

Ntau Letebele LRC Oral History Project 7th August 2008

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

This is an interview with Ntau Letebele and itâ\200\231s the 7th of August (2008). Ntau (Letebele) on behalf of SALS Foundation in the United States, we really want to thank you for taking the time to meet with us and to agreeing to participate in the LRC Oral History project. I wondered whether we could start the interview...if you could talk about the historical significance of the land in terms of how it came to being...before we started the interview you said that there were no borders with white farmers, these farms became known as Dublin and Callais, so I wondered whether you could start from a historical perspective?

Yes, Iâ\200\231m the current chairperson of the CP of Mpuru-Letebele-Maraba land claims.

These are the different communities?

No, itâ\200\231s one community.

One community and they have different...?

You see, the way we have, we have looked at the historical background of the area and constituted the name of the claim with regard to who the leaders of the community there and when. Hence we came up with the name Mpuru-Letebele-Maraba, and ya. Letebele was the headman...

(Interruption, interview resumes after a short break)...

Int

NN

Int

NN

And that must have been along your family lines?

True. Maraba was the chief, but not residing in the community, residing in a different community. But because of the intermarriages, weâ\200\231ll find that within the same community youâ\200\231d find the Letebeles and the Marabas. So basically they are one community. Of significance here is that, as a young man, I will talk about my involvement and how we came to this. By that time I think, when South Africa became a democracy...

This is 1994?

1994. Residing in a very underdeveloped community, impoverished community, was very few people one taking keen in community issues, and having the light on the history of my forefathers about the history of why they came to live and the different villages. One was very fortunate because one went to university; [was 25 years old at that time, with keen interest in community issues. When government started to say there is this process for peopleâ\200\231s land to be restored, I must say it was an awakening

call for some of us who then started to engage the old people in the area to say there is this process. And they began explaining, because there were still some who resided or lived on the farms. Very old people, many in their seventies, some in their eighties, so they could relate stories of before white people came to their area, the process of dispossession, and why it's important for them to reconnect with the forefathers whose graves are still on the farm. Because some of them had put some tombstone on some of the graves on the farm. So we then started a process way of consultation with a number of old people who could give us the history of what happened, and then we consolidated the information and lodged the claim with the National Land Claims Commission. That was in 1995. We also began a process of mobilising the community. You must understand in a rural setup, very few people are brave enough, to...very few people were very brave to engage in such a process, because why? They did not believe that such a thing was possible. Because they never thought, young as I was, and some of people who assisted me, who could take on...people who were considered powerful, especially white commercial farmers, who they have lived under their yoke for so many years. We began a process of mobilising the community, getting to have a committee that was going to run the process, very difficult process because there was no precedent for us in terms of how we need to do this, but with some little bit of community activism at least we could deploy some of those tactics in terms of how we mobilised. We started very few because many people did not believe in the process. On the farm...on the two farms, Callais and Dublin, you must understand that during those times, this is the history we were given that there was a mixture of tribes there: you had the Shangaan speaking people, you have the Northern Sotho speaking. Some little bit about the Letebeles because I must mention this because the surname describes a tribe. It describes one of the tribes in South Africa; remember we've got nine black languages. One of the groups is called the Ndebeles. But these people are normally found in Mpumalanga area because they're a tribe; it's like when you say you have the Zulu nation or the Zulu tribe, so you have got the Ndebeles. So because now they lived in a Sotho dominant area, the Sothos used their tribe to then say this is what we would call you here, so they then adopted their surname from the description of their tribe. They lived like a very close-knit community. They were the more dominant in that particular area by virtue of them coming from same stock. I'm raising the issue of the three tribes because it's very important to understand that there were times when there were inter-tribal wars in and around the area. So they tended to live together because they could fight against the invading Swazis from the east, because just nearby where the farms are a huge battle was fought between the tribe called the Mapulanas and the Swazis of then Mzilikazi, one of Shaka's relatives. So, they would have in terms of their setup there, design areas for where they would live, areas where they would graze, areas where they would farm. As I had already indicated that many of them were still alive, they could still relate...so we were in a very fortunate position because they could go and point out some of the things that they were doing and how they lived there. Very agricultural area but with the current setup you'd find that currently you've got commercial farming taking place there and you also have some little bit of what you'd call tourism project. Because part of the Callais farm was subdivided. Part of it is called Manoja Caravan Park. It's 42 hectares. But in that caravan park, you'd find very conservative white people there until recently, I must say, recently, around 1999/2000, black people were allowed into that resort. Its clientele is largely white people who would want to patronise amongst themselves. I'm raising this because

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

later on when the process unfolded we were asked us to whether we would be willing to run such a venture as part of the restitution process.

Itâ\200\231s like a resort of sorts?

Ya, ya. But the feeling was that if this thing was to fall into black hands it was unlikely to be patronised as it used to be. And then we settled for compensation.

So that was the Dublin farm?

No, Callais. With regard to Callais as well there is a portion where they do the citrus farming, they also had a portion that was demarcated for game farming. And on top of the mountain youâ\200\231d find very unique areas where the traditional rituals were being performed. You must understand in that area the Marabas were renowned for rainmaking, they were also renowned for being responsible for what is called circumcision, because the Sotho-speaking, they go through a process of circumcision but they also go through a second session the following year, I donâ\200\231t know how to describe it in a...

Itâ\200\231s initiation isnâ\200\231t it, into manhood?

Ya, itâ\200\231s initiation into...you see, the first initiation is the circumcision part, but the Sothos undergo a second process, a process which we call bogwera; it distinguishes them from the Shangaans. The Shangaans only go through this first process, but the Sothos go through a second process. Itâ\200\231s called bogwera. Bogwera itâ\200\231s a further enhancement of your graduation into manhood, because it tests your character under trance circumstances. Remember with, unlike the Xhosa tradition where the initiates, they go home. In our case for the duration of the circumcision period you donâ\200\231t see women, you donâ\200\231t go home, you are up to your own at the mountains. So the Marabas were responsible for that. And the Letebeles were the headmen. The Shangaans were subservient to them, because you must understand that in that area the Shangaans would come up from the east mainly from...this is the history we got to know...that many of them, one of Shakaâ\200\231s generals, Soshangane went up to the east Mozambique and then some of them spilled into that part of the world. So I think as a consequence of the inter...of the wars that black people fought amongst each other, it was a consequence of where people would find themselves. So agriculture and tourism to the area is very, very critical because the majority of the people thatâ\200\231s where they get employment. Itâ\200\231s typical rural setup where youâ\200\231d find the majority black people do their own spazas, they do family trading stores, or supermarkets, and bottle stores, that is the type of setup they have, but what is critical to the area is that there are many of the black people there, they relied on cattle farming. Yes, some little bit of subsistence agricultural farming of mielies and that type of thing. But cattle farming they hold dear to themselves. I will tell you later why Iâ\200\231m raising some of these because they lost huge amounts of cattle when they were dispossessed. I donâ\200\231t know if you want me to go into the details of that.

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

Sure, of course, of course...

There were many stories as to what happened when white people first came into the area. Largely they were asked to work for...to be on the farm, they call it for sleeping. In order to be on my farm you must sleep. You must work to sleep. Although theyâ\200\231d be paid very, very little.

Can I just ask you quickly, when you tell me the story, when did the white farmers actually take the land away from black people, because originally it was in the hands of black communities, how did that happen and when?

The history that we get told is that it was a gradual process. Black people there left...in the initial phases some left out of protest. One because their cattle was being confiscated for trespassing. They came there in and around the early 1940s. So from late 1940s up until late 1950s it was a gradual process of people protesting at the treatment they were getting, moving into what was called Trust land. So the accelerations began to happen of serious movement from the farms around 1959/1958, thatâ\200\231s when the majority then felt no they would go then. With the last dispossession in terms of the history we got was that the majority left in and around 1963 thereabout. The last batch left in the late 1960s. Like I'm saying to you it was not a typical forced removal. So the acceleration that youâ\200\231d see was mainly in the early sixties where a whole bunch of people were then moved out of the farm, with some subservient still remaining, but that batch also was finally removed at a later stage. People were protesting against largely working for nothing, no longer having huge access to the land they used to have, dispossession of their cattles, I'm talking hundreds of cattles that were lost, and essentially working for nothing. But also with the homeland system, I think, you know, black people were essentially being told this is not an area for you to live, then youâ\200\231ve got to move to the other side, so thatâ\200\231s how

it essentially happened. But the nice thing is that people can still point out where they used to do their circumcision schools, where they can still do their rainmaking things, the rituals, perform them there and, you know, where they used to plough and all sorts of things. Remember I said we had two farms, with one being subdivided, which is Callais, and then you have got Dublin on the other hand. With Dublin, according to the LRC and the records, and after the investigation, itâ\200\231s a clear cut case, those, itâ\200\231s

unresolved because there is a lot of paper trail in terms of how black people were dispossessed of that farm. Itâ\200\231s largely a citrus farm in there, a very good farm, the

challenge there is mainly around not getting the necessary co-operation from the Regional Land Claims Commission to fast track the process to restore the land. But with Callais, the nice thing is that at least with the evidence that we presented it has reached a stage where it has now been expropriated and we got the land back, though not yet registered in our name.

I just want to ask you quickly, I understand that you actually...you were born after this final dispossession, right?

Yes.

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

So were you born in another area?

Yes, the Willows Village.

The Willows Village. And you would have probably heard stories about this land?

Yes, all of these things are stories for me. And...but you see, the challenge for rural communities is that you find less access to information. And the chances are that if some of us were not there chances were that this thing could have...many people could have missed the boat. Because very few people were brave enough to say we need to challenge the system and benefit from what democracy was offering. So weâ\200\231re very fortunate that...we lost the claim, we proceeded on our own for quite some time, because of its own challenge, because a process like this needs funding and voluntarism a lot. Because from those years we donâ\200\231t have a fund. Youâ\200\231ve got to basically use your own resources for the greater community benefit. Because unless youâ\200\231ve got people who are willing to do that, things like this would collapse. So I'm raising this because the amount of networks that you need to build and to also meetings and so on, very few people and rural leaders have got the necessary resources. We were in a very fortunate position that Durkje (Gilfillan) knows about the history of the farm because initially we lodged with the National Land Claims Commission, then they established regional offices, and then it happened to fall under her jurisdiction.

When did you lodge the claim?

1995.

And she was the Land Commissioner?

Ya, Regional Land Claims Commissioner. Reporting to the National Land Claims Commissioner. And when she left her position, I think after 1999, around 2000 we then, because of the relationship that was developed, we then indicated to her the challenges that were coming up, because some of the commercial work farmers then, were beginning to be resistant to the process. Questioning many things. It was then becoming a legalistic issue. And we presented our scenario to her and then we were in a very fortunate position, the LRC was quite willing to assist us. This is crucial because at a later stage it proved to stand us in good stead, because our case for Callais farm was the first in Limpopo where a farm was expropriated. But you see, there were a number of stumbling blocks along the way. One was: the past land owner entered into an agreement to sell the game-farming portion of the farm. But he knew that to enter into any sale agreement he must inform the Regional Land Claims Commission. They told him to stop but he entered into his own deal. And the person who wanted to buy the place went ahead, started developing, put up fancy...some chalets on the game farming part, some dams. So when the Commission wanted to transfer the land into our hands, immediately took us to the Pretoria High Court, the court stopped the transfer. Whilst waiting for that, the farm...the past owners at that

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

time, Rivermouth, experienced some financial difficulties. Apparently they were at the hands of food exporters who sort mortgaged their fruit to say, weâ\200\231ll guarantee you this price in the market at that time, was very unfavourable, so they ended up owing the fruit exporters. But over and above that they had mortgages to keep up with on the farm. The Land Bank and some other creditors. So they couldnâ\200\231t keep up with their repayments. And they were beholden to the fruit exporters. What then happened was that now these fruit exporters then approached us with some...you know, the way they operate these people, if youâ\200\231re not smart enough you can find yourself in a very, very difficult position. They bring well-connected black people, in this instance they brought the former Premier of Limpopo...of Gauteng, Dr. inaudible (possibly Dr. Ngoako Ramathlodi) to be their credible BEE partner. To say, look, you see...with the High Court stopping this process and now with the issue around the Rivermouth owing us this much, we want to enter into a strategic partnership with yourselves. You see, I donâ\200\231t know how it happened, the process got dragged on because with the advice of the LRC we kept on demanding a number of documents, due diligence on their...amongst all sorts of things. But because we were not playing ball, because our view was always that, one, where the guy who had entered into a sale agreement on the game farming section...because this guy was saying, for that section of the farm, 1500 hectares, he can put huge development and sell stands there for timeshare for about five hundred thousand, and is likely to realise about seventy-five million; he wanted to give us three million rand, then we walk away from the farm. But we said to him, we hear all of that, the farm is not yet in our name, we can only negotiate with you when the farm is in our name and then we can consider the proposals, because now weâ\200\231re only sitting with your own proposal. Remember this guy had already had plans approved by the municipality. But we said no, weâ\200\231re not going to negotiate from a position where weâ\200\231re still hoping that this land is going to belong to us. Letâ\200\231s rather wait. Thatâ\200\231s why he took us to court. These other ones as well...

So this was Dublin?

Itâ\200\231s Callais.

And Dublin has the resort on it, where you got compensation?

No, thatâ\200\231s Callais. (interruption)

So Callais is divided into three?

Yes, it has the Manoza caravan park, Callais..., which is the game farming section, and it also has a portion where they do citrus farming. The Valencias, the Star Rubies, and those kind of fruits there. So, youâ\200\231re now faced with...thatâ\200\231s why the Legal Resources Centre was very important to be on our side. You now deal with a fellow called Riaan van der Merwe, who has already entered into a relationship with the past owners to say, to bail us ourselves out of the difficult financial position weâ\200\231re in, we need some cash. In order to do that, letâ\200\231s sell the game farming section. They entered into a sale agreement but for that to be validated you needed the approval of the Commission. But the Commission just informed them that there is a claim on the farm

so you can't do anything. But then he went ahead and developed the place, put in some chalets there, some dams there, and also put some...

(Interruption, interview resumes after a short break...)

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

He developed the game farm.

Ya. But...I don't know, I think it was just arrogance. So now this guy he comes to us and says, look, now I've got this nice plans for the place, but you know I'm a very nice person, accept compensation, on top of you accepting compensation I'll give you out of my own goodwill, three million rand. And our standpoint was very clear that we will not accept that until the farm is transferred into our name. So plans were at an advanced stage, the Commission said, no, this farm must be transferred to us. Took us to High Court that stalls the whole process, the court ruled in his favour.

Why was that? Why did the court rule in his favour?

I think it was largely on the contractual agreement he had with the past owners, that that needed to be resolved, because there was a legitimate expectation from his side. But also the Legal Resources Centre did not file opposing papers; we got to know of this thing I think by chance. But in terms of strategy I think the LRC felt at that time that there was no need to...

...challenge?

...to challenge it because there was no case, they proposed a different route. Because they said, he didn't have a case. Whilst dealing with that, then you're dealing with the Sechaba situation. Sechaba...Bula Intertrading are the guys whose fruit...the guys who market the fruit on behalf of the farmers to overseas markets. But apparently some years back the Japan market where the fruit was largely exported to, was overflooded with fruit and the price just went down, so they couldn't get much. So the owners found themselves in a very difficult position because they could not with the fruit they have sold cover their running expenses and so on. So this guy, because they still wanted to continue on the farm, they felt the best way is to call, communicate, deal with us, and maybe we can strike some kind of agreement. They came up with, they will capacitate us, they will do all sorts of nice things. But when we also on that stalled, or justice delayed, these guys forced the farm into liquidation. You know, with liquidation, now Sechaba was appointed, Sechaba...then we found out this Sechaba Trust who are the liquidators, one of the guys at Bula Intertrading, the guys who does the fruit exporting, is a director there. So we tried to talk to them to say Bula, you know, we still need to have the farm transferred to us, and so on and so on, but now LRC advised us that, you see the biggest creditor there is Land Bank so we need to get their support. But because they're a government institution they have a mandate to support land restitution. We tried to have those kind of meetings and those meetings yielded nothing. These guys on the other hand proceeded to place adverts in the media about liquidating the farm.

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

And this is Riaan van der Merwe?

No, no, itâ\200\231s Bula Intertrading. But with support from Riaan (van der Merwe). Because Riaan realises that if this thing goes ahead he stands to lose everything. So fortunately with the Legal Resources Centre being on our side, around midnight we are able to stop the liquidation. The following day many people were on the farm wanting to buy the farm. It was at that point that everyone realised that now this thing has to come to a head. The only way out of this thing is no longer negotiations, itâ\200\231s just to force an expropriation. And that happened last year. And with Callais farm being the first in Limpopo, an expropriation.

Itâ\200\231s only the second farm since 1996 to be expropriated in this country.

Ya. So ours is the second. Ya. But that proves the point that without legal expertise on your side, youâ\200\231re unlikely to make much progress, because youâ\200\231re dealing with poor people with fewer resources. Because these guys they raised all sorts of legal technical arguments all the way, even when you tried to have meetings to resolve some of these things, they bring their lawyers, they bring delaying tactics, with the LRC on our side I think it was far, far much better for us to deal with some of the challenges.

Now as I understand it, both....the Callais farm is going to be transferred to you at a later date, itâ\200\231s currently not in your name?

Correct. But itâ\200\231s just in...

...process?

...Yes, itâ\200\231s just in process, and you know, the state has ownership but in reality we are in charge of what is taking place on the farm because we have got an interim strategical farm, a manager on the farm...

Now, I understand that your community and this farm management, strategic farm management company, they would share profits of the yields.

Yes.

It would be a 50/50. But does this strategic management company, are they part of government?

No, no. They are commercial farmers, they manage a number of farms in the area.

Int

NN

Int

NN

Are they white farmers?

They are. You see...one view that we took, which we were able to sell despite some resistance through some of the community members. You must understand some, for them, it's the end of poverty, so it means their problems will be solved. They can take charge, you know, they're excited about such things. It's their own farm, they can do as they're pleased. They think it's millions that are being made out of that. With the experience of what was happening with many farms in and around our area and many parts of the country, we're able to bring those lessons to the table to say, it's well and good to want to manage the farm, but you've got to recognise that to do that you need capital: running capital, you need the right expertise to manage the farming operations, you also need access to markets. And we were able to say to all present that none of us...we may have some limited experience in terms of having been farm labourers or so and so on, but that is not good enough to run a viable commercial farm. So we then convinced them to say, the route to take in this initial phase is to get someone with experience so that things do not collapse. Because what we have seen around our area, it's very shocking.

I do want to talk to you about that, because from what I can understand, almost every single farm that has had a land claim attached to it in the...area, has failed. I just want to read something to you and see what you think because you have a better indication of how valid this is. This is from the Business Day 20th of January 2008. And it says: 'these were not farms where production had simply been halted as a consequence of land claims and neglect had taken its toll. These farms had been destroyed beyond redemption. They are now perhaps only fit to be returned to an era before the eradication of malaria and tsetse opened up the lowveld to agriculture on a scale and productivity unmatched anywhere in the country. The last time I saw such wrecked buildings and the wanton destruction of showcase farms was more than thirty years ago in the aftermath of the South African Defence Force invasion of Angola. The degree of vandalism has gone far beyond the force needed to rip out usable items, it's hard to imagine the level of rage that would motivate someone to break every window pane in a building and knock down others until no two bricks remained on top of each other. What mischief motivates humans to defecate in every room, in every building, on every farm? Why would anyone open irrigation furrows to permit scarce precious water to drain uselessly into the veld? The view from the blasted windows and rooms littered with broken roof shingles and hundreds of shelves, often endemic wild fruit, shows ripening mangoes dripping from mature orchards like fat red ticks.' Ok. And it says, 'on mango processing farm upgraded by government, on one of the claim farms is virtually standing still because production on all the claim farms in the area has stopped.' So it seems to me Callais is very different, because of your community and how you've handled it. What's happening in the area that's so shocking, from your experience?

You see, you need strong leadership. And you also need leadership that the community members can trust. To the extent that you're able to make sacrifices, because you earn that confidence and trust of the community. So what even the correctness of some of the choices you made, people believe in those. But you've got to balance that against the need for people to want to be empowered as quickly as they

Int

NN

10

wish. I think for us the challenge in terms of dealing with that was, they trusted the leadership, but also the leadership was strong in terms of getting the right advices and bringing those to the table.

Right. Iâ\200\231'm wondering, in terms of the other farms in that area, whatâ\200\231s happened to that, whoâ\200\231s created this destruction, whatâ\200\231s the history of that?

Because they are neighbouring farms, I will give you some scanty details. You see, the post settlement on the farms was not properly managed. They gave viable commercial access to very, very poor people. And because of lack of leadership, because of lack of support from the LRC in terms of guiding that process, you then found community members saying, because I donâ\200\231t have confidence in this leadership, this is also my farm, Iâ\200\231ll do as I please, Iâ\200\231ll see what you can do. So that sense of saying this is ours, we need to guard this jealously, was not there. But for much of this I want to blame the Regional Land Claims Commission. You know, South Africa has some little bit of history, you must understand that...

(Interruption...interview resumes after a short break...)

Int

NN

You see, weâ\200\231re coming from a history of defiance campaigns, wilful disobedience of authority. So because of that history, anything that...if I have not worked for something, youâ\200\231ll even find that in some of the poorer areas, people will destroy even schools and things like that. And this instance, yes government is restoring their land back, but because many did not contribute to the development of the farm, and they felt in their own judgement that maybe the leadership is either eating money or mismanaging the funds...

The community leadership?

Ya, they thought. You know, some of these things are perception, you know, issues. With slow intervention from the Regional Land Claims Commission, I donâ\200\231t think things should have deteriorated to the extent where it was. Because to some extent they must have got wind of what was taking place in the farms. In our case, because we could draw some lessons from that, from...we took a view that we will not change management on the farm. For the simple reason that it was going to create a gap. SFM, we approached them directly with very little support from the Commission. Because with the issue around the expropriation and the old farm owners not wanting to invest into the farm, we just foresaw a problem. Because you must understand the issue around the High Court cases, the possible auctioning of the farm, possible...the liquidation that was already under way, created some level of uncertainty, so past owners were not willing to invest into...much into the improvement of the fruit or improving the farm. So that was creating huge problems because of the uncertainty of as to when the problems were going to be resolved on the farm. So that was a huge problem for us because what it meant is that we got to get onto the farm and start running. Because by the time you get the farm and you say, now itâ\200\231s mine, and you start to do certain things, it would be too late. Because you need to do spraying, you need to prepare, and all sorts of things. So, thatâ\200\231s when we got support from the LRC in terms of who we can talk to, we also got to speak to an organisation called

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

11

MABEDI, which is Maruleng and Bushbuckridge Economic Development Initiative. It's funded by Business Trust. You have got huge corporations such as BHB Billiton, Anglo American, Pick n Pay, contributing to that. So they fund this organisation to provide support. So sat with them, sourced the strategic farm management to assist us. Even to date I can tell you, although the land is in the name of government, our agreement with SFM is more on a gentleman's agreement, largely because technically we are not the land owners until it is transferred into our name, but also because we are not receiving any support.

Financial support, you mean?

Ya.

I'm also wondering, you worked with Durkje Gilfillan on this for a long time, I wondered whether you could talk about that relationship, because Durkje Gilfillan is quite a land expert and has a way of dealing with this. What were some of the things you learned and what were some of the things that you found interesting, important, challenging, in that relationship?

I think, myself personally, because I sort of the link with the community to Durkje (Gilfillan), that relationship and support was very, very good, I must say. And the nice thing because of her experience, of having been in government, of now being on the other side. And having been with the community for so many years, from the Commission side and now the Legal Resources Centre. You must understand some may not even distinguish the different roles that she has played over time. She has also gained the confidence...the community has gained confidence in her. In that she's an authority. I mean, it even reaches a stage where they say, if Durkje (Gilfillan) hasn't said this, we can't move. It has reached a stage where they say, Durkje (Gilfillan) has told us we must proceed with this process this way. It's in instances where for instance people come to us with all sorts of things, the community members will remind you and say, remember what Durkje (Gilfillan) said, we can't move ahead on this unless she's here. And that is quite comforting because it says, one, they've got confidence in the services that they're getting and it's also very important to realise that besides the legal part that relates to courts and that kind of thing, but understanding and explaining to the community and really...see Durkje (Gilfillan), because of her history in the anti-apartheid struggle, understand community dynamics. She also has passion for what she's doing. Of helping, you know, poor people, underprivileged communities. And to some extent that has endeared her to community members. I think the question we keep on asking ourselves is, what would have happened if we had not received the kind of support that we continue to receive and we've received in the past.

Right...land claims are always a very long process, and what's amazing is that your community, you, and Durkje (Gilfillan) have maintained a very good working relationship. That's not always the case with a lot of land claims?

Ya. It's not easy because, I'm not saying we are not having challenges.

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

12

Iâ\200\231m sure. Iâ\200\231'm sure you do, thatâ\200\231s why Iâ\200\231m asking the question.

You see, youâ\200\231ll find people want...people want power. People feel theyâ\200\231re not fully

acknowledged, young as I am, Iâ\200\231'm seeing when I was 25 years old, Iâ\200\231ve virtually

grown up in the claim process. And also people joined the process midway. And they say, no, no, we can do a better job than him. I think it requires some bit of resolve and to stand your ground and to wish away some of these things because I donâ\200\231t think, maybe with my experience of working for government you would find a situation whereby you get a hundred percent consensus. You always say if you have got 80/90 percent of the people fully behind what youâ\200\231re doing, you can always forge ahead. So

I think with, as the leadership we have always remained determined to see there will be those challenges, but we should not lose focus in terms of where weâ\200\231re going. But

also where we are trying to balance these things is to say, look, people must state what they want, if they want to be involved on the farm, we have set a process of saying, what skills do you have? What sort of support can you receive? And people must realise that these things take time. Not an easy task because people always allege that youâ\200\231re eating money, that they can do a better job, but it is in the manner in which you

conduct your affairs and then you can stand the rigour of being questioned in front of everyone that over time you build that confidence. You know we have lost many people because the claim has taken too long. You know, I'm just throwing this into the equation. The area is largely rural and you must understand that witchcraft practice in that area, many people believe in it, very few donâ\200\231t.

So traditional healers.

It is, ya. So some would say, no, you are exposing yourself by being in leadership because so and so and bewitch you. And all those kinds of things. Those are part of the challenges that says you canâ\200\231t run away to face challenges because there are these

type of things. Or people who are challenging your authority and your leadership, because we have had our own challenges where people were saying, we have mismanaged the funds when we never received a cent from government. When people were even kicking up some of the community members. Kicking up, largely because as part of this process, some of the community members would connive with people who are not even part of the claim to saying, you know, there is money coming our way, and letâ\200\231s inflate the numbers. You come under my name we will share the spoils.

Iâ\200\231ll give you five thousand and I'll keep the rest. That type of inaudible were beginning to creep, but we were able to withstand our ground and say, letâ\200\231s do a proper verification, because the Commission would not know the people, weâ\200\231d know the people. We know the people. So what we were doing then was to say, we verify it and we would kick them legitimately. Contestations for power will always be there... and those we tend to ignore at times. But those people we continue to engage with them.

How did you find the Legal Resources Centre, because you said, when you started this, for a while you were on your own, how did you find the Legal Resources Centre, what was the process by which you came to know about it?

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

NN

13

Iâ\200\231ve always known about them, but as to how I should ask for their request, it was when Durkje (Gilfillan)...because remember she was the Commissioner, you know, we never lost contact and, you know...she informed me of where she was going, and after some...it was over an article in the Star by one of the guys who was reporting to...in fact I was referred to her by one of the guys, Tony Harding, who used to report to her. He advised me to say, why donâ\200\231t you ask Durkje (Gilfillan) to assist you in this process? And...

Thatâ\200\231s how you met. How did you always know about the Legal Resources Centre, Iâ\200\231m curious?

Because, one, from being involved in the â\200\230varsity student politics.

Did you do legal work?

No, I didnâ\200\231t do legal work. Iâ\200\231ve been involved in student politics and community politics, you know, resistant politics, not for a very long time then. But we knew who was on the side of the...

...the people.

The people. Knew George Bizos and...you know, we always knew that they would defend people, getting funding from overseas largely. So thatâ\200\231s how I got to know them.

Iâ\200\231ve asked you lots of questions, Iâ\200\231m wondering whether thereâ\200\231s something Iâ\200\231ve neglected to ask you, which you think ought to be included in your LRC Oral History interview?

You see, itâ\200\231s very crucial to realise that without the support of institutions such as the

Legal Resources Centre, for poorer communities to take this commercial world farmers us head-on, you can even lose your case because the legal technical issues require funding, but also these people need support, because...not only legal, but also just guiding the process in terms of what needs to happen. Because the expectation out there is huge, and Iâ\200\231m worried that even as we may be accused that weâ\200\231re moving slow, that letâ\200\231s move on to the farms, you know, letâ\200\231s share the spoils, you know. We have given everything to white people, we donâ\200\231t see any change. So it requires a strong leadership and leadership with credibility. If process such as these are led by people without credibility, and people who the community donâ\200\231t have confidence in, the things that youâ\200\231re relating from the Business Day report, are likely to be the case.

But Iâ\200\231m certain that in our area we have tried to find a balance, I must say, about cattle farming. When we got the farm, remember the SFM, the current strategy is

trying to absorb very few people to integrate them into the farming operations...They have done that, though itâ\200\231s for a short term. But the game farming section was just

Int

NN

Int

NN

Int

14

like that...you know, the ideas about developing tourism projects there and then so on and so on. But we had to find balance because the majority of the community members were grazing their cattle in the Trust lands, you know, in the villages, and the grass was almost...itâ\200\231s almost depleted. Find a balance and weâ\200\231re using the 1500 hectares for grazing. The nice thing is that people are beginning to do things for their own needs... Theyâ\200\231ve put their own pipeline for water and put drinking ponds for the cattles, theyâ\200\231ve put in and around. I was doing a count last week about 450 cattles. And men now are using their own resource to buy cattle so that...because they see huge potential for cattle farming in the area. And I must say, no-one wants to destroy the farms because, one, theyâ\200\231ve got a stake themselves in the farm, because they know that if they donâ\200\231t look after it, many people will invade and they would even lose their own grazing. I mean, with snares, where people would put snares to catch...

...animals?

Ya. Community members, the claimants, they would go right into the farm, walk through the place, take them out, and I think that sense of ownership it gives me hope, it says to me, I donâ\200\231t think people would want to destroy something that they feel is theirs. Going forward weâ\200\231re also planning to put some small...because the farm is used...you know, the nice thing is that we have not antagonised the guys who were farming, the past owners. Because the view we took was that, I donâ\200\231t think, the fact that they are the owners doesnâ\200\231t make them our enemies. It doesnâ\200\231t mean we canâ\200\231t engage them and learn from their experience. Because as part of the plan going forward we are in discussions to create some small plots where people can plant some vegetables so that they can sell those, and these guys are willing to link up with Pick n Pays and the Spar in the local area, so that...

...So you have a market?

Exactly. Because theyâ\200\231ve got the experience. And you must understand the business in South Africa is still more along racial lines. They are likely to give them business, than they would give to us. So to that extent I think that kind of engaging the community to work for themselves. But also weâ\200\231re also saying the farm is not going to solve all your problems. Because the farm is not going to solve all your problems, part of the profits that we are likely to get from the proceeds of the harvesting now, are likely to be invested into training some of the young school kids, maybe give them five thousand, ten thousand, to assist with their schooling. Because that is in the long term stability of the farm if we have amongst the community members everyone say, although I donâ\200\231t have a cattle, although Iâ\200\231m not having a small vegetable garden there, but at least I've also benefitted. You know, itâ\200\231s a balance. You know, there is no formula for some of these things but it is those type of challenges where we need to think very creatively.

I wondered whether I could end the interview whether we could talk about a memory you might have working with Durkje Gilfillan or going to the Legal Resources Centre or how you might have celebrated when you heard about the expropriation, just a memory as part of your Oral History interview.

NN

Int

NN

Int

15

You know, very, very important is that as a young man then of, I said 25...

That was 1994...?

No, no, 1995. Looking back one...first meeting I remember we said to the community members, people are coming to discuss about us taking, then their interpretation, we have now taken the white people's farms. Now you must understand it's just in the beginning of democracy. When we invited some of the people to come there, they point blank refused to come and said, you know that white guy, he's going to kill you!

Because you must understand you have got what are termed verkrampte, which in Afrikaans is your conservative white farmer, who have killed black people in the past along the river. Because you are separated by the river. Now looking back when people did not believe and now, you know, many people now are so happy, now they have their land. Having connected them with the LRC, with MABEDI, the experience of all of these things, you know it gives one comfort. You know, over weekends, we go onto the farm, we sit at the drinking points where the cattles come, we braai meat there, we drink liquor there, you know, we just talk, inaudible and say, now we have an asset. You know, people are so happy. People are so happy that we have an asset, and I must say will make good use of it. And it requires people like Durkje (Gilfillan), Legal Resources Centre, to be on our side, to provide guidance because they bring a balance in terms of the contestation for power around these issues because you must always understand that there could be mistrust and some little bit of jealousy amongst ourselves. So...you know, Durkje (Gilfillan) keeps on saying to us, you need to document your procedures, you need to document how you're going to do things, so that in the future you'll be able to arbitrate over your differences with documentation,

to say, these are the policies that we've agreed, you know, as we see Durkje (Gilfillan) aging now, and you know, she's becoming part of the family. Like I'm saying to you people are saying...I'm the resident interpreter...they would say, where

is the old lady? Unless she has said this...we can't move forward. Ya. That is the confidence they've gained, the respect they have for her, you know. And when she says something it's an authority and they don't forget. So this is part of the bigger

empowerment process that as black people I think we need to capitalise on and...I don't foresee the Zimbabwe type situation in our area. Because we will fight for that not to happen.

Well, Ntau, I'm really glad I waited, because it was a fantastic interview, thank you so much. And I wish you and your community all the best, and I'm sure you have to take a lot of credit for excellent stewardship of this project.

Ntau Letebele-Name Index

Bizos, George, 13

Gilfillan, Durkje, 5, 11, 13, 14, 15

Harding, Tony, 13

Letebele, Mr., 1

Ramathlodi, Ngoako, 6

Van der Merwe, Riaan, 6, 8

For more information on this particular land claim refer to:
<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Govt-takes-Limpopo-farm->

20080122

Legal Resources Centre Oral History Project

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand
Location:- Johannesburg

Â©2010

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. These digital records are digital copies of electronic documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

DOCUMENT DETAILS:

Document ID:- AG3298-1-082

Document Title:- Ntau Letebele (client) Interview
Author:- Legal Resources Centre South Africa (LRC)
Document Date:- 2008