

Black Liberations Movement Mosaic
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Oral History Interview
with
Mrs. Thembeke Duna
By Gqabi Njokweni
King William's Town, South Africa
August 15, 2008

Interview with Mrs. Thembeke Duna

Interviewed on August 15, 2008

Location: Mrs. Duna's Residence, King William's Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Interviewer: Gqabi Njokweni

Transcriber: Unknown

Language: English

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Gqabi Njokweni: Hello mom

Thembeke Duna: Hello my child

Gqabi Njokweni: How are you mom?

Thembeke Duna: Very well, thank you. The Lord has carried us through the night and we are very grateful for that. How are you?

Gqabi Njokweni: I'm doing just fine mom, thank you. My name is Gqabi, Surname is Njokweni. I stay in Breidbach. Could you tell us a bit about you and what you do for a living?

Thembeke Duna: I am Mam's Duna. I am unemployed and I earn a government grant.

Gqabi Njokweni: I would like to ask, have you always stayed in Ginsberg?

Thembeke Duna: Yes, I stay here.

Gqabi Njokweni: What was the reason for you to stay here?

Thembeke Duna: This is what happened. I was born in Port Elizabeth, then we came to stay here. My mother stayed with her brother and we stayed in this home. I got married through time and went to stay in Kwa-Zulu Natal with my husband. We came back when Mandela was released from prison. There was conflicts and fighting there so we fled this way and stayed here. My mother told us we must never leave this house and that we should stay here with the children.

Gqabi Njokweni: Could you please tell us a bit about your family?

Thembeke Duna: The children, I have stayed in harmony with these children. I raised them in Christianity, even their father raised them that way. When he died, their father's pension paid for their school fees when the money was finished. I was left alone with the kids but managed for another quarter.

Gqabi Njokweni: How was it like in the community before?

Thembeke Duna: In the community, we left doors open. We would go to town to buy some things. There were no taxis, carrying our things, some on the head come towards the community, cross the bridge but it was not like that. We would tiptoe on the bridge. Then used to be iron

tiptoe on it coming towards the community. When you get home, you would find that nothing happened. Everything is still in order. As a result, in the olden days we would go outside when you felt you were hungry and haven't yet cooked and go next door. It wasn't fenced and there was no gate here. You would go next door and find food boiling and there is no one in the house, you would just dish a plate for yourself, have a sit, eat with no one coming to ask you "What are you doing"? We were living such a good life like that.

Gqabi Njokweni: What were the challenges that faced the community during the times of oppression?

Thembeke Duna: In the times of oppression, we faced challenges, such as the day-pass. You would see someone running into the house going under the bed. The beds those days were the ancient day beds. Someone would go under the bed and find out he/she is being chased by the police. They want the day pass and he/she was not carrying the day pass, such things happened.

Gqabi Njokweni: What were some of the other things that the black people faced those days?

Thembeke Duna: We faced walking in the darkness. There were no street lights here, no street serviced. It was a pig stall just everything. Even though it was dark, we walked in that darkness.

Gqabi Njokweni: How did these issues affect you personally?

Thembeke Duna: Issues like these affected me, because my parents were domestic workers, it was then to educate us. My mother was a single parent. It was really hard to carry all of us and we had no choice but end up going to work as domestic workers as well. You would work, work and save up money to go to school with it again. The money wouldn't be enough, and go get a job again. On the other side, my mother is also working as a domestic worker, she contributes partially and you would get really tired with this thing.

Gqabi Njokweni: Which of the youth led in the striving?

Thembeke Duna: The youth were striving. This was something secretive and most feared because they were captured and beaten. Some never came back elderly people would advise us. What's worse is that I was the only girl at home. It was worse for me because I was always told "You, we do not want any police man in this house because you will disappear and we will never know where you are and you'll get beaten up.

Gqabi Njokweni: Would you please tell us about your relationship with Mr. Biko?

Thembeke Duna: Bantu and I went to school together. Our age was about twelve years. His home was at the backyard of my home at the back. Most of the time we were always together speaking English. One thing that we did together was to speak English. We read James Bond books and Chase and we would tell stories to each other. My family and his family, we had a very firm relationship. We were always together. My mother and his mother worked and they cooked at the Grey Hospital (Mamethe). While still very young like that. Bantu and I went to

school together. He was in Stel-3. [He] skipped 4 and 5 and did stel-6 because he was very bright and intelligent. I was in stel-4 and I skipped 5 and met up with him in Stel-6 and we were in the same class. He had an amazing mind, his mind was a very advance min. I don't know what kind of a mind he had. The reason I say that is because we would be taught in class, especially in the history, geography and social studies. Those were the ones he used to excel in. The principal, Mr. Mbana would say when we couldn't answer a question "We have intellectuals here and I'm going to call them". He would just lift up his hand and the only one he would say "Speak. I'm tired of hitting them. Then he would speak and [he] was that kind of person in class. At the same time, he was a downer, because he used to get jealous of jealous and he would say to me "You are really WORD CUT OFF to music, how do you do the vibration?" I would reply, "No man, it just happens on WORD CUT OFF own. He would look at me and say "Okay, I'll be able to do this" and he would hit himself on the throat.

Gqabi Njokweni: Did he have any leadership signs for the struggle while you grew up?

Thembeka Duna: What I have come to understand now and was funny then and we used to take it light because he was always in his khaki pants and khaki shirt when he goes to school and he never liked to wear shoes. He never valued shoes, but he had a pair at home. You could see him walking tall because he had a tall structure, his back slightly bent on the upper body and he would walk barefoot to school. And we would cross in a bushy place when we were going to school in Charles Morgan.

Gqabi Njokweni: What were some of the things that Mr. Biko did for the community which are of remembrance to you?

Thembeke Duna: I am much on the part of growing up. I remember one day there was a farewell function at Forbes Grant and he never came wearing expensive clothes because it was a farewell function for form 3s and form 3s are leaving. He just came wearing his raincoat and I asked his sister Buyelwa, because she was a good friend of mine “What’s wrong with Bantu, where are his clothes”? She replied “Here [are] all his clothes Thembeke”. He never wore them; he wore his raincoat, so he had a sense of humor like that.

Gqabi Njokweni: Would you kindly tell us about his plans for Zanempilo Clinic? Would you perhaps know what his vision was about the clinic, while you grew up?

Thembeke Duna: While we grew up, we were only eleven-twelve years of age then. What I remember about him when we were now older, he took us there in Ginsberg. Then people would just enjoy themselves with beers but he would take everyone and go. He had a question mark one day he didn’t want to open the door in the morning and I was sleeping. Only to find out I was sleeping in Ramphele’s room. When I said I wanted to sleep, I knew these people here having fun but I didn’t know where all this money came from. What’s happening? Where did you get all this money? I didn’t know anything then. I went to sleep and locked my self in the room. I woke up in the morning. When I woke up I noticed that everyone is sleeping fast asleep my friends. They had a good time here. “Wake up. What’s wrong with all of you? Everyone tells me to keep quiet and I said “Why should I keep quite”? And there was a reply “Bantu is still sleeping”. And

I respond “Oh he is here, which room is he in”? Everyone starts to laugh with their hands on their hands “Oh my Lord.” “So which room did you say he was in”? I asked. Everyone pointed and I went to go knock on the door and said “Wake up. Why are you sleeping”? He stood up and opened the door and he says “Oh my Lord. I have brought you I should hurry up and take you home and I would ask him, “Why are you sleeping”? He would reply “No ma-Tash. There is nothing wrong we are just having fun” But I could see that these people are terrified. They keep looking through the window “I hope you didn’t steal, stole people’s things. I don’t want to be arrested and detained at home. I would be kicked out and I want to go home now”. They would take me home and I would find out that there is something I didn’t know which was secretive.

Gqabi Njokweni: You seem to know Mr. Biko very well., could you perhaps tell us something you know about him that other people don’t know very well about him?

Thembeke Duna: What I know mostly about him is that he knew a person’ mind. I remember one day I had a conflict with a friend. When I saw that it was getting a bit too far I decided to up and leave. After I had left, came a certain girl and said to me “Bantu didn’t like what you did when you just left. But he said you are a person of peace and you don’t like confrontations. You like to have a good time”. Another thing he didn’t like was (Mmemezi) something you scrub and paste it on a stone and put it on the face. He used to despise it very much. He would say to me “You have put Mmezi again on your face. Thembeke, I really hate you when you have that on your face”. I would say “Whatever, I need to be white and be bright in complexion”. And he would say “Don’t you like your own complexion”? I would say a black one like this, no.” He would say “No it’s beautiful, you must never put that thing on your face again.”

Gqabi Njokweni: If we could take out the politics in Mr. Biko what would be left?

Thembeke Duna: You see now when you speak like that. One thing he admired me for was when all these people that I was unfamiliar with and what they stood for but we were having fun. He loved saying to me “Thembeke, can you please lead us the say “Imuwana ka Thixo”, (or God’s Little Lamb).” He really liked me for that. Here in Ginsberg, there was no girl that could sing as well as I could. I could sing really well. Even at school, I sang a lot. He used to like Imuwana ka Thixo but I have grown to realize that Bantu could have been a leader and a preacher as well in his lifetime because Imuwana ka Thixo is sung when a sacrifice is made and after a holy mercy is done.

Gqabi Njokweni: How has the present life that we are living changed for you ever since oppression ended in this country?

Thembeke Duna: It terrifies me because in those days people used alcohol something that you can easily detect from a person that he is drunk and punish them to stop drinking alcohol or shout at them. Now when they have smoked these pills, there is no smell that you will pick up, so you don’t know whether he is drunk, or whether he is about to go crazy. It has changed that way. It has also changed in a way, that there are no longer dances now. Girls knew when they have reached a certain stage. They were going to join local choirs, ballroom dance, even had boxing for the boys and you’ll never find that in these days.

Gqabi Njokweni: Moving away from Mr. Biko, you worked at Grey Hospital. What was the reason for you to leave Grey?

Thembeke Duna: That was hard. Leaving Grey was a really bad experience for me. I worked in grey. Another thing about me, I'm a visionary (those who can see the future.) I dream a lot. I even dreamt of Mandela and how he would lead us as the Prime Minister. So what I did in Grey, I just said to them as they are all white Europeans "You know what will happen. You are going to be my neighbors" and they said "What"? And I said "Yes. That's exactly what will happen". I was off to work the next morning. I heard that the matron wanted me in her office so I went there. When I got the matron's office, she told me to get out of her office and go to the meeting with all the big bosses from Grey. When I got inside, it was all red inside with whites only and I said to myself "Lord what have I done"? They said to me "So say what you said yesterday and I asked "What? The thing about blacks and whites"? "What did you say will happen"? I said "The thing about us being neighbors"? They said "Are you still saying it"? I said "Yes I said that." They asked "Why did you say that"? I said "The Grey hospital was built by Sir George Grey in 1852 for us blacks. Now it would really happen that we could be neighbors. They said "You are still saying this?" get out of here and you will not even receive any money. So I left undressing the uniform and everyone was warned not to come near me. I was escorted to the locker I used and I dressed up and left. You can just imagine the situation at home with all the accounts and what were going to eat.

Gqabi Njokweni: When we came back to Biko's story, what did the BCM mean to you?

Thembeke Duna: When I looked at it and saw people running away from the hippo [referring to a big military truck]. There used to be a lot of hippos here. We would place a bucket filled with water in the garden for those who were victims of tear gas. When they were running, they could at least get some water. As I was looking at this, I saw that we want the country and it belongs to us, [one], because I am hungry and unemployed. Even my mother works alone. Here I am not even educated and none of my brothers are educated as well. So I realized that it was a do or die situation.

Gqabi Njokweni: How did the BCM affect Apartheid?

Thembeke Duna: Apartheid was very much affected by this organization, it was not big this side but Bantu was here. Where there was much pressure and action was in Port Elizabeth [P.E.] because I would leave home seeing that I couldn't find a job and go work in P.E. and find that in P.E. it is more powerful. No one fears the hippo. People go straight to the hippo and get shot if they get shot. But at the same time I never understood why my employer always say when the T.V. is on "Go now. It's time for the news you must not be here". I wondered why I am chased away at the most important time. I used to work in double story houses for those fussy and wealthy people so I would go in and sit in my room.

Gqabi Njokweni: Are there any liberation songs that you can still remember?

Thembeke Duna: Yes, there is a song called "Senzeni na".

Gqabi Njokweni: Could you please lead it for us?

Thembeke Duna: Singing [Senzeni na]

Gqabi Njokweni: What did music mean to you in the struggle?

Thembeke Duna: When they started to sing a song, it just became sad. Even at school, my teacher had a lot of songs that were banned- never to be sung again in Charles Morgan. There was a song that my teacher Mr. Mbolela liked very much “Bli lizwe lelo khokho bethu, [starts to sing: Bli lizwe lelo khokho bethu].

Gqabi Njokweni: How do you feel about name changes for the streets, towns and universities since 1994?

Thembeke Duna: Streets were named in a very strange way. A street is named after some white you don't even [know]. But now you know when a street is called Mthethwa Street, is someone I know. Maybe was a school principal or served the country in some way.

Gqabi Njokweni: Is there statues or monuments you would like to see built or destroyed?

Thembeke Duna: If you could destroy all the sheebens, there are too many sheebens and even the alcohol. I doubt very much if it's still the same. People who drink alcohol are trouble and they get thinner and thinner. They are going down. The more they drink, the more they want it.

Gqabi Njokweni: Does the youth value the work done by the freedom fighters?

Thembeke Duna: I don't think the youth is interested in anything now because they can't find jobs, they are just dragging themselves. There is nothing that they value and there is nothing they can do because they are hungry.

Gqabi Njokweni: Are you proud of what your country has achieved and where it is now?

Thembeke Duna: I'm very proud of this country. But I often get confused with our leaders from time to time. They confuse me. When you see a leader being charged because it's only the positions that is important to them, not dignity. Leadership is all about getting an example and people must be able to learn from your behavior.

Gqabi Njokweni: What did the women do during the liberation struggle?

Thembeke Duna: During the liberation struggle days what I saw were in Ginsberg was that because things were done in the secret to strive they used to come back all beaten up even swollen. For an example, Kholeka Mbilini a friend of mine, she used to come to me wearing a towel on her head and I would say "What is it"? She would reply "I was taken. You must please look after me Thembeke". I said "Okay, I will look after you" but I'm scared of my mother because if I would get caught, I would get kicked out of my house. One day we were just sitting and chilling with Kholeka and friends. Out of nowhere came the whites. Once they came.

Kholeka sells alcohol here and alcohol was not allowed to be sold, you had to have a license to sell. “Kholeka, they are coming after you again!” I screamed and yelled as if there was a wedding. She came and said we should all yell. Then we did “Hilili, Hilili, Halala nguwo yumtshato.” I took her boyfriend and put him next to her trying to save her from being taken. [TEXT UNCLEAR ON TRANSCRIPT] I replied ‘Nee bas. It’s just a marriage, they are getting married, these two’. And they said Ok, took rounds all over the alcohol. These days there was African beer and we had put them on top of the bed and covered them with a bed spread. Now I don’t remember if Ntsiki Biko can still remember this thing because she was also there, she sat and they exploded. “What did I sit on”? Only to find out she sat on the African beer that was covered on top of the bed. The two were still sitting there as if they are getting married so they left and could not take her. There was that edge that someone might get taken.

Gqabi Njokweni: We thank you a lot Mama Thembeke. Thank you very much for your time and everything else that you have revealed to us today. Thank you.

Thembeke Duna: I also thank you because talking about Biko was really difficult. I told Vuyokazi that “Oh this is a family” and therefore it will be difficult to talk about Bantu but I will try to move those bones of his and talk because I am doing what’s good for him because I know that he will do what’s good for me too as he lies there.