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Focus: WOMEN / BILINGUAL (FRENCH)
Nokutela Dube (S. Africa), Émilienne
Moungou-Mouyabi (Congo)
Tribute to John S. Pobee (Ghana)



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Now published quarterly, with all issues available on line, the intent of the *JACB* is to promote the research, publication, and use of African Christian biography within Africa by serving as an academically credible but publicly accessible source of information on Christianity across the continent. Content will always include biographies already available in the database itself, but original contributions related to African Christian biography or to African church history are also welcome. While the policy of the *DACB* itself has been to restrict biographical content to subjects who are deceased, the *JACB* also includes interviews with select living African church leaders and academics.

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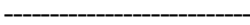
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Introduction: History as Lament and Laugh

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* is the second installment of our 2020 women-themed issues and the second to offer bilingual content. Whereas the January issue focused on early female pioneers of African Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom and in Ethiopia, this one jumps to the twentieth century to direct its lens at the lives of two women who had but a short time to leave their lasting legacy. Their biographies open an intimate window into the ways in which we can experience history as lament or as laugh—and sometimes as a bit of both.

In the first one, Dr. Médine Moussounga Keener tells the heartbreaking story of Émilienne Mboundou-Mouyabi, a rising star in the Evangelical Church of Congo whose life was cut short by illness at the age of thirty-two. As the first female pastor to be ordained, Émilienne was a brilliant and inspirational figure, blazing the trail for those among her Christian sisters who, like her felt a burning call to serve God as pastors. Sadly, only a few years into her ministry, she died of complications due to malaria after the birth of her first child. In closing her account, Dr. Moussounga Keener gives voice to the lament of the Congolese Christians and women of the EEC who still mourn her loss thirty years later. She underlines that, even though her death left “an emptiness that cannot be filled,” Émilienne made a powerful impact on the women she ministered to: “She had a burden and a vision for the women of the EEC that became a recurring theme in her talks, ‘*Kilokola ya bakento me kulunga*’ [The hour of women is here]: ‘We need to serve the Lord; not only me, but all women after me.’”

Nokutela Dube’s life, narrated by Dr. Heather Hughes, is also, like Émilienne’s, a story of lament. However, because it describes the successful recovery of Nokutela’s rich legacy, her story is a triumph of women’s history in South Africa. Nokutela is remembered as a founder of the Ohlange School, of the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal*, and as a talented musician and composer of Zulu hymns. She and her husband John Langelibalele Dube worked together in education for many years. He eventually divorced her because she was unable to have children. Nokutela died within a year and was buried in a grave that remained unmarked for ninety-three years, her legacy forgotten. Then, thanks to the work of historians Dr. Hughes and Dr. Cherif Keita, the memory of Nokutela Dube’s life was restored. In 2014, her grave was declared a National Heritage site. Nokutela was posthumously given the Mahatma Gandhi Satyagraha Award and inducted into Freedom Park, a national memorial that recognizes those who gave

their lives for freedom. Here is history as laugh: it narrates the joy of recovered memories, of truth and justice restored.

In the next article, Dr. Casely Essamuah, secretary of the Global Christian Forum, pays tribute to the life and work of Ghanaian theologian John Samuel Pobe who died on January 22, 2020. This African giant left a rich legacy as a “scholar, theologian, writer, mentor, educator, ecumenist and missiologist,” as well as an advocate for women theologians and scholars.

The final piece, by Editorial Manager Dr. Kyama Mugambi, presents the vision of African Theological Network Press (www.atnpress.com). ATNP, he argues, is one key to unlocking the future of Christianity in Africa by creating a network for the publication and dissemination of quality publications for theological education throughout the continent.

Now, as the 2020 season of Lent draws to an end, may the lives of these African Christian ancestors offer you an opportunity to lament and to laugh, even in the midst of the extraordinary circumstances we face today on a global scale. As the Psalmist reminds us, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Ps. 30:5b)

Michèle Miller Sigg
Managing Editor

Mboungou-Mouyabi, Émilienne (née Niangui Loubota)
1957-1989
Evangelical Church of Congo
Congo

Childhood

Émilienne was born in Congo-Brazzaville, on December 24, 1957, in the small town of Kimongo, in the Niari region. Daughter of Loubota Mbinda Albert, deacon in the annex of Kimouélé in the consistory of Louila-Kimongo [1], and Dienze Tsimba Esther, parishioner of the same annex, Émilienne was raised in a God-fearing family. Eldest in a family of eight children, she was full of love for her siblings and wished them to succeed in life. Her younger brother, Misère Emmanuel Loubota, remembers her as follows: "She was an older sister of good character; she was kind. She was especially very cheerful and loved to have her little brothers at her side. She played the role of a mother toward her siblings." [2]

Émilienne attended Emery Patrice Lumumba elementary school from 1965 to 1972, in Kimongo. She began her middle school at Sollat Hilaire in the same town. Disciplined and diligent, Émilienne had excellent grades. But her brilliant scholastic progress came to an abrupt end when she decided to abandon her studies in 1974, while she was in seventh grade. This decision was not undertaken lightly; in fact it shows Émilienne's maturity at the age of 15. Émilienne was frequently "courted by teachers" and she decided to leave in order to avoid "falling into temptation." [3]

Deplorably, the sexual harassment of minors by some teachers caused many of them to drop out of school, to contract venereal diseases, or to end up with unwanted pregnancies and a future life of sexual promiscuity. Instead of compromising her integrity, Émilienne chose to drop out of school and walk in the fear of God. She undertook the only decision that was within her reach in order to express her protest against a practice that debased and continues to degrade innocent young girls. She has thus left us an eloquent example of obedience to the Lord.

Calling

Émilienne was actively involved in the different programs of her annex and parish. Baptized in 1972, she was already at that time the leader of the local choir.

After abandoning her studies, Émilienne devoted herself to God's work. She felt a burning desire to serve the Lord. During that period she taught catechism and was mentored by the evangelist John Paul Makosso. Having seen her dedication to the Lord and having perceived her call, he commended her to pastor Roger Bavibidila, president of the consistory and head of five parishes. In 1974, Émilienne was appointed consistorial secretary in Diambala [4] under the leadership of pastor Bavibidila. This position helped her assert the desire to serve God full-time, even though no woman in the EEC had become a pastor since the synodal Council had voted that women could become pastors in the Church. [5]

Émilienne was not the first Congolese woman who wished to serve the Lord as a pastor. Indeed, since 1969, when the EEC allowed women in pastoral ministry, there had been unfortunate candidates who did not even get the opportunity to take the pastoral test. In the parish of Mbanza Tsibi, for example, annex Kampala, there was a woman who had applied to become pastor. Unfortunately, she was denied that possibility and was not even allowed to become an evangelist. [6] Adversity against the pastoral ministry of women was like a wall in their way.

As a woman, becoming a pastor was an important step for young Émilienne, and the path was not without drawbacks. Difficulties began with her own family, as her brother Misère Loubota explains, "At the beginning of her calling, our parents believed that it was an adventurous thing to have a woman practice pastoral ministry." [7] It must have been a shock to her parents to know that their daughter wanted to venture into territory that was new and probably uncertain in their eyes.

Even though her premature abandonment of her studies weakened her, she thought about taking the pastoral exam. Determined, Émilienne confided in her pastor about her sense of being called to full time ministry. After that, pastor Bavibidila recommended her and two others, Elie Ndagami and Ndala Joel, to the synodal Council as pastoral candidates.

By encouraging her to follow God's call, Pastor Bavibidila displayed a spirit of humility and wisdom before God. He recognized that this young woman had the necessary talents and character to serve her God full time, and he decided to encourage and mentor her.

In 1976, the three candidates took the test for theological training at the Seminary of Mantsimou in Brazzaville. Émilienne was the only one to pass it. [8] It was a big step towards the fulfillment of her goal. On October 1, 1976, the young Émilienne Nianguï Loubota, age 19, started her classes at the Seminary of Mantsimou, the only woman among the men.

Pastoral training

Émilienne's arrival at the seminary was a turning point in her life and in the life of the EEC. Pastoral training has two components: academic formation and practical training.

Academic training. Émilienne started with the pre-pastoral cycle reserved for students who do not have a middle school certificate. [9] She worked hard, both in her classes and [to obtain] the national middle school certificate. After her success, she started her pastoral training, which lasted five years. However, her adjustment was not easy. It was very daunting to find herself the only woman among all these young men as she admitted in an interview with Raymond Bitemo, [10] "The beginnings were difficult. At times I felt deficient." [11]

In this male environment, she had to overcome the difficulties of adaptation. After a few weeks, Émilienne began to feel comfortable with her teachers and classmates. She stated in the same interview, "Very quickly, I grew accustomed to my colleagues that I now considered like my brothers, and I was their sister." [12]

Émilienne was a young woman with very pronounced personal principles. For example, upon her arrival to the seminary, she refused to integrate [13] into the pastors' wives group saying, "What will I learn from them?" [14] Far from being proud, Émilienne expressed a fundamental need to spend time with classmates. She felt accepted and enjoyed sharing and studying with them.

As months went by, Émilienne felt relaxed among her colleagues, flourished in her personality and found her place. Pastor Tsibatala, one of her colleagues at the time, said, "She was a man among men; no one could dominate her." [15]

Émilienne was not afraid to give her opinion; she displayed exceptional bravery and honesty. Pastor Moundanga remembered her in these terms: "When there were misunderstandings or small conflicts between us, she was neither afraid nor ashamed to denounce the one that was wrong." [16] Pastor Loussakou has added, "She was not afraid to speak up; when things were not going well, she expressed herself openly and frankly." [17]

Even as she was smiling and welcoming, Émilienne was very serious in her calling and studies. On the academic front, she was coping very well. Her classmates recognized that she was intelligent and was always among the six best. During this period, the presence of a woman among student-pastors came as a shock to some people. When the illustrious evangelist pastor Ndoundou Daniel

first saw Émilienne Niangui Loubota among the student-pastors, he was very upset. He called three of them: Bamana, Yindoula, and Kibalou, to inquire into the reason why this young woman was in the seminary. They explained to him that she was being trained as a pastor too. Having realized this, pastor Ndoundou advised them to mentor her well. [18] Professors, missionaries and classmates helped young Émilienne to thrive academically.

Preaching practicum. Émilienne, like all the other pastors in training, had to spend two months of each year doing a practicum, during the dry season, in two different parishes. She spent her time in the parishes of Kimouélé and Kitsindi. The evangelists [19] and her brother, who sometimes accompanied and mentored her, played a considerable role in her spiritual growth.

She was perceived as a tireless servant of the Lord. Mrs. Jeanne Balehola, who was a young girl in the Kindounga annex (of the Kitsindi parish), remembered that period well, because Émilienne shared her room, due to lack of other accommodations. This is how she describes Émilienne's ministry: "When she came to our parish with many annexes, she spent three days in an annex, and was accompanied by an evangelist on these tours; she preached and sometimes led the morning worship (6:00 to 7:00 am) as well as the evening worship (8:00 to 10:00 pm)." [20]

Émilienne was "eloquent in her preaching; she had the art of communicating the Word of God." [21] During her internship, Émilienne would take time to communicate with women of all ages. Often she would say "I came for you mothers and girls. Come forward at the end of the service so that we may pray." [22] She spoke tirelessly, encouraged, and prayed with women. She was "nice, open, cheerful and friendly." [23] Émilienne did not put herself on a pedestal, but participated in the activities with the parishioners.

On the first two Wednesdays of October, student-pastors talked about their activities during the practicum, in addition to the report that the consistory sent to the seminar. Émilienne, who worked as hard as the others, did not find it difficult to speak of her activities during the internship. To be among the forerunners was a difficult task, as challenges and obstacles to her ministry abounded. She acknowledged this in her interview with Raymond Bitemo: "But I must point out that the learning of any job is difficult. Problems abound. In my case, I have sometimes known difficult moments in my training. But with the help of God, the advice and encouragement of pastors Nkounkou and Buana, I was able to surmount all obstacles." [24]

As a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, she also experienced 2 Timothy 3: 12, which says, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." The scars left by moments of misunderstanding, humiliation,

and attacks on her person and ministry were so deep that her pain and suffering can be felt through the remarks reported in the preface to the thesis that she defended at the end of her seminary years: “Since I started here, I recognize that in this seminary I have been sometimes ridiculed, unfairly attacked, wrongly criticized by certain persons.” [25]

Despite these persecutions, Émilienne ran her race. In June of 1985 she received her pastoral degree and she was ready for divine service. Those nine years of pastoral training at Mantsimou were a great achievement and a first, as she put it: “Being a pastor was for me a goal. I reached it and I feel a deep sense of joy.” [26]

At the end of her pastoral training, the whole church was thankful to God for her heroism and endurance. Joseph Mandzoungou described her graduation as “The EVENT in the history of the EEC,” because it was the first time since the start of the Swedish missionary work that gave birth to the Evangelical Church of Congo that a woman was among the pastors. [27] And Raymond Bitemo spoke of the first “female product” of the EEC.

Émilienne’s graduation did not go unnoticed in the country. The national newspaper *Mweti* published an article that began by announcing that among “the 27 students graduating this year from the Theological Seminary of Mantsimou, a place of honor is bestowed to Mrs. Mboundou-Mouyabi, born Niangui Loubota Émilienne.” [28]

Her colleagues were pleased with her prowess. Pastor Jean Baptiste Milongo said that she was “the pride of our class.” The Reverend Dr. Dominique Tsibatala spoke of “a blessed class.” Her family and her church were proud of her. The EEC started to make plans to send her to Sweden to continue her studies. Émilienne was honored that day and hailed as a symbol of winds of change that were blowing in the EEC. She herself envisioned her imminent ministry as a sign of openness to women in pastoral ministry and as a movement of progress within the EEC:

The joy of being the first woman pastor translates in me as a sign of our church growth and Christian women’s awareness to work more with the men for the advancement of the work of the Lord. That is why I invite all women, including girls who feel the calling to become pastors, to not back down, but pray and go forward with faith. [29]

Marriage

Towards the end of her studies, Émilienne was troubled by the question of marriage. She feared God, walking in the purity of heart and body, seeking his will. Émilienne did not want to marry a layman for fear that he would prevent her from freely exercising her pastoral ministry. [30] At that time, three of the student-pastors were single: two male students and her. Émilienne received a marriage proposal from one of the student-pastors, but because of opposition in the family and probably other factors, she declined the offer.

In 1982, Rev. Dr. Pierre Mboundou Mouyabi returned from France. As a PhD student in Paris, Pierre was abandoned by his wife, who found him to be too poor. [31] He arrived in the Congo as a bruised and divorced father. He was appointed at the Mantsimou Seminary to teach New Testament. It was in this seminary and in the context of his work that he first saw Émilienne Niangu-Loubota, who was one of his students. A few months later, he proposed marriage to her. Encouraged and advised by pastor Madiata and his wife, she accepted his proposal.

Émilienne was a very bright student and her professors saw a future both for her and for the EEC in the pursuit of her studies. Therefore, her marriage to Dr. Mboundou-Mouyabi disappointed some leaders of the Church and probably some missionaries too. Some of them even verbalized their disapproval, since Mboundou Mouyabi had conflicting relationships with a few of his colleagues and leaders in the Church.

But this did not prevent the couple from celebrating their traditional marriage in 1982, in Kimouélé. Then, on January 30, 1984, their civil marriage ceremony was carried out by the President of the Court, Dimynat Diangala, in Dolisie. Thus, they became the first pastoral couple of the EEC. Émilienne was pleased to have married a servant of God, someone who had the same vision for lost souls and for the work of God. She confided to Raymond Bitemo in an interview: "My joy is complete to have a husband who is a pastor and shares the same aspirations as me. This greatly comforts me." [32]

As a wife and mother, Émilienne was a benevolent woman and a vigorous worker. She cared for her husband's children, having taught them what she had received. Her step-daughter Viviane Kombo remembered her with the following words: "We have lived five solid years, rich in daily emotions. She was a mother, and the day of her death, it was a tragedy." [33] Pastor Ruth-Annie Mampembe-Coyault, her other stepdaughter, speaks of "a woman rather low-key, very hard working with her hands: in Mouyondzi, she planted her own vegetable gardens, in addition to her pastoral ministry." [34] Recalling their life together, widower Mboundou-Mouyabi spoke with nostalgia of "five years of peace and pastoral joy." [35]

At the end of her studies, Émilienne and her husband were sent to the consistory of Kolo and began their ministry.

Ministry

The minutes of the synodal council of the EEC in Brazzaville, dated July 3 to 5, 1985, state that Pierre Mboundou-Mouyabi and his wife were sent to the consistory of Kolo. At that time some leaders of the Church did not want a pastoral couple to serve in the same parish. Mr. and Mrs. Mboundou-Mouyabi were therefore assigned to different parishes. He had the responsibility of two parishes: Mouyondzi and Kinguala, in addition to the youth of the consistory, while his wife was responsible for the parish of Mouzanga.

Émilienne was ready to put into practice the words of wisdom she had uttered a few months earlier in an interview with Raymond Bitemo:

To lead a parish, is to lead men. It is a difficult task, but what is important is that the work is organized and responsibilities well-defined. The pastor is always helped in his task by advisors, deacons, deaconesses and believers themselves who are his allies.” [36]

Émilienne left her husband and her step-daughters and went to the parish that had been assigned to her. She was warmly welcomed by her parishioners and served her Lord wholeheartedly. However, Mouzanga was a highly malaria-contaminated and fairly primitive area. Access to drinking water and food required considerable efforts. Life in Mouzanga was a real challenge for her. Viviane, who visited this parish with her step-mother, recalled:

She was sent in a remote village of Mouyondzi. She left her home and went to this village to serve the Lord. She came back every two weeks or so. It was really a challenge for her as a woman. The living conditions in the village were very rudimentary. I remember. I went there once with her. But parishioners made sure she had water and food; things that were difficult to have. She had a very good contact with the Christians in this village. [37]

Émilienne knew whom she had put her faith in, and it was with joy that she proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ in those circumstances. She was very open in her sermons. With her soft and captivating voice, she shared with the congregation what God put in her heart, trying to help them understand the

mysteries of God's Word. Sometimes, at the end of her sermons, she would allow her listeners to ask questions, which she was always quick to answer. [38]

Courageous and determined, she treated her parishioners and those who came in contact with her with compassion. Émilienne abhorred lies and was known for her truthful behavior. People were attracted by her charisma and personality. She was a convener of the masses. Émilienne carried out her ministry with dedication, efficiency, and good will, even though separation from her family for part of the month was a considerable sacrifice. Émilienne was "a reasonable woman and [an] outstanding woman." [39]

After she had served in Mouzanga for some time, Émilienne struggled with malaria, like the rest of the people. The regional physician, "a little panicked" [40] because of the resurgence of crises of malaria in the area, suggested to the EEC that it was a bit risky for a young mother to live in these conditions. After some consideration, the church sent Émilienne to Mouyondzi, where she served with her husband. However, the good times spent in Mouzanga were not forgotten. Women could serve God as pastors just like men. "The myth is broken." [41]

Work in Mouyondzi took a different form as Émilienne was now sharing the responsibilities of the parish with her husband. The pastoral life still was not easy, especially on financial grounds. With a monthly salary of 28,000 francs (about \$61) and 55,000 francs (\$120) for her husband, Émilienne resorted to planting peanut and cassava gardens to supplement the needs of her family. During two years of service in the consistory of Kolo, Émilienne showed a passion for feeding God's people spiritually. She often went on the road to speak where the Church needed her services.

As the first woman pastor, Émilienne's work was not confined to her parish. In 1987, after working for two years in the consistory of Kolo, she was removed from her parish to facilitate her appointment to the EEC's department for work among women, whose headquarters were in Brazzaville. That department, chaired at that time by Mrs. Sikou Philomène, aimed for the well-being of women. Or, as stated by David Mboundou, its aims were "the struggle for the rights and duties of women." [42] This appointment caused some tension in Émilienne's family and marriage because she often traveled between Mouyondzi and Brazzaville to fulfill the many requirements linked to her new position. Mrs. Loubamba remembers those times as follows: "We often met and had a close relationship. I was a member of the national organization L'Œuvre Féminine. She worked there. She always had a vision. She travelled with Mama Sikou Philomène." [43]

In March of 1987, Émilienne was ordained as a pastor in the EEC, along with the rest of her class. Her ordination was a memorable day for the women of the EEC and a great historic event for the Church in the sense of change. Mrs. Loubamba stated: "the women were honored and happy and they gave donations. We cried with joy when she was ordained." [44] It was not only the women of the EEC who saluted the first female pastor, but the whole Church celebrated its "first female product."

It is important to mention that Émilienne's ministry was profoundly influenced by her prayer life. She drew her strength and inspiration from God. Her parents in Kimouélé recognized this dimension of her life:

It is through prayer that she managed to become a pastor. [When she] was getting ready for the exam, in all the letters she sent to the parents, she did not forget to ask them to pray a lot. *It's through prayer that she succeeded.* She liked prayer. She sometimes prayed alone or in a group. [45]

Monique Loubassou said she was a woman of prayer, and evangelist François Mvoubi-Poungui affirmed that "she had spiritual gifts and loved prayer."

Her death

In 1988, the church leaders decided that the best five students from the class of 1985 would take the entrance exam for the Protestant Theological Faculty of Yaoundé in Cameroon. As part of the group, Émilienne traveled to Brazzaville in January of 1989 to prepare for and to take the exam. At that time, she was pregnant with her second child.

Shortly after her arrival at the seminary, she suffered from malaria and was treated by a Swedish nurse. As her health did not improve, her husband came hastily to Brazzaville to be with her. She was taken to Makélé-kélé hospital where medical examinations showed that she was suffering from anemia and high blood pressure. In addition, her pregnancy threatened to end in a miscarriage. She was therefore hospitalized on February 21, 1989. On May 10, she gave birth by C-section. But after the birth of her daughter, her blood pressure remained dangerously high. Fifteen days later, on May 25 at 4:30 pm, Émilienne Mboungou-Mouyabi, at age thirty-two, entered into glory to be with the Lord.

Her death was received as a shock that paralyzed members of the EEC. Raymond Bitemo captured the atmosphere of the moment: "The news of her

death spread the same evening in the capital as a wave whose brutal shock unnerved Christians and especially women, who were almost all in tears.” [46] Her death left a huge feeling of emptiness in the consistory of Louila-Kimongo, and people grieve her premature departure to this day. [47] Members of her graduating class and her family were deeply affected. Pastor Jean Baptiste Milongo said “I heard about her death in the train between Mindouli and Missafou. When they announced this to me, I almost fell. I went to Brazzaville.” [48] Pastor Tsibatala said, “She has left a void for our class; it was a shock. Until today this regret is there. She was the first to leave us; very young she left us.” [49]

Mrs. Loubamba agreed: “She left us one evening; her sudden departure perturbed me.” [50] Her mother (who took care of the orphaned baby), traumatized by her daughter’s premature death and overwhelmed by grief, spent five years in mourning and did not want any of her remaining children to become pastors. As for Émilienne’s husband, he never fully recovered from losing her, and it was clear during an interview with the author that his pain was still present.

The mortuary vigil held in Brazzaville, in the parish of Bacongo, was filled with members of the EEC, the Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, and the Kimbanguist church. At this vigil, the desperate prayer of a Christian woman expressed the state of mind and the thoughts of many: “Lord, in our churches we have many men pastors and we only had this one as a woman pastor. Why did you not choose to take a pastor from among the men and let the only and first woman pastor live? God, you’re unfair.” [51] Five days later, accompanied by a procession of hundreds of people, Émilienne’s body was taken to Dolisie by train, then on to Kimouélé by truck. It was with dismay, pain, and prayer that she was buried in the family cemetery.

Her premature death was seen as a tragedy. Some women in the consistory of Louila-Kimongo who wanted to serve God as pastors renounced their calling for fear that they would eventually meet the same fate. Evangelist Mvoubi summarized their feelings in these words: “In the consistory people have callings, but unanswered callings. Women, especially, when they think of her death, abandon the calling.” [52]

In the eyes of those who loved her, Émilienne should not have died; she still had work to do. She left an emptiness that could not be filled. However, Émilienne went to be with her God and heard these words: “Enter in [to] your rest, good and faithful servant.”

Conclusion

Émilienne Niangui Loubota lived a short life, but she left a considerable and positive impact that is still significant today. She had a burden and a vision for the women of the EEC that became a recurring theme in her talks, "*Kilokola ya bakento me kulunga*" [The hour of women is here]: "We need to serve the Lord; not only me, but all women after me." [53]

Her ambition and prayer was to see the Lord touch Congolese society through a cohort of women pastors. Thus, she continuously encouraged young women to serve the Lord in the Church. And her message was joyfully received by the women of the EEC, who were delighted to finally have a woman pastor. Her footprint in the EEC is huge and indelible. As Pastor Alphonse Loussakou said, "She broke the myth of not receiving women in the pastoral ministry." [54] Dr. Tsibatata exclaimed: "her testimony was to be understood like this: that we do not recognize a pastor by his cloak," [55] (appearances can be deceiving). Her example has helped many sisters take the decisive step toward their pastoral ministry. Monique Loubassou, who became the second woman pastor in the EEC, is one example, and here is her testimony:

In 1985, when they graduated from seminary, our Mayangui choir came to sing at the closing service of the academic year of the Seminary of Mantsimou. When I saw her, I thought to myself, as the pastoral calling has been burning in me for years, why can I not be like this woman pastor? Since she has dared, I can also do it. [56]

The vision that God opened before Émilienne, one of women serving the Lord in pastoral ministry, was impressive and ambitious. She demonstrated it through her life, and others have done the same. Pastor Ruth-Annie Mampembe-Coyault says in the same spirit, "I think that her example has left a big impression on the women of the EEC and has allowed them to understand that it is possible for them to serve God as pastors." [57]

At this point we want to note that Émilienne was not the first woman to attend seminary. The first woman, whose name need not be mentioned here, was approved when the seminary was still in Ngouedi, but she was not able to continue her training because of sin in her life, and she was sent away. [58] Émilienne did not shame her Lord. She disgraced neither her family nor her church. She left the exemplary testimony of a woman dedicated to her Lord, someone whose deepest desire was to serve him wholeheartedly. She opened the way for other women pastors. Pastor Laurent Loubassou said, "As she had not betrayed her calling, her main contribution, in my opinion, has been an incentive for the EEC to continue to accept women to full time pastoral ministry." [59]

Pastor Tsibatata has concurred, saying, "It is thanks to her that today we have other women pastors." [60] Today the Evangelical Church of the Congo has fifteen women-pastors and evangelists.

Émilienne Niangui-Loubota is a symbol of the emancipation of women in the EEC and the fight against rampant sexism. Through her, the Lord has shown that He can use women as well as men in His service. Her admission into pastoral ministry brought about a new atmosphere in the EEC. She was up to the task that was entrusted to her. Her courage, enthusiasm, and determination opened the door to divine service for other women. In our eyes her death was premature, but God accomplished His purpose in her short life. May our hearts not forget this exceptional woman, a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. [61]

Médine Moussounga Keener and Eliser Moussounga

Author's note: The desire to write the biography of the first woman pastor of the Evangelical Church of Congo (EEC) originated while I was working on the article on Pastor Jean Mboundou. As I read through the booklet *Biography [sic] of the Pastors of the Evangelical Church of the Congo*, published in 2009, I noticed that Pastor Émilienne Mboundou-Mouyabi (née Niangui Loubota) was not included. This led me to ask the following questions: Why was she not included? Who was she? What has she done?

Pastor Monique Loubassou experienced similar difficulties when she was doing research for her thesis: "I defended my thesis at the end of my seminary years on the topic of the women's organization *Ceuvre Féminine*. And nobody supplied me with more information about her [Émilienne Niangui Loubota] and her work. (Monique Loubassou, interview by author, November 22, 2010, Brazzaville)

Pastor Jean Baptiste Milongo noted that "the whole Church does not have enough recollection of this woman." (Jean Baptiste Milongo, interview by author, January 20, 2011, Brazzaville)

The role of the first woman pastor of the EEC is too important to be forgotten and relegated to the past. That is why Pastor Eliser Moussounga of the EEC and I decided to write this article. We want to express our sincere appreciation to all those who kindly responded to our survey and have thus enabled us to revisit the life of this remarkable woman.

The admission of women to the pastoral ministry represents a turning point in the Church, and the Evangelical Church of Congo is no exception. For these women pioneers, who faced the socio-cultural pressures of their country

and other religious obstacles, it was a very complex period of time in their life and in their ministry. Acclaimed in *Mweti* (the most popular national newspaper in the Congo in the 1980s), the first woman pastor is mentioned on the first page of issue 1193, dated Friday July 5, 1985, as "woman-Pastor." Also, she was featured on the cover of *Le Chemin*, the EEC newspaper (issue 12, July-September 1985) with the phrase "Finally a woman pastor." Émilienne Niangui Loubota has become an emblematic figure of the EEC, a pioneer in the field of pastoral ministry.

Notes:

1. This name is taken from the Louila River and the Kimongo district.
2. Misère Loubota, interview by author, November 24, 2010, Brazzaville.
3. Loubota, interview.
4. The consistory of Diambala is now called Louila-Kimongo consistory.
5. The minutes of the Synodal Council of the Evangelical Church of the Congo, held in Brazzaville from March 18 to 20, 1969, on the proposal of the Matsimou seminary, reported on page 16 the adoption of the principle of the admission of women to seminary.
6. Alphonse Loussakou, interview by author, Nov. 16, 2010, Brazzaville.
7. Loubota interview.
8. François Mvumbi Pougui, interview by author, January 26, 2010, Brazzaville.
9. This degree allows students to go to high school.
10. We would like to express our gratitude to Mr. Raymond Bitemo, journalist with the newspaper *Le Chemin*. Thanks to his numerous articles, documentaries, and photos, we have a wonderful historical record, a treasure of the Evangelical Church of Congo.
11. Raymond Bitemo interview, *Le Chemin* # 12, July-Sept. 1985, p. 11.
12. Bitemo, interview.
13. Jean Baptiste Milongo, interview by author, undated.
14. Remarks reported by pastor Moundanga Bititi Dominique, her colleague at the time, Sunday January 23, 2011, Brazzaville.
15. Pastor Tsibatata, interview by author, December 9, 2010, Brazzaville.
16. Pastor Moundanga Bititi Dominique, interview by author, undated.
17. Pastor Alphonse Loussakou, interview by author, undated.
18. Recollection shared by Alphonse Loussaka.
19. During her practicum, the following evangelists accompanied her on a rotating basis: Tongo Felix, Tsimba Mboukou Zebedee, Dilou

- Maurice, Moussitou Gabriel, Toubi Benjamin, Bayekola Raymond, Jean Paul Mouissila, Mboumba Philip, and Makoundou Damas.
20. Jeanne Balehola, interview by author, Nov. 23, 2010, Brazzaville.
 21. Moundanga, interview.
 22. Balehola, interview.
 23. Balehola, interview.
 24. *Le chemin* #12, p. 10.
 25. Mboungou-Mouyabi, Émilienne, “La conception de notre père selon Martin Luther [The Conception of ‘Our Father’ According to Martin Luther]” (unpublished thesis, Mantsimou Seminary, Brazzaville, 1985).
 26. *Le chemin* #12, p.11.
 27. *Le chemin* #12, p. 10.
 28. *Mweti* #1193, July 5, 1985, p. 4.
 29. *Le chemin* #12, p. 11.
 30. Mboungou Mouyabi, interview by author, March 2010, Mouyondzi (Congo).
 31. Mboungou Mouyabi, interview.
 32. *Le chemin* #12, p. 11.
 33. Viviane Kombo, interview by author through email, July 12, 2010.
 34. Pastor Ruth-Annie Mampembe-Coyault, interview by author through email, July 16, 2010.
 35. Mboungou Mouyabi, interview.
 36. *Le chemin* #12, p.11.
 37. Kombo, interview.
 38. Moyo Jean Claude, interview by author, November 24, 2010, Brazzaville.
 39. Tsibatata, interview.
 40. Mboungou Mouyabi, interview.
 41. Tsibatata, interview.
 42. *Le chemin* #28, P.2.
 43. Mrs. Loubamba, interview by author, January 5, 2011, Brazzaville.
 44. Loubamba, interview.
 45. [Loubota] family in Kimouélé, interview by author, 2010, Kimouélé.
 46. *Le chemin* #28, p.4.
 47. Wilfrid Moussitou, interview by author, Nov. 23, 2010, Brazzaville.
 48. Milongo, interview.
 49. Tsibatata, interview.
 50. Loubamba, interview.

51. Prayer reported by Misère Loubota.
52. François Mvoumbi Pongui, interview by author, undated.
53. Balehola, interview.
54. Alphonse Loussakou, interview.
55. Tsibatata, interview.
56. Monique Loubassou, interview.
57. Ruth Annie Coyault, interview by author, undated.
58. Loubamba, interview.
59. Laurent Loubassou, interview.
60. Tsibatata, interview.
61. Pastor Mbougou-Mbayi has finally remarried—his wife’s name is Pauline Ngounga—and they now live in Brazzaville.

Other sources:

Bakissa, Jeanne Rose (pastor in the EEC), interview by author, November 2, 2010, Brazzaville (Congo).

Oniangue, Jules Albert (pastor in the EEC), interview by author, November 5, 2010, Brazzaville (Congo).

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Mbougou-Mouyabi, Émilienne [VERSION FRANÇAISE]
(née Niangui Loubota)
1957-1989
Église Évangélique du Congo
Congo

Enfance

Émilienne Mbougou-Mouyabi est née au Congo-Brazzaville, le 24 décembre 1957 à Kimongo Poste, dans la région du Niari. Fille de Loubota Mbinda Albert, diacre à l'annexe de Kimoulé au consistoire de Louila-Kimongo, [1] et de Dienze Tsimba Esther, paroissienne de l'annexe de Kimoulé, Émilienne est élevée dans une famille craignant Dieu. Aînée d'une famille de huit enfants, elle était pleine d'amour pour ses petits frères et sœurs et souhaitait leur réussite à tous points de vue. Son frère cadet, Misère Emmanuel Loubota se souvient d'elle en ces termes : « Elle était une grande sœur de bonne moralité, gentille. Surtout elle était très souriante et aimait que ses petits frères soient toujours à ses côtés. Elle jouait le rôle d'une mère envers ses frères [et sœurs]. » [2]

Émilienne a fait ses études primaires de 1965 à 1972, à l'école primaire Emery Patrice Lumumba de Kimongo. Elle continua ses études secondaires au Collège d'Enseignement Général (C.E.G) Sollat Hilaire de Kimongo. Disciplinée, très assidue et travailleuse, Émilienne a de très bonnes notes scolaires. Mais sa brillante progression scolaire connaît une fin abrupte lorsqu'elle décide d'abandonner les études en 1974 alors qu'elle est en classe de cinquième. Cette décision n'est pas prise à la légère; en fait elle montre la maturité d'Émilienne à l'âge de quinze ans. Émilienne étant beaucoup « courtisée par les enseignants », décide de partir afin d'éviter de « tomber en tentation. » [3]

Notons ce fait déplorable: certains enseignants, en faisant des avances sexuelles auprès de leurs élèves mineures, sont la cause de l'arrêt des études, de maladies vénériennes, de grossesses non désirées ou d'une vie de promiscuité précoce pour plusieurs jeunes filles. Au lieu de compromettre son intégrité, Émilienne a préféré se retirer et marcher dans la crainte de Dieu. Elle a su prendre la décision qui était à sa portée pour protester contre une pratique qui avilissait et avait encore aujourd'hui des jeunes filles, victimes innocentes. Elle nous a ainsi laissé un exemple éloquent d'obéissance au Seigneur.

Son appel

Au niveau de l'église, Émilienne était activement engagée dans son annexe et sa paroisse. Baptisée en 1972, elle est déjà à cette époque dirigeante de la chorale locale.

Après avoir abandonné ses études, Émilienne se consacre à l'œuvre de Dieu. Elle sent brûler en elle le désir de servir son Seigneur. A cette époque elle enseigne le catéchisme et elle est encadrée par l'évangéliste Jean Paul Makosso. Celui-ci ayant vu son dévouement au Seigneur et ayant perçu son appel, la recommande auprès du pasteur Roger Bavibidila, président du consistoire et responsable de cinq paroisses.

Ainsi, au cours de l'année 1974, Émilienne est nommée secrétaire consistoriale à Diambala [4] sous la direction du pasteur Bavibidila. Son désir de servir Dieu à temps plein s'affirme, ministère qu'aucune femme au sein de l'EEC n'a pu encore exercer, même si le conseil synodal avait voté la possibilité aux femmes de devenir pasteurs au sein de l'église. [5]

Notons qu'Émilienne n'est pas la première femme congolaise qui aspire à servir le Seigneur en tant que pasteur. En effet, depuis 1969, l'EEC accepte les femmes au ministère pastoral, même si les candidates n'ont malheureusement pas encore pu franchir les portes du séminaire de Mantsimou. Dans la paroisse Mbanza Tsibi, par exemple, à l'annexe Kimpala, une femme avait postulé pour devenir pasteur. Le poste lui fut refusé et elle n'eut même pas l'autorisation de servir en tant qu'évangéliste. [6] L'adversité contre le ministère pastoral féminin constituait un mur tenant les prétendantes à l'écart.

Devenir femme-pasteur est donc un pas important à franchir et le chemin n'est pas sans embûches pour la jeune Émilienne. Les difficultés commencent au sein de sa propre famille, comme l'explique son frère Misère Loubota : « Au début de sa vocation, les parents croyaient que c'était de l'aventure de voir une femme exercer le ministère pastoral. » [7] Cela a dû être un choc pour ses parents de voir leur fille se lancer sur ce territoire nouveau et probablement incertain et aléatoire à leurs yeux.

Même si l'abandon prématuré de ses études la fragilise sur le plan intellectuel, elle envisage de se présenter au concours pastoral. Déterminée, Émilienne parle de sa vocation à son pasteur. A la suite de quoi, le président du consistoire, Pasteur Bavibidila, la recommande au conseil synodal comme candidate au concours en même temps qu'Elie Ndagami et Ndala Joël. Le Pasteur Bavibidila, fait preuve de sagesse et d'un esprit d'humilité devant Dieu. Il reconnaît que cette jeune femme a des talents et le caractère requis pour servir son Dieu à temps plein; il décide de l'encourager et de l'encadrer.

En 1976, quand les trois candidats présentent le concours d'entrée au Séminaire Théologique de Mantsimou à Brazzaville, Émilienne est la seule à être

admise. [8] C'est un grand pas vers l'accomplissement de sa vocation. Le premier octobre 1976, la jeune Émilienne Nianguï Loubota, âgée de dix-neuf ans, commence ses cours au séminaire de Mantsimou, seule femme parmi les hommes.

Sa formation pastorale

Son arrivée au séminaire constitue un tournant décisif dans sa propre vie et au sein de l'EEC. La formation pastorale a deux pôles : le pôle académique et le pôle pratique.

Formation théorique. Émilienne entre au séminaire pour suivre le cycle pré-pastoral (CPP), réservé aux étudiants qui n'ont pas le Brevet d'Études Moyennes Générales (BEMG). [9] Ayant le niveau de la 5^{ème}, elle commence au CPP3, équivalent de la quatrième. Conformément au règlement du séminaire, arrivée en CPP4, elle présente le BEMG comme candidate libre. Elle le réussit et obtient son examen de passage en classe supérieure. Elle poursuit donc ses études durant cinq ans.

Malgré cette réussite, l'adaptation n'est pas facile. C'est très intimidant de se retrouver seule femme parmi tous ces jeunes hommes comme elle le reconnaît lors d'une interview avec Raymond Bitemo [10]: « Les débuts étaient difficiles. J'étais à certains moments complexée. » [11] Dans ce milieu complètement masculin, il lui faut donc briser ce mur de difficultés liées à l'adaptation. Après quelques semaines, Émilienne commence à se sentir à l'aise avec ses collègues de classe et ses professeurs. Elle l'affirme dans le même entretien : « Mais très vite, je me suis habituée à mes collègues que je considérais désormais comme mes frères et j'étais leur sœur. » [12]

Émilienne est une jeune femme au caractère personnel très marqué. Par exemple, dès son arrivée au séminaire, elle refuse d'intégrer, voire de côtoyer [13] le groupe des épouses des pasteurs en se disant « Que vais-je apprendre d'elles ? » [14] Loin d'être orgueilleuse, Émilienne exprime un besoin fondamental, celui de passer du temps avec ses collègues de classe qui vont en partie contribuer à sa formation. Elle se sent acceptée et prend plaisir à partager et à étudier avec eux. Au fur et à mesure que les mois passent, détendue parmi ses collègues, Émilienne s'épanouit dans sa personnalité et trouve sa place. Voici ce qu'affirme le pasteur Tsibatata, un de ses collègues à l'époque : « Elle était un homme parmi les hommes, on ne pouvait pas la dominer. » [15]

Émilienne n'a pas peur de donner son opinion et fait preuve d'une bravoure et d'une honnêteté exceptionnelles. Le pasteur Moundanga se souvient d'elle en ces termes : « Lorsqu'il y avait des incompréhensions ou de petits conflits entre nous, elle n'avait pas peur ni honte de dénoncer celui qui avait tort. » [16]

Le pasteur Loussakou ajoute : « Elle ne mâchait pas ses mots ; quand ça ne marchait pas, elle le disait ouvertement et franchement. » [17]

Bien que souriante et accueillante, Émilienne est très sérieuse dans sa vocation et ses études. Sur le plan académique, elle se débrouille très bien. Ses collègues de classe reconnaissent qu'elle est intelligente et elle figure toujours parmi les six premiers de la classe.

Durant cette période, la présence d'une femme parmi les élèves-pasteurs est un choc pour certains. Lorsque l'illustre pasteur-évangéliste Noundou Daniel rencontre pour la première fois Émilienne Niangui Loubota parmi les élèves-pasteurs, il est scandalisé. Il appelle trois des leurs (Bamana, Yindoula, et Kibalou) pour s'enquérir du pourquoi de la présence dans cette institution de cette jeune femme. Ils lui expliquent avec conviction qu'elle poursuit comme eux ses études pastorales. L'ayant compris, le pasteur Noundou leur conseille alors de bien l'encadrer. [18] Les enseignants, les missionnaires, et les collègues de classe aident Émilienne à progresser sur le plan théorique.

Ses stages

De plus, dans le programme d'études, comme tous les autres pasteurs stagiaires, Émilienne doit consacrer deux mois chaque année, pendant la saison sèche, dans deux paroisses différentes pour un stage pratique. Émilienne effectue ses deux mois de stage dans les paroisses de Kimouélé et Kitsindi. Les évangélistes [19] (et parfois son frère) qui l'accompagnent et l'encadrent jouent un rôle important dans sa croissance spirituelle.

Elle est perçue comme une servante infatigable. Mme Balehola Jeanne, qui est à l'époque une jeune fille à l'annexe Kindounga (de la paroisse Kitsindi) se souvient bien de cette époque, car par manque de logement, elle et Émilienne cohabitent ensemble dans la même chambre. Voici comment elle décrit le travail d'Émilienne : « Lorsqu'elle venait dans notre paroisse aux multiples annexes, elle passait trois jours par annexe, accompagnée par un évangéliste. Lors de ces tournées, elle présidait et prêchait aux cultes du matin (6h à 7h) et du soir (20h à 22h). » [20] Émilienne est « éloquente en prédication ; elle a l'art de communiquer la parole de Dieu. [21]

Lors de ses stages, Émilienne communique beaucoup avec les femmes de tout âge. Souvent on l'entend dire « Je suis venue pour vous les mamans et les jeunes filles. Venez à la fin du culte pour que l'on prie. » [22] Elle ne se lasse pas de parler, d'encourager, et de prier avec les unes et les autres. « Gentille, ouverte, souriante, accueillante, » [23] Émilienne ne se met pas sur un piédestal, mais participe humblement aux activités avec les paroissiens.

Chaque mercredi de la première quinzaine du mois d'octobre, les élèves-pasteurs font un compte-rendu détaillé de leurs activités réalisées lors des stages, en plus du rapport écrit que chaque consistoire envoie au séminaire. Émilienne qui travaille comme les autres, y parvient aisément. Être parmi les précurseurs est une tâche difficile; les défis et les obstacles abondent. Dans son ministère, Émilienne rencontre des difficultés et une grande opposition. Elle le reconnaît lors de son interview avec Raymond Bitemo.

Mais je dois souligner que l'apprentissage de tout métier est difficile. Les problèmes ne manquent pas. En ce qui me concerne, j'ai connu parfois des moments difficiles au cours de ma formation. Mais avec l'aide de Dieu, les conseils et les encouragements des pasteurs Nkounkou et Buana, j'ai pu franchir tous les obstacles. [24]

En tant que servante du Seigneur Jésus Christ, elle fait aussi l'expérience du passage de 2 Timothée 3:12 qui dit « Or, tous ceux qui veulent vivre pieusement en Jésus-Christ seront persécutés. »

Les cicatrices laissées par des moments d'incompréhension, l'humiliation, et les attaques sur sa personne et son ministère sont tellement profondes qu'on perçoit la douleur et la souffrance à travers les propos rapportés dans la préface de son mémoire soutenu à la fin de ses années d'études au séminaire : « Depuis mon entrée ici, je reconnais que dans ce séminaire j'ai été quelque fois ridiculisée, injustement attaquée, injustement salie par certaines personnes. » [25]

Malgré ses persécutions, Émilienne «court sa course.» En juin 1985, elle obtient son diplôme de pasteur, prête pour le service divin. Ces neuf années d'études et de formation pastorale à Mantsimou sont un sujet de joie et une grande première. Elle le dit lors de l'interview avec Raymond Bitemo: « Être pasteur a été pour moi un idéal. Je l'ai atteint et j'en éprouve un profond sentiment de joie. » [26]

A la fin de sa formation pastorale, l'église entière remercie Dieu pour sa bravoure et son endurance. Sa sortie du séminaire est qualifiée par Joseph Mandzoungou comme « L'ÉVÉNEMENT de toute l'histoire de l'EEC, » car c'est la première fois depuis le début de l'œuvre missionnaire suédoise au Congo qui a donné naissance à l'EEC qu'une femme accède au rang des pasteurs. [27] Et Raymond Bitemo, quant à lui, parle du « premier produit féminin » de l'EEC.

Le couronnement des études pastorales d'Émilienne ne se passe pas de façon inaperçue au niveau national. Le journal national Mweti publie un article qui commence ainsi : « Parmi les 27 élèves pasteurs sortant cette année du

séminaire théologique de Mantsimou, une place d'honneur revient à Mme Mboundou-Mouyabi, née Niangui Loubota Émilienne.» [28]

Ses collègues se réjouissent de ses prouesses. Le pasteur Jean Baptiste Milongo affirme qu'elle « est la fierté de notre promotion.» Le révérend docteur Dominique Tsibatata parle de «classe bénie.» Émilienne fait la fierté de sa famille et de son église. L'EEC formule des projets de l'envoyer en Suède pour continuer ses études. Émilienne est à l'honneur en ce jour et elle est acclamée comme le symbole d'un courant de changement soufflant au sein de l'EEC. Elle même visionne son ministère pointant à l'horizon comme un signe d'ouverture pour les femmes au service pastoral et un mouvement de progrès au sein de l'EEC. Elle le décrit en ces termes :

La joie d'être la première femme-pasteur se traduit en moi comme un signe de croissance de notre église et une prise de conscience des chrétiennes à travailler davantage aux cotés des hommes pour l'avancement de l'œuvre du Seigneur. C'est pourquoi j'invite toutes les femmes, notamment les jeunes filles qui sentent la vocation de devenir pasteur, de ne pas reculer, mais de prier et de s'engager fermement, avec foi. [29]

Son mariage

Vers la fin de ses études, Émilienne est troublée par la question du mariage. Elle craint Dieu, marche dans la pureté de cœur et de corps, et recherche sa face. Émilienne ne veut pas épouser un laïc par crainte que celui-ci ne l'empêche un jour d'exercer librement le ministère pastoral auquel Dieu l'a appelée. [30]

A cette époque il y a trois élèves pasteurs célibataires ; elle et deux autres frères. Émilienne reçoit la proposition de mariage de la part de l'un des élèves pasteurs. Mais, à cause de l'opposition dans la famille et probablement d'autres facteurs, elle décline l'offre.

En 1982, le révérend docteur Pierre Mboundou-Mouyabi revient de France. En fait, en tant qu'étudiant en thèse de doctorat à Paris, Pierre est abandonné par son épouse d'alors qui le trouve trop pauvre. [31] De retour au Congo, c'est un père de famille meurtri et divorcé. Il est affecté au séminaire de Mantsimou où il enseigne le Nouveau Testament. C'est dans ce séminaire et dans le cadre de son travail qu'il voit pour la première fois Émilienne Niangui-Loubota, étudiante parmi ses étudiants. Quelques mois plus tard, il propose le mariage à celle-ci qui, encouragée et conseillée par le pasteur Madiata et sa femme, accepte la proposition.

Émilienne est une étudiante très brillante et ses professeurs voient le futur pour elle et pour l'EEC dans la poursuite de ses études. Par conséquent, son futur mariage avec Dr. Mboundou-Mouyabi déçoit certains dirigeants de l'église et probablement certains missionnaires, quelques-uns parmi eux allant jusqu'à verbaliser leur désapprobation, surtout que le pasteur Mboundou Mouyabi avait des relations conflictuelles avec certains de ses collègues et certains dirigeants de l'église.

Mais cela n'empêche pas le couple de célébrer leur mariage coutumier en 1982, à Kimouélé. Puis le 30 janvier 1984, leur mariage à l'état civil est conduit par le président de la cour Dimynat Diangala à Dolisie. Ils deviennent ainsi le premier couple pastoral de l'EEC.

Émilienne est heureuse d'avoir épousé un serviteur de Dieu, quelqu'un qui a la même vision qu'elle pour les âmes perdues et pour l'œuvre de Dieu. Elle le confie à Raymond Bitemo lors d'une interview : « Ma joie est complète d'avoir un époux pasteur qui partage les mêmes aspirations que moi. Cela me reconforte énormément. » [32]

En tant qu'épouse et mère, Émilienne est une femme bienveillante et travailleuse. Elle s'occupe des enfants de son mari, leur enseigne ce qu'elle a reçu. Sa belle-fille Viviane Kombo, se souvient d'elle par ces mots « Nous avons vécu cinq années pleines et riches en émotions au quotidien. Elle a été une mère et le jour de sa mort, ce fut un terrassement. » [33] Pasteur Ruth-Annie Mampembe-Coyault, son autre belle-fille parle de « femme plutôt discrète, très travailleuse de ses mains : à Mouyondzi, elle s'occupait de ses plantations elle-même, en plus de son ministère pastoral. » [34] En se rappelant de leur vie commune, veuf Mboundou-Mouyabi parle avec nostalgie de « cinq ans de paix et de joie pastorale. » [35]

À la fin de ses études, Émilienne et son mari sont envoyés dans le consistoire de Kolo pour commencer leur ministère pastoral.

Son ministère

Le procès-verbal du Conseil synodal de l'EEC à Brazzaville, du 3 au 5 juillet 1985, affecte le pasteur Pierre Mboundou-Mouyabi et son épouse au consistoire de Kolo. A cette époque certaines personnes au niveau des autorités de l'église ne veulent pas qu'un couple pastoral serve dans la même paroisse. Monsieur et Madame Mboundou-Mouyabi sont donc affectés dans des paroisses différentes. Il a la responsabilité de deux paroisses : celle de Mouyondzi et celle de Kinguala, en plus de la jeunesse du consistoire ; alors que sa femme est responsable de la paroisse de Mouzanga.

Émilienne est prête à mettre en pratique les paroles de sagesse qu'elle a prononcées quelques mois auparavant lors d'une interview avec Raymond Bitemo:

Diriger une paroisse, c'est diriger des hommes. C'est une tâche difficile certes, mais l'essentiel est que le travail soit organisé et les responsabilités bien définies. Le pasteur est toujours aidé dans sa tâche par les conseillers, les diacres, les diaconesses et les fidèles eux-mêmes qui sont tous ses collaborateurs. [36]

Émilienne quitte son mari et ses belles filles et part pour sa paroisse de service. Elle est bien accueillie par ses paroissiens et elle sert son Seigneur de tout son cœur. Cependant, Mouzanga est une zone très paludéenne et assez primitive. L'accès à l'eau potable et à la nourriture nécessite des efforts considérables en distance et en travail. Vivre à Mouzanga représente un défi réel pour elle. Viviane, qui a visité cette paroisse avec sa belle-mère, s'en souvient :

On l'a envoyée dans un village éloigné de Mouyondzi. Elle a quitté son foyer et est allée dans ce village servir le Seigneur. Elle revenait toutes les deux semaines environ. C'était un vrai challenge pour elle en tant que femme. Les conditions de vie dans ce village étaient très rudimentaires ; je me souviens, je suis allée là-bas une fois avec elle. Mais les paroissiens s'assuraient qu'elle ait de l'eau et de la nourriture ; choses qui étaient difficiles à avoir. Elle a eu un très bon contact avec les fidèles dans ce village. [37]

Émilienne sait en qui elle a cru et c'est avec joie qu'elle proclame l'évangile de Jésus Christ au milieu de ces circonstances. Elle est très ouverte dans ses prédications. De sa voix douce et captivante, elle partage avec la congrégation ce que Dieu met dans son cœur, s'efforçant de faire comprendre les mystères de la parole de Dieu à ses auditeurs. Parfois, à la fin de ses sermons, elle demande à ce qu'on lui pose des questions auxquelles elle répond promptement. [38]

Courageuse et déterminée, elle traite ses paroissiens et ceux qui viennent en contact avec elle avec compassion. Émilienne n'aime pas le mensonge ; elle est connue pour son caractère franc et véridique. Les gens sont attirés par son charisme et sa personnalité. C'est une rassembleuse des masses. Elle accomplit son ministère avec dévouement et efficacité et elle y met de la bonne volonté, même si la séparation d'avec sa famille pendant une certaine partie du mois est un sacrifice considérable. Émilienne est une « femme de raison » ; une « femme exceptionnelle. » [39]

Après avoir servi à Mouzanga pendant un certain temps, Émilienne devient susceptible aux crises de paludisme comme le reste de la population. Le médecin du coin « un peu paniqué » [40] à cause de la recrudescence des crises de paludisme dans la région, suggère à l'EEC que c'était un peu risqué pour une jeune mère de vivre dans ces conditions. Après considération, Émilienne est affectée à Mouyondzi où elle sert avec son mari. Cependant les bons moments passés à Mouzanga ne sont pas oubliés. Les femmes peuvent servir Dieu en tant que pasteur au même point que les hommes, « le mythe est brisé. » [41]

Le ministère à Mouyondzi prend une forme différente ; Émilienne partage à présent les responsabilités de la paroisse avec son mari. La vie pastorale n'est pas toujours facile, surtout sur le plan financier. Avec un salaire mensuel de 28.000 frs CFA (et 55.000 frs CFA pour son mari), Émilienne cultive des plantations de manioc et d'arachide pour suppléer aux besoins de sa famille. Pendant deux ans de service dans le consistoire de Kolo, elle fait preuve d'une passion pour paître le troupeau. Elle est souvent sur le terrain, allant et parlant où l'église a besoin de ses services.

En tant que première femme pasteur, le ministère d'Émilienne ne s'arrête pas seulement au niveau de sa paroisse. Deux ans après son travail pastoral dans le consistoire de Kolo, en 1987, elle est détachée de sa paroisse pour animer le département de l'œuvre féminine de l'EEC dont le siège se trouve au sein de la direction de l'EEC à Brazzaville. L'œuvre féminine présidée par Mme Sikou Philomène, a pour objet le bien-être des femmes, ou comme le dit David Mboundou « la lutte pour les droits et les devoirs de la femme. » [42] Cette nomination cause une certaine tension dans sa famille et son mariage car elle est souvent en déplacement entre Mouyondzi et Brazzaville pour faire face aux demandes de ce nouveau rôle. Mme Loubamba, qui était une amie très proche, se souvient de cette époque en ces termes : « On se voyait souvent. J'étais membre du bureau national de l'œuvre féminine. Elle y a travaillé. Elle avait toujours une vision. Elle faisait des tournées avec Maman Sikou Philomène. » [43]

Au cours de cette même année 1987, au mois de mars, Émilienne est consacrée pasteur de l'EEC avec ceux de sa promotion. Le jour de sa consécration est mémorable pour les femmes de l'EEC et celles du Congo ; un grand événement historique pour l'EEC ; un grand pas en direction du changement. Mme Loubamba capture bien ce moment historique: « Les femmes étaient dans la joie et à l'honneur; et on a fait des dons. On a crié de joie quand on l'avait consacrée. » [44] Ce ne sont pas seulement les femmes de l'EEC qui saluent la première femme pasteur de l'EEC, mais l'église entière célèbre son premier « produit féminin. »

Il est important de mentionner que le ministère d'Émilienne est profondément influencé par sa vie de prière. Elle puise sa force et son inspiration en Dieu. Ses parents à Kimouélé reconnaissent cette dimension de sa vie:

C'est par des prières qu'elle est arrivée à être pasteur. [Lorsqu'elle] était dans les préparatifs de son concours, toutes les lettres qu'elle adressait aux parents, elle n'oubliait pas de demander de beaucoup prier. La prière l'a fait parvenir. Elle aimait la prière. Elle priait parfois seule, ou dans des groupes de prière. [45]

Monique Loubassou affirme : « C'était une femme de prière. » Et l'évangéliste François Mvoumbi-Poungui renchérit : « Elle avait des dons spirituels et aimait la prière. »

Sa mort

En 1988, les autorités de l'EEC décident que les cinq meilleurs étudiants de la promotion de 1985 feront le concours d'entrée à la faculté théologique protestante de Yaoundé au Cameroun. Comme elle fait partie du groupe, Émilienne se rend à Brazzaville en janvier 1989 pour préparer et présenter ce concours. Elle est alors enceinte de son deuxième enfant.

Peu après son arrivée au séminaire, elle est atteinte de paludisme et se fait soigner par une infirmière suédoise. Comme sa santé ne s'améliore pas, son époux se rend précipitamment à Brazzaville pour être avec elle. On l'emmène à l'hôpital de Makélé-kélé où les examens médicaux montrent qu'elle est atteinte d'anémie et d'hypertension artérielle. En outre son col de l'utérus est ouvert et elle court le risque de voir sa grossesse se terminer en une fausse couche. Elle est alors hospitalisée le 21 février 1989. Le 10 mai elle accouche par césarienne. Mais après son accouchement, sa tension artérielle reste dangereusement élevée. Quinze jours plus tard, le 25 mai 1989 à 16h30, Émilienne Mboungou-Mouyabi, âgée de trente-deux ans, entre dans le repos éternel.

L'annonce de sa mort est reçue comme un choc qui paralyse les membres de l'EEC. Laissons la parole à Raymond Bitemo qui a su capturer l'atmosphère du moment : « La nouvelle de sa mort se répand le soir même dans la capitale comme une onde dont la brutalité du choc ébranle les chrétiens et surtout les femmes qui fondent presque toutes en larmes. » [46]

Sa disparition affecte profondément ceux de sa promotion, sa famille, et l'église. Son mari ne s'est jamais remis de sa mort ; il ne s'est pas remarié et à travers notre interview on se rend compte que sa douleur transparait encore

aujourd'hui. Le pasteur Jean Baptiste Milongo dit « Sa mort, je l'ai apprise dans le train entre Mindouli et Missafou. [Quand] on m'a annoncé cela, j'ai failli tomber. Je me suis rendu à Brazzaville. » [47] Le pasteur Tsibatata affirme « Elle a laissé un vide pour notre promotion ; c'était un choc. Jusqu'à aujourd'hui ce regret est encore présent. Elle était la première à nous quitter, très jeune elle nous a quitté. » [48] Mme Loubamba témoigne ainsi : « Elle nous a quittés un soir ; son départ brusque m'a secouée. » [49]

Sa mort a laissé un vide immense au niveau du consistoire de Louila-Kimongo et jusqu'à ce jour son départ prématuré est regretté. [50] Sa mère, qui a pris soin du bébé, traumatisée par le décès prématuré de sa fille et accablée par le chagrin, a passé environ cinq ans dans le deuil et elle ne veut plus qu'aucun de ses enfants ne devienne pasteur.

La veillée mortuaire qui s'est tenue à Brazzaville, dans la paroisse de Bacongo, était remplie de chrétiens de l'EEC et des fidèles des églises catholique, salutiste, et kimbanguiste. Lors de cette veillée, la prière désespérée d'une chrétienne exprime l'état d'esprit et les pensées de beaucoup : « Seigneur, dans nos églises il y a beaucoup de pasteurs hommes, et on n'avait que celle-ci comme pasteur femme. Pourquoi n'as-tu pas choisi de prendre un pasteur parmi les hommes et laisser la seule et la première femme pasteur ? Dieu, tu n'es pas juste. » [51]

Cinq jours plus tard, accompagné par un long cortège de centaines de personnes, le corps d'Émilienne est mis dans le train qui le conduit à Dolisie, puis dans le camion qui l'amène à Kimouélé. C'est dans la consternation, la douleur, et la prière que son corps est enseveli dans le cimetière familial.

Le décès prématuré de la première femme-pasteur de l'E.E.C. est une tragédie. Certaines femmes au niveau du consistoire de Louila-Kimongo qui désirent servir Dieu en tant que pasteurs renoncent à leur appel par crainte qu'elles ne finissent par mourir aussi. L'évangéliste Mvoubi résume leurs sentiments en ces mots : « Dans le consistoire les gens ont des vocations, mais des vocations qui souffrent. Les femmes surtout, lorsqu'elles pensent à cela [sa mort], elles se désistent. » [52]

Aux yeux de ceux qui l'aiment, Émilienne ne devait pas mourir ; elle avait encore du travail à faire. Elle a laissé dans les cœurs de beaucoup, un vide qui ne peut pas être comblé. Toutefois, Émilienne est allée vers son Dieu et son Seigneur pour s'entendre dire «Entre dans ton repos, bonne et fidèle servante.»

Conclusion

Émilienne Niangui Loubota a eu un court ministère, mais sa vie laisse un impact considérable, une signature positive qui interpelle encore aujourd'hui. Elle avait un fardeau et une vision pour les femmes de l'EEC qui revenait souvent sous forme du leitmotiv suivant: *Kilokola ya bakento me kulunga* [l'heure des femmes a sonné] ; « Nous devons faire le service divin ; pas seulement moi, mais toutes les femmes après moi. » [53]

Son ambition et sa prière étaient de voir le Seigneur toucher la société congolaise à travers une cohorte de femmes pasteurs. Ainsi, elle ne cessait d'encourager les jeunes femmes à servir le Seigneur dans l'église. Ce message était joyeusement reçu par les femmes de l'EEC, ravies d'avoir enfin une femme pasteur.

Son empreinte au sein de l'EEC est indélébile et énorme. Comme l'a su le dire le pasteur Alphonse Loussakou, « Elle a brisé le mythe de la non recevabilité des femmes au ministère pastoral. » [54] Le docteur Tsibatata renchérit, «Son témoignage devait servir à comprendre que ce n'est pas l'habit qui fait le pasteur. » [55] Son exemple a aidé de nombreuses sœurs à franchir le pas décisif vers leur ministère pastoral. Monique Loubassou, qui est devenue la deuxième femme-pasteur de l'E.E.C., en est un exemple. Voici son témoignage :

En 1985, lors de leur sortie du séminaire, notre chorale de Mayangui est venue chanter au culte de clôture de l'année académique du séminaire de Mantsimou. En la voyant, je me suis dit en moi-même, alors que la vocation pastorale brûlait en moi depuis des années : pourquoi ne puis-je pas être comme cette femme pasteur ? Si elle a osé, je peux aussi le faire. [56]

La vision que Dieu a ouverte devant Émilienne était grandiose et ambitieuse ; et cette vision c'était de voir ses sœurs en Christ devenir servantes du Seigneur dans le ministère pastoral. Elle l'a démontré par l'exemple de sa propre vie, et d'autres ont suivi. Pasteur Ruth-Annie Mampembe-Coyault renchérit dans la même lancée : « Je pense que son exemple a beaucoup marqué les femmes de l'EEC et leur a permis de comprendre que c'était possible pour elles de servir Dieu en tant que pasteurs. » [57]

Il est bon de noter que la toute première femme à satisfaire au cours pastoral n'a pas été Émilienne. Celle-ci dont le nom reste dans l'oubli est acceptée à l'époque où le séminaire se trouve encore à Ngouédi, mais elle ne persévère pas à cause du péché dans sa vie, et elle est renvoyée. [58]

Émilienne ne fait pas honte à son Seigneur ; elle ne déshonore ni son église ni sa famille. Elle laisse un témoignage exemplaire d'une femme dévouée à

son Seigneur et dont le désir le plus profond est de le servir de tout son cœur. Elle ouvre le chemin aux autres femmes pasteurs, et l'EEC lui doit beaucoup. Pasteur Laurent Loubassou affirme : « Comme elle n'avait pas trahi sa vocation, sa contribution principale, à mon avis, aura été un encouragement pour l'EEC à continuer d'accepter des femmes au ministère pastoral à plein temps. » [59] Le Pasteur Tsibatala résonne avec lui en disant « C'est grâce à elle qu'on a aujourd'hui d'autres femmes pasteurs. » [60] Aujourd'hui l'Église Évangélique du Congo compte quinze femmes-pasteurs et évangélistes.

Émilienne Niangui-Loubota est un symbole de l'émancipation de la femme au niveau de l'EEC et de la lutte contre le sexisme prévalant. A travers elle, le Seigneur a montré qu'il peut utiliser les femmes autant que les hommes à son service. Son entrée dans le ministère pastoral apporte un souffle nouveau au sein de l'EEC. Elle est à la hauteur de la tâche qui lui est confiée. Son courage, son enthousiasme et sa détermination ouvrent la porte à d'autres femmes pour le service divin. A nos yeux sa mort est prématurée, mais Dieu a accompli son dessein dans sa courte vie. Que nos cœurs ne puissent pas oublier cette femme exceptionnelle, servante du Seigneur Jésus Christ. [61]

Médine Moussounga Keener et Eliser Moussounga

Observations de l'auteur: Le désir d'écrire la biographie de la première femme pasteur de l'Église Évangélique du Congo (EEC) est né en parcourant "La biographie des pasteurs de l'église évangélique du Congo," publié en 2009, alors que j'écrivais l'article sur le pasteur Mboungou Jean. Dans ce livret j'ai remarqué que la personne du pasteur Émilienne Mboungou-Mouyabi (née Niangui Loubota) n'y figurait pas. Cela m'a conduite à me poser des questions suivantes : Pourquoi n'y était-elle pas ? Qui était-elle ? Qu'a-t-elle fait ?

Je ne suis pas la seule personne à avoir rencontré cet obstacle. Le Pasteur Monique Loubassou évoque des difficultés similaires lorsqu'elle affirme : "Ma soutenance de fin de séminaire portait sur l'œuvre l'Œuvre Féminine. Tout au long de mes recherches, personne n'a pu me renseigner davantage sur elle [Émilienne Niangui Loubota] et son œuvre." (Interview par l'auteur, 22 novembre 2010, Brazzaville)

Et le pasteur Jean Baptiste Milongo remarque que « l'église entière n'a pas assez de souvenirs sur cette femme. » (Jean Baptiste Milongo, interview par l'auteur, 20 janvier 2011, Brazzaville)

Le rôle de la première femme pasteur de l'EEC est trop important pour qu'elle soit oubliée et reléguée au passé. C'est ainsi que le Pasteur Eliser

Moussounga de l'EEC et moi-même avons décidé d'écrire cet article. Nous voulons exprimer nos sincères remerciements à toutes les personnes qui ont bien voulu répondre à notre questionnaire et nous ont ainsi permis de revisiter la vie de cette femme remarquable.

L'entrée des femmes au ministère pastoral constitue un point marquant au sein de l'église universelle en général et de l'Église Évangélique du Congo en particulier. Pour ces pionnières, qui ont eu parfois à braver les pressions socio-culturelles de leurs pays et d'autres obstacles religieux, c'était une période très complexe de leur existence et de leur ministère. Acclamée dans *Mweti* (Le journal le plus populaire au Congo dans les années 1980. La première femme pasteur y fait la une dans le numéro 1193, du vendredi 5 juillet 1985) comme « femme-pasteur » et dans *Le chemin* (Le journal de l'Église Évangélique du Congo. Dans son numéro 12, juillet-Septembre 1985, figurait à la une photo de la première femme pasteur de l'EEC) par l'expression « Enfin une femme pasteur, » Émilienne Niangui Loubota est devenue une figure emblématique de l'EEC ; une pionnière dans le ministère pastoral.

Notes:

1. Ce nom est tiré du cours d'eau Louila et du district de Kimongo.
2. Misère Loubota, interview par l'auteur, 24 novembre 2010, Brazzaville.
3. Misère Loubota, interview.
4. Le consistoire de Diambala s'appelle à présent consistoire de Louila-Kimongo.
5. Le procès-verbal du conseil synodal de l'Église Évangélique du Congo, réuni à Brazzaville du 18 au 20 mars 1969, sur la proposition du Séminaire de Matsimou, fait état à la page 16 de l'adoption du principe de l'admission des jeunes filles au séminaire.
6. Entretien avec le Pasteur Alphonse Loussakou, 16 novembre 2010, Brazzaville.
7. Misère Loubota, interview.
8. François Mvoumbi Pougui, interview par l'auteur, 26 janvier 2010, Brazzaville.
9. L'obtention de ce diplôme permettait d'aller au lycée.
10. Nous voulons ici exprimer notre gratitude à Monsieur Raymond Bitemo, journaliste au journal *Le Chemin*. Grâce à ses nombreux articles, documentaires et photos, nous possédons un trésor historique immense de l'Église Évangélique du Congo.
11. Propos recueillis par Raymond Bitemo dans *Le Chemin*, numéro 12, juillet-septembre 1985, p. 11.

12. Bitemo, *Le Chemin*.
13. Milongo Jean Baptiste, interview par l'auteur, sans date.
14. Propos rapporté par le Pasteur Moundanga Bititi Dominique (son collègue à l'époque), le 23 janvier 2011, Brazzaville.
15. Tsibatata, interview par l'auteur, 9 décembre 2010, Brazzaville.
16. Moundanga Bititi Dominique, interview par l'auteur, sans date.
17. Alphonse Loussakou, interview.
18. Souvenir rapporté par le Pasteur Alphonse Loussaka, sans date.
19. Lors de ses stages, les évangélistes suivants l'accompagnaient à tour de rôle: Tongo Felix, Tsimba Mboukou Zebedee, Dilou Maurice, Moussitou Gabriel, Toubi Benjamin, Bayekola Raymond, Jean Paul Moussila, Mboumba Philippe, Makoundou Damas.
20. Mme Balehola, interview par l'auteur, 23 novembre 2010, Brazzaville
21. Moundanga, interview.
22. Mme Balehola, interview.
23. Mme Balehola, interview.
24. *Le Chemin*, no.12 p. 10.
25. Mboungou-Mouyabi, Émilienne "La conception de notre père selon Martin Luther," (mémoire, Séminaire Théologique de Mantsimou, 1985), p.1.
26. *Le Chemin*, numéro 12, p.11.
27. *Le Chemin*, numéro 12, p. 10.
28. *Mweti*, numéro 1193, 5 juillet 1985, p. 4.
29. *Le Chemin*, numéro 12, p. 11.
30. Mboungou Mouyabi, interview par l'auteur, mars 2010, Mouyondzi (Congo).
31. Mboungou Mouyabi, interview.
32. *Le Chemin*, numéro 12, p. 11.
33. Viviane Kombo, interview par l'auteur, par email, 12 juillet 2010.
34. Ruth-Annie Mampembe-Coyault, interview par l'auteur, par email, 16 juillet 2010.
35. Mboungou Mouyabi, interview.
36. *Le Chemin*, numéro 12, p.11
37. Viviane Kombo, interview.
38. Moyo Jean Claude, interview par l'auteur, 24 novembre 2010, Brazzaville.
39. Tsibatata, interview.
40. Mboungou Mouyabi, interview.
41. Tsibatata, interview.

42. *Le Chemin*, numéro 28, p.2.
43. Mme Loubamba, interview par l'auteur, 5 janvier 2011, Brazzaville.
44. Loubamba, interview.
45. La famille Loubota, interview par l'auteur, 2010, Kimouélé.
46. *Le Chemin*, numéro 28, p.4.
47. Milongo, interview.
48. Tsibatata, interview.
49. Mme Loubamba, interview.
50. Wilfrid Moussitou, interview par l'auteur, 23 novembre 2010, Brazzaville.
51. Prière rapportée par Misère Loubota, frère de la défunte.
52. François Mvoubi Pongui, interview par l'auteur, sans date.
53. Mme Balehola, interview.
54. Loussakou, interview.
55. Tsibatata, interview.
56. Monique Loubassou, interview.
57. Coyault, interview.
58. Loubamba, interview.
59. Laurent Loubassou, interview.
60. Tsibatata, interview.
61. Le pasteur MBoungou-Mouyabi a fini par se remarier avec Pauline Ngounga et il habite actuellement à Brazzaville.

Autres sources:

- Bakissa, Jeanne Rose (pasteur de l'EEC), interview par l'auteur, 2 novembre 2010, Brazzaville (Congo).
- Oniangue, Jules Albert (pasteur de l'EEC), interview par l'auteur, 5 novembre 2010, Brazzaville (Congo).

Cet article de 2012 est le produit des recherches de Dr. Médine Moussounga Keener, Coordinatrice de Family Formation à Asbury Theological Seminary à Wilmore, Kentucky, U.S.A. et d'Eliser Moussounga, pasteur de l'Église Évangélique du Congo, Congo Brazzaville.

Recovering the Lives of African Women Leaders in South Africa: The Case of Nokutela Dube¹

By Heather Hughes

Thanks to a long tradition of scholarship—from Mia Brandel-Syrier in mid-twentieth century to contemporary writers such as Deborah Gaitskell and Meghan Healy-Clancy—our understanding of African women’s agency in private and public Christian associational life in South Africa has been immeasurably enriched.² Against the backdrop of their work, this chapter focuses on women leaders in these communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It argues that a blind spot in our vision has led to a tendency in biography (especially in patriarchal societies) to credit men with all kinds of achievements for which a more careful examination might reveal that credit really ought to be shared. The implication is that many more African women probably served in leadership positions than are remembered in the published record of the period, which is crowded with men but in which very few named women appear.

What type of leadership are we concerned with? In a 2009 lecture, David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, made the point that

religious leadership can be exercised very visibly when focussed explicitly through the official bodies of a religious community; but it can also be exercised in less obvious ways, distributed across the whole of a society in every walk of life.³

¹ This article is a chapter from *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives and Challenges*, ed. by Dana L. Robert (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2018), 194–214.

² See Mia Brandel-Syrier, *Black Woman in Search of God* (London: Lutterworth, 1962); three contributions by Deborah Gaitskell, “Housewives, Maids or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903–39,” *Journal of African History* 24, no. 2 (1983): 241–56; “Devout Domesticity? A Century of African Women’s Christianity in South Africa,” in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cheryl Walker (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990), 251–72; “Hot Meetings and Hard Kraals: African Biblewomen in Transvaal Methodism, 1924–1960,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 30, no. 3 (2000): 277–309; and Meghan Healy-Clancy, *A World of Their Own: A History of South African Women’s Education* (Scottsville, South Africa: Univ. of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013).

³ David Ford, “What Is Required of a Religious Leader Today?,” Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme,

Very many African women leaders were devoted Christians and active in church life, yet with few exceptions, the upper echelons of leadership and decision-making within the “official bodies of a religious community” were closed to them, at least in a formal sense. Some women, at least, were regarded by their peers as exercising wholly visible informal leadership in their churches, if one reads correctly the significance of certain words and phrases in T. D. Mweli Skota’s *African Yearly Register* (1932).⁴ This treasure trove of biographical information about “New Africans” (following the designation used by Ntongela Masilela, Tim Couzens, and others) contains individual entries for forty women, among hundreds of men.⁵ Several are noted as being “a great help to their husbands” (generally pastors) or “very active in church work”—code, surely, for those regarded as leaders. A quarter of the women’s entries also indicate formal leadership roles in auxiliary religious associations, such as mothers’ unions, Sunday schools, and missionary bodies.

Evidence gleaned from the *African Yearly Register*, as well as information presented below, suggests moreover that leadership roles were not confined to one organization or calling, so that women’s leadership across “the whole of a society” was not an alternative but part of the way they exercised their leadership. This breadth of scope was vital to the self-definition of the African middle class. Everyday racism inculcated a powerful desire for autonomy so that racism’s effrontery could be shut out and a more congenial world created. That goal would require vision and enormous effort on the part of both women and men to bring it into being: in politics, business, civic and workers’ organizations, culture, sport, education, and health, as well as in religion. In this sense, the *African Yearly Register* was a sourcebook of role models.

Nokutela Mdimba Dube’s career was unusually well documented during her life, although that did not save her from a long period of being written out of

www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/resources/lecturespapersandspeeches/whatisrequiredofareligiousleaderstoday.

⁴ T. D. Mweli Skota, *The African Yearly Register: Being an Illustrated National Biographical Dictionary (Who’s Who) of Black Folks in Africa* (Johannesburg: Orange Press, 1932). See, for example, pp. 146, 183, 185, 207, 225, and 227. Sadly, despite its title, this work seems to have appeared only twice.

⁵ See Ntongela Masilela, “New African Movement,” <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/index.asp> and Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H. I. E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985). The entries in the *African Yearly Register* should be treated as indicative rather than as a representative sample.

history after her death.⁶ This chapter provides an account of her rise to prominence; it is followed by examination of her subsequent neglect and later reinsertion into the public record. The chapter concludes with further reflections on why early women leaders have been neglected and how the situation might be remedied.

The Life of Nokutela Dube

Nokutela Mdimba was born in the Colony of Natal at Inanda, one of the leading stations of the American Zulu Mission, not far north of the port of Durban.⁷ The exact date of her birth is elusive; the year was about 1872. She explained many years later that her name was derived from the Zulu verb *ukuthela* (to pay taxes).⁸ The choice of name suggests she was born early in the calendar year at the time of harvest, when the colonial government collected annual taxes from the African inhabitants of Natal, and in itself is an interesting example of indigenization: most Christian parents at the time gave their children distinctly biblical or missionary names.⁹ Her parents were already converts to Christianity. Her father, Simon Mdimba, had schooled at the seminary at Amanzimtoti Mission, which in time came to be better known as Adams College. There he met her mother, who converted to Christianity while working in the home of David Rood, a clergyman. Nokutela later noted that one of her grandfathers had obtained his favorite wife by means of *ilobolo* of one hundred head of cattle, thus indicating considerable wealth, while one of her grandmothers, of humble birth, had attracted only ten cattle.¹⁰ Nokutela had other siblings, at least two sisters and two brothers.¹¹

⁶. Often in biographical writing, women are referred to by their first names and men by their surnames. Here, use of only the surname Dube for both the main characters in the story would cause confusion, and Mdimba Dube is not how the subject of this account styled herself. Thus I have frequently used Nokutela and John, not out of disrespect, but for consistency and ease of identification.

⁷. American Zulu Mission was the official name of the local field of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

⁸. Nokutela Dube, "The Story of My Life," *Life and Light for Women* 28 (1898), 110–12.

⁹. For a useful discussion of naming, see Meghan Healy and Eva Jackson, "Practices of Naming and the Possibilities of Home on American Zulu Mission Stations in Colonial Natal," *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 29 (2011): 1–19.

¹⁰. "Ideas of a Zulu Woman," *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 1899, 8.

¹¹. Details such as these are not set out anywhere and require much piecing together. John Mdimba is probably the best-recorded of her siblings, continuing as he did

She received her earliest formal education at the day school at Inanda, where her parents were then living. Not long after, however, they moved down the south coast of Natal to a farm called Intimbankulu; several Inanda families, including the Dubes, were involved in a struggling land syndicate there.¹² At the age of eight she walked all the way back to Inanda Seminary, the girls' boarding school established in 1869 by the American Zulu Mission (AZM). The story of Inanda Seminary has been told elsewhere; suffice to note here that its intention was to educate girls for a life as useful Christian wives and mothers.¹³ It served as a companion institution to Adams College, where men received training for ordination. Women were also encouraged, however, to prepare for professional employment, such as nursing and teaching. These dual roles, of homemaker and public example, implied an onerous responsibility for women.

Extremely unusually, a school essay of Nokutela's survives and demonstrates a first attempt in English. It was sent to the *Rice County Journal* in Northfield, Minnesota, by Ida Wilcox, wife of William C. Wilcox, as part of a series of letters on her missionary experiences in southern Africa. Again unusually, she names the author: it is striking how infrequently missionaries did name their converts in reports and correspondence (a particular hindrance for biographers). Thanks then to Ida Wilcox, we have this fragment of a direct connection to the young schoolgirl, aged about eleven, from her essay titled "My Home":

to occupy a high profile at Ohlange. Another probable brother was called Cornelius. She had a sister called Augusta, noted as such at the time of her death, and we know that another sister was married to Elka Cele, prominent in the early years of the African National Congress (ANC). Sources for the reconstruction of family names include *Ilangalase Natal* and the Inanda Seminary Archive Collection at Inanda Seminary, especially File 1a.

¹². G. G. Nxaba, "The Life of Dr. John Langalibalele Dube," Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archives, 1810–1961, ABC 77.1 (Dube, John), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Nxaba was related to Nokutela through his mother Ntoyi, Nokutela's cousin. The story of her conversion to Christianity is told in Meghan Elisabeth Healy, "'To Control Their Destiny': The Politics of Home and the Feminisation of Schooling in Colonial Natal, 1885–1910," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 250.

¹³. See Healy-Clancy, *A World of Their Own*; Agnes A. Wood, "Shine Where You Are": *A Centenary History of Inanda Seminary, 1869–1969* (Alice, South Africa: Lovedale, 1972); Heather Hughes, "'A Lighthouse for African Womanhood': Inanda Seminary 1869–1945," in Walker, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, 197–220.

We live in Africa, there are many people here. Some are good, and some are wicked. They know how to read. There are a great many who have waggons, oxen, goats, sheep and some other things. Some are rich and some are poor. Those who are poor are jealous for the things of those who are rich. Their food are these, mealies, potatoes and other things. There are a few who are diligent, their houses look so clean and nice; and some are bad. In our homes we sleep down upon mats, and some people buy beds to sleep. We don't use to eat upon tables, we placed our food down, then we eat again; we don't used spoons all days. If a person had no children, he troubled very much, because boys can plough for him, and do all their father tells them to.¹⁴

Beginning in the early 1880s, Nokutela spent eleven years at Inanda Seminary, part as scholar and part as teacher, by her own declaration one of the most formative experiences of her life: "I always thought there was more for me to learn, and always wanted to know more. . . . During the early part of my time at the Seminary I was converted."¹⁵ Her conversion may have been especially encouraged by the unofficial school chaplain, Maziyana Mdimba, very possibly Nokutela's uncle.¹⁶ She also came under the care and influence of Mary Kelly Edwards, the founding head, who was often at odds with the AZM over matters such as its financial support for the school, which she regarded as inadequate, and the social distance to be observed between white missionaries and their African charges, which she thought overly proscriptive.¹⁷ She also had brushes with colonial officialdom over the fate of so-called "runaways," girls who left their fathers' homesteads without permission to attend the seminary.¹⁸

Edwards presided over something of a "total institution," a minutely time-tabled life of Christian learning and service. During Nokutela's time at the seminary, most of the scholars were, like her, from Christian homes. Between forty and sixty girls were in residence at any one time. Five formal grades completed the school program, with an additional two years for those who wished

¹⁴. Ida Wilcox, letter dated May 2, 1882, published in *Rice County Journal*, n.d.; I thank Cherif Keita for this news clip.

¹⁵. Dube, "Story of My Life," 111.

¹⁶. Wood, *Shine Where You Are*, 47.

¹⁷. See Sara C. Jorgensen, "Bad Examples: Missionary Misbehaviour as an Indicator of the Impact of Social Distance and the Evolution of Social Order in the American Zulu Mission," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 2 (2014): 273.

¹⁸. See Healy, "'To Control Their Destiny,'" 247–64.

to stay on to teach. One of the teachers gave a detailed sense of the daily round of lessons.

The instruction is given as far as possible in English. . . . More time is spent on the Bible than on any other book, as it is a daily study through the entire course. “Line upon Line” is used in the first year; then the Bible itself is the text book; the whole of the Old Testament history is taken up, also parts of the prophetic and poetical books, then, “Harmony of the Gospels” and Acts. The stories are read, then written by the pupils, and copied after correction. It is a great pleasure to teach these lessons, it is so easy to interest them, and they often ask a great many questions.

Arithmetic is studied through Interest and Proportion; Language Lessons and Grammar occupy considerable time—Geography also. Besides these, the course includes a little of English History, Physiology, and Physical Geography.¹⁹

In addition to class attendance, the girls had to grow food, chop wood for fuel, fetch water, help with cooking, keep the premises clean, and sew their own clothes. Nokutela gained great prowess as a needlewoman and later had occasion to note how important this skill was in encouraging women to become active in the church. The girls also had to support Sunday schools and otherwise assist as far as possible in the sustenance of the school: fees were ninety shillings a year, but many were unable to pay. Midway through her time there, the Inspector of Native Education noted in his report on the seminary:

The scholars are neat and clean without exception. All are well instructed in Needlework, and cutting out; they make clothes in aid of the mission at Inhambane, wash, iron and receive special instruction in household duties. . . . [It] may fairly claim to be a model institution.²⁰

In 1911 Nokutela was the one who spoke on behalf of the “old girls” on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations of the American Board in South Africa; to have performed in such a role suggests that she had been a model herself. She commended Principal Edwards in these terms:

¹⁹. M. E. Price, “Inanda Seminary,” *Life and Light for Women* 15, no. 5 (1885): 163.

²⁰. F. B. Fynney, cited in Wood, *Shine Where You Are*, 37.

Those who later set up homes of their own could easily be distinguished from those who had never been under your influence. Now we your daughters are scattered all over the country, but we can never forget your teaching. You taught us to be good children and to know the Almighty. You taught us things to think about both in joy and sorrow; neither can we forget the sympathy which you have shown in all that concerns our people. We shall always remember the comfort and advice you have never failed to give us in time of need.²¹

The seminary offered Nokutela the most comprehensive education then available in Natal for young women of any race. Once having completed her schooling, she taught for a few years, including a period at Amanzimtoti, before her marriage in January 1894 to John Langalibalele Dube. The Dubes were by far the most prominent Christian family in Inanda.²² John's father, James, had been one of the earliest converts, as well as one of the first ordained pastors, of the AZM. He had prospered through his transport riding (hauling freight long distance by means of oxen and wagons) and farming businesses and never drew any salary from the church. John enrolled at Adams College, where he encountered William Wilcox and under his influence converted to Christianity. After James Dube's sudden death in 1877, Wilcox became a father figure to the young John and was instrumental in arranging for his travel to the United States in 1888 in pursuit of his dream of becoming a doctor. This he never realized; however, he did spend four years in Oberlin College's Preparatory Department. Failing health forced him to return home, but not before he had embarked on his first attempts at preaching and fundraising for missionary work in Africa. At age twenty-one, he also saw his first publication, *A Talk upon My Native Land*, into print.²³

Soon after their marriage the Dubes embarked on an unusual missionary venture of their own: to establish a mission at Incwadi, a 9000-acre farm situated inland, to the west of Pietermaritzburg. It belonged to the Qadi chiefdom under Chief Mqhawe, to whom Dube was closely related. The invitation to Incwadi had come from Chief Mqhawe himself and so was not a formal AZM initiative. But neither was it undertaken in opposition to the AZM. The venture had the full support of Mary Edwards, and both John and Nokutela

²¹. Nokutela Dube, speech cited in Wood, *Shine Where You Are*, 70–71.

²². Heather Hughes, *First President: A Life of John Dube, Founding President of the ANC* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2011), chap. 1.

²³. John Langalibalele Dube, *A Talk upon My Native Land* (Rochester, NY: Swinburne, 1892); see Hughes, *First President*, chap 2.

had been faithful servants of the AZM to this point. These factors helped to invest their approach with legitimacy.

Several of the young women in Nokutela's extended family were also engaged in missionary ventures far from home; they represented a generation of innovators in church and public life, performing roles quite unlike any that women had played before in Zulu-speaking society. Her cousin Selina, who had also schooled at Inanda Seminary, was at Inhambane by the mid-1890s, engaged in work for the East Central African Mission that the Wilcoxes had begun. Another cousin, Ntoyi, was Edwards's assistant at Inanda; and helped her to open a hostel for African women in Durban, also in the mid-1890s.

The Dubes were accompanied to Incwadi by Nokutela's brother John Mdimas, also an AZM teacher, and his wife. Despite their autonomy, their conduct at Incwadi adhered closely to that of the American missionaries, stimulating interest through preaching on Sundays. Their first services attracted large, curious crowds, and within a year they had established a day school with 100 children in attendance, a congregation of 27, and classes to teach women how to look after "civilized" homes and families. Their next plan was to launch an industrial institution for those completing primary school.²⁴

To make this happen they travelled together to the United States in 1895. Leaving the Mdimas in charge at Incwadi, they based themselves in Brooklyn at the Union Missionary Training Institute (UMTI) and set to acquiring further education and travelling extensively to plead for funds. It was rare enough at that time for an African man to be addressing both white and black audiences in the United States, but rarer still for a woman such as Nokutela to be doing so. By all accounts, she spoke with poise and conviction, and also sang. The power of her voice was frequently remarked upon, and her singing played a significant part in their success in attracting donations. Her general course at UMTI included domestic subjects, as well some medicine and music; she believed that "music is a great power among our people, and God has opened the way for me to learn better how to sing into their hearts and teach them to sing of Jesus."²⁵ In addition, she took singing and piano lessons with two Brooklyn-based music teachers, Miss Granger and Mrs. Grindal.²⁶

The Dubes were active in church life in Brooklyn, frequently performing together, John speaking and Nokutela singing; increasingly through these years she began to speak too. On their travels, they visited the South, where

²⁴. Dube, "Story of My Life," 113.

²⁵. Dube, "Story of My Life," 113.

²⁶. Dube, "Story of My Life," 113. She also learned to play the Autoharp; see below.

Nokutela was shocked by plantation conditions and the poverty she saw. They visited Tuskegee Institute and were introduced at a commencement ceremony by Booker T. Washington himself; they also performed at Hampton Institute in Virginia. They travelled in the North as well. Nokutela was especially delighted at the gift of a sewing machine from the congregation at Seneca Castle in upstate New York.

In the interests of fundraising she gave press interviews, in which she displayed a gentle sense of humor:

When I first came to America the cities and the many houses confused me. I am used to the open land, and the streets seem strange. But in two years I am no longer confused, and I wear such clothes as you, and boots and corsets, and I stay always in the house, and I do not tell how long I have lived. I am like Americans in two years.²⁷

By 1899 the couple had completed their studies (John had also been ordained) and raised some \$4,600, and were ready to return to Incwadi. For various reasons, however—not least because John was appointed pastor of the Inanda Church—they began to build their new industrial school at Inanda. From the start, Nokutela played a leading role.²⁸ She headed both the domestic and music departments, and under her leadership Ohlange Institute became famous for the musicians it produced, such as Reuben Caluza, as well as for her choir, the Inanda Native Singers. Furthermore, Nokutela became the first published African woman composer. In 1911, the Dubes' *Amagama Abantu* (Zulu songs) appeared. She had arranged the music and John the lyrics in this collection, historic also as the first secular songbook published in an African language in South Africa. Referring to the final song in the collection, "*Umthandazo Wasapho iwaOhlange*" (A prayer for the children at Ohlange), Tsitsi Jaji points to a broader significance:

It is no coincidence that this final song is very similar to the music and lyrics of Enoch Sontonga's "*Nkosi sikelel'iAfrika*" which would serve as an anthem of the SANNC and later the ANC. Its inclusion, along with a song with explicit calls to various ethnic groups to unify, "*Wonk Um'nt'ontsundu*" (The whole brown community), demonstrates that

²⁷. *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 1899.

²⁸. In *First President* I made an initial attempt to argue that recognition for John's achievements should be shared with Nokutela. Material that has come to light since supports this view.

the Dubes saw group singing as part of a political education as well as school training.²⁹

More mundanely but of great importance in the lives of the scholars, Nokutela also oversaw the cooking of school meals. Quality of food was a frequent cause of bitterness and even rebellion at African boarding schools; yet as one pupil remembered, “The diet was second to none, the stew or soup being prepared in the Principal’s kitchen under the supervision of his wife. Ohlange was known for good meals and good health.”³⁰

There is some evidence that she played a role in the founding of *Ilanga lase Natal*, the paper most closely associated with John Dube’s name. She certainly helped to maintain it indirectly, since it was dependent on the school itself for the resources to keep it afloat, and the school in turn derived income from her fundraising labors, both her own musical performances and those of the choir.

Through the offices of one of their most significant local benefactors, the sugar baron and politician Marshall Campbell, the Dubes performed for visiting delegates of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1905. The association had decided to hold its seventy-fifth annual conference in South Africa as a symbolic confirmation of the spirit of empire, following the devastation of the South African War. After meetings in Cape Town, delegates took various excursions through the country before reconvening in Johannesburg. Most travelled to Durban, under the leadership of the association’s president, Professor Sir George Darwin (son of Charles Darwin). Campbell hosted a lavish reception for the group, during which Nokutela and the Inanda Native Singers performed. Her “particularly clear soprano” voice attracted frequent applause. John was then called on to address the assembled delegates, the only African to do so through their entire South African visit. Darwin was greatly impressed.³¹

The Dubes embarked on another overseas trip in 1909. They spent some time in the United Kingdom, assisted by the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines’ Protection Society and a number of leading nonconformist churchmen of the time, who all endorsed their work. Among them were R. Wardlaw Thompson,

²⁹. Tsitsi Jaji, “Re-collecting the Musical Politics of John and Nokutela Dube,” *Safundi* 13, nos. 3–4 (2012): 219. “SANNC” is the acronym for the South African Native National Congress; in 1923 the name was changed to African National Congress (ANC).

³⁰. Nxaba, “Life of Dr John Langalibalele Dube.”

³¹. Report in *Natal Mercury*, August 24, 1905.

foreign secretary of the London Missionary Society; D. Burford Hooke, secretary of the Colonial Missionary Society; Frederick B. Meyer, one of the most influential evangelical preachers of his day and prominent in the Keswick Movement (founded in 1875 to promote social and spiritual purity in the face of moral decline, and in which Arthur Tappan Pierson was also heavily involved) and president of the World's Sunday School Convention; and Robert F. Horton, lately president of the National Free Church Council and minister-in-charge of the Lyndhurst Road Congregational Church in Hampstead.³²

While in London, the Dubes also met with the visiting Schreiner delegation and through it, made the acquaintance of a number of prominent public figures.³³ Among them were Jane Cobden Unwin, suffragist daughter of the radical statesman Richard Cobden and wife of T. Fisher Unwin. Unwin was Olive Schreiner's publisher and agreed also to publish a pamphlet that the Dubes had prepared for this visit. Another was Betty Molteno, who had been an educationist herself, the principal of the Collegiate School for Girls in Port Elizabeth beginning in the late 1880s. Both Molteno and her lifelong partner, Alice Greene, who had joined the staff of the Collegiate School in 1887, had left their posts because of their pro-Boer sympathies in the South African War. They were also close friends of Olive Schreiner's.

Molteno and Greene began supporting Ohlange from this time, and the Dubes soon built them a small cottage in the school grounds. The two became very friendly with Nokutela in particular; on one visit to Ohlange in 1913, Betty Molteno declared that she was Nokutela's guest.³⁴ In this way, Nokutela became part of an international network of radical women campaigning for African and Indian rights throughout the British Empire.

In their efforts to raise money in Britain, the Dubes were particularly anxious, they said, for agricultural land, farm implements, and more accommodation for boarders. As always, John spoke and Nokutela sang. They visited various churches and halls in London, Sheffield, and Nottingham, wherever they had been invited through the good offices of their sponsors. In

³². Hughes, *First President*, 152; "Lyndhurst Road News Sheet," January 1910, 9, available at Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, Camden Library, London.

³³. Led by William P. Schreiner, the delegation was protesting the exclusion of black people from the franchise in the 1909 Union of South Africa Act. See André Odendaal, *The Founders: The Origins of the ANC and the Struggle for Democracy in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2012), chap. 46.

³⁴. Catherine Corder and Martin Plaut, "Gandhi's Decisive South African 1913 Campaign: A Personal Perspective from the Letters of Betty Molteno," *South African Historical Journal* 66, no. 1 (2014): 12.

February 1910, they departed for New York. They travelled in the South, New England, and Minnesota, and possibly ventured into Canada. They returned to Natal later in 1910.

As is well known, John Dube was elected first president of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) on that body's formation in 1912, partly in recognition of these remarkable achievements. What is less well known is the equally significant role played by Nokutela; her contributions probably favored his election. She was well liked and highly respected by other Congress leaders—by Pixley kaIsaka Seme for one example. Moreover, while the presidency frequently took John away on Congress business, Nokutela, her brother John Mdimba, and her brother-in-law Charles Dube continued to form the backbone of Ohlange.

This apparent success, particularly for Nokutela, came to an abrupt end in 1914, while John was leading the SANNC delegation abroad to protest the effects of the 1913 Land Act. News escaped that a young Inanda woman had borne him a child, of which he had apparently admitted parental responsibility. The baby died, however, and a local investigative committee cleared him of indiscretion. Rumors had circulated earlier about his fathering children by other women; the tragedy of the situation was that he and Nokutela were unable to have children of their own. John Dube's actions, both at the time and subsequently, suggest that he felt keenly that his manhood had been compromised. For Nokutela, the pressures to fulfill the rightful role of Christian marriage were nigh unbearable. As her school essay shows, from a young age she had been aware of the calamity of childlessness.

Sympathies were divided locally between Nokutela and John (and probably even within her family, for John Mdimba remained close to John Dube). She found it impossible to remain in Inanda and withdrew to a farm near Wakkerstroom in the Transvaal, where John and several others in her circle owned land. Evidence of her movements for this period has thus far been elusive, so this part of her story is hard to complete. She also seems to have spent time at Piet Retief and Msobotyeni and to have kept in touch with some former associates, such as Cleopas Kunene, founding editor of *Abantu-Batho* newspaper,³⁵ and Jwili Gumede, a teacher in Inanda. John Dube, probably becoming ever more desperate for a family, initiated divorce proceedings against her and obtained a provisional decree in March 1916, citing as the reason her

³⁵. Peter Limb, "A Centenary History of *Abantu-Batho*, the People's Paper," in *The People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of Abantu-Batho*, ed. Peter Limb (Johannesburg: Wits Univ. Press, 2012), 19.

infidelity.³⁶ He does not, however, seem to have made the matter public; he may have reckoned that doing so might have provoked more trouble for him.

Then in the first weeks of 1917, Nokutela became seriously ill with a kidney infection. A worried neighbor phoned John Dube, who was in Sophiatown at the time and who arranged transport for her to Johannesburg. She was cared for by Dr. William Godfrey, a friend of Gandhi's, and Anna Victoria Mangena, wife of Alfred Mangena, one of the earliest African advocates practicing in Johannesburg. Both were from Natal (Godfrey from Durban and Mangena from Maphumulo) and had probably been previously known to the Dubes; Mangena (born Ntuli) had schooled at Inanda Seminary.³⁷ In spite of their efforts, Nokutela died on January 26, 1917.

Her funeral in Johannesburg was very large, attended by most of the SANNC executive, including Saul Msane and Pixley kalsaka Seme, and several came from the Natal branch of Congress. Other prominent figures such as Cleopas Kunene and Daniel Letanka (another editor of *Abantu-Batho*), the Mangenas, and Ray Phillips of the American Board came to pay their respects. John Dube and his aged mother Elizabeth, along with several of Nokutela's relatives, led the mourners. Nokutela's musical talents and contributions to the founding of Ohlange Institute were specially remembered in the service. She was buried in Brixton Cemetery, in grave number CK9763. In the dehumanizing arrangements of the time, even after death, the "CK" stood for "Christian Kaffir."³⁸

Her death seems to have reawakened great sadness about the fate she had suffered, and this sense of an injustice done to her, together with mounting frustrations with John Dube's leadership, probably contributed to his downfall as Congress president just months later. In a "who's who" published either later in 1917 or early in 1918, she was remembered with a fine photograph bearing the caption,

This woman was a founder of the Ohlange school and the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal*, as well as composer of the Zulu songs that were sung

³⁶. Nicolson to Colenso, August 4, 1916, A204 (Colenso Papers), Box 55, KwaZulu-Natal Archives Repository, Pietermaritzburg.

³⁷. Victoria Mangena was one of the first qualified African nurses in South Africa and the first to practice in the Transvaal. See Skota, *African Yearly Register*, 181–82; E. J. Verwey, ed., *New Dictionary of South African Biography* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1995), 1:154.

³⁸. Hughes, *First President*, 195–96.

at Ohlange. This work was undertaken with her husband, Mafukuzela. She died in January 1917.³⁹

How a Woman Leader Was Forgotten and Rediscovered

John remarried in 1920. His new wife, Angeline Khumalo, was herself a remarkable woman and became a role model in her own right, most closely associated with the Daughters of Africa.⁴⁰ Importantly, she also bore the children that John so desperately longed for. Yet it became somewhat awkward to remember the first Mrs. Dube. Thus, in recollections and commemorations of the history of Ohlange Institute and of Ilanga, he alone came to be identified as the founder.⁴¹ And gradually, through Angeline's presence in the Dube family as John's wife, and later her many years as his widow, an elision occurred: she was the one who became associated with John Dube's earlier achievements. Thus, by the time of her death in 1986, Angeline appeared to be the "Mrs. Dube" who helped to found Ohlange Institute and Ilanga. Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's funeral oration for Angeline Dube declares that

Mrs Dube was there beside him as he struggled to make his dream for an education come true for his people. . . . In 1903 he launched Natal's African paper, *Ilanga Lase Natal*, as a vehicle through which his education could benefit his people. . . . Only Mrs Dube ever knew the full story of this determined campaign to bring the world to the people through his newspaper.⁴²

³⁹. *iAlmanaka lika Bantu-Batho* (1917/18), A1618 Skota Papers, University of the Witwatersrand Historical Records; this note (image C3-1-45-2-001) constitutes one of the few pages, miraculously and fortunately, to survive. *Mafukuzela* (one who stirs things up) was John Dube's praise name. See also Limb, "Centenary History," 29.

⁴⁰. Interview with Angeline Dube, conducted by Tim Couzens and Heather Hughes, Ohlange, 1978. The Daughters of Africa is a much-neglected organization; for an account of its presence on the Witwatersrand, see Meghan Healy-Clancy, "Women and the Problem of Family in Early African Nationalist History and Historiography," *South African Historical Journal* 64, no. 3 (2012): 450–71.

⁴¹. For just two examples of many, see R. T. Bokwe, "Our High Schools: Ohlange," *Natal Native Teachers' Journal* 4, no. 4 (1925): 201–2, and Skota, *African Yearly Register*, 145, both of which make no mention of either wife.

⁴². "Citation at the Funeral of Mrs. Angeline Dube (UMama UMaKhumalo), Widow of the late Dr. J. L. Dube, the First President of the African National Congress and Founder of Ohlange Institute and Founder of *Ilanga Lase Natal*," by Mangosuthu G. Buthelezi, Chief Minister of KwaZulu, President of Inkatha, and Chairman, The

Downplaying two women's roles to the extent of obliterating distinctions between them and thereby elevating the husband's role to heroic status fitted with the expectations of a patriarchal narrative of leadership and achievement. Through many decades of retelling, this elided version of the record became the generally accepted wisdom perpetuated in historical accounts.⁴³

Nokutela's unmarked grave remained forgotten for ninety-three years, until efforts were initiated in 2010 to identify it, as well as to locate surviving relatives. Much of this work of rediscovery was led by documentary filmmaker Cherif Keita, who had previously produced a film about John Dube, *Oberlin-Inanda*, and was then working on one about Nokutela.⁴⁴ Mention should also be made of Stephen Coan, a journalist for *The Witness* who took a strong interest in the Dubes' story and wrote a number of detailed press features, covering most of the events recounted below.

In 2011, with the sympathetic help of Alan Buff, the manager of Johannesburg Parks, and gravedigger Rufus Lekhuanye, Nokutela's exact gravesite was identified. While filming in the Inanda area, Keita stumbled upon several of her surviving relatives, including a great-niece also named Nokutela. In 2012, many of those relatives, joined by direct descendants of Angeline and John Dube, gathered in the Brixton Cemetery to unveil a proper tombstone.⁴⁵ The following year, in 2013, Nokutela was posthumously awarded the Mahatma Gandhi Satyagraha Award by the Gandhi Development Trust at a ceremony in the Durban City Hall.⁴⁶ In 2014, Nokutela's grave was declared a National

South African Black Alliance; read on his behalf by Dr. F. T. Mdlalose, Minister of Health and Welfare, KwaZulu Government, National Chairman of Inkatha (E. G. Malherbe Library, University of KwaZulu-Natal).

⁴³. One does not wish to single out particular accounts, for all of them featured such elision; I was as guilty as the rest. During the interview with an ailing and elderly Angeline Dube noted earlier, we were far more interested to ask what she could relate about John Dube than to inquire about her own exceptionally busy public life, a matter I came greatly to regret in subsequent years.

⁴⁴. Cheick Mahamadou Chérif Keïta, Paul Hager, and Ngangura Mweze, *Oberlin-Inanda: The Life and Times of John L. Dube* (DVD; St. Paul, MN: Media Lab Africa, 2005); Cheick Mahamadou Chérif Keïta, *uKukhumbula uNokutela = Remembering Nokutela* (DVD; St. Paul, MN: Media Lab Africa, 2013). A clip of the latter film can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=T58J6qERy4.

⁴⁵. "Nokutela Dube's Headstone Unveiled," *Eyewitness News*, 2012, <http://ewn.co.za/2012/08/11/Nokutela-Dube-headstone-unveiled>.

⁴⁶. Stephen Coan, "Remember to Call at My Grave," *News24*, August 16, 2013, www.news24.com/Archives/Witness/Remember-to-call-at-my-grave-20150430.

Heritage Site and her story received considerable publicity on the BBC World Service and in other media sources.⁴⁷ During Women's Month (August) in 2016, she was inducted into Freedom Park, a national memorial for those who gave their lives for freedom, as well as standing as a celebration of African culture.⁴⁸ Finally, two significant events occurred in January 2017. Keita presented the Durban Local History Museums with an antique Autoharp of exactly the kind Nokutela would have played, and on January 17, the centenary of her death, a special commemoration was held at her grave.⁴⁹

Nokutela Dube's reception into the national pantheon of leadership signifies more than a belated recognition of her achievements. Memorialization is as much about the present as the past, and nation building projects in contemporary South Africa are highly contested. The current ANC regime is mired in allegations of corruption and state capture, facing the wrath of communities whose basic services have not been delivered, and experiencing vicious infighting. It needs unifying role models around which to rally support and with which to promote visions of an ANC-led common citizenship. It has certainly been highly receptive to Nokutela's national recognition and may have hoped that she would serve such a purpose. Curiously, however, the ANC Women's League, which is facing its own accusations of having abandoned women's struggles in favor of a campaign to support President Zuma, has not been prominent in any of the remembrance activities.⁵⁰ The recovery of Nokutela's legacy is a process still in the making; it remains to be seen whether her memory will be drawn into such contests or rise above them as an inspiration for what women can achieve.

⁴⁷. See *Kha Ri Ambe*, October 2013, p. 13; Martin Vennard, "The Pioneering Woman the World Forgot," BBC News, June 13, 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27702630.

⁴⁸. "Freedom Park Pays Homage to Nokutela Dube," South African Government News Agency, www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/freedom-park-pays-homage-nokutela-dube.

⁴⁹. Sinothi Thabethe, "Nokutela's Musical Autoharp Is Finally Back Home, Durban," Durban Local History Museums, January 30, 2017, <http://durbanhistorymuseums.org.za/nokutela-dubes-musical-antoharp-finally-back-home-durban>. Stephen Coan, "Nokutela Dube Remembered," *The Witness*, January 30, 2017, www.pressreader.com/south-africa/the-witness/20170130/281509340908852.

⁵⁰. See, for example, Lebo Keswa, "ANC Women's League Should Celebrate Thuli Madonsela," *Daily Maverick*, August 14, 2015, www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2015-08-14-anc-womens-league-should-celebrate-thuli-madonsela/#.WRi588a1vIU.

In Pursuit of Forgotten Women Leaders

Several of the gendered dimensions to this life story are clear from the way it has been constructed and related. It is worth teasing out some of those that are either less clear or warrant further comment. The first seems to be the nature of the archive itself; that is, the state of the evidence from which we are able to construct such stories. The archival record is patchy to say the least on African organization in general and on women's associational life in particular. Partly through good fortune, partly through her own efforts, it is possible to trace Nokutela Dube through many different types of archival record. But quite certainly that remains to be discovered. Unusually, she makes her first appearance as a schoolgirl and her last after her death, in an almanac of leading public figures. We find her in newspapers (interestingly, in the United States she gave interviews; in South Africa, reports *of* her are published but never an interview *with* her), in missionary journals (including a brief autobiography written in the late 1890s), her songbook, and fleetingly in epistolary references and other people's papers. Seemingly, only one letter written by her has survived. In her own neat hand, it is addressed to the government on behalf of Chief Mqhawe, complaining of severe hunger among the Qadi people.⁵¹

As such sources go, though, this is a relatively rich collection, and much of it exists because Nokutela attended such a well-documented school and subsequently married someone so prominent, *and* because they ran a newspaper. One immediately appreciates the difficulties of retrieving the individual lives of women less well placed. In some cases oral history has made an indispensable contribution toward redressing the imbalance, but one understands why a figure such as Charlotte Maxeke (again, someone whose life was reasonably well documented while it was lived) has for some time stood in as virtually the sole representative of a generation of women leaders.⁵²

One challenge we face, then, is the few traces that remain. But there is a linked issue, which is how we *conceive* of associational life and of leadership.

⁵¹. Nokutela Mdimba to the Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA), March 3, 1890, SNA 1/1/123 (322/1890), KwaZulu-Natal Archives Repository, Pietermaritzburg. The existence of this letter opens up another line of enquiry into the way women as well as men, Christians as well as traditionalists, were incorporated into chiefly circles.

⁵². For an example of the contribution of oral history, see Margaret McCord, *The Calling of Katie Makhanya* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995). For Charlotte Maxeke, see Thozama April, "Theorising Women: The Intellectual Contributions of Charlotte Maxeke to the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa" (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape, 2012).

Nokutela's example should serve to underline that often leadership was not an individual, but rather a family, matter. Though Julia Allen has noted the "considerable progress that has been made in establishing recognition of women as the co-partners with men in shaping Christian identity, teaching and expression," we are still faced with the disparity evident in records found in the *African Yearly Register* that was discussed at the opening of this chapter.⁵³ There are other ways, though, in which it would be helpful to rethink female leadership and which, as a result, may bring to light further remaining traces.

One of these is to reconsider the *kinds* of organizations that are included in discussion of public associational life; again, the search for female leadership may expand the canvas so that a more complete understanding of both men's and women's leadership roles becomes possible. The case of Elizabeth Plaatje, the wife of Solomon Tshekiso Plaatje, will illustrate this point.⁵⁴ We know that she, like Nokutela, was instrumental in her husband's newspaper and other writing ventures, for which she has yet to receive adequate acknowledgement. Yet a line in her obituary suggests still more, when it states that she "held one of the highest offices in the temperance movement."⁵⁵

Temperance has frequently been noted as a foundational commitment in nonconformist churches and missions; the Blue-Ribbon Army was extremely active at Inanda Seminary, and Nokutela was likely a member.⁵⁶ Yet it has rarely been linked to broader conceptions of civic organization. An insightful article by Wallace Mills on this subject, published over three decades ago, has attracted far less attention than it probably deserves.⁵⁷ The phenomenon of "temperance nationalism" has been explored in settings other than South Africa and may be another way of thinking about female leadership (it also gives a clue as to the kinds of sources to revisit). Moreover, many of the temperance movements, such as the International Order of True Templars (according to Elinor Sisulu, popularly known among her parents' generation as "I Only Take Tea") were open

⁵³. Julia Allen, "Indigenous Women in the Early African Church," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 1 (2010): 40.

⁵⁴. For another remarkable figure who was both a prolific writer and journalist and a SANNC leader, see Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1984).

⁵⁵. "Late Mrs. E. Sol. T. Plaatje," *Umteteli waBantu*, January 30, 1943. I am grateful to Brian Willan for this reference.

⁵⁶. Price, "Inanda Seminary," 166.

⁵⁷. Wallace G. Mills, "The Roots of African Nationalism in the Cape Colony: Temperance, 1866–1898," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 13, no. 2 (1980): 197–213.

to both men and women.⁵⁸ Thus women potentially were playing leadership roles beyond the bounds of women-only organizations at a time when they were restricted from common membership or leadership of other mainstream organizations, such as the SANNC.⁵⁹

A persuasive argument has also been made for the need to link home and public life far more closely together for women than for men; the home became their domain. On occasion, women mobilized themselves as a result of their resistance to state invasion of their domestic sphere, as in the 1913 anti-pass campaigns.⁶⁰ Moreover, through their domestic responsibilities, they were also contributing to a unifying public culture embracing race pride and purity: as Healy-Clancy has it, theirs was a “public-private home.”⁶¹ It was in this domestic space that they took charge of another historic duty: “a woman should continue to be regarded as the cradle of the race,” as Solomon Plaatje put it in *Native Life in South Africa*.⁶² Yet as we know, Nokutela was childless, which meant that she was never quite able to fulfill these domestic expectations. Not least of the implications is that with an absence of children to continue a “line” and therefore act also as a repository of memories, a life is that much more easily forgotten.

Nokutela Dube’s case raises another intriguing question about the reach of influence of these leading figures—or, at the least, what their contributions to public debate about women’s role might have been. Through her associations with figures such as Betty Molteno, Alice Greene and even Olive Schreiner herself, Nokutela may well have participated in the elaboration of ideas that we have come to know as first-wave feminism. In 1899, just before her departure from America, she told an interviewer:

I do not like your women. They are very busy—always engaged—but they do no work as my Zulu women do. They must be taken care of too

⁵⁸. Elinor Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 66. On this and other temperance movements in South Africa, see also Alan Gregor Cobley, *The Rules of the Game: Struggles in Black Recreation and Social Welfare Policy in South Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997).

⁵⁹. Lack of access to direct membership did not mean absence from meetings or exclusion from discussion forums; see Frene Ginwala, “Women and the African National Congress, 1912–1943,” *Agenda* 6, no. 8 (1990), 77–93.

⁶⁰. Julia C. Wells, *We Now Demand! The History of Women’s Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand Univ. Press, 1993).

⁶¹. Meghan Healy-Clancy, “The Politics of New African Marriage in Segregationist South Africa,” *African Studies Review* 57, no. 2 (2014): 7–28.

⁶². Solomon T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1981; orig. 1916), 118.

well or they complain. They hurt their bodies with their clothes, and they will not bother with children. . . . Every day they go shopping, and always for something to wear. . . . I do not wish the Zulus to become like that.⁶³

This is remarkably close (with an additional indigenized twist) to what Schreiner in 1911 described as “sex-parasitism.”

The debilitating effect of wealth sets in at that point exactly (and never before) at which the supply of material necessities and comforts, and of aesthetic enjoyments, clogs the individuality, causing it to rest satisfied in the mere passive possession of the results of the labour of others, without feeling any necessity or desire for further productive activity of its own.⁶⁴

No direct line of influence from Nokutela Dube to Olive Schreiner is suggested; however, it is tempting to imagine common discussions, given that these women were brought into direct association as early as 1909.

Conclusion: Preserving and Narrating the Story of Women Leaders

The points made above relate in part to the way in which women’s stories have been preserved in the archival record and in part to the ways in which women’s stories have been told. While these two are connected in complex ways, preserving and narration are different activities. A decade ago, Natasha Erlank pointed to the extent of male bias in the way the history of African nationalism had been written; the same point has recently been underscored: “Women, women’s groups, and family life have generally remained peripheral to scholars’ discussions of the institutional and ideological development of African nationalism.”⁶⁵

Asking new questions about the role of women in leadership may lead us to new sources, while writing biography can hopefully exert some impact on the way history is communicated. For most biographers, biography is an end in itself; indeed, as an increasingly respectable genre, this position is quite legitimate. And yet, in this process of addressing bias and retrieving the contributions of

⁶³. “Ideas of a Zulu Woman,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 1899.

⁶⁴. Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour* (London: Virago, 1978), 100.

⁶⁵. Natasha Erlank, “Gender and Masculinity in South African Nationalist Discourse, 1912–1950,” *Feminist Studies* 29, no. 3 (2003): 653–71; Healy, “Women and the Problem of Family,” 451.

those who rightfully ought to be identified as shapers of the narrative, biography may also play an important role in the way history is written in the future. We need always to be reminded that “the absence of women in history books does not mean that they were indeed absent, but that androcentric, patriarchal history excluded them.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶. Rosinah Gabaitse and Simangaliso Kumalo, “Singing from Beyond the Grave: Nokuthela Linderely Dube Returned to Memory,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40, no. 2 (2014): 109.

Notes on the Life History of the Reverend Canon Professor Emeritus John Samuel Pobee (1937 to 2020)

Tribute Compiled by the Reverend Dr. Casely B. Essamuah
Secretary, Global Christian Forum

Birth and Upbringing

The life and story of the late John Samuel Pobee, a New Testament scholar, theologian, writer, mentor, educator, ecumenist and missiologist is unconventional in many respects. In a foreword to an 80-page funeral brochure, the deceased had given strict instructions regarding his funeral. Giving credit to God's grace and divine mercy that had kept him alive as a man who had lived with many physical ailments since childhood, he directed that at his funeral, there should be no "jingoism and haughtiness of the Pharisee in the biblical parable of the Pharisee and the Publican." Therefore, even though tributes were to be included in the funeral brochure, they were not to be read at any of the services. Furthermore, Pobee gave instructions for his mortal remains to be interred at Akusu, the royal mausoleum of his wife, Martha, near Kumasi. For a proud Fante with a matrilineal lineage to request that he be buried in his wife's cemetery is as unconventional as the man John Samuel Pobee.

Additionally, a paragraph introducing his biography begins as follows: "Writing a biography, especially stretching over eight decades may be compared to an exercise in sewing a lady's frock. It has to be long enough to contain a lot, and short enough to make it attractive." For those of us who had the pleasure of knowing him, that sentence is quintessentially Pobee. He deftly combined sobriety and seriousness with a witty sense of humor.

Pobee was born on Friday July 8, 1937. His father was a renowned schoolteacher named John Mends Samuel Pobee and his mother, Margaret Ama Atta Pobee, née Aggrey Fynn, was a descendent of the Reverend Philip Quaake, the first African Anglican priest. Pobee hailed from a family whose involvement in the Anglican Church and quest for educational achievements were non-negotiable.

During his early childhood, he was plagued with different ailments, one of which left him bedridden from 1942-45. In 1947, he caught the dreaded typhoid fever. As a result, his formal primary school education was shortened to three instead of seven years. These ailments endeared him even more to his six other siblings, and whenever he got slightly better, the parents offered home schooling. Thus, at the young age of twelve, he passed the Common Entrance

examination and gained admission on scholarship to the famous Adisadel College, an Anglican Boys School in Cape Coast. Not unlike many boys his age, it was this boarding school that transformed him from a boy into a man. His nostalgic recollections of his education at Adisadel College are well chronicled in his history of the school, *Adisadel on the Hill, The Story (1910-2010)*.

Academic Career: The University of Ghana and Beyond

After Adisadel, Pobee attended the University of Ghana from 1957 to 1961 where he read theology on a Commonwealth Scholarship. He was greatly influenced by his mentor, the Rev. Noel King, who also ensured his further studies in UK.

In 1961, he attended Selwyn College, University of Cambridge, England, on a scholarship from the University of Ghana as part of the African Faculty Development Program. He successfully acquired two degrees from the University of Cambridge – a Master of Arts, (M.A.) and a Master of Letters (M.Litt). His thesis was on *Martyrdom in the Letters of St. Paul*, written against the backdrop of Ghana's first President Kwame Nkrumah and his dictatorship.

He returned to Ghana after his studies at Cambridge, Pobee served the University of Ghana from October 1966 as a Lecturer in New Testament Studies. In 1972, he was promoted to Senior Lecturer, and in 1977, to Associate Professor and finally, in 1981, to full Professor.

In 1978 to 1980 and 1979 to 1983, he served as Head of Department for the Study of Religions, also assuming the positions of Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Dean of Examinations, and Dean of Admissions. From 1976-1980, he also served as Associate Director, Humanities Programme, Population Dynamics Programme; Chapel Warden of Commonwealth Hall, and Secretary to the Senior Common Room Committee (1969-74).

The University of Ghana in its tribute stated that, "Professor Pobee was a pioneer in the promotion of gender equality, religious tolerance and inclusion in the academy and beyond. He promoted higher education for women, insisting on fairness in the distribution of scholarships between Christians and Muslims." They also singled out his initiation of funding for the Legon Theological Series – established for the promotion of research and scholarship, and funded by the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany (EMW - Evangelisches Missionswerk).

In all these positions, he sought to make others excel and follow their dreams. Future bishops of the independent Anglican Church in Ghana such as

Joseph Dadson, Theophilus Annobil, E. Okoh, Daniel Allotey, Abraham Ackah and others were encouraged and supported in their aspirations for further studies.

In no way a “denominational tribalist” Pobee also encouraged Joshua Kudadjie, a Methodist, to read for a degree in Theology at his own alma mater, Selwyn College, and return to the University of Ghana as lecturer. The Rev. Joshua Kudadjie went on to serve as Vice Principal of the Methodist University College of Ghana [MUCG] and coincidentally passed away the same day that Pobee did, January 22, 2020. During Pobee’s days at Legon, he also encouraged and supported the further education of Elizabeth Amoah, who became the first woman to hold a doctorate in the study of religions, and the first woman faculty member in the Department for the Study of Religions.

One such beneficiary of Pobee’s encouragement and support is Prof. Esther Acolatse, University of Toronto, Canada, who wrote in a tribute as follows:

I tell many in my theological guild that I do my feminism gently because it was male academics who made way for me, and Prof. Pobee was one of these wonderful mentors. He worked to find sizable money for me for graduate school and ensured that I was visible whenever possible to propel my career. Words cannot count the debt of gratitude I owe.

In addition to the countless men and women whose scholarship and academic career he bolstered, Pobee has to his name, 28 monographs, 24 edited symposia, 129 contributions to books and 119 articles in journals.

In 2000, the University of Ghana conferred on him the title Professor Emeritus, and in 2013, an honorary degree Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, in the category of “Distinguished Scholarship.” Elected to the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, March 27, 2013, Pobee’s inaugural lecture was “Truth and Nation-State Building: A Theologian’s Perspective.” He also delivered the 50th series of the J. B. Danquah Memorial Lectures February 20-22, 2017 on “Peace and Security: An African Christian Theological Contribution.”

Churchman

After the two degrees, Pobee also trained for priesthood of the Anglican tradition from 1963 to 1964 at Westcott House, University of Cambridge. But it was only on October 23, 1988 that he was ordained. In his own words he “had difficulty with the idea of canonical obedience to the diocesan bishop and his successors.” Interestingly, he was ordained by the Rt. Rev. Peter Walker of Ely who had been his Principal at Westcott College, Cambridge, but with Letters Dimissory from

the Rt. Rev. Joseph Kobina Dadson of the Diocese of Sunyani-Tamale, who had been his student at the University of Ghana, Legon.

After his time in Geneva, Pobee was proposed to be a candidate to become Bishop of Sekondi, and the process brought to the fore some of the worse aspects of church politics. He recounts it all in his autobiography, without bitterness or rancor but instead consider it a providential outcome that he was an “unconsecrated bishop.”

Later on when he relocated to Ghana, he served as Canon of the Anglican Dioceses of Accra, Cape Coast, Sunyani-Tamale, Vicar-General (Deputy Bishop) Diocese of Accra, 205-2012. He was a consultant to three Lambeth Conferences—in 1978, 1988, and 1998. Pobee was a member of the Inter-Anglican Doctrinal and Theological Commission from 1981 to 1986, and also of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission 1983-1994. At the local parish level, he served St. Anthony of Padua Parish, the Anglican Church of Abelenkpe, and was instrumental in the construction of the sanctuary and elevation of the church to a parish level.

Scholarly Legacy

With fellow Anglican clergyman, John Samuel Mbiti and Harry Sawyerr who were mates at Cambridge, they were some of the earliest to note that theology in Africa was in a state of “northern captivity.” They restored the human person to the center of theological discourse, and not necessarily philosophy alone. Their theological discourse involved, oral, non-written, and non-propositional aspects of the language, liturgy, and faith-beliefs of the African people. In a sense, they brought theology out of the classroom to the people, integrating real life issues in a dialogue between culture and the Bible. Like Mbiti, who postured that Africans are “incurably religious,” Pobee’s theology also harnessed the pre-Christian traditional religiousness of Africa to translate into an authentic Africa Christian witness. By so doing, Pobee expanded the lens through which African religiosity is studied

Pobee’s scholarship was so wide and deep that in a festschrift in his honor, edited by Cephias Omenyo and Eric Anum, entitled, *Trajectories of Religion in Africa: Essays in Honor of John S. Pobee*, the authors conceded that they found it very difficult to categorize all the articles that had been written in Pobee’s honor. Their summary article was captioned: *All Things to All People*, to encompass the breadth of Pobee’s scholarship.

The Canadian academic, Dr. Diane B. Stinton chose Pobee as one of four African theologians whose work she examined in her doctoral thesis for the

University of Edinburgh, later published as *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*.

Pobee was very active in and became the very first African president of the International Association of Mission Studies (1988 – 1992) which explains why his theological writings span ecumenism and missiology.

Pobee's scholarship blossomed during the period when no one qualified theology with a geographical label, Pobee dared to write *Towards An African Theology*, 1979, which served as a precursor to several contextualized theologies all over the world. He was a pioneer in editing a festschrift to Prof. C. G. Baeta, published in 1971 under the title *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*. The contributors later became outstanding theologians in their own right. In fact, his selection of contributors reflected those who eventually defined the contours of theology in and from Africa during the last decades of the twentieth century.

An intellectual giant who embodied all the institutions he served and was associated with—Adisadel College, University of Ghana, the World Council of Churches, the International Association of Mission Studies and the Anglican Church of Ghana—he was a worthy ambassador who exuded the best of the DNA of these institutions. But even more importantly, he left his indelible mark on each of these august bodies.

Ecumenical Career

Introduced to the World Council of Churches by the then Rev. Fr. (later Archbishop) Desmond Tutu, who was, at the time, associate director for Africa at the Theological Education Fund based in the UK, Pobee was to be appointed from 1983 as associate director of the Programme of Theological Education in Geneva, and later as Coordinator of Theological Education. During his fifteen-year sojourn in Geneva, he also served at one time as academic dean at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey. The WCC offers this tribute:

The encounter with Tutu led Pobee to become a member of the Commission for the Theological Education Fund which afforded him numerous opportunities to engage with prominent theologians and church leaders from a wide spectrum of denominations and continents. In his autobiography *Sense of Grace and Mission* Pobee acknowledges that these encounters helped him to learn that ecumenism entailed opening up to and engaging the other, different as they may be. He could never again be the narrow faithful Anglican and Ghanaian. He began the journey to becoming a world citizen and an ecumenical Christian.

Pobee continued to be an external examiner and visiting professor in many tertiary institutions in Africa, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, the Pacific, Latin America, West Indies, USA, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

Pobee also had a commitment for the inclusion of women in theological education, ministerial formation and church leadership, including ordained ministry. Pobee's habit of promoting women in theology is confirmed by Prof. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, former WCC deputy general secretary and a fellow Ghanaian who acknowledged the servant role ("backroom boy" in his own words) Pobee played in the inauguration of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989, in Accra, Ghana. In this context, Pobee himself said "a group of women led him to put 'women in theology' on the agenda." He also initiated and published some volumes on women in theology.

The current WCC deputy general secretary, an African woman, Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri also reflects: "What Pobee did through the WCC is unforgettable. He truly had the empowerment of young ecumenists from the global south at heart."

Dr. Ofelia Ortega, pastor of the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba and former President of the World Council of Churches (2006-2013), also pays tribute by singling out Pobee's encouragement of women in theology. She states:

I was working under his leadership in this programme as Executive Secretary for Latin America and the Caribbean for eight years. During these years being a woman theologian and coming from the global south (Cuba) I was surprised to see his continued work for women in Africa and in our regions. He proposed to dedicate a fundamental part of our funds to support women theologians to organize their programmes (as for instance the African Circle of Women) and to find resources for scholarships to train women theologians in Latin America and Caribbean regions. Many of our women leaders in our region received his help to finish their doctoral degrees.

The general secretary of the World Council of Churches, the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit commended Pobee's long and rich influence on young people who went on to form the heart of the ecumenical movement. "We are grateful for both his vast array of knowledge and, even more, for his dedication to sharing it with those who will carry on," said Tveit. "We pray for his family and loved ones, and we will embrace his legacy with respect and affection."

Hubert van Beek, the founding Secretary, Global Christian Forum, and former staff colleague of Pobee at WCC, recalls:

in his inimitable manner, he (Pobee) had enabled me to see the African side of any matter. I also remember him as one who would speak joyously and without inhibition of his faith in the corridors of the Ecumenical Centre. One area of my work in which John made significant contributions was the building and nurturing of relationships of African Instituted Churches with the World Council of Churches, and their involvement in the ecumenical movement.

The Rev. Prof J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, President of Trinity Theological Seminary expressed gratitude for Pobee's service on their Governing Council, his provision of books and other resources and a personal friendship that endured to his great advantage. It is to Pobee's credit that the Catholic authorities in Ghana, invited him to be the first Rector of the Catholic University in Ghana, a position he graciously declined.

The years in Geneva when Pobee was with the World Council of Churches, John S. Mbiti at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, and Dr. Mercy Oduyoye was Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Church were remarkably robust. Their camaraderie and theological output propelled the African Christian présence onto a global platform.

Marriage and Family Life

Marriage came late in life for Pobee. As fate would have it, this strong Anglican theologian-priest ended up marrying Martha Ama Akyaa Nkrumah on July 26, 1994. The wedding at Akuafu Hall Chapel, University of Ghana, was officiated by the Roman Catholic Archbishop Peter Akwasi Sarpong of Kumasi and attended by several Anglican bishops. Remarkably they had eucharistic fellowship – all were invited to partake. Martha, a career diplomat was to serve in Moscow, Russia, Geneva, Switzerland, Tel Aviv, Israel, and Washington, DC, USA. She is currently Ghana's Permanent Representative at the United Nations in New York – the first Ghanaian woman diplomat to hold that position.

Joy, laughter, and an infectious engagement with life was Pobee's portion, and his wife, Martha, on whom he doted endlessly, completed him in all things. He was always unflinching in recounting his enormous pride in Martha and what she had brought to his already rich and colorful life!

Conclusion

John Samuel Pobee died on January 22, 2020.

The last word belongs to another scholar who greatly benefited from his friendship and office, Prof. Akintunde E. Akinade, Ph.D., Professor of Theology, Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University in Qatar:

Rev. Canon Prof. John Samuel Pobee was confident, contextual, creative, and cosmopolitan. For many years, he was the big masquerade within the World Council of Churches in Geneva and the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. These two institutions enabled him to actively sponsor and support scholars from the Global South. Just like a marvelous masquerade, he danced with pomp and panache. Under the aegis of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS), he facilitated my participation in my first international conference in Hawaii. He also provided a generous grant from the Fund for Theological Education in Geneva for my graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York. As the President of IAMS, Prof. Pobee's light beamed radiantly on the Ecumenical Movement. He boldly advocated for a theology brewed in "an African pot" to borrow a phrase by Agbonkhanmeghe Orabator. He formulated theological paradigms that are deeply rooted in the African worldview and imagination. Prof. Pobee was an "organic intellectual" who recognized the imperative for robust theological synergies between Cambridge and the Akrofi-Christaller Institute in Akropong-Akuapem in Ghana. He tirelessly advocated for African agency in theological education and appropriation. His intellectual mind had no place for smallness. The quenchless light of his intellectual imagination propelled us to new heights in ecumenical theology and cross-cultural conversations. The use of the hermeneutics of suspicion enabled him to valorize the boundless affinities between theory and praxis in theological discourse. He was unequivocally committed to the Anglican Church. He could not resist the appeal of what James Baldwin has described as the "accumulated Rock of Ages." This transcendental gaze propelled him into new vistas and ventures in theological education. His theological odyssey was defined by a vigorous sense of grace and mission.

Of all the works written by Pobee, one which fills him with great pride is the history of his alma mater, Adisadel College. As he ended it, we too end with the Adisadel School Ode:

*Others have labored and we share the glory
Ours to do exploits and add to their gain
Those who come after will take up our story
May it be worthy of singing again.*

Sources:

Funeral Brochure. *Celebration of Life of Rev. Canon Professor Emeritus John Samuel Pobee, Ghana, 2020.*

Pobee, John S. *Sense of Grace and Mission.* Kaneshie-Accra, Ghana: Amanza Ltd, 2012.

Theological Publishing and the Future of Christianity in Africa: African Theological Network Press

Theological education must address the unprecedented growth of Christianity in Africa in the last eighty years. Quality content and intellectual rigor in the theological training of future leaders will ultimately determine the sustainability of the growth of Christianity on the continent. Conceived as a response to this challenge, the mission of African Theological Network Press (ATNP) is to provide high-quality scholarly publications by African authors that address contextual mission concerns while remaining accessible and affordable across the continent.

ATNP launched in March 2018 as a partnership initiative between four institutions – the Akrofi-Christaller Institute in Ghana (ACI), the Jesuit Historical Institute in Africa (JHIA), located in Kenya, Missio Africanus in the United Kingdom, and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), also in the United Kingdom. ACI is a Presbyterian research university dedicated to the study and documentation of Christian history, thought and life in Ghana and throughout Africa. JHIA is a Catholic initiative of the Society of Jesus based at Hekima College that gathers primary research materials on the development of Christianity within its African socio-cultural context. Missio Africanus is a missions training project with Charismatic roots that helps missionaries and Christian leaders from around the world to overcome the cultural barriers they encounter in their work in the West. SPCK is the largest and one of the oldest Christian publishers in the United Kingdom. This historic Anglican institution seeks to create Christian books and other resources that are relevant to an African audience and widely accessible.

The vision of ATNP is to work through this partnership to expand current theological discourse by providing materials for academics and church workers. ATNP's publishing agenda focuses on four areas: (1) Christianity and Society, (2) Regional and Local Histories of Christianity, (3) Christian Theology, and (4) Mission and Christian Higher Education. ATNP aims to connect the continent through theological content by establishing networks in different regions to facilitate a wider distribution of publications.

In February 2020, ATNP published its first two titles for distribution in East Africa. The first, Emmanuel Katongole's insightful work *The Sacrifice of Africa*, is an honest confrontation of Africa's painful legacy that compellingly demonstrates Christianity's real potential to interrupt and transform entrenched political imaginations as it creates a different narrative for Africa. The second, Kwame Bediako's iconic *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History*

and Experience, offers insights into the Christ of contemporary African history and the Jesus of African faith. Bediako provides an understanding of the lived Christianity of countless Africans pursuing a high stakes quest for liberation and peace.

Although these books be found elsewhere, ATNP has now made them available for the first time in East Africa. In addition, *The Sacrifice of Africa* will be available in West Africa in April 2020. ATNP is also preparing the publication of a new missiology title featuring the scholarly reflections of seasoned and emerging theologians from Africa and the diaspora.


The task of preparing the church for the future is enormous. ATNP is committed to providing a publishing platform that will enable African scholars to participate in shaping this future.

Kyama Mugambi

Editorial Manager, ATNP


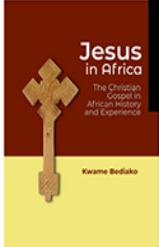
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Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa

Compiled by Beth Restrick, Head, BU African Studies Library

Martin, Phyllis M. **Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville: Mothers and Sisters in Troubled Times**. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009. \$56.89 (Hardcover) [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

ISBN-10: 0253352819 ISBN-13: 978-0253352811

Description: *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville* explores the changing relationship between women and the Catholic Church from the establishment of the first mission stations in the late 1880s to the present. Phyllis M. Martin emphasizes the social identity of mothers and the practice of motherhood, a prime concern of Congolese women, as they individually and collectively made sense of their place within the Church. Martin traces women's early resistance to missionary overtures and church schools, and follows their relationship with missionary Sisters, their later embrace of church-sponsored education, their participation in popular Catholicism, and the formation of women's fraternities. As they drew together as mothers and sisters, Martin asserts, women began to affirm their place in a male-dominated institution. Covering more than a century of often turbulent times, this rich and readable book examines an era of far-reaching social change in Central Africa. ([Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com))

Omenyo, Cephias Narh (ed.), **Trajectories of religion in Africa: essays in honour of John S. Pobee. Studies in world Christianity and interreligious relations**, 48. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014. [Amazon.com \(limited stock\)](https://www.amazon.com)
ISBN(13): 9789042038103 ISBN: 9042038101

Description: The book, in the main, discusses issues relating to mission, ecumenism, and theological education and is presented in four sections. The first segment discusses works on ecumenical and theological education and assesses the relevance of the World Council of Churches. Other issues discussed in this segment relate to the interrelationships that exist between academic theology, ecumenism, and Christianity. The World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910, which set the agenda for world-wide mission in a promising manner in the 1920s, is also assessed in this section of the work. The second segment, which covers Religion and Public Space, discusses works that examine the relationships between religion and power, religion and development, religion and traditional religious beliefs, and religion and practices in Africa. The

third segment of the book treats Religion and Cultural Practices in Africa and how all these work in teasing out an African theology and African Christianity. Some of the issues discussed in this section relate to African traditional philosophy, spiritism, and the interrelationships that exist between African Christianity and African Traditional Religion. The last segment of the book discusses the issue of African biblical hermeneutics and specifically looks at contemporary hermeneutical approaches to biblical interpretations in Africa. (Worldcat.org)

Visual Media

"Ukukhumbula uNokutela," "Remembering Nokutela." [Saint Paul, MN]: Media Lab Africa, [2013] DVD video: NTSC color broadcast system: English. Purchasing details can be found at:

<https://www.medialabafrica.com/nokutela.html>

Description: "On Saturday, August 31, 2013, Nokutela Mdimba Dube was welcomed into the pantheon of the first South African liberation heroes, when a gravestone was officially unveiled for her, after she had suffered for almost a century the indignity of total oblivion in an unmarked grave in Johannesburg. All too often, unfortunately, the history of women is reduced to a footnote in the epic of brave men. In Africa, even that footnote disappears when a woman has not been able to bear a child. *Remembering Nokutela* [uKukhumbula uNokutela] is the four-year long journey of an African-born U.S. director, Professor Cherif Keita, to rescue Nokutela Dube (1873-1917), a forgotten woman pioneer of the liberation movement in South Africa from the Purgatory of history, almost a century after her death at the age of 44." --from container.

Preview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=T58J6qERrY4>

Open Access Theses & Dissertations

Kenge, Esther Lubunga. **Towards a theology of peace-building in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): The contribution of Christian women.** University of KwaZulu-Natal. [Doctoral Degrees \(Biblical & Historical Studies, Theological Studies & Ethics\)](#) 2015.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10413/12036>

Abstract: This study is an attempt to define a theology of peace that can be a driving force behind the motivation of Christian women to be involved in the process of peace-building in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

In fact, the DRC has been for many years a theatre of conflicts and unprecedented violence against women and children that has affected the fabric of life in every sector. The study aims at answering the following research question: “What contribution can Christian women make to foster a theology of peace in order to build sustainable peace in the Kivu region of DRC?” This study has used two major theories, biblical peace and feminist ecclesiology, which circumscribe the involvement of Christian women in building peace in the DRC. The study uses qualitative empirical methodology to address the issue of peace-building in the DRC from a feminist perspective. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, contextual Bible study, written documents, and personal observation and experience. A group of five local women’s fellowships, from the most influential denominations affiliated to the Eglise du Christ au Congo — ECC (National Council of Churches in the DRC), was selected for group discussion and bible study. Individual interviews were conducted with six leaders of women’s fellowships, eight pastors, and three members of independent organizations. In addition, the President of the national office of La Fédération des Femmes Protestantes (FPP) and the President of the provincial office of the ECC-North Kivu shared their views on the situation of the conflict and their contribution towards the restoration of peace. The analysis of data has revealed that Christians could make a difference in addressing the situation of conflict in the DRC, mainly conflicts that involve local communities. However, the majority of the population claiming to be Christians do not display Christian ethics and values in handling conflicts because of tribal and ethnic ties, divisions among Christian denominations, and weaknesses in the teaching of God’s principles of peace-building. The story of Abigail encouraged women to be courageous and bold in order to rise up to the challenge of restoring peace in a patriarchal society dominated by violence caused by male arrogance and intolerance. The contextual Bible study of the story of Abigail provided a number of Christian values that are vital for peace building. These include justice, forgiveness, humility, valuing life, and avoiding bloodshed and self-avenging. This study argues that a theology of peace that cuts across all cultures and denominations should be rooted in the above Christian values. To foster such a theology of peace-building among women at the grassroots level, it was suggested to cast the above Christian values in a form of a creed or hymn that women could declare or sing regularly in their meetings as a commitment to live up to their faith and act upon it. By so doing Christian women can contribute to the process of peace-building in the DRC.

Kaunda, Chammah Judex. **Theological education for social transformation—A missiological analysis of core elements in the theology of John Samuel Pobee.** Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Univ. of Geneva. Thesis, MA (Master of advanced studies in ecumenical studies), 2012.

<http://doc.rero.ch/record/31745>

Summary: The study is a critical analysis of John S. Pobee's thoughts on theological education in Africa focusing on social transformation. It argues that for theological education to become relevant in the African context, it must be informed by the daily existential experiences of African people at the grassroots. By utilizing a missiological analytical research methodology, the study has demonstrated that the mission of God is an all-embracing process in which every Christian participates or struggles together with God in the humanization of society. This means the ecumenical imperative in theological education demands a new paradigm, which requires tools for social analysis and models for thinking theologically in order to occasion renewal in the Church for the purpose of social transformation. In this way theological education should be life centered and praxis-oriented. In other words, it is a way to engage critical participation in an on-going process of recreating and liberating work of God, in which human beings partner with God in the struggle for social transformation. This in itself calls for theological education in Africa, to complement the paradigm of Christocentric universalism with the paradigm of interrelatedness of all life. Finally, articulation of the notion of ecumenism within African wisdom and philosophy must be perceived as crucial for theological education. This is underpinned by an understanding that every human culture has categories and idioms in which the concept of ecumenism can be translated for contextual articulation. This implies that there is an urgent need for empirical studies in different African ethnic groups in order to retrieve indigenous concepts and metaphors of ecumenism.