

A pioneer lost and found

For almost a century, Nokutela Dube's remains lay forgotten in the Brixton Cemetery, marked simply by a small plaque with the racist initials CK and the number 2973. Then even that rusted away, writes **Stephen Coan**

THE AIRING of the documentary *uKukhumbula uNokutela* (Remembering Nokutela) on SABC 2 later this month marks the completion of a trilogy of films dealing with a famous South African political family and a remarkable feat of historical resurrection on the part of the film's maker, Chérif Keita.

Nokutela Dube was the first wife of John Langalibalele Dube, first president of the ANC, founder of the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* and creator, along with Nokutela, of the Ohlange Institute at Inanda outside Durban. While her husband's role in South African politics and education is a matter of record, Nokutela's had faded from memory. Keita's research and subsequent film has now enabled her to reclaim her rightful place in South Africa's history.

Film-making is just one string to Keita's bow. From Mali, he has spent nearly 30 years living in the US where he is the William H Laird professor of French and the Liberal Arts in the French and Francophone Studies Department of Carleton College, Minnesota.

Keita first came to South Africa in 1999 with a group of American students investigating the topic of "Poetry, Performance and the Politics of Identity in South Africa". "We travelled the country for a month listening to stories of the struggle against apartheid," recalls Keita, "as well as visiting historic sites such as Isandlwana, Robben Island and Dube's Ohlange Institute in Inanda."

It was there Keita met John Dube's grandson, Zenzele Dube, who told him how his grandfather's education in the US had provided the inspiration for his life when he returned to South Africa. "I was intrigued by Dube's American connection," says Keita, "and decided I needed to cure my ignorance of such a great figure."

"I told myself this would be my chance to dig out more on Dube's life in the US and a way to 'repay' all the stories shared with me by South Africans during our visit."

Despite his academic background, Keita opted to make a film rather than write a book. "I'd never made a film or studied film-making but decided this would be the best means to extract this historic figure from oblivion and bring him to a wider audience than a book could ever reach."

Initially, Keita approached then-president Nelson Mandela for an interview around which he intended structuring the film. Mandela agreed in principle but declined when sent the questions. "He admitted that to answer my questions he'd need to do some research himself, because he knew very little about Dube. But he wished me luck. I was disappointed at first but later realised it was the duty of my generation to do this work."

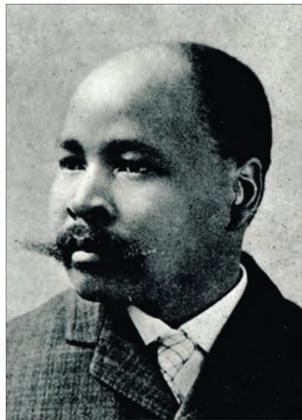
Spurred on by the enthusiasm of Dube's grandson, Zenzele, Keita began to make what would become *Oberlin-Inanda: The Life and Times of John L Dube*, which linked the story of Inanda to Dube's education in the US at Oberlin College, Ohio. The film was completed in 2005 and won a Special Mention at the 2005 Pan African Film Festival in Ouagadougou and was subsequently screened twice by the SABC.

Keita followed up with another film, *Cemetery Stories: A Rebel Missionary in South Africa*, detailing the previously untold story of the American missionary Reverend William Wilcox and his wife Ida Belle Wilcox, under whose wing the 16-year-old Dube first went to the US in 1887 where he attended Oberlin College. Keita subsequently organised for the Wilcox descendants' visit to South Africa in 2007 to meet the Dube family. In 2009, William and Ida Belle Wilcox's contribution to South Africa was recognised posthumously with the bestowal of the Companions of OR Tambo Award (Silver).

But another aspect of the Dube story remained to be told. "I felt that there was silence about one important person, Nokutela. Without her story the task was incomplete and would amount to further



MAN WITH A MISSION: Chérif Keita speaking at the unveiling of a memorial plaque on the grave of Nokutela Dube in Brixton Cemetery. The plaque was subsequently replaced with an elegant engraved headstone.

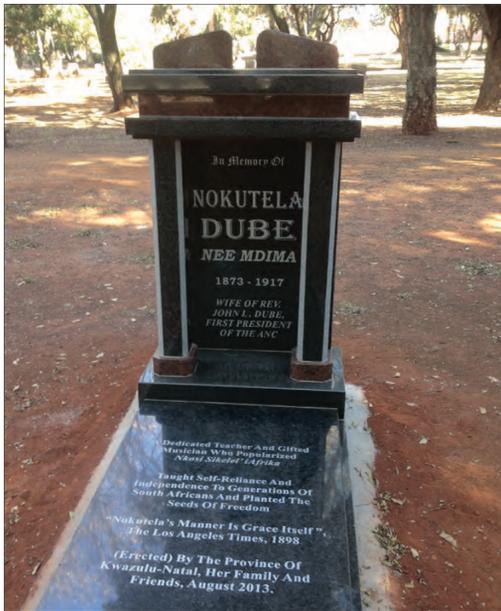


STATESMAN: John Dube, a founding member and first president of the ANC. PICTURE: CAMPBELL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

marginalising a woman's voice. I knew by then all that Nokutela had done for the whole enterprise and was convinced that without her, John would not have accomplished any of what is considered his legacy today."

Nokutela Mdima had been Ida Belle Wilcox's pupil at Inanda Seminary in the early 1880s and a school essay she wrote at the age of 10 was published in the *Rice County Journal* of Northfield, Minnesota, in 1882.

"Ida Belle had sent it to her mother to show the dedication of her Zulu pupils to their learning of English. Her mother



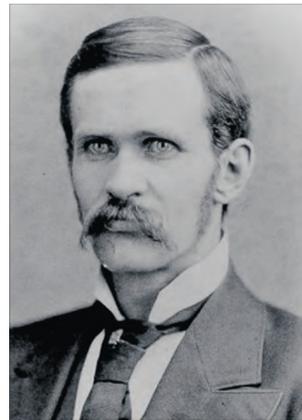
MYSTERY PUT TO REST: The grave of Nokutela Dube in Brixton Cemetery. Her grave was unmarked and forgotten for over 90 years until Chérif Keita determined it should be found.

would usually read her letters and then give them to the newspaper for publication. The essay described Nokutela's home and the way of life of her people. But at the end, there was a prophetic line, which said, "(in my world) people who do not have children are troubled a lot."

"It was as if she had a premonition that this would be her fate in life – to be childless and therefore marginalised in the

history of her own country that she would help shape so profoundly."

After returning to Natal from the US in 1892, Dube accepted a teaching post and, in 1894, married 21-year-old Nokutela Mdima. The couple subsequently made several visits to the US to further their education but mainly to raise funds to realise their joint vision of an independent school for Africans patterned on the Tuskegee model



IN SOLIDARITY: Reverend William Wilcox, an American missionary to South Africa, took the 16-year-old John Dube to the US where he studied at Oberlin College.

of Booker T Washington.

"John's ability as an orator and Nokutela's talent as a singer, pianist and autoharp player gave them an amazing platform," says Keita.

"Nokutela dazzled audiences with click songs and the Americans gave generously to their cause. They got the seed money to start the school in 1900 but frequently hit the road again to raise funds to sustain the rapidly-growing independent school."

Nokutela captivated the US press and was featured in *The Los Angeles Times* of February 13, 1898, in its series "Women of Note".

At the end, the report said: "Nokutela speaks English with a charming deliberation and in the softest voice in the world. Her manner is grace itself."

Her husband's fall from grace would break her heart. "In 1914, after 20 years of marriage, John had an affair; there was a child who did not survive long," says Keita. "The scandal and the betrayal saw Nokutela leave Ohlange and Inanda and everything she had built in her life to find 'refuge' in a most inhospitable place for blacks at that time: the Eastern Transvaal near Wakkerstroom, where she spent the last three years of her life preaching the Gospel and ministering to blacks living on white farms."

"Nokutela was still married to John, when in January 1917, she became gravely ill with a kidney infection and maybe also because of heartbreak. When John was informed of her condition, he had her brought to Sophiatown, where they owned a house. In spite of the treatment of Dr Godfrey, a renowned Indian doctor friend of Mahatma Gandhi, their Inanda neighbour, and the care of Victoria Mangena, the first black woman to qualify as a nurse on the Rand, Nokutela lost the battle. She died on January 25, 1917."

Her funeral at Brixton Cemetery was attended by leaders of the fledgling ANC and a group of friends and admirers of different races. On Nokutela's grave was placed a small sign identifying her only as CK (standing for "Christian K*****") 2973.

"In a sort of poetic justice, 1917 was the year when John Dube's leadership of the new political party was challenged, causing him to lose his bid for a second term as president-general of the ANC. In the face of a declining national political prominence, Dube left the Joburg area to concentrate on his educational activities in Natal and at Ohlange."

In 1920, Dube married Angelina Khumalo. They had six children, four of whom survived to adulthood. Dube died in 1946.

Meanwhile Nokutela's grave was left without a headstone and eventually its location was forgotten. Keita was determined to find the lost grave which he did with the help of Alan Buff, director of Special Projects for Johannesburg Parks and Cemeteries. "Alan surveyed the area and said it would be a difficult process because of the dilapidated conditions of the black section of the cemetery and a total absence of names and grave demarcations. The small plaque with the numbers identifying her had long rusted away." After a year and a half of searching, Nokutela's grave was finally pinpointed in 2011.

In the meantime, Keita had contacted members of the Mdima family in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng and in August 2012 brought them together at Brixton Cemetery for the unveiling of a small plaque identifying her resting place. He then embarked on a project for the erection of a headstone on her grave, which was completed in August 2013. "Two days before its unveiling, the Gandhi Development Trust bestowed its 2013 Gandhi Prize to Nokutela Mdima Dube."

Keita says *uKukhumbula uNokutela* presented the greatest challenge in his Inanda trilogy "but also the greatest level of satisfaction because it was not only a matter of finding a lost pioneer and patriotic heroine but also of bringing her back to her people and inscribing her, once and for all, in the heroic epic of South Africa's liberation."

"Just as some people are called by the spirits to become sangomas, the spirit of John and Nokutela Dube called me to pick up a camera and tell their stories and along the way, to tell the stories of their mentors, William and Ida Belle Wilcox, all four people who spent, so early on, everything they had to plant the seeds of democracy and freedom for South Africa."

● *uKukhumbula uNokutela* (Remembering Nokutela) will be broadcast at 9pm on SABC 2 on January 17.

Race is a matter of life and death for Harlem undertakers

DAVID USBORNE

ISAIAH Owens does not discriminate when accepting business at his funeral home in the heart of Harlem, in New York City.

"Catholic, Pentecostal, different religions, some Muslims, anyone," he says. It happens, though, that of the more than 400 funerals he's arranged this year, barely a dozen were for white families.

A few things have changed since Owens, the son of South Carolina sharecroppers, first opened shop in the city in 1971, though not at his current location on a bustling stretch of Lenox Avenue. Far fewer men are being taken by Aids too early in their lives. Or, indeed, by bullets.

"Homicides I see very seldom. Thirty – no, 20 – years ago, it would be 10 homicides every three weeks," he said.

Other things are much the same. Death still largely divides Manhattan by race, he says. For most black families living north of 110th Street, open-coffin funerals and interment remain a must.

White Manhattanites, he reports, prefer direct-to-cremation affairs with minimum fuss. He recalls a colleague at Campbell's, a funeral parlour on Madison Avenue and 81st Street, joking that buildings in that part of the Upper East Side, where ladies do lunch and cleaning maids don't, more or less require prospective buyers "to sign a pledge they are going to have a direct cremation" before they'll let you in. "All these rich people," Owens almost sighs, "and they all have direct cremations."

Sitting in the chapel pews, Owens explains. "Open casket viewing is, I guess, a black experience," he said. "Pretty much when you pass away, the family and their friends are going to want to visit you and say goodbye."

It is his job to make the dead look presentable; almost alive, for the hour or hours that the viewings generally last.

Beside him is a big envelope labelled "Extreme Photos" containing before and after pictures of people whose suffering in death made them especially hard to repair. During the Great Recession, he admits,

fewer Harlem families had the wherewithal to spend the \$7 000 (R112 000) or above that a typical Owens package – cosmetics and dressing, viewing, funeral service and burial – will cost. Throw in a horse and coffin-bearing carriage – he was the first in Harlem to offer that as an optional frill – with 10 limousines, and the bill can run to \$200 000.

“Homicides I see very seldom. Thirty – no, 20 – years ago, it would be 10 homicides every three weeks”

When families couldn't muster the cash, the city buried their loved ones in a pauper's graveyard on an island off the Bronx, in a pine box.

Today things are better again for the death profession. Owens hopes to top 500 funerals this year. Later, he shows off his vintage hearse during a downpour on the

avenue outside. With its flying silver lady on the bonnet – he says, cryptically, that the make is "Rolls-Royce/Cadillac" – and white-walled tyres, it wouldn't be out of place on the set of *The Great Gatsby*.

The parlour's waiting room for families, one flight down from the chapel, is a startling onslaught of mirrored walls and chandeliers.

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Where clients are not taken to is downstairs to the basement – or backstage – area of Owens' operation.

Straight ahead and behind a plastic curtain is the mortuary itself, with tiled floor and walls and an odour of chemicals. Two bodies lie under sheets, freshly embalmed. Turn right and you are in Owens's

workshop. Here one body, also covered, is awaiting his attention.

A wooden workbench is piled high with the tools and concoctions he commonly needs. They include a gallon (3.78l) container of "Liquid Tissue", which he generally injects with a hypodermic needle into those places where flesh and muscle have fallen away in the final days and weeks of life.

There are combs, half-used lipsticks, bottles of hair gel, latex gloves and, mysteriously, one bottle of paint thinner. As the images in the envelope attest, some customers take considerably more time than others. While he has helpers – the parlour employs 25 people – Owens prefers whenever possible to tend to the bodies downstairs himself.

He knows that in the neighbourhood, kids call him "Fix 'em" behind his back. It is a nickname he is happy to have, even though his is a job not everyone would covet. Because that is precisely what so many families in Harlem entrust the bodies of their loves to him to do – fix 'em.

Shown some images of Owens's work, one of Manhattan's most prominent plastic surgeons, Douglas Steinbrech, whose business, like Campbell's, is anchored in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, declared himself impressed. "I can see he does better work on the dead than a lot of the work I see being done on the living in New York," he commented admiringly.

Among the famous of Harlem to have received the Owens treatment has been Sylvia Woods, whose soul-food restaurant, Sylvia's, also on Lenox Avenue, was for years a Harlem landmark. Her funeral in 2012 at the Baptist Abyssinian Church, arranged by Owens, drew luminaries from former President Bill Clinton to then Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

"I am good at what I do," Owens professes. It's time for Owens to return to his duties. The lady upstairs, he decides, is looking a little desiccated and her viewing is set for first thing in the morning. But it's nothing he can't fix, he declares. – *The Independent*