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INTERVIEW WITH: CHIEF SONIAS VILAKAZI

Dale McKinley (DM): All right we are going to start now, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to us. First of all, can you please just tell us your full name and what your position here is in the community?

Sonias Vilakazi (SV): My name is Sonias Vilakazi, I am a Chief in this community of Matimatsatsi Maandagshoek.

DM: “Kgosi”, thanks again for talking to us, where I want to start is I want to start a little bit about with the past. Can you tell us, please a little bit about the history how this community got to this place.

SV: Originally we are the Swazi’s and we are from Swaziland, we came here from Swaziland because there was a fight there, we came to Ga-Sekhukhune, when Sekhukhune was still at Steelpoort. He gave us this land and others came after to join us by climbing across the mountain and some later went back.

DM: When was that, what time frame, what date?

SV: Is long time ago I can’t even remember.

DM: Was your grandfather or Great grandfather with him involved or was it in a previous generation?

SV: It was my grandfather.

DM: You were born in this community, when were you born here?

SV: In 1949.

DM: And the community had been here quite some time when you were born.

SV: Yes

DM: Can you tell us when you were born ... how is it the community lived in this area. What was the situation like in terms of the standard of living, in terms of the relationship with the authorities at that time in the 50s and 60s?

SV: During that time there was no chief and there were white farmers ... we were living under the white farmers, until the 70s, when they started chasing us and some refused and others were arrested and some remained. During that time my father was a councilor.

DM: How did you become chief?

SV: Because my father was a councilor, the community decided after my father's death in 2000 that I must be a chief and I was inaugurated in 2004 and the people of Sekhukhune, the premier and the people from the local municipality came.

Ahmed Veriava (AV): "Kgosi" (Chief), when you were a young man or when you were still a boy what were the ways in which people got food and how did they live?

SV: We were using hard-soil, to make pots in order to sell them to other people until the mine started.

AV: Were you growing your own crops as well and keeping cows?

SV: I was keeping my father's cows.

DM: I am interested to know, you were saying that the white farmers were here and then they kicked a lot of people off the land, but some people remained. These people that are still here, what was the relationship when they were staying here ... did they have their own land, when did they become part of the homeland system or what was the situation with the independence of the community or were they still dependent on the white farmers?

SV: During that time the Rand Mine was the one which was controlling the land. The Rand Mine chased people, saying that the land is their farm. Some left others we remained and took the matter forward, to the people of Sekhukhune who referred to us the man called Godfrey Magaramedi who then forwarded the matter to Mr. CN Phatudi who was a premier during the 70s, who then sent the message to the mine that the community belongs to the Sekhukhune and they are right to stay there.

DM: This is interesting, because this is the first time that I have heard about this Rand Mine previously ... when did it operate and what was it doing here ... was it platinum or chrome?

SV: Is long, but it was chrome.

DM: Where was this mine located?

SV: Just behind the mountain.

AV: And when was this, when did the mine first come to this area.

SV: Just behind the mountain.

AV: And when was this, when did the mine first come to this area?

SV: I don't know, because I was young. When I grow up it was like that.

DM: When did that mine close?

SV: It is not closed, it has been taken over by Samancor.

DM: We like to know, I am doing research especially in the 70s and 80s, because chief would then be a younger man ... interested to know how was this community participating, I mean what was the situation in terms of the struggle the anti-apartheid struggle and how the younger people were participating in that or was it quite separate from things?

SV: During that time I was already a man, because I had a wife and three to four children. But during that time in the 70s it was not a time of the politics, the real politics started in 1976. The only thing that was happening was that white farmers where chasing black people in their lands and arresting them.

AV: Have you always lived in this area?

SV: Yes.

AV: You have never gone to the city, for maybe to work or something?

SV: Before I can become a chief, I did go to the city to work.

AV: Why did you go to the city?

SV: Because, it was that time when people were suffering and there was no food in our area.

DM: Can you tell us a little bit, about what was it like in that time when you went and worked, the conditions of work there, discrimination how was it like then for you?

SV: It was terrible and bad because it was that time when white people where having power over black people. They were beating us when we were not performing our work properly.

AV: What year was it?

SV: Because we got democracy in 1994, it was during the 70s and 60s.

AV: Which city where you working in?

SV: Germiston.

AV: What work were you doing?

SV: I was working at the workshop.

DM: So, can “Kgosi” just tell us a little bit about, what it was like to be away from your family for so long and the community ... was most of the community being supported by people like himself who are going away to work in the cities and the women and children are staying behind here, the migrant labour system in other words?

SV: I was leaving the community and my children, so that I can go to work. When you go to work, when you go to the cities during that time you were supposed to have an Identity Document, because without it you were going to be arrested. We were given

ordinary work and work that was paying well; they were giving the local residents good jobs.

AV: “Kgosi”, I know that you know that in lots of areas, when people go away to work then sometimes the cattle and the land there is no one to look after them, what happened to the cattle and crops that you were growing?

SV: When I was away, my wife and my children were looking after them. My wife was looking for ploughing and my children were looking for cattle.

DM: So now, just shifting now to the late 1980s and early 1990s. Just to get sense of things ... the same we were asking Simon ... which is when things begin to change - the releases, the unbanning of organisations and everything else - how was it for you, you are a family man you had your children, you have been working for a long time ... what was it that you thought was going to be happening after the political freedom came?

SV: Democracy was promising, because our political leaders were telling us that we are fighting for land and better life so that was the reason for us to support democracy.

DM: Under the issue of the land - what land was this community fighting to get back, what land was that or had they asked it to get back?

SV: The whole South Africa.

DM: So there was no land here in this community that you wanted, that had been taken away from you and you wanted it back?

SV: Yes the land was taken by white people, so we were saying that all the land must be back to us, even now we are still fighting for the land, and we didn't get all of it.

AV: “Kgosi”, why is land so important to you?

SV: Land is life, there is nothing that you can do without it and there is nothing that you can eat without it.

DM: So, prior to 1994 how would you describe, as the leader of this community, how would you describe the standard of living in this community? How were people ... were people having enough to eat, were people having enough jobs, what was the situation here in the early 1990s before 1994.

SV: During 1994, it was still difficult because we were just won the votes and things couldn't just change that fast. The issue of food and other things was still a problem.

AV: “Kgosi”, I want to ask, on the day of elections what was going on in this area?

SV: There was happiness.

AV: And describe, were there parties or were there rallies?

SV: All the political parties were happy and the whole South Africa was happy even the white people.

DM: What were you, by 1994 since you were born in 1949, you were hardly in your early 40s like myself now, so how were you feeling about what should happen, what

were your expectations? You have a family, you have been struggling with the communities, you have been discriminated against and now things have happened. The political freedom has come; the leaders have been released, what was the expectation, about what was going to happen in this community?

SV: I thought we were going to live a better life all of us and there was going to be jobs and foreign countries were coming to invest in our country.

AV: “Kgosi”, after like if we compare when you were growing up and now - were people growing as much of their own crops and keeping their own cattle, as they were when you were growing up.

SV: Some are still doing that.

DM: Okay, what I wanted to ask is, what were the changes with regard to the role of traditional leaders? His family, his father was a “Ntona” (councillor) and so from the traditional leadership side, did anything change after 1994 in terms of the roles of traditional leaders with the new government and democracy?

SV: After the votes there was a law that says that if there is a community without a chief and there is “Ntona” he/she must be regarded as a chief.

DM: I know that there was the legislation that was passed in the 1990s, the traditional leader legislation. Does the “Kgosi” believe that the role has been, is better now than it was in the past or because many traditional leaders have felt that their powers have been taken away from them and some of them don’t like the new situation, they feel that maybe they don’t have as much as influence in power ...?

SV: We are no longer having that power, because during the past we were having power to question and sanction any person in our community in a manner we regarded as appropriate, but now things are no longer the same, because if you question them, they can take you to Magistrate Court.

DM: Does “Kgosi”, feels that things in your role as a traditional leader ... do you like the changes or not, in other words were the changes good things or are they bad?

SV: The changes are good, because they are giving the culture of traditional leaders back.

DM: Can you tell us just to try to give us a picture of the kinds of things that as “Kgosi” he deals with in this community ... the issues and the things that he deals with on a day to day basis?

SV: There are so many things people need, a letter to open bank accounts. I also go around to look for developments and I also work with the councillor. Even the paramount chief “Sekhukhune” I also go there to look for what is needed in our community and I also go to the Municipality.

AV: “Kgosi”, the people from this village bring problems to you ... what problems do people bring to you?

SV: Yes they do come, because sometimes they fight verbally or physically. If they refuse us to solve their problems, we take them to the office of the premier or to the paramount chief.

DM: Do you have a good working ... just interested to know what you feel about ... (the) relationship with local government? As a traditional leader you have talked about all these things that you do and all the meetings and things that you have/ Is the relationship a good one or is it not so good?

SV: There is a good co-operation.

DM: Do you ... one of the things is that we have talked with a lot of people around here, they don't seem to like the local councillor who has been elected, they don't think he is doing much ... what does "Kgosi" think about it?

SV: We do tell the councillor what we need and he forwards our message to his seniors, so we are working like that.

DM: Now we are just shifting to more recent times. We have talked to Simon about the mine and those kinds of things, but as a traditional leader, what was your role when Anglo American and ARM came into the community, what role did you play?

SV: When you talk about the issue of mines, I start to become angry.

DM: We want to hear, what you are angry about?

SV: In 1999, there was a white man from Pretoria called Jeffrey White who visited our community and asked to survey our land. I notified my community about it.

DM: If you can continue with that story?

SV: Later he came back to me and told me that there is a lot of platinum here and is what he wants. He went back and agreed with Anglo American and they came back with a lot of white people. He told me that they were coming to open a mine. I asked them that if they are coming to disturb us, because we knew that when they open mines they chase people like dogs. They said that they won't do that, they said the law of South Africa says that you must sit down and negotiate. We called the community and agreed with them that the mine can start. After that, ARM came and made a joint venture with AMPLATS. I was the one who was involved in the process of joint venture. I used to go to Sandton for meetings. Because we didn't know anything, we asked them what are we going to get. They said we don't have land and the land belongs to them. We said because we are the residents we need to get something from the mine. They said they will develop the company for us like section 21 ... they said we will control section 21 and that they will give us five percent.

DM: Five percent of what?

SV: Five percent of the annual income. So we agreed because we didn't know what the law says. We reached a point of electing the directors and we said the directors should come from our community so we agreed. The election took place and I was elected to be one of the directors. We continued and we were getting the information from the mines. The director's term was for three years; during the first term of the directors things were

fine. During the second elections they said that they will consider other people from other villages to be elected, we didn't agree with them, but they forced us to agree. They were people as far as from Lulu Mountain who came to be elected. After the elections we made an appeal because our people were not elected. As I am saying now that five percent we used to get, we are no longer getting it they are giving it to the people of Lulu village. We are no longer getting any information from the mine, its now given to Lulu village. We told our problems to the municipality, the office of the premier and the paramount chief. That is why when you say anything about the mine I become angry, look around there are children who are not working, the mine is no longer employing them. This problem is really giving us a head ache that is why we have appointed Richard Spoor to fight for our rights.

DM: Okay two or three questions coming out of that story. All throughout this entire process from the time of consultation and going to Sandton and agreeing for the five percent and everything at any point in time was there ever a written contract that was put down?

SV: Yes, there is an agreement that we are having, let me show you.

DM: Okay, so there is an agreement signed, so this is your signature?

SV: No, it is my son's signature.

DM: The other question is, how was it that the situation ... and what has happened with this community from the mountain coming ... how has that affected the relationships between the communities?

SV: It was bad; we even called the police because we wanted to fight.

DM: And what happened with that when the police came?

SV: The police came to monitor the situation so that we don't fight, because we were saying that they were not supposed to vote but they did vote.

DM: What you have described and you saying you are very angry and I can understand why you are angry at the situation, here we have a new democratic government all of these other things, you have written the letters to the premier and all other things, but the situation is still not dealt with ... how does that makes you feel about it, it seems to me that in a democracy here something has been stolen to from you and because of the law and maybe because people didn't know what was going on, that stealing has taken place and it seems that you can't get back or you can't get you share?

SV: Our wish as a community, we think that we should re-vote.

DM: For the directors of the company, how do you think that is going to happen?

SV: To a legal case or to court.

AV: "Kgosi", and if that doesn't work, if you lose the case, what will you do?

SV: If we lose, we will try other things and we will fight until we get what is ours.

DM: As someone who has been involved in these things, do you have any idea of the kind of money the mine is making?

SV: I didn't know how much they were making, they were only saying Modikwa is not doing well, even if it did well they would not say anything.

DM: What is your favourite soccer team in South Africa?

SV: I like Bafana Bafana because it is the team of the nation.

DM: What do you think of Mamelodi Sundowns?

SV: I could support it if their leader was co-operating well with us.

DM: We know who that person is, you don't have to call his name ... that is why I was asking that question. How does it make you feel that here is a man - maybe 40 something years - and he is worth many billions of rand, he owns this mine and other mines and he says he represents the new Black Economic Empowerment in South Africa, and then the situation in your community is still the same?

SV: That is why I said I can't like him or support him, because he never fulfils our agreement. I was supporting him before, more especially during that time he became the leader of NAFCOC, and I thought he was taking us to a better level. I am really disappointed by the way he chased us from the mine.

DM: We are almost at the end, just a few more questions. Besides getting back the new elections for the Section 21 company in the mines, maybe that would then allow the community to get some funds, the necessary funds from the mines, what other kinds of things in the community does "Kgosi" want to see happening? Because maybe that would provide some funds, but maybe won't deal with the issues we've talked about with Simon, the education situation, the situation of transport, the situation of all these other things that the community needs?

SV: We don't have tarred roads, our children are travelling 13kms to school and we don't have a community hall. We've made a lot of applications to the mines asking them to build a hall for us, but they have never responded. There are so many things that we need in this community, if you can look around there is no better houses, most people are suffering here.

DM: I want to ask a question. As a traditional leader, all the changes that have taken place since 1994, I am not talking about changes just in the politics, I am talking about the fact that people have more and you can go to town, there are new things coming from overseas and all these things. How does he think this has affected the culture of the community here, the changes since 1994 as a traditional leader? Do you feel as many of the elder generation today are saying, that the young people and the influences about the music and the western culture, they are destroying African culture, the values and the morals. Do you feel that way or not?

SV: In the issue of culture, it is depending to the person to maintain his/her culture; you can't blame someone when you don't follow your own culture.

DM: Finally, just to rap this up, what do you think (the same question I have asked Simon) ... you talked about what the community needs, you have talked about the problems with the mines and everything else, but if you look in the near future, if you look to the next five to ten years, how do you see things, do you see a good picture (with things moving okay or somewhere in between?)

SV: I want to talk on behalf of this village. If I can see the re-vote of the directors in the mine and people of this village participate, I think that will be the way we can see the good things in the next coming five years.

DM: Okay, as we asked all the people that we were talking to is there anything else that we have not covered, we have not asked that “Kgos” would like to say to all the people here?

SV: What I have asked and wished is peace in this heaven, no matter what colour you are we must be a one thing.
