



umama



RECOLLECTIONS
OF SOUTH AFRICAN MOTHERS
AND GRANDMOTHERS

COMPILED AND EDITED BY MARION KEIM



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do after (miraculously) completing matric. Despite the fact that funds were not readily available my mother would have liked her children to continue studying after matric. In my case it was a matter of accepting a state loan to train as a teacher. My mother never pushed us, but was proud of our achievements. She hated people she called 'snobs'; people who 'took themselves too seriously' or thought of themselves as superior to those around them. She herself was modest and self-effacing and did not go in for boasting or self-promotion. When I consider this I see characteristics of this kind weaving through my life.

My mother was an exemplary listener. I suppose this is one aspect of her love of reading. She heard what others were saying, at a very profound level, and was an ideal model of a genuine communicator. She had her own strong opinions about most matters, including the political matters of the day, but she expertly used soft power as opposed to violence and the strident tone of the self-righteous. These are characteristics I can see in my own career.

My mother was never deliberately unkind to anyone or anything, had a strong belief in the importance of honesty and sincerity and was the most unselfish person I have ever known. She hated pretentiousness and self-importance, was modest about her not inconsiderable talents and achievements, and was not one to blow her own trumpet. But I think, most importantly, what I inherited from her was a strong conviction that values are to be lived rather than spoken about.

Wally Morrow is one of South Africa's most respected thinkers in education. Born in Pretoria, he was formerly professor of Philosophy of Education and dean of Education at the University of the Western Cape, dean of Education at the University of Port Elizabeth and chair of the Ministerial Committee on Teacher Education. Since the early 1990s he has been prominently involved in transforming South African education and he has played a leading role in guiding the education sector's response to HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa. To his regret, he is no longer able to continue with this important work since becoming ill in February 2008.

Cedric Nunn

MADHLAWU

Amy 'Madhlawu' Louw (1900–2003),
born in the Ceza region, Natal



It was a photographic project in the early eighties that led me back to reconnect with my maternal grandmother, Amy 'Madhlawu' Louw. She lived in the remote region of iVuna, midway between Ulundi and Nongoma, KwaZulu-Natal. She was born in 1900 and raised in the nearby Ceza region. Her father, Arthur Nicholson, had come from England as a soldier in the British army fighting in the Anglo-Zulu War, and at the end of the conflict somehow remained in Zululand, marrying Elina Velaphi Mabaso, a Zulu woman.

I had the good fortune of seeing quite a lot of my grandmother while I was growing up, as we were living about a hundred kilometres away in Hluhluwe. I spent several holidays with her and we frequently visited her over weekends. But for a child growing up, adults were remote and not easily accessible. When I returned years later as a thirty-year-old, I began to see her and the land she inhabited with fresh eyes and new understanding. Encountering her as an adult, in what I had regarded as a harsh and unforgiving landscape, far from the conveniences of civilisation, I immediately began to see how truly remarkable she was.

Madhlawu had had two marriages, first to Willy Louw when she was about twenty, then, after Willy had died, to his brother Dandy when she was in her forties. When we teased her about this seemingly traditional practice she was quick to tell us that she married him for love and that he was the 'sweetest man'. From these two unions she produced eight children, five from her first marriage and three from the second. She kept all her pregnancies through to term and raised all her children in that remote region.

She was already in her eighties when I re-encountered her in my

thirties, and had had to relocate to higher ground after the death of her second husband Dandy, when the land they had occupied was designated communal grazing ground by the local chief. She left the solid stone house built by her husbands and built what was to be a temporary house, of wattle and daub, about two kilometres away from the confluence of the iVuna and White Umfolozi where the stone house was.

It was in this humble abode, where she was to live for the rest of her life, that I began once again to make her acquaintance. I spent a week with her on that first encounter, rising with her in the morning and heading into the fields, returning at midday to eat lunch and then taking a siesta in the fierce heat of the day. A peasant farmer, she was incredibly resourceful and enterprising.

Her days were filled with planting maize, sorghum, pumpkins and cotton, hoeing, feeding fowls, ducks and pigs, making grass mats, sewing clothes to sell, brewing Zulu beer (for which she was renowned), selling snuff from the tobacco she grew and of course the inevitable cleaning and cooking in her own home. In addition to all this there was the constant flow of neighbours and visitors who kept her informed of events in the community. There was always time to relax in the midday heat and to enjoy company in the cool of the afternoons and evenings. Radio Zulu was a constant background sound.

I found that she occupied a space that did not quite fit in with the orthodoxy of the apartheid eighties. The only person of mixed race in her immediate environment, she was surrounded by Zulu neighbours and in many ways shared a life with them. But there was this curious reserve, a contradiction that confounded me, a certain distancing. For instance, MaKhumalo, her closest neighbour and friend, would never sit on a chair whilst visiting. Instead, she would sit on the floor or stand, showing a definite deference.

My mother explained that when Granny had arrived in this region, which was largely unpopulated, in the thirties, the people who lived around her had come there originally mostly as servants. Whilst Granny's husbands were alive, they had had many cattle and were considered wealthy by the standards of the time. Therefore there was a class difference which continued to be observed by all, even after the loss of all her cattle through a cattle disease that ravaged the land and the relocation that had reduced what little of the herd had remained.

As a child, I had obviously seen her quite differently: as a distant elder who occasionally was able to give me, one of very many grandchildren, some attention. As an adult, I was able to see in her the things I was unable to see as a child. She was a reserved person, but readily engaged when necessary. She quietly accepted the circumstances life threw at her and rarely let them get her down. My respect for her grew as I began to comprehend the complexity of her environment and the simplicity she had brought to bear in relating to it.

From what I observed, there seemed to be a sliver of a way of life that could have been lived in harmony and mutual interdependence between people – people who readily observed class difference but recognised their blood ties – had it not been for the meddling of the apartheid social experiment of group separation. I discovered that Madhlawu had Zulu relatives in the nearby region, though I never got to meet them until much later. Her Zulu mother was from the region, and Madhlawu retained a connection with her maternal family.

In all this time she lived a solitary life, well into her nineties, being visited from time to time by her children who had all moved to the cities, and occasionally visiting them. Her independent spirit (she resisted every effort of ours to have her relocate to seemingly more convenient locales) inspired me as well. My mother and our family were sympathetic and supportive of her wish to remain in her own home even as she became infirm with old age, and my mother made great sacrifices to spend long stretches of time with her, doing what she considered her daughterly duties.

What she valued in her life, which was lived close to the earth, resonates with our emerging understanding of the wisdom of growing one's own food and consuming food from within a five-kilometre radius from where one lives. Intuitively, she lived this life. Her refusal to eat commercially raised chicken is well known in our family. She was also notorious for her sharp tongue that would spare no fool, and she lived up to her local name of Madhlawu, which means 'the sharp-tongued one'.

Madhlawu loved a good drinking session and, even more so, a party. But she could live with the remains of whatever alcohol was not used up in that session in her house for months until another occasion presented itself. Even when well into her eighties, she would delight all present by dancing a jig and singing a song about being sixteen, young and pretty.

I believe I was fortunate to be raised in a community that valued the aged, a view that is so different from the prevalent one in the Western civilised world in which old people's lives are seen as being wasted and over, fit only to be spent in an old-age home. In Madhlawu's world, old age commanded respect and inclusion and she, though constantly referring to herself as being old, commanded the status of equal.

She gave respect as readily as she expected it. And whilst I can see how the rigid imposition of the perspective of old people, especially where it is out of step with the youth, could be constricting, there is a need for balance in which the value of all ages is maintained. This I learned from Madhlawu.

Our matriarch is now gone. She died with dignity at the age of a hundred-and-three, in the arms of her last few remaining children. The family, who are struggling to find a new centre in the wake of the gap that her parting has left, keenly feels her departure. The home she created and maintained is gone and with it our connection to the 'old country'. But something remains that she has established, a pattern, perhaps, of possibilities, of ways of being, that transcends narrow boundaries. For that I thank her.

Cedric Nunn, born in Nongoma, KwaZulu-Natal, is a photographer. He began taking photos in the early eighties, initially documenting the realities of apartheid that seemed to have been ignored by the mainstream media. His focus throughout his work has been on recording social change.

Aziz Pahad

AN ORDINARY WOMAN WITH A VISION

Amina Pahad, born 1918 in Klerksdorp, died 1973 in Mumbai



My mother Amina Pahad, born in July 1918 in Klerksdorp in the then Transvaal, was an ordinary woman of Indian descent who was inspired by extraordinary ideals. Though she never sought the limelight, through her struggle and her political defiance she exemplified the dogged belief in the possibility of building a different society, one imbued with notions of love for humanity, irrespective of colour, caste, creed or race. Her vision, like ours today, was of a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa.

My mother was first a humanist who displayed immense strength and courage in the face of adversity. She was a feminist before contemporary ideas of feminism had taken root. Her feminism drew from the wellspring of her deep and abiding commitment to human rights and social justice – ideals which she assiduously cultivated in all of us. She was kind and generous even when our entire family was continually harassed by the then notorious Special Branch who, with regularity and at all hours of the day and night, came to our flat in Becker Street, Johannesburg. When they arrived at our flat she was polite and patient with them. She fed them, gave them coffee and tea and when we complained that they were there to arrest any one of us, she simply asked us, as a rebuke, 'Whose house is this, yours or mine?' To my mother they were 'only doing their job'. She treated them as she would any other visitor entering our home.

To all in the neighbourhood her hallmarks, her strengths, were her kindness, her generosity of spirit, her selflessness and her commitment