

Lindiwe Myeza: unfreezing the walking voice

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Abstract

Lindiwe Myeza walks with stories. These include stories about working hand in hand with the great Afrikaner anti-apartheid activist Beyers Naudé and caring spiritually and practically for the youth after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. The most powerful stories relate to the literacy training Myeza conducted to teach the illiterate to read and write and understand their own human dignity. These stories are told here through the changing lenses and shifting identities that are common to oral history. Therefore, this raises the question of how, methodologically, these “walking voices can be frozen into a story that deals respectfully with the interviewee and her past. Three methodological approaches are employed, which are mutually inclusive. Firstly, ownership of the story is given to the interviewee on the grounds of the indigenous knowledge she presents in her stories and in terms of the vulnerability she displays in revealing her life story. Secondly, contextual and cultural bridging is achieved by being sensitive to the social location of both the interviewer and the interviewee. Finally, the story is moved towards the healing of society.

Introduction

Background

“I thank God for allowing me to be me. Blessed are those who dream dreams and make them happen.” The elderly woman speaks in a quiet and pronounced voice. She sits in a wheelchair with her legs raised on a chair. She talks about her life and casts her life’s motto in religious words. She has lived through the destruction of Sophiatown, the humiliation of black women at the hands of apartheid and the Sharpeville massacre. Yet she considers herself blessed.

Lindiwe Leah Aida Myeza was born on 7 March 1935 in Sophiatown. Now, at the age of 77, she lives in a small house in Diepkloof, Soweto.

MaLindi is not famous, but her stories from the turmoiled South Africa of the 1960s and 1970s should not remain frozen in silence. Nevertheless, these and subsequent stories of her life, remembered and seen through many lenses, cannot be frozen into one coherent heroine-like story. Lindiwe Myeza’s stories are multicontextual, with shifting identifications that are constantly open to reinterpretations. It is therefore an exciting methodological challenge to try to freeze her story in an academic account.

Aim

The challenge of this article is not to fill the gaps and harmonise the disparities between acted contexts, storied contexts and interpreted contexts. On the contrary, the challenge is to juxtapose a variety of voices instead of freezing them into a single story. This leads to an open-endedness that recognises the future of Myeza as a walking voice.

Method and philosophy

How, then, does one deal methodologically and philosophically with the (un)freezing of the walking voice? In this article, three conceptual frameworks will be used to move towards unfrozen stories. The first is the interviewee’s ownership of the stories told about her life. This means that the stories will not be interpreted by the author of this article.¹ They will simply be presented in terms of the indigenous knowledge inherent to the interviews of all the interviewees.

Secondly, contextual and cultural bridging will be a methodological priority in retelling the stories. There will be a sensitivity not only towards the social location of the interviewer and interviewee,² but also for the shifting contexts of all the storytellers and listeners involved.

¹ See Philippe Denis & Radikobo Ntsimande, *Oral history in a wounded country* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2008), 23.

² See Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, *Making apartheid history: an oral history resource guide* (Cape Town: IJR, 2009), 11.

Thirdly, the article will attempt, though not deliberately, towards partnering the healing of voices and silences, and an effort, though not concerted, will be made to locate the relevant stories within a pattern of national development.³

³ See Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of sound: the art of oral history* (Chicago, Illinois: Precedent Publishing, 1975/1985), 138.

Sources

This article developed from a series of interviews, two of which were conducted with Lindiwe Myeza herself, the first one concentrating on her connection with Beyers Naudé. The first section of this article, which describes Myeza's religious context, is based on these two interviews.

Between the first interview with Myeza, which was conducted between 12 January 2012 and 18 August 2012, interviews were also conducted with the following people:

- Prof Mandla Makhanya, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of South Africa (conducted on 5 June 2012)
- Prof Veronica McKay, Executive Vice-Dean of the College of Education at Unisa, Chief Executive Officer of Kha ri Gude, the government's mass literacy programme, and Director of Unisa's ABET (Adult Basic Education and Training) Institute (conducted 7 June 2012; this included a telephone interview with Ms Elizabeth Mokotong, former colleague of Myeza at ABET)
- Dr Simangaliso Kumalo, former Methodist minister in Ivory Park and now senior lecturer in the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

This article, then, will invite voices from three different, though similar, contexts: firstly, the religious context; secondly, the political context; and thirdly, the educational context of Lindiwe Myeza, all as told by herself. The stories will not be interpreted, at least not in terms of existing historical categories or facts, but they may be opened up to walk into a future of healing and development.

Religious contexts and stories

The Beyers Naudé connection

The first level of entry into the life of Lindiwe Myeza came when I was alerted to her involvement in the work of Dr Beyers Naudé. Naudé was an Afrikaner cleric and anti-apartheid activist who left the Dutch Reformed Church when the DRC sided with the apartheid government at the Cottesloe Consultation of Churches that followed the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. In 1963 Naudé founded the Christian Institute of Southern Africa, one of the main aims of which was to promote interracial dialogue. It was on these visits to, inter alia, Dutch Reformed congregations, that Myeza accompanied Naudé. Her stories about her travels with Naudé are of great significance. She traveled with Naudé to DRC congregations to make white people aware of the plight of black women, particularly domestic workers. Of course, in those days, domestic work was the only work available to black women. A domestic worker would typically rise at 04:00, while her children were still asleep, and would only return home at nine in the evening, by which time her children would (hopefully) be asleep. At that point she would have to start washing and cooking for her own family for the next day. And when the trains were set alight and the taxis were expensive and full, she would be late for work and the madam would warn her and withhold part of her meager salary. And when she left her employer's home after the family had had dinner and she had washed up, the madam would count the eggs in the fridge to see if any were missing. So by visiting these congregations, MaLindi wanted to make white people aware that the black woman working in their kitchen was neither "*skelm*" nor stupid. In fact, she was a leader in her church and in society, and probably president of the women's league and/or chairperson of the community forum combatting drugs and crime.⁴

But back to her travels with Beyers Naudé: MaLindi remembers that she was still young, with a spring in her step, when she worked with Naudé. But she had to be like a mother to him, although he was twenty years her senior. His wife, Ilsé, had asked her to look after Beyers when he was not at home. Consequently, MaLindi had to ensure that he did not eat fish and chips, which was his favourite food, and that he ate the food packed by Ilsé and marked according to the time of day. However, when he entered a restaurant for some reason, perhaps to meet somebody there, Lindiwe had to stand outside to drink coffee from a can.

MaLindi said that she would never call Beyers "*baas*", as was expected of black women in those days, since that would have killed him. She remembers how he cried when he saw poor people who were hungry and suffering, such as when they went into the townships and visited black churches, like the AICs (the African Indigenous Churches), which were founded by black spiritual leaders, independent of the white mainline churches. It was on his recommendation, and with his encouragement, that MaLindi eventually became the chairperson of the WAIC, the Women's Forum of the African Independent Churches. Things turned out well for her, even though she worried about who would employ her when she had Beyers Naudé's signature on her pass.

Servant leadership

⁴ See article by Christina Landman entitled "Malindy soek nog nuwe velde" in *Die Kerkbode* of 3 February 2012.

Becoming the chairperson of the WAIC was only the beginning of Myeza's involvement in church leadership, which was always of an ecumenical nature. However, Myeza is a servant leader. At the WAIC she coordinated the women's training programmes and was involved in conducting the training herself. At the same time, she also conducted women's conscientisation training at Beyers Naudé's Christian Institute from 1970 to 1976. From 1976 onwards, she trained women in inner city programmes at the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg. From 1981 to 1983, she was the Director of the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, an ecumenical training centre for the unemployed and illiterate, and a haven against the injustices of apartheid. Here she was involved in training – or, in her words, in the “Programme for Ecumenical Women”, until 1993. Furthermore, Myeza was in charge of the Women's Desk of the South African Council of Churches for years, becoming the Senior Vice-President of the SACC in 1998, under the presidency of (Methodist) Bishop Mvume Dandala.⁵

Religious heritage

Religion is part of Myeza's life and part of her heritage. Myeza situated herself fully in the context of the ecumene, and during our first interview it did not occur to me to ask her which church she belongs to. I later discovered that Myeza is a Methodist, as was her mother, Emma Myeza, and her father, Albert Myeza. However, she comes from a Congregational Church family, with strong political affiliations. Her great-great grandfather, Madodeni Dube, was a cousin of the famous John Langalibalele Dube (1871-1946), founder of the Congregational Church in South Africa and first president of the African National Congress. Lindiwe Myeza's maternal grandfather, Jonathan Mkhize, was a pastor in the African Congregational Church. MaLindi calls his wife her grandmother, the “village social worker”, and says that she was deeply influenced by her grandmother's compassionate relationship with the community. This was reflected in all Myeza's community work and, inter alia, also structurally in her involvement with the Asengeni Fund. After the Soweto uprisings of 1976, she managed the Asengeni Fund with John Rees, (Methodist) General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches from 1970 to 1977. This fund was established to help people in hospital with their medical costs and people in prison with their legal fees. She tells how, during these times, she took food and underwear for the girls who were imprisoned in Krugersdorp after the 1976 uprising, and that she argued for their release.

Nevertheless, she remarks, many people in Soweto were ignorant of what was happening in the streets and thought that the whites were nice people. They therefore could not understand what Myeza was doing.⁶

Myeza's profile, which was read out when she received the Presidential Order of the Baobab, significantly notes her work among and for the youth:

Myesa actively participated in the student uprisings of the 1970s. In 1976, Myeza organized medical and other assistance to numerous student activists from Soweto. Well aware of the risk, she provided safe havens to many who were hiding from the security police.

She also worked with the University of the Witwatersrand to provide support to the many black students who were prevented from writing their final examinations. She was also asked to assist in brokering peace negotiations between disputing parties at the Mzimphlope hostel uprising in Soweto, and went on to assist with similar interventions in Tembisa, Vosloorus and Vereeniging. Despite being a woman in a fiercely patriarchal society, she was able to employ her vast and varied skills to mediate successfully between the warring factions.

Women's piety in the Soweto of the 1960s and 1970s

I asked Myeza what it was like to be a woman of faith in Soweto during the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s? She answered as follows:

To be a Christian woman in Soweto was to be able to be what you are. It was ultimately fulfilling. The women were the ones who brought the things into the community that made them to survive: values, and strength. The values we brought into Soweto were loving, caring, understanding, chinning up, respecting, empathizing, making things look normal. Yes, they were verbs. All these values are verbs. And we made people strong by showing through our own lives the strength of faith. And o yes, women must be strong, because they are responsible for life. If we are not strong, the community will collapse. And we were strong through our faith (Interview 2, 18 August 2012).

⁵ These dates are taken primarily from a copy of Lindiwe Myeza's CV, which she provided.

⁶ Even in the new millennium (2000s), after apartheid was abolished, Myeza has been engaged in fundraising, serving as Vice-President Marketing and Communication of SAIF, the Southern Africa Institute of Fundraising, which professionally represents fundraising practitioners for NGOs and FBOs. See *SAIF News*, February/March 2003, Issue no 6, p 1.

During the times of turmoil, Myeza organised prayer meetings and Bible studies for the women “to keep their faith alive and practical,” as she puts it. In 1979 she founded Pulpit Women, bringing together lay and ordained women whose preaching voices were not recognised in the community. This group did much to support traumatised teachers and learners during the 70s and 80s, and also served as a place of healing for the women themselves who did not get recognition as religious practitioners. Myeza remembers the story – one of many – of a woman who led an independent church but was not allowed by her family, as a woman, to officiate at her brother’s funeral.

Through Pulpit Women, Myeza met Dr Lydia August, daughter of MaChristina Nku, founder of the St John’s Apostolic Faith Mission Church, one of the largest African Independent Churches in South Africa. Myeza was a great admirer of Christina Nku. She admired her for her healing ministry, her upliftment of the poor and destitute, starting from Evaton Township where the main church is situated, and for relentlessly enhancing education among church members. When MaNku died in 1988, her logical successor, according to Myeza, would have been her daughter Lydia August, who acquired a doctorate in Theology from Atlanta University in Georgia. August, furthermore, was the President of the AIC Women’s Fellowship and Assistant Chairperson of the OAIC (Organisation for African Independent Churches, Southern African Region).⁷ Myeza relates: “Another woman leading the church was, however, not acceptable to the men in the church, and Bishop Masango became head.” The Church eventually split because of the family being in favour of Lazarus Nku, MaNku’s son, to take over the leadership. Nevertheless, Myeza and August became friends through Pulpit Women, enriching not only the community but also one another through prayer, Bible reading and reflecting. Myeza describes the contents of their relationship as “contextualizing the Bible, letting ourselves be made strong”.

This, then, is a summary of the relationship between politics, faith and womanhood during the beleaguered Soweto of the 1960s to 1980s.

Political contexts and stories

Political influence

In spite of her political heritage and family line, Myeza says she has been only a foot soldier in the political struggle. But also, no less than a foot soldier. She wants to be remembered for herself, for her values and community work, for the upliftment and empowerment she brought about among women. She does not want to be remembered because of the Dubes in her family.

Myeza was never elected to a political position, being almost 60 years old when liberation came in 1994. However, everything she did had a political dimension: empowering others through her beliefs, helping political prisoners, educating women and the illiterate and providing voter education. Moreover, Myeza had a powerful influence on the political leaders of the present. Professor Veronica McKay (interviewed 7 June 2012), Executive Vice-Dean of the College of Education at Unisa, refers to the influence Lindi exercised – both as educational and spiritual guide – on Angie Motshekga, current Minister of Basic Education, and on Thabo Mbeki, former President of South Africa. “Lindi created the new government,” McKay says. Professor Mandla Makhanya (interviewed 5 June 2012) had independently echoed McKay’s remark some time before, stating that Lindi Myeza had a massive influence on Angie Motshekga and Thabo Mbeki, but he also mentioned the name of Simangaliso Kumalo, who will be referred to later in this article.

Awards

Lindiwe Myeza received awards from both the politicians mentioned, Motshekga and Mbeki. In 2006 she received a presidential award from Thabo Mbeki, namely the Order of Baobab (in Silver), which was awarded to her for her distinguished service to the South African community. In 2010, Angie Motshekga awarded her with the Kha Ri Gude Literacy Education Award for her lifelong commitment to literacy training.

However, many awards preceded these two. Already in 1977 the *Star* had awarded her the “Unsung Heroine Award” for her bravery and support during the Soweto uprisings. The Methodist Church awarded her the Sitiloane Award, and the Giving and Sharing Foundation awarded her with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Actually, the walls of her house in Diepkloof carry a heavy load in displaying all the honours bestowed on her, including a plaque with a key attached to it, granting her the Freedom of the City of Richmond, California.

⁷ Masilo (Victor) Molobi, “The AICS and theological training: with special reference to the St John Apostolic Faith Mission of MaNku”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 32.3 (2006):33-52.

Personal reflections on politics

“Religion and politics are one,” says Myeza. “Your faith makes you strong for the political struggle. And that is what we now need: A strong woman president!” According to Myeza, the woman elected to be president must do three things: firstly, she must not be removed from the people, but must let the community make the political decisions of the day; secondly, she must reduce debt and let the riches remain in the country; and thirdly, she must empower the women, because the women have been the torchbearers all along. And Myeza believes that it is time that we identify and write down the stories of these women, these torchbearers.

Educational contexts and stories

Myeza’s educational history

Lindiwe Myeza matriculated at the Mazenod Catholic High School in Durban and she completed a teacher’s diploma at the (Methodist) Indaleni Teacher Training College, also in KwaZulu-Natal.⁸ As a teacher, Myeza had to be adaptable and teach whatever subject was assigned to her. She tells how she taught Latin (sic), English, Zulu and Music at Charlestown Secondary School in Volksrust, Mpumalanga, on the border of KwaZulu-Natal; she also taught Zulu and Afrikaans at Ndonde Community School in Rockville, Soweto; and she wrote handbooks for all these subjects, that is, actually writing them by hand.

Literacy training

Myeza’s main contribution in the educational context lies in the field of literacy training. In 1983, as Director of the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre mentioned earlier, she started the Women’s Informal Training Initiative, which was the first of its kind in the country. The very next year, in 1984, she joined Unisa’s Institute for Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), newly founded by Veronica McKay, now Executive Vice-Dean of the College of Education at Unisa.

McKay (interviewed 7 June 2012) vividly remembers the Unisa of the 1980s of which Lindi Myeza became a part. At the time, there were no black lecturers at Unisa, except in the Department of African Languages. On three occasions while Myeza was at the office, bombs went off in Prof Maritz’s office below. The Department of Sociology, of which Maritz was the HOD, supported and advised lawyers who were defending political prisoners at the time. Ironically, the Unisa of the 1980s did not allow Lindi to drink tea with other academic members of the staff or to enter the restaurant on the third floor. She had to drink her tea with the “workers” on the seventh floor.

McKay, who wrote her PhD on “people’s education”,⁹ calls Myeza her “mentor”. In McKay’s academic studies, as in the structuring of the ABET courses, Myeza, who never acquired any university training, guided McKay – through her (Myeza’s) indigenous insight – into understanding and combatting illiteracy. At that time, policy prohibited any reference to religion in the ABET course contents. At the age of 77, Lindi is still employed as a Kha Ri Gude¹⁰ literacy coordinator for a small honorarium, since she does not receive a state pension. Lindi has spent a life in service and McKay describes her as “a stunning educationalist” and believes she deserves more recognition and compensation for her tireless efforts.

Co-workers’ memories

In the early 1980s, Elizabeth Mokotong was appointed in the Department of Sociology at the University of South Africa, thus becoming the first black woman, outside of African Languages, to be employed as a lecturer at Unisa. She and Lindiwe Myeza were also the only black women sitting on the board of the ABET Institute. Mokotong (telephonic interview 7 June 2012) speaks fondly of Myeza, both as an educationalist and as a church activist. She remembers Myeza’s involvement in Wilgespruit and how the programmes she presented “were not technocratic but people-centred”. She also remembers how Myeza, as a layperson at Wilgespruit, interacted with the prominent black theologians of the time, Simon Maimela and Bonganjalo Goba. Incidentally, the latter were the first black professors appointed in the then Faculty of Theology at Unisa in 1981.

Mokotong remembers the police beatings in Soweto and how Myeza worked with pastor theologians Beyers Naudé and Nico Smith in combatting police brutality and bringing the atrocities to the attention of the

⁸ See the profile of Lindiwe Myeza (1935-) for the Order of the Baobab in Silver on <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?reid=1036>.

⁹ Veronica McKay, *A sociological study of “people’s education” in South Africa: a humanist evaluation* (PhD thesis, University of South Africa, 1990).

¹⁰ Kha Ri Gude is the Department of Basic Education’s Mass Literacy Campaign of which McKay is the CEO.

rest of the world. Myeza was committed to this cause ever since her child returned from school one day and announced: “Mommy, there’s a Caspir¹¹ in our school yard!”

“From Lindi I learned how to do development properly,” recalls Mokotong. Lindi taught the women to do things for themselves ... and then to celebrate. She had a “CODESA for the pastors’ wives,” says Mokotong, probably referring to Myeza’s involvement in the WAICs.

Mokotong also remembers the Unisa of the 1980s as a place where even the black lecturers were not allowed in the restaurant and drank their tea with the workers on the seventh floor. During these times, there were separate group visits and graduations for black and white students. And those who failed to conform to apartheid policies, such as the Sociology Department, had their offices bombed.

Lindi was always fun to be with. She was a reconciler, a hard worker, an educationalist, a developer, a celebrator, a church person and a colleague in ABET. “We particularly enjoyed marking the assignments from Robben Island, from where our best students came,” Mokotong recalls.

When Prof Mandla Makhanya’s office was approached for an interview with the author, he immediately made time in his busy schedule. Makhanya is the Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of South Africa. He worked with Myeza while teaching ABET programmes in Mamelodi, a “township” of Pretoria/Tshwane, during the 1990s. Although no religious component was allowed in the ABET programmes, Makhanya remembers Myeza as a “church activist” for whom the boundaries between church work, politics and literacy training were blurred. He remembers her as being “always on her feet”, although she was nearing 60 years of age, and he admired her for leaving Soweto early in the morning to be on time to teach in Mamelodi, especially on Saturdays. Not having a husband to support her, Makhanya remarks that Myeza still managed to give her child – a daughter, Buhle – a good education. She exercised a great influence on the people in her personal life, on politicians and on people on the ground. “It is therefore a pity that historians today only give attention to what the political activists and leaders have done, and do not reflect on community leaders.”

Dr Simangaliso Kumalo teaches in the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg. He is also the Chair of the Academic Task Team of the Methodist training centre in Pietermaritzburg, the Seth Mokitimi Seminary. Kumalo attended a lecture the author gave on Lindiwe Myeza at the Joint Conference¹² at this university on 20 June 2012, and he agreed to an interview later that day.

Kumalo was the minister of the Methodist Church in Ivory Park, a “township” of Johannesburg, from 1997 to 2002, when he met Myeza teaching ABET classes there. Summing up Myeza, he characterises her as “shaped by the culture of the SACC, with the heart of a woman”.

“Ivory Park was a hellish place. Because of her [Myeza] the people, also the women, could read and write. They could read the Bible and the hymn book. They celebrated ... That was liberation,” says Kumalo.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to publish the stories of Lindiwe Myeza so that they can heal those affected.

Three methodological challenges directed these stories on their path to being frozen in an academic account. Firstly, Myeza was given ownership of her stories, as did the other interviewees. The result was an uncritical and uninterpreted flow of stories. Myeza emerged as a person who was not at all controversial, and her valuable contribution to society was uncontested. In a sense, this made her appear harmless or insignificant from the “enemy’s” perspective, which was probably not the case at all. However, this again highlighted her indigenous knowledge and experience of what sustained a society in crisis. She herself prioritises the spiritual embodiment of her stories and the values she lived and taught as her main contribution to the communities in which she worked.

The author did not interpret these stories. Of course, the moment a story is “frozen into words”, it is already interpreted in a sense. However, the author merely assumed co-authorship of the stories by addressing the issues that Myeza herself raised, namely gender, societal sustainability, empowerment and celebrating life.

This brings us to the second issue of methodological interest, that is, the bridging between the author and Myeza in terms of social and cultural location. The author, as interviewer, is mobile, university-trained and equipped with words, computers and space for publication, but has limited access to the historical and contextual experiences of the interviewee. The interviewer, therefore, has to remain teachable and be careful to allow a voice from an old lady in a wheelchair to create itself to walk into the future. If the interviewee has displayed vulnerability in the quest for recognition, or shifted identity to be able to communicate with the interviewer, it is not appropriate for the interviewer to expose and undermine this voice, keeping it from walking with dignity and strength.

¹¹ Apartheid police vehicle

¹² Joint Conference of Academic Societies in the Field of Religion and Theology, which represents 16 academic societies, of which the Church History Society of Southern Africa is one. The “Joint Conference” was held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg from 18 to 22 June 2012. The overall theme of the conference was “Knowing, believing, living in Africa: perspectives from religion, theology and science.”

Thirdly, the essay intended to and has moved towards partnering the healing of voices and silences. Because the stories of Lindiwe Myeza were told to a white woman as stories of reconciliation, compassion, interracial cooperation and, ultimately, the celebration of life in the form of survival, literacy and identity, it is hoped that they will result in greater healing for societies.

Works consulted

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