

Black Liberations Movement Mosaic
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Oral History Interview
with
Mrs. Gloria Piliso
By Atandi Anyona
King William's Town, South Africa
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Interview with Gloria Piliso

Interviewed: 16 August, 2008

Location: Braai at the Jooste family residence, King William's Town, Eastern Cape,
South Africa

Interviewer: Atandi Anyona

Language: English

Translators: Thobeka Mheshe, Atandi Anyona

Transcriber: Ryan Koons

Black Liberation Movements Mosaic

Ryan Koons: All right, we are recording.

Gloria Piliso: My name is Gloria Gcotyelwa Piliso from King William's Town in South Africa. When I was in high school, we were involved in a lot of meetings. We used to have meetings because we were fighting against what was happening. We in fact were continuing with the struggles that were started by our heroes like Steve Bantu Biko. We were saying "No" to being taught in Afrikaans; we were saying "No" to oppression; we were saying "No" to so many evil things that were happening, especially to the black people. We used to gather around and we sit together; we would sing freedom songs. We never knew that we would really reach a stage where South Africa is a free country; we really have democracy in our country. But, these songs gave us hope; when we're feeling down, when we're losing hope, when we feel that everything was against us, they would give us hope, they would give us that inner thing that says, "go on, don't give up."

And if we were sad, something is said then to one of the comrades who would sing song like this:

(Singing in Xhosa)What have we done? (X9)

The Afrikaners are dogs. (X4)

When we sing those songs, after a minute we would really start praying, being vocal about our issues because we knew that at the end maybe something will happen. The song that I've just sung says, "What have we done? Is our crime to be black? Is that why so many evil things are done to us? Is that why we are not allowed to white schools? Is that why we are given an inferior education compared to other races?" And we were saying, "the Boers—the people who were in power then—you are dogs. How can you treat another human being like that?" Because, as you know, in the culture of the blacks, we have a saying that says, "Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu [a person is a person because of people]" Umuntu [humanhood] played a major role with us. You could come to South Africa not knowing everybody, but South Africans will take you to their houses; South Africans will share what ever little bit of food or anything that they have with you because that's why--that's how we have been brought up. That is our culture. We share everything. And then even, let's say maybe, the movement... the ANC or anybody has come to the country and demolished something and then we hear in the newspapers, on the radios, and even on TV, that something has happened, and it was done by the [incomprehensible], we would rejoice, and we would sing songs like this.... (trying to

remember song). There were many songs that we used to sing. We would sing songs of victory; we would sing songs, depending on the mood today and what was happening. If there was something that was victorious to the movement, we would sing jovial songs. And if we were sad—because somebody has died because of the bullets or anything—we would sing sad songs. And music played a major role in us, especially when things were tough. Cut! (Laughter.) Atandi Anyona: Who composed songs, and how did they get to the people, you know?

Gloria Piliso : Okay. You would be surprised: most of the songs, somebody would sing one verse. The majority of people would not know what that song is. But, if we know the rhythm, how it goes, and you sing one verse, we'll follow. What you will notice with South Africans, or with African people, is their creativity. You do not have to know anything. If you know the rhythm, how it goes, we will follow. In the spur of the moment, we can sing a song, we can create a song, we can compose a song. That's us. That's our culture. But some of the songs, we knew them because they were songs for struggle. But others we created on the spur of the moment.

Atandi Anyona: When was the music usually sung?

Gloria Piliso : The music was sung before any meeting starts, to unite us, to compose us, to remind us why we are meeting, and then we would sing a song. And after singing that song, after collecting our minds, and we were ready for whatever that was going to be

deliberated on and we would start the meeting. And at the closure of the meeting, we would sing a song to. It was like that.

Atandi Anyona: Like, you know you have many countries, they fought for their independence in different ways. Some of them just used diplomacy, they didn't go to war, they didn't sing. I was just, you know, saying, "We'll just wait when the government gives us independence." But why song? What is special about song?

Gloria Piliso : Song, it is very special, it is moving, it is touching you. You would be surprised to hear that many of the people joined in the struggle, not because they knew what was really being fought for. They were attracted to the struggle by the songs, the melody, the lyrics of the song—they said so much. Some people, they were drawn to the struggle because of that, because of the song. Song—music generally has a way of touching people's heart. Other people do not hear when you are talking vocally. But when you sing, the message is put across much more easily. And especially for the African people, because they like music. If you want to go true to them, you want them to listen to you. You can talk. But if you do it with music, you have won them.

Atandi Anyona: And in terms of, since there are many languages in South Africa. And, these songs that you sung, what language were they? Were they a mix, were they...?

Gloria Piliso : A mix of song because our heroes are mixed. We have Steve Biko Bantu who is also a Xhosa. We have Mandela who's Xhosa. We have other people: [incomprehensible; perhaps "Abo Vilagazua"]: Zulus. In all the languages, even within Sesotho; we used to sing song in any language, as long as we knew what was what, what it meant, we'd follow it and really sing it.

Atandi Anyona: The songs that you... did you borrow... for example... I'm sure you had traditional songs. Were they used... or, where did liberation songs come from?

Gloria Piliso : I think it is said that they came from the people who were in jail, in cells, especially in Robben Island. Those people who used to... the NGOs [Non-Government agencies] used to visit them, especially the black people, they would go there and visit them. They had their tape recorders, and they would go in there under a pretense that they want to interview them about something else. And in the process, they would be asked, "how are they keeping themselves strong?" And then they would sing the song. And then after coming there, they would go to the movement, and say that, "These are the songs that are being sung by the people in Robben Island." And then we would sing them also. And also, the free countries like Lesotho that used to have the political—the politicians, we used to get songs from them. But still, those songs, we were not supposed to sing them freely. They would be smuggled into the country and then we would practice and sing them like that.

Atandi Anyona: Were there songs for the children and songs for the older people, or were the songs sung....

Gloria Piliso : No, they were just universal songs. Songs for everybody, especially if they were for the struggle. No songs for any other particular category, just songs as long as they had a meaning to them.

Atandi Anyona: In places like churches, did you sing the usual songs or even in church did you sing freedom songs?

Gloria Piliso : Yes, we used to sing freedom songs; especially in those churches where the ministers or the priest were politically correct. There were some who were scared; some were afraid to be vocal about what was happening, but ministers like Bishop Tutu, when we attended their services [incomprehensible], they would start singing freedom songs. So there were people who were vocal about what was happening, especially the church leaders. In their churches, you were allowed... they would even start the church with freedom songs. Then we knew them, because we took them as our brothers. So we would sing freedom songs in their churches or in their midst.

Atandi Anyona: And the people you sung to, for example when you are singing he to the Boers, what impact did the music have on them?

Gloria Piliso : They used to get angry. As much as they did not know what we were saying, but when you sing a song, especially those provocative songs where they can hear that maybe we are swearing at them, they used to shoot us. But funny enough, I remember one time in Guguletu, in [incomprehensible], we had a meeting. We did not see them because, the police, they were in camouflage, not as in camouflage clothing, but they were not wearing their police uniform. They were wearing clothes that are worn by everybody. Apparently they were within us. And after some time when we were talking, somebody whispered that the enemy is inside here. We had no way of running. They were surrounding us, all of them, in their civilian clothes. We were scared. And funny enough, they did not hesitate to shoot but, the song, we sang the song [“Senzeni na”—“What have we done?”] that says, "what have we done? Is it because we are black that we are being treated like this?" All of us, we sat down and we sang that song. Funny enough, not even one bullet was used. They did not even shoot it. They simply said that, “You stand up and get out of this place, quietly.” That's what we did. Some of the songs, they had an impact on them also but, I'm sure they were doing their work, sometimes they just could not do what they were supposed to do because of the songs.

Atandi Anyona: And for example now, the freedom songs, on today's date, are they still sung and who sings them, like, today?

Gloria Piliso : Funny enough, I'm sure my age group, the 60s, we are the last group who sang most of freedom songs. Now, even if you are attending a comrade's funeral, we did

not even remember some of them. And our kids, they do not know them. As a result, we were even thinking in our school that, how about we have a book of the freedom songs. Because when we have to sing them in the spur of the moment, we have to think--we have forgotten some of them; we're only reminded then.

Atandi Anyona: Is there any last comments you like to share about the songs or anything you'd like to tell us?

Gloria Piliso : I would say that music played a major role in people universally. And as a result, if we can, even in our battle with HIV/AIDS, if we are failing to talk to the people, to talk to the youth, let's use the music. Music has a funny way of touching people's heart, especially if the lyrics are good, especially if the lyrics carry the meaning that you want to put across. Music plays a special role in people's life. Thank you.

Atandi Anyona: Thank you Mama Pandora.

[End of Tape]