



RESISTING EXTRACTIVIST DEVELOPMENT

Interview with Nonhle Mbuthuma

Nonhle Mbuthuma is the Spokesperson for the Amadiba Crisis Committee

Hibist Kassa: Could you share with us about the Xolobeni community?

Nonhle Mbuthuma: I am the spokesperson of Amadiba Crisis Committee. The community of Amadiba is one of the rural areas which is under traditional authority. The Amadiba Crisis Committee was formed in 2007 but the struggle started before that because the Mineral Resource Commodity (MRC), the Australian company, arrived in early 1996 in our community. At that time the struggle kept going back and forth. We decided to form the Amadiba Crisis Committee because the traditional authority is our traditional government or local government. We are trying to separate in order to not make our traditional authority biased because they are handling everybody whether you are for or against. That is why we decided to form Amadiba Crisis Committee where we are focusing on fighting against mining. The land where we live is an agricultural land. It's an ancestral land. It also has a history of dating back to the 1950s and it's one of the areas that have not been disturbed. Our community is of those that have not been moved by force. When we say no to mining it is because we have a history behind us and it supports us. Our ancestors fought for that land so that today we survive, today we live in a peaceful environment.

HK: Can you tell us a bit more about the 1950s?

NM: In the 1950s, there was the Pondo revolt. It was the beginning of the Pondo revolt where the colonial power was trying to colonise the whole of Pondoland, not only Amadiba. They were starting on the Ciskei; before 1994, there were the Ciskei and Transkei regions. In the Transkei, which is my region, the resistance was strong. People were not being shaken and many were being taken to be killed in Pretoria. But they did not give up because the colony was trying to tell the amaPondo that "we need to reserve land for development". They wanted to push us into a position where our households would be squatted in one place. They wanted to reserve the grazing lands and were calling that a "betterment plan" and cutting up our land. The AmaPondo were not believing in that. I am very proud of our ancestors for not believing that because they were telling the colonial government that "if you cut the land into pieces, you are separating the human being from nature which is killing the human being because in order for us to survive we need to live close to our fields, we need to live close to our grazing land and black people can live longer if they're living like that." But if you put a human being somewhere there and the land somewhere there, you create poverty, a dependence syndrome because people are going to stop walking that distance. Your garden should be closer to your home and your livestock should be closer to your home.

Today, the mining company also says we must move towards 'development'. Now that colonial government comes back to our minds. What kind of development is one without the people? If the development is there to develop us, it needs to be built where we are. We shouldn't have to move in order to develop. Who is going to be developed behind us? That development is not for us, it's for someone else. They keep saying that mining is going to develop the Amadiba, but you





need to move. When you move us who is going to be developed behind us? It's clear for us, that development is not for us and we keep telling our own government. We keep reminding our own government that what our ancestors fought for was a right cause, because right now we are not starving and we have a home which is important [to defend]. We have land. We have shelter. We have water, because people respect nature. They respect the culture. When there is no culture, when there is no nature, the life system is gone. But they always put mining as the alternative to a life system, the life of a human being. If you have the mine and then you put the people away from the land, you're going to employ the people. But the question is how long will the mining last? It's short-term but right now I can guarantee you, where I live, every household does have food. Even if the country goes to lockdown level 5 today, we will not starve because we do have land.

HK: What do you mean in terms of the culture and the life system that you mention? How was life in the community in the past and what are the new things people are doing to survive now?

NM: Culture is part of the African people that respect nature. Once the culture disappears, people will no longer respect nature. Because, when there is culture, for example, people will know that "this medicine is important to me, in order to respect this medicine, I need to have a culture." There are some trees where we believe that if you have twins, that special should be a plant in your household. That is why, when it comes to diversity, our community is the hotspot where you can find all the types [of nature]. It's not that people don't want to vandalise the nature, but they respect the nature. People know that "when I harvest emoti, I must harvest emoti in a way that people can benefit because this is a good thing. It's not for selling but it is something that is important to me in order to live long". When I talk about livelihood, what we are doing right now and what our ancestors were doing then, is to produce food for ourselves and is to keep the seeds for ourselves. We are not buying the seeds. We are keeping the seeds, and those seed rotate. They go to the next generations. The more people see that it keeps people united, and tells people to respect each other, to love each other. This culture, it helps people love and care for each other.

For example, barter exchange: If you know that that family does not have livestock, you think "no let me do that and let me share". You know sharing is very rare these days but my community has the kind of culture where if I left my child at home with your children, there is no problem. I'm not worried that my child will be stolen. Right now in the whole country, women and children are not safe in this country but nobody asks what the cause of this is. The cause of women being murdered is because communities are being pushed out from the land and once people have nothing to do, they are unemployed. What else? They will try to do something new, where they can get money in order to buy food. Because all in all, people want to feed their families. I am very proud of our community to say that we are feeding the world. We are harvesting sweet potatoes, we are harvesting yams and veggies, everything is there. We are self-employed. We are not employed, but if the government could recognise the self-employed, it would see that people can govern themselves and not to be dependent on employment. Because right now, what is happening with the COVID-19 pandemic is that there is a hell of a lot of retrenchment, and we are worried about what is going to happen to this country. But if they keep pushing the communities away from the land, what country are we building?





HK: Tell me more about other activities, for instance materials to build your houses.

NM: Where we live, we buy something that we do not have, or is not around us, but when we build our homes, we build in a sustainable way. For example, the poles were from the forest, and you can see how people thought to be environmentalists when going to harvest the poles. Otherwise, if people did not think, if they did not respect the culture and the livelihood, all the forest would be gone. But today we still have a lot of forest. Although people were cutting the forest, they were cutting in a way that the tree can grow more. You're not just vandalising to cut the tress.

We use the sand that is around us from the rivers in a way that we rehabilitate. This is because we use the sand not for selling; we are just building our own homes. But it's unfortunate because most of us are living most in a rondavel. The mining company's use this fact to undermine our culture, our tradition. They say that these houses that we have, which are rondavels, are not so good. But it is better for us to live in a rondavel, which is thatched in the roof, because in winter its warmer and in summer its cooler than iron. But the mining company says that we are not modern. They will build us the best rooms in the other places where they will remove us to.

We are still living in a traditional way, the brother in laws and the mother in laws are living in the same household- and that is why we are building [more] rondavels. But the mining company ... when they build, they will build a four bedroom which is totally not us. You can imagine sharing your room with your in laws. But they [the mining companies] never think about that. They think when we build rondavels, they are not important. They said we are the poor of the poorest, but for us we know why we build the rooms like that, and we are happy. And we also know that our ancestors know the rondavels not the square house when they passed away. When we do these rituals, we use the rondavels to speak to our ancestors. When things are not so good, we speak to them to ask some help, to ask some guidance because we believe that wherever they are they are still watching us, they still lead us. When you build the house that is completely against our belief, what are you trying to do? You killed the tradition and the culture of that community.

HK: What are your energy sources and what is the role of the women in the community?

NM: Right now, we still use the firewood. I understand, especially us as women, we need to go the field in order to feed the children. We also have to take care of the household at the same time and also the children at the same time. It's a lot of work. But if our government can be supportive with solar energy, instead of us going to dig up the coal [then that would be great]. Solar energy...[can help] prevent event global warming. Global warming is here and it's real. And it is affecting us, it doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, it will be all of us being affected. That is why we are saying that if the government is serious about doing things better [it should provide support for solar energy]. Mineral resources are already outside, there is no need to dig more minerals...

[We have] said that in order to minimise the load to the women, solar energy [should be promoted]. If this country can have a company that can teach the women how to build solar energy [that would be good]. The fact that there are no skills is also going to be a problem. But if the women are given that opportunity to have a factory and are being taught how use solar energy then the problem will be solved. We cannot have a monopoly in solar energy and it cannot be based on a tender system. We need to teach the people in to know for themselves.





We are no longer talking about Socialism anymore, where people must work together. [But] this is what we are doing in my community right now: [We] work as a community, together. Yesterday I was harvesting my sweet potatoes, but you would think those people were employed, but they were not. You just tell people that "I need to harvest this much because I need to sell" and then people come because they know that in return when somebody needs to be helped, you will be helped too without needing a payment.

HK: What are your views on the concept of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as the Amadiba Crisis Committee?

NM: Since we have been fighting mining here, we decided to take our own government to court where we said that we have a right to say no. We realised that when it comes to 'development' there is only the right to say yes. There is the right to say yes and the right to say no, this is a right to decide. This is not a right to be consulted. This right to be consulted is [effectively] people coming to tell you that you have to move. But you have no right to say, "no I don't want to move". This is why we say consultation is not enough. We need to give consent on whether we want to move or don't want to move.

Why are we not treated the same [as every other private individual]? Because on private land, they have those rights. But when it comes to our communities, we don't have those rights. We just have a right to be consulted. That is why we said that before the mining company gets any mining rights, we as the community must give consent and not just be consulted. The right to say no is also the right to choose which way we want to live.

Consultation is not enough. We say we need to give consent and we are not going to change our minds. We know that our government was not thinking that a rural community in Amadiba can say "no". Democracy must be democracy for individuals, not for the mining companies." Communities like us need to benefit from this democracy and we cannot go back to where we are being forced.

They cannot use the same system [of forced removals] in our democracy. It's a pity when I see the new laws being pushed by parliament. They just take one step ahead and ten steps backwards. The Traditional Leadership Khoisan Act that is being pushed in parliament says in one of the clauses that when it comes to investment, the investor and the traditional leader can take a decision without talking to people, without people giving consent. What the hell is that?

That is why here at Amadiba we say that if the government is doing the right thing, they must practice the democratic system [for all]. That is why we said that FPIC is the best for all, not just for us but for both the communities and the mining companies. The environmental issues are affecting us, the communities, not the mining companies. Look at what is happening in Mpumalanga right now: It is pollution left, right and centre. Where are the mining companies? What is the government doing about that? Nobody even thinks that people are dying due to the things being done by the mining companies, but the government is nowhere to be found. Some mining companies even quit and leave the country with holes in the ground, and they are not even making these companies accountable for what they have done to our country. Yes, as a country we are very rich in terms of our minerals. But we are the poorest of the poor countries even though we have those





minerals. This is because our government can't make these mining companies accountable for what they have done to our land.

HK: What was the feeling at the end of apartheid? What did people think the end of apartheid would mean for the community?

NM: After '94, we were all singing happy that our government is going to think for us, our government will be with us. We never thought today there would be more assassinations of activists fighting for the land like what was happening during the apartheid government. We never thought like that. We feel a pain and we are asking ourselves; how did we find ourselves here? Is this the democracy that ancestors fought for? What were we fighting for? Were we fighting for the right to vote? Or were we fighting for the right to vote and the right to the economy? Those are the questions that we have. Right now it is clear to us what we won after 1994 is the right to vote because that is what our government brought. But when it comes to economy, the economy is still in a few hands, it is not in our community. But our own government is busy pushing us to make sure that those little communities who have control of their own economy must be given away. Why is it like that?

HK: What role can the trade union movement play in ensuring a more just mining regime or economy more broadly?

NM: Honestly, when it comes to the trade unions, I think something went very wrong with the trade unions because trade unions are there fighting [for] their own workers and communities are fighting for survival. There is no link between the trade unions and communities. I can understand why, because the trade union believe in creating jobs. But those jobs are short term or long term. That is why there is no communication between the community and the trade unions. And the trade unions right now, you don't know where they are going while the retrenchment rate in the country is getting higher. We don't see them as active as they used to be. Something is not so good. That is why I was saying before: I think we as a country are no longer leftists. The Left is shrinking but the Right is getting better. That is the situation and it's my theory when I look at what is happening in this country.

