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Introduction: history as lament and laugh

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Introduction: History as Lament and Laugh

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* is the second installment of our 2020 women-themed issues and the second to offer bilingual content. Whereas the January issue focused on early female pioneers of African Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom and in Ethiopia, this one jumps to the twentieth century to direct its lens at the lives of two women who had but a short time to leave their lasting legacy. Their biographies open an intimate window into the ways in which we can experience history as lament or as laugh—and sometimes as a bit of both.

In the first one, Dr. Médine Moussounga Keener tells the heartbreaking story of Émilienne Mboundou-Mouyabi, a rising star in the Evangelical Church of Congo whose life was cut short by illness at the age of thirty-two. As the first female pastor to be ordained, Émilienne was a brilliant and inspirational figure, blazing the trail for those among her Christian sisters who, like her felt a burning call to serve God as pastors. Sadly, only a few years into her ministry, she died of complications due to malaria after the birth of her first child. In closing her account, Dr. Moussounga Keener gives voice to the lament of the Congolese Christians and women of the EEC who still mourn her loss thirty years later. She underlines that, even though her death left “an emptiness that cannot be filled,” Émilienne made a powerful impact on the women she ministered to: “She had a burden and a vision for the women of the EEC that became a recurring theme in her talks, ‘*Kilokola ya bakento me kulunga*’ [The hour of women is here]: ‘We need to serve the Lord; not only me, but all women after me.’”

Nokutela Dube’s life, narrated by Dr. Heather Hughes, is also, like Émilienne’s, a story of lament. However, because it describes the successful recovery of Nokutela’s rich legacy, her story is a triumph of women’s history in South Africa. Nokutela is remembered as a founder of the Ohlange School, of the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal*, and as a talented musician and composer of Zulu hymns. She and her husband John Langelibalele Dube worked together in education for many years. He eventually divorced her because she was unable to have children. Nokutela died within a year and was buried in a grave that remained unmarked for ninety-three years, her legacy forgotten. Then, thanks to the work of historians Dr. Hughes and Dr. Cherif Keita, the memory of Nokutela Dube’s life was restored. In 2014, her grave was declared a National Heritage site. Nokutela was posthumously given the Mahatma Gandhi Satyagraha Award and inducted into Freedom Park, a national memorial that recognizes those who gave

their lives for freedom. Here is history as laugh: it narrates the joy of recovered memories, of truth and justice restored.

In the next article, Dr. Casely Essamuah, secretary of the Global Christian Forum, pays tribute to the life and work of Ghanaian theologian John Samuel Pobee who died on January 22, 2020. This African giant left a rich legacy as a “scholar, theologian, writer, mentor, educator, ecumenist and missiologist,” as well as an advocate for women theologians and scholars.

The final piece, by Editorial Manager Dr. Kyama Mugambi, presents the vision of African Theological Network Press (www.atnpres.com). ATNP, he argues, is one key to unlocking the future of Christianity in Africa by creating a network for the publication and dissemination of quality publications for theological education throughout the continent.

Now, as the 2020 season of Lent draws to an end, may the lives of these African Christian ancestors offer you an opportunity to lament and to laugh, even in the midst of the extraordinary circumstances we face today on a global scale. As the Psalmist reminds us, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Ps. 30:5b)

Michèle Miller Sigg
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