

THE
NEW
FACE
OF

South Africa

Born free, today's post-apartheid generation asks, what's next?

By Chris Smith

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
PER-ANDERS PETTERSSON

Children in Soweto's
Pimville neighbor-
hood bounce on
a trampoline in front
of a small shop
known as a spaza.





“Chris, you must eat!” Thami declares, handing me a plate of spicy sausage. “You must be fed when you leave South Africa. Meat is a very scarce resource—there is no tree that grows meat. You must run after it and grab it with all your strength!” Ever the provocateur, he’s playing off the “savage African” stereotype, tweaking his American visitor and getting big laughs. We’re gathered around a public fire pit on the grassy verge separating a mall parking lot and the main road in northern Soweto. One of our cars,

doors thrown open, blares American hip-hop and home-grown house music, a counterpoint to the honking minibuses clogging the road. It’s a normal Saturday afternoon for my friends, all middle-class, twentysomething Sowetans. They are entrepreneurs, nonprofit workers, and students—and members of the country’s “born-free” generation, which

came of age after the “democratic miracle” that in 1994 brought Nelson Mandela to power and ended white-minority rule. Above our heads, the Highveld sky is impossibly blue.

We discuss the world-beating incompetence of the national soccer team, the perils of jealous neighbors paying witch doctors to curse you, and the merits of Facebook. Thami Nkosi, a 29-year-old activist, is the ringmaster. He disses Barack Obama (“He’s not an African. He’s American. He subscribes to white American viewpoints!”); extols the prowess of Shaka, the great Zulu warrior-king; and deplores the drag racers who terrorize Soweto’s roads on weekends. We also discuss the scarcity of decent jobs—unemployment in Soweto is around 40 percent—and the country’s populist new president, Jacob Zuma, who has promised the world to the poor. This isn’t a day for despair, though. In the South African way, heavy truths are leavened with jokes. Adopting a liturgical cadence, Thami leads the group in a blasphemous Lord’s Prayer. “For thine is the condom and the power and the glory . . . until the next morning,” he bellows, and everyone explodes in scandalized laughter.

I FIRST VISITED JOHANNESBURG in 1998 as a backpacker exploring Africa on the cheap. I had been to the developing world before, but nothing had prepared me for the bright, hard line that divided rich from poor. The wealthy, mostly white, northern suburbs hid behind high walls, the bougainvillea laced with razor wire; some poor areas didn’t have electricity or running water. Sometimes only a highway separated the two.

Soweto, at the time, was, to my eyes, a sprawl of Lilliputian brick houses and tin-roofed shacks, soot-filled skies, and menacing-looking guys manning the corners. Twenty minutes southwest of Jo’burg, it was the country’s largest black township. (Today, the population is almost 4 million.) It didn’t have hotels or offices. It had little in the way of commerce besides fortresslike liquor stores and *spazas*, hand-built kiosks where you could buy a loaf of bread or batteries. Like other visitors, I took a township bus tour. I saw Mandela’s house, met a few handpicked locals, and was back at my hostel by evening, where I listened to other travelers’ mugging stories and plotted my escape to postcard-perfect Cape Town. The

“rainbow nation,” as some people still unironically called it, didn’t seem all that cheery to me. Apartheid was gone, sure, but crime, AIDS, and poverty were on the rise, the inevitable damage caused by a system that had cared only about its white-skinned citizens.

I found my way back a few years later. I photographed AIDS orphanages and urban decay, the gritty hot-button stuff for which South Africa had become notorious. I wrote a story about a band of guerrilla electricians who toiled around Soweto, illegally reconnecting their poor neighbors to the electrical grid after the state utility cut them off. These electricians, many of them former “comrades” in the anti-apartheid struggle, had soured on the ruling African National Congress’s free-market policies, which had led to layoffs, factory closings, and the privatization of previously free municipal services like water and power.

I spent many days in Soweto, but it was usually a relief to return to my rented room in the suburbs each evening. The people I got to know best were my “fixers”—locals who work for visiting journalists as translators, bodyguards, and all-around guys-who-get-stuff-done. These relationships weren’t always comfortable. Some I didn’t trust; others I trusted except when they were drunk, which was often.

Thami was different. He was my fixer when I returned to South Africa again in 2006. A frustrated ball of ambition, he was sporadically employed as an outreach worker for a local health service and trying to conjure a way to pay for a college degree. Everyone in Soweto will tell you that you need both a degree and connections to get a professional



Thami Nkosi, opposite, relaxes near his home in Jabulani. Above, a market in Kliptown.

job, and even then you might have to “pop up” with a bribe for someone. Thami didn’t have the degree, the connections, or the money.

Wiry and catlike, he moved with the grace of the promising junior soccer player he once was. Like many his age, he didn’t much remember the “petty apartheid” of segregated bathrooms and restaurants. His strongest memories are of apartheid’s twilight years, when black-on-black political violence (stoked by the white authorities) engulfed Soweto. He lived, as he still does, less than a mile from an epicenter of the conflict, the Dobsonville Hostel, where partisans from the ANC attacked supporters of its rival, the Zulu-nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party, with spears, machetes, and AK-47s. The experience taught him to distrust blind partisanship as well as his community’s putative leaders, who were unable or unwilling to stop the violence. His home life offered little refuge. His father had disappeared when he was a baby and his mother worked constantly, so he rarely saw her. “Essentially I was raised by the streets,” he says. When he was 16, his father resurfaced. A womanizer and an alcoholic, he died of AIDS a few months later.

Thami’s story is typical. South Africa’s murder rate, though it has fallen in recent years, is still about seven times that of the United States. And the country has the world’s highest rate of AIDS-related deaths: 350,000 a year. His response to his father’s death, however, was atypical.

He became a “gender justice” activist, counseling men to use condoms and not to cheat on or abuse their women. “You feel guilty because you were not able to help your dad out,” he says. “So you think, ‘Let me do something before somebody else at home dies.’”

We spent those days in 2006 cruising Soweto, which had changed since my earlier visit. What used to be an undifferentiated gray blotch on apartheid-era maps—a warehouse to store Johannesburg’s black labor between working hours—had sprouted malls and ATM machines, and the government was crowing about how it had paved every road in the township. There was now even a Soweto Wine Festival (though most of the vintners were Afrikaners, South Africans of European descent who speak Afrikaans). He introduced me to a bunch of his friends, most of whom seemed just as improbably well adjusted. South Africa’s black middle class, dubbed “black diamonds” by the local media, was growing quickly—to a total of 3 million by the latest count.

Thami, though, was intensely political and critical of the status quo. Like those guerrilla electricians I had met before, he complained that the ANC had abandoned the poor, and he lamented the corruption that had taken root in the party. “If you *toyitoyied* once, they name a street after you,” he said, referring to the apartheid-era protest dance. When we visited Kliptown, a Soweto neighborhood where anti-apartheid

advocates drew up a progressive proto-constitution in 1955, a middle-aged drunk staggered up to us in the commemorative public square. “You must pay me because I struggled,” he demanded. As we walked away, Thami could barely contain his rage. “This is our freedom?” he asked. “The freedom to be drunk at noon?”

Three years passed and we kept in touch. I wired him money to help pay for university classes. He had a son, Tumi, now 3, with his longtime girlfriend, Jabulile. Two years ago he got a job with Sonke Gender Justice Network, which sent him to a United Nations women’s conference in New York last year. True to form, he got into arguments with a group of abstinence-only proponents from the Vatican. And he quarreled with the apparatchiks of South Africa’s former minister of health, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, whom activists nicknamed “Dr. Beetroot” for her denial of AIDS science and emphasis on herbs and nutrition to fight HIV. When pressed about his credentials before presenting a paper at Columbia University, he thundered, “Fifteen million children in Congo and Senegal are hungry. Those are my credentials!” Last June, in honor of his gender justice work, the *Mail and Guardian* newspaper named him one of “300 Young South Africans You Have to Take to Lunch.”

So it seemed like Thami was moving up. At the same time I knew from emails that his life was anything but easy. I resolved to return to see how my born-free friend was doing.

BACK IN JOHANNESBURG IN 2009, I accompany Thami to an HIV awareness training in an inner suburb named Yeoville. A once-trendy area that went feral in the late 1990s, Yeoville is now packed with immigrants from all over Africa and with the criminals who prey on them. On this morning, 20 men and women, mostly local outreach workers, are waiting in the gymnasium of an Anglican church. Thami travels the country leading sessions like this; the goal is to send the trainees back into their communities equipped to educate others.

Thami gathers them in a circle for a racy game of musical chairs. “When I say ‘penis,’” he declares, “you must move one chair to your right.

“The immediate issue people have is, ‘Where is my next meal coming from?’” Thami says. **“We should take all that money given to alleviate HIV and first teach people how to plant and eat.”**



Opposite, Thami plays with his son, Tumi. Above, a squatters' camp located between Soweto and central Johannesburg.



When I say ‘vagina,’ move one to your left. And when I call out ‘sex,’ you must run to the other side of the circle.” There’s some nervous laughter, but everyone scrambles when he yells “penis.” After he yells “sex,” he grabs a seat for himself, and one poor guy ends up seatless. Nonplussed, the guy almost whispers his first command, but soon gains confidence. “Sex!” he shouts, a sly grin spreading across his face.

The ice broken, Thami separates them into groups for a quiz. “Name two ways an HIV-positive woman can pass the virus to her baby,” Thami demands. “Correct!” he booms when somebody answers, rolling his “r” extravagantly.

Despite his devotion to HIV prevention, Thami feels hemmed in by the work’s narrow scope. Education, of course, is valuable: I heard over and over that people still don’t wear condoms regularly even though they understand that they are courting death. But Thami sees it all as a symptom of a bigger problem. He spins a scenario. “Let’s take this guy, he lives in slums, gets food for his children from garbage bins. The next day you send me to tell him that HIV kills. Bullshit! That’s far away,” he says. “The immediate issue people have is, ‘Where is my next meal coming from?’—not this *kak* about condoms. We should take all that money given to alleviate HIV and first teach people how to plant and eat.”

Indeed, 16 years after the African National Congress swept into power on promises of homes, jobs, clean water, and electricity for all, progress has been agonizingly slow. South Africa has the continent’s largest black middle class, and its members are highly visible, golfing at the Soweto Country Club and blasting R&B from gleaming new cars. But it is dwarfed by the ranks of the poor, who make up roughly half the country’s 49 million people. Jacob Zuma, who took office last year, sings the old ANC liberation song “Bring Me My Machine Gun” during rallies, but the words ring hollow to Thami, who sees the struggle fetish as a cynical attempt to deflect attention.



Above, a couple stops to photograph themselves in front of an apartment complex in Kliptown. Opposite, Motsumi Makhene at Central Johannesburg College.

More worrisome, perhaps, is the yawning gap between rich and poor. Black unions have always been one of the ANC's pillars—they played a key role in crippling the apartheid state—but they've grown sick of waiting, and last year a wave of strikes rocked the country, as miners, health care and construction workers, city employees, and even the army protested low pay. Land invasions by the homeless have spiked, too, as people in search of work in cities discover there is no room for them. Apartheid's "influx control" policies, which attempted to keep the cities as white as possible while pushing blacks into remote town-

ships and "homelands," created a backlog of demand for housing near where the jobs are. Since 1994, the government has built almost 3 million homes, but it can't keep up. Meanwhile, 80 percent of the country's commercial land remains in white hands, and an ever-growing ring of squatter camps encircles Johannesburg. Discontent hasn't yet burst into the open; the ANC won 66 percent of the vote in last year's elections. But even as the black diamonds vie for tee times, carjackers are said to greet their wealthy victims with a distinctly populist message: "We've come to repossess our car, *bra*."

MOTSUMI MAKHENE uses his hands when he speaks, kneading the air as if molding clay. A poet and painter, he is also the principal of Central Johannesburg College, a technical school that has taken over a former whites-only, red-brick campus just north of the city center. Several of Thami's friends who work at the school suggested I get Makhene's take on post-apartheid South Africa. Makhene is a member of the so-called Class of '76, a group of old-school activists shaped by the Soweto Uprising. That schoolkids' protest kicked off the revolt that ultimately brought apartheid crashing down.



Motsumi Makhene, a Class of '76 activist, hoped freedom would open opportunities for all, regardless of race or income. Utopia never came. **"We're not all in this together yet," he says.**

He tells a story from his childhood, of stopping for food on a trip between Johannesburg and Durban. "We had to get our meals from the back of the restaurant," he says. "We weren't allowed to go in and sit down." Experiences like this turned him into an activist, along with thousands of his peers. They marched in the township streets, burned municipal buildings, attended clandestine meetings. "The enemy was visible," he says. "You could see the walls, you could smell it very clearly. It was very clear what a young person should do."

Like other Class of '76ers, Makhene hoped freedom would open opportunities for all, regardless of race or income. But utopia never came.

With dizzying speed, South Africa transformed itself into an American-style consumer culture. Makhene talks—in wonder more than disapproval—of the younger generation's disengagement. He speaks of students closing off a street for a weekend-long party. "They want to enjoy life," he says with a sigh. But he understands. "Our young people are brought up by TV and cell phones," he says, and his generation hasn't always set a good example, glorifying "the accumulation of much by the few." He acknowledges, "We are not all in this together yet."

Thami offers a similar diagnosis from the other side of the generational divide. Young South Africans, he says, have few good role models, and the country's infantilizing culture—you are officially classified as a "youth" until you're 35 in South Africa—offers them little chance to establish themselves in the world. Ultimately, he says, the fight has changed. "The Class of '76 had its struggle. I have mine," Thami says. "It's different altogether now. It's not about demonstrating in the streets. The struggle now is to access the wealth of this country and distribute it to everyone. We say we're free because we can go to Sandton just like the white man can," he says, referring to one of Jo'burg's ritziest districts. "I don't think that's the bigger chunk of freedom."

ON ANOTHER MORNING, I meet Thami in Johannesburg after his college class lets out and we churn through the traffic down to Soweto. As we near the township, he points out Soccer City, a newly remodeled stadium with a design based on a traditional African bowl, built for this year's World Cup (see sidebar, below). Crisp housing complexes bristling with satellite dishes dot the landscape; the government has planted hundreds of thousands of trees, and there are whole blocks where it seems every house has added a room or two.

Thami, characteristically, is ambivalent. While he and his girlfriend frequent the new Maponya Mall, a glass-and-steel edifice with luxury shops and cafés where young professionals peck away on MacBooks, he sees the changes as mostly cosmetic. "People don't understand what development means," he says. "We're not building human capacities—we're only building physical structures."

We drop his school stuff off at his grandmother's house in Jabulani, a central Soweto neighborhood that can be sleepy or dangerous, depending on the block and the time of day. Most township householders erect a constellation of properties on their land, either for extended family or renters, and Thami lives in a small room in his grandmother's backyard, across a concrete courtyard from the main house. His room, spartan and clean, with stucco walls and a bed holding a big white teddy bear, hasn't changed much since I visited in 2006. A study on gender roles and a collection of political essays by a Durban professor sit on a writing table.

As we cross the courtyard, Thami offhandedly mentions that this is where he slaughters a goat every year or so. "The idea is to thank the gods for my son's life," he says, explaining that he slits the animal's throat and drains the blood right on the concrete. "My great-grandmother was a traditional healer," he says. "She had a room in her house that was full of snakes, and when I was a baby I would crawl right in there." As I'm standing there in the sun imagining the goat and the snakes, his cell phone rings. It's one of the guys, wondering where we are.

At a friend's house in Dobsonville, we hunker down for a barbecue, or *braai*, as South Africans call it, with beer, sausage, and big communal handfuls of *pap*, a grits-like staple. Thami holds forth under a tent in the driveway, energetically opining on the media, American rappers, and South Africa's woeful political order. "I see these Jaguars with Jacob Zuma stickers, and I wonder what that means," he says. "There's so much crap happening in this country."

As always, the discussion circles back to economic realities. "I call myself middle class and I can't even afford a house," Thami says. "I should become a corporate nigger, yeah? Be concerned only with making money and not with people being raped." He's joking, but his frustration is palpable. As we sit and drink, his friend Sifiso mentions a recent report that whites still occupy more than 70 percent of the country's top jobs. Between the corruption and the simple lack of openings, landing a good position is akin to winning the lottery. No one here has yet achieved "black diamond" status.

Sifiso is one of the principals behind a fledgling chicken restaurant, and he speaks of "branding" and "tipping points" with a motivational speaker's optimism. His drive is laudable, of course, but he turned to entrepreneurship only out of frustration. His attempt to find a job in his field of study, animal husbandry, was stymied by the Afrikaner old boys' network that controls the industry. I meet Khaya Shongwe, too, a sweet-tempered friend of Thami's who is a door-to-door salesman. He peddles Chinese-made Tummy Trimmers and shark-shaped back scratchers, but he's competing with legions of others selling the same stuff. "I trust in God," he says. "That's all I can do."

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Above, a neighborhood soccer team practices in the Diepkloof section of Soweto. Below, a restaurant in Nelson Mandela Square at Sandton City, an upscale shopping center north of downtown Johannesburg.

Soweto's Soccer City



This summer, all eyes will be on South Africa when the country hosts the World Cup soccer tournament. Soccer City, Africa's largest stadium, was built on former mining lands on the edge of Soweto. Eight games will be played here, including the opening and closing matches. South Africa poured \$373 million into the new sporting venue, and the capacity is now a staggering 94,700 people.

Designed to resemble a calabash—the hollowed-out gourd commonly used as a cooking pot throughout Africa—the stadium features floodlights that illuminate earthy brown and orange tiles to create the illusion of fire underneath the massive vessel. Soccer City's central role in the tournament is emphasized by lines of seats and windows aligned to indicate the direction of the other host stadiums throughout the country.

History buffs might appreciate the legacy of the site. In 1990, the stadium, then a more modest structure known as FNB Stadium, hosted the first public rally for Nelson Mandela after he was released from prison.

—Hilary Lawson

For information about attending the World Cup, see the Guide, p. 94.





Above, Thami and his friends relax at a *braai* in Dobsonville. From left: Isaac Hlatswayo, Bafana Sigasa, Nkonzo Khanyile, Thami Nkosi, Teboho Montsi, Mbuso Radebe, and Khaya Shongwe (in red T-shirt). Opposite, Thami and Tumi at the Apartheid Museum.

Young, turned-out Sowetans mingle while a DJ spins local house music. Looking around the party, it's easy to feel good about the future. **"Soweto is coming up," Sifiso says.**

Out of necessity they do what they can for one another, a cooperative way of living called *ubuntu*. An African concept meaning that one's identity is bound to that of the family and the neighborhood, *ubuntu* staved off the collapse of black society under apartheid. Out in front of the house, a few guys offer an impromptu illustration, fixing up a section of a wall that a friend has just knocked over while parking his car.

Nkonzo Khanyile, the owner of the shiny blue Opel that struck the wall, finishes his repair work and wanders over. A dreadlocked, perpetually smiling 28-year-old program assistant for the United Nations Population Fund, Nkonzo is another childhood friend of Thami's and,

in some ways, his temperamental opposite, the guy who strikes the conciliatory note in any debate. He is also the most upwardly mobile of the group. He has expanded his home, in a rough area of Dobsonville, room by room over the years, and it now sports a booming DVD system and a comfortable faux-velvet couch. His mother, an ANC activist who came and went mysteriously, died when he was 16, and Nkonzo found himself head of the family. He supports six of his eight siblings to varying degrees (a ninth sibling, a security guard, was murdered on the job). Nkonzo acknowledges the pressure but says it couldn't be any other way. "In Soweto we are one in our suffering," he says.

That evening, we drive up to a walled compound at the top of a hill. Sifiso lives in a small apartment here with his fiancée and daughter. The security guard opens the gate, and we park beside a line of late-model cars, all buffed to a high sheen. Young, turned-out Sowetans mingle while a DJ spins local house music; a friend points out the son of Aggrey Klaaste, a famous black journalist from the struggle years. Looking around the party, it's easy to feel good about the future. "Soweto is coming up," Sifiso says.

When I leave the party, a few guys hop in the car to escort me. Soweto's sprawl can be confusing, not to mention dangerous, for outsiders after dark. Coming down the hill, we encounter a man with a 40-ounce beer bottle in one hand and a gun in the other. He's waving the gun, swaying on his feet and screaming at a group of men a few yards away. We slow-roll past him, glass crunching under our tires. "*Tsotsis* [thugs]," says one of the guys from the backseat. "The government is cracking down on them."

On the Sunday before I leave for home, I meet Thami at a gas station just inside Soweto's borders. We drive to his girlfriend's house to collect his son, then to a Native American-themed steak house at a nearby mall. We order burgers and milkshakes, and the server gives Tumi, a pudgy-cheeked terror, a paper headress and a red balloon that he proceeds to chase across the restaurant. We drive on to the Apartheid Museum, sited incongruously next to a casino and an amusement park in Jo'burg's southern suburbs.

The displays are alternately sobering and inspirational. A wall of placards lists the laws that banned mixed marriages and mandated where each race had to live. Another exhibit offers an exhaustive history of Mandela's life. As we wander, Thami gathers his son into his arms, and soon the child is asleep, hanging from his shoulder. While Tumi sleeps off lunch, we watch a grainy video from the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, in which the police opened fire on a group of unarmed black protestors, killing 69.

Back out in the parking lot, I ask Thami what he was feeling. "Ah, my brother, seeing that stuff gives me the creeps," he says, bundling Tumi into the backseat. Then, turning to me, he adds, "I'm actually thinking about how far we've come." **A**

CHRIS SMITH is a writer and photographer who has worked in Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and at home in the San Francisco Bay Area. He reports that THAMI NKOSI expects to receive a degree in project management this year. Photographer PER-ANDERS PETTERSSON lives in Cape Town. He is profiled on page 8.

