

katorus stories



from the East Rand Khulumani Support Group



Pics: Workshop participants, Khulumani Support Group, March 2007, Katlehong

Introduction: Katorus stories

We present here the work of the “art and memory” workshop held by the Khulumani Support Group in Katorus on the East Rand, in February and March 2007. The workshop aimed to encourage Khulumani members to explore their memories, experiences, and heritage, and to communicate these – to themselves, to their own community, and to our broader society. The workshop encouraged participants to voice ideas, awareness, and understanding of their personal histories; and to speak of the needs and demands that arise from these.

The workshop comprised members of the Khulumani Support Group in Katorus, chosen through a Katorus Khulumani Support Group East Rand general meeting. It held five working sessions and follow-up meetings, with facilitation by staff from the South African History Archives (SAHA).

SAHA undertook the workshop as a pilot community outreach effort. The intention was to engage with, collect, and bring to light those unwritten and unrecorded events and perspectives that have structured our country today. The workshop process used art-making to explore participants’ memories, and to record and interpret these memories. (This art-making process has been pioneered through several projects in South Africa – notably, the Long Lives project for people living within the HIV and AIDS epidemic; and drawings done by ex-political prisoners at the old Johannesburg Fort museum. The process is increasingly recognized as an effective mechanism to recover ignored, suppressed, distorted and hidden histories.)

The drawing process began by asking participants to draw images of their own experiences, the “pictures in their minds” that they wished to commemorate. We then asked them to describe their drawings to the workshop, to talk about their images. As we began to realise the shattering scope of the images and stories that emerged from this process, we brought in an experienced investigator from SAHA to talk through and record each person’s story separately.

In the final stage of the workshop, participants were asked to draw and discuss what they see as “the way forward”: the issues that arise from this past that we still confront today.

Those images and stories are carried in the following pages. We have also tried to cross-reference these stories with the formal archival record – mostly, newspaper clippings and written report on the events described. Some of that material is also included here.

In the months before the workshop, members of Khulumani Support Group put forward proposals to the Ekurhuleni Metro to memorialize their experiences of the East Rand political violence of the 1990s. We believe that the results of this workshop form a firm foundation for such a project.

These drawings bear witness to the events that so many people have lived through to reach our democratic, united, and free South Africa. The images tell us of direct experiences, of pain and loss, fear and courage; of the legitimacy of people’s anger, and demands; of the immediacy of wants and needs; and above this, of the still-flying banners – frayed, faded perhaps – of ubuntu, and of hope.

Participants in the workshop:

**Dansile Mabenga
Dora Thango
Adelia Mabango
Francina Mtimkhulu
Michael Phama
Elizabeth Moloi
Themba Dube
Moffat Mahlangu
Judith Mavuso
NomaRussia Bonase
Maria Hlope
“Julia N”^{*}
“Catherine M”^{*}**

SAHA Facilitators: Judy Seidman Piers Pigou.

** These participants have requested that their stories remain anonymous; identifying details are not published*

our stories have not been told

The images and memories brought out through this workshop demonstrate how far we have to travel in commemorating and memorializing the 1990 violence in the East Rand. Compared to the stories and drawn pictures that emerged from the workshop, the “accepted” history of the East Rand violence leaves out not only the suffering, but also the human courage, sacrifice, and dignity of those years..

Our present records rarely sound the “voice” of people who experienced those times. People who survived for days and months and years through the most horrific events appear only as fleeing refugees, or as injured at the hospital, or finally as more bodies in the veld. At most, we hear their voices in a one-line sound bite between flames and blood.

This process of depersonalizing events comes out starkly in the language of the reports. Press reports list numbers of bodies found in the morning, when the police hippos come to clean up. They give us no reason for bodies shot, mutilated, burnt, in Thokoza or Mazibuko hostel or Crossroads or Daveyton; for human beings left lying on the ground and taken away by the police. We are not told of the actions of perpetrators: those responsible are not identified, recognized, or held to account.

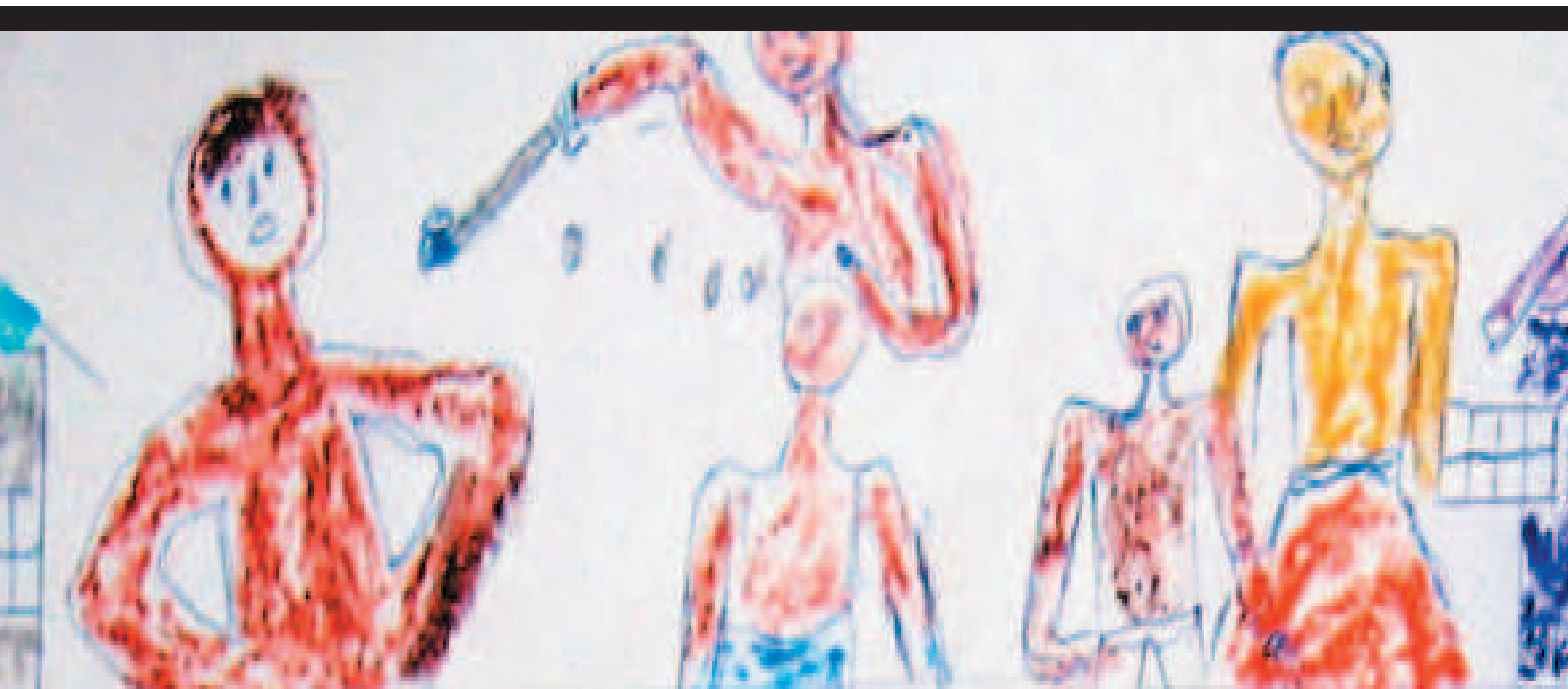
contested terrain

Today, thirteen years after the birth of our democracy, the memory and personal experience of these years of violence remain highly contested terrain. The unrest continues to carry labels of “senseless” or “madness”, dismissed as “black on black” violence – a meaningless outrage divorced from the historic struggle of repression and rebellion. The official statement at the launch of the Thokoza monument said:

“we had embarked on a path of destruction. ...we did all these terrible things to ourselves... we lost our focus. We forgot what the real problem was and targeted those with whom we should have been walking towards freedom”.

(- from statement at the unveiling of the Thokoza Memorial, Oct 16 1999)

In researching this workshop, we could not find a compiled chronology of the incidents of East Rand violence. (The timelines used here were subsequently compiled from newspaper clippings collected by the IBBI, and held at SA Historical Papers.) This



lack of the most basic timelines brings confusion and conflation, with different acts and their consequences lumped together. It compounds the belief of many survivors that their realities, their pain, and their awareness have been swept under the carpet, no longer on the agenda.

experience, proof and rumour

One problem that the workshop – and Khulumani as a whole – has had to address is the problem of what constitutes proof, rumour or hearsay. We listen to people's experiences – but even direct personal experience of violence may not provide instant clarity about what happened. Violence took place at night, out of sight, to a woman hiding in her own home. That personal experience may feed also on what the person heard about abductions, targeting of individuals, gaps left by the disappearances of friends and loved ones. Men and young boys do not come back, leaving women and young children alone to pick up their lives, vulnerable to subsequent attacks, looting and extortiondid those loved ones flee, or die, or land in jail? Many people had to search the mortuaries, looking through piles of bodies too mangled to identify, only to leave with their losses unsolved. A phrase from one participant captures the times: "we were swimming in a pool of confusion".

"They tell you what happened to you is a rumour – you are in pain, still digging that wound."

"These are not rumours. We have Khulumani's database. These are our members' stories, recorded."

living with the past

The workshop underscored our awareness that these events cannot just be "finished and forgotten". Lives were torn apart: people lost breadwinners and loved ones, houses and possessions, jobs and security. People carry the mental and physical scars of this violence. Even today, many people still struggle to reknit the tattered fabric of their lives.

We accept that the images and memories of this workshop provide no final answers to how we should remember and commemorate our heritage. Instead we need to open a debate which too often appears closed. We hope this may form a first, tentative step in exploring and exposing what happened here; that the uncounted numbers of our people who participated in, were shaped by, and still live with the shadows of these events will begin to find their own voices.





Pic: Francina Mthimkhulu leads a song at a Thokoza Khulumani meeting, 11/11/2007.

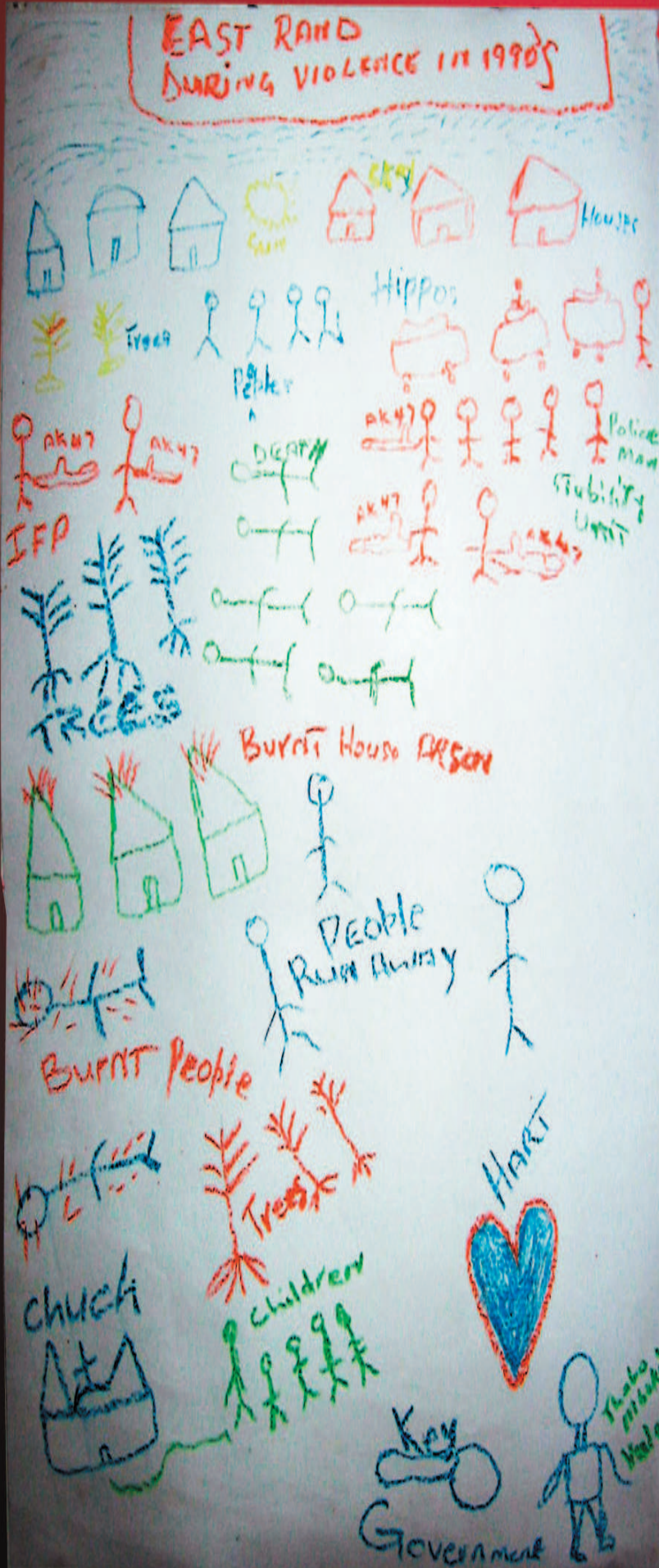
Francina Mthimkhulu/*Katlehong – Ndlandzi Section*

Francina's picture (opposite) reflects a number of experiences and incidents. In the early 1990s, Francina lived near Kweseni hostel (a major IFP stronghold) which is across the railway line from Ndlandzi section. Hostel residents using the train would shoot at people in the community from the moving train, people were thrown from moving trains, their bodies found near the tracks

But these images form part of a much longer story. Francina left school during the boycotts in the 1980s. She never completed her schooling. She feels this has had a long-lasting impact on her life, limiting her opportunities.

Then, in June 1985, Francina's father, Albert Mthimkhulu was working at a new job in Leondale; one day he went to work and never came home again. Francina went to the Germiston mortuary and was shown many pictures. She 'identified' a picture of Albert, or someone she felt resembled him, but in retrospect is not sure that it was a picture of him. This body had been buried by the time she saw the picture... she is not sure that it was indeed her father. as she was very emotional at the time. She was 15 years old. She does not know whether there is a record of where the body was buried.

remember reconcile redress



My picture shows Thokoza in the 1990s. The sky is blue, the sun is shining, we see houses and trees, the people in our community.

Here are the hippos of the Stability Unit, soldiers and policemen. Now here, these are the IFP with their AK47s - and our soldiers fighting here, with our AK47s. People are shooting, dying, lying on the ground.

These are burnt houses; the same houses we began with, now on fire. The people are running away; other people run to churches to hide, and to hospitals to hide. When they catch you they shoot you and burn you.

People hide under the trees.

The heart is bleeding and dark with pain.

The key for us is the government; Thabo Mbeki holds that key, to open for all of these people. We are begging and pleading for help, for recognition of our pain, for redress for our hurts.

from the beginning...

The Katorus workshop focused overwhelmingly on the political violence of the early to mid-1990s. This stands out as the most violent period in Katorus history -- Human Rights Watch calls it possibly the most violent time in all of South Africa's violent history. Conservative figures, compiled mostly from police reports, claim that between 1990 and 1994, 14,000 people were killed in political violence nationally; while Katorus, as the epicentre on the Reef, saw over 3,000 people killed. Residents of Katorus claim the figures are far higher; Khulumani has a register of thousands of names of the "disappeared".

But every participant in the workshop pointed out that the violence of the 90s built upon, and reinforced, earlier violence and disruption. Each person approached 1990 through successive waves of violence during the liberation struggle: repression and oppression, the violence of resistance, ungovernability. Participants traced their first encounters with police back to when they were school children in 1976; through attacks and loss during in the State of Emergency of the mid 1980s; they cited disrupted or lost education; burnt, destroyed, or occupied houses; missing family; lost jobs -- a catalogue of our heritage.



Judith Mavuso/ Phola Park

In 1976, Judith lived in Katlehong and attended the Thokothaba School (a secondary school) in Thokoza. At the time, Judith was 17 years old.

On 20 June (4 days after the 16/6 uprising in Soweto), the principal of their school (“a Sotho guy”) introduced the changes into our curriculum and told us whether we liked it or not we would learn in Afrikaans: “we were very angry – he was insulting us”.

The school children gathered to discuss this. They faced very practical problems: mathematics was hard enough in English; trying to learn in Afrikaans would make them further handicapped.

“Somebody phoned the police to warn that we were toying-toying... The police came in a green Hi-Ace and warned us to go home. They tried to disperse – I overheard police say in Afrikaans that the children should be shot.”

The police started to shoot... and the students started running for cover...some were injured ...the green Hi-Ace went around the other side and there the police found Judith.

“They were kicking me with iron boots; they were beating me with sjamboks with iron tips. They put a hole here (indicating back of head) you could put your finger in it; when I blew my nose, blood came out, black blood, not red”.* These were white and black police, some in uniform some in private clothes.

“They said I must tell them when did Tsietsi (Mashinini) come, where was our meeting point .. At that time I don’t know who Tsietsi was ... but they insisted they wanted me to point out the place where we meet Tsietsi MashininiThey took me in the Hi-Ace and drove me around the location with them until it started to get dark”.

Then they let her go. Later the school offices at Thokothaba were burnt.

“My head was injured: since that time, till today, I get terrible headaches. I did not get medication, or go to hospital – I was afraid to voice out what happened to me, even to the neighbours. I was afraid the police would take me to jail.”

Months later, she went back to school, but did not matriculate.

Judith had several experiences in the 1990s that she has not talked about yet – when she was living in the Chris Hani informal settlement in Daveyton. But she comments on how these experiences affect her and those around her:

Pic opposite: Judith Mavuso’s picture of the police assaulting her in 1976

*Another member of the workshop confirmed that Judith bled black from the nose and mouth for weeks after the beating.

“Bantu Education destroyed my life. 1976 is where I feel the pain most, where my future was destroyed.”

- Judith Mavuso



“People are traumatized – if they see the police, white people, they say they are still the agents of apartheid; these are still the same. They still have the same corruption they had before. If you are raped, they laugh at you. They call other ones, (saying) ‘see, this one comes with a story of rape, of someone who was shot’ “.

My picture shows the Mandela squatter camp in 1990. I was coming from the Eastern Cape on that day, early, at three o'clock that morning.

Here, it is by the Mandela squatter camp area, at six o'clock early in the morning. The people are screaming, saying we are dying. The Stability Force soldiers are shooting us left and right. This is a big hippo.

They were speaking loudly: "Today all these kaffirs must be dead here in Mandela."

People were running like hell towards the hospital. Some were dying. I managed to save my life.



you must know where you come from

The violence that rocked Katorus in the early 1990s went through a number of different phases, with changing modes of attack and defence, different participants, and different rationales. Violence occurred within the hostels themselves, as taxi violence, astrain violence, in attacks from hostel on community members, in attacks on hostel dwellers by residents, and with criminal elements riding the wave of distabilisation. Throughout these, residents claimed that the security forces participated in violence, and supported perpetrators.

This violence was not experienced as a one-off event, but as a series of blows, one kick after another, until they blur into a chant, a chorus that repeats with each separate verse. Many of the drawings produced in the workshop show multiple experiences of violence over a number of years. Some images combine experiences into one symbol; others draw one particular event or sequence. Several pictures are structured to show layers and repetitions of violence, a sequence that combines to break down every attempt at establishing a community life.

Participants at the workshop felt it was important to understand why the violence happened – and they were very clear that it must not be filed and dismissed as “black on black” or “ethnic” violence. They argued that their experiences showed a combination of both targeted and indiscriminate violence acted out between three – not two -- distinct groups:

- communities which supported the liberation movement and particularly the newly-unbanned ANC;
- groups organised by and identified with Inkatha, mostly consisting of men based in ethnically-segregated migrant labour hostels; and
- members of the apartheid-government’s security forces, the police and the military, using the power of government.

The Human Rights Watch 1993 report points out that: “the government insists that only the ANC and Inkatha have the power to bring peace to the townships. This assertion ignores the reality that control of the SAP and the SADF, whose policing activities have a significant effect on the incidence of violence, rests with the government.” Participants in the workshop drew image after image of events where they and their neighbours were shot by police, or attacked by men escorted by army hippos.

Consequences of the violence were: death and injury, abductions and disappearances, multiple losses, arson, looting, dislocation, mental pain. The scars of this violence remain today in Katorus – in burnt-out houses dotting the physical landscape of the communities, in the physical and psychological impact on victims, survivors and perpetrators, in missing family members, in lost opportunities. Too often these realities remain: a mass grave of ambitions and hopes, covered over with the earth of every-day survival.

Understanding the forces involved enabled workshop participants to discuss the causes and explanations for this destruction and loss. They began to identify courage, sacrifice, and dignity in the face of destruction. They say: we stand here, we have not lost our way; we can find our way forward. We can maintain peace, find ubuntu, restore dignity.

“Black on black violence – these terms make me angry. These people (who use that lable) don’t understand that there was a third force making this situation worse”.

“It was the dying era of apartheid: it was kicking like a dying horse, fighting for the final battle of resistance, with the aim of destroying everybody, and to limit the votes of the opposition parties because they were aware of the black majority which would rule the country.

“The death toll was further escalated by the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 which brought worse hatred by the oppressors and their subordinates to every community that was looking forward to democracy and liberation.

“They used the strategy of killing, kidnapping, and torturing with the intention of paralyzing, traumatizing, raping, etc, with the intention of getting fewer or no voters at all to the voting stations.”

-Khulumani statement, November 2007