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Nokutela Dube remembered for teaching self reliance

“It is a story of three centuries,” said Joyce Siwani, standing at the graveside of Nokutela Dube on Saturday.



PHOTO: SUPPLIED

Onica Makwakwa, Buli Siwani and Joyce Siwani, great grandniece of Nokutela Dube, at a ceremony at Brixton Cemetery in Johannesburg, commemorating the centenary of the death of Nokutela Dube, who taught independence to generations.

“Nokutela was born, lived and worked in the 19th century, she continued to work and died in the 20th and was then forgotten. Now she comes to life in the 21st century.”

Siwani, Dube’s great grandniece, was speaking at the commemoration of the centenary of the death of Nokutela on Saturday in Brixton Cemetery, Johannesburg.

Nokutela Dube (née Mdima) was the first wife of John Langalibalele Dube, first president of the ANC, founder of the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* and creator, with Nokutela, of the Ohlange Institute at Inanda outside Durban.

While her husband’s role in South African politics and education is well known, Nokutela’s contribution had faded from memory until recently.

After their marriage in 1894 the Dubes made several visits to the U.S. to raise funds to create their joint vision of an independent school for Africans.

John Dube had previously been educated in the U.S. under the auspices of William and Ida Belle Wilcox of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

The couple remained childless. "This brought about a conflict of culture and religion," said Siwani.

When Dube fathered a child by a student in 1914, Nokutela left Inanda to work as a missionary among black people living on white farms near Wakkerstroom. She fell ill in January 1917 and her husband brought her to Sophiatown, Johannesburg, where they owned a house. She died on January 25, 1917. Nokutela's funeral was attended by many members of the fledgling ANC, including lawyer Alfred Mangena and future ANC president Pixley ka Isaka Seme. But her grave in the cemetery was unmarked.

"Then she was forgotten," said Siwani. "Until Chérif Keita came along."

Keita, a professor in the French and Francophone Studies Department of Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, played a key role in returning Nokutela to national memory. After making two documentaries on John Dube and his connections with the U.S. — including Northfield — he made a third documentary devoted to Nokutela. He reminded how Nokutela taught self reliance and independence to generations, as well as helping to popularise Nkosi Sikel' iAfrika. With the help of the Johannesburg Parks Department, he located Nokutela's grave. A headstone was erected and last year she was inducted into Freedom Park, the national shrine in Pretoria.

Keita was unable to be at Saturday's ceremony, but it was attended by 25 American students and professors from St Olaf 's College, Northfield, currently on a study tour of South Africa.