



BRIDGING TRADITION AND TRAGEDY TO OVERCOME HIV/AIDS IN KWAZULU/NATAL: The Case of Chief Khanyile

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Chief Khanyile

Introduction

KwaZulu/Natal is one of the largest and most populous provinces of SA. In the dying days of apartheid it became synonymous with violence and political discord. Violent clashes between the supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the African National Congress (ANC) have been an ongoing feature of the area for decades. Efforts to develop the area, where poverty is rife and where the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in SA is located, have been hampered by violence, misunderstanding and mistrust. In the district of Inkandla, in the rural far north of KwaZulu/Natal, one chief, Chief Kanyile of the Ekukhanyeni tribal community, has become known as a man who believes in peace, who respects human rights and promotes democracy rather than conflict, and who strives for stability in order to provide the conditions in which development can take place for all the people.

Who is this Chief Khanyile, and how is it that the inhospitable and difficult terrain of northern KZN has given rise to this man of peace?

Background: Traditional culture

Inkandla is a mountainous area where the roads wind up steep hills and are sometimes little more than tracks. To get around in a motor vehicle, even in a 4x4 is difficult, and travel is bone jolting. Fed by stunningly beautiful thunderstorms which darken the skies on summer afternoon, the rivers are often impassable during the rainy season, and the winds blow strongly through the valleys all year round. This is an area where old ways run deep and the Amakhosi (chiefs) rule by virtue of their traditional power rather than by any democratic mandate. The people of Inkandla do not challenge their leaders. Traditional leadership demands loyalty and obedience, not creativity and participatory citizenship. Hierarchies and traditional procedures and systems abide.

The area is poor and most people survive on subsistence farming, pensions and remittances from migrant workers. Little development has taken place, and as poverty has tightened its grip, crime has become commonplace and the fences of schools can disappear overnight. Because of these high levels of crime, the chiefs even go to the extent of warning strangers about hijackings.

Chief Khanyile is one of eighteen tribal chiefs in the area. His tribal authority covers Ekukhanyeni. As with most of rural KZN, the area is dominated by the IFP, and the Amakhosi play a critical role in ensuring that this remains the case. The ANC is seen as the party of urban dwellers with ideas that are not welcome in the rural areas where people prefer the old ways of doing things. There has been surprisingly little political violence in the area, despite what has

happened in much of the rest of the province. The elimination of the ban on political parties other than the IFP since 1990 has made little difference. The people of Inkandla and of Ekukhanyeni are more concerned about crime, water, electricity, roads, schools, clinics, unemployment and social services than they are with political differences.

Occasionally, there may be some trouble from the firebrands of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), a teachers' trade union affiliated to the ANC. The members of the union complain about the leadership style of the traditional leaders, but they too admit that, in Ekukhanyeni, no-one stops them or the ANC from speaking out. It is just that no-one is really interested in what they have to say! Some of the youth are ANC supporters, but this is not a land of youth. Here the old people are in charge; not just old people, old men. It is a patriarchal society where young people and women have little status and leadership is the prerogative of older men.

The role of Inkosi Khanyile

Chief Khanyile was born in 1944 in the heart of Inkandla, the son of Chief M G Khanyile and Queen Madlomo. He went to school in the area, completing his matriculation before going off to Johannesburg where he worked first as a chef and then a head chef until he was called upon to take over as chief when his father died in 1998. So, after nearly 30 years in the city, far from KZN, Chief Kanyile came home to rule. And he brought with him, if not a sweeping wind of change, then at least a breeze that smelled of something a little different.

Although a staunch IFP supporter, Chief Kanyile is used to living side by side with people of different political persuasions. In his tribal council he stresses the importance of respecting the political positions of other people and promoting free political activity. When peace-threatening situations emerge, he intervenes and solves the problem diplomatically. This does not mean that he chooses councillors from among those who do not support the IFP; but he does insist to his councilors that those from other political parties have a right to their views, and that the concern of the tribal council is peace and stability, not politics. Even before he took over from his father, he played a mediating role when political violence threatened the area in 1994.

His main commitment is to development, and he believes it is his role as Chief to play a leading part in the development of his people. He encourages his people to be as self-reliant as possible, and to have confidence in their own abilities to improve their lives. Through the tribal council and a development trust, he has facilitated the initiation of a water supply project and a road construction project. He supports and approves all development projects in his area. He promotes close co-operation between the tribal council and the development committee. However, some people complain that he only appoints old people to this committee and that they are never from opposition parties but only from the IFP.

Still, Chief Kanyile knows that, if there is to be real development for his people, part of his role must be to facilitate the working together of all development actors, including the tribal council, NGOs that are active in the area, and public enterprises such as the National Development Agency and the electricity provider, ESKOM.

On the water project, the tribal council is working together with the Umgeni Water Board to bring clean water to the people, largely through communal taps which are accessible at a reasonable cost. On road construction which is so important in this inaccessible area, funding has been secured from the national government and it is hoped that the construction of roads and bridges will save many lives and provide a lifeline to businesses in the area. When the rivers come down in flood, people are often swept away. When it rains, learners and educators cannot get to school without endangering their lives, and sometimes important examinations have to be delayed because exam papers cannot be delivered. A number of entrepreneurs and business people have left the area because it becomes inaccessible in the rainy weather, making businesses uneconomical and unpredictable. Without the necessary infrastructure, this area cannot thrive. The Chief urges his people to overcome their differences and to work together in the interests of the community.

Plans have been developed to electrify the whole area and it is the responsibility of the councilors and headmen to ensure that it is supplied to all the subsections of the area. This project is funded by the provincial government. Here the role of the Chief is to act as a symbol of unity, showing everyone how they can benefit from the project, whether it is a women's sewing group or the tribal court: or whether they are ANC or IFP supporters, and ensuring that everyone has access to this vital element of infrastructure.

But it is agriculture that remains closest to the hearts of the residents of this area. The majority of them are fully involved in subsistence farming. In order to realize their development dreams they have formed organizations, but they need capital to enable them to diversify their agricultural produce and increase their markets. They also need training and an irrigation scheme to make small commercial farmers viable. The Chief is concerned with all these needs and ventures and has promised more land for farming purposes.

Chief Kanyile is aware of the importance of culture and symbols in the lives of people. He has initiated a monthly community cultural event where all sectors of the community take part. This includes traditional leaders, church leaders, political leaders, youth organizations and community-based development organizations and NGO's. This community forum takes place in an open space at the top of a mountain and is known as *Isono Lasentabeni*. The gathering seeks to raise HIV/AIDS awareness among the youth and to promote strong cultural values, and it created a unique sub-committee, spawning a project that encourages youth to abstain from sex before marriage. In an area where the HIV/AIDS epidemic is rife, and where traditional leaders are not always willing to admit its existence, Chief Kanyile's approach is unusual and encouraging.

It is interesting to note that in Kanyile's area, women and youth participate fully in the activities of the community. Women are fully involved in development and in projects such as sewing clubs, candle-making, handicraft and community gardens they play leadership roles. Youth play a role in all the important social structures of the area, offering their services voluntarily to help with such tasks as baby care and agricultural activities. They are eager to be part of the initiative to combat HIV/AIDS. The tribal authorities promote youth development in the form of sports, cultural activities and handicraft. Every 6 months they hold an Inkandla youth competition covering all these activities.

The Chief and his council have many plans for projects including tourism, small businesses, recreational facilities, clinics. People are also suggesting community policing and are calling for a police station in the area. The chief understands that, in order for the growing problem of crime to be addressed, there must be a community commitment to a crime free society, and there must be opportunities for young people to work and to play in their own area.

What sort of a man and what sort of a leader is Chief Kanyile?

In compiling this case study, we spoke to many people; the Chief himself, his councilors, religious leaders and community development workers. It was interesting to note that the Chief did not want us to speak to anyone unless he himself was present. Does this seem contradictory in a man who, in so many ways, was open to doing things differently? Yes, said some of the people with whom we spoke, Chief Kanyile is a man of contradictions. He sometimes appears insecure and is not always transparent. Although he preaches the importance of involving everyone, when it comes to important positions, he chooses carefully from among those he knows and trusts. Some commentators complained that there are too many old men among his appointees. All this is true. But it is also true that he is willing to allow free political activity in his area and is committed to resolving conflict peacefully. Above all he treats all people with respect and is willing to learn from others.

A critical Incident – bridging traditional and modern cultural demands

Some time after taking over as Chief, Khanyile found himself faced with a conundrum. The community was in its nature still extremely rural, and extremely close to its cultural and traditional roots. Comparatively, it was politically stable due to its overwhelming IFP and Zulu majority. He felt they should be doing more to confront modern issues like the problem of HIV/Aids. As Chief he felt responsible and concerned for the increasing illness, deaths and orphans in the community. He felt the whole community should be engaged in something positive that would also help attitudes to change. Traditionally, he also knew that subjects related to sex were taboo except in specific situations (e.g. rites of passage).

He decided to try to use the cultural unity and strength of the community to embark on an awareness campaign that might lead people to accept and deal with the un-ignorable impact of modern issues on traditional life and development imperatives. He initiated a monthly community cultural event in which all sectors of the community would take part.

Aware of the importance of culture and symbols in the lives of people, he launched the introduction of the initiative at a semi-private traditional meeting which he had convened, with the elders, advisors and other officers of his chieftainship. At this meeting he asked for the approval and commitment of his traditional 'soldiers' to his proposed initiative, and to agree to embrace other sectors, like religious leaders, political leaders, non-government organizations active in the area, health sector and others. When the elders asked why he was 'mixing' the non-traditional with the traditional, and whether he wanted to destroy them with outside influence and interference, he suggested that what he wanted was to educate the non-traditional in the importance and significance of the traditional; and vice versa; and hopefully to develop a commonness of intent that would be better for the community overall.

Contrary to wanting to destroy them, or their traditional culture, he wanted it all to flourish in the face of the modern issues impacting them. When it came to dealing with people suffering from HIV/Aids, they needed the assistance of medical and other people who knew the facts and could teach them to help the sufferers and their families. This would help them all overcome fears and ignorance pertaining to this illness. It can no longer be ignored, and we can no longer pretend that it is something else", he told them. He explained that the community is dealing with a serious disease having very serious impact on it, and they need to face this; they need help, and they need help from those who know. At the same time, the youth need help and guidance and discipline in order to understand issues and prevent this disease. He felt that traditional culture could help in this. They needed to promote abstinence as they had done in the old days, when people were joined with community blessing when they were old enough, with their families approval, and after they had been properly tutored in life. He thought that within the context of a traditional culture revival and commitment, the community as a whole might be more accepting of activities or discussions that tapped into other issues that were affecting them all. He succeeded in achieving a delicate balance; they were swayed by his arguments and agreed that he should proceed.

Backstage, he personally and directly approached local NGO's, political leaders, church leaders, medical people (nurses/doctors), business people, community-based projects and local government officials to 'sound them out' regarding the proposed initiative, and to get some indication of whether they would participate or not. He generally got a positive response, and called another larger meeting that included all the e parties that had agreed to participate, including his elders, cultural officers, women and youth from the community. By lobbying with the various parties first to assess how people felt, he ensured that the meeting would not be confronted by any unexpected major dissent or divergence.

The meeting was well-attended, which Khanyile considers a symptom of the communities desire to be pro-active. Many people said they always try to attend Khanyile's public meetings in order to keep in touch; in order to listen to him; in order to see other people they don't see so often; and in order to be seen. Many also indicated that when the Chief sends out word of a meeting, then you attend.

Khanyile warmly welcomed everyone, commenting with pleasure on the diversity of the attendees. He announced the initiative, explaining how it would take the form of a cultural gathering held at the top of the mountain, and that it would be called 'Isonto Lasentabeni' (We are gathering together to do good things for each other). The gathering would be monthly, and all stakeholders should contribute, participate and attend. He invited suggestions from the floor as to what they thought of this?

One of the older woman indicated that this event was a wonderful idea but it meant plenty of food and cooking and work for the women. Who would provide the food and ingredients? How would they get their pots up the mountain and so forth? Khanyile explained that they would start a fund for the food and other expense issues; that, yes, the women would be expected to prepare food, and to teach the younger ones how to cook; and that the young men would have to carry things up the hill. One of the older men asked if traditional beer would be included in the event? This drew mixed responses – laughing and head-shaking. A woman commented that they would have to carry the old men down the mountain if they just sat and drank all day. Another indicated that drinking leads to stupidity, loose behavior and loose tongues.

After some debate it was agreed that there would be some traditional beer, only for the elders and special adult guests, and limited to a specific part of the clearing. No other alcohol. No youth would be entitled to partake. Limited amounts would mean only limited and controlled drinking. The women were put in charge of these logistics and instructed to meet to discuss needs etc and then to return to Khanyile. He would help ensure arrangements were sufficient. The gathering was meant to be a happy occasion, and a good experience for everyone to share. Khanyile stated that if someone's behavior was outrageous or a bad model, related to drinking or not, that person would be disciplined by him and removed from the gathering on his instruction, and would face a traditional hearing and would have to miss the next event before participating again.

He invited more suggestions, and it was agreed that traditional dance lessons and displays, as well as praise singing, traditional crafts, food, and discussions and lessons in traditional culture and knowledge, would form the basis of the activities. It was agreed that both the traditional and the religious leaders could lead prayers; one at the start of the gathering, the other at the end, alternating with every event. The traditional healers said they could do walking-tours on the mountain, pointing out plants etc and what their remedy/purpose is; how to grow it, where it grows, how to process it and so on. One of the youth suggested this information should all be recorded somehow, and a representative from an NGO suggested they would be able to help

guide local people to do this. One of the youth suggested political awareness discussions. An elder declared he was not going up the mountain once a week for political sermons, or arguments against or for. Life was so politicized already. They did not want ANC activists coming to disrupt the gathering. Khanyile then firmly suggested that the gathering would be non-political; that any person from the community, plus invited guests from elsewhere, regardless of religious, family, tribe, work or political affiliation, would be welcome if their intentions were to contribute and participate peacefully and with good intentions. The main intention of the gathering is to revive, restore and strengthen moral and cultural values.

Then Khanyile broached the subjects of safe sex and HIV/Aids, and said these matters were a cause of grave concern to all cultures and that he wanted them included in the gathering. In the public scenario of this mixed meeting, his openness drew laughter, giggles and shock. Traditionally, sex is a taboo subject, except during rites of passage ceremonies, and except between privately consenting parties. It is never talked about when opposite sexes are together. His raising of it in this public forum caused discomfort, and amazement.

One of the elder men said this was not a subject that should concern them at this forum. A number of other older men and women agreed with him. Khanyile retorted by asking why the family of x was a frequent subject of their in-house traditional discussions? The elder replied that this was because both the parents in that home were very sick, and their children needed help. Khanyile asked what they are so sick with for weeks on end, without improving. The elder said they had TB and malaria. Khanyile asked why medicine had not seemed to be effective, and why the hospital was sending volunteers to the household, who wore plastic gloves when they entered the house and always checked about bloody sores on the sick ones? Why had the volunteers instructed the children not to directly touch any blood from their parents? Why had the volunteers brought new buckets and utensils into the household and told the children never to use them? Why are the children frightened to be in their home, and frightened by what their parents look like?

The old man said that in addition to TB and malaria, they must have a disease of the blood, or cancer. Khanyile said yes, they have a disease of the blood, and blood and sexual contacts can spread the disease to others, and that diseased blood is a sign of HIV/Aids and there is no known cure. The x family will suffer the slow and tragic deaths of the parents, the children will be orphaned too young, the community will have to bury more people and heavier burdens descend on all. He told them that if they are honest they will see that many others are similarly suffering. He declared the disease a most serious issue for the family, the community, the economy and the prospects of development, and that everyone must learn about the disease and inform and change their habits and culture, in order to get the better of it.

The elders and older women were silenced but muttering unhappily. The youth were nervous. Nobody spoke. Khanyile knew he had breeched convention and traditional culture in having raised the subject in this way at this type of meeting, but he stood his ground, boldly eyeing the

crowd and wondering who would respond next. He was not going to change the subject now that he had brought it up. But he also did not want to be the only one who spoke on the subject.

Then a local government official asked permission to speak. He said that government was in the process of forming policy around HIV/Aids and how to deal with it, and how to treat it. He said the disease was spread worldwide and that SA was still 'coming out of denial' regarding the prevalence of the disease, and that international research was ongoing to find medication and inoculation for the disease. He said he thought Health Department officials and volunteers should be approached. He also suggested that the groups and discussions could be separated into elders, women, young girls, young boys. Khanyile thanked him for his input and wise suggestion, and asked for any other input. One of the NGOs present declared they would like to engage, and could bring linkages with other more specialized NGOs. A traditional healer said he would engage.

Khanyile thanked them both. When he asked the general gathering to confirm that HIV/Aids awareness would be included in the cultural-value-revival, he got a small response. He reminded them that silence is consent; and that he did not want to have meetings with people afterwards who have consented-in-silence today but actually don't agree. He reminded them that participating in the gathering would be voluntary – there would be no law compelling anyone to participate if he/she did not want to; but he did hope to see the whole community participating. He again asked for indication of approval, and received a positive indication from the majority. He then thanked everyone and suggested that he would form a sub-committee that would be responsible for co-ordinating this aspect.

Then Khanyile invited everyone to take a break, so that the elders could gather to decide who would be their representative; the older women, the older youth (boys and girls separately), the traditional healers, would do the same. He suggested that for the moment the local government official would be the representative, but that this may change after the official has consulted with his own office. He suggested the same happen with the delegates present from the NGOs. He also invited the religious leaders to consider participating and delegating a representative after they had duly consulted. After the break, he invited each group to name their delegate. A sub-committee comprising 10 people was confirmed. He named his cultural officer and one of the NGO delegates as co-conveners of the sub-committee for the start-up period, suggesting that participants consider this and communicate any changes to him after the first gathering. He thanked everyone for being positive-minded about taking this matter forward, and thanked the people who had been delegated into the sub-committee, and expressed his hope that the sub-committee would be effective.

He was privately pleased at how the meeting had unfolded on the HIV/Aids issue, and realized that the inclusion of government and NGO representatives had gone a long way in helping convince his people that it was the right thing to do, even though they were afraid.

He then returned to the issue of the fund suggested earlier. He asked everyone present to make a small contribution if they could, to indicate their commitment. The funds raised were written into record and he said he would open a special account for Isono Lasentabeni. The funds would be used to pay for food and other issues that may require payment. He said the fund would ask for donations at every gathering held, and that people could donate at any time. At every gathering he would briefly report (through his treasurer) what the funds had been spent on; how much has accumulated; who has been especially generous and so on. He said all vegetable growers should consider making a monthly donation in kind towards the food needs. He said he would approach businesses for donations towards other ingredients. In time the fund may even support more than food needs. They must start; the gathering will get better every time, and everyone will benefit.

He then asked one of the traditional healers, and one of the religious leaders, to each give a blessing to the success of Isono Lasentabeni.

He closed the meeting by expressing his pleasure and pride in the committed and generous caliber of his community. He said he was very proud to be their Chief. He felt that the decisions taken today were excellent and would pilot all kinds of other developments. He made everyone feel good about themselves.

Study questions

1. Is Chief Kanyile a “bridging” leader or not? Explain your answer.
2. Given the context in which Chief Kanyile operates, what do you think he could and should do differently?
3. What is it about Chief Kanyile’s context that makes it particularly challenging for a transformational or bridging leader?
4. Although some people may be critical of certain things about Chief Kanyile, on the whole, people from very different backgrounds are positive about him. Why do you think this is the case?
5. Clearly Chief Kanyile has analyzed the problems of his community and addressed them accordingly. Imagine you are the Chief. Set out the problems as you understand them and a strategy for overcoming them.
6. In considering the case study incident, do you think he really demonstrated the power of bridging leadership or simply used the powers of his traditional leadership? Explain yourself.

This case was written by Bheka Ntshangane, under the supervision of Prof. Peter Franks, University of the North, Limpopo, reworked by Arlette Franks. All case materials are prepared solely for the purposes of class discussion. They are neither designed nor intended to illustrate the correct management of problems or issues contained in the case. Copyright 2003, Leadership Regional Network and Synergos Institute, New York. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, used in a report or spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronics, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise – without consent from the Leadership Regional Network and Synergos Institute. This case was made possible through a grant from the Synergos Institute.