



# NONI JABAVU

## Product of powerful women

In the 1960s Noni Jabavu was known world over for her powerful novels. **Makhosazana Xaba** reflects on the gifted men and women in her family who helped to shape her wonderful talent.

In March 1955 Noni's only brother, Tengo Max Jabavu was shot dead. He had been a final year medical student at Wits University. In April *Drum* magazine reported on his death, the tribute entitled, "End of a Great Line".

The upper half of the page carried a picture of him on the driver's seat. At the bottom of the page was a row of four headshots of the Jabavu men: his grandfather John Tengo (JT); his father Davidson Don Tengo (DDT); and his two uncles, DDT's brothers. Noni's picture was the last in this row with the caption "Sister... married to an Englishman." The eulogy

ended with: "Thus the death of Tengo Max Jabavu puts an end to the direct line of pioneer work in African education, journalism and leadership through the first Tengo and Don." The Jabavus were leaders and pioneers of their time, but so was Noni the woman in the Jabavu family who is often marginal in the writings and discussions of the contributions that the family made.

### JABAVU MEN OF LETTERS

Indeed JT became a pioneer in 1884 when he started the bilingual weekly newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu* based in King Williamstown thus becoming the first black newspaper owner and editor in South Africa. He edited the newspaper until his death in 1921 when his son Alexander Macaulay took over. Now known as the "Father of black journalism", JT used his newspaper actively as a forum for discussion of political, religious and social issues of the time.

JT also worked tirelessly campaigning all over Africa for the establishment of the first college for blacks in South Africa. The college, located in Alice was later called Fort Hare University and his son DDT made history by becoming the first black person to lecture at the college.

DDT and Alexander Kerr were the first two lecturers in 1916 when the college opened. DDT

worked at the university as a Chair of Latin and African Languages and held various positions on the management of the university over the years until his retirement in 1944. He was a prolific writer in, mostly, academic, political and travel genres. He was an accomplished linguist (he spoke seven languages), a great orator, and a teetotaler and like some black men of his time, a religious man. He was lovingly called "Professor" and well known in the rest of Africa as many young women and men chose to come to the only university for black people in southern Africa. It was a more affordable option than travelling abroad. And indeed for some, it was a more desirable option because it was a symbol of African self-determination.

Four months after reporting Max's death *Drum* published an "important message" from Noni who, after the funeral, was returning to England where she was living. She wanted Africans to know that overseas publishers were looking for African and Asian writers of novels and autobiographies. Her message ended: "... and I hope that my defense of African writers will not prove to have been more patriotic than realistic. So shake the dust off that manuscript and send it over." As suggested in her first book, Noni was planning to respond to the call.

Four years later in 1959 when

DDT died, in the September issue of *Drum* Benson Dyantyi wrote, "I knew then that an era was ending, that I was witnessing the conclusion of a chapter in the history of non-white people. This was the end of a line of Jabavus a line which served our people well as men of letters. The only man who could have carried on the illuminating saga of the Jabavus was Tengo Max - but he was brutally killed by a gangster while a student at the Witwatersrand University."

The reporter had no way of knowing then that at the time of her father's death Noni's manuscript was in its final stages. Evidently, it was inconceivable to Dyantyi that a woman could have followed in the steps of these men of letters. Noni was communicating back and forth with her publishers across the seas, between Uganda where she was living then and England where the book was soon to come out. They were polishing the manuscript preparing it for the world to witness the continuation of the "illuminating saga". Noni was to become known world-wide as a woman of letters.

#### THE JABAVU WOMEN

Before returning to Noni let's look at the women in her family and life, women who made history in their own ways but receive marginal recognition. It was equally these women, as much as the written-about Jabavu men that contributed towards the person that Noni became. The most common characteristic that these women shared was a determination and belief in themselves that undoubtedly led to their achievements and pioneering deeds.

Let's begin with Noni's great grandmother Mary Mpinda, JT's mother. She contributed to J's success because she so believed in education that she worked doubly



*Far Left: John Tengo Jabavu and his wife*



*Left: D.D.T Thandiswa Nolwandle Makiwane at their wedding*

hard to earn money so that she could send her son to school. During the late 19th century formal education was new for black people and some regarded the practice with suspicion while others ignored it. Mary was a washerwoman, and, having turned to religion she was convinced that education would not only uproot her son from poverty but would lay a foundation for a bright future. When JT became the second black South African to write and pass matric in 1883, Mary's dream became reality.

Noni's grandmother Elda Sakuba lovingly called uMaBiyashe, was phenomenal in her own way as the little written about her suggests. Although she had elementary education, she rose to all occasions as the wife to J. the editor. Daisy Makiwane talking to Noni remembered Elda as a full supporter of her husband and "... gave her sons that grounding, brought them up to sing and to know goodness by what she called 'feeling it'. She was a person with a streak of poetry battling inside with the strict discipline that she imposed upon herself."

Elda believed that her children should learn choral music as a way to internalise teachings of the bible. Well known for her nightingale voice and a daughter of

the Reverend James Sakuba she taught her sons "psalmody, hymnology, anthems and oratorios". Perhaps it was the reason that DDT became such a great lover of music, a piano player and conductor of choirs.

Noni's mother, Florence Thandiswa "Nolwandle" Makiwane, one of Reverend Elijah Makiwane's daughters, married DDT in 1916. As per custom, she was given a name by the family she married into. The wedding took place soon after Thandiswa returned from Birmingham where she was studying, thus the name Nolwandle.

She was a qualified teacher and took education of her children very seriously. She was active in the affairs of the university, serving for years as a matron in one of the residences. She pioneered a women's community development organisation called the Zenzele Club in the 1920s. She travelled far and wide in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape, the then Cape colony, organising and supporting women. She was driven and believed fully in the work she did. In today's language these were clearly women's empowerment groups.

Perhaps the most telling tribute to Nolwandle's work was well articulated by a journalist who wrote a brief obituary "Ndlela-ntle

Nolwandle!" in the September 1951 *Drum* after her death. It argued that she did not only improve herself by returning to England to study when Noni was only two years, she was known to insist that women should "learn to think freely and independently". The obituary continued, "The fruits of her labours became evident when in the late twenties, self-improvement clubs began to spring all over the country and 'Senzele' became a household word in all the villages of the Ciskei and Transkei". Concluding, the journalist noted that Nolwandle may have been ahead of her time and that her work did not receive the recognition it deserved because of a gender bias: "Perhaps she came too early and was born a woman".

Noni's aunts, Daisy and Cecilia were Nolwandle's elder sisters and, they were makers of history. When Maggie Majiza, Daisy and Cecilia's mother died in 1883, Reverend Makiwane remarried. Nolwandle was the third of three children from his second marriage.

When Victoria Hospital began a small three-year long programme to train black nurses, only two were admitted for training. Cecilia, already a qualified teacher, chose to become a nurse and registered for training. In 1907 she wrote the state examinations and in 1908 became the first black person in the whole of Africa to be licensed as a nurse.

January 7 has historically been observed as a day of prayer to honour Cecilia and her pioneering achievements. A hospital, Cecilia Makiwane, in Mdantsane was named after her. She chose never to get married and her memory has

lived on. Her statue was erected at the Victoria Hospital in 1977 and today the Cecilia Makiwane Annual Awards are given to nurses who in their practice embrace her spirit.

Daisy Makiwane made history when she became the first black woman to matriculate and obtained a distinction in maths. She wanted to become a mathematician but as the times dictated, she could not live out her dream in South Africa. Later she became the first black woman journalist at the newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu*. During her tenure she occupied many positions starting as a reporter, a feature writer, lead writer and finally an editor.

#### NONI EMERGES FROM THE 'ILLUMINATING SAGA'

Mary, Elda, Nolwandle, Daisy and Cecilia are women who were, in their own right, phenomenal torch bearers. In the late 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, when the status of women was very low and marriage and childbirth was their expected 'natural' role, what these women in Noni's family achieved is extraordinary. They were different from many of their peers. They "served" their people in different ways. They were role models. They contributed chapters to the "illuminating saga" of progress by black people of their times. Noni grew up hearing stories told with pride, of outstanding achievement by individuals from both sides of her family. Here was a firm foundation for her to build on. And, she built visible, enviable monuments.

Born Helen Nontando on 20 August, 1919 in Alice, Noni was the

family's second child. In December 1917 DDT and Nolwandle had had a baby girl, Nozipo. Sadly Nozipo became one of the thousands of victims of the pandemic, Spanish Influenza that killed millions all over the world. She died in October, two months after Noni was born.

Noni attended primary school at Lovedale and at the age of 13 continued schooling in England in 1933. When World War II began in 1939 she was recruited to work in a munitions factory thus putting an end to her schooling.

Her contribution to the "illuminating saga" comprised a long list. She was a journalist at the BBC (radio and TV) in the 1940s and '50s. She wrote *Drawn in Colour* in 1960 thus becoming the first black woman in South Africa to publish an autobiographical memoir. Then came *The Ocbre People* in 1963. She was editor of the *New Strand* a literary magazine in London between 1961 and 1962 and was the first ever black person and woman to occupy this post. She was a freelance journalist in many of the countries she lived, including when she was in South Africa in 1977 when she was a columnist for the *Daily Dispatch*. This apple fell directly under the tree.

In the next edition of *Labour Bulletin* Xaba will discuss this extraordinary women's works and achievements.

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