



### Eish Sabelo

A few months back, I was texting my host sister - from my time with the Peace Corps in Swaziland - Calisile Mkhombe. Typically, our conversations revolve around Cali's nursing work and the doings of the rest of the family. Essentially, I pepper her with many questions, and she patiently answers them. We say we each miss the other and close with the hope of seeing each other soon. It's a pretty standard script.



From left to right: Mncedisi Mkhombe, Calisile Mkhombe, and Me. (2017)

On this particular day, however, Cali flipped it.

Cali: "Eish Sabelo,\* when you say you will come to see us soon, are you serious?"

Me: "Of course, Sisi. Do you remember we are working with LBT now? We are preparing to move to Cameroon next September. After a few years, we can plan a vacation to come and visit. Then you can meet skoni wakho!\*\*\*"

Cali: "Ahhh, I remember Sabi,\*\*\* but I thought it must have been a joke because it was so long ago."

Me: "Hahaha. I feel that for sure, but it is still the plan. Preparing to serve as a missionary takes a long time. It feels like a really long time sometimes."

Cali: "Why? What are you doing that is taking so long?"

Me: "Well, first, we are taking classes. This is training us to be good Bible translators and project advisors. We are also visiting churches and asking people to partner with us. That is what's taking the most time. When we are done, we will have visited over 60 churches."

Cali: "Partner, Sabi? What does that mean?"

Me: "Oh, right. Well, it means supporting us, really. We ask people to pray for the work and the project. We also ask them to consider donating to our ministry. It is how our ministry is funded."

Cali: "Hawu,\*\*\*\* and people just give you money?"

Me: "Yes, surprisingly."

Cali: "It sounds nice, Sabi. America is nice."

Me: "Haha, yes, I'm sure. But you know, the experience really has been pretty painless, for as much as I stress over it."

Cali: "And what do people do if they want to support you?"

Me: "Well, we normally just tell them to sign up on our website."

Cali: "OK, Sabi! Thank you for explaining, Sabi! Uhambe kahle Sabi!\*\*\*\*\*"

Me: "Wemukelekile sisi. Uhambe kahle nawe.\*\*\*\*\*"

### Hawu Wena

To be frank, the conversation didn't register much. Shortly after, I went back to the activity that consumed most of my days at that time: worrying about everything. You know, the typical "pop idolatry" of American life.

It wasn't until a few weeks later, after I'd downloaded our daily list of support gifts so I could write thank you notes, that I saw Calisile's name smack-dab in the middle. The full import of her question finally registered to me. She had asked how to give because she wanted to support us, too. She'd donated 10 dollars or 110 Emalangeneni or a half-day round-trip bus ride to town to find a bank that did international money transfers.

"Hawu wena," I thought, which was appropriate because I was feeling many emotions. First, there was irritation that she'd used what little extra money she made on us. Second, there was embarrassment; did she think I mentioned fundraising as a sneaky way of asking her to donate?



Calisile at her graduation from nursing school. (2022)



Being silly in the Mkhombe's kitchen. (2014)

Finally, there were just tears. After all, it was just like sweet Cali, the girl who sends a portion of each paycheck back home to do something like this for her family.

## Really Real, Really

I want to add that I asked Cali for permission to include her in our prayer letter. She needed to be a willing partner in sharing her story. Not just some African girl with a pretty smile and a compelling narrative who can teach Americans moral lessons about life and then fade into obscurity. A big, if I'm being honest, probably the biggest part for me personally of our church presentations is promoting the reality of Africans as full-bodied fellow humans. They really are real, not just pictures on a screen, and so they experience the full range of life's many moments, good and bad. They also make real contributions to arenas as big as the world and as small as a bible project in Cameroon, good and bad.

As I've been working on this prayer letter, thinking about Cali and her kindness, I keep remembering the account of the widow with the two mites in Luke 21:1-4. At the Seminary, I was once asked how I would preach this text. I confidently said I would celebrate this woman's sacrifice and encourage my people to live similarly. My professor gently responded by offering that perhaps a more textually faithful interpretation is to notice that Jesus condemned a world that made some rich at the expense of others.



*JESUS MAFA. The Widow's Mite, from Art in the Christian Tradition. A project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library.*

\* Eish is an informal exclamation used to express various emotions in South Africa. Sabelo is my siSwati name, meaning "the Gift."

\*\* Skoni wakho means "your stepsister" in siSwati.

\*\*\* Sabi is a nickname for Sabelo.

\*\*\*\* Hawu is an informal interjection, like "Oh my," but also expresses a range of emotions in South Africa.

\*\*\*\*\* Uhambe kahle means "go well" but is used as a goodbye in siSwati.

\*\*\*\*\* Literally, "You're welcome, sister. Go well as well."

My professor was right. The fact is that we live in a world where historical realities, ancient and modern, make it difficult for Africans to launch their own Bible translation projects. We should never paper over real injustice with a sappy story of sacrifice. But he was also a little wrong. When doing something to address endemic poverty, Biblical and otherwise, it's always tempting to make the story about us. Whether it's our repentance over the ways our lives can contribute to an impoverished world or our excitement that God created us with gifts and talents that can ameliorate such poverty. But God also created the widow with the two mites. And yes, she was poor, and yes, it was unjust, but she also really gave those two mites, and injustice shouldn't overshadow that it really was all she had. And we should really honor that.

This letter tries to do many things in a bit of space, which means it will do all of them poorly. But if I can speak plainly for a moment, these are the things I want Cali's story to communicate. Cali is a real person who lives beyond the words of this letter. She's really very sweet; I hope you can meet her in this life or the next. She really gave to the work of Bible translation, and her partnership will really make a difference. It really was a sacrifice to do what she did, and there are some pretty real reasons why that is. Furthermore, many Africans, just as real as Cali, already have and will become important players in this translation story. And like the widow with the two mites, I just wanted to take a moment to honor that.

## PRAYER REQUESTS

- Pray that Cali's efforts to apply for work in America will bear fruit.
- Give thanks for the thousands of years of faithful work that our African brothers and sisters have committed to God's kingdom. Especially translating His Word into their languages.
- Pray for the Subula team as they continue to work faithfully on their Bible.
- Pray for all the churches and ministries which we visited during our partnership development trips. Pray that God will work wonderfully through them and bring many to faith and that they might be His hands and heart to a hurting world.
- Pray for Erin and me as we begin packing up our home and spending our last days with our dog Fig.

## CONTACT

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