

THE FATE OF XOLOBENI WOULD BE THE FATE OF US ALL.

Working Document n°2

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research

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The community of Umgungundlovu, also known as Xolobeni, has been fighting off the Australian mining company Transworld Energy and Mineral Resources and the Department of Minerals and Resources.
Madelene Cronjé / New Frame

Xolobeni is a rural village in South Africa's Eastern Cape. If there were no titanium underneath the village and its land, the name Xolobeni would not be known to many people outside the Wild Coast region. And yet, there is titanium, and there is therefore the obligatory multinational mining corporation (the Australia-based firm Mineral Commodities). Because the land is so precious to the people, and because they see themselves as the stewards of the land, they formed the Amadiba Crisis Committee (ACC) to defend their right to land and to the place. This is theirs, not only by right of property but also because they know that the mining company will eventually destroy the land and further endanger the planet. All of the major themes of our times resonate in the struggle waged by the ACC against not only the Australian mining firm, but also against a government that takes a position with the firm rather than with the people: climate catastrophe, the annihilation of culture, out of control corporations, a compromised State, and the destruction of land and community.

This Working Document is researched and written by the South African journalist Kevin Bloom. Bloom is the author of two powerful books about the African continent – its history and present – as well as its possible futures: *Ways of Staying* (2010, which won the South African Literary Award) and *Continental Shift: A Journey into Africa's Changing Fortunes* (2016). The text below, like his books, peels away at the many layers of the conflict around Xolobeni, offering a view of the intertwined contradictions of capitalism. At **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**, we are closely monitoring the currents of 21st century capitalism, with our eye focused on the mining sector. This Working Document is a small voice in those large currents.



I. Signpost

From Mzamo Dlamini's front porch there is an uninterrupted view of the gorge that Hollywood director Ed Zwick once chose as a stand-in for hell. The endemic plant life that clings to the banks of the Mzamba River, the sheer cliffs that enclose their own sub-tropical micro-climate, the cinematic confluence of water and land and sky, were for Zwick the perfect body double for the alluvial diamond mines of Sierra Leone. It was just a short walk from here in 2006 that Leonardo DiCaprio, flaunting a plausible South African accent, pretended to die at the hands of a mining-funded rebel cartel.

'We always knew that the strategy was to take the three of us out', Dlamini said, speaking not of the Oscar-nominated *Blood Diamond* but of the real threats to his life. 'Even before 2015 there had been some attempts, which is why I didn't really like to stay at home. We would hear from our sources, there were times when the hit men would be caught waiting for us'.

By 'the three of us', Dlamini meant himself, Nonhle Mbuthuma, and Sikhosiphi 'Bazooka' Rhadebe, who back in 2015 had been the three joint leaders of the Amadiba Crisis Committee, the local activist organisation formed in 2007 to keep an Australian prospecting company from mining the titanium-rich dunes of the Pondoland Wild Coast. On 22 March 2016, Rhadebe had been [shot dead](#) less than 10 kilometres from here by two assassins posing as policemen. Some months later, Dlamini had resigned from the leadership of the crisis committee to join the municipal council — but not before he had [publicly accused](#) Mark Caruso, the chief executive of the Australian company, of sponsoring a violent campaign to break the resistance of the activists.



And so the question for Dlamini, given that the South African government had for years been trying to convince the locals that Caruso's titanium mine would deliver them from poverty, was this: had his own resistance since been broken?

'The municipality is not so involved in this mining thing', he said, halfway through that initial interview in December 2018; 'you only see them when the minister comes'.

It was a statement that spoke of a plot line infinitely more intricate than the one dreamed up by Hollywood. For starters, there was the reference to Gwede Mantashe, South Africa's then minister of mineral resources, who three months earlier had visited the village of Xolobeni in the heart of the Amadiba region to attend a community meeting. Two days after the meeting, on 25 September 2018, Amnesty International had [issued a report](#) condemning the excessive use of force by the South African police (SAPS). Witness testimony, video footage, and photographs revealed how SAPS had used tear gas, stun grenades, and death threats to disperse the 'peaceful' anti-mining protests. Richard Spoor, the crisis committee's lawyer, who had asked Minister Mantashe to intervene, had been arrested for *crimen injuria* — prompting Amnesty International to demand an immediate withdrawal of charges. It all amounted, noted the world's most powerful human rights organisation, to a basic contempt for the people's decision to 'defend their ancestral lands'.

Then, in late November 2018, there was the judgment handed down by Annali Basson of the North Gauteng High Court. A watershed ruling that placed the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act on an



equal footing with the Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Act, it sided with the applicants from Xolobeni in determining that *they* — and not the government in Pretoria — had the right to say whether mining could happen in their backyard. The core of the ruling hinged on the dispute between community *consultation*, which the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act stipulates as a minimum requirement before a mining right can be granted, and community *consent*, as stipulated by the Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Act. The latter won, prompting Mantashe to [complain to City Press](#) newspaper that within ten years there would be no more mining in South Africa. The [mining experts](#) at South Africa's major law firms agreed, citing wholesale divestment and the crippling of the industry as an almost certain consequence of the judgment.

But Dlamini was adamant that these pro-mining types were not his new friends. He had been 'deployed' to the ANC-led municipal council, he insisted, so that the crisis committee could have its man on the inside — even if the local council had zero say over decisions made at the national level.

'Because in the same way we have people telling us when we are going to be killed', he said, 'we have people telling us that this is never going to end'.

Indeed, in the more than two dozen interviews that went into the reporting for this story, there was no one who believed that the Basson judgment was anywhere near the final chapter. On the contrary, with Mantashe signalling in December 2018 his intention to appeal the judgment — and with the future of the South African mining industry apparently at stake



— Basson’s interpretation of the law was seen as the country’s entry into a much larger global fight. In this context, the crux was those parts of the judgment where reference was made to the rights of ‘indigenous people’ in international law. In other words, while the mining lawyers were objecting to Basson’s citation of treaties that South Africa had not even signed, activists were beginning to refer to Xolobeni as the country’s ‘Standing Rock’.

Like the movement of indigenous Sioux against the [Dakota Access Pipeline](#) in the US, this was now becoming the story of how a small group of rural agitators, branded ‘anti-development’ because of their commitment to the old ways, were standing in the path of state policy. It was becoming the story of the fight for water sovereignty, food sovereignty, and the sovereignty of their ancestors’ graves. It was becoming the story of non-violent resistance in the face of a government that was all too willing to crack skulls. And although it had always been these things — the Xolobeni story, after all, had been exhibiting such elements since soon after the Australians arrived on the beaches in 1996 — two more things happened in the final months of 2018 that shifted it all into a global gear.

The first was the IPCC’s, or Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s, [special report on global warming of 1.5°C](#), which alerted mainstream Western media to the fact that continued abuse of the natural environment was likely to wipe out much of modern civilisation by the end of the twenty-first century. The second was the election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil on a right-wing populist ticket that promised further reclamation of the Amazon rainforest — already [losing its status](#) as one of the planet’s most important carbon sinks — for mining and commercial agriculture.



Climate change, in more ways than just rising oceans and swelling deserts, was making the world smaller, perhaps even simpler. As in Dakota, the parallels with Xolobeni were there for anyone with the eyes to see. While Brazil's indigenous leaders had been hoping that Bolsonaro's war talk would turn out to be an election ploy, by February 2019 their hopes would lie in ruins. In the three months following his election, native Amazonian communities would see their healthcare centres set ablaze and their villages firebombed. By late July 2019, around the time that the [alleged murder](#) of an indigenous chief by gold miners was making global headlines, data would confirm that Bolsonaro's policies were deforesting the Amazon at the [rate](#) of three football fields per minute.

'The difference is that now these attacks are institutionalised', Angela Amanakwa Kaxuyana, an indigenous activist in Brazil, [explained](#) in February, 'as in the president *himself* incites hatred'.

Mining and commercial agriculture in the Global South had found its earthly avatar in Bolsonaro. If the situation was not quite as dire in South Africa, exactly how far removed from the Brazilian lodestar were we? The quest for answers to this question would coincide with the release of several unprecedented reports — all backed by the scientific method — that pointed to ancient and indigenous farming practices as one of the most effective bulwarks against humanity's growing list of existential threats.





20 November 2018: Community members making their way to Komkhulu for a meeting that was supposed to include the mayor.

Madelene Cronjé / New Frame

II. Nutrient

The village of Xolobeni and the Amadiba region of which it is part occupy the north-eastern corner of what is known to botanists as the Pondoland Centre of Endemism, or PCE, a [global biodiversity hotspot](#). From the Umtamvuna River in Port Edward, which lies just two kilometres north of the Mzamba, to the Kei River in the south — an area of just 1,880 square kilometres — over 2,200 species of plant life can be found, of which an [estimated 196 species](#) are endemic. Although an extensive international study has yet to be done, new species continue to be discovered on a regular basis; by comparison, the entire United Kingdom contains [less than 50](#) endemic plants.

To qualify as a biodiversity hotspot, a region must have 1,500 vascular plants, meaning it must have ‘a high percentage of plant life found nowhere else on the planet’. To get to this number, Conservation International and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) includes the PCE in the [Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany](#) complex, which runs down the east coast of the continent from Xai-Xai in Mozambique to Port Elizabeth in South Africa. As one of 36 such hotspots, it is part of just 2.4 percent of the earth’s land surface that supports more than half of the world’s plant species as endemics.

‘From residents of the urban centres of Maputo, Durban, and Port Elizabeth’, [noted CEPF](#) in April 2010, ‘to commercial farmers and foresters, to traditional pastoral cultures of the Zulu, Xhosa and Swazi and artisanal fishing culture in Mozambique, all are dependent on the region’s natural resources for their livelihoods and well-being’.



And it is the rivers and streams that do most of the heavy lifting. Of the eleven river gorges that support the highest biodiversity in the PCE, three run through the 22 kilometre stretch of coast that makes up the Amadiba region — the Mzamba, the Mnyameni, and the Mtentu (as we will see below, the Kwanyana, which is technically a stream, is thought by conservationists to hold even higher biodiversity, especially in its estuary, where the mineral-rich red dunes are located). The endemic plant life in these forested ravines in turn supports the rich biodiversity on the grassland plateaus, where the Amadiba locals farm their crops — and where, given the worldwide disappearance of the biodiversity that underpins human food systems, Xolobeni validates its place on the global frontline.

On 22 February 2019, the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) released the [first ever report of its kind](#), detailing how the plants, animals, insects, and micro-organisms that keep soils fertile, pollinate flora, purify air and water, sustain the health of trees, and fight crop and livestock disease are, effectively, dying off. Prepared by the FAO under the auspices of the [Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture](#), the report was based on information provided by more than 90 countries, analysing the latest global data.

'Biodiversity for food and agriculture is indispensable to food security', stated the report in its executive summary, after noting that pesticides and mineral fertilisers — as deployed for decades by the conglomerates that uphold industrial monoculture — had been starving the world's ecosystems of nutrients. 'Biodiversity makes production systems and livelihoods more resilient to shocks and stresses, including to the effects of climate change'.



The top-line mitigation strategies flagged by the 530-page report were straightforward enough: mosaics of regenerative production and the integration of trees and indigenous flora; management of greenhouse gas emissions via livestock and crop rotation; optimisation of organic fertiliser use through closed nutrient cycles. What was not immediately apparent, however — at least not to the current South African government, whose views were in line with all previous governments stretching back to 1948 — was that these strategies comprised the core farming practices of the Amadiba locals.

‘If they take the land away, we will starve’.

For Malungelo Dlamini, Mzamo’s uncle, it was as simple as that. He was sitting on a plastic crate, with the sea behind him and the Mzamba River gorge over his left shoulder, remembering a time when the community had fewer concerns. At age 79, Malungelo had played an active role in the [Pondo Revolt](#) of the late ’50s and early ’60s, when peasants throughout Pondoland pushed back against the apartheid state and their own co-opted chiefs. At the core of the revolt was the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act, which had created the legislative basis for ethnic self-government and the system of forced removals. It was, in essence, a rebellion motivated by the land itself: who controlled it, where people could live on it, how it was used.

‘The previous government wanted to build a fence and force us out’, said the elder Dlamini, ‘but we dug a big hole and their truck fell inside. The following day the chiefs called a meeting and everything was stopped’.



From that moment until the arrival of the Australian prospectors, the women and children of Amadiba were left alone. As Govan Mbeki [put it](#) in his seminal *The Peasants' Revolt*, by 1960 'the Pondos had successfully smashed the Bantu Authorities system'. The apartheid state hit back, of course, forcing the men into the migrant labour system, but the culture of activism would be carried over to resistance on the mines. Not only would the National Union of Mineworkers draw deeply on the organisational experience of the men who took part in the rebellion; resistance in post-apartheid South Africa would drink from this same well too. In a mammoth project to commemorate the 34 striking miners who were shot dead by riot police at Marikana on 16 August 2012, journalist Niren Tolsi [alerted](#) the country to a profound parallel: 'The miners congregating on the Marikana koppies is also reminiscent of the Pondo Revolt of 1960 and their gatherings and massacre on Ngquza Hill in the Eastern Cape, a province where the majority of the dead miners came from'.

Meanwhile, back in Amadiba, the old ways had remained largely intact. The spread of homesteads across the grasslands, wide and generous with room for the endemic plant life to breathe, had not altered much since the early 1800s, when the first settlements were established. The decades and centuries of living in harmony with the coastal ecosystem, the respect for the rhythms of the seasons and the needs of the soil, the understanding that indigenous vegetation was not something to be subdued, had resulted in crops that were prized for their size and savour — maize, onions, yams, sweet potatoes, spinach, carrots, lemons, guavas.



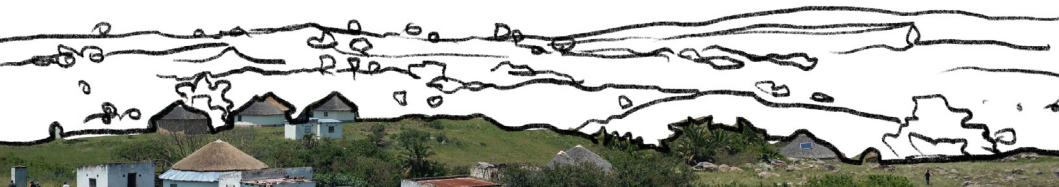
For the last few years, after a lifetime as subsistence farmers, Malungelo and his brother Matom had been working for their other ‘son’ Malombo Dlamini, who had capitalised on the natural bounty to build a thriving sweet potato business. The soil was so rich that the business had zero fertiliser overheads; instead, the nutrient provider was still kraal manure.

‘When I sell in Durban, if my competitors from other areas are selling, they will choose my sweet potatoes’, Malombo said. ‘People have taken tubers from sweet potatoes from here and planted them in other places, but they’re not the same’.

If anything, aside from the boons that the old farming practices continued to bring to Amadiba, what the business represented was a rare and tight connection — observable throughout the region — between the elders and the youth. At 35, although the Pondo Revolt was for Malombo a distant lesson from oral history, he saw the world pretty much as Malungelo and Matom did.

‘We support each other’, said Malombo, ‘because the government wants to chase us away, they want to use this land. So where are we going to live? Are we going to live in the sky? Are we going to live in the Mzamba River?’

Again and again, it came back to the land — and the stories, statements, and contexts were directly reflective of the civic action campaigns that had been gaining traction in the Global North since the release of October 2018’s ground breaking IPCC report. For instance, the response to the IPCC of the [Climate Land Ambition and Rights Alliance](#), or CLARA, an

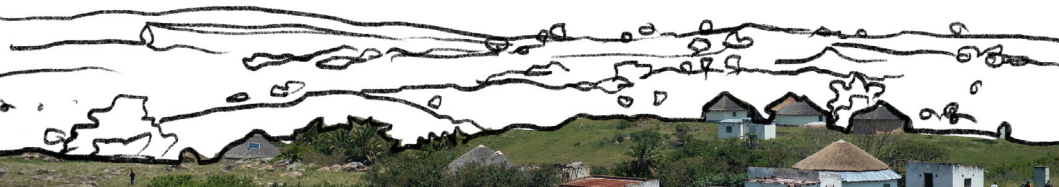


international network that brings together non-profit organisations, scientists, farmers, and indigenous leaders to demonstrate the value of local solutions in tackling climate change. CLARA's contention was that the 91 international climate scientists who had authored the IPCC report, in their efforts to mitigate the worsening cycle of droughts, floods, tropical storms, and polar ice-melts that were occurring as a result of humanity's inability to reduce emissions — a scenario, the scientists warned, that would end in wide-ranging societal collapse if a U-turn was not effected by 2030 — had focused too heavily on the 'untested approach' of carbon removal technologies.

Better than potentially disastrous measures like bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) or solar geo-engineering, the response stated, were measures that secured the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities.

'While half of the world's land is associated with a "customary land use" claim', noted CLARA, 'only 10% is legally under indigenous and community ownership. Securing community land rights represents an effective, efficient and equitable climate action that governments can undertake to protect the world's forests'.

This same sentiment would be echoed in May 2019 by a report dubbed 'the biggest and worst news humanity has ever received'. Prepared by 145 leading experts from 50 countries, the global assessment by the UN's Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, or IPBES, confirmed that the natural world was in the midst of



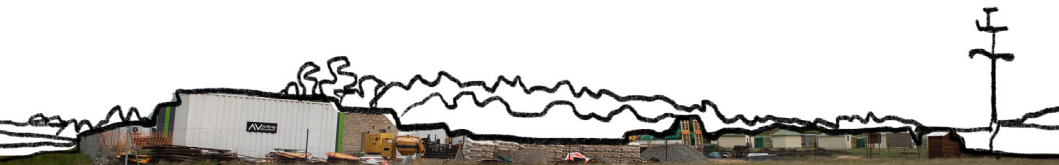
an unprecedented crisis, with extinction rates tens to hundreds of times higher than they had been in the past 10 million years.

The phrase ‘indigenous’ was mentioned 32 times in the 40-page [summary for policymakers](#), with the following on page six providing a précis of what the IPBES authors — ecologists, zoologists, botanists, marine biologists, and climatologists — meant by their use of the term: ‘Regional and global scenarios lack an explicit consideration of the views, perspectives and rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, their knowledge and understanding of large regions and ecosystems and their desired future development pathways’.

And where the link with land rights in Xolobeni was obvious, it was not just the forests that the IPBES and CLARA scientists were talking about — grasslands and peatlands were marked as critical too, with the avoidance of ‘ecosystem conversion to other land-uses’ cited as ‘the first priority to prevent CO₂ emissions entering the atmosphere’.

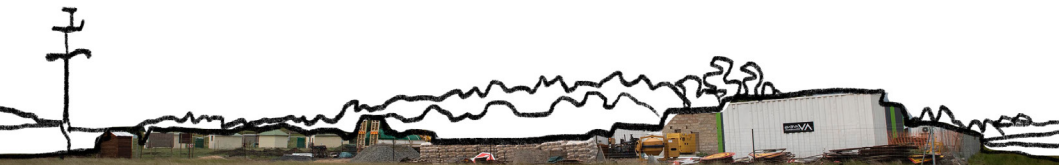
Then there was the part about agriculture, which reflected the FAO report, but with the added ingredient of the world’s [rapidly accelerating carbon emissions](#), an intractable and desperate situation that was quickly shifting *adaptation* onto the same level of urgency as *mitigation*.

‘In light of population pressures’, warned CLARA, ‘there is danger that “sustainable intensification” may just increase reliance on industrial farming models that deepen inequality and erode stores of natural capital, contrary to agro-ecological approaches. On the production side, assisting smallholders to adapt to climate change is the most urgent priority that



addresses both food security and leads to a transformative pathway for agriculture’.

In Pondoland, this refusal of industrial farming had literally been burnt into the soil — the Pondo Revolt was born out of the fight against the Land Reclamation Scheme, in which the nascent apartheid state called in the police to enforce stock control, fencing, culling, and the division of arable land from grazing land. The people resisted then. They are resisting now.





20 November 2018: Komkhulu ('The Great Place') where the meeting took place. The mayor was scheduled to speak but she canceled last minute.
Madelene Cronjé / New Frame

III. Komkhulu

On 16 January 2019, when Gwede Mantashe ignored the pleas of local and international human rights groups and returned to Amadiba, he chose as his venue a place that had long been an enclave of the pro-mining faction. Not only was Xolobeni Junior Secondary School the site of visits by previous mining ministers — most notably [a visit by Buyelwa Sonjica in August 2008](#), during an early attempt by government to push the mining licence through — it was also the site of what appeared to be a criminal use of force perpetrated by the South African police upon the pupils of the school.

‘Police in Transkei are being investigated for allegedly beating up school children opposed to the planned titanium mining on the Wild Coast’, wrote Malungelo Boozi of the Daily Dispatch newspaper in October 2008. The complaint had been laid with the Independent Complaints Directorate, the precursor to the Independent Police Investigative Directorate, by social worker John Clarke. According to a chapter entitled ‘[Sjambokked](#)’ in Clarke’s book *The Promise of Justice*, the close proximity to the school of the homes of the brothers Zamile ‘Madiba’ and Zamokwakhe ‘Basheen’ Qunya, leaders of the local pro-mining faction, had everything to do with the incident.

‘It is reasonable to suggest’, noted Clarke in his report to the ICD, ‘that in the eyes of the Qunya family the Xolobeni JS School has become part and parcel of the mining enterprise, if not their personal fiefdom. Whatever the allegiances or personal views of the principal may be, it is obvious that the Qunya brothers, as influential members of the school community, would have been angered by what they may have



perceived as a youth rebellion because of their refusal to wear school uniforms and perform for [Minister Sonjica's] visit'.

Although Madiba Qunya had assented to a lengthy telephone interview in December 2018, with an invitation to 'call back anytime', neither he nor his brother would respond to the follow-up questions about these allegations. Either way, Clarke's report had stated that for some time after the whippings delivered by the adult male police officers, many of the pupils — girls and boys ranging in age from 15 to 18 — could not sit down 'because of the lingering pain'. The ICD, according to Clarke, had confirmed the incident and recommended that the police officers be disciplined — but the command structure had 'shrugged it off'. A formal letter of complaint had later been sent to then education minister Naledi Pandor, who had failed to respond. And so Richard Spoor, who was already serving as the crisis committee's lawyer, had arranged for an attorney by the name of John Wills to institute a class action lawsuit against the minister of police. But, although over 60 families had joined the action, wrote Clarke, Wills had not been able to find an advocate to take the case on risk.

'When they started preying on children', Clarke would say, recalling the incident in January 2019, 'they tapped into a deeper sentiment than greed'.

This was exactly the message that the Amadiba Crisis Committee, or ACC, planned to give Mantashe when he came back to Xolobeni Junior Secondary School after his disastrous visit of September 2018. But at 10am on the morning of 16 January, just as proceedings were due to start, the mineral resources minister was out visiting the dunes, his cavalcade of Audis back dropped by the rainclouds and the sea.



‘He didn’t even ask permission from the elders’, said Nonhle Mbuthuma, who in the years since Rhadebe’s murder had become the ACC’s leading public voice.

If anything lay at the heart of the anger that the 250 rain-soaked members of the crisis committee were beginning to vent, it was this, a matter at once delicate and explosive. Back in December 2018, during a meeting with Mbuthuma in the ACC’s makeshift offices in Port Edward, it was to the concept of respect that the conversation kept returning.

‘Can you imagine, they were drilling in our graves’, she’d said, remembering the time she had first encountered the prospectors, when she was a young schoolgirl and the trucks came in the middle of the night. ‘They were driving through our fields; I couldn’t believe it. We took knobkerries and tried to chase them out’.

And yet to hear Mbuthuma tell it, there had been one display of disrespect that outdid all the rest — one fundamental reason that, come 10:30 am with still no sign of the minister, the activists were toyi-toying in the marquee set up and paid for by their government. That reason, in a word, was *Komkhulu* — the ‘Great Place’ — where decisions that affected the community were arrived at by consensus, where anyone could speak but all were bound by the rules of debate. It was at *Komkhulu* that matters to do with the use and allocation of land had traditionally been settled; it was at *Komkhulu* that Madoda Ndovela had spoken out against mining in 2003, mere days before his murder; and it was at *Komkhulu* that the ACC had been formed in June 2007, a decision that had drawn in 900 active members by November of that year.



Komkhulu, for Mantashe, was way more than an inconvenience: it was a gathering place he could not acknowledge, let alone attend.

In a press release sent out by the Department of Mineral Resources on 14 January 2019, it was claimed that the ACC, during a private meeting on 17 November 2018, had invited the minister back. What the ACC had actually said, their own release stated, was that the elders had informed Mantashe that any discussion about the land happened ‘at the Great Place’. The crux under customary law was that the land was communally held — which was why it was enough for Judge Basson that 68 of the 74 directly affected homesteads had joined the litigation against government, and in turn was why, presumably, Mantashe felt compelled to insult not just Pondo tradition but the Pretoria High Court itself.

As [pointed out](#) in December 2018 by Aninka Claasens, one of South Africa’s foremost experts on the legal rights of mining-affected communities, ‘90 percent of new mining applications relate to land in the former homelands’. Like a light switch, it was an observation that brought everything into focus.

After the Basson judgment, Claasens reminded us, *nine out of ten* submissions to the Department of Mineral Resources were all of a sudden bound by the provisions of the Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Act, which had been passed in 1996 to safeguard the security of tenure of the residents of the former Bantustans. The government and their private sector mining partners had been ignoring this short piece of legislation for more than two decades, dealing with communities by employing consultants and paying off chiefs, but now the game was up. Not only had Judge



Basson affirmed the Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Act as a legal reality, requiring that before mining could happen a community had to offer its ‘free and informed’ consent, but the Constitutional Court, four weeks before the Xolobeni judgment, had [raised the status of the Act](#) to common law, which gave it infinitely more weight.

The dilemma for Mantashe — the intractable catch-22 — was that the people of the former homelands, people that the government itself deemed ‘the poorest of the poor’, had stopped believing that mining would rescue them from penury. It was a lesson that had filtered down from the platinum belt in South Africa’s former Bantustan of Bophuthatswana — specifically, the lesson that was delivered by the [Bapo ba Mogale](#) and [Bakgatla ba Kgafela](#), traditional communities whose natural resources and subsistence livelihoods had been destroyed by the likes of Lonmin, Anglo Platinum, and Pallinghurst Resources. When the men of Xolobeni returned home from work on these mines, they returned with news of what they had seen in the adjacent shantytowns.

With all of that in mind — with the mining industry on his back; with the development policy of the ANC still anchored firmly in what these resource companies could pull out the ground — how could Mantashe not return to Xolobeni?

In the event, his [master class in coercive dissembling](#) was a thing to behold. He arrived late, blustered like a schoolyard bully about ‘co-existence’ and ‘hard work’, and dismissed the Basson judgment as ‘*ububhanxa*’ — meaning ‘idiocy’, or less politely, ‘bullshit’. And then, at question time, he got dirty.



‘I’m a member of the ACC’, said the first and only person picked to ask a question from the government-sponsored stage, ‘and we have agreed that we want mining, but a white person came and told us to disagree’.

The whistling and shouting from the real members of the ACC were all to the effect that this person was fake.

‘We have never seen him before, he’s not from here’, Mbuthuma said, after the police had fired their stun guns and physically assaulted an ACC sympathiser. ‘We asked Mantashe to continue the meeting so that we could put our questions to him, but he closed the proceedings and left’.





20 November 2018: Mabhude Danca and Nonhle Mbathuma, founder of the Amadiba Crisis Committee.

Madelene Cronjé / New Frame

IV. Encroachment

A short walk from Siyabonga Ndovela's place, up the gravel road and to the left of the top of the waterfall that drops into the Mtentu River gorge, there is a front row seat to a natural spectacle that not even David Attenborough was able to explain. For a few weeks each year, the kingfish, one of the ocean's most efficient solitary hunters, gather together in schools to become what Attenborough termed 'dedicated pilgrims'. Breaking through the river mouth, the fish — each the weight and length of a large adult human — swim to a demarcated place upstream, where, 'in response to an unknown cue', they begin to circle. They do not come to breed, or to hunt. Why do they circle? Nobody knows.

The kingfish have been performing this ritual for as far back as anyone in Ndovela's family can remember — and not one member of his family, despite (or because of) the fact that they are all expert fishermen, has ever taken advantage of the phenomenon to make a catch.

'I had a phone call today', the 26-year-old Ndovela said, during the course of a two-hour interview in his homestead. 'These guys from close to Bizana, they went with their net in the middle of the night'.

There were four of them, he explained, all employed by a Chinese trawling outfit that operated out of Port Elizabeth, from whom they had 'borrowed' the net. Although such nets were typically the length of a soccer field and the depth of a three-storey building, they had hauled it down the gorge's treacherously steep slopes, under the cover of darkness, to bag the circling fish. How they managed to climb out of the gorge with the catch *and* the net was anybody's guess, but Ndovela wanted to make it clear that



the men were not from the area. They were from inland, he said, where connections with local traditions were a lot looser.

Also, it turned out, they were working for an operation whose legal status was at best grey. In May 2016, the South African navy patrol ship Victoria Mxenge had pursued nine Chinese trawlers after they were spotted fishing illegally around Durban, Port St Johns, and Cape Recife. Desmond D'Sa, from an activist group called 'KZN Subsistence Fisherfolk', had [alerted East Coast Radio](#) to the fact that the foreign vessels were jeopardising local livelihoods.

'There are a number of fishing communities on the South Coast', D'Sa had said, 'as far as Port Edward, who have called in to us and indicated that there were trawlers coming in under the darkness of night and raping the ocean'.

Port Edward, which was once the last town in apartheid South Africa before one crossed over into the Bantustan of Transkei, was still, as far as the ocean was concerned, where the fisherfolk activism stopped. Did it matter that the 22 kilometres of coast between the Mzamba and Mtentu estuaries were bang in the middle of the extended shoreline from which the Chinese trawlers had been spotted? Put another way, would it have made a difference if there was a crisis committee of the sea to match the one that existed on land?

The question, Ndovela knew, was moot. The South African navy, as led by the patrol ship Victoria Mxenge, had lost hold of eight of the nine vessels while escorting them north to Richard's Bay. Another three trawlers,



which had been escorted south to East London by the SAS Drakensberg and the patrol ship Sarah Baartman, were released on payment of a R1.3 million fine — the trawlers returned with their catch, which somehow had not been confiscated, to the People's Republic of China.

Meanwhile, to feed his family, Ndovela needed a 'subsistence licence' from the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. 'It's either four shad or eight', he said, trying to remember his quota. 'Then it's four crayfish, four bream, one cob, one musselcracker, five blacktails, ten karanteens'.

Which seemed like a lot for a day's fishing, until one remembered that it was almost impossible to split those species across a single session, and that the whole point of the licence was to allow the fishermen and their dependents to *subsist*.

'Fifty mussels', Ndovela added, 'how do you feed a family on that?'

As on land, the South African government was not making things easier for the people of Amadiba — a fact not unconnected from the reality that, as on land, the ecosystem was under threat.

In its 2010 report, the Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund noted that the coastal waters off the Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany hotspot were 'significant at the global level for their biodiversity of marine species'. But the fund had pulled out just as warming waters and illegal trawling had rendered their help indispensable. The Chinese embassy, at the time of the 2016 East London incident, had insisted that the seized vessels were fully legal. An embassy spokesman had demanded a 'prompt and appropriate



settlement’ of the investigation ‘in line with the friendship and cooperation between [the two] countries’ — a statement that would have looked less like diplomatic coercion had three television crews not been warned off boarding the boats. According to reports, 800 tons of squid at a value of R85 million were in the vessels’ hulls, plus ‘large numbers of dorado’, a species that sat alongside the kingfish on the ‘[red list](#)’ of the Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative.

Change, to be sure, was coming. Change bigger than Ndovela or anyone else on the crisis committee had ever seen, change that would render the current notion of ‘crisis’ meaningless. And of all the crisis committee’s supporters, it was Sinegugu Zukulu, with his MPhil in environmental management from the University of Stellenbosch, his conservation experience on the Endangered Wildlife Trust, and his vice chairmanship of the NGO Sustaining the Wild Coast — but mostly his decades of deep engagement with the bounty outside his front door — who lived this truth in his bones.

Above all, Zukulu wanted to emphasise that Amadiba would not be grassland for much longer. While the seas were warming and being plucked of their fish, Pondoland was turning into a savannah. The record amount of carbon in the air — at 410 parts per million an average last seen [15 million years ago](#), when humans had yet to evolve and the oceans were 30 metres higher — was leading directly and swiftly to the spread of woody vegetation, or *umnga*. This shift in biomes, Zukulu explained, would mean a shift in the rural economy.

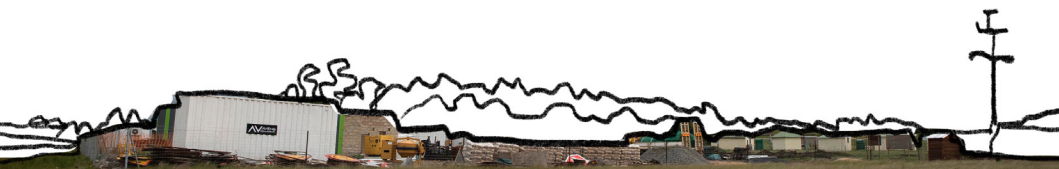


‘Right now, throughout the former Transkei, all the valleys are full of *umnga*’, he said, referencing an academic [research paper](#) from 2015. ‘In fifty years it will be out and taking over the grasslands. In a hundred years, the entire area from the ocean here all the way up to Johannesburg will be savannah thicket, just like you see near Kruger. So that means the rural economy as we know it today will transform’.

Transform, though, to what? Aside from replacing maize with sorghum as a staple — a necessary move towards the hardier crop, which local farmers, due its lower yields, were resisting — there were no easy answers. The spread of alien invasive species such as balloon vines, which tend to take over forests and smother trees, as well as the water scarcity brought on by the savannah’s thirst, were not helping the problem. Neither were the erratic rains, the unprecedented lightning strikes, or the increasingly lethal tornadoes ripping through the province’s tornado belt — in December 2018, portending extreme weather events to come, a particularly vicious twister had torn through at least [26 Eastern Cape schools](#), demolishing buildings and rupturing roofs.

This, then, was the South African face of climate change. And peering into the sheer enormity of it, a simple but brutal question was waiting to be asked: what was the point of protecting Pondoland’s precious biodiversity if, given the carbon already in the atmosphere, it was destined for obliteration?

Such fatalism, which was but a conceptual step away from collapsing the Amadiba Crisis Committee, consenting to the titanium mine and agreeing to the government’s development path, was anathema to Zukulu. For him,



irrespective of the future shocks, there were treasures in the Pondoland biome that demanded our attention *now*.

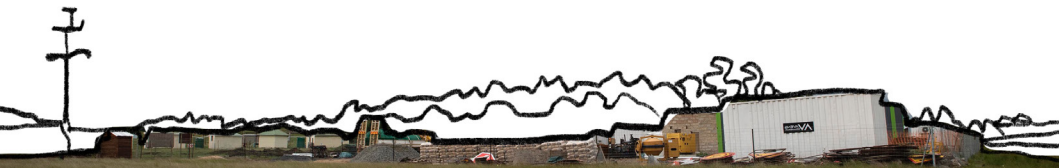
‘I was walking in Kwanyana the other day’, he said, ‘and I suddenly found all these medicinal plants around the red sands. The hypoxis, the African potato, I saw those in abundance. I saw also *itshetshisa*, which is used for cleansing the babies of their first green stool. Again, the gist is that the biodiversity is going. And the land around Kwanyana is the *most* fertile. That homestead which is about fifty metres from the dunes has the richest soil, you can tell by the quality of the crops’.

As the Australian prospectors’ ground zero and the place that Mantashe said was ‘where the mine will be’, the Kwanyana estuary was also a haven for birdlife. In December 2018, this writer had spent an afternoon in the estuary in the company of a pair of crowned cranes, a species on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s [endangered list](#), birds considered sacred by the local *amagqira* (traditional healers).

Beyond which, Zukulu pointed out, Kwanyana had been declared a [heritage site](#); the dunes were awash in pre-Homo sapiens’ stone age tools, including artefacts such as picks, axes, choppers, and scrapers that dated back between 300,000 and 500,000 years.

Mining in the ‘Kwanyana Block’ would remove it all: the stone age tools, the endangered birds, the medicinal flora.

‘The endemic plants in the Pondoland Centre of Endemism are very site specific’, said Zukulu. ‘A particular plant will be found in a particular area,



and only there. Any plant that is lost would be lost forever. We commissioned a scientist to assess whether an area would be possible to rehabilitate, and after looking into the soil he told us it would be impossible, because the very mineral that they want to take out is the mineral that is central to the vegetation's growth'.

This mineral, according to the litigants in the court case – a sample that made up more than 90% of households in the Kwanyana area and surrounds – would do way less good *out of the ground* for the human population too. This was by far the most dangerous of the things Zukulu had been saying for the last 22 years — specifically, that the people would be stripped of their livelihoods, moved into townships, disconnected from their ancestral homesteads, and ultimately, perhaps, their souls.

For delivering such messages, a [hit](#) had been placed on Zukulu in 2006. A cousin of his had intervened to save him, a family member who has since been murdered.





20 November 2018: Komkhulu ('The Great Place'),
Madelene Cronjé / New Frame

V. Indaba

‘We want to see you not in the courts’, said President Cyril Ramaphosa to the gathered executives at the February 2019 [Investing in African Mining Indaba](#), ‘but in your boardrooms where we can talk and debate’.

This was neither a rebuke nor a *mea culpa* — although, in Ramaphosa’s younger days, it might have been both. It was *not* a reference to the thousands of hours in the dozens of courtrooms that government and the mining conglomerates had sat side by side as co-defendants, with communities like Xolobeni as the plaintiffs. Rather, it was confirmation that Ramaphosa intended to mend the relationship *between* the government and the conglomerates, which had [sour](#)ed due to the regulatory hurdles introduced under President Jacob Zuma. Mantashe, who boasted the same background in the apartheid-era mining unions as Ramaphosa, had been called in for expressly this purpose; together, the duo was guaranteeing a new dawn for a [‘sunrise industry’](#) that would attract investment, reduce unemployment, and stimulate growth.

The president’s speech received a standing ovation and was, by all accounts, the highlight of the conference. Four months later, during his first speech as the boss of a combined mining and energy super ministry, Mantashe would be showered in similar praise. The [2019 Junior Indaba](#) for ‘explorers, developers and investors’ in the emerging mining sector was the perfect venue for Mantashe’s debut as chief of the new Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, because he was now in a perfect position to guarantee South Africa’s long-term commitment to both the extraction and burning of coal.



‘To me’, he promised the audience, ‘it is not about killing coal and growing renewables. That’s a silly debate. It’s about growing the various technologies at our disposal. We must also invest in finding clean coal technology’.

The climate crisis, Mantashe seemed to be saying, was in need of nothing so much as the resourcefulness of engineers. He was going this route despite the IPCC’s [warning](#) in October 2018 that negative emission techniques, all ‘unproven at large scale’ and some that carried significant risks, would only help to limit the destruction if the burning of fossil fuels was cut by 45% by 2030 and phased out completely by 2050. In neither of his parliamentary budget speeches of mid-July 2019 did Mantashe mention the ‘just transition’ — the phrase that had become shorthand for the safe and guaranteed passage of South Africa’s 82,000 coalminers into the renewables sector. Instead, before [reaffirming](#) his commitment to oil and natural gas in two pieces of mooted legislation, he spoke about the potential of the country’s unexploited coalfields. He also [said this](#):

Long-term sustainability, and stability, of mining depends on coexistence with others, that is, agriculture, environment and tourism, and mining communities. Mining companies must, therefore, prioritise and be proactive in engaging with these stakeholders. This coexistence is affirmed by recent court judgments on the regulation of mining and exploration rights, which emphasise meaningful consultation with communities and lawful occupiers of land, also cooperative governance between organs of State.

The gist of the passage, benign and progressive on the surface, was all in the word ‘consultation’ — the place of ‘consensus’, as ratified in the recent



Xolobeni judgment to which Mantashe referred, was still not something he was willing to accept.

And then, on 8 August 2019, the IPCC released a report that gave the lie to the rest of Mantashe's words. Called the [special report on climate change and land](#), it drew on the work of 107 leading scientists from 52 countries, with 53% of the authors from developing nations — a welcome mix, given that the IPCC had known for decades that the poor in Africa, Asia, and South America would be most affected.

Agriculture, forestry, and other land use was now responsible for 23% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, the report found, with that figure rising to 37% if emissions associated with pre- and post-production activities in the global food system were included. In terms of the vicious feedback loop that this was inflicting on the world, a standout finding from the report was the fact that soil erosion from conventionally tilled agricultural fields was 100 times higher than the soil formation rate.

At 1°C average global heating, soil erosion — like dryland water scarcity, vegetation loss, wildfire damage, permafrost degradation, tropical crop yield decline, and food supply instabilities — would kick into what the IPCC termed 'increasingly severe' cascading risks. Land vegetation, as a sink for carbon dioxide, would lose its effectiveness as the planet continued to heat; the projected thawing of permafrost would 'increase the loss of soil carbon'; and increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide would in turn 'lower the nutritional quality of crops'.



Back in the microcosm of Xolobeni, as we've seen, the feedback loop was already playing itself out. The South African government, through the [Lima Rural Development Foundation](#), whose sponsors include the mining conglomerates Lonmin and Anglo Platinum, was pushing fertiliser-heavy monoculture as the answer to food insecurity.

'Lima is introducing GMOs here', Zukulu said, referring to the [controversial practice](#) of funding genetically modified crops, 'and accompanying the GMOs is the glyphosate spraying of weeds. People are buying into it, because they see it as emancipating them from their hard labour of weeding. Unfortunately, no one is telling the people how dangerous that Monsanto poison is'.

Meanwhile, the leader of the Xolobeni pro-mining faction Madiba Qunya, during the 45-minute interview he granted before turning cold, explained how modernisation was his people's only hope. Somehow, the Basson judgment had been celebrated as a victory by his side too.

'We are welcoming the judgment in terms of giving us a right that we didn't have before', said Qunya. 'If that judgment can be used for legislation that in reality specifies that we own that land — not just that we own it, but in a *specified* manner — I think I will welcome that. That will be a very good achievement for us'.

The rest of the interview had been a riff on the theme, pointing to the fact that in the former Bantustans, the land was still registered under the headman or the chief as well as to the need now for title deeds that people could present as security to the banks. On the related subject of



traditional authorities teaming up with empowerment companies to sell their people out for profit, which had proved a favourite pastime in the post-apartheid mining industry, Qunya promised that Xolco, the Xolobeni Empowerment Company, would prove an exception to the rule.

‘There will be spin-offs from the mine’, he said. ‘The issue in Xolobeni is that there are no alternatives. People are still walking long distances to the clinic, they still drink from rivers with the cattle, there are still no roads for the cars, there is still no electricity. We need alternative development’.

Which, if it was someone else saying it — and if the majority of households had been asking for it — would mostly be true. Could the mine ‘co-exist’ with tourism and agriculture? Could title deeds be parcelled out equitably? Could profits from mining be shared? In a roundabout way, these questions were all answered in the affirmative by Qunya.

But in the background, there were the long-standing allegations of impropriety regarding Qunya’s dealings with Max Boqwana, his co-founder at Xolco. There was the debt incurred for local shareholders by the original deal in 2003. There was the switchover to the pro-mining side of Chief Lunga Baleni, who had reportedly been bribed with cash and a four-wheel drive. There were the assertions that the pro-mining youth group had strong ties to Qunya’s majority partner and personal funder, the Australians. There were the accusations and counter-accusations of witchcraft and incitements to violence. There were the dozen assassinations and counting.



There was also Gwede Mantashe’s promise to return uninvited by the elders, to conduct another survey to ascertain the ‘will of the people’ — an affront to the Constitution that, as Aninka Claasens [wrote](#), would keep the rural inhabitants of South Africa as ‘tribal subjects rather than rights-bearing citizens’.

The list went on. As of August 2019, a search for Xolobeni, a village of some 74 homesteads on an undeveloped rural coastline in the poorest province of a country that had recently been deemed the [most unequal](#) on earth, yielded more than 69,000 results. To borrow from William Blake, the village had become the world in a grain of sand.

A world that was heating up, a world literally and figuratively shrinking. And so, the question that had been driving the reporting could probably be answered like this: if the political response in Ramaphosa’s South Africa was not exactly the political response in Bolsonaro’s Brazil — or, indeed, in Trump’s United States — it was only a matter of degree.

Rent-seeking as a reaction to the [sixth mass extinction](#), as a reaction to a planet that was howling at us to transform, was exactly what it looked like: a terror-stricken doubling down, a soul-dead manifestation of fear and greed, a monumental and unpardonable cop-out.

In this un-brave new world, the fate of Xolobeni would be the fate of us all.





20 November 2018: The Mtentu river.
Madelene Cronjé / New Frame



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