# **Transcript: The Ties That Bind: Africa’s Unsung Hero**

**Conversations in Social Justice:**

**The Ties That Bind: Africa’s Unsung Hero**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 3. Episode 7.

In this podcast York St John MA Media Production student Mpho Dintwa talks to Everett Ndlovu, Lecturer in Journalism. Mpho discusses the making of his award-winning documentary Ties that Bind. The film, which received one of the top prizes at the Sotambe International Film Festival, tells the tale of Michael Dingake, a political activist and writer who was a fellow prisoner of Nelson Mandela in the battle against apartheid.

**Everett Ndlovu:**

Hello everyone. Welcome to our exciting podcast and today we have caught somebody outstanding, Mpho Dinta.

It is something outstanding for an MA student to become an award-winning documentary maker in the global context.

Yet surprisingly important remains collected so unassuming as if to him that is something normal, yet we find it outstanding in our context.

Mpho Dinta welcome to the program and congratulations for such an achievement.

**Mpho Dintwa:**

Thank you thank you.

**Everett:**

Tell me what happened, how did they go through this process in which for you to win an award among international documentary makers when you are actually a student?

**Mpho:**

I, I think to, take us back a bit.

I did Michael Dingake or I really had to know much about him was when he was launching his book.

One of his books called them ‘Better to die on one's feet’.

Which also you know touches really on his contribution in the liberation struggle.

So I developed interest in in him and then I found that he wrote a book called My Fight Against Apartheid.

And I read the book when I realized this book was an amazing book.

You know it takes you in as if you were part of the whole process of fighting for Apartheid.

So after reading the book, then I approached the family you know to be able to tell the other story and here you know, they were happy that I was the only person who ever you know had approached them to tell to tell his story.

So then the research started.

It took, yeah it took some time for me to be able to start the actual principal photography.

But Fast forward after the film was done, I then had to, you know, start taking out there to film festivals.

One was in Durban, the first one.

It's called Durban filmat, so it won an award in Durban in South Africa to be part of the best five films in Africa out of 60.

And then, It won also a distribution deal through this company called Trace.

Trace is a French company but is now in South Africa.

So after that I took it to a festival called Garden Rd Festival which is which took place in most of the Bay in the Western Cape this year in August.

**Everett:**

That's good.

**Mpho:**

Yeah, so it was, you know I took there also and the reception was fine, you know, was good you know because I think the whole thing people never really, so in terms of these issues of struggle or stories of struggle, is somebody from outside South Africa, so people were quite, you know, happy to witness that kind of a story.

And then I did also submit it to Southern Festival in Zambia.

And in Zambia I think what was interesting is I submitted it a year before, I think, but then no, but I wasn't selected and this time around I think it's because I'm also submitted a trailer then and by this time around I submitted for the whole feature itself.

So yeah, so I got a notification that my film was selected to be part of the, you know to be screened in the festival.

And to me, I think that was good enough really.

And then later on they got another message saying that I have been selected or nominated for the awards.

**Everett:**

How wonderful.

**Mpho:**

So yeah so yeah.

And then I got a call during the awards that you know I won it.

I won an award for best documentary in Southern Africa, so that was just a beautiful moment because looking back on how really I've managed to produce it because, you know you, you produce distance, you know you start finding these projects, you know, and some of us so you know to me.

I think it was just a rewarding kind of moment to look back and also, appreciate you know that people out there who don't look at your work.

**Everett:**

So you self funded this project yourself, you never got any assistance from anybody?

**Mpho:**

No, I you know this the entire project.

The entire project I did fund it myself.

**Everett:**

What was the motivation anyway?

If I may ask?

Because you went through a lot, how?

How many years was it for you to make that the documentary?

**Mpho:**

I think it was four years or so, yeah, around four years.

**Everett:**

Oh my God, that's a lot of dedication and it took you all over southern Africa to cover the story.

**Mpho**

Yeah, yeah.

We went to Cape Town, South Africa, Johannesburg, Durban.

The suburbs in Johannesburg, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

**Everett:**

Yeah yeah.

You also wanted to tell the story.

**Mpho:**

Yes, no, because I think because like I was saying like because I believe in the story and because I've never, I've never seen a story like that before because I think my point of view here was what I wanted to put out there was to say in South Africa, do not do this alone.

The people who were directly involved in the liberation struggle, especially Botswana, Mandela, first when Mandela left South Africa for the very first time we went through Botswana.

Langeni in the film, you know, he talked about that when he was going to China for training.

He went through withdrawal, almost even went through Botswana.

**Everett:**

Actually including Zimbabweans

**Mpho:**

Yes but, I was just trying to put the light on the you know the contribution of Botswana in the liberation struggle.

But here through the life of Michael Denig.

**Everett:**

Michal Denig a pure Africanist was actively involved in this vicious fight against Apartheid in South in South Africa.

Yet we never hear of such heroes.

All people we hear about are Nelson Mandela and nobody else.

Can we hear what Mike himself says about his experiences?

**Audio of Mike Denig:**

You kept your, I mean you, you slept in one, say in your own cell.

Each prisoner there the 30 of us, in each cell, and when this cell was opened.

One of the comrades who I worked with Mac Miraj recognized me, I think it peaped, you know, through the window.

And then I heard him see saying, you know, telling you know the US.

It's Mike Denig.

**Everett:**

But why then is it that even Botswana itself, where Mike is from, he's never told his story.

What are they hiding?

What is the relationship between political affiliations and publicity for such heroes in Botswana?

**Mpho:**

Yeah, I think you, I think that's one, you know, the big question that I think we all have to ask ourselves if if we really want to progress in anyway .

Politically or otherwise, I think the younger story could have long been told.

But I'm happy that I'm the one who you know, who did tell his story.

But in terms of the government organizing his contribution, I think it should have been something which really happened a long time ago.

But sometimes I think it becomes a political thing to say once one is with the opposition you know we will not want to give that person kind of an airtime.

You know in fear that that might, maybe, you know, somehow influence the voters.

So I mean, that's my kind of judgment here.

I think I've seen that a lot where, you know people don't want to see anything good about opposition parties because you know voters might think you know, now maybe the ruling party is not good enough, or it's not doing enough.

No, maybe now it's time to switch the tables.

So, but in this case, I think the story is far from that.

The story symbolizes the contribution done by you know the South African people fighting the struggle.

So you didn’t have to be and you know a member of whichever party, we just had to be a human being from you know the static region to be able to contribute in the struggle.

So I don’t really, you know to me I think from what I've heard when I was talking to him really attached to me to be able to your point where I had to tell us this story, because not only him, you know, other people, I mean he used to say there was other mussurana apparently in Robben Island.

But this other mussurana he was not within with them in the in the single cells, so he didn't know really what happened to him.

So yeah, so you can see that there were other people out there who really, you know, fought for this and, you know it's only about you to be able, to then, you know, give thanks to those people who fought for our freedom.

**Everett:**

What is really surprising in this case is that we always blame the West for misstelling, or not telling our stories.

Yet after independence we seem not to be telling our stories in full, but focusing on the ruling class and giving them praises.

Ignoring whoever is seen as being in the opposition, but what is really impressing me here is that in South Africa, Mike Denig is really seen as a hero.

And he was in prison with the likes of Nelson Mandela and Androm Langeni.

Let's see what let's hear what Langeni says about him.

**Audio of Langeni:**

So Mike was brought immediately to our section.

They regarded him as a leader, straight away.

They must have seen certain qualities in him.

So we can't take him to the main section, it's going to be influential.

They are, they were keen on separating us from the main section of the population for fear that we will influence them in whatever way.

**Everett:**

Quite interesting is not only Langeni or other people give praises to Mike Denig, even former president Tabom Baki, former South African President.

And since Mike is a pure African nationalists who contributed immensely to the liberation of South Africa, let us hear what he says.

**Audio of Tabom Baki:**

People like Mike Denig, of course, very important, these were leaders of the ANC.

Not only just activists, leaders of the ANC, because Mike spent many years here in South Africa, joined the ANC and rose in the ranks into positions of national leadership.

By the time he had to leave and they counted to go back to Botswana, he to Botswana land as it was then.

He had risen into the national leadership.

**Everett:**

It is really impressive to imagine that it took you to do something so phenomenal to bring this kind to the limelight.

To the extent that even the ruling party in the Botswana decided to acknowledge his contribution to the liberation of South Southern Africa.

Can you tell us more what has happened ever since?

**Mpho:**

I feel I was told that I was to be honored by the university of Botwana, I remember when Denig left South Africa to Botswana.

After his release he was working in the University of Botswana for some time.

I remember approaching the deputy vice chancellor of the University of Botswana

Before then, I met with the Vice Chancellor of the university and he then asked me to see his Vice.

So I sat down with the Vice Chancellor and then I said to them and I introduce myself with them and what I do.

And you know, the film I have done, and I said, you know, how would it be if we honored Denig in the university?

Because also, not only because of his contribution, but also because he was also he was also working in the University for quite some time after his release.

So yeah, I mean I never thought that it would go anywhere because it took about two years, I think, because I remember approaching them in 2020 and I was looking at the emails last time that it was in 2020.

So yeah, so I think we got two was owned by the University of Botswana.

**Everett:**

Given Doctorate of letters.

**Mpho:**

Yeah yeah, and by the university and honoring him with Doctorate of Letters.

So just to me I think was just a beautiful thing to see.

Because, really, there's that's what we're seeing in the documentary to say, you know, here we have a living legend, you know, and let us, really, you know, recognize him while he's still here with us and some of the people in the documentary were very close with him.

You know, we're also saying the same thing to say if we look at Denig really contributed or he really deserves to be kind of honored in any way.

**Everett:**

And you have also been recognized in some way because I remember you were invited to give a talk at one of the was in Botswana, the Museum of Botswana.

**Mpho:**

Yeah, Botswana archives.

Yeah, yeah, I think I think that on the twenty-seventh I think of October, there's going to be an audio visual memorization of some sort. Is the linear score initiative.

So, so I've been I was invited to give the talk with regards to the importance of audio visuals in the space of you know, archives and preserving of information.

**Everett:**

Considering, therefore, that the voices of oppositional figures in Africa are never given any platform.

How will you continue to fight for social justice in your activities as a documentary maker?

**Mpho:**

I think what someone was asking that before.

I think when I was just coming back from Canada and study my company and really I was not sure of what to do you know?

And on myself just doing all this, you know, kind of social conscious, you know proclaiming, and I said to him or her, I think then she was alady from a journalist company.

So I said to her, I think It's the some sort of a calling, you know, because you find yourself, you know being dragged into these kind of topics you find yourself, you know heavy interest to address these issues.

You not everyone find interest from Boston, but you kind of having this burning sensation in you to say you know I need to tell this kind of a story for the better of you know, whoever might benefit from.

So yeah, so I think I'll continue to do that really, regardless of really what happens, funding or no funding.

I think I always find you know, new ways on how I can be able to tell to tell those stories.

And also I think if a project that I do then I reflect and then you know you know, see how you know I can maybe do the next one better than I've done the previous one.

So I think that also helps me a lot to find new ways on how I can tell stories.

**Everett:**

But then I can foresee powerful figures standing in front of you because as much as you own the story, you don't own the distribution channels and your material may never get a chance to be showcased in the public meeting.

How do you hope to go around that challenge?

**Mpho:**

Yeah, I think like I was saying earlier, you know finding reflecting nothing really helps to find new ways on how we can do things better was like I was saying earlier when I got this distribution deal in Durban, which, and I think it's almost done now, but for the for the past year, I think it was two years, yeah, but no one ever, you know put the deal to soya.

Here you have your document that will be shown in you know in the network.

But I think I think people are now moving into the digital space, I mean so just an issue of now you know who am I targeting.

And how do I reach those people digitally and also trying to how see how I can be able to distribute my content independently, enrich my audience directly so those are things that I'm exploring and seeing how, how to do that.

The only challenge is in countries like Botswana where people still do rely on the traditional, you know the way of distribution of this TV.

It might be a challenge you know because, of course, the youth might be able to then consume your content digitally, but for those who might not be kind of exposed to that might be a challenge.

**Everett:**

You seem to be so in so confident with whatever you're saying and you seem to be coming up with a lot of innovative plans like you're using digital platforms is one of your distribution channels.

You once spoke about something like Netflix but specializing on Indies.

Is it something you still want to pursue?

**Mpho:**

Yeah, I think basically, that's what I'm talking about.

To be able to then develop a platform where you know it can normally be an OTT platform focusing only on documentaries so, but that's the whole idea.

**Everett:**

And then in your own analysis.

How can we democratize media in Africa?

So that everybody gets a chance to be heard.

**Mpho:**

Yeah, I think in in a space where people compete for things.

We're never going to have the situation where even it's got, it's got a fair share of something, but I always go back to the government to say what is the role of the government in trying to educate and entertain people.

So I think private companies can play a major role.

But its the government’s role to be able to make sure that you know is the custodian of storytelling, you know and be able to tell stories to the citizens you know to be able to say, you know.

Yes, Michael Denig story regardless if he is for the ruling party or he's not really so, I think we need.

We need a government where we will be able to, then you know, find the right way and the right channels of being to distribute this content to the audience out there so.

**Everett:**

And then what advice would you give to potential documentary makers who are currently going through university and I know documentary making is not chicken feed.

It's not something easy, but it's so rewarding at the end of the day.

So what advice to give them so they can persevere and never look back.

**Mpho:**

I think the first thing really is you.

I think it starts with you.

I think for yourself to know what interests you.

What do you like?

I think that is where it starts.

So that you can be able to then inverse all your energy on developing your craft and on developing on what you would like to do.

What is what is one thing that really you know?

What one issue that really.

You're passionate about.

Yeah you know.

I think we have a certain way on how we look at the world on how we want the world to be like so,

so I think to me is that issue of like, OK, what do we want to see?

How do I want to see the world?

**Everett:**

So then I then, you know, follow, you know the kind of ideas that I want to put out there and so I think once you've managed that once, you've managed to identify your passion.

Like you are passionate about correcting History.

**Mpho:**

Yes.

So once you have that, I think you'll be able to, because there are times where things are not going away, ut then your passion will take you through.

Because you know you want to see this thing, you know you have to know why you studied it in the first place.

**Everett:**

And finally what is your advice to people who quit?

Who give up the struggling?

Especially when you want to do something, but when faced with challenges you give up.

**Mpho:**

Giving up, I think I think, it depends really, but it's also a good thing.

**Everett:**

You reckon?

**Mpho:**

Yeah, yeah, it's also a good thing because we have to look back and say you know, is this really worth what I want to get out of it, yeah.

Also another thing is you might be quitting because initially you do not think things through.

You did not really find within yourself what you want to do and you did something without really finding that passion out of out of what you want to do.

So you might be doing the wrong thing because of that.

So by quitting that, then maybe now you can now reflect and say.

OK, who am I, right?

What are my interests?

What do I want to achieve?

What kind of voice do I want to voice do I want to have it out there?

So I think, like I say, you know if you can be able to, then you know, find it within yourself.

Who you really are, and know what interests you.

You know?

Like this thing, the thing of like be the change that you want to see.

You know.

Like if that change that you always you know crying for, you have to be the one really to be able to push it, it could be anything if you are writer you know you write, they write what you know if your documentary, you know you still writing, so you start there, so you tell stories.

Tell us you know you don't tell us stories.

You don't know.

**Everett:**

How many documentaries have you produced so far about?

**Mpho:**

Around about 3.

I've done a film challenge.

I've done a mini series.

I've done a season.

**Everett:**

And do you think broadcasters in Africa will when they consider you as a member of staff there?

**Mpho:**

Yeah, I mean, I, I think I think things change.

I mean, if you look at what's happening in the US with you know documentaries like some of soul, you know which you know was shot years and years ago and just now that it saw the light of the day yeah so to me because to me I know that one day things will change and you know one day maybe there will be the right person in the right place who will see the need for such content.

**Everett:**

Yes, things will change, and this message is for you, the listener.

Life is your own marathon.

You are the only one who knows where you want to go

Never look back because you will see only disappointments.

Never look at your feet because you'll see only hurdles.

Look towards your winning line and you'll see hope.

Always tell yourself, yes, I can.

In no time you will be what and who you have always wanted to be,.

Most of all in the name of justice, give the opportunity to the muffled voices to be heard.

Well, thank you for joining me.

Let's meet again, same time, same space with another inspiring guest.

I want to thank my guest Mpho Dinta and my producer John Brown.

This is yours, Everett Ndlovu.