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**CONVERSATION FOUR****INTERVIEW WITH MA-NGCONDE: A TRADITIONAL HEALER AND PROPHET**

This interview with Ma-Ngconde represents part of a broader research project into the work of certain prominent traditional healers and diviners in the Eastern Cape and southern KwaZulu-Natal. We were particularly interested in discovering what Ma-Ngconde herself ascribes her remarkable success to. Moreover, we wanted to ask her about her initial sources of inspiration, the specific methods and materials she uses, the nature of her clientele and the role she plays in the community. Ma-Ngconde was approached and asked if she would be willing for an interview of this nature to take place. Once her consent had been granted, a date was set for the interview. Ms Tloti and Dr Wood conducted the interview with Ma-Ngconde in Xhosa, with Ms Tloti acting as an interpreter. The interview was transcribed and translated by Ms Tloti, who then showed it to Ma-Ngconde. Ms Tloti read the interview to Ma-Ngconde, translating it into back into Xhosa as she did so. Ma-Ngconde gave her permission for the interview to be submitted for publication, after which Ms Tloti asked her if there was anything that she wished changed or omitted. Ma-Ngconde requested the alteration of two minor details, but declared that she was satisfied with the transcription of the interview as a whole. This published version is a direct translation of the original. Apart from the changes requested by Ma-Ngconde, the interview has been slightly shortened. This research contributes to the study of indigenous knowledge systems in that it explores the nature of the work carried out by traditional healers and diviners in contemporary South African society, by focusing on the career of a particularly successful individual. An area of specific interest in this regard is the way in which Ma-Ngconde blends elements of traditional beliefs and Christianity in her work. Finally, Ma-Ngconde speaks for herself here. An interview of this nature has an especially important role to play, because the voices of traditional healers should form part of the academic discourse of IKS. Ma-Ngconde is one of the foremost traditional healers and prophets working in South Africa today. She lives and works from a walled compound on a hilltop approximately 20 km outside the Eastern Cape village of Debe Nek, near King Williams Town. She has been consulted by a wide range of South Africans of all races: from high-ranking politicians and wealthy entrepreneurs to the inhabitants of rural villages in the Eastern Cape.

She talks about her work to Sylvia Tloti and Felicity Wood, from the University of Fort Hare. Ma-Ngconde's real name is Joyce Makiwe Mali (née Tungu). Her marriage name is Nomthunzi. She is commonly known as Ma-Ngconde, a reference to her clan-name. She is the daughter of Rufus Vizinto Tungu and Albertina Tungu, who had two children, Ma-Ngconde and her brother, who was buried a week before the interview. She married into the Mali family in 1966 and was blessed with four children. The first-born, and the only daughter, was buried on the same day as her uncle, Ma-Ngconde's brother.

**Did you receive your powers before or after you married?**

It was after I married into the Mali family. In 1981, when I was 33 years old, I fell sick and was admitted into Grey Hospital. I was informed that I would have to be operated on. The evening before the day of the operation, my maternal grandmother, Mampanla, whom I had never seen before, appeared to me in a dream. She told me that I would not be operated on, and that when I was discharged from the hospital, I was to begin helping people with their physical and psychological problems. As she was talking to me, she was spraying me with water from something that looked like a hosepipe. She told me not to charge any money for the services I would render. The following day my doctor informed me that he did not think it was necessary to perform the operation; he was discharging me from the hospital, and that if I experienced any further problems I was to go back to see him.

Although I am a staunch Methodist, I like the music and the rhythm of the Zionist Church services, so I used to go there a lot. It was at one of those services that four men from Zone 7 in Zwelitsha approached me. They had a criminal case that they wanted me to help them win. I told them I could not do that because I did not know how. One of them told me that he was told in a dream that I would be able to help them. I refused, so they left. That evening my grandmother appeared to me and told me to help those men. She told me to take pure water, pray over it and to spray the men with it. I did that and they won the case. At that time my financial situation was quite bad, so, although my grandmother had forbidden it, I charged the men R200 and used R30 immediately. That same evening my grandmother appeared and took me to task about the money. She provided me with the address and made me get up in the middle of the night to take the money back to its owner. The man refused to take the money, so I just let it drop to the floor and left.

That, then, is how I started. The information [about my powers] was mostly passed on by word of mouth. I also started helping people who had physical ailments, like the childless woman my grandmother told me to help with Feluna Mixture, (obtainable from pharmacies), which I first had to bless. Just as my grandmother had said, the lady used only two bottles and fell pregnant.

**Does your method of working involve prayer only, or does it involve the use of other substances as well?**

I use different methods for different circumstances. With some people who come to see me, I can see their ailments or problems like I'm watching a film. I tell

them what I see, and then they fill in the details I may have left out. I then get told (by my grandmother) how to treat each particular person. For example, I may be told to treat a person with a cardiac problem with No. 17 Heart and Nerves, *versterkdruppels* and *witdulsies* [patent medicines that are available over the counter at any pharmacy]. These are to be mixed with milk. So, basically, I use blessed water and the medicines that I have already mentioned.

**The use of water: does it involve sprinkling or immersion? Does your power come exclusively from the ancestors/your grandmother? Also, what is your relationship with other churches?**

People bring water that I bless. They will use the water to drink, to sprinkle around their homesteads and also to wash. What I do is to pray first, and if grandmother has anything to say to me she will do that after I have prayed. I do have dealings with other churches: various denominations do come here and we hold services together. Amongst the church buildings I have built, quite a number of them are not Methodist, for example, the A.M.E. and the Israelites. Also, I provide musical instruments for groups like the Salvation Army.

**What kinds of problems do people come to see you about? For example, do they come for things like wealth or luck or health?**

Most people come to seek help with physical health problems. There are some who consult me on emotional, mental and psychological matters.

**What about wealth or luck?**

It may be that some people come specifically for that, but I wouldn't know because the procedure is as follows: when you come to see me you write what you would like to get help in on a piece of paper which you wrap around two candles. I never read what people have written on those pieces of paper. After the service, we then all go to the hearth [an enclosed outdoor area with a big hearth in the centre], where we make a big bonfire of the papers and the candles. It does happen that a person comes up to me at a later stage to tell me that he/she experienced luck in one way or another and would therefore like to thank me for that.

**Who comes to consult you? Do any white people visit you? What about government officials?**

Whites, Indians, coloureds; they all come to see me, some from as far as Cape Town and Windhoek in Namibia. Of course, some of them are from around here. Others come because they have lost valuable possessions and therefore need help with that. Government officials usually come to grace the different occasions that I usually have here, such as feasts and anniversaries, because I also help with upliftment of the community.

**When is your anniversary?**

My date of birth is 24 April 1948, and I also started doing this work on 24 April. So I always celebrate my anniversary in April, even if it is not always on the exact date. My next anniversary will be a celebration of 23 years in this service. I started in 1981.

**Your husband?**

My husband died in 1988.

**What are your sources of power?**

My grandmother told me to light three candles when I help people, and that these candles represent the Trinity. When you come to see me, you need to have the two candles that will be burned, and the three that I will bless and which you will take home with you. Whenever you have a problem or you just feel like praying, you light the three candles and pray. She also told me to sell the following: milk, candles, salt, my photos, T-shirts with my photo, stickers, key-holders, aprons and brooches. She told me to use the proceeds from the sales solely to help the community, hence the churches and the music instruments I have already mentioned. Some families are so poor that they cannot bury their dead; so I usually buy the coffins and the food to feed the mourners. That is why I do not refer to myself as a 'prophetess', but as 'the helper of the people' (*umncedi wabantu*).

**So, how do you survive?**

To be honest with you, I do use the money [that people give me]. What can I do? I will not let my family and myself starve when there is money around. Fortunately, my grandmother does not react the way she did with the R200! Also, people that have been helped by me are very generous towards me, for example the kitchen unit in the house [where the interview took place] was installed by a person from Gauteng. The dining-room suite is also a present from a satisfied patient.

**Do you immerse people in water?**

No, that would be baptism. I use what is called a bath. The milk I have mentioned is used for this bath, as well as steaming. It is important for me that after I have helped a person, he or she then goes back to his or her own church. If you do not belong to any denomination, I introduce you to my own priest in my own church, the Methodist Church.

**Do you also partake of the bath as, maybe, a cleansing ritual?**

Yes, I do. Mondays are my resting-days, so I use them to cleanse myself.

**Do you use water mixed with herbs or pure water that has been blessed?**

Blessed water mixed with milk.

**Do you ever go to the river or to the sea for any kind of ritual?**

I do go to the sea. I do not decide to go on my own; my grandmother will tell me to go when she deems it necessary, so I will go there with everybody. For example, one young woman came to me to seek help to get rid of pimples on her face. They were quite big and looked like they had pus in them. My grandmother

revealed to me that she had a snail in her stomach, and that I had to take her to the sea first. So we all trooped there. We usually take our candles and pieces of paper with us and, after we have prayed, we burn them on the beach before getting into the water. Everybody invites their ancestors to protect and bless them. Everybody is armed with a silver five-cent piece (not the bronze one), which they will throw into the sea after I have told them to. On this particular day, I was told beforehand that the young lady would have to go there with three five-cent pieces. When we came back, I was told to prepare a coffee mixture for her. Thereafter the snail came out of her: today she does not have a single pimple on her face.

**Do you go to any beach or do you go to a particular one?**

We do not go to any beach. I used to go to Hamburg, but my ancestors told me to stop going there but to go to East London instead.

**In what form do your ancestors come to you? Do they ever appear in the form of, say, a snake?**

They always appear in human form. I am terrified of snakes: I would not have been able to handle it! But I have heard of people who use snakes to heal or help their patients.

**The link between magic and power: do you think people can use magic to rise to positions of power?**

Some, like I have already mentioned, write their wishes down, but others will tell me about their aspirations, for instance a senior position they wish to occupy. So with those I use the steaming method (with milk) and they also buy a mixture that I have at the shop which is called *isiphondo*; it is a mixture of the fat of sheep kidneys and candle wax. One applies a bit of the mixture on the eyebrows for luck. Others bring their application forms so that I bless them before they send them away. I also have lucky balls that I give out for free.