

ONE WITH THE EARTH Environmentalist Grace Masuku pictured in Cape Town this year as part of photographer and film maker Adrian Steirn's 21 Icons South Africa series PHOTOS: ADRIAN STEIRN AND GARY VAN WYK



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In my culture
we've got a
saying: Every
parent is your
parent, every
grandmother
is your
grandmother



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Mother

This week, 21 Icons shines the spotlight on our fifth icon in the second series, renowned traditionalist, conservationist and environmentalist Grace Masuku.

As a descendant of the Bakgatla-ba-Kgafela people, Masuku has worked tirelessly to preserve the tradition and culture of the Batswana people.

She has established numerous community outreach projects aimed at improving the lives of people in her community and restoring their traditional respect for the environment.

The portrait features Masuku standing outdoors, becoming part of the land she stands on as roots surround her feet and legs - a reference to her connection to African heritage and culture, as well as her work with medicinal herbs and plants.

Masuku is also deeply rooted in her community and strongly believes in the ubuntu creed that "without you, there is no me". She represents a South Africa that many of us have left behind.

She talks about her life as a community leader whose role as a healer and environmentalist has seen her not only working with key international bodies, including the International Union for Conservation of Nature, but also becoming a custodian of her culture. She has established museums to preserve the heritage of the Batswana tribe. Her desire to keep old customs alive is driven by her belief that losing touch with the moon, the stars and the land is equal to letting go of

nurture

the hand that guides all of life's most important processes.

Masuku says it was inevitable she should feel a connection to humanity after growing up in a community where there were no boundaries between families.

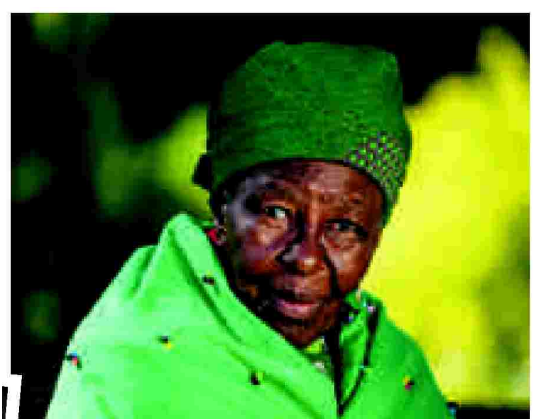
She's equally connected to nature - again, not surprising because nature has very much been a part of her life since early childhood.

"Wherever we went, our elders would point out what this plant could be used for, how that plant could be used ... We weren't even aware that, as they were doing it, we were attending a school of some sort."

There's no denying Masuku's life is entwined with the rhythms of the land around her and, by extension, with the people who share that space. It's the best way to live, she insists, commenting on the sadness of life in the city, where people have "become alien to themselves" as they chase intangible goals.

Her life stands as a stark contrast: she has always striven to be an anchor of the community, a role she

OF THE EARTH



first fulfilled by qualifying as a teacher before going on to become a school principal.

While she may have bade farewell to the classroom, her work in education continues in the broader sense: her goal now is to ensure that her people understand the importance of their culture, that they do not lose their essence by becoming beguiled by the conveniences of a modern world and thus lose sight of who they are.

Although Masuku is happiest and most alive when with the members of her community, she has kept august company, having attended college with former archbishop and fellow icon Desmond Tutu. As befits someone who values humility above all other attributes, she dismisses notions of his greatness, describing him as "just like any other boy you know".

"There were so many of us that became important in our own way. This is something I wish our children could see when they are in the classroom - the impact you have when your goal is to make life better for others," she says.

- Watch Grace Masuku tonight on SABC3 at 8.27pm
- For more information, visit 21icons.com
- Download Zappar from your app store, zap the icon and watch the trailer



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