

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## The Marriage of Nkanyiso Dlamini and Lindi Buthelezi

Durban, South Africa  
April 1995Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, NH  
USA

Dear Peter,

On April 27 I stuffed four days of clothing into a travel bag and journeyed with a friend to the wedding of Nkanyiso Dlamini and Lindi Buthelezi. Their wedding rituals began in a black township outside of Pretoria and culminated in a chapel on the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal in the Durban suburb of Amanzimtoti.

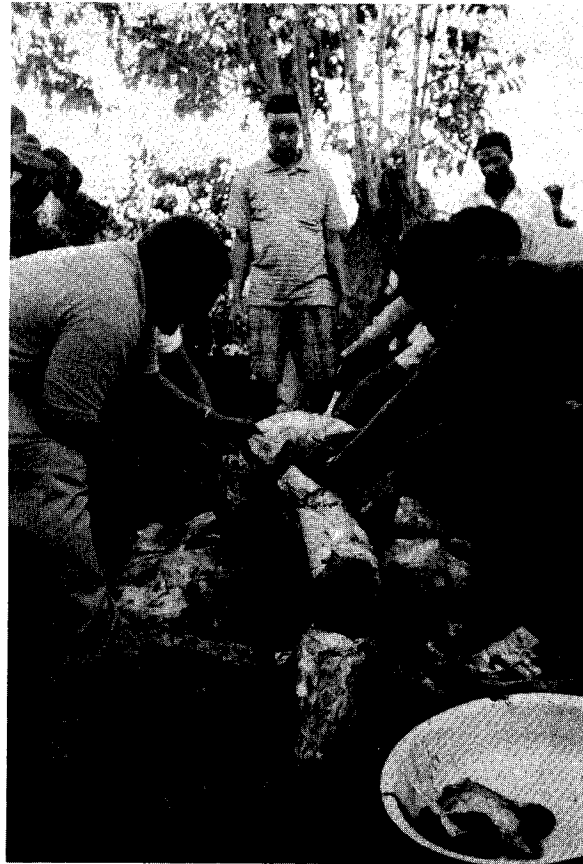
I love weddings. Memory tells me that I've attended one short of a dozen, and I strolled down the aisle as either a bride's maid or maid-of-honor in four of the 11. I played no role in the Dlamini's wedding, other than that of an observant guest. Truth told, the couple and I met the day before the ceremony. Nevertheless, I feel certain that no matter what else happens in the years that circle my life, I will not forget the umshado (wedding) of Nkanyiso and Lindi. Indelibly imprinted in my mind are the images of a cow slaughtered in sacrifice for ancestral spirits on the one hand and flower girls in frilly dresses and lace gloves on the other.

Both Nkanyiso and Lindi are teachers in the Durban metropolitan area -- the bride for two months, the groom for 10 years. Despite their urban, professional status, neither dared consider marriage without the blessing of their Zulu ancestors. That blessing required the slaughter of both a goat and a cow. The animals arrived by truck from a rural area. You cannot buy them dead from a butcher. They must be alive to scream at the moment of death to wake the ancestors. I missed the actual slaughter, but arrived just in time to see the cow's skin peeled from its flesh.

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Friends of the groom cut  
up a cow slaughtered  
in sacrifice to the  
ancestors of the  
bride and groom.



Nkanyiso and Lindi  
sit at the altar in  
Adams Chapel in  
the Durban suburb  
of Amanzimtoti.

The cow met its end at the home of Lindi's mother, Betty, who lives in the Pretoria township of Shoshanguve. I traveled there with one of Lindi's relatives, my friend Sibongile "Bo" Buthelezi, a teacher in Durban. We arrived a couple of hours before sunset. Shoshanguve is a maze of unpaved, red clay roads that lead to modest, mostly four-room houses. One hard, swollen road is indistinguishable from another. I know I could not find my way there again.

A blue and white marquee covered the front and driveway side of Betty Buthelezi's township house. Underneath the canopy, dozens of women neighbors set up chairs and tables and diced fruit and vegetables in anticipation of the next day's reception. Inside the house, a dozen more women, "aunties," buzzed around the kitchen, cutting the cow's heart, liver and intestines into bite-size pieces before throwing them onto a grill or into one of three cast iron cauldrons in the yard. The women became my teachers and I their eager student. They showed me, for example, which parts of the liver are reserved for women beyond child-bearing age. One put a knife into my hand and taught me to cut zigzag against the flesh of the cow. They showed me the shallow plastic tub which contained the cow's blood and explained how that blood will be boiled until it gels and then consumed. They also gave me a plate piled with what they consider the tastiest part of the cow -- its intestines. I confess that I could not bring myself to eat the gray-brown meat, which to me looked like sludge that plumbers fish out of clogged kitchen drains. My "teachers" frowned when I turned down the delicacy and rightfully so. After all, I told them that I eat chitterlings, or as we say in the American South, chitlin's. Chitlin's are the small intestines of a pig. They couldn't understand why I could eat one and turn up my nose at the other. Truth is, I couldn't explain my behavior. I guess it's all a matter of socialization.

From the moment of my arrival at the township house until the time I excused myself to ready for sleep, I ate meat, more than I've ever consumed in such a short span of time. We all did. Plates and plates of boiled and grilled beef passed before me. By the time a fifth, or maybe it was sixth, plate of meat landed in my hands I could stomach no more. I was seated next to a young man, a college teacher, who earned his master's degree at the University of Michigan. He explained that I mustn't turn down the meat. Instead, he urged me to take one bite and send the plate back. At least that way I would not offend. I took his advice and all remained happy with me.

Through all of this, I couldn't help but wonder about transporting a cow into city limits for slaughter. "Isn't it against the law?" I asked one of the many women bumping around the cramped house. "And what do you do if you live in the suburbs?" The woman gave me a blank stare, as if the question had never crossed her mind. "Law or no law, this is something we must do," she said, adding that without the blessing of the ancestors, who are wise beyond the years of the living, the marriage might fail or the couple might fail to produce a child. Later another aunt -- perhaps sensing my confusion at certain things -- explained that on occasions such as these "we put aside our education."

Education is highly valued among the family members of Nkanyiso and Lindi, so the woman's words spoke volumes to me. The house was filled with teachers, nurses, school principals, ministers, shop owners and the like. The chief negotiator for the groom, a principal, leaves in July to study for a master's degree at a university in Kansas City, Missouri. He told me of his academic plans, while cutting flesh from a leg of the cow.

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I awakened at 5:45 a.m. the day of the wedding, roused from my dreams by a voice saying, "good morning," and by the sudden brightness of an overhead light. I didn't move from my precious spot on the floor; nor did I open my eyes. I listened to heavy rain beating down on the corrugated tin roof and smelled the smoke of a weak fire. For a brief, dreamy moment my mind convinced me that I was in North Carolina at my grandparent's farmhouse, waking to rain dancing on the corrugated tin roof and to the smell of wood smoldering in a fireplace downstairs. But when I did not hear the whine of an opening door or the creak of my grandfather's footsteps on wood plank floors, I realized I was in another place and time. The woman who said good morning stood above me with a tray of coffee. I sat up and only then noticed that I shared the blanketed floor with two other women, while three more slept in a bed -- two horizontally, one vertically.

I heard pots rattling in the kitchen and bodies stirring in an adjacent room. "The groom will have to eat from the pot," my friend, Bo, said, as she sipped her coffee. I took her words as a riddle and gave up without trying. "Why? What are you talking about?" I said, still drowsy. "If it's raining on your wedding day, in our culture it means the groom must eat from the pot rather than a plate." When I asked for further explanation, my friend couldn't elaborate. I dropped the question, understanding that when people are so thoroughly steeped in their culture they often cannot explain what is second nature.

Water poured from the clouds throughout the day, turning townships roads into muddy red rivers. I rode with a relative to pick up a wedding guest who waited at a nearby petrol station after traveling by taxi van to the township. On the way, we saw a car stalled in a pool of water. I commented on how disgraceful it is that township roads are left in such ruin. True, the roads are a serious problem, my car companion said. But she added that there are greater worries. Political violence, for example, forced her out of her township home more than a year ago. "I'm just glad I got out alive," she said. "Others weren't so lucky."

At 4:45 p.m. family and friends began piling into cars to go to church. As there were many more people than cars, each vehicle made two and three trips. When time came for the bride and the two bride's maids to climb into a car, the house erupted with a chorus of traditional Zulu song. The music and gladness followed the car as it backed out of the driveway and started up the slippery road.

Inside the small wood-framed church, the rain became a memory. The minister spoke in Sotho and one of Lindi's uncles translated to Zulu. The ceremony was really no different than the eleven ceremonies I've witnessed in the U.S., except for the singing. There was no choir. The voices filling the church were those of family members and friends and, though I could not understand their words, the force and power behind them moved me. During one particular song I felt suspended in air, and I considered that it is this feeling of upliftment which for decades has drawn so many black Americans to small, wood-framed churches. As the bride and groom strolled out of the church, their families engaged in a competition of song. One side had their say, then the other. There was laughing and gesturing and finger pointing. My hosts explained that the bride's family sang of her virtues, while the groom's family sang of his. The bride's family, for example, sang that the Dlamini's are getting a special lady, worthy of special treatment. The Dlamini's responded with "we hope she's a good cook to cook for all of us."

Back at the house, it appeared as if the whole neighborhood trekked through mud to the wedding feast and feast it was. There was beef, of course, and chicken, as well as white rice, curried rice, phutu (a corn meal similar to grits) and six or seven different salads. A caterer hired to assist the family handed me pate on toasted bread. For drink, the choices ranged from champagne to beer to fruit punch. I dished out at least 200 bowls of rum raisin ice cream; cherry and lime jello, and fruit salad.

The relative who helped me spoon dessert into bowls explained that whenever a big affair such as a wedding occurs in a township the host family knows to expect 100 to 150 extra people. "It's never strictly a family affair," she said. "It's a community affair." Indeed, it was.

My head finally reached a pillow at maybe 3 a.m. Saturday, after traveling from Shoshanguve to a township somewhere East of Johannesburg. I curled into the fetal position and dozed off to sleep, wishing desperately that I had remembered to bring Maalox tablets to soothe what felt like a fat cow grazing in my knotted stomach.

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I stayed in the Durban township of LaMontville Saturday night at my friend Bo's home. Sunday morning we rose at 8 a.m. in preparation for church at 10 a.m. Bo explained that normally a second church service is not held. However, Nkanyiso's father is a minister and the members of his congregation want to meet the bride.

The drive to Adams Chapel in Amanzimtoti took close to 30 minutes. The chapel is located in an area once known as Adams Mission. (Even today people refer to the location as Adams Mission, though that is no longer its legal name.) Bo's family and I arrived before the rest of the wedding party and so stood outside the chapel, as congregants trickled in. My eyes fixed on a long, winding structural crack on the front of the chapel. Indeed, long after I left the chapel I continued to think about the crack, which seemed so ominous. I suppose it bothered me that a place with ~~such~~ historical significance in South Africa has been left to crack and wither.

I first became knowledgeable of Adams College, Adams College Chapel and Adams Mission in the autobiography of former African National Congress president general Albert Luthuli, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961. Founded as the Amanzimtoti Institute in 1853 by the American Board Missions and renamed in the 1930s after its pioneer medical missionary, Dr. Newton Adams, the college was intended to train teachers and ministers.<sup>1</sup> Chief Luthuli spent 15 years of his life teaching at Adams College and he met his wife there. I became even more enthralled by the history surrounding Adams Mission after reading a book titled "Not Either an Experimental Doll," which chronicles the correspondence of three remarkable South African women, one of whom attends and ultimately flees the college in 1951.

The old college buildings are still open but to students in their last years of high school, as far as I've been able to determine. Lindi graduated from the school, and I was stunned to learn that she had. When I saw the buildings the Sunday of her wedding, I couldn't have imagined that children actually spend time there. The structures look like abandoned warehouses, not fit for entry. Lindi's only comment about the school is that "it smells like urine."

Inside the chapel, three preachers spoke, including Nkanyiso's father. Regretably, I again missed the message, as it was given in Zulu. Nkanyiso and Lindi sat near the alter, facing out towards the congregation for all to see. They looked beautiful and my pew was situated close enough for me to see Lindi lovingly pick lint from a sleeve of Nkanyiso's tuxedo. Choirs sang at the service, and a male choral group danced. Again, I felt uplifted by the power and strength of their voices.

The service ended at 2 p.m. and cars then rode a short distance to the minister's house, where a tent had been erected to accommodate the family and friends of the bride and groom. Scores of church women served chicken, beef, goat, rice, pasta, beet salad, potato salad and lots more, while little children weaved in and out of the crowd, chasing one another and wrestling in their Sunday bests.

After a around of cheers, toasts to the bride and groom and the cutting of the wedding cake, we moved outside of the tent to plastic chairs set up on the scraggly lawn. I sat next to Bo's mother, a wise 65-year-old who teaches me something new each time we meet. Lindi and the bride's maids appeared from the side of the house, now dressed in traditional clothing, ready for the umabo -- the giving of gifts by the bride to the bridegroom's people. They sat on a mat covering the ground. The brother of Lindi's late grandfather rose from his chair and, with stick in hand, marched around the yard, reciting Lindi's lineage and explaining to the Dlamini family that she is in excellent health. Nkanyiso's father followed suit, pacing back and forth, proclaiming to the Buthelezi's that his son is a man of integrity and in excellent health.

Lindi's several aunts then took center stage. They gave traditional Zulu mats and blankets to members of Nkanyiso's family, even to grandparents who have long passed. This is done to build good relations between the two families, Bo's mother explained. The blankets were the most beautiful I have ever seen; I dare not imagine the cost. I commented to one of the aunts that the wedding must have been a great expense for Lindi's mother, especially the purchase of such exquisite blankets. "Yes," she said, "she spent everything she has because Lindi is everything to her."



Lindi and the bride's maids sit on traditional mats during the umabo -- the distribution of wedding gifts by the bride to the bridegroom's people.



Two of the bridegroom's relatives dance in appreciation for gifts given to the groom's paternal grandparents, both of whom are deceased.



At the end of the gift giving came a sad moment. It is the time when the aunts deliver Lindi to the groom's home, which in this case meant his father's home in Adams Mission, where the couple stayed the night. The mother of the bride cannot go with her daughter to her new home. "Why?," I asked. No one seemed to know; they speculated that it is because the mother cries too much. "Not so much today, but in olden times the mother knew how much work faced the daughter in her new home," replied one aunt.

The aunties walked with Lindi to the porch of the minister's house, where they joined other women. The women circled the new bride and appeared to counsel her. They also gave her a special head wrap and a brown, checkered wool blanket to pin around her shoulders to signify that she is now married. For as long as her mother-in-law requires, Lindi must wear both articles of clothing in public. That could mean one day or one year. My parting glance of Lindi was of her inside the circle of elder women.

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In retrospect, I believe I witnessed not only the union of two people but the marriage of traditional and "modern" practices. At the wedding reception in Adams Mission people sang traditional Zulu songs, along with a few rounds of "for they are jolly good fellows." South Africa's leaders are struggling to achieve a similar synthesis between traditional African democracy and Western political precepts and norms. Here in KwaZulu-Natal intense divisions exist between urban and rural Zulus and between what is considered "traditional" areas and "democratic" areas.

An estimated 2.7 million people in KwaZulu-Natal live under the rule of amakhosi (traditional leaders). Numbers of them view cities as killers of culture and urban dwellers as pitiful orphans, estranged from their customary roots and misguided by Western influences. As one woman shared, "it is up to us...rural communities to keep up the good work of safeguarding our traditions and customs...and declare the so-called Western influences null and void." The same person believes that if society can turn back the hands of time and do away with the migrant labor system "our beautiful culture can be restored back. This is really the system that brought down our beautiful culture. A man will leave a wife behind to go the cities to work. He will meet these women of the cities who have no culture and no respect at all for it."

Rural and semi-rural people worry that democracy will destroy their values, habits, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies. Will the ritual slaughter of cows be allowed when new local government structures are finally put in place? Will they be allowed to take the cow's horns and put them on their rondavel? Will they retain the right to have their feasts right through the night, singing and dancing? And will new government structures allow them to bury their loved ones at the gate of their kraal (homestead)? These are among the questions that rural and semi-rural people have, Dr. Sibongile Zungu pointed out during a recent breakfast briefing sponsored by the local Diakonia Council of Churches.

Dr. Zungu, a medical practitioner, is chief of a district located about two hours north of Durban. Her views and opinions have been featured in most of the nation's major newspapers recently. "Are we not running the risk of buying for rural African people new democratic and electoral institutions born in an anonymous urban milieu and then finding this new gadget a few months later piling up with dust and rust on the landscape of our rural communities?," she said during the March 30 breakfast meeting.

Dr. Zungu believes, as does Herbert W. Vilakazi -- a professor of sociology at the University of Zululand -- that South Africa should consider the British model of governance, with its House of Lords and House of Commons. "(The British) managed to work out a marriage between their tradition and the demands of modernity," the two wrote in a recent Finance Week article. "They maintained the Monarchy and the House of Lords; to meet modernity they fashioned the House of Commons. Together, the House of Commons and the House of Lords form Parliament. Even though the accommodation of the needs of modernity have vastly reduced the power of the House of Lords in favour of the House of Commons, the former has not been consigned to the dustbin of history."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Zungu and Vilakazi further believe that amakhosi (traditional leaders) should participate in all three tiers of government -- local, provincial and national -- with voting powers.

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I saw Lindi the week after her wedding. She stopped by my South Beach apartment, while Nkanyiso worked at his night teaching job on Smith Street. He holds down a day teaching job, too.

We strolled two blocks to the beachfront and watched as children chased pigeons, as joggers pounded the pavement, as skaters zipped past on roller blades and as couples sauntered by hand-in-hand.

We bought chocolate-dipped ice cream cones and gazed at pink-hued clouds suspended on the horizon, while also trying to keep the chocolate from dripping on our blouses.

Lindi and Nkanyiso are typical of numbers of urban, professional black South Africans I have met since arriving here. They hold dear their Zulu traditions and culture; they're proud of their history and enjoy the celebration of rituals. Yet they wouldn't think of returning to a strictly traditional way of life.

Lindi told me that in traditional Zulu culture a new bride, on her first day in the home of her new family, is supposed to awaken early to prepare breakfast, not only for the husband but for his entire family. Unfortunately, Lindi overslept her first morning as a bride. By the time she stepped onto the Dlamini's front porch, family members were already sipping their morning tea.

Though a late riser, Lindi didn't forget to don her head wrap and the bulky wool blanket. She dressed as tradition requires of a new wife. However, her mother-in-law took one look at her and told her to take off the blanket. "It's too hot," she told Lindi. Lindi said she happily yanked the blanket from her shoulders. Then she poured herself a cup of tea and savoured the start of a new way of life.

My sincere regards,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Sharon', with a stylized, flowing script.

Sharon F. Griffin

Sources:

<sup>1</sup>Not Either an Experimental Doll. Ed. Shula Marks.  
Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal P, 1987. 19-20.

<sup>2</sup>Zungu, Dr. Sibongile, and Vilakazi, Herbert. "The Answer is  
in the Soil: A Case for a Blend of Elected and Hereditary  
Leadership." Finance Week. April 6-12, 1995: 7.