

KHOAPA, BENNIE (PROF), 10 August 2020, Matatiele Eastern Cape

Interviewer: Anne Mager. AM

Interviewee: Bennie Khoapa. BK

Note: Quality of the telephone recording is affected by poor reception in the mountainous area of Matatiele.

00:00:00

AM Good morning, Prof. Bennie Khoapa. Thank you so much for talking to the Banned Persons Memory Project today. Our first question is a background question. Where were you born, what were the circumstances of your growing up, your schooling, your childhood, and so on?

BK Well, ja, we can start there. I was born in Matatiele. Matatiele is in the Eastern Cape, south of Kokstad, I think. Yes, right in the mountains, you know, on your way to Lesotho, is where Matatiele is located. I was born in one of the rural areas there, a place actually called Khoapa, next to Kokstad. It's sometimes referred to as Khoapa Location.

AM Okay. So does that mean that your father was the chief in that locality if the location was named after him?

BK Ja, well, ja, there's a group of Basothos that joined the Victorian army at that time and one of them was led my great-grandfather, Albert Khoapa. He was the one that was leading a group that fought in the mountains there. Until after the war when they were allocated an area that they had won called Khoapa, and they were given that territory in recognition of their participation in the army.

AM Okay, so where did you go to school, Bennie? Where did you start schooling and how did it follow from your beginnings?

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BK Right. There is the path two miles from what is then known as the town of Matatiele, that's where I started schooling in a school named Polokong, P O L O K O N G, Polokong. That's where I walked to school, we all of us walked to school. We had to do what's called sub-standard A. That's where I formed most of my impressions of the place, the people, and the systems.

AM Okay, and from there you went to college?

BK Ja, from there I went to high school in Natal, in a school called Adams College and that's where most of my education foundation was constructed. I can recall that much, you know, of the area.

AM So, after school, I think you went onto study social work. Can you tell us a little about that period?

BK Ja, in 1956 when I finished high school, somebody suggested there is a school somewhere in Johannesburg that specialises in training social workers and that

maybe I should try ask them about the possibility of me participating in that programme, and I did. That year, I was accepted into the Hofmeyr School of Social Work in Johannesburg. And that's how my professional career started.

AM On your graduation, did you practice as a social worker or did you move into some other kind of work?

BK Well, I would say so. I was employed by a company called the South African Rubber Manufacturing Company in Howick, in Natal.

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And that's how I started my career at a very interesting time in South African political history. And the rest follows after that. Quite a few experiences, I could say, got to influence my development generally. So, this was in Howick, Natal. I don't know if you know the area well enough, but it's three miles out of Pietermaritzburg, going north.

AM And at this point - you've been talking about your career - at what point did you begin to move to some political consciousness and political awareness?

BK Well, you know, almost immediately I got there because this was, you know, the year of very interesting political developments. To start with, I wasn't aware that this was an area where there would be very active ANC political organisation and so, you know, I walked right into it.

Much of that year, there was deep political activity in Howick, and I was right in the middle of it, because (laughs) they just started to have ANC activism in the area. So, I was there [unclear] right from the beginning and after that my whole experience was shaped by that.

AM Okay, so did you join the ANC at this point?

BK (Laughs) well, I nearly joined it, but the day when I was going, you know, to join it, there was a general sweep around security wise and I missed that (laughs) opportunity of being among those arrested.

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But, yes, that was the beginning of a really very active period of political activity. I did not formally join the ANC in that sense, but I was in the middle of it. I was at one point very actively concerned about membership of the ANC and the PAC, at the time.

AM Okay, but you did join a Christian movement. Can you tell us about that organisation and the period that you were involved in the YMCA?

BK Ja, well, when I went, you know, to Howick, the YMCA was one organisation that I worked for. Young Men's Christian Association was headquartered in Johannesburg at that time, and I joined them as the national secretary for African work and that's how I grew up professionally within that organisation. Yes, much of my experience was shaped by that organisation.

So, ja, it features very strongly in my life from that time onwards. I travelled around the country quite a bit, organising branches of the YMCA and I travelled from Durban, you know, and so on, but my focus was ostensibly in that direction. So, I had my contacts and my influences within the YMCA.

AM Okay, and at what point then did you move more specifically towards Black Consciousness and make contact with Black Consciousness leaders?

BK Well, you know, the YMCA, in a sense, was very instrumental in generating consciousness in the black community at the time. We were one organisation that had contact with people in the urban areas, in the townships.

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So, I couldn't avoid being in the centre of it and I operated from the national centre in Johannesburg and then down to Durban and Pietermaritzburg. And then from there to all the, you know, the little urban areas that were growing up in South Africa. So, I couldn't avoid being in the middle of it.

AM I think your CV says that you became an advisor to the South African Students' Organisation. Can you tell us how that came about and what that led onto?

BK Ja, you know, when I got an office and worked from the YMCA offices, I had contact with a lot of African students. Particularly at the time there was the South African Students Organisation called SASO and its leadership. So, I was quite active in their activities and discussions, and so on. And from that time on, I worked, practically as a partner to them.

So, yes, through that I became almost a partner of the South African Student Organisation, called SASO, through its leadership. People like Stephen Biko and others. And that's how we started to work together. And from there we took an interest in the topical issues that were being raised, you know, at the time. And after that, I think there was an inevitable kind of relationship in terms of the analysis of the issues that were there.

AM So, the idea of Black Community Programmes, did that come out of discussions in SASO? Was the YMCA very central to that? Because - I think you were the first director, if I'm not mistaken, of BCP with a young Steve Biko as the youth organiser, so if you can give just us the genesis of BCP because you were at the heart of it.

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BK Ja, I think it is correct to characterise it that way. I was working as director of a programme in the YMCA which was concerning community development, and in that way we worked very closely with students in organisations, SASO in particular. And from there, we began to generate ideas about things that we thought were needed in relation to the time.

And when I had my office in Durban, the students were my constant friends and partner in identifying what needed to be done in the community. From that time

onwards, we referred to our works as Black Community Programmes. But these are the kinds of programmes that people needed to participate in in order to raise the consciousness of people to what was needed and essential, and that was how we gave the BCP the name, Black Community Programmes.

Because we felt that anything that we talked about, if it did not concern itself with the concerns of black people in the community, it will be useless, in a sense. Yes, that's how Black Community Programmes was formed, that's how it developed its philosophy and that's how it became well known, not only in the local area but nationally as well.

AM Thank you. Of course as the BCP - you had an intense year and then had to retreat as organisations were being harassed and people were being harassed, and ultimately the BCP was banned. Can you tell us about that period of harassment and the harassment of you, personally?

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BK Ja, it happened to be a very active period. Because at that time in the nation, there was a lot of rhetorical time and discussions about what was happening in the community in South Africa, nationally, as well as some of the vibes that were coming out of America and coming in particular from platforms such as those of Malcolm X and, you know, others. So, we became almost the South African equivalent of the Malcolm X black community activism in the States.

I also happened to be in the United States at that time and coincided also with the assassination of Dr King. And when I got back here, I found myself talking a great deal to many groups that wanted to know more about the philosophy of Black Consciousness in the United States.

And then we saw the natural linkage between what they were talking about and what we were concerned about also in South Africa. And therefore it was inevitable for SASO to be seen as the partner of black political development in South Africa.

AM Bennie, your first visit to the United States, was that to study at the university?

BK Ja, there was a cooperation. Well, ja, there was a rhetorical kind of relationship between the YMCA and the so-called Black Power Movement. I was, in fact, invited by the YMCA in the United States and in doing so we were in partnership with the student groups and organisations in universities as well as in communities in the United States.

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So, I visited to strengthen that relationship between the YMCA youth, as well as the YMCA within the States, and that's how we got to really cooperate at the programme level with them.

AM So, this was not the time when you did your Master's [degree] in the United States? You were there on behalf of the YMCA at this time?

BK Ja, I was there, it was on behalf of the YMCA at this time, and the programmes that had taken place in the United States at that time were essentially very similar to the philosophy at YMCA in terms of community development and therefore we became natural partners.

AM And did that partnership develop over time?

BK Ja, well, in a sense I think the events that took place around that made it necessary for us to articulate what was happening and to try to describe that in a political context, what it meant for development, in particular, and for the YMCA in a community sense.

Yes, it became a - I don't want to say a natural relationship but it became very coincidental in that the skills that the YMCA were advocating for in community were the kind of things that were being addressed in a broad sense in the community by the Black Power Movement, if you like. So, it put emphasis on the importance of consciousness, historical development and the move to reduce oppression of communities, particularly the black community, you know, at the time.

And most of the people who were active in the community at that time happened to be black youth in areas like Harlem and other black communities, and this became the way the community was mobilised. Yes.

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AM Okay, thank you. All right, so the 1977 tragedy, the death of, or the murder of Steve Biko and the banning of the various Black Consciousness organisations, how did that affect you?

BK Well, almost directly because I think by that time, by the time, you know, he got murdered, there had been a strong identification by the youth themselves, with some of the social events that were taking place at that time.

So, yes, Black Community Programmes almost identified directly with Black Consciousness in South Africa and by that time, I think people were beginning to recognise us as the representatives of the ideology of self-consciousness and self-determination as well as political sensitivity to the relationship between what was happening in the community and the political system as a whole.

AM So, the bannings themselves, the banning of BCP, did that put an end to your activities?

BK Well, I think it put more emphasis on its importance, really. Because they specifically began to see the relationship between the issues that were being raised by SASO, Black Consciousness and community development and the relationship between all of those sectors. And as far as the government was concerned, it was seen to be agitated for by people like Stephen Biko and colleagues. So, yes, it became really part of the same agenda as we went on.

So, it made government believe that the people who were responsible for most of the restlessness in the community were in fact the Steve Biko type of people and Black Community Programmes. - in particular because they were responsible for advocating and responsible for explaining in the terminology and language that people had as a result of lack of understanding and consciousness of the political issues.

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AM Okay, Prof., when were you banned yourself and what were the terms of your banning order?

BK I was banned at about the same time in the 1970s, I've forgotten the actual date. But we were now seen as a general movement of black organisations, and in particular the Black Community Programmes was seen as the main agitation point for the movement.

And I think that the government thought that, you know, our part of the engine was agitating for activism in the community, and they were not wrong (laughs). That's how they, I think, they rationalised my banning and my restrictions, and in that way a movement started, you know, in the country. Black youth responded to that and in support of the Black Community Programmes, in support of the leaders of the Black Community Programmes.

And that's how, in a sense, a general movement started within the country, and it was difficult to stop it. It began to get into the political rhetoric and with that the political consciousness of the country changed, really, into strong support for activities in the direction of conscientizing the community into action. And a lot of - I think it began in communities that were intended to iterate the importance of Black Consciousness as the way to go.

And so, the era of Black Consciousness really began to be established at that time. And at the core of it, people like Steve Biko and others were seen as leaders of that philosophy.

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AM Now, you were banned. Were you allowed to go on working, could you study? What did you do in this period after the banning?

BK Well, I was not prevented from doing the work that I was essentially employed for, which was a director for the Black Community Programmes who immediately was now beginning to fall into disrepute as far as the government was concerned. So, we then began to move towards saying things like - what the issues were, why they were happening, how they were involved in this. And then we began to talk about programmes, in that sense. How do you prevent these things from happening?

And it was only, in fact, ours was to reiterate the importance of those activities that leaders and students were involved in developing. So, in a sense, we became partners in this threat, if you like. Ja, then it really began to be Black

Consciousness, Black Community Programmes, Steve Biko, Ben Khoapa, all the same thing. And it was difficult to control this from the community point of view. We began to have organisational activities all over in South Africa that emphasised the importance of self-determination, self-assertion and self-development.

And from there, development began to be community development. Community development meant community programmes and community programmes meant BCP, and BCP meant political consciousness, and the development of other organisations and activities that were very clearly politically, you know, advocated for, in a sense, in schools, in churches, in community organisations all over the country. It all began to be these things to advocate for.

00:33:07

AM Okay, thank you. Prof. you were not allowed to meet with more than one or other person at the time, that's correct. So, if that is correct, you couldn't go to these meetings and participate in this kind of way. What did you do personally yourself? You explained to us how the movement continued in various ways, but you, personally, what did you do?

BK Well, fortunately I was not directly restricted from doing any work for the YMCA which was the organisation that employed me. That then meant that we had an opportunity to explain what we are saying in those areas that government objected to.

It was really a question of self-development, self-assertion and political dignity and determination to commit ourselves to change, in the best way that we could think of and as far as we were concerned the way to think of it was the Black Community Programme's kind of philosophy.

That's what we strengthened and in subsequent years the philosophy that guided the programmes of BCP, became to be known as community development by black definition. It was really the growth of the movement which now began to be strengthened. Government reaction seemed to be that this is what they consider as most dangerous to the political future of the system.

And so after that, [unclear] a whole lot of small organisations, in schools, in churches, in our community organisations began to dominate across the country.

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Now, what that meant was that it didn't mean that (laughs) all of us who were interested in development worked to identify the general movement that was taking place in the country. Ja, it was really helped by government overreaction or reaction to the movement [unclear].

And then after that, I think, a movement was born and went from there to the black efforts in schools and churches and even in factories. Almost everywhere we began to see the emergence of the black initiatives in trade unions and in the

community. So that in a sense, the movement was born across disciplines [unclear].

AM Okay, now at some point you returned to the United States to study for a Master's degree and for a PhD degree, when did that happen?

BK Well, that was well after I had [unclear], to emphasise, when I came back I went for the YMCA programmes, I focused on the sensitivity and the importance of consciousness in anything that we study, whether it was basketball, whether it was [unclear], or whether it was creativity, technology educationally, so that I was in fact an advocate for sensitivity for all education programmes, as far as they were concerned with black people to put a lot of emphasis on self-creativity and formalise it in the arts, in the technology area. After that, it was very difficult for Black Consciousness not to be associated with that [unclear].

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[Unclear] following the student activism that was taking place within the country at this time, at secondary school level, at the high school level, even at university, at that time. [Overtalking].

AM Sorry, Prof., I'm trying to ask a question about you. I'm trying to understand how your life unfolded. So, can you explain to us when you obtained your own Master's and PhD degrees, was that in the 1980s, did you travel to America after your banning? Can you explain to us that period?

BK Ja, most of my formal degrees that I achieved came after all these dramatic events. When I came back I stayed in social work, and for me, it gave me an opportunity to express our philosophy as we had it in the Black Community Programmes. At school, at formal education programmes, such as those that you found in schools of social work, as well as the contribution of what Black Consciousness implied for the educational system as a whole in South Africa. And that's how we got concerned about social work, its importance, as well as community development as a discipline and how it all needed to be supported in the formal sense of, you know, of curriculum development, not only in primary school but also in secondary schools, as well as technical institutes. So, my interest in that aspect was to do with the practical application of Black Consciousness as it was advocated for by the Black Community Programmes, that was the problem in a sense (laughs).

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We even got involved in saying what kind of activities in the community would actually illustrate the importance of Black Community Forum and the importance of Black Community Programmes.

AM Prof., you returned to South Africa in 1991 and became the Registrar at the University of Fort Hare. Can you explain to us a little bit about this period of your life, Fort Hare, and then your work after that with the Technikon in Natal?

BK (Laughs) Yes, when I came back to the country, I obviously would start with the education as an arena for involvement with community development. And so, yes, I came back as registrar after I'd been sensitised in what you call student activism, in a sense. So, yes, when I went to Fort Hare, I went there as a student development person. Hopefully, we were able to appreciate what we meant all the time in the Black Community Programme when Steve Biko was there and many others.

But what we actually meant all the time was that our approach to education ought to be sensitive to the political views of the country as well as, in particular, the needs of black students as they were living in the country. Ultimately our aim is to change the society that we are in to be able to articulate and meet the needs and the wishes of black people.

And that's how I saw myself within the Technikon movement. I think that in some ways, we need to change the complexion of, by complexion I mean the appearance of implementation in South Africa in the right kind of philosophical context.

00:44:52

AM Bennie, our technician has just asked that if your phone is - if you're holding it so that you're speaking into the speaker - your voice is a little unclear.

BK Yes, I can hear that it is actually unclear. But anyway, are we together still?

AM Yes, we are together still. All right, so there's a period at Fort Hare, you continue to believe passionately in the ideas that you started out with around community development and self-awareness and so on - were you able to implement those ideas in the context of 1991 at Fort Hare? This is very different from the 1970s, isn't it?

BK Yes, I personally felt very encouraged by the way in which the methods that we had developed in the '70s and so on began to be taken, I think, in all spheres of education. In particular, we were excited by the fact that we had made a breakthrough into the technological educational arena.

That was an unusual instance to find yourself participating in curriculum development in the higher education system in South Africa, and I continue to feel that contributions were made there by BCP, by Black Community Programmes, by the leaders of that movement, who were very strongly Black Consciousness and I think continue to be so even up to today.

So, I don't feel like we are not anything at all as a result of the progress we made there, politically. Ja, and I think we continue to, you know, show the only way to develop self, achieve development and self-confidence in the black community, is to be involved in those technical areas, such as Technikons and programmes in the university that make sense.

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You know, in a sense, we produced people like Dr Ramphele, and so on, to move to a point of being the Principal of one of the most important institutions in the country, such as Cape Town.

And since then, there's been a whole growth of higher education being technologically very prominent, in a sense. I'm very proud to see the growth of the Technikon movement in South African at the moment. Because it is based essentially on the philosophy that was developed by Black Community Programmes in general.

So, I think it's one area we evaluated as being a direct contribution of Black Community Programmes and the leadership of that programme at that time. Ja, so I'm very proud of that.

AM That's great. When you retired from the principalship of the Technikon of Natal in 2002, did you retire then to Matatiele?

BK Yes, I'm still floating somewhere between that and, ultimately retiring from work. Yes, we retired to my home, in a sense, in Matatiele. My dad had died before he saw what he wanted to see, which was all of these years with me being all of these things in order to achieve what? He wanted me to know there was no Technikon in Matatiele. And I tried to explain to him that these things do happen in a very process-oriented way.

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But, yes, we still have a lot of work, you know, to do in the area of community development. And I hope that we can produce a leadership in the higher education system that is going to see the importance of community development in social planning as much as in political and municipal activities.

Yes, [unclear] – it is a fact the some of the activities and achievements in our communities can be evaluated in terms of a format that was formed in the Black Consciousness way, really, following the leadership activity in the `80s and the `90s. Ja, what I got in retirement, [unclear]. But I can rest now and hope that future generations that are coming there are going to produce young people with degrees.

[Unclear] I was talking to one young woman about the importance of African women in the technology area and the ability to see hope in the sense that [unclear] young girls come in and say I want to be a technician in the [unclear] area, and so on. So, ja, it's not anything that was lost, you know, in terms of development, but we are facing some challenges, I think young people in terms of [unclear].

AM Prof., we can't hear you very well, so if you can hold the phone so that perhaps the speaker is not too close. I'm not sure what's going wrong, but the line is very poor.

00:54:01

But I have one last question, if I may. You have set up a Land and Community Trust in Matatiele, can you tell us a little bit about this Trust and its work?

BK Ja, Can you repeat because I think it is very important. I missed it in our audio here. Can you go over that question again?

AM You've established a Trust for Land and Community Development, I think it's called. Can you explain what the work of this trust is in Matatiele area?

BK I hope I can hear you to do that while you still have the audio. Yes, the hope I think is still that we can transfer the philosophy that was generated by the Black Community Programme to begin to move into the area of serious community development involving young people, in municipal work, in political work and then to develop a philosophy of development in local areas so that people emphasise the importance of philosophical understanding of why we are doing certain things.

We're seeing a lot of difficulties in the area of defining what we are about and the participation of young people in government in general. We begin to have in our locations, involvement of young people in governance and the importance of such resources is not just facilities but analyses of problems that are occurring. That community development is not just about acquiring resources, but it is in fact the creation of those resources and the explanation of their importance in national development.

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I'm hoping that we could have senior leadership that's going to assist young people in understanding the importance, you know, of this. I think we're making some progress in that direction, but a lot of it is going to depend on how the current leadership is able to explain how these things become important because of their philosophical importance. I think there's a whole new chapter altogether that we must come back and talk about sometime when you are a hundred years old and I'm 90 years old (laughs).

AM Okay, thank you, that is extraordinarily interesting. I'm so sorry that we haven't had a better line, that it's been so difficult to get the audio right. Perhaps when the lockdown ends, we'll be able to see you face-to-face and get the interview recorded differently. Thank you very much for this opportunity to talk with you and for sharing your ideas and experience. Thank you so much.

BK Thank you, and I hope we can discuss it at another level. Thank you for coming and for talking to you.

00:58:37

Transcribed by Way with Words

Checked by Anne Mager