

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18817/ot.v15i25.642>***USING FILM TO RECONNECT SOUTH AFRICA TO EARLY LIBERATION HEROES¹******USANDO FILMES PARA RECONECTAR A ÁFRICA DO SUL AOS PRIMEIROS HERÓIS DAS LUTAS CONTRA O APARTHEID******USANDO PELÍCULAS PARA RECONECTAR A ÁFRICA DEL SUR A LOS PRIMEROS HEROES DE LAS LUCHAS CONTRA EL APARTHEID***

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Abstract: This article reflects on the relevance of using films in South Africa's post-apartheid national reconstruction process. The films have the potential to reconnect present-day South Africa with their early forgotten heroes who have fought for liberation, against segregation and apartheid.

Keywords: Movies. South Africa. Heroes. Fights for Liberation.

Resumo: Neste trabalho, reflete-se sobre a relevância de seu usar filmes no processo reconstrução nacional da África do Sul pós-Apartheid. Os filmes têm o potencial de reconectar a África do Sul atual aos seus primeiros heróis, atualmente esquecidos, que lutaram pela liberação, contra a segregação e o apartheid.

Palavras-chave: Filmes. África do Sul. Heróis. Lutas por Libertação.

Resumen: En este trabajo, se refleja en la relevancia de su uso de películas en el proceso de reconstrucción nacional de Sudáfrica post-Apartheid. Las películas tienen el potencial de reconectar a África del Sur actual a sus primeros héroes, actualmente olvidados, que lucharon por la liberación, contra la segregación y el apartheid.

Palabras claves: Películas. Sudáfrica. Héroes. Luchas por Liberación.

As the director of the documentary film, “Cemetery Stories: A Rebel Missionary in South Africa”², I take the viewer along a ten-year journey in the footsteps of two families, the Wilcoxes and the Dubes, one of white American missionaries from the US Midwest, and the other, of Zulu Christian converts or *amakholwa* from Inanda (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), whose friendship in the late 19th century, in the segregated British colony of Natal, stands as a major landmark in the struggle for Black liberation and Democracy in South Africa. Along the

¹ Case study submitted for evaluation in December 2017 and approved for publication in June 2018.

² “Cemetery Stories”, “Oberlin-Inanda” and “uKukhumbula uNokutela/Remembering Nokutela” are distributed by Medialabafrica.com.

way, I uncover for audiences on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean some very important lost pieces of personal and family history, while showing how, through a meticulous process of archival and oral research done both in the US and South Africa, I reconnected for the first time in 90 years, the heirs of John L. Dube (1871-1946), the co-founder and first president of the ANC, with the descendants of Reverend William Cullen Wilcox (1850-1928) and Mrs. Ida Belle Wilcox (1858-1940), two “unorthodox” missionaries who forged in the early 20th century a unique alliance with the Zulu community to challenge the land-grabbing policies of the colonists and the British Administration in Natal. “Cemetery Stories” illustrates also the ways in which this unusual alliance gave South Africa some of its first black leaders of international stature, by opening the doors of American education to two of the founders of the African National Congress: the Oberlin-trained Reverend John L. Dube and his first wife Nokutela Mdimba Dube, politicians and educators who successfully championed US-inspired values of freedom and liberty, using their ties to the American philanthropic and media world as an effective weapon against British domination in South Africa.

For me, William and Ida Belle Wilcox are two of the unsung prophets of South Africa’s multiracial democracy by their unwavering commitment to Civil Rights for Black South Africans, from the moment they arrived in Inanda (Natal colony in South Africa) in 1881 as missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) to the fateful years of 1917 and 1918, when they were forced out of South Africa by the Natal colonists and colonial Administration. William and Ida Belle are the “adoptive” American parents of the South African Liberation pioneer and hero, Reverend Dr. John Langalibalele Dube, also known as “The South African Booker T. Washington”, the co-founder, along with his wife Nokutela Mdimba Dube, of the Ohlange Institute, an imitation of the Tuskegee Institute, in 1900, of the *Ilanga* newspaper in 1903 and the co-founder and first President-General of the South African Native National Congress (later African National Congress) in 1912. John Dube’s rise to national and international prominence owes as much to the unwavering friendship and mentoring of missionaries William and Ida Belle Wilcox as to the parenting of his own progenitors, Reverend James Dube, one of the first Zulu ordained pastors of the American Zulu Mission, and his wife Elizabeth. In fact, one can say that the Reverend and Mrs. Wilcox helped bring about a New Dawn for the Zulu people, the one envisioned by a young Zulu widow, John Dube’s grandmother Dalitha, when she took the audacious step to become the first convert of the Lindley Mission

Station in Inanda in the 1840s. Reverend Wilcox and his wife Ida Belle were missionaries who were not satisfied to just preach against the injustice they saw all around them in colonial South Africa, they were also willing to go down into the trenches to fight on the side of the oppressed masses they were committed to bringing to a new way of life.

In fact, up until recently, in the official circles of the ANC and even in academic circles, little was known about Reverend William Cullen Wilcox. One would often read in the rare and short biographical notices of John Dube that he accompanied missionary Wilcox to America. That is often all that was mentioned. The question of who is missionary Wilcox and what he did during the 38 years he spent in Natal was rarely asked and therefore never answered substantially. Yet, knowing this historic figure is crucial for a rewriting of South African liberation history, for the truly revolutionary role he played, a notion usually not associated with missionaries. One can say that Wilcox was a renegade missionary and a true precursor of Liberation Theology. Very early on, he stated his definition of the missionary in these terms:

The Missionary cannot help giving the native an idea of his worth when he teaches the Gospel of Christ. There is nothing in the whole Bible to show the superiority in a white skin, or that a man born with kinky hair and a dark complexion is not just as good as any other man. When to this idea of worth, which means racial equality, is added an education which is above the simple requirements of religious belief, the man emerges, realizing his worth and hating the white man who would kick him off the sidewalk. As he and his kind become more enlightened, and as their numbers continue to increase more rapidly than the whites, they will not always submit to taxation without representation. They are not always going to be excluded from every place of honor and responsibility.³

These prophetic words encapsulate the motivations which led William and Ida Belle Wilcox to do in 1887 what other missionaries had refused to do: to accept a desperate Zulu mother's plea to take her young, talented 16-year old son to America so that he can get the education he could not get in colonial Natal. Let us hear Wilcox retell the story himself:

About twenty-five years ago, as one of the American missionaries was preparing to return to his native land, a Zulu mother came to him with a chubby-faced boy of sixteen and putting 30 sovereigns of gold in his hands, she said: "I want to give this boy to you. His own father is dead, but he left this money for the education of his son and I want you to be his father and take him to America, where he can get all the education white boys get. It is not possible for him to get it here. The missionary hesitated to assume the responsibility as he knew the danger. Other missionaries were strongly opposed to it.

³ WILCOX, Mark F. (Ed.). *Proud endeavorer: the story of a Yankee on a mission in South Africa*. New York: Graphic Press, 1962. p. 144.

But he could not refuse that pleading mother, the widow of one of our most faithful Zulu ministers.⁴

Rev. Wilcox and Ida Belle honored this responsibility to the fullest and at a great cost to themselves and to their family. Indeed, at the time John's mother was asking them to shepherd her son to America, the couple was wondering how they were going to feed themselves once back home. However, I believe that the Wilcoxes saw in this request an opportunity to take their revenge on the colonial system, which they disliked viscerally, by training a young man who could become a thorn in its side. If the Wilcoxes had done nothing else but raise and guide one of Africa's most talented young leaders in a time of great need, it would have been justification enough for South Africa to show them its deepest gratitude. This gratitude came in November 2009, when the South African government bestowed on them the Companions of O. R. Tambo Award and sent an official delegation to visit their grave at the Forest Lawn Cemetery, in Glendale, California.

However, it is to be noted that the contribution of the Wilcoxes to South Africa's liberation history did not stop with their decision to bring John Dube to the United States in 1887. They were themselves at the forefront of a fight for equal rights to land ownership for the colonized peoples in Natal. The common story is one of the proverbial missionary who invited Africans to close their eyes and pray, thus allowing other Europeans to take their land. In every way, the story of the Wilcoxes is a challenge to that story.

Unlike other missionaries who were determined to indoctrinate Africans spiritually and culturally, the Wilcoxes saw the economic empowerment of the blacks of South Africa as the first step in achieving a true Christian life. Wilcox was revolted by the way in which the colonial state promoted land-grabbing and was driving black people from the rural areas into the mines and the cities, where they often fell prey to vice and "moral corruption." He took issue with the Mission's position on the land question, which he likened to a complicity with the colonial administration to exploit the populations of color. He said: "I could not approve of the action of the Mission in handing over the lands of the natives as they did to the Government against their protest, and therefore I asked to be given work where I would be free from the embarrassment of this land question."

⁴ *Ilanga Lase Natal*, July 23, 1915.

His vocal opposition and protests were not appreciated at all by his employer, the American Board, leading to a final separation around 1909. One black leader wrote to *Ilanga Lase Natal* to express his sadness in the following terms:

Mr. Wilcox is admired for his undying love for the people and his dedication to serving the Lord. He does not discriminate against anyone. He can stand for his beliefs even if they do not agree with that of other white people. He is a good man because, during the time of the hut tax [a reference to the Bambatha Rebellion], he supported black people by saying that they should not pay taxes. Mr. Wilcox is well respected and we need more people like him, who are not afraid to stand up on their own and argue for what they believe. Perhaps most people like him because he is the kind of man who acknowledges his mistakes and apologizes to black people, something that most white people would not do.⁵

Now that Wilcox was finally free from his association with the American Board, he thought that the time was right for him to resolutely implement his belief in independent missions, the type that would be self-sustaining, self-determining and would not rely on handouts from church organizations in America. He believed that the first step was to encourage a spirit of industry among the Zulus. He wrote:

Suppose the 700 000 Zulus of Natal were thrifty, intelligent agriculturalists, with small holdings, good houses, fenced fields, well-cultivated, and fruit trees as may be found in most states of America, who cannot see how vastly greater would be the wealth of this country. There is a mine in Zulu muscles richer than any that have been discovered in the Rand or that will be discovered.

In 1910, he returned from the United States with the seed money to start what will be known as the ZULU INDUSTRIAL IMPROVEMENT COMPANY, a shareholding company whose aim was to give the Christian community or “Amakholwa” the economic power to withstand the land-grabbing movement of colonists and the Administration. Many in Natal believed in this dream and his return was greeted with much enthusiasm in *Ilanga Lase Natal*:

With much pleasure we announce the coming back to Natal of that veteran missionary, Rev. William C. Wilcox, who for many years worked for the betterment of the natives. Previous to him leaving Natal, he had adopted the idea of a cooperative industrial scheme, and in the face of much discouragement, he has worked strenuously and hopefully for giving due effect to his scheme. [The plan is arranged so as to fit in with current ideas of commercial enterprise;] and we are of the opinion that with anything like fair opportunity the Rev. gentleman will make it successful. The Gospel of work does not appeal to everybody, and some are satisfied to go half-way, but Rev. Wilcox is a whole-way man and is therefore likely to make the results just what are intended.⁶

⁵ *Ilanga Lase Natal*, april 5, 1907.

⁶ *Ilanga Lase Natal*, august 5, 1910.

Indeed, this company, The Zulu Industrial Improvement Company, with its 300 black shareholders, was able to provide land to many desperate families in the Natal Midlands, and it is this success, according to Wilcox, that raised a serious alarm among white colonists. Wilcox wrote in a 1917 *Ilanga Lase Natal* article:

We had more applicants than we had land and I challenge missionaries and colonists to show me a more industrious and honest class of natives than the 300 who entered the scheme and took holdings. We bought one farm and paid for it entirely. Then we bought another and paid for that and still more land was required. Our success was too great and apparent. White people were alarmed. When we bought the third farm, an outcry was raised: "Why these kaffirs were actually buying a piece of land a white man could live on!" That could not be allowed in this free country of ours!⁷

The passionate advocacy of Reverend Wilcox, commonly known by the Zulu name of "MBUYABATWA", on behalf of the Blacks of Natal, led him to found in 1911, two communities in Natal, known as Cornfields and Tembalihle (Estcourt area, about 110 kilometers from Pietermaritzburg), to the great displeasure of the local white farmers, who managed, with the collusion of the Administration and the many restrictions imposed by the 1913 Native Land Act, to drive the Zulu Industrial Improvement Company to bankruptcy. Wilcox's concerns for black economic empowerment were in perfect harmony with those of the South African National Native Congress, so much so that one of the protest actions of the newly created group was a petition to the Members of the Parliament of Britain on behalf of Wilcox and the Zulu Industrial Improvement Company. The petition says:

Out of thousands of cases which might be cited, we give a few, indicative of the severe hardships inflicted by the Act [...]
About 9 months ago, the application was made on behalf of 400 natives by Mr. Wilcox, of the Weenen Division, in Natal, to purchase a farm between two native holdings. The Governor-General's permission was not granted, and the farm has now passed into the hands of a white man [...]⁸

This excerpt gives us an idea of the devious techniques used by the white administration to derail and drive out of existence as a company that proved that with equal chances the *Amakholwa* (Christian) community had every way of building a solid economic base for itself. By 1914, the Zulu Industrial Improvement Company was crumbling under its debts and

⁷ *Ilanga Lase Natal*, march 16, 1917.

⁸ South Native National Congress Petition, www.ANC.org.za

the penalties it incurred for violating rules that prohibited joint ventures and land transactions between different races.

Broke and destitute, William and Ida Belle Wilcox, were treated as pariahs by other whites, and driven out of South Africa in 1917 and 1918, for their fight for equal rights to land ownership for all in South Africa. He wrote in *Ilanga*: “Why should the Natives not be free to buy land where they want to in the land of their birth the same as anybody else, especially as Indians and other foreigners do?”⁹

Although Wilcox was defeated by the white colonial order, the seeds he planted did not die after his departure from South Africa. The twin communities of Cornfields and Thembalihle firmly resisted what became known as “forced removals” under Apartheid, the system of total separation that came 30 years after his departure from South Africa. These areas were designated as “black spots”, areas from which black people had to be forcibly removed so as to create homogeneous areas for white farming and living across South Africa. How did these two communities resist when others were so easily removed from their land and relocated to poor and crowded townships? They resisted because they kept the title deeds the Zulu Industrial Improvement Company had provided them, making it impossible for anyone, British colonial administration or later Apartheid government, to challenge their right to stay on the land their ancestors had bought.

Thus, after 83 years of harassment by the white farmers, vindication came finally in 1994, for both the citizens of these marginalized communities and to William Wilcox, who had long departed from this world, when the courts allowed them to reclaim, under the new democratic order, the lands that were taken from them.

William Wilcox died in 1928 in California, a man who was financially destitute, but who had the great personal satisfaction of knowing that he had done the right thing: he had planted many seeds and left a legacy of courage and commitment among the Black population of Natal. Historian Paul La Hausse said that in order to find the origins of Zulu economic nationalism, one has to start with William Wilcox’s Zulu Industrial Improvement Company. When the news of his death reached Natal in 1928, Josiah Mapumulo, one of the most radical intellectuals of the colony, wrote this moving tribute in *Ilanga Lase Natal*:

⁹ *Ilanga Lase Natal*, march 16, 1917.

I was deeply saddened to read of the demise of Rev. Wilcox from your beloved newspaper. The Pastor used to be my teacher and he is the one who encouraged John Dube [Mafukuzela] to go overseas with him. I was in the same class with John Dube, who is now famous among our people [...] He was a very courageous man who was not afraid to criticize other pastors if they were not acting in the interests of the people. That is why these days we need people like Rev. Wilcox, people who will stand up for the truth.¹⁰

Such was the life of a brave missionary, who dared to preach that in colonial South Africa, fighting for economic independence and justice was the first prerequisite for building a true Christian community. Not only did he preach it, he practiced it, to a great cost to himself and his family, viewed as he was, as a public enemy of the state and a renegade by the missionary orthodoxy. His impact on liberation movements went beyond South Africa and stretched into the neighboring Portuguese colony of Mozambique. In the early 20th century, Wilcox was sent to Mozambique to open a mission in Makodweni, Inhambane region. There, he made his first convert, a man by the name of Tizora Navesse. It is at that mission that Wilcox began preaching about Self-help and independence and later when the mission was abandoned by the American Board and taken over by the Methodist Church, Tizora Navesse became the first native pastor to be ordained by the Methodists. From that position, Reverend Navesse became a passionate advocate for native rights and independence among the Mozambican laborers working in the mines of South Africa.

As a filmmaker, I saw this story as a perfect vehicle for contributing to the formulation of a new narrative about South African liberation. Surely, a struggle that lasted several centuries counted several generations of fighters who did not live to see the Promised Land and whose voices spoke to me clearly through the words of the revered South African poet Don Mattera:

“Remember”

Remember to call at my grave
 When freedom finally
 Walks the land
 So that I may rise
 To tread familiar paths
 To see broken chains
 Fallen prejudice
 Forgotten injury
 Pardoned pains.

And when my eyes have filled their sight

¹⁰ *Ilanga Lase Natal*, august10, 1928.

Do not run away from fright
If I crumble to dust again.

It will only be the bliss
Of a long-awaited dream
That bids me rest
When freedom finally walks the land [...]

Surprisingly, I was motivated in this journey to give voice to the forgotten pioneers and fighters by a challenge laid before me by the late President Nelson Mandela. I had written to him in 2000 requesting an on-camera interview about Reverend John Langalibalele Dube, the founder of his party and the hero, he had honored publicly by casting his vote in 1994 on the ground of his school, the Ohlange High School. There, with the whole world watching him on that historic day of South Africa's first democratic and truly multiracial elections, he had stood in front of John Dube's grave to declare: "Mr. President, I have come to report to you that South Africa is today free." President Mandela had agreed in principle to my request, but upon seeing my questions, which he had requested to be submitted in advance, he had his office tell me that he himself knew very little about the man who founded his movement and in whose footsteps he and his comrades-in-arms had walked the long road to Freedom. Receiving Mandela's grave message about his inability to answer my questions, along with his sincere wish that I succeed in my research project, my boundless excitement and hopes for an on-camera chat about John Dube were suddenly dashed. . I was overcome by a terrible feeling of discouragement, for I had suddenly missed my chance to learn about a past hero from the mouth of a living giant of modern African history. Luckily, I regained my composure a few days later, once I realized that through this canceled meeting, Madiba had offered me a unique gift by admitting his ignorance about this chapter of his people's history. I told myself that if Mandela, at his age, did not know much about Reverend Dube, the first president of a party and movement he embodied in the eyes of the world, there was one important lesson and an urgent call to me, and to my generation, to roll up our sleeves and dig out the information for everyone's edification. On that day was born, my motivation to answer this nagging question: What Would Mandela Like to Know about John Dube and the many generations of Freedom fighters who preceded him? In a sense, it was the spirit of John Dube, nicknamed *Mafukuzela onjenge Zulu* (The Zulu Storm who woke up the nation) that spoke to me through Madiba and through his humble admission that he could not offer anything of substance to a younger person like me about the father of his own party.

Four years later, in December 2004, I completed my first documentary film, “Oberlin-Inanda: The Life and Times of John L. Dube”(54 min), which was selected for the 2005 Pan African Film Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), in Burkina Faso. Because my wish had been that a representative of the Dube family be present for the unveiling of this little-known story to an international audience at the greatest gathering of the cinema of Africa and its diaspora, I turned to then-President Thabo Mbeki, with a request for financial support. The committed Pan Africanist he is, President Mbeki obliged generously by sending Mr. Zenzele Dube, the grandson of John Dube, to Ouagadougou, where the film attracted a lot of attention, press coverage and even won a Special Mention for Best documentary in a special prize category. This was followed by a letter of gratitude to me from President Mbeki on behalf of the people of South Africa. The letter was written by Mr. Pallo Jordan, the then Minister of Arts and Culture, and contained a request that this first ever film about Dube be made available to the South African Broadcasting Corporation, the country’s public broadcaster.

In July 2005, I arrived in Durban with the film, as part of the Official selection of the Durban International Film Festival. The then Consul General of India in Durban, Mr. Ajay Swarup, sent some of his staff members to attend the first screening and later contacted me himself with the request that I hold a private showing at the residence of an important member of the South African Indian community in Durban. He explained to me that this person was tremendously interested in the subject of my film, but had limited mobility due to a recent stroke. This dignitary turned out to be Professor Fatima Meer, the famous sociologist, whom I knew as a close friend of Nelson and Winnie Mandela and the author of a notable book about the couple, Higher Than Hope. I was truly honored by this attention shown to my film by another important icon of the South African liberation struggle. I was even more honored when, after watching the film with the Consul General and myself in her living room, she asked if I had a copy for President Mandela because she wanted to have one hand-delivered to him by her nephew, who served as Mandela’s personal lawyer. At the same time, a communication between His Excellency Ajay Swarup and the other Indian Consul General in South Africa led to the film’s Johannesburg premiere a few days later, in front of a packed room and the presence of prestigious people such as officials of the Gauteng Provincial government, the family of Mahatma Gandhi, Mrs. Amina Cachalia, a lifelong anti-Apartheid activist, and Mr. Ahmed Kathrada, a Robben

Island co-inmate of Mandela for 27 years, to whom befell the honor of officially opening the evening.

“Cemetery Stories: A Rebel Missionary in South Africa”, the second of what was to become a trilogy of films dedicated to the forgotten heroes, wove an even more personal thread between me and the story of South Africa’s liberation, through the following surprising and eerie discovery: Reverend William Cullen Wilcox’s wife, Ida Belle Clary, was a native of the Minnesota town of Northfield, where I live, and to make things even stranger, I found out that Mrs. Wilcox’s parents, Nathan and Ann Webb Clary, were buried in a very old cemetery behind my house¹¹. At that moment, it became clear to me that spirits had been talking to me and guiding me on my journey to become a filmmaker and to tell these forgotten stories. This second film owes its title to the fact that I follow the story of the Wilcoxes from the grave behind my house to the grave of their protégé John Dube in Inanda, South Africa, finally to their own resting place at the Forest Lawn Cemetery, in Glendale, California. Thanks to my networking with both provincial authorities of KwaZulu-Natal and the central government, in November 2009, the newly elected President of South Africa, Mr. Jacob Zuma, in one of his first official acts, sent the then Premier of the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, Dr. Zweli Mkhize, to join me in paying the official tribute of their nation to these unheralded heroes who had fought for social justice for all in South Africa and had died in abject poverty and total anonymity in their distant homeland, many decades earlier.

We are a delegation that represents the government and the people of South Africa in the province of KwaZulu-Natal; we are here to pay tribute to the heroes of the South African people, Reverend William Cullen and his wife Ida Belle Wilcox, who settled in this province in 1881 and left that country after a great sacrifice.... This we do as an effort to correct the wrongs of our own history and to make the Wilcox remaining and future generations walk with their heads held high for they are the descendants of the stock of courageous man and woman of principle [...]

In closing, I must pay tribute to the ‘Zulu’ man from Mali, Prof Cherif Keita. He has brought us here together to tell the story over a hundred years old. I say he was driven by the spirit of our heroes. He was indeed sent by the spirit of our heroes to ensure that justice which eluded the rulers at the time, is restored by those who have lived to lead a free South Africa.¹²

¹¹<https://patch.com/minnesota/northfield/bp--carleton-professor-cherif-keitas-documentary-film6ab2d2786a>
<https://www.news24.com/Archives/Witness/The-land-has-spoken-20150430> Ariel Emery, “Famed Missionaries Have Northfield Connection”, Northfield News, Saturday-Sunday, may 11-12, p. 1 and 5A.

¹² Speech by Premier of the KwaZulu-Natal Province, Dr. Zweli Mkhize, on the Occasion of Paying Tribute to Reverend Wilcox, Los Angeles, United States of America, nov. 9, 2009, KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Government (<http://www.kwazulunatal.gov.za/>)

The last film in the trilogy, “uKukhumbula uNokutela/Remembering Nokutela”¹³, is my answer to another call from the grave, by a woman who had been completely erased for almost a century, from both her family and her nation’s liberation history¹⁴. Nokutela Mdim Dube(1873-1917), the forgotten first wife of John L. Dube, is the poster girl for the marginalization of women in history, not just in South Africa, but all around the world. Her case proves that even within the context of a liberation movement, the history of women is simply reduced to a footnote in the epic of brave men. And sadly, even that footnote quickly disappears, when a woman has not been able to bear children. This film shows my four-year journey to find her grave, in a location that was unknown in living memory until 2009, when I contacted the Johannesburg Parks and Cemeteries Department with the information I had found in a February 1917 of *Ilanga Lase Natal*, the newspaper she founded in 1903 with her husband John. Through our joint efforts, Nokutela’s unmarked grave was found in 2011, at the Brixton Cemetery of Johannesburg, leading to her official recognition by the Government of South Africa and the entire nation as a pioneer and a heroine of their liberation, 100 years after death¹⁵. Who is Nokutela Mdim Dube?

Nokutela Mdim was born in Inanda, Natal, and was educated at Inanda Seminary, becoming its earliest graduate to build institutions for modern Africa, in her capacity as a singer, a seamstress, an educator and an early voice for Africa in 19th century United States of America and Europe. She received additional training in the United States at the Union Missionary Training Institute in Brooklyn, New York, between 1896 and 1899. She is the co-author with her husband, John L. Dube, of a book titled *Amagama Abantu* (A Zulu Song Book), 1911, a book that stands as a landmark in the development of Zulu Choral music. Up until her death in 1917, she traveled many times with her husband John to the United States to gather financial support for their work to uplift the African people through industrial education, following on the model of the famous African-American leader, Booker T. Washington, the founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Because their school was totally independent of the Natal Department of Education, for years it did not receive any government support and had to constantly struggle to

¹³ UKUKHUMBULA uNokutela/Remembering Nokutela. Produced by Cherif Keita and Dominic Fucci. Directed by Cherif Keita . Edited by Dominic Fucci. [Saint Paul, MN]: Media Lab Africa , [2013] ©2013. 1 videodisc (57 min.), sound, color ; 4 3/4 in.

¹⁴ <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-05-08/her-contributions-south-africa-were-unknown-new-film-aims-change>
[http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27702630=](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27702630)

¹⁵ <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/opinion/a-lost-pioneer-and-patriotic-heroine-resurrected-1968795>

survive in a colonial environment very hostile to Black education. The talent of John and Nokutela as fundraisers and promoters of African education was crucial not only in the beginning, but also through the many decades of the school's life as a unique nursery for independence and self-employment, not only among black South Africans but also for Africans from the neighboring British colonies. Part of their effort, as educators and performers, led to the popularization of *Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika* (composed by Enoch Sontonga), the song that became first, the Anthem of the African National Congress, and later, the National Anthem of the Republic of South Africa, after being known in the early part of the 20th century, as "Prayer For the Children of Ohlange", the anthem of their pioneering school.

This is, in short, the life of an extraordinary African woman pioneer, who, because of a cruel irony of biology (she could not bear children!) and the injustice of human history (Colonialism, Apartheid and the patriarchal system so dominant at the time) was wiped out of the collective memory of her country and of the world. And what a cruel irony that a woman who was one of the first to give voice to her people's struggle across the Atlantic was silenced and made invisible to her people and to the rest of the world for almost a century! Nokutela had started almost 70 years earlier what Miriam Makeba did in the early 1960s at the podium of the United Nations when she used her musical talent to denounce the dehumanization of her nation by the white regime in Pretoria.

After multiple screenings of "uKukhumbula uNokutela/Remembering Nokutela" on national television, and upon her nomination by myself, her family, the United Congregational Church of South Africa (UCCSA) and the institution of Freedom Park in Pretoria, Nokutela Mdimba Dube was awarded the highest civilian honor, The Order of the Baobab Gold, on April 28, 2017, by the Government of South Africa¹⁶, in a ceremony I had the great honor of attending. This event marked the culmination of an intellectual and spiritual journey I started in January 1999, when I visited South Africa for the first time, with 17 students of Saint Olaf and Carleton College.

¹⁶ <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/national-orders/recipient/ms-nokutela-dube-posthumous>