

**Singing from beyond the grave:
Nokuthela Linderely Dube returned to memory**

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Abstract

Nokuthela Linderely Dube, one of the first black women to qualify as a teacher, author of the first Zulu songbook and wife to John Langalibalele, the first president of the African National Congress, is a significant figure whose memory has been buried in history. She represents the first generation of African women who pioneered women's struggle against cultural, racial and political oppression. She regarded her opposition to forms of oppression as a result of being raised in the church and growing up at a mission station. In spite of her outstanding contribution to the education of Africans and her support to the work of the ANC and the church, she remains unknown by many South Africans. This article seeks to examine and contribute to her legacy. The aim is to bring forth lessons gleaned from her legacy that can be used in a democratic South Africa, where women continue to struggle for a culture of gender equality to be fully inculcated at all levels of society.

Woman has from time immemorial been looked upon as inferior to man, and in order to destroy this mischievous idea we desire to have girls as regular boarders and to give them work with the young Zulu men and boys. The latter will then get an idea of the intellectual strength of womankind and lose his erroneous ideas of his own mental superiority. We cannot hope to raise the Zulu

Rosinah Gabaitse & Simangaliso Kumalo

men to any very high standard unless we show them
that they are not superior to the women – J. L. Dube.

Introduction: Women, memory and history

Doris Lessing once observed that “[w]omen often get dropped from memory, and then history.”¹ Although Lessing wrote from a context different from Nokuthela’s or our own contemporary context, her point is still valid. The tragedy of “dropping women from history” has happened, and continues to happen, because in patriarchal cultures, men control knowledge, its transmission and its preservation; they are the writers of history. The transmission of knowledge has always been the domain of males who, through their writings, preserved and articulated what they perceived as “ideal”. In this so-called history, the contributions of women are erased, written out, ignored and excluded. History has been silent on the contributions of women in the growth of human culture and society. Of course this was almost absolute in the past, but one has to note that there has been much change in recent times. Patriarchy still reigns, but it is important to acknowledge that significant changes have occurred – globally, and also in Africa, women have much more of a voice, and an influential one, hard won through different waves of feminism, activism, liberation theologies, African Women’s Theologies and other movements, and this is reflected in the histories being written today. Contemporary history is gradually revealing the actual contributions of women; most of it is subjective and remains a reflection of educated elite males et cetera, but there is more awareness and critique of this.² It is subjective because it is actually a construction of reality in patriarchal terms.³ The writings of some “history” that highlights the contribution of women still show the power that men have traditionally held in the domain of writing and scholarship. In most of these writings in which the contributions of women are documented, they are either downplayed or used to elevate the story of the men in their lives. So they still need to be read with suspicion. This has been the case with Nokuthela Linderely Dube (née Mdimba), a remarkable woman of the missionary epoch who contributed tremendously to the making of John Dube, the hero that he was. Very few people actually know of John Dube’s first wife, Nokuthela Dube, who was his companion for over 24 years before she died of a severe kidney infection in January 1917.⁴ Despite the

¹ Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography to 1949* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 196.

² E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1983), 108–109.

³ R. Reuther, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1983), 112–113.

⁴ H. Hughes, *First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2011), 196.

fact that a great deal is written about her husband John Dube, almost nothing has been written about her and as a result, she has been dropped from history.

We agree with Christina Landman that “a woman’s self-image must not depend on her marriage partner”.⁵ However, the contribution that a woman makes to nourish her partner’s life must be recognised and appreciated instead of being ignored and allowed to be washed away by the waves of history. When that happens, it is a continuation of the subjugation and marginalisation of women not only by society but by their partners too. The primary goal of this article is to retell the story of Nokuthela Dube in order to return her to memory. Further, we are telling the story of Nokuthela Dube in order to interrupt the male hegemony over history and engage in what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls a “remembered past”.⁶ When we engage in a “remembered past”, we do not just articulate that the absence of women in the making of history means that they were actually absent, but we also show how history is subjective. By doing this we refuse to perpetuate, cancel and suppress the history and leadership of women such as Nokuthela.⁷ As we begin to tell the stories about such women, we also demonstrate our suspicion that the absence of women in history books does not mean that they were indeed absent, but that androcentric patriarchal history excluded and silenced them. In telling the story of Nokuthela, we keep her memory alive and we rescue her from the invisibility that characterises the life of many great women in patriarchal contexts. Telling this story subverts her exclusion from the history books – and her very existence. This article serves as a reminder that Nokuthela Dube played a very significant role in the historical events that changed the landscape of South African education, religion and politics.

Who was Nokuthela? Nokuthela as the framework of her story

As this article is about Nokuthela, we are going to break away from the norm and mention her name before that of her husband. By doing so we are emphasising that this is *her story*, not John’s story, and so we will not define her in relation to her husband. Secondly, telling *her story* this way breaks away from the way stories are told in patriarchal contexts and spaces. In patriarchal contexts, stories that involve couples always mention the name of the man/husband first and this eclipses the achievements of the wife or woman. Thirdly, mentioning Nokuthela’s name first is one way of subverting and redressing male dominance in history and in stories. In this article Nokuthela occupies centre stage, unlike her position in history.

⁵ Christina Landman, *Passion and Partnerships: Powerful Partnerships for Passionate People* (Pretoria: Struik Christian Books, 2001), 10.

⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, 31.

⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, 36.

Nokuthela, whose name is derived from *ukuthela*, “the paying of taxes”, was from Inanda where she grew up in the community of *amakholwa* (Christians). She was born in 1872 at Adams, the first American Zulu Mission (AZM) station in Natal. Her parents were devoted members of the AZM. In 1880 her family moved from Adams to Inanda and this brought them closer to John Dube’s family. The only information on her early life is to be found in an essay entitled “my home”. This was written in English and published in the *Rice Country Journal* in Northfield, Minnesota by Ida Wilcox, wife of William Wilcox, as part of a regular series of letters on her missionary experiences in southern Africa. Nokuthela wrote this essay when she was 13 years old, which means that the essay can be dated around 1885. She wrote:

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 that have wagons, 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 foods are mealies, potatoes and other things. There are few who are diligent, their houses look so clean and nice and some are bad. In our homes we sleep down upon mats, and people buy beds to sleep.⁸

Heather Hughes describes her as “having an attractive, open face with bright eyes and an engaging smile”.⁹ An American journalist described her as “young with blazing black eyes, smooth brown skin and handsome regular features. She speaks good English with a deliberation that is charming and in the softest voice in the world”.¹⁰ Although this gives us some idea about how she looked, it does not say much about what she did and when. Furthermore, this description of Nokuthela as “*young, with blazing black eyes ... speaks good English with a deliberation that is charming and in the softest voice in the world*”, entrenches negative ideas about women. It suggests that women be recognised for their youth, smile, beauty and charm rather than for their talents, achievements and abilities.

⁸ Hughes, 58.

⁹ Hughes, 58.

¹⁰ Hughes, 58.

Her contribution to the empowerment and liberation of her people

When she finished her schooling, Nokuthela became a teacher in one of the local schools. She later returned to Inanda Seminary to teach under the mentorship of Mrs Mary Edwards, the legendary founder of Inanda Seminary. Nokuthela and John were married in January 1894 in Inanda. This partnership led to greater achievements, not only for the couple but for the people of South Africa as a whole, when one takes into account the school and the newspaper that they founded. It is intriguing that Nokuthela and Dube worked very closely with each other, considering the fact that African society during that period was patriarchal and a collaborative partnership between a wife and a husband therefore was very uncommon. This was so because gender roles were clearly defined. In those days women among the Zulus occupied the private sphere, such as childcare and domestic production, while the men occupied the public space, such as the courts and religious leadership spaces.¹¹ While some theorists hold that gender roles were not very rigid among the African people, they were not flexible either.¹² For example, it was uncommon for men to be actively involved in raising children, feeding them and bathing them. If there were men who did that, they were an exception to the rule. Men provided food and shelter for the children. In addition, it was uncommon for a man to stay home and cook while the woman went to the countryside to hunt.

Most African societies (South Africa included) were and still are highly hierarchical and operate within a patriarchal framework. The way the society is ordered allows women prescribed roles. They are expected to occupy subordinate positions. The Zulus were no exception and gender hierarchies existed within this group. As a result, the relationship between Nokuthela and John was not a relationship of equals; it was a relationship which operated within a framework of the male as the head of the household.

Despite the social norms at the time, Nokuthela's and Dube's relationship was different because they seem to have had a common vision; they travelled together to Incwadi to start a mission station, studied together in the USA, travelled together, shared platforms in community halls and published books together.¹³ In some ways, it can be argued that they transgressed some gender boundaries of their time. Yet, despite what we see as a beautiful partnership, not much is written about them as companions and equals. Instead, much more is known and written about John. The exclusion of Nokuthela itself reflects the patriarchal framework in which they existed, where women's stories were not told. It further demonstrates that although

¹¹ Eileen Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1950), 155.

¹² Krige, 155.

¹³ In 1911, they published the Zulu songbook *Amagama Abantu*.

women were not totally powerless, they were not perceived as influential. Soon after their marriage, Nokuthela and John embarked on a mission, an expedition to Incwadi. Here a huge tract of land was purchased by Chief Mqhawe (Dube's cousin) for the establishment of a new Qadi community west of Pietermaritzburg to extend his chiefdom. It has to be noted that Mqhawe mobilised his people to contribute a cow each for them to buy the farm.¹⁴ Over 300 cows were collected and these were the families who moved to Incwadi. Bheki Phewa observed:

Sometimes people talk as if Chief Mqhawe spent his own money to buy the land for our forebearers and distributed it to them for free. That is not true; our parents paid a cow each as payment for a piece of land.¹⁵

Both Nokuthela's father Simon and Dube's father Ukaonina had bought plots at Incwadi through chief Mqhawe's scheme. They were *abathengi*, landowners.¹⁶ So it has to be noted that Dube and Nokuthela were actually going to their other homes when they went to Incwadi.¹⁷ Their aim was to do missionary work without the interference of the missionaries or government.

On their arrival at Incwadi, Nokuthela was overwhelmed by the poverty and ignorance among the people. She exclaimed: "Our hearts went up in prayer to God as we looked and saw nothing but kraals with no sign of Christian civilization."¹⁸

Within the space of three years they managed to start two schools and two churches. At the time, Nokuthela was already a qualified and experienced teacher. Dube had no qualifications and was not ordained. It could be argued that although it was the couple's idea to start a school, Nokuthela was the one who spearheaded the development of the curriculum. She was able to use her experience as a qualified teacher. This demonstrates that she was ahead of her time.

Schools which were controlled by missionaries discouraged and destroyed African culture. African cultures were viewed as backward and in contradiction to the gospel. On the other hand, the South African government was intent on giving black people of South Africa an inferior education. So she and Dube went about facilitating the establishment of schools and

¹⁴ The farm is 250 hectares. He paid a total amount of \$1 863.16 and because he did not have all the money, he got a loan of \$1 000 from Bishop John Colenso. According to the Title Deed, the land was bought in 1870.

¹⁵ Bhekani Phewa, interviewed by R. Simangaliso Kumalo at Incwadi on 30 August 2015.

¹⁶ Both men appear in the Title Deed as landowners, *abathengi*.

¹⁷ In fact, one of the current schools known as Godlntaba High School is located on the land that was owned by Nokuthela's father, Simon Mdimma.

¹⁸ Heather Hughes and Cherif Keita, *Nokuthela: The Story of a Forgotten Woman Leader* (Pietermaritzburg: Department of Arts and Culture, 2012), 7.

Singing from beyond the grave: Nokuthela Linderely Dube ...

churches where they could offer superior education to black children. Nokuthela's teacher's qualifications helped her in the development of the curriculum. In 1896, following Dube's unsuccessful attempt to succeed the Rev. Stephen Pixley as the pastor of the Inanda mission station, Nokuthela agreed that they go to America to pursue further studies. The choices of courses reflect the roles of women and men at the time. Theological education was deemed to be a masculine pursuit, while domestic studies were reserved for women who were tasked with keeping and maintaining the home. Then, as now, church and academic leadership positions were male dominated. Contemporary church and academic leaders, the principal producers of biblical interpretations and theological education in the accessible public sphere, are male dominated. Male dominance in the field of knowledge creation means that it is men who get access to education. It is men who have acted as religious leaders and interpreters of sacred texts in most religions across the world and women's voices are silenced or excluded completely.¹⁹ This means that men almost had/have a total monopoly on the production of all fields of knowledge – both the learning and the teaching of it. This was reflected in the experience of Nokuthela.

It is important to note that Dube's first trip to America was supported by Rev. William Wilcox. On his second trip, Nokuthela went with her husband and he benefited from her support. They arrived in Brooklyn, New York, where they registered themselves at the Union Missionary Seminary. Nokuthela and John toured different churches and community halls where Nokuthela spoke and melodiously sang for the crowds. Meanwhile, John used his oratory skills to speak about the need for an all-embracing education for his people in Natal. It is said that Nokuthela was both an eloquent speaker and a marvellous musician. Hughes noted:

It was rare enough at that time for an African man to be addressing both white and black audiences in America, but rarer still for a woman like Nokuthela to be doing so. By all accounts she spoke with conviction and great poise, and sang: the melodious-ness of her voice was frequently remarked upon and played no small part in their success in attracting donations. An American journalist described her at the time as young, with blazing black eyes, smooth brown skin and handsome regular features. She speaks good English with a deliberation that is charming and in the softest voice in the world.²⁰

¹⁹ Reuther, 5.

²⁰ Hughes, 7.

Through these tours, they were able to pay for their upkeep and studies and they also raised enough money to start a school on their return to South Africa.

In 1899, Nokuthela and Dube came back to Inanda. After their return, Nokuthela completed further training as a teacher and Dube as a qualified and ordained clergyman.²¹ Therefore it is not surprising that he now became the pastor of the Inanda congregation (which he had coveted earlier) and Nokuthela taught at the local school.

Not only did Nokuthela excel in education, she influenced people's lives through music. African people are cast in music. Their politics is embedded in music, their wisdom is stored in music and their stories are told through music. In addition, their religious knowledge is taught and expressed through music. Their whole being finds meaning through this medium and even at the *eschato* or final moments in life they are accompanied by music. If one considers the centrality of music among Africans, especially South African Zulus, then Nokuthela was not just a music teacher, she was a life orienteer. She influenced people who would later have influence in society. Perhaps even John learnt from this. In 1903, John started the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal*, which is still in publication. In 1911 Nokuthela and John published the first Zulu songbook, a collection of Zulu secular songs. It was entitled *A Zulu Song Book: Amagama Abantu nawe Mishado*. One of those who benefited from Nokuthela's musical skills is the respected Reuben Caluza who was a student and later a teacher at Ohlange.²² He went on to become a legend of choral music, not only in South Africa but internationally. Heather Hughes noted:

Nokuthela's special gift to Ohlange was a strong music department offering both vocal and instrumental classes. She was the one, after all, who had completed a formal course in music education in Brooklyn and, with her outstanding singing talents, had won audiences over to their work whenever they travelled in America. Ohlange was to become justly famous for its musical achievements, particularly under Reuben T. Caluza, though what is never recorded is that this reputation was built on a foundation laid by Nokuthela. She probably taught Caluza.²³

Hughes is right in observing that although Nokuthela mentored Caluza, not much is written about this. This was one of Nokuthela's greatest achieve-

²¹ Hughes, 56.

²² Cherif Keita, *From Inanda to Oberlin* (2007). Documentary film on the life of the Rev. Dr. John Langalibalele Dube.

²³ Hughes, 123.

Singing from beyond the grave: Nokuthela Linderely Dube ...

ments. Through Caluza's achievements, Nokuthela's memory shall be kept alive. Caluza went on to graduate with a Master of Music degree from Hampton University, Virginia, in the United States. He became a legend in the field of choral music and is respected in contemporary musical circles as a composer and conductor.

Wiped out of memory and history

Nokuthela and John did not have children and this may account for some of the stress in their marriage, which led to a separation early in 1916. During their time, and even today, one of the main reasons for marriage was procreation. Women, especially, were under immense pressure to bear male children. They were seen as continuing the name of their fathers. Nokuthela moved out of their marital home at Inanda to stay at Wakkerstroom in the then Eastern Transvaal. This was after John had been accused of infidelity a number of times and his impregnating a young girl.²⁴

In Wakkerstroom, Nokuthela embarked on rebuilding her life. She moved from one place to another, evangelising and encouraging women to organise themselves in order to do some domestic education classes. It was while in Wakkerstroom, in 1917, that Nokuthela contracted a severe kidney infection. When John was told, he quickly arranged for medical help and to bring her to his Johannesburg house in Sophiatown. Unfortunately help came too late and on 26 January 1917, having arrived in Sophiatown only a few days earlier, Nokuthela died. She was buried at Brixton Cemetery in grave number CK97637. The designation "CK" depersonalised her by referring to her grave as Christian Kaffir.²⁵ Of significance is that her funeral was attended by the top leadership of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC; it was before the name was changed to the African National Congress) such as Pixley ka Isaka Seme, who was the chief organiser of the funeral, Alfred Mangena, (the first black person to qualify as a lawyer in South Africa), Saul Msane, Daniel Lentaka and others.

Hanga lase Natal recorded the events of her death as follows:

Nokuthela Dube, the wife of John Langalibalele Dube, has passed on at her husband's house in Sophiatown. She died on 25 January 1917 and was buried on the following day. Dr Godfrey diagnosed that she had caught pneumonia and that her kidneys had failed. There were many dignitaries at her funeral. The funeral service was led by the Rev. J. H. Langeni. Nokuthela had borne no children.²⁶

²⁴ Hughes, 123.

²⁵ Hughes, 196.

²⁶ *Hanga lase Natal*, 17 February 1917, 6.

In Nokuthela's case the words later written by Doris Lessing soon proved to be true: "Women often get dropped from memory and then history."²⁷ Very little is remembered or said about Nokuthela. Her inability to have children meant that she was forgotten soon after she died. She was almost erased from history because no child carried her name, she separated from her husband, and her life and legacy was excluded from history books. This is unfortunate because it can be argued that she made strategic contributions to John's success. Without her support we would not have had an ordained John. In addition, without her work we would not have had the two schools that she established at Incwadi, Ohlange, *Ilanga* and Caluza. She was also the legend of choral music. Heather Hughes noted:

Few African women of Nokuthela's generation had appeared on so many platforms, before so many audiences, yet significantly she took none of the formal positions or credit for success, that he [John] did. Society and John Dube himself would not accept that. The notion of equals had distinct limitations.²⁸

Being brought back to memory

Only recently, in a book written by Heather Hughes about Dube entitled *First President*, has Nokuthela's story begun to be told, but more work still has to be done to tell the story of this giant and pioneer of our liberation. Cherif Keita²⁹ was also able to trace her grave in Brixton. This happened after a long and protracted struggle, and with the help of the officials of the Johannesburg Parks Board. Nokuthela was not given a proper burial space, something that is important for the Zulu people. In Zulu culture, a person is buried among his or her people and the funeral is conducted by family members who also have to conduct other rituals such as cleansing of the hands and implements – *ukuhlanjwa kwezandla amahalavu*, *ukumbuyisa*, bringing the spirit of the dead person back home. Rituals are also carried out to bring the dead person's spirit into the home. This is even more important when the person died far away from her home. This is followed by the unveiling of a memorial stone on the grave – *ukwembulwa kwetshe lesikhumbuzo*. These rituals are performed to keep the memory of the dead person alive. They are organised by the spouse or the children of the dead person. If a person is separated from his or her spouse and does not have any children, it becomes difficult to know who takes responsibility for this ritual. It is therefore not

²⁷ These words are quoted from Hughes, 124.

²⁸ Hughes, 124.

²⁹ Cherif Keita, a researcher from Carlton College in the USA who produced a documentary on J. L. Dube's life, has just recently produced another documentary on Nokuthela Dube.

Singing from beyond the grave: Nokuthela Linderely Dube ...

surprising that there is no evidence in the case of Nokuthela that these rituals were performed. We also know that no tombstone was laid on her grave until 80 years later by Prof. Cherif Keita from the USA. It is evident that being a woman, and one who did not have children, Nokuthela was violated even beyond the grave. First she was buried in Johannesburg, not among her people in Inanda. Her grave was then marked Christian Kaffir (CK) and no memorial stone was laid for her. She was wiped out of memory and forgotten for a period of 80 years.

Conclusion

This article is another modest attempt at returning Nokuthela, the mother of Ohlange, *Ilanga lase Natal*, the ANC and the nation of a democratic South Africa to memory. Nokuthela is dead; however, when we follow her story, we learn how she became one of the first African women to qualify as a teacher, a leader in her own right, a companion of John Dube, the founding president of the ANC, and a founder of women's organisations. We should not forget how she sang in public halls and churches in the USA in order to collect money for Dube's education, how she compiled the first Zulu songbook and how she produced legendary figures of choral music, including Reuben Caluza. Through her works we can then hear her singing herself back to our memories in contemporary South Africa. Nokuthela's story reminds us of the women heroes who have been forgotten.

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Rosinah Gabaitse & Simangaliso Kumalo

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