

OBITUARY - Hamilton Thyali

Editor's note: I was saddened recently when I phoned Margy Frost in Barkly East to hear how the drought was affecting the region, to be told that Hamilton Thyali, a pioneer in South African aquaculture, had died at his home in Cofimvaba in the Transkei more than a year ago. He was in his early eighties. Hamilton was featured in an article on the Balloch hatchery in Piscator No 130 (November 1998). He was a gentle, courteous man possessed of an unassuming but intrinsic dignity. He was recruited by the former head of Cape Nature Conservation, Dr Douglas Hey, and spent most of his life at the Jonkershoek trout hatchery, CNC's research headquarters on the Eerste River in Stellenbosch. He was one of the pioneers of aquaculture in this country and, as a tribute to him, we publish this account by Robert Kirby originally carried in that most beautiful of books and now alas, out of print, Fly-Fishing In Southern Africa, Struik/Winchester, 1993.

At the age of 70 the 'Right Reverend' Hamilton Thyali, a lay preacher, retired from the Cape Department of Nature and Environmental Conservation, where he had worked for 47 years, and moved back to his home in Transkei to be with his family and play a more active role in ministering to his congregation.

In his years at the Jonkershoek Fish Station he had worked almost exclusively with trout, hand-breeding literally millions of the unique 'Jonkershoek Strain', descendants of the original rainbows hatched there in the late 1890s. Until the Department of Nature and Environmental Conservation changed its trout policy in the 1980s, the Jonkershoek establishment was virtually the sole supplier for stocking local waters, and even today there can be few trout in the rivers and streams of the Western Cape that, in some way, are not the product of Thyali's careful husbandry of the strain.

A Stellenbosch University research project into the isolation and development of this exceptionally heat-resistant strain underlines its importance.

Thyali was unstinting in his stewardship of trout breeding at Jonkershoek. His tall over-all-clad figure was ever stalking the holding ponds, inspecting the brood stock, and he would visit the hatching trays two or three times a night 'just to make sure'. His practical experience often counted for more than even the most meticulous methods based on scientific research.

On occasions when all other attempts at stripping and breeding indigenous fish species had failed, it was to him that the experts turned. As the French say about cooking: Much of it is in the turn of the hand.

Over three weeks one winter he came to Franschhoek to help me strip and breed from a small stock of 160 Jonkershoek-strain rainbows. Looking and behaving like an English squire, in a peppercorn suit and gumboots, with a trilby banged on to his head, he began by dispatching a few of us neck-deep into the freezing water. Thyali stood nearby at a small table on which he had laid out the equipment he had brought with him: a small

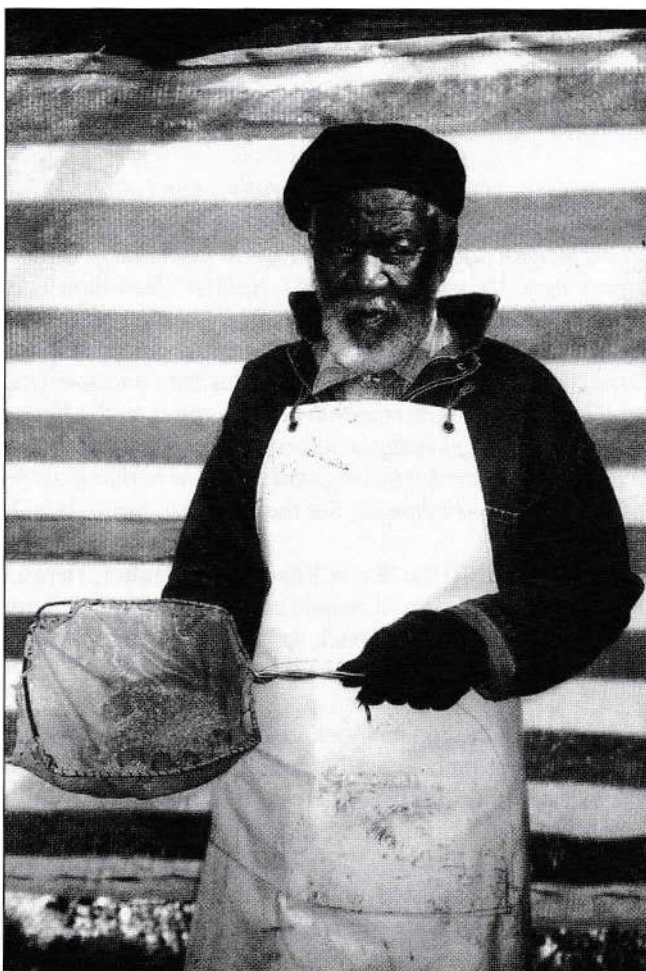
china bowl, and various sieves and cups.

"Give me hen," he said.

Handed a fat, slippery two-pounder, he pressed a stream of ova from it and peered at them. "Over-ripe," he pronounced, expressing the rest of the eggs from the astonished fish and flinging it unceremoniously back into the dam.

Failure to strip over-mature eggs often inhibits the next year's breeding. When a hen fish produces eggs that are ready, they are identifiable immediately by a soft orange colour that seems to glow.

These were squeezed into the china bowl followed by the command: "Give me cockfish two." Trout milt looks like watery milk. Using two males, this sperm was gently expressed on to the waiting eggs and stirred with a finger, and the first part of the artificial breeding process was over.



Hamilton Thyali, consummate gentleman, man of the cloth and aquaculture pioneer.

Afterwards Thyali drank tea with us in our kitchen and reflected with imperturbable dignity on the failings of politicians, a breed in whose propagation he had no interest, believing them to be at the root of most human suffering.

Six weeks of hatching remained, during which the eggs were kept in shallow trays, with a continuous stream of water passed over them. From the 160 fish the breeding produced 8 500 fry.



"This design feature, the fact that a dry fly lands hook-down, is a fundamental contradiction of all that is sane on this earth."

Neil Patterson, Chalkstream Chronicle, Merlin Unwin Books, 1995.