

From Political Prisoner to Johannesburg Public Library Manager: An Interview with Bongiwe Nkabinde

by

Jocelyn Poole, MLS, MSM
Associate Professor and Head of Information Services
Georgia State University, Statesboro, Georgia
jpoole@georgiasouthern.edu



(left to right) Bongiwe Nkabinde, Manager of Region C Roodepoort for the City of Johannesburg, South Africa, recounts the struggle during apartheid to Jocelyn Poole in her office.

The following interview was conducted at the Johannesburg Public Library in the City of Johannesburg, South Africa, on August 30, 2007, following the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) World Library and Information Congress, 73rd General Conference and Council in Durban, South Africa from August 20 to 25 in 2007. Bongiwe Nkabinde can be reached via BongiweNkabinde/joburg.org.za@joburg.org.za.

JP: Bongiwe, first I want to thank you for providing me with this opportunity to interview you. For the record, would you mind stating your name and your position here?

My name is Bongiwe Nkabinde, and I am Manager of Libraries, Region C for the City of Johannesburg, South Africa.

JP: Tell me about yourself and what it was like, getting an education under apartheid. Could a Black or Colored be in charge of a library?

Black or Colored could not head libraries before. They could be assistant librarians, helpers, janitors or shelvers.

JP: What are the qualifications in South Africa for becoming a librarian?

A four year degree is needed in librarianship. You can have two years post graduate or an honors degree requirement as well.

JP: Did you have Black professors or white professors in the Black universities?

In most of the universities, the majority of professors were white; very few black professors. However, black professors taught most of the ethnic or local languages.

It was not a mixed school, so different areas had different ethnic groups. Each area had its own township, so you were divided according to your ethnic group.

JP: So you mean the Colored, Bantu and Blacks went to separate schools?

It was like the Zulus, Xhosa and other groups were separated from Colored, Blacks and Whites.

JP: That seems so unusual. It is so confusing. You had Colored, Blacks, being, Xhosa, Zulu and Swazi.

The schools were segregated and as a result I could not go to the Xhosa school, the Indian school, the colored school or the white school. I could only attend the Zulu school. The apartheid system segregated the people of color based on their ethnicity. For example, I was living near a Xhosa school but I couldn't go to a Xhosa school; I had to go far away to a Zulu school.

JP: Are you Zulu?

Yes, I am.

JP: Do you also do the tongue-clicking sound like Nelson Mandela and his ethnic group, the Xhosa.

Yes, I do.

JP: It's just fascinating how the Xhosa language has this "click" sound. What did you know about Mandela?

It was illegal to have pictures of or, books or literature by or about Mandela in your possession. We knew of Mandela because of the oral African tradition. "Tell one, teach one." The system tried to stop the revolution by trying to silence all information about Mandela and the ANC. The ANC and Nelson Mandela information was censored from the public news. But you grew up knowing that there was a Nelson Mandela.

JP: What type of impact did apartheid have on your life? I know you told me that you were a political prisoner. Tell me more about that experience and how was it just living day-to-day?

It was difficult because you could not do anything. I was a political prisoner for 3 years at the Johannesburg female prison and then I was transferred to Durban Westville Female Prison. We never had enough food; we were in single cells; visitors were limited and we were not open for parole. It was horrible.

Durban Westville Female Prison life was difficult for me because it was far from home Johannesburg so I didn't have regular visitors and my mother was just a factory worker who could not afford to travel now and then. During weekends we were only allowed 30 minutes in the morning and afternoon exercise otherwise were locked in our cells the whole day.

The only thing that was allowed in our time which Nelson Mandela and other fought for was for political prisoners to study through correspondence and that was a privilege that could be taken anytime. During the day from 8h00 to 16h00 we worked at a sewing workshop and we were mixed with all types of prisoners under the watchful eye of prison warders and only studied from 17h00 - 20h00 and then the lights were switched off.

Before I went to prison I was a teacher at Phefeni Senior Secondary School with only a teaching diploma so I was studying towards my junior degree. I had few courses to complete my Bachelor of Arts degree. So when I went to prison I got permission to complete my degree. I managed to pass but could not attend the graduation ceremony so I graduated in absentia. I then studied towards my Library degree but could not complete because I was not released. So when I was released from prison I applied at Wits University to complete but I could only do a post graduate diploma.

JP: Tell me what you remember about the day that Nelson Mandela was released from jail.

Yes: I was actually living in Mandela's house at Orlando West when he was released from jail.

JP: So what were you doing in Nelson Mandela's house?

I lived at Mandela's house because my husband's father was imprisoned with Mandela for twenty three years on Robben's Island. He was also an ANC freedom fighter. When he was released from Robben Island he didn't have a place to stay because my mother-in-law had passed away a year before he was released, so Winnie offered him a place to stay temporarily until Mandela was released.

JP: What was his name?

Wilton Mkwazi.

JP: Wow!! So you actually moved out of Nelson Mandela's house when he was released from prison! You were really that close to Nelson and Winnie Mandela?

Yes, Winnie actually paid for some of my schooling when I went to Wits University to do my Library Diploma.

JP: Please continue telling me about the day that he was released from jail.

We were so excited!! It was a day of jubilation; people were dancing crying and, celebrating. Everyone was jumping in the streets along Mandela's house. There were thousands of people waiting to photograph him. We were running up and down the street. Even the small children were just jumping and dancing in the streets. We danced the whole night as we moved from place to place. We could not sleep.

JP: How could you sleep? We were all excited in the United States also. We couldn't believe it either. So how has apartheid changed your life? It is hard to imagine one day you have to walk with a pass and be in before a certain time, and now all of a sudden, you are free!

Yes, you know I tell my kids that they are lucky that they never had to experience the laws we experienced. I can now work as manger of more than five libraries. The kids can go to any school that they wish to attend. We can vote, and now we control the government.

JP: What about the Soweto Uprising? Were you a part of that?

Not really. In 1976, I was in KwaZulu-Natal Newcastle doing my Matric and only came home during the school holiday. So when I came home, Soweto had changed policeman were all over the place, chasing us up and down the streets and shooting. The Government offices and shops were burnt down and some of the houses were burnt in our neighborhood because they were regarded as spies (izimpimpi) for the Government

JP: So before, it wasn't like this?

Before, we had gatherings and meetings and it was different but we weren't allowed to have more than a group of ten people gathered at one time.

JP: Did you have friends that were involved?

Yes. You know I went to one of the schools that was involved in the uprising that is Morris Issacson only a few months but my father changed his mind and sent me to a boarding school and it was that year that the uprising happened. You know our education system was so terrible. We started the foundation phase in our mother tongue and then medium phase we had to use Afrikaans as a medium of instruction and then senior phase change to English. You were never into one language. You couldn't correlate things that were similar. Can you imagine doing math in grade 7 in Afrikaans a language you only learnt as a second language only in grade 5. You would start in one of the African languages e.g. Zulu or Xhosa and then change to Afrikaans and then they would switch to English. It was so confusing. So a lot of people never understood anything. You could not correlate what you were studying into reality. The kids wanted all classes to be taught in English so they could go on to any university in the world. Afrikaans is a language practiced by the white South Africans regime. The students refused to be confused and they took to the streets. The police came and started shooting and killing innocent students, at which time, the adults joined the students in the protest. Soweto then became a police army camp. The Soweto uprising was one of the sparks that freed Mandela and ended the apartheid system.

JP: Let's talk about the different languages. I've read where South Africans want books published in their native language, but you have eleven different languages, right? It wouldn't be profitable for the publishers.

Yes, we have a big problem, especially with the school system because what is published is not enough so even the main subjects like Math and Literature are not published in our African languages. Even if they were published in our language, the teachers wouldn't understand the concepts of the language because they were not taught in that language. So it is a very confusing situation, but the government is still working on that because it is said that a child taught in mother tongue at an early age understands the concepts better in his future life. It is going to be difficult because we have eleven different languages and not many people are writing and translating from English to another language. Most books are published in Afrikaans or English. Publishers are not publishing books in eleven different languages. It will not be profitable for book producers to undertake. Most books are published in English and Afrikaans.

JP: Yes, I can see how this can present a problem. What are some of the issues related to the inequality of services and resources after the end of apartheid? I am sure you still have some inequalities after apartheid.

Yes, we have a very big gap. For example, the libraries in the white suburbs are better equipped than those in the townships. Most of the adult population in the township are illiterate and therefore don't use libraries that much., the distance between libraries is more than 5 kilometers, schools don't have school libraries, due to the shortage of teachers there are no dedicated school librarians, transport system to white suburbs is still a problem.

JP: Do you still have white and black libraries?

Not really because now blacks have moved into the white suburb areas so they are allowed to use the same libraries. But in some locations you have mostly blacks, but they can go to the different locations. If you have a membership card you can use any of the eighty four libraries in Johannesburg.

JP: Do you have libraries in the public schools?

No, not in the townships. They are only in the private or model C schools. Usually the library is a small room like my office with donated books from the public library. We have policies in place now to uplift and upgrade our libraries. We still have a problem with money.

JP: What about library services in rich areas and poor areas? Do you have equal services for libraries in the poor areas?

Because of poverty and squatter camps and illiteracy, it is difficult to supply library services in poor areas. We have just started temporary structures in informal settlements Therefore South Africa needs books and other modern supplies and financial support so that equality in the library can be accomplished to meet the needs of the people.

JP: AIDS is a big problem here in South Africa. What are the libraries doing to help prevent AIDS in Africa?

The library tries to educate the public about AIDS. Libraries distribute condoms, AIDS literature, and pamphlets to inform the people. We conduct workshops, we do programmes for child headed families that is orphans of parents that died of AIDS; we help them with home work and reading and sometimes give them books.

JP: I was surprised to see condoms in all the rest rooms. I've been told that this is a government policy.

Yes, those that cannot afford to buy them can still get free condoms so that they can use them to prevent the spread of AIDS.

JP: Do you find that this is a good thing? Is it helping? I've talked to several people who say that it is not working.

The different cultures and traditions of South Africans, even some of the churches discourage the use of condoms. Therefore, the disease continues to grow. It will take time to change people's behavior so libraries will have to continue to supply information and work with schools to distribute more information through school kids. The culture has to change, so for now it's not helping much.

JP: I understand. Well, I want to thank you for this interview. It's really been a pleasure. Thank you again.