

The Last Ride

Landbouweekblad / Agricultural Weekly (South Africa) - Rural Insight by Sean Christie

May 2, 2024

Ben Freeth's 2,000km ride on horseback to draw attention to Zimbabwean land grabs was not his first. And probably not his last either.



It's not the end yet. Benefactors provided horses and a mule for Ben Freeth's 2,000 km trek. Johnny was his ally on the last leg. "His name means mercy, and that's what I experienced again and again during the ride."

Around 07:00 on Monday 18 March this year, the Zimbabwean activist Ben Freeth climbs for the last time on his strong Namibian farm horse Johnny. Before he puts his foot in the stirrup, he mutters softly: "Okay, Johnny, okay..."

The two have come a long way, in the middle of a scorching summer and a drought that forced Namibian farmers from Grootfontein to Keetmanshoop to sell their animals at a third of the normal market price.

Freeth, in his months-long khaki uniform and wide-brimmed hat with a wedding plume, his shriveled face and baggy shirt reveal something of the obstacles on his 2,000 km long journey.

On the last leg he is not alone. About 30 other riders stand among the thorn trees, brushing out horse tails and straightening saddles. On a dapple grey horse next to Freeth sits his daughter, Anna. Just the day before, she had landed from London, and her ticket back was still booked for the same evening.

At the beginning of his journey, on 28 November 2023, Anna was also by his side on the Mount Carmel farm outside Harare. It was a hot day and Anna got sunstroke.

In a few hours, Anna will also be by his side at the end of her father's journey on the steps of the historic Turnhalle building in Windhoek, once the home of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) tribunal.

Before the riders embark on the last stage, Freeth prays first. Then the disparate group set off in the direction of the rising sun. Some are old friends and allies of Freeth, such as his tennis partner, Reggie, who surprised him on the road a few days before. But most are Namibians who heard about Freeth's riding in the media, and spontaneously came to support him.

In the field next to the A1 motorway, flags of the 16 SADC member states are handed out to the riders, more or less in a row for all the photographers from the media groups. "What a great day," exclaims an elderly Kenyan as the group crosses the highway and rides into a dry course of the Klein-Windhoek River.

Originally, the group was going to ride right up to the steps of the Turnhalle building, but the police only gave permission for Johnny to enter the city.

In fact, it had more impact: Freeth on foot, with Johnny's bridle in one hand and a simple wooden cross in the other, and a few dozen people following on foot with waving flags down Robert Mugabe Drive.

Amid slightly muted applause, his journey comes to a halt - for the time being - and an impromptu speech on the steps of the SADC tribunal follows. A memorandum addressed to the SADC Secretariat, requesting the reinstatement of the tribunal, is read out. Someone brings Johnny water, but the restless horse does not want to drink.

And so ended Freeth's long ride for justice.



Freeth was very skeptical about the Namibian part of his trip. "The drought worried me, but also because a large part of the route ran through private, fenced land. I did not know how we would find water and pasture. But all the gates swung open for me and the hospitality was there unbelievable." A group of supporters joined him outside Windhoek for the last stage, but were forbidden to ride into the city with him on horseback.

A man, Yuri, inspired by the story of Ben Freeth's journey, made a saddle bag with the name Tsedeq - one of the horses he rode from Zimbabwe to Namibia - engraved on it.

The background

On the eve of his last ride [17 March 2024], a few hundred people gathered in Freeth's honor at the Rolé horse center in Brakwater to hear him talk about his journey. Those hoping for a travelogue would be disappointed, as Freeth's story begins in 2007, the year he and his father-in-law, Mike Campbell, appealed to the SADC tribunal to defend Campbell's farm, Mount Carmel, against the lawless land reform programme of the Zimbabwean government and to help protect them.

The government at the time confiscated thousands of commercial farms without compensating the owners, and although Campbell repeatedly appealed to the Zimbabwean courts, he ultimately did not receive protection.

On 28 November 2008, the judges of the SADC tribunal found in favour of Campbell and several additional applicants, ruling that they should be fairly compensated for their land. It did not happen. Instead, Robert Mugabe's government rejected the decision and subsequently withdrew from the SADC tribunal.

As he stands in the middle of the horse ring on 18 March this year, complete with an Anton van Wouw bronze statue depicting an Anglo-Boer War scene, Freeth does not mince words about the day in 2008 when he and his in-laws from Mount Carmel were kidnapped and tortured in an interrogation camp.

In 2009, their houses were burned to the ground. Campbell, who never recovered from the attack, died in April 2011. A month after his death, the SADC heads of state jointly decided to suspend the tribunal.

At the time, the outraged head of the tribunal, Justice Ariranga Pillay, said: "I think...they feel they have created a monster. Why? They have not processed all the implications of a SADC tribunal. They were probably under the impression that the tribunal judges were only engaged in judicial activism."

After the dismissal of its judges, the heads of state of SADC countries subsequently tried to replace the tribunal's protocol with a new protocol, which abolished individual access to the court. There was however, an obstacle.

To change the protocol, the signatures of two-thirds of the SADC heads of state were needed, and only nine out of 16 signed. This number was reduced to eight in December 2018 after the Constitutional Court in South Africa found that former president Jacob Zuma had acted unlawfully when he, together with other heads of state, suspended and dissolved the tribunal. Zuma's signature has therefore been removed.

Subsequent lawsuits in Tanzania led to similar findings. Theoretically, the old protocol should still be in force, and with the right attention and pressure, the region can once again have a court where individuals who cannot find justice at home can bring cases.

That's why Freeth traveled the route. •



Among the group that accompanied Ben Freeth on the last stage of his trek to the steps of the SADC tribunal in Windhoek, was a farrier from Okahandja in Namibia, a Zimbabwean member of parliament, a millionaire crop farmer from Zambia and a woman from Kenya who helped establish free clinics in California in the 1960s.

Three horses and a cross mule

On the porch of his last place of residence, the night before the last leg in Windhoek, Freeth showed that this long journey in search of justice was not his first long journey. In 1996, with two mules, three donkeys and a friend, Freeth traveled 2,000 km from Jimma in Ethiopia, through the Omo River Valley to the top of the slopes of Mount N'giro in Kenya.

"There were no policemen, roads, schools or hospitals," Freeth said. He described this experience and life lesson in his 2011 book, *Mugabe and the White African*. "Man needs a system of law and order so that countries do not degenerate into places of senseless human tragedy where hunger and poverty are imposed at the barrel of a gun."

Freeth had already wanted to embark on a similar journey, but young children and the pressure to survive land reform in Zimbabwe took its toll.

Here the 52-year-old Freeth hesitated for a moment with his narration. "I am in the middle of a difficult divorce. Apart from the breakdown of law and order in Zimbabwe, this is probably the most turbulent time in my life. This trip to Windhoek was probably also an attempt to find personal healing."

The logistical arrangements of his trip were a welcome distraction, and since the divorce proceedings had cost him almost all of his resources, the only way to continue was in a spirit of faith.

First, he needed a horse. "A friend in Matabeleland offered to help, and when I visited the stable, the owner pointed to a wild, chocolate-coloured stallion and said: 'That's yours'." Freeth named the horse Tsedeq, Hebrew for "justice" and "the right".

The horse threw him off as Freeth broke him in and he broke four ribs, just 17 days before his planned departure date. "For symbolic reasons, I wanted to leave on the 15th anniversary of the SADC tribunal's verdict in favor of Zimbabwe's farmers, but I was in so much pain that I hesitated."

Miraculously, Freeth still managed to get into the saddle on 28 November 2023. His daughter rode on Tsedeq, while he first rode on her friend's horse.

During the entire 800 km trek through Zimbabwe, it was not necessary for Freeth and Tsedeq to cross a single fence. "You can drive right across the country. This is the impact of land reform."

At first, Freeth got up at 3am every morning to hit the road, but soon realized it was too easy to forget things or not saddle up properly. He changed his start time to 5:00am and rode until just after dark.

"When I used to saddle up, people would come up to me and said: 'You can't sleep here, it's not safe', and then invited me into their house. Then I had to break camp again, pack up and be social, while I was dead tired."

A close bond developed between Freeth and Tsedeq, who slept side by side.

The rain held off and the two depended on community water wells, with Freeth having to give Tsedeq water from his bush hat. "After about 11 hats full, his thirst was quenched!"

Galloping without a bridle

Near the Victoria Falls they had a narrow escape with elephants. "We were riding on a strip road when Tsedeq suddenly stopped. I knew they were probably elephants, and because the wind was blowing in our direction, I thought we would stand and wait first. The next moment an elephant cow appeared in the road, quite close to us. She didn't see us and the wind was in my face.

"I took out my camera to take a photo between Tsedeq's ears. The cow walked forward with her calf in her tracks. Tsedeq's ears were strained and his neck was flattened... As more and more elephants appeared, the horse began to gallop in the opposite direction.

"Just the day before, I lost my reins when I crossed a river with wild thorn trees. At full gallop it was like being in a sports car without a steering wheel or brakes!"

He felt his broken ribs. "To prevent branches from stripping me from the horse, I pressed my body against Tsedeq and tried to reassure him. I said, 'It's okay, these elephants won't hurt us, we're okay.' When he finally stopped, I guided him in the direction of the elephants, and after that he was almost okay with them."

At Kazungula, where the borders of Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana and Zambia meet, Freeth had to send Tsedeq home in a horse trailer. With long quarantine periods and other veterinary processes, was

it just too complicated to take a horse across the border. He was also worried that his beloved horse would not survive the harsher environmental conditions in the north of Namibia.

After a break to recover, Freeth flew to Windhoek to get his next horse. A strong mule, the 15-year-old Morenga, was his traveling companion for a while. The new duo made good progress through the Caprivi Strip until they came upon three horses near Rundu. Mules are highly social animals and especially love the company of horses. "After this he repeatedly ran away, each time returning to the horses he saw."

Freeth's next horse, Stardust, was "a real gentleman". The two of them drove from Rundu to Grootfontein. Then it was Johnny's turn.

Namibian farming families loaned Stardust and Johnny to Freeth. "The support in Namibia was truly remarkable."

In Zimbabwe Freeth slept in the bush every night, but in Namibia, where he ate several of the best steaks in the world, two horses were loaned to him, and there was always feed and water for his horses.

Freeth had a lot of time to figure out why his ride grasped people's attention so much. "Partly it is because people saw Zimbabwe burning from a distance, but felt powerless to do anything about it. Suddenly there is this Zimbabwean who stands up for justice, and they have an outlet found for their sympathy." But he admits that for many people it may have been more about the horses.

"Namibians are horse people, they are almost like the Mongolians in some ways. Perhaps the image of this man, meandering through the country on a Namibian farm horse, summoned a bit of that history: the Thirstland trek, the wild horses of the Garub..."

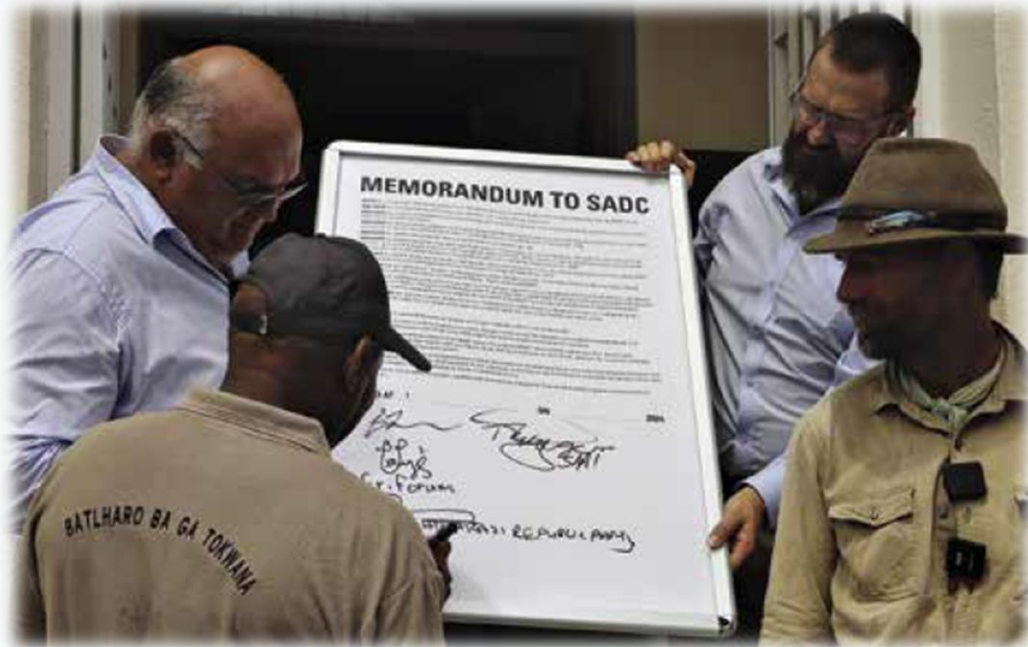
Freeth prayed most of the day. "I rode on Johnny and Googled the meaning of John - 'God is merciful'. It really summed up what I have learned time and time again on this journey."

And what's next?

A few days before the last leg of the journey, I noticed some high-profile people at Freeth's place of residence, among them Dr. Theo de Jager, former president of the World Farmers' Union and the director of Saai, the Southern African Agri Initiative. Together with De Jager was Barend Uys from AfriForum, and these two were largely responsible for the memorandum that was read out on the steps of the SADC tribunal.

"Ben's ride is ending, but our journey to restore the tribunal has just begun," said De Jager. AfriForum's legal team has walked a long, supportive path with the Zimbabwean farmers who approached the SADC tribunal. Their current plan appears to be a political strategy, according to which they form alliances with chiefs and royal houses right across the region.

On the steps of the Turnhalle building were also Mogakolodi Masibi of the Batlharo Boo Ba Ga Tokwana traditional community of Disaneng, west of Mahikeng in South Africa's North West province, and Mqondisi Moyo, president of Zimbabwe's Mthwakazi Republic Party (Matabeleland).



With Ben Freeth (right), is, from left, Mogakolodi Masibi of the Batlharo Boo Ba Ga Tokwa-post-community in the North West, Dr. Theo de Jager from Saai and Barend Uys from AfriForum.

An interesting mix, but not an alliance that SADC heads of state will necessarily be on the lookout for right now. Freeth wanted to get the support of the Namibian Agricultural Union (NLU), but the chairman, Thinus Pretorius, issued a statement making it clear that the NLU submits to the constitution of the country, "which upholds the rule of law and the possession of property under the charter of fundamental rights guarantee. While we empathize with the Zimbabwean farmers who are losing their land has, there is no longer a SADC tribunal in Windhoek, and therefore the NLU will not participate in the action".

Freeth officially responded by saying "the NLU seems to have missed the point" and that what happened in Zimbabwe "could happen anywhere". He referred to the reaction of a member of the alliance to restore the tribunal. "Ben, there are two types of agricultural unions in the world. The first kind goes to the government and asks what it wants, and then goes to the farmers and tells them what the government wants. The other kind goes to the farmers and ask what they want, and then go to the government and tell the government what to do. Unfortunately, the first kind of union is in the upper hand."

Zimbabwean Ben Freeth may no longer be on horseback, but his long ride for justice is far from over.

ENDS