

# Breaking bread with a feminist icon

OVER the years, and especially during Women's Month in South Africa, I have often been asked by interviewers: "If you had the opportunity to host two or three woman 'icons' over a Women's Day lunch at your home, who would they be, and what would the conversation revolve around?"

The academic in me often wants to say: "I do not like the term 'icon' ", while the obsessive part of me panics as I desperately hope my favourite caterer will be available on the day.

Recently, the following version of the question was put to me by a student: "Could you name one or two woman 'icons' you would love to have lunch with on Sunday, August 9, 2015?"

My lunch guests could be living or dead, as it was part of a "reimagining project".

I liked the options, and my guest would be Nokutela Mdimma, the first wife of John Dube, the first president of the ANC.

I imagine the following conversation over a long lunch.

I would tell Nokutela that we as a nation should apologise for erasing her from history, and that her contribution may never have been recognised had it not been for the work of professors Cherif Keita and Heather Hughes.

She would confirm that she was crucial to the achievements of her husband, John Dube, and that he would not have been able to build the Ohlange Institute, which was so important in educating black South Africans, had it not been for her vision and hard work.

The same can be said for the newspaper *Ilanga Lase Natal*, which they founded.

We would talk about how things have changed for women in South Africa, and particularly black women, but also how much has stayed the same.

I would ask her to share with me why it is important for women to write and publish their work, both in the media and more scholarly forms, such as books, as I am aware through Professor Keita's work that she did the same.

She published an article in a newspaper in Northfields in the US in 1882 titled "My Home Africa", and also co-authored with her husband a Zulu song book, *Amagama Abantu*. The book is now recognised as seminal in the development of Zulu choral music.

I am sure she may be surprised to learn that, 98 years after her death, women in academia, and particularly black women, face many challenges that are both gendered and raced in terms of publications.

I would sheepishly have to share with her the fact that I could not introduce her to many black



What would a Women's Day lunch be like with an unsung SA heroine? By Cheryl Potgieter

women professors, as we are very few in number and do not exist at all at some of our top universities.

Our conversation would also turn to the role of white women in helping her to meet her goals. I would ask her to talk about her relationship with the missionary Mary Edwards, who helped John Dube to found the 3 642 hectare farm which later became the well-known Inanda Seminary that has educated generations of girls.

Were she and Mary friends? Did she present what we today call a business plan or vision to Mary?

Networks and partnerships are still important today for women to succeed, and she was key to facilitating the partnership which included, I assume, raising the capital that led in time to the establishment of the seminary.

She studied home economics and music in the US, and I imagine she would share the similarities and differences between her and her African-American women peers.

She would no doubt talk about the concerts at which she sang and played the piano. She was often very tired when she did this after a long day of studying, but it was something she had to do, as these performances raised funds for the Ohlange Institute and other development projects in South Africa.

I would give her some pointers about the current state of the nation, specifically in relation to women. I am sure that the poverty experienced by black women in South Africa some 20 years after the ANC came to power and the gender-based violence they are experiencing would both sadden and anger her.

She was a supporter of Booker T Washington's philosophy, which said that black people had to have economic advancement prior to or simultaneously with political power. Would she share any advice for current South African women, drawing on Washington's views?

I guess at this point we would start to talk about issues deemed more personal. I would share with her the fact that I have chosen not to have children, and how I am often judged by both women and men for that decision.

I would ask her if it was true that John Dube had an affair after they had been married for 20 years. I would enquire whether it was this affair that led to them separating, and whether the "justification" for the affair was that she could not have children.

Information suggests that she left him, which indicates she was forced to make a difficult decision. To this day, many women who are in emotionally or physically abusive relationships find it very difficult to leave their partners. I would like to hear her voice on the matter.

Given that Nokutela was such a skilled conversationalist, I am sure she would ask me about my family. I would tell her that my mother and her two sisters have one wish before they die, and that is for their family homes, taken by the apartheid government, to be given back to them.

These homes still stand in central Port Elizabeth. They do not want compensation but the homes themselves. This would lead to a discussion of land in relation to women's rights.

I would tell Nokutela that, unfortunately, Women's Month and Women's Day in South Africa have become very commercialised, which reflects the nature of our society.

I would, however, tell her I am excited that I will be facilitating a panel discussion on August 21, and that among the panellists will be Sophie Williams, one of the women who led the 1956 march to the Union Buildings.

In September, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, specifically the college I head, will be hosting the annual John Dube lecture. I will also be introducing an annual Nokutela Mdimma lecture from August next year.

Finally, would she consider me nominating her for an honorary doctorate? She deserves to be recognised for her contribution to our nation. Would she wish to be referred to as Dr Nokutela Dube, or Dr Nokutela Ndimma-Dube, or simply Dr Nokutela Mdimma?

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