

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Chronicles of The Lost Decade

A project sponsored by DiraSengwe Conferences

Interviewee: **Nomandla Mhlauli**

Interviewer: **Angela McIntyre**

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AM: So maybe you can introduce yourself to us first, just tell us, tell us who you are and what you do.

NM: My name is *Nomandla Mhlauli*. I am a regent, which means that I'm holding the throne for my son, as the father passed on in 1996. My son is not eh, is no more ah, young but it's just that, he is still trying to gain more experience to work with communities before taking the throne. And eh, also the members of the family members are also supporting that. Because before working with people who, you you, before taking that throne you needed to, to have experience in working with other, other people around. Because that, sometimes Traditional leadership will, eh make you work in one place. But, but it was like that before, but now at least now, would be exposed to other areas, but he is still interested to do more and as he has done civil engineering. And we, the government and other people also encouraging us as Traditional leaders to take our children to school so, that they will be able to face with the challenges of, of the country now. So I'm a nurse by profession.

AM: Carry on you were telling me about your position, so you are sort of a guardian of a future

NM: Yes, usually before the throne was usually taken by the uncles, but it's was noticed that, when the child is grown enough they, they will, they will fight and everything when the child supposed to take the throne. Now it was decided that the mother must hold of throne to avoid that. And you will be able to educate other children because when you're talking about the heir to the throne, you still have a responsibility to take care of other children. So when you give this to the uncles, they have got their own responsibility so they won't be able to take care of you as a mother of the child and the other siblings. So we appreciate that and even in the Constitution the the issue of equality it has made as comfortable now as women.

AM: So interesting. So tell me, you've come to the AIDS Conference, uhm. In your position as regent, how do you, what do you feel is your role and responsibility regarding HIV within your community?



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NM: Yes, yes I came here as the as a member of the National House of Traditional Leaders that is the National Parliament of Traditional Leaders. Each province is represented by three representatives. I'm one of those representatives from Eastern Cape, and I'm the leader of delegation from there. Now the National House was also invited to this conference as it is also participating in SANAQ.

AM: Yeah, ok. Yes of course from SANAQ ja.

NM: So our, as members of SANAQ, as we were there's different organisations there. Each and every organisation is expected to, to go back to, to their counter parts, that for us is provinces. So as the National House with got different committees. Still those committees each and every province is a represented there and each and every committee. So I'm going to report back to the Social Development Committee which is dealing with the issues of HIV and AIDS.

Then the chairperson of the committee was supposed to be here and the chairperson of the National house was supposed to be here. So now I'm, my role now is to go back and report to them the committee. When the committees meet they will, they also have different fora which is made up of different provinces, that is social development from different provinces to share whatever information they do have and then we've got also local houses with same arrangement and we go down to the trust authorities, that is National Councils. So eh, and it is eh, is very easy when you're working together you report back. As provinces we are also participating in the provincial AIDS Council's, so it is easy for us to communicate with the provincial structures as we are also participating in the national structures.

AM: Can I ask you, I want you to remember back now to the time when you first heard of HIV and your first experiences of seeing people with HIV tell me a story about that.

NM: My, my first experience is, is not a nice one. Because when I experienced that, I'm a nurse by profession. So I was a nurse working in the paediatric ward. You can imagine how AIDS was, that patients with HIV and AIDS were treated before. Everybody was afraid of them and you'll see some when, when they've passed on, you'll see the clothes and every belongings put in a plastic bag and what and what and what and what. That was so painful to experience especially for children as I was working with children then. I was always thinking, why now,



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because the children are the gifts of God. Why God would allow that because I was concerned about children. The future, our future which are children and youth. So it was very painful for me as a nurse. And you'll see that they are treated differently, and that was the instruction we got as nurses before. Need to be very careful and what and what and what. But now as we see now as time goes on everybody now, you could even, not know how is being transmitted exactly. You will be even afraid of using utensils like, like spoons and what and what and what. Thinking that, that can be, you can get it from that spoon that was used by that patient. So, but as time goes on everything was clear. So that was my bad experience because I love children.

AM: When was that, was that in the 1990s?

NM: It was yes, 1990s because I train for nursing from 1987 to 1991; I started working from 1991, yes from 1991 so you can imagine what was happening by then.

AM: So you watched the epidemic growing?

NM: Yes, I watched it growing. But by then we, there was nothing much especially from the rural areas, especially for the rural areas even information. It was not easy to get to access information. Yes even now for some areas, deep rural areas it is not easy to access information about HIV and AIDS. So but it's better now for other, other areas.

AM: So, but there was a time when there was no information but there was also no medication. You must have seen a lot of people dying?

NM: Yes, yes there was no medication and there will be those people from the traditional healers, those will be saying; that no we, we do cure AIDS. So people from the rural areas were prone to that and you know sometimes in our rural areas, this HIV and AIDS was also or linked to the issues of what, what do you say, those people who are killing others, eh, witchcraft.

AM: Ja, witchcraft

NM: It was always and it was still like that. So it was worse by that time, uhm, most of the woman will be killed saying, because of that. So women were prone to that because there was not enough information about the silent symptoms. So when, when people have got those



hollow hallucinations, and what and what. They are saying that they are seeing somebody to others. And then people, people will be killed.

AM: So woman with HIV they were accused of, of being witches, of witchcraft?

NM: Not exactly, those were who were ill, yes. So those who were ill, they'll be saying, no I'm being witchcraft by somebody else. So you would see a lot of people, houses baned and all of that. But as traditional leaders we decided to join hands with the Department to try that people get more information about this, because this must not be linked to witchcraft and other things. Because HIV and AIDS is there, we needed to join hands. So as the Traditional leaders, the other reason that it was key for us to be part of SANAQ, is because of those cultural practices.

Some of the cultural practices, yes they do assist to limit the spread of HIV and AIDS. But there are other cultures which are harmful, especially to women. For instance, when you are talking about maybe you won't understand the issue of inheritance. When I have lost my husband. Then there'll be somebody from the same family, from the same family will be coming and then inherit me. So, and the issue of, and other forced marriages and what and what. But those issues now, they are discussed openly because as women from the traditional communities we raise those issues and we are getting positive response from those, from other Traditional committees and Traditional leaders. Because they do understand now what is happening.

AM: So HIV has caused some changes it's brought about some changes in Traditional leadership?

NM: Yes, a lot a lot but we still need to do more because some will be saying that I'm doing this because of culture. Yes I'm forced to do this because of culture. So we are trying to fight that, they might, when ever somebody's doing something wrong must not hide talking about culture, culture must be clear, and we needed to. Culture is supposed to be dynamic; it's supposed to go with times. Yes, because now we've got a lot of challenges.

AM: Culture has to adapt to the HIV epidemic, is that what you're saying?. But how did the change people's behaviour, from the point of view of the Traditional leaders, what are your strategies and ideas about changing people's behaviour?



NM: We, for instance as a, I'm the chairperson of Imbubena, which is a group of women of Traditional leaders in Eastern Cape. Now I'm the chairperson of that, of that organisation. That is where we are trying to discuss these issues and, and check what we can do about the behaviours.

Because when we talk about some cultural practices those behavioural. For instance the issue of polygamy versus HIV and AIDS now. We, we raise those issues with Traditional leaders, male Traditional leaders. How can we deal with that one, because now polygamy was there? But now, polygamy now, is it still relevant or what can we do if it's supposed to be there? What can we put so that we are not prone to HIV and AIDS? So we raise those issues, those issues of inheritance and other issues. And that, the other issue the burning issue especially in the Eastern Cape. That, the forced marriages especially for children. Yes, and still under age.

I don't say it's good for the elderly youth, but the children who are still at school. So killing the future of the children that one we are doing very well with the half of Traditional leaders in the Eastern Cape. So they are also fighting against that. Because, they those people are saying. No, it's because of culture but also women, the mothers also saying they are poor, they would also like to get something from when they children they children are married. What about the child's future?

AM: But did you ever find yourself as women to be in conflict with men? With the Traditional leaders who are mean I mean. Did you ever find yourselves men versus women having discussions, I mean arguing? Tell me about that, about the confrontations, the conflicts.

NM: Yes, we do, we do, we do. Because in some conferences we would come together, for instance we had just had a conference on AIDS. There were different countries there, those issues I'm raising, which are affecting women. We are discussing with them and most of them they acknowledge that there are challenges. So some will talk about, take on the issue of culture, culture, culture. As it was read during the other sessions. Who identifies the proper culture? How, which culture can you say this one is mine, this is ours. So we needed to check on those issues, but we don't want to run away from the activities which are assisting us to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS. But we need also to check on those, on those practices. What is



exactly, what was interesting some of discussions, when we were talking about the virginity inspection.

The other lady was raising that, the issue that. As woman, we are blessed with virginity inspection. Are we saying that really we agree that we are the ones who are spreading the disease? Why are we saying that no, we must be the ones who must be inspected. Are we agreeing that we are the ones who are spreading the disease? But before those questions were not there, because we are just as traditional leaders doing what was done, and we know that it goes together with the behavioural change and what and what. For instant when you are talking about the initiation as a class. Not as in circumcisions or girl what, what and what inspection, virgin inspection. But initiation, but or we are talking about circumcision? There are other issues that, if we are talking about that, there are lessons which is supposed to be some lessons which are taught to those boys about manhood, about responsibilities of a man. The man is regarded to as be taking care of the family, as we know. But now, if that is done properly. That's why for instance in Cape Town they decided to form some forum so that they can see what is being taught there. Why those boys are coming back still doing those bad things, when r they are back from there, from the mountains. For as we expected them to behave very well, but it seems as if now. The others will come, will go there, before they went there, they were not smoking, but coming back, they're smoking everything and everything. Could that be their behaviour. So they are going back now the traditional leaders to find out what is being taught, must have fruits so that we can be able to see as the communities, that those are from there, if the purpose is that.

AM: Let's say 10 years ago 20 years ago, was it allowed was a committed to question the circumcision? Could you talk about those things as a woman? That you want to know what they're doing with your young?

NM: No, it was so difficult. For instance even now there are those cultured areas you can't talk about it for instant in that deal, in other areas. They don't even want to talk about it. What we are saying as women. The weakness they, the men are having, whenever there something mentioned about circumcision. They will just think about, they will just think that we are



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interested to know about what is being done there. But we are concerned about the issues, to be discussed for instance that happening issues in Eastern Cape that is part of Pando Land. Woman accused of giving children money of young age to go for circumcision. Those issues are supposed to be discussed by women so that we can talk to other women as leaders. So because they don't know that they are doing wrong. So if you just sit and you say circumcision you'd just run away. What is important for men, when ever if they want that secrecy to be there. Discuss issues, just general issues. Maybe just burst out and talk about issues. We are not interested at what, what is exactly cut, to happening there. We wanted to know, to get the fruits when the men is coming back. And to expecting my son, to find out if he wasn't there, to take care of the family. I'm still, I'm the mother but until it was suppose to be done by men.

AM: So you're demanding accountability?

NM: Yes, accountability which is important, yes.

AM: That's very interesting.

NM: But being a female traditional leader, sometimes there are challenges, sometimes they are challenges amongst the community. Men, they still regard you as just ordinary, a wife, but some will regard you as a leader. But also it depends on your capability to deal with the issues so that people can see that you can do whatever is done by men. You must not just regard yourself as just somebody as a woman, regard yourself as a leader whom the community is looking upon. So you need to do everything as a leader, don't regard yourself as just a woman.

AM: do you think that, has HIV change the status of women in your culture?

MN: Pardon?

AM: Has HIV, has a change the status of women, has it changed gender relations in your culture?



MN: Yes it has, and because we have more platforms to discuss issues now, issues of gender and encourage women to come up. For instance it was difficult for women to go to our meetings. As you know before when you are talking about traditional leaders, that is the chiefs and what. You'd be talking about the crawl. And for us as traditional communities as women it's a taboo to go to the crawl. You can't go to the crawl. So now, the meetings are no more held around the crawl, the meetings are held in our traditional council halls and ? so that women will be able to come and discuss issues without interfering on the issues of culture and what and what. So they are able to come, and we encourage them to come speak now and talk about their issues. And they are coming up really, but we need to do more to encourage them because they still regard them as non-entity, they still feel small or at that got capacity, yes.

AM: Are there members of your community who are opposed to this, to being equal, to these new, this new gender relations.

MN: No really, maybe they don't spell it out, but around my area really they support me very well. Even, even in the, in the house , for instance, starting from even before going for the house of traditional leader, you start from, you're starting from, you use to that I'm coming from Pedi, that is my doorstep. That is the traditional leaders of that area regarded me as their leader, of their leader, to take me to the Provincial House, it means a lot for me. And also the support that we got from our king *Sandile*, that's our religion. He is always supportive of women, he is always encouraging women to come up. So even in the provincial house my provincial house, they regarded me as the leader of delegation where two women representing Eastern Cape in the National House with one male. Which means a lot, we are leading by example as Eastern Cape, so that, it means a lot. But also it goes together with your commitment, you don't look down upon yourself, you need to take yourself as a leader not think about, no I'm a woman and woman. It's just it's not that they were doing a favour for us, that there for the gender issues. They have noticed that they have capacity to do that. And I'm not afraid to say it. Because it's very interesting to work in the traditional leadership.

AM: I'll be learning a lot from this.

NM: For now, we're also busy with this SET campaign of AZT, we are working together with different. According to the Act, Act 41 of 2003, traditional leaders from the Act for 2003. All



the departments are starting to work with traditional leaders. So our province is doing very well we are working together. Now we are also participating in this campaign, AZT. And there are coming in numbers, they will just follow me, the AIDS Council that is Eastern Cape they are following on my way to this conference and that – Mrs Mhlauli, you are doing very well, because women, women traditional leaders, are leading the campaign. So which is very interesting for me.

AM: Hmm, it is very interesting.

NM: And we are also, it's not only about that, we are also on other development projects working together with the Department of Social Development, Department of what we've been trained, of issue of Cancer and other issues a lot. For me it's a lot. It's a lot, it's a lot. We also, In Eastern Cape we did have a research, which was because we don't have the capacity to do the research. I mean in partnership

