

Mondli Makhanya Interview

MM: Mondli Makhanya

FW: Fiona White

FW: How do you understand non-racialism in South African today?

MM: That's a big question.

FW: It is, we can break it down, but just so, whatever sense you have.

MM: Ok. How do I understand non-racialism. I suppose it is about constructing a society that, it might sound a bit cliché, but a society that appreciates the fact that we are diverse, that we do come from different places, spaces, cultures and religions, but that there is a concept of South Africanism, that at the end of the day, we are in a pot, and we are cooking. In one pot, and that in accepting the fact that we are different, but there is a lot more that is common about us than is different, and that our difference are in fact our strengths. And I think in fact that it is, I think we are, that there is a thing that is quite unique about our country, in that the system that prevailed before was a system that sought to pull us apart, but out of trying to defeat that was born this concept of non-racialism. Other people in other parts of the world talk about multi-racialism, multi-culturalism, and I think the beautiful thing about what we are doing in South Africa, and what we are trying to do, is we are trying to kill, you know, the negation of race, I think that is, I mean I'm rambling a bit.

FW: I mean, nobody has a clear sense, that's why we are asking everyone what their sense, it's very helpful.

MM: yes, you need to look at similar countries to ourselves, probably the closest would be a US, or a UK, where, ok, besides language, there is an influx of immigration, different groups, but I think they have done, they've gone about it differently, kind of, and with them I think it has been about, Americanism, being American has been more about being the dominant group, and I think they have gone more for being kind of multi-cultural rather than non-racial.

FW: If you think about the concept of non-racialism, now 17 years after 1994, how do you think the concept of non-racialism has travelled? I mean do you think that the idea, and what you talk about as the ideal is still there, or do you think it has changed.

MM: I think it has changed. I think pre-1994, particularly among the more progressive forces in South Africa, I think we had a much better sense of non-racialism, because everybody was striving towards the ideal, and we could see the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, we could see the goal. But I think once the unbannings of the organisations happened, once we got to 1994, and even 1990, then we started getting quite a bit of fracturing. And I suppose it had to do with, I mean power comes into play. Fears come into play. And I think that what probably happened at that particular point, as people were striving for powers for positions, that kind of brings out the fact that we're different. You know, you were privileged and you were not as much oppressed as I was, and I deserve more redress than you do.

And I think that those kind of tensions came out there, and I think a lot was done immediately after 1994, the Mandela years, there was a huge attempt at creating a sense of South Africanism, but I think what we also did during that period was that we did not do enough to actually confront what had gone on before, that as a society we were scarred with racial scars, that we were damaged. And I think we celebrated the whole notion of a rainbow nation too prematurely, we hugged and we kissed and danced in the streets and kind of like made the project really artificial. And there was no, we didn't confront hard truth and do some hard work about the past. And I think the majority of people felt cheated by those years, it was more about white appeasement than addressing the issues, but I mean it had to happen. But then we swung to the other extreme under Mbeki, because he started to assert a much stronger idea of African nationalism. And I think that in some ways some of that was necessary, that assertion, but it served to exclude and make other people feel like, I mean white people felt like the other, for instance. And I'm not sure that was kind of, proper practical, or ideal to have gone that way, I mean it was wrong. It kind of threw us back into our corners, so you would have, there was almost a thing where Mbeki became the leader of the blacks and Tony Leon was the leader of the whites in the country, and a lot of what had been done in the first 5 years was undone, and we need to build on that, but instead we took a step backwards. And I think that right now we find ourselves in a very bad space in terms of race relations. Stuff is bubbling to the surface, we are being thrown back into our corners and the champion of non-racialism in the ANC is not leading.

FW: Why do you think it's got much worse now? I mean it seems to me that in the last few months, since I started this project, it's exploding. What's your take on why?

MM: Firstly because we didn't confront the past. I think it's basically, they are coming home to roost, I think. And secondly, I think that economic conditions, obviously, people feeling that this thing hasn't worked for us, and it hasn't worked for us as blacks. And I think that also what hasn't happened is that the white business, let's talk about that, white business had to be dragged kicking and screaming into implementing policies of redress and so on, they didn't take to employment equity, it had to be legislated, there was no voluntary transformation. And even then there was a whole lot of tokenism and papering and so on. It was more about, same thing about economic empowerment, it was basically ticking the boxes. And as a result, you look at society now, I mean things have changed dramatically, I mean the suburbs are different and so on, but still you walk into your average restaurant and it tells you where South African wealth is, look, in Joburg less so than other places in the country, so I mean basically the fact that we haven't achieved economic transformation as we should of.

I also think that white South Africa hasn't come to the party, in terms of recognizing, I think for a lot of white South Africans apartheid was an irritation that happened, and let's just get on with it, it happened, and I feel sorry for you and everything, but let's move on. I just think that that's a big thing. And you know, it's kind of like, someone once said something about, that was quite profound, I don't remember who it was, it was a speech I was listening to, about how when a white person walks into a room, and sees a majority of blacks, they feel abnormal, but when they walk into a room and see a majority of whites, they don't see the abnormality of that.

So I do think that there has also been a very opportunistic and crass rise of African nationalism, rather African chauvinism. Unfortunately it's finding a place in the ANC, which is kind of like the leader in our society, and that is trickling into different parts of our society. It's not sophisticated at all, its chauvinism in its rawest form, and it manifests itself you know in Julius, and I think he's the worst form of it. But you see it in business, kind of like people, ja just wanting to be bullies because of the notion that we are in power. And that is as a result of this huge vacuum of leadership, there is no sense at the top, and it's not just Zuma I'm talking about, it's the ANC as an organisation that is leading our society, it's not providing direction about where and what we should be doing.

FW: I want to just go back and ask you about two comments you made, we didn't confront the past, and white South Africans didn't come to the party. How do you think it could have looked now, had we done things differently? I mean if we had confronted the past, including white South Africans?

MM: I think that we needed to have some pain, and I think that we would now be knowing, I think, all of us, what apartheid was, what we went through, and I think we would be able to gain a greater understanding of kind of like, first of all of cultures and likes, dislikes, you know popular culture, things that break the ice. You know there's, you see it for instance when, if there's a big pirates chiefs derby the same week there is a Bulls Sharks game, if the two happen at the same time, and you see the different conversations that happen in South Africa, and on the day itself, people are glued to different screens. And I think that if we had actually done something about it ourselves, Bulls Sharks, there are those things. And I don't think you need to force people to become friends, but I just think that 17 years later, the lack of cohesion, you know, had we actually gone through that.

I think the other thing we needed to have done and should still do, is language. It's a huge gap. And I'm just saying, basically, the empowerment of indigenous languages, and making sure that people, it's not small, the understanding of each other's languages. If the one huge contribution the government could have made, was making sure that there is a broad understanding, because if I walk out of here and I'm in the lift and I greet somebody in Zulu, a white person or an Indian person, the likelihood is that they will not be able to respond, and this is intrinsically divisive. And I think that is a huge thing that would have gone a long way.

FW: So how again would that be different? Through education? I think it's a very good point that not many others have raised, is having so many local languages, so how do you know which one, I think that has been a big issue.

MM: It's simple, you know. All of them matter. I mean there are the dominant ones, which will always be isiZulu Sotho, Tswana and whatever. I mean I am from KZN, and I arrived in Joburg in 1990, and I think my Sotho vocab was probably 20 words at the most when I got here. And it's very easy for Zulu speakers not to learn other languages, you can get away with it, it's the dominant language. And so, but I found myself, it was easy because I interact with people so you pick it up, but I found myself being excluded from certain situations, not because they wanted to exclude you, but you are cut out of jokes, of nuances, and cut out of possible relationships and friendships, so you are compelled to.. So what happens, just to answer your question about which one, when I speak to a person I speak to them in

Zulu, and they may answer me in Sotho, and we will just continue. My wife is Sotho, for instance, and we speak a bit of a mix. Whatever is there. But it's simple, it's basic, and I think that unfortunately you would have to exclude some languages in doing so, just out of practicality.

FW: The other thing, I'm going to jump to a question, we generally ask what people feel are the key features of a non-racial society. Is there anything you want to add on that, on what you feel are the key features.

MM: I suppose it would be about accepting difference as normal, as a strength, and not as necessarily a divisive thing. And you know, I was on some, every beginning of the year I go to Wits, the journalism class call editors to come to speak to their new entrants, so we go there on different days and speak to them. And I always enjoy walking through the campus, and seeing, I don't enjoy it, sorry, but just observing students grouped differently. Indian students there, white students there, African students there. And I often find, I wonder what is it that makes those 19, 20, 21 year olds, what makes them attracted to each other racially. Because the African students, one is from Kimberley, one is from Polokwane and so on, but they group themselves that way, and probably later on, it continues that way. I mean ideally in an ideal society, that should not be happening, youngsters should not be grouping themselves that way. But I know it's an idealistic thing, I mean the society we come from, we are geographically separated. There is perhaps a...

FW: Do you see that in the workplace as well?

MM: yes, very much. Not so much, kind of like, interestingly, what I've seen in workplaces that I've been at, less so among journalists. Interestingly, among journalists, people, we, I think we share experiences and so on. But there's much more of a oneness, for lack of a better word, community. In different parts of this building, you won't find the same thing. You will get those separations. Right through the structure.

FW: Really, because I was sitting in reception thinking this is the most multi-racial, cultural group of people that I have seen in a long time walking through these doors.

MM: No, no it is that. I'm maybe exaggerating when I say that, look you will get people from the IT department going out and having lunch together across the racial boundaries. But I think there is much more of a community among the editorial community. I mean a white guy from the Sunday Times will easily connect with a black guy from the Sowetan. At management level, again, that cancels out, there there is much more of an interaction.

FW: What role the media can play in fostering non-racialism?

MM: Look, I think we just tell stories. We, how can I answer that. I think by basically reflecting the society as it is, and the way that society should be. I mean, up until about 2000, 1999 sorry, the Sunday Times had, used to have two editions, a black edition and a white edition. You'd find that the front page picture would be a different picture, different shops would stock different issues. And if you, in some places where you are likely to get both, there were places where they would be side by side. I mean I

used to live in an area where you could actually get both. You probably did see it but you didn't notice. The stories were generally, 90% were the same, but inside there was a supplement called the Extra, the black extra, but then it became the Extra without it, and what that had was a lot more township news. But what we found was that you would have a different front page picture, it was called the Metro edition. Not as in the Joburg metro, but that was another thing. And then what you would then have is that the back page, the lead in the one would always be soccer on the one, and rugby and cricket in the white one. Page 3, the celeb news, Brenda on page 3, and a white person in the white one. But what actually happened was that you actually found that the society was actually ahead of us in a way, because interests were coalescing in a way. And blacks, our black readership was actually rejecting the black edition, because they found it patronizing. So we killed it, and in killing it we lost nothing. I mean there were protests from people saying they still wanted their township news, but in a way what that was doing, we were behind the curve a little bit. But now what you find, what newspapers do do, by actually projecting one interest of the country, when there is a toll road controversy for instance, it's not a black controversy or a white controversy but a whole country's controversy. And just to put it simply, I think that the role that we do play and role we should play is to create one conversation for all South Africans. And I think that also just to reject, to take very principled stances on things that divide South Africans, things that are anti-South African and to reject opinions that are against non-racialism. But also to use out platform to debate non-racialism and the issues around non-racialism.

FW: Is there anything you want to say about anything that happened in the last few weeks, I mean obviously that has highlighted the tensions around the roles that the media plays.

MM: Yes and I mean that is what I was talking about the chauvinism element, because its chauvinism that is driven by greed, and so people who question that are immediately labeled coconuts, but we get it all the time. Black journalists and black commentators are called reactionaries because you are serving white interests and things like that. And I think what happened last week, it cut to the bone of that whole issue. It was last Monday, you're a black editor of a black editor, and how dare you challenge black leadership, we expect that from the Whites, not you.

FW: I mean, I was wondering from a white perspective, why is there an assumption that challenging Malema's money has anything to do with whites, I mean why is it a white issue? Is it not more a black issue, I mean he is the leader of a youth league that is 99% black.

MM: Blacks should not be questioning corruption and wrongdoing, that's the racist element of it.

FW: So to go back to talking about the media, is that it's the idea of reflecting society, and using your platforms to put the debates on the table.

MM: Yes, to project society as it is and also to project the society as it should be, as we would like it to be. Reinforce, kind of like the positive images about what the society should be about. And then at the same time, I think the biggest thing, as important, is just the debate element.

FW: A lot of people I have spoken to have said that newspapers must use their debate columns, their forums more to put the debate out there, which is quite interesting, that there is not enough in the sections of the newspaper that are about opinion, debates, etc.

MM: Somebody must do it. That's the thing, the whole point is that we should be doing a lot more but there are spaces in the newspapers for them to do that. I mean the space is there. It's an argument I often have with people saying the media isn't doing enough, because no one is willing to give their opinion. But yes, we should be doing a lot more than that, which is why I think this project of yours is exciting, the dialogue part will be exciting.

FW: A lot of commentators are saying as well that the moderate voices aren't coming through, it's really more the extremist voices. Like the Julius Malema's and the extremist Afrikaners.

MM: I disagree. I really disagree. I think the middle ground voices really predominate, it's just that the extremes are louder and more aggressive, and they are pulling us to their extremes. I think that you can't ignore a Julius, he's a powerful guy, in a powerful organisation, which is a great pity that the ANC has let him be that because he is actually pulling us to his extreme. And on the other side, you've got the Steve Hofmeyer's of this world. But I do think that the middle is reflected very strongly. There is a danger though, that it can be outshouted by the extremists. So I think that, look, the other voices must scream as loudly as Julius does.

FW: I mean it's interesting, because I have interviewed a lot of prominent people and I don't know why this feeling keeps coming through. Why do you think the ANC has, from your own perspective, let this be, why do you think that's happened?

MM: No look, I think it has to do with the politics of pre-Polokwane. The fact that it became a very decisive voice and decisive influence in the drive to remove Thabo and the creation of a new leadership, and the power it gained there is a power that it maintained. And the fact the current leadership has a power that is kind of beholden, that it kind of held hostage by, that power of the youth league, and that you have a leader who can't do anything, and it's just always, who is always looking out for his own back, his own survival. So the youth league gained its power because Zuma allowed the youth league to gain its power, so it allowed the youth league to do things that are anti, you know, what we as South Africans are. I mean like that, how the ANC can sit back and the youth league spews out comments that are racial, racial, racial, in this day and age, and I mean it's horrendous stuff and it's dangerous, and alienating, and you will serve to make a section of the population feel they do not belong here and they are not as South African as everybody else, and how it undoes the whole non-racialism project is that it's not every white person is going to get on the plane and go to Australia or new Zealand. I mean most white people are going to remain here, and they are going to remain feeling marginalized and alienated, and what that can breed is a type of backlash that you don't want

FW: Really I suppose, are there any other challenges that you want to speak about, is there anything else?

MM: Well I do think that we need to do something about the geography of our cities, this thing that the darkies live out there, by and large, and when we build low cost housing we build it out there, but I think we do need to deal with that. Kind of like creating integrated communities, that is something that has got to be done. I think that we need to transform the workplace at a much more rapid rate. Kind of like implementing the policies that are there, not just tick boxing, I mean the spirit of it. I mean it shouldn't be that we need to have x percent being black or being woman, we need to focus on that it is about changing the workplace, make it meaningful rather than just ticking boxes.

And I mean this feeling that blacks may run the country kind of politically but whites run it economically, I mean that is going to create huge tensions. And it's true. So I think we need to do that. I've spoken about language. I do think that we need to do something about cricket and rugby, it can't proceed in a situation where you still have basically white teams, and basically blacks are allowed. In 1995, you had one black player in the team, and in 2007, there were two other black guys in the team. And it's not because blacks aren't playing rugby, you know. And I think that needs to be much more considered, you know. And um there's this story, let's have a look at it later, it's about basically the fact that the sector is.. the story talks about that, over the weekend, how all the provincial teams are still fielding all white teams and so on, and that does not translate. So it's an interesting story, because I'm sure people know about the role of sport in social cohesion. I mean our key moments in the last 17 years have been the rugby world cup victory and of course the world cup last year.

FW: And do you have time to tell me your story?

MM: You are on 58.03! But no, I'll tell you my story. So my son was at crèche down the road, and so then he had a friend called Peter, a white boy, and they were kind of like, when they came back from school and they would talk, and they were best friends, and he was about 4ish then. And at some point he would come back and start saying like racist stuff, about blacks. And we were starting to get worried when he said these things, and it continues and it gets worse, things he was repeating. And eventually we asked him, where you getting these things from? And he said, no from Peter. Peter is saying these racist things to him. And so we complained to the school, and the school was shocked, you know. These two boys were the tightest of the tight. And so then, I mean, they take the matter up with the parents, and they were also surprised. And they did a little diversity thing in the class, but then they confronted Peter's parents about this. And we all got together and spoke about it. And it turns out that Peter has an older brother, in his early teens, and he visits, has these friends from school, and he goes to play with these boys, and Peter follows his brother, and that family is the racist family. And Peter is picking this up when he accompanies his brother. And when I meet this family, they are beautiful people, so eventually they stop the son from going to play with those boys. And we became very close family friends. And the two moms became very good friends, and they have gone on to other schools, but still to this day they still see each other. But we had judged them completely, and they were horrified about their son.

And this other incident, this colleague of mine I worked with at the Star. So, a white guy, Derek. So like we used to live up on the other side, so after work we would often go to, knock off at 8 o'clock and stop off at the local bulldogs and have one or two. And then the one day we were at bulldogs, and we spent like ages, like one or two became 3 or 4, and he's from Durban originally, we both are, and we found

that at some point in the late 80s, he had been in the army, doing conscription, and he had been stationed in the place where I come from. And so we talked about this thing, and then there was this one funeral that we discovered we were both at the same funeral. And at the end of the funeral, there were clashes, there was a shootout and they shot at us, and there were 2 or 3 deaths at that funeral, comrades died. And then we talked some more about other incidents where we were both at, and basically I said, you know, you could have killed me. It was kind of an eerie moment as we were sitting there together, and we went on and on until the early hours, and it was such a thing. I mean after that, we really became a lot tighter.

FW: I mean that's a fascinating thing, because on the one hand we talk about all the problems, but mostly with the older people I spoke to, they just say that actually we have come so far in society. And really that's a fascinating story that shows how 20, 30 years ago, he could have killed you, and now you are close compatriots. And that is a story that shows that we have to get some perspective, I mean we have come so far.

MM: yes, as much as we have all these huge problems, we have actually achieved a lot, considering that the structural divide we had, considering that the system pushed us, but the fact that you know..

FW: I think it's quite a heartwarming story, it just shows that there is hope.

MM: He died. He died in an air crash in Kenya.

FW: Oh really? Working as a journalist?

MM: He was coming back from a travel trip, and the travel company had opened a route. And then the weather was bad. Derek was, it was in 1998. He would have been about 30.

FW: And how old was he when you were?

MM: Early 30s I think he would have been.

FW: So I mean you were having that conversation 10 years later.

MM: Yes, and I mean I told that story at his memorial service, actually.