



Interview with: MaThusi (26)
Interviewed by: Nomkhosi
Date of interview: 12 December 2016
Travel: KwaQwabe – Umthwalume - Durban

MaThusi: I came here [to Durban] in 1953.

Nomkhosi: 53 okay.

MaThusi: I left home because my husband [died].

Nomkhosi: Okay.

MaThusi: He went to rest before us at a place where we will meet with him, if indeed such meetings do take place. I came to look for casual jobs here in Durban, so that I would be able to buy things.

Nomkhosi: This was in 1953?

MaThusi: Yes. From those casual jobs I was able to build a house. I built a house and finished it. This is the house that I now come from and go back to. But even in this house there is nobody left. All have died. I am the only one who is left. It's the same thing, even in the household that I married into.

Nomkhosi: *Hawu!* Okay.

MaThusi: They all died and I remained. I told myself that I was an orphan. But God was faithful because when I no longer had the strength to work, I was able to get the pension. I was able to get something to strengthen my house and I am able to maintain that house. What I get satisfies me. I know that I would never get this from the selling so I rely on the pension. I am not in need of anything. I am able to keep my house going because of this pension. Whatever I need, I get it from my pension. There is nobody else that I can rely on. I even rely on it when I am sick. When I am sick, I go to the clinic and it's free. They are able to help. And I rely on the asthma pump.

Nomkhosi: Asthma pump?

MaThusi: Actually, this asthma started with the grandfather. He probably passed it on to me. Since I have been here I have never seen anybody with this disease. So I have to pump this thing and it really helps me because it relieves me.

Nomkhosi: Really? You can see a difference?

MaThusi: Mkhwanazi: Yes, I can see a difference. I can even go to the garden and work the land a bit and pick up things.

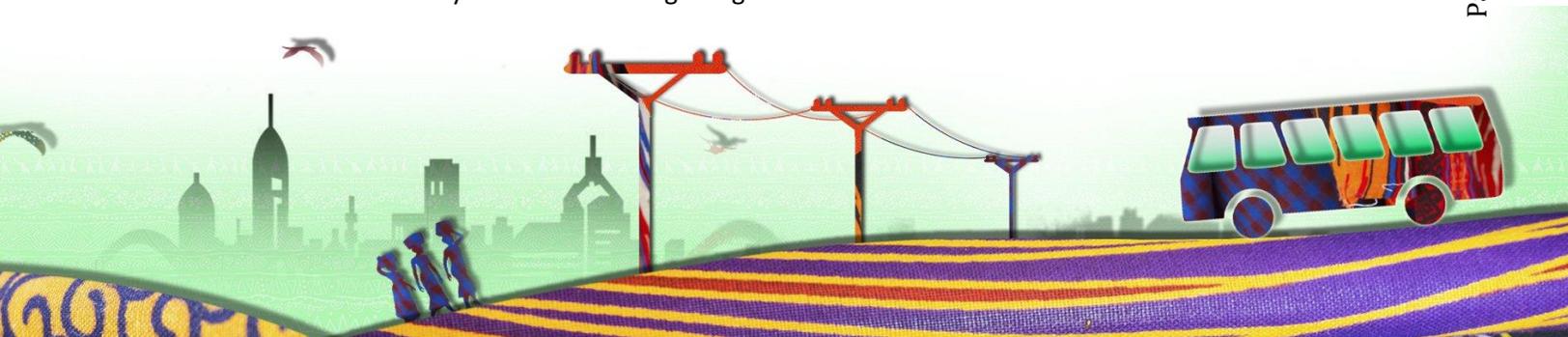
Nomkhosi: You still work the land even now?

MaThusi: A small garden is not a lot of land. A garden is perhaps something that equals this bed. Perhaps you would have a bed of carrots here and in the next bed spinach on one side and green beans on the other. I plant anything that can grow. I plant and eat from there. I do not have any other job. Because anytime I feel like leaving the hoe, I just drop it. I do not push it when I feel I can't do it anymore. This is because I know that I am only doing this for myself. Even when I am watering my garden, when I get tired I leave it and I tell myself that I will finish in the afternoon if I can. This is because I want to see if this thing follows me or not. And then one day I will go down and harvest it and throw it in the pot. In that sense, there is not much. But at home, I have built a house in a space that I was allocated by the chief. I am not on the farm.

Nomkhosi: Where is home?

MaThusi: At Umthwalume.

Nomkhosi: Where was your home before getting married?





MaThusi: I was from KwaQwabe, that is, Chief Qwabe's place. It borders on Ncelele.

Nomkhosi: Did your husband work in the city?

MaThusi: He once worked but he stopped because of being unwell. I suggested that he stops, because he was on and off. One day he would go, the next day he would not go. His health was against him. Sometimes he would go to work and come back not able to do anything. I said it would be better that he stopped working and just stay at home. So, just as he was completing the paper work for a disability pension, he died. So I started living this kind of a life. I had to start doing everything for myself.

Nomkhosi: Did you have children?

MaThusi: We only had one. He is busy focusing on his house.

Nomkhosi: He is old now?

MaThusi: He is a big old man. The little girl you saw coming in here, is his granddaughter.

Nomkhosi: She is his granddaughter?

MaThusi: He had her with a woman he used to date.

Nomkhosi: Oh, so it's your grandchild. She is so little (about two years old).

MaThusi: There is a place in Smith Street called the Mall. I take her there when they give children Christmas presents. We went there on the 10th, the day we had a lot of rain.

Nomkhosi: So what were your survival strategies when your husband passed away, before you came to the city?

MaThusi: I did not waste any time. I just came straight to Durban. I saw that I would not have the power to build the homestead on my own. But I have built a big house and that sort of thing needs proper planning. You can't do it without a plan. You really need to push hard in order to get what you want. So I decided to come here. I worked. I started saving and I started building. And then a white person asked me about it and I told him that I had been allocated land to build a house and he agreed to help me wherever he could. I built five-room house. I built a round (rondawel). I built a two-roomed house. I have not stopped.

Nomkhosi: Oh, you have a very big homestead. Does your son come back home or is he trying to build his own home?

MaThusi: The place I was given does not have rules that make sense. They say that when the owner of the house passes away, the kids cannot remain and retain the house.

Nomkhosi: Says who?

MaThusi: The chief. They say you have to build it and they re-allocate it anew.

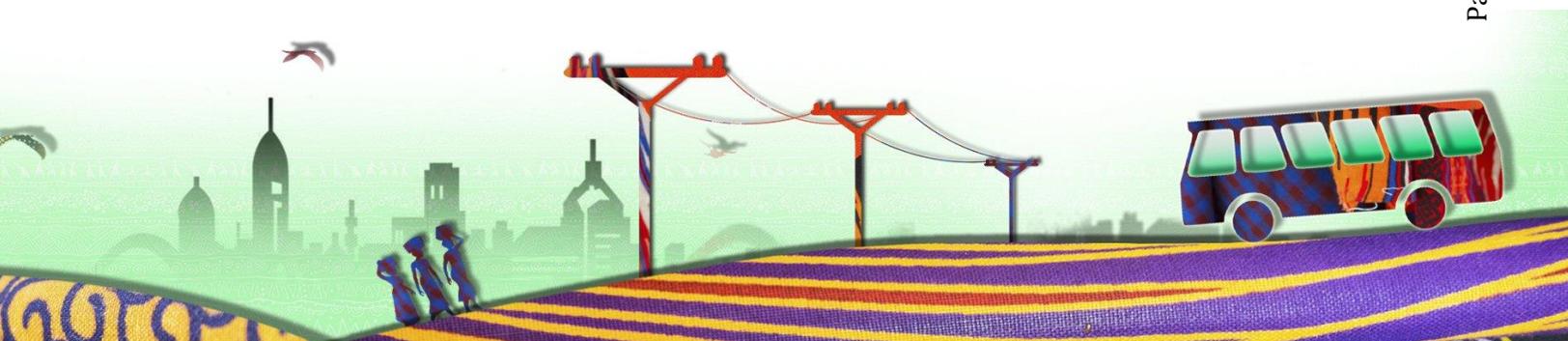
Nomkhosi: That can't be true.

MaThusi: It is true. There have been riots because of that. People were saying that when we are dead, our children would be told to buy the house again. Who would be selling that house? So people are really told to buy their own family houses. In actual fact, if a family has a big piece of land, that land can be cut into pieces and sold to two or three families. I am talking about something that I have seen. A person ends up getting a really small piece of land from his very own family land. So people have asked questions about it—why the land goes back to the chief when the parents pass on.

Nomkhosi: And the person was known by the community and his or her family.

MaThusi: Yes, even when a person was known. There was an old woman who was once beaten up. They ran and came to my house where they found a boy who is my relative. I was not there—I was here at the hostel. They asked him why he beat up the old woman? What did he want from here?

Nomkhosi: Were they accusing him of something he did not do?





MaThusi: They actually wanted to beat him to hell. He told them they had the wrong house. They asked for the house they wanted and he showed them. So they left with the police. So this means that once they hear or see something suspicious, they are quick to take steps to protect the community. They would ask what are you doing to the old woman who lives by herself? Do you want to kill her? Do you want her pension? The government gives us the pension to spend it in a way that we like. I have been living from the pension for a long time. When my white people were relocating from Durban to Cape Town, I told them that I am old now and I can't go with them. They told me that I can sell my house and buy another one when I reach Cape Town. I said I could not sell this house because only those who have passed on know this house.

Nomkhosi: Oh, they know this one?

MaThusi: Yes, they know this house. It was going to be heavy on me to have to change it. I would have to slaughter an animal and report to them that I am changing houses. And they would ask me what is wrong: am I going because I am following my employers? Even in Cape Town, they would say that I have to take pension now because I am old. So I thought that it would be good to part ways while I still have the strength to carry a 20-litre bucket of water in my head.

Nomkhosi: How old were you at that time?

MaThusi: ... *yehheni* ... you are asking an old person now ... ay, I was already quite old. That was the time when the taps were being put in people's yards. I was also lucky to get a tap in my yard. Now I get a jug and go and collect water and go back to the house. If I have a heavy container, I am able to call on any child that passes by and ask for help. Maybe that would be ten litres of water. Now that is the kind of life that I lead. We have children who check up on us. I would even ask the boys to check my electricity if I don't understand what is happening, and they would help me.

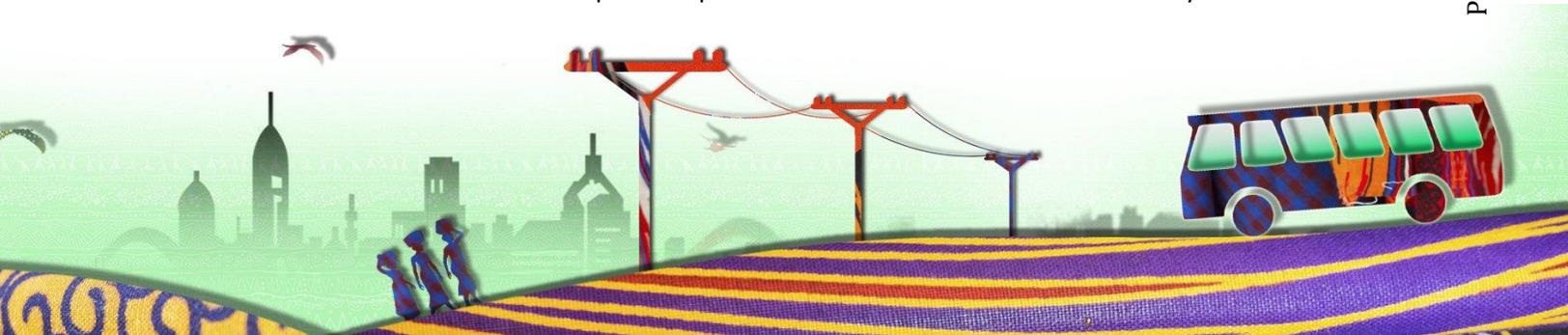
Nomkhosi: These are children from the community?

MaThusi: Yes, these are all my neighbours. We have built a nation. If I call on a child, the older neighbours would say: "There she is calling. Can't you go and check what she needs?" Then I would tell him that there is something that does not seem to connect. And the child would tell me that the main switch is down (Laughs). I would say I have plugged the kettle for so long and it doesn't get hot and the child would say: "Don't worry, gogo, I will help you." Then I would say thank you and ask him not to get fed up with me because I call on him every time there is something that I need help with. With *nayiti* (needle), I do not even touch it. If my dress gets torn, I do not even try to mend it. I just stop using it because I can never use *inayiti*.

Nomkhosi: You don't put it on when it's torn?

MaThusi: I don't want people to see this leaf of an old person. I don't want them to say I have given in to being an old rag. I don't want that. One should still take a proper bath. It's a problem when you stink because children also do not want to come close to you. They ask what's wrong with this stinking old lady. Does she wee-wee on herself? And her nails are this long? If mine get long, I get a nail clipper and call the children to help me cut them. Then I now look clean. I even give my feet a proper wash. I never have long dirty nails which are full of sand from the garden. Children would help me and they would go. I am grateful because I do not have a big tummy. My body is stiff, I am not so flexible. Even my eyes do not see properly. When I try to cut my nails, I end up cutting myself, so that is why ask the children to help. I do not want you to be worried about these dirty long nails when I am offering you tea. You would say no thanks even though I had just prepared it.

You must also try to follow those who are clean. One must bath and use lotion. One must wash one's feet with a stone. One must not put on a petticoat which has lost its colour. Even if you use one item





of clothing, you must wash it and wait for it to dry. You wrap something around your body and go check on it. This is the life that I live.

It is important that you love yourself. Even when you reach the clinic, they would ask you, have you bathed this morning? When did you last brush your teeth? They would even check at the back of your ears to see if they are clean. They ask you if you can still hear. They say that it is important that we take care of ourselves. So if people teach us to take care of ourselves, why would you not do it? What do you want? Do you want to fall sick? Taking care of yourself is important because it goes with health. It determines how you will live. Those people who sleep on the road must have God's strength because they put on clothes which make them look like they work at a garage.

Nomkhosi: What do you mean when you say God gave them strength?

MaThusi: I mean they continue surviving even in the circumstances they face. I always say I do not want to [appear as if] I sleep on the road. I sleep in the house. Even that house, I have to see how it is (I have to clean it). Because I have arthritis, I decided to put tiles in my house so that it could be easy for me to clean with a mop. When I see that they start to lose colour, I use Jik (bleach) until I see them coming back to their colour. Nobody wants to work for another person and I do not have the money to pay them. I can't pay (a helper) peanuts and she would want all the money that I am also getting from the government. But as I can still put a pot on the stove, I will do that. I would plug in the kettle and put water in the bucket and go and bath. After that I would throw in my clothes in order to wash them, as well as my blankets. I do all that. That is the life that we live on this earth, my child. You should not say you are very old (and can't do anything). Why are you old? You are old so that you can take care of yourself. When you are dead, people should not be scared to come close to you or even touch your corpse because you are stinking. People would be asking themselves when was the last time she took a bath. Even her vagina, as old as it is, is stinking.

Nomkhosi: Even a new one stinks.

MaThusi: It gets worse. One should [look after oneself all one's life]. [An old woman] was once young and fresh. People should use roll-on as well so that they don't smell bad. Because the smell of old age is a smell of old age and the smell of being young is a smell of youth. Even as you sit there I could be smelling something. Whereas when we are sitting and chatting we should just sit and relax. You should not just stay for few minutes and rush to go because you can't stand the smell of an old woman. It must not be like that. You can keep thinking you are fine when you are not. You should take care and make sure you don't have bad odour. (She makes a comment in passing about the dishes she left on her bed and about old age).

Nomkhosi: Can I ask about your work? When you came here and started out, what kind of a job did you have?

MaThusi: I was a domestic.

Nomkhosi: Did you ever try something else like selling?

MaThusi: No, I wasn't selling when I started. I started out working for a white person. (A woman from the other bed tries to get up and leave in a wheelchair. She passes between myself and MaThusi. Then MaThusi asks her neighbour to help her with the rice she is cooking which does not seem to be heating up).

MaThusi: I got employed by a white person. While I was doing that, he had to relocate to Mandeni. A white person does a job where he can be transferred from one area to another. I only worked for one year and then I worked for another one who went to Cape Town. I worked for him for 32 years. When he left for Cape Town, I realised that I was an old woman and worn out. I realised I had to go.





Nomkhosi: 32 years working at the same place? What was the last amount of money you were getting paid?

MaThusi: I used to get paid R2000 per month, excluding the R100 per month he used to give me for travel to my temple. He would give me this every Friday so I could go on the Sabbath.

Nomkhosi: Every Friday? It seems you really had nice employers.

MaThusi: Yes, it means he was a good man. It means we were both satisfied with my work. I made him happy and he made me happy. He did not want me to go around looking for greener pastures.

Nomkhosi: You lived in his house?

MaThusi: Yes, I lived in his yard but we had to part eventually.

Nomkhosi: Was it a man or woman?

MaThusi: He had his family and there were kids. I refused to help when his daughters got married. I used to *juda* for his daughters (babysit) and he wanted me to help out with his grandchildren as well.

Nomkhosi: What is *ukujuda*?

MaThusi: It is when they go to eat out, I remain with the kids. Then he wanted me to look after his grandchildren when their parents went out. They would say: "Please!" But this 'please' used to hurt us sometimes.

Nomkhosi: Did they not pay you extra for doing that work?

MaThusi: No, those girls did not pay. Perhaps if they had some leftover chips from the restaurant, they would give that to me. That's it. And I would wash for all the people who came to visit and iron for them also.

Nomkhosi: Where did they live?

MaThusi: In Mitchell Park. (Her neighbor comments that MaThusi got paid a lot of money in the olden days].

MaThusi: The people who worked for the Jews got paid a lot of money, even in those days. It was really not the same as being unemployed. We did not have a reason to go around asking for help from neighbours.

Nomkhosi: You did a good job because you built and finished your house.

MaThusi: Yes, I did well because I built a house and finished it. Now people just look at this old lady with her walking stick walking around her five-room house and the round. I can say that I am well and happy. You have to persevere even when it's difficult. You think of your past and your future. I always say that nothing will happen for me in Durban—one has to go back home. I used to hear that in Umlazi people were getting burnt alive, although I do not know if that was true. So that is why I chose to go back to the rural areas where land was allocated to me.

Nomkhosi: What is the difference between living in a place where people get allocated land and in a place where they don't?

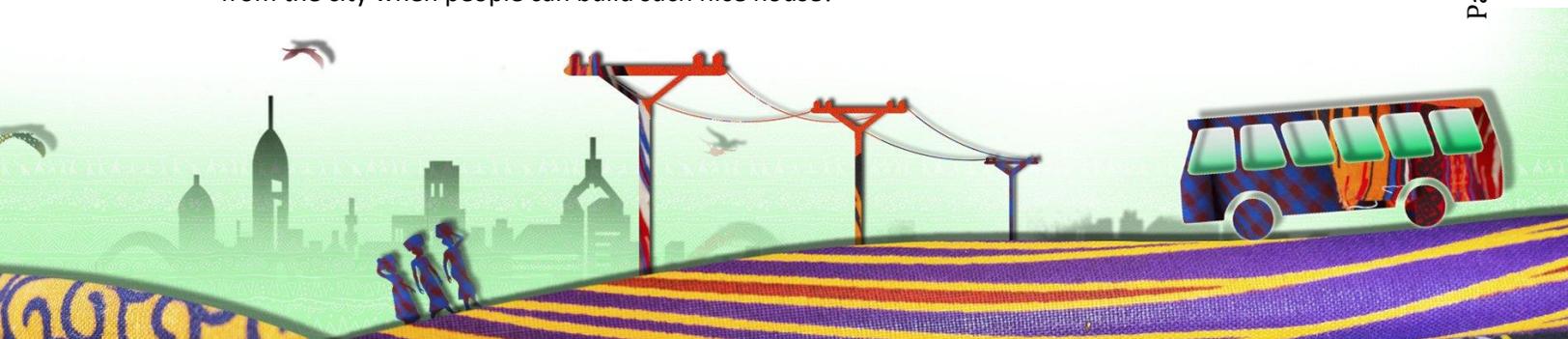
MaThusi: You mean some would be given places in the suburbs?

Nomkhosi: No, I mean those who do not get land in the rural areas. How else do they get it?

MaThusi: Ay, no, the chief would try and get land for that person. He would explain to the *izinduna* (headmen) that there is a person who is really in need. In the past it was really difficult. An unmarried woman was never allocated land. They argued that she would corrupt the nation.

Nomkhosi: Really?

MaThusi: They argued that they would have boyfriends without counting them and that does not help. But now you find successful women with kids coming from double-story houses. What can you want from the city when people can build such nice house?





Nomkhosi: That's true.

MaThusi: What can you ever need when you get to eat the food that you like without a problem?

Nomkhosi: You mentioned the issue of unmarried women being disqualified from being allocated land. Did you have any similar negative experiences since the passing of your husband?

MaThusi: No, there is nothing that I experienced other than trouble with neighbours over the boundary. When they planted their stuff over the boundary I would call the *induna* to come help me see if everything was still in order in terms of the land allocation of each person. He would look and tell the neighbour to take her food back to the space that was allocated to her.

Nomkhosi: But would that change after reporting?

MaThusi: She started by fighting with the other neighbour. But today we are walking on top of that neighbour. She has become dust and we walk on her (she died). I realised that if I continued complaining, she would call the *induna* and then the *induna* would call us both before him. We would all stand there and he would ask each of us to point out the boundary. She would then point. Then they would ask us to show the signpost [*isidindi*], so I decided to leave her alone and I [didn't] care anymore. Her husband would support her and say his wife was allocated land when he was not there, when he was in the city of Durban. But this woman would leave her signposts (pass the boundary) and comes closer to my space. There is normally a passage in between two. This woman would use that neutral space in between our plots. She thought that because it was empty she could use it and it was fine to go over her own boundary. The reason why we put *isidindi* in was just so that we would not fight. People cannot be smart and just take over the space. Some people have the mind of a chicken.

Nomkhosi: Of a chicken?

MaThusi: Yes.

Nomkhosi: How is that?

MaThusi: For example, I would plant beans and you would also plant beans. The chicken would leave my beans and go and eat yours. Then I would say that because my beans have not been eaten, this proves that my chickens do not eat beans. Next day the chicken would come eat my beans and she would call me and show me my chicken eating my beans. Then I would apologise to her, realising that we both have the mind of a chicken. So I decided to do something in order to stop the talking. I decided to put all my chickens in the *hhoko lezinkukhu* (chicken pen). So they are locked up. They eat and drink [in the cage].

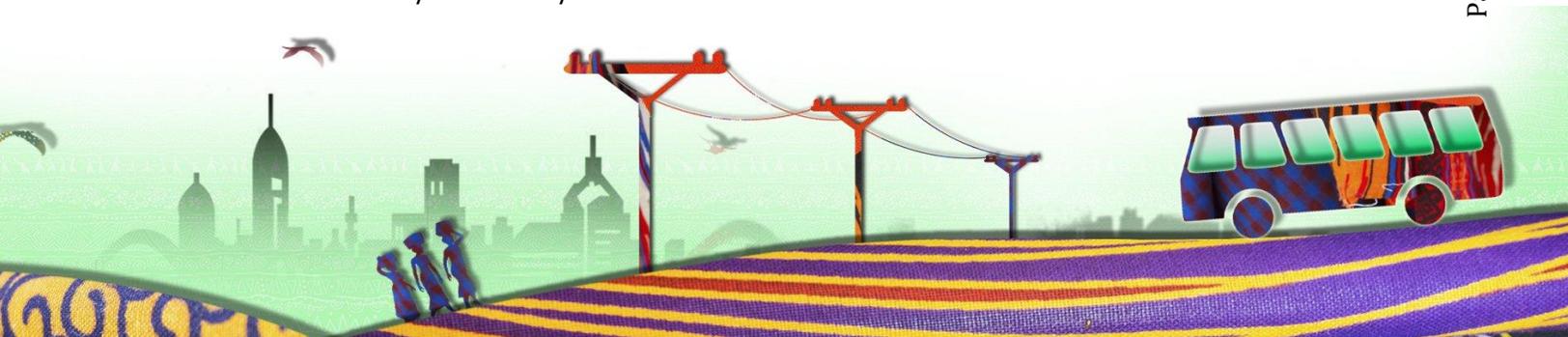
Nomkhosi: So now who looks after your chickens when you are not there?

MaThusi: I normally leave them with my neighbour. I leave them food and ask them to give them food when they are done. It's just that I do not stay there for many days if I am this side. For example, I only came here on Friday and it is Monday today. I came for the grandchildren's Christmas party. But I will also be leaving on Wednesday.

Nomkhosi: Are you leaving for Christmas or you will still come back before Christmas?

MaThusi: I do normally come back, my child. I am just taking chances. I will come back to pay my rent. I am doing this so that when I buy something [in the city] I am not forced to go back home the same day. I collect a number of items together and when I am ready to go, I call my neighbour and ask her to tell the children to come fetch me and the stuff. They would ask me how much stuff I would be carrying. If I say they have to come with a wheelbarrow, they would come with a wheelbarrow. I would tell them that I am coming either in a bus or taxi. I would tell them what time to expect me and I would find them waiting for me.

Nomkhosi: Who do you leave in your house?





MaThusi: I will now live with my daughter-in-law, that is, if she does not have a problem and is sane in her head.

Nomkhosi: If she is what?

MaThusi: If she is sane and if I do not do anything that will make her go insane.

Nomkhosi: When did your son get married?

MaThusi: He has married many times, this boy. He has sent *abakhongi* (representatives of the groom in the *lobola*, bride wealth, process) many times. He paid for the education of one of them.

Nomkhosi: And then what happened?

MaThusi: She found herself a boyfriend in college. She went there for training and she saw herself as being too beautiful. She was with the principal.

Nomkhosi: And she got caught?

MaThusi: There was a phone call from the [college] to say the child was not behaving well. She used to get [together] with a teacher who was in the same area. Sometimes she would go to school and walk back. When I asked her about it she said she decided to get a lift because she had to attend a meeting. I kept quiet. [My son] who received the phone call decided to go there one day,

Nomkhosi: Your son?

MaThusi: Yes. He came after school, at a time when school kids were dispersing. He hid somewhere and saw another gentleman walking with his partner. They reached a spot when they wanted to take a rest. As the guy started [smoothing over] the grass for the lady to sit. Then [my son] said: "Why are you sweeping the ground by hand? Are you not scared that a snake will appear?" When they both looked up, the lady said she just wanted to pee. And her fiancé said: "So that is how you do it if you want pee? This is not it at all." And that was the end of their meeting.

Nomkhosi: That girl brought a disgrace upon herself.

MaThusi: Imagine! They were about to send *umembeso* (gifts to the bride to be's family) to her house.

Nomkhosi: Oh, he had already bought *izibizo* (gifts to the bride to be's family)?

MaThusi: Yes, similar to the stuff that someone bought from me. A guy bought it all because he had *umembeso* to send.

Nomkhosi: This is for another girl?

MaThusi: Yes. I actually forget her surname. I wouldn't know because she brought abomination to us all.

Nomkhosi: Was she not from the same area as you?

MaThusi: No, she was not. Have you ever heard of *isikebheni* (name of a place)?

Nomkhosi: Yes.

MaThusi: She is from around that area. But [everything has been quiet since] but we know about what the problems are. We would see her every time we went for virginity testing. If she needs to do anything, she must do it in the dark (unseen).

Nomkhosi: How did you see that she went for these tests because you said she is not from the same area?

MaThusi: She is from the church temple—*kwaShembe*—and they pass by us all the time.

Nomkhosi: Oh, does that mean the other was not from the Shembe church?

MaThusi: She was also from the Shembe church, but I guess she failed to behave. There is nothing we could do.

Nomkhosi: Does your son go to temple?

MaThusi: Big time.

Nomkhosi: We hope that this time everything will go well.





MaThusi: We do not know—only God knows. He is the only one who knows about a man’s life. I am very old now. Even at the pension station, you would bump someone and say sorry. I would have my walking stick. Some people do not want to carry walking sticks, although they need them. When I am carrying my own stick, I make sure that nobody leans on it—each should have his or her own. People want it to look like they are still young. But they should buy their own sticks. They are always on display at the pension station. Some people are scared of this.

Nomkhosi: They don’t want to be seen to be old?

MaThusi: They feel that they will be too dependent on it.

Nomkhosi: But is that not true?

MaThusi: Yes, but you start using it because you need it. You cannot walk on your own. You get to rest by leaning on it.

Nomkhosi: So now when is the date for *umembeso* for your son?

MaThusi: 18 December, on a Sunday.

Nomkhosi: People are about to ululate?

MaThusi: Yes, people are starting to sweep the yards now.

Nomkhosi: When will the wedding be?

MaThusi: Next year July.

Nomkhosi: Will he have saved enough? Are you helping him in anyway?

MaThusi: A man would [sell] his cows to sponsor his son—those who have cows. But now people don’t keep livestock.

Nomkhosi: Then what does a woman do if the father is no more?

MaThusi: She has to find support where she can. If you see she behaves well, you can’t just leave her.

Nomkhosi: Does your daughter-in-law work?

MaThusi: It’s not usual that young women who grew up in the Shembe faith works.

Nomkhosi: Is it not allowed?

MaThusi: It’s just that if they work they learn dirty habits when they are out there. And they bring these to the new home and they become a problem.

Nomkhosi: But if she does not work, she will have to solely rely on her husband?

MaThusi: No, she can study when she is married. She can go work if she likes. It depends on how educated you are. You can’t just have a Grade 1 and get a good job which will give you money.

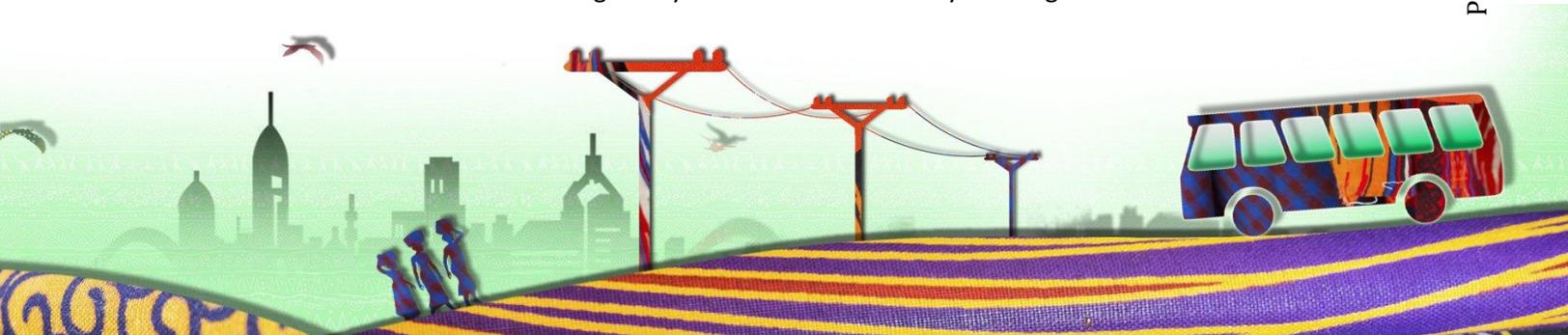
Nomkhosi: You, as a woman, started working at a very difficult time of your life. Would you not advise other women to start early and prepare for the difficult times when your husband passes on?

MaThusi: I would not say that she should work. I would not send her to work, because she may encounter problems and they would have to talk to each other and decide what they want to do. One thing that I really need her to do for me is get my pension at the end of every month. When she goes to work, she can work.

Nomkhosi: I once spoke to another old lady from Ndwedwe who never wanted her daughter-in-law to work. Her son had menial jobs. She was on pension and went around selling stuff. That really surprised me as a person who grew up in township. I thought everybody had to work. I have never experienced such a situation in which one is not expected to work. I wondered how long she would be working for her daughters-in-law and her grandchildren.

MaThusi: Was she not satisfied with her pension? She has to be satisfied with what she has. It doesn’t even cover all the food you need for a month. How did she pay for her groceries?

Nomkhosi: She seemed to have a big family. Her sons are in the city working.





MaThusi: The problem seems to be with her house (her sons). It's a pity if she is the one who has to decide that the daughters-in-law should not work. Personally, I think they should sit down and decide what to do.

Nomkhosi: I would not want my granny to be working while I sit and do nothing.

MaThusi: I don't even want to work. If you don't know what you want, it is difficult to find what you do want. You see, the pension does not come every month; it comes every two months. It's much better when it comes every month.

