The triumph of a quiet dreamer

Sibusiso Vilane, the first black person to stand on Everest’s summit, kept his great ambition to himself, writes MICHAEL SCHMIDT

How do you size up a man so you know his heart?... 

The climber’s wife, Nomusa, 26 — he started dating when she was a schoolchild of only 13 — puts it most succinctly: “Sibusiso told himself his parents died a long time ago. He blamed both of them for what happened: the split.”

She says that although her husband lends his father money and speaks poetically enough to him on the infrequent occasions they meet, he has been deeply wounded by his father’s refusal to attend the 2001 funeral of his sister, Buhlsie, because of an old dispute over not having benefited from her dowry. An elder brother, Mangaliso, had died aged two.

About his relationship with his father, Vilane says: “It is not a healthy one from the point that ever since they separated, when I was maybe about three years old, my father never really cared about my sister and me at all.”

He has never sustained me, never paid for my education, never saw me grow because he was living in South Africa and I in Swaziland... and obviously, that does not lead to a good relationship.”

Vilane says he started young herding goats and cattle. The money went to his grandmother until his mother came back from the city and sent him to school. He was already 10 by then. He says he ’whipped ”position one all the time” at school, knowing how “hard it was out there.”

Neither of his parents were aware that he planned to climb Everest.

At first glance, the house on the corner that Vilane built in Lububane, near Ekwazini, in 1996 seems typical: a three-legged iron pot simmering under flaking black plastic shade cover, tyres and bits of scrap metal lying on corrugated iron roofs, fat worms gnawing their holes around wattles-and-daub coops and newspaper posters of Kaizer Chils stars sharing the lounge wall with a framed postcard of Swazi King Mswati III.

But two large circles in the clay masonry are different. One is an oddly English decorative point hook from the grinding wheels and chisels and bits of scrap metal lying on corrugated iron roofs, fat worms gnawing their brows around wattles-and-daub coops and newspaper posters of Kaizer Chiefs stars sharing the lounge wall with a framed postcard of Swazi King Mswati III.

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