



It is only the poor who are forbidden to beg.

INSIGHT

# ‘Remember to call at my grave’

STEPHEN COAN looks at what led Chérif Keita on a journey to find Nokutela Dube’s long-forgotten grave and ensure that her deeds were recognised

LAST Saturday, a tombstone was unveiled in Johannesburg Brixton's Cemetery over the previously unmarked grave of Nokutela Dube, née Mdimma, the first wife of John Langalibalele Dube, first president of the ANC, creator of the Ohlange Institute at Inanda, and founder of the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal*.

That Nokutela was an important figure in her own right was made clear earlier in the preceding week when she was awarded a posthumous Mahatma Gandhi Satyagraha Award by the Gandhi Development Trust at a function held at Durban's City Hall.

When the descendants of Nokutela Dube, went up on stage to accept her award, much mention was made of Chérif Keita and the key role he has played in bringing Nokutela Dube back into history, as well as finding her long-forgotten grave.

For well over a decade, Keita has been uncovering the history of the Dubes and, in what can only be called a labour of love, he has made two films to take his findings to a wider audience.

Keita, professor of French and Francophone African and Caribbean literatures at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, in the U.S., as well as an authority on the music of his native country, Mali, first visited South Africa in 1999. "I travelled with 18 students to hear stories from South Africans," he told *The Witness* in a previous interview. "There were heart-rending stories, and stories to celebrate."

Back in 1999, Keita also met Zenzele Dube, grandson of John Dube, who told Keita how his grandfather's education in the U.S. had provided the impetus for his life when he returned to South Africa. "When I heard this I thought I had to get the story of Dube in the U.S.," said Keita, "and bring it back to South Africa as a token of my gratitude for all the stories I heard while I was here."

Thus began a project that saw Keita make the award-winning documentary film *Oberlin-Inanda: The Life and Times of John L. Dube*, which linked the story of Inanda to Dube's education in the U.S. at Oberlin College in Ohio.

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, under whose wing Dube first went to the U.S. Keita also organised the Wilcox descendants' visit to South Africa in 2007 to meet the Dube family.

Keita now visits South Africa on an annual basis. "I feel like a local. I have even been given a Zulu name, Zweluthu [it means "our land", but is used here in the sense that he belongs to the place]. I feel like a child of KwaZulu-Natal."

During a visit to South Africa in 2011, Keita gave the John Langalibalele Dube Memorial Lecture at the Edgewood Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, but spent the rest of his time following another Dube trail, that of Nokutela Mdimma, who became Dube's first wife.

"John Dube led me to the Wilcoxes and they led me back to Nokutela," said Keita. "It's as if she is crying out for my attention — that she has invited me to speak for her. I did what I did for John Dube and for the Wilcoxes, now it's Nokutela's turn."

Keita describes the Wilcoxes as the American adoptive parents of John Dube and Nokutela Ndimma. "They both grew up to together as mission children," said Keita. "They were both moulded by William and Ida Wilcox. Nokutela was Ida's pupil at Inanda from 1881 on.

"In 1882, at the age of about 13, Nokutela wrote an essay titled *My Home*, which Ida sent to the *Rice County Journal* in Northfield, Minnesota, the Wilcoxes home town," he said.

"It was published as part of a regular series by Ida who wrote about her experiences as a missionary and she used Nokutela's essay to demonstrate the dedication of Zulu students in learning English at Inanda."

The Wilcoxes also provided a role model as a couple, according to Keita. "Ida went everywhere with her husband; they were always together. And together they were strong."

In 1887, William Wilcox took Dube

to the U.S. where he attended Oberlin College. When Dube returned to Natal he accepted a teaching post and, in 1894, married Nokutela Mdimma. The couple subsequently made several visits to the U.S., mainly to raise funds to realise their joint vision of an independent school for Africans.

"It was a great partnership that generated so much in terms of fund raising," said Keita. "And they were valued there as equals. The *Los Angeles Times* of February 13, 1898, featured Nokutela in its feature *Women of note*.

An American journalist described Nokutela 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. Her manner is grace itself."

"During the tour of the U.S. with John, she was the first black South African woman to use music to speak about her people, mesmerising audiences in the late 1890s singing click songs," said Keita.

"Miriam Makeba was so excited in November 2001, when I told her about Nokutela, and proud to have been on a trail blazed by another young South African woman more than 50 years before her."

Nokutela was a talented musician. "She built up the musical culture that was so much part of Ohlange and with her husband, she produced *A Zulu Song*



Chérif Keita (left) with Lulu Dube, the only surviving daughter of John Langalibalele Dube, after a showing of the rough cut of his new documentary, *Ukukhumbula Nokutela (Remembering Nokutela)*, at an ANC conference marking 100 years of the ANC Women's League, which was held at Coastlands Hotel last month. PHOTO: RAJESH JANTILAL



Lillian Makhatini, great-niece of Nokutela Dube, speaking after accepting the Mahatma Gandhi Satyagraha Award that was awarded posthumously to Dube by the Gandhi Development Trust at a function that was held at the Durban City Hall last week. PHOTO: RAJESH JANTILAL

► **CHÉRIF KEITA**, discussing Nokutela Dube's tour of the U.S. in the late 1890s singing click songs

“Miriam Makeba was so excited in November 2001, when I told her about Nokutela, and proud to have been on a trail blazed by another young South African woman more than 50 years before her.”

Book, published in 1911. In it there is *A Prayer for the Children of Ohlange*. It's to the tune of *Nkosi Sikelele Afrika* but with different words. It's essentially a praise song of Dube.

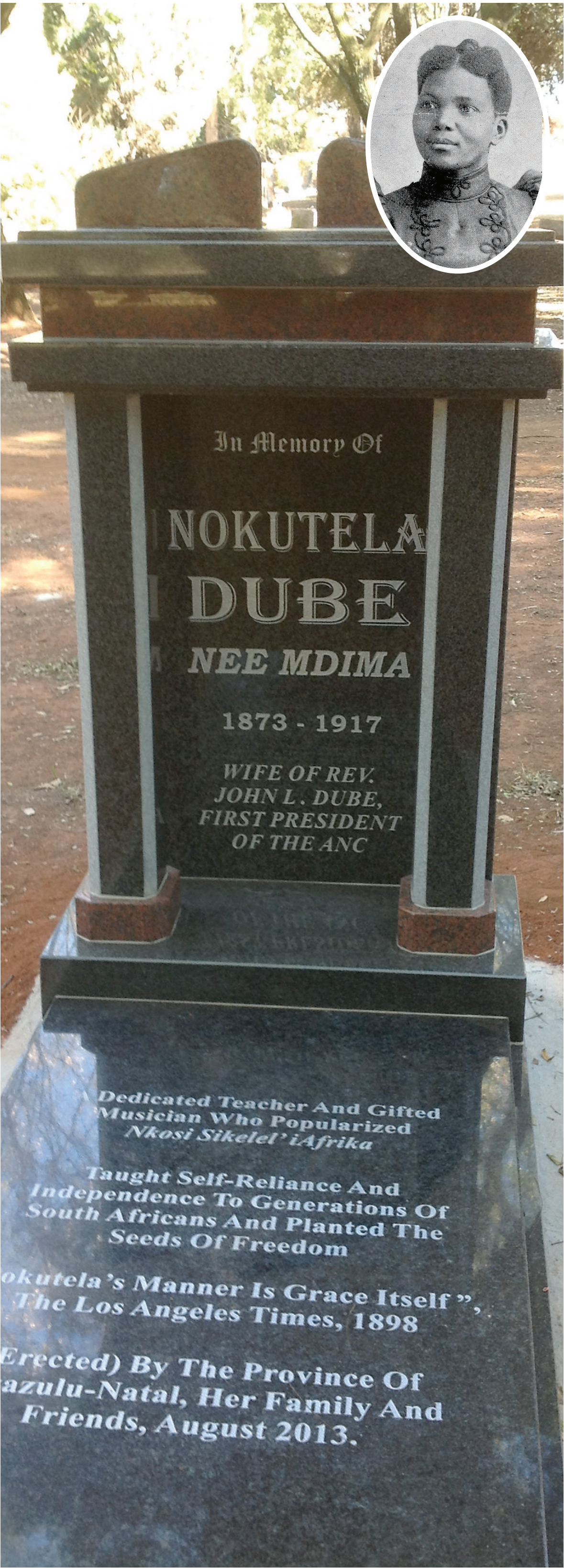
"Ohlange was her creation along with John's, and as such she was the first mother of the children of Ohlange." But the powerful partnership of husband and wife was to come to an abrupt end. In 1914, as revealed in Heather Hughes 2011 biography, *First President*, Dube had a child by a female student at Ohlange. The child died shortly thereafter, making it easier to prevent the matter becoming public knowledge.

In an interview with *The Witness*, Hughes talked about the event, one more tragedy than scandal. "It came out of a long, long period of pain, almost mourning, that he and Nokutela couldn't have children," she said.

"In hindsight, we don't have to moralise or be judgmental. We can explain and understand. It was the end of their marriage and the end of their joint venture."

Nokutela was so distressed that she left Inanda and went to live on a farm in Wakkerstroom in the then Transvaal. "She left everything. It must have been so tragic for her," said Keita. "The whole incident possibly led to the breakdown in her health."

Dube also spent much of his time in Johannesburg, where the Dube's had a house in Sophiatown. When he heard Nokutela was suffering from a kidney infection, Dube arranged for her to be



The tombstone placed over the previously unmarked grave of Nokutela Dube (inset), which was unveiled in the Brixton Cemetery in Johannesburg last Saturday. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

taken to Sophiatown. But it was too late. Nokutela died on January 26, 1917, and was buried in the Brixton Cemetery, her grave recorded in the burial register as CK 2973. The CK standing for "Christian Kaffir".

Three years later, in 1920, Dube married Angelina Khumalo. They had six children, four surviving to adulthood. Dube died in 1946.

The site of Nokutela's grave was left unmarked and its location forgotten. Something Keita set out to remedy. During his 2011 visit, Keita went to Brixton Cemetery and, assisted by Alan Buff, the manager of Johannesburg's Parks and Gardens, and Rufus Moleseng, the cemetery's caretaker, he was able to locate Nokutela's final resting place. Since then, an engraved marker stone has been placed on the grave and last weekend the final tombstone was unveiled. Attending the ceremony was the former KZN premier and now ANC national treasurer, Zweli Mkhize, Minister of Arts and Culture Paul Mashatile, and KZN MEC for Social Development Weziwe Thusi, as well as members of the Mdimma and Dube families.

Those attending the unveiling were also shown a rough cut of a new documentary film by Keita, *Ukukhumbula Nokutela (Remembering Nokutela)*, which was shown the previous weekend in Durban to guests and delegates at an ANC conference marking 100 years of the ANC Women's League at Coast-



## Rocky and Sasha

### VILLAGE VET



ROCKY loved me. He and I saw eye to eye from the first moment we met. He was a large, cuddly, black, teddy bear of a Labrador. A friend more than a patient. I was a judge at a local school pet show at the time and had given him second prize in "the friendliest dog" category and the award for the third biggest dog on show. He obviously appreciated the accolade and became a firm favourite in our clinic. His first owners had emigrated to Canada in the early nineties and his next family had moved to a small property in the Cape before Hilde and her clan adopted him. He responded with contentment to the love, attention and security that his new family bestowed on him. And with this, his weight ballooned. He wobbled into our clinic with Hilde one day, and they ambled out again, armed with dire warnings about the detrimental effects of carrying too much flab and with his owner clutching a large bag of prescription diet food. As I recall, he had his usual happy look on his whiskered face as he left our premises, obviously unaware and undeterred by his future fast. To her credit, Hilde took the task to heart. Early mornings and evenings would often find them power-walking around the neighbourhood, burning up the limited calories allowed by the diet and eating away at his waistcoat of fat. I am sure it was a mutually beneficial arrangement and every couple of weeks they would arrive for a weigh-in, Hilde, her face pink and healthy from the exertion, and Rocky with his customary smile. Eventually, he reached his target weight. He had lost nearly a quarter of his body mass and it probably extended his life by a similar proportion. He was now a lean, energetic, athlete of a dog. His achievement was recognised by the manufacturers of the diet food and he became a finalist in the National Pet Slimmer of the Year competition. The dignitaries arrived down from Johannesburg for the presentation cocktail party and I can remember vividly him sitting on the back seat of the car as they arrived. Ram-rod straight. Like royalty. I almost expected him to fan out his paw in salutation to the fawning masses. The weight-loss programme aside, I saw a lot of him throughout his life, often popping in at their home for minor veterinary issues. There was never any need for restraint, even during uncomfortable procedures. I would usually get a slobbery tongue in my ear for my troubles.

Even when I visited him for the final time. It was the day after Christmas, 2002. He was 14 years old when I gave him his last injection. He was a sweet, iconic dog right to the end.

Sasha hated me. She was born on a farm in the Nottingham Road district, the daughter of a boerbul mother and a large, dark German Shepherd dad. She had arrived shortly before Rocky's final days and had formed this opinion of me early on in her life. Which was strange because her family and their close friends knew her as a loving, devoted pet, devoid of malice. I am not sure why she did not like me. Perhaps she was jealous of the attention I gave Rocky. Maybe she associated me with pain and insecurity, and viewed me with distrust. It could be that her breeding had something to do with it. Whatever the reasons, it was an attitude that persisted throughout her life and even, probably, deteriorated with time. I, no doubt, exacerbated the problem. It is difficult to give love when it is not reciprocated, but, although I tried to establish a relationship with her during her formative, bonding years when she was small and cuddly, this affection was not returned. As she grew older and her canines more pronounced, so a status quo evolved which involved me ignoring her as much as possible and she only growling at me if I ventured too close. Mostly she tried her best to get as far away from me as possible. This, of course, was not always feasible. She became difficult to handle during the rare visits to our clinic for surgical procedures, so it became necessary for me to do house calls to attend to minor ailments. These visits were quite stressful for both of us and usually entailed Hilde wrestling her to the floor and me trying to ensure that the needle attached to the syringe I was carrying penetrated dog flesh. I think I was usually successful. I don't ever recall Hilde complaining of a short, sharp pain during the grapple. Sasha never actually bit me, I don't think, but she did mistake Hilde for me on one occasion and sank her imposing teeth into her hand. I had tranquillised her prior to cutting her nails on their kitchen floor. During the procedure, she awoke from her stupor and took a bite out of the nearest flesh. What started as a nail clipping on a dog, ended up as a surgical procedure on a human. Such is life.

It is ironic that last month, when I administered her final injection, there was no struggle, no need for restraint, just a resigned understanding, an implicit suggestion that perhaps, in another life, we would be friends. Maybe Rocky will be there too. I sure hope so.

• feature1@witness.co.za