent have jobs, according to the South Africa Labour and Development Research Unit based at the University of Cape Town. But even those black women fortunate enough to have decent jobs are often a paycheck away from poverty. Black female-headed households spend R259 ($75) a month on average, while their white equivalent spends R2,018 ($575). My concern is that credit card use, like drugs, can be addictive, especially in the hands of people with money management skills.

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One Friday I spent hours sifting through documents in the Natal Archives Depot in Pietermaritzsburg. I happened upon a document dated April 10, 1885 which speaks to the issue of debt. The document is a transcript of the translated testimony of a man named Wosiliscasa of the Amagwabi tribe. Wosiliscasa is presenting his case to "Geluza," the secretary for Native Affairs in Natal. His story is as follows:

Some time ago I was in want of money. And just as I was about to sell one of my cattle, I saw a whiteman who is known by us as "Mantyongo" -he lives near my kraal- who, when I informed him of my intention to sell a cow, replied, "Don't sell it, I will lend you money if you want it." He lent me 6.10 (in British sterling) and told me to return it in six months time with interest. I replied that I did not wish to borrow the money for such a long time, and that I would sell my cow and pay him back as soon as I could. I asked him for two months to pay it in.

I at once proceeded to try and sell my cow and soon saw a whiteman. I asked him to buy my cow, and he said, "let me go and see it first." But before seeing the animal he met the whiteman from whom I had borrowed 6.10, who told him that the cow was not mine and that all my cattle (5 in number) were his.

Soon after this I came across another whiteman "Helemu" to whom I sold my cow for 6 (British pounds). As I wanted 6.10 I asked him to lend me .10, which he did. After selling the cow I at once went to "Mantyongo" to repay him the money which I had borrowed. When I said "here is the 6.10," he replied in a very angry manner, "that is not the amount you owe. There is interest to be added. Your debt has now increased to 20 (British pounds)."

I then left him and went to Stanger about another case of mine, and whilst I was still there I heard that Mantyongo had taken away all my cattle, 4 head, one of which was broken in. On hearing this I at once went to Verulam, and on my arrival at that place, I heard that my cattle had been sold.

I spoke to the Induna (headman) about my case and expressed my wish to bring it before the regional magistrate. The Induna replied "Umlungu Kamangalelua," "Abelungu Kabalahlani" which signifies that it is impossible to bring a case against a whiteman without losing the same."

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While at Oxford I attended a few seminars on the economies of sub-Saharan Africa. I learned that 18 of the world's 20 poorest countries are African, and I learned new words and concepts such as "structural adjustment programs." Some lecturers argued that bankers -the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank- now control sub-Saharan Africa. The institutions bail countries out of bankruptcy and impose structural adjustment programs that do more harm to the poor than good.

The lecturers also maintained that the debt burden of most sub-Saharan countries is so astronomical that the presence of bankers -neo-colonialists- is ensured for decades to come. Whether or not this is entirely true, I don't know. But it sounds a lot like the situation Wosiliscasa found himself in 110 years ago. Suffice it to say, I have a lot to learn about cows, money and politics.

Best wishes,

Sharon F. Griffin

[1]Rutsch, Peter. "They are their master's voice." The Daily News(Durban, SA). 17 Jan. 1995, late ed.: 22.

[2]Ibid., p.22.

[3]Ukuphemba Umthethosisekelo Wakho. Creating Your Constitution. Community Law Centre, 1994, p. 88.

[4] Ibid., p.90.

[5]Ellen Jensen Krige, The Social System of the Zulus (1965), Shuter and Shooter (publishers), p. 176.

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