

# A Remarkable Woman in African Independent Churches: Examining Christina Nku's Leadership in St John's Apostolic Faith Mission

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## Abstract

The name African Independent Churches (AICs) refers to churches that have been independently started in Africa by Africans and not by missionaries from another continent. There has been extensive research on (AICs) from different subjects in the past. There is, however, a research gap on the subject of leadership in the AICs, especially with reference to women leaders. To address this gap, this article discusses leadership in the AICs with special reference to the leadership of Christina Nku in St John's Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM). A historical examination of Christina Nku's leadership is studied by looking at her roles as a family woman, prophet, church founder, faith healer and educator in St John's AFM. The aim of this article is twofold. First it is to reflect on gender in the leadership of the AICs. Second it is to apply the framework of leadership in the AICs to Christina Nku's leadership in St John's AFM. Consequently, the article is an interface between gender and leadership in an African context. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that Christina Nku was a remarkable woman in the leadership of the AICs.

**Keywords:** Christina Nku; African Independent Churches (AICs); gender; St John's Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM); leadership

## Introduction

A short history of the African Independent Churches (hereafter AICs) is discussed in order to understand the background of the AICs. The article also discusses leadership within the AICs in order to juxtapose it with the leadership of Christina Nku in St John's



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Apostolic Faith Mission (hereafter AFM). Christina Nku's leadership in St John's AFM shall be discussed by looking at her roles as a family woman in the Nku family, a prophet to the nation, church founder, faith healer and educator. A discussion on her roles shall assist in arriving at the conclusion that she was indeed a remarkable woman in the AICs. The aim is also to reflect on gender in the leadership of the AICs and to apply it to the leadership of Christina Nku in St John's AFM. Consequently, the article is an interface between gender and leadership in an African context.

## **A Short History of AICs**

The history of the AICs<sup>1</sup> in Southern Africa, according to Park (2014, 9), goes back for more than a hundred years. Since the AICs were recognised the proliferation of these churches and their members in southern Africa could no longer be ignored. Park continues to say that the gravity of the AICs has already been stressed by a great number of missiological and anthropological scholars over the past half century (Park 2014, 9). The AICs continue to make impact on the continent because of their relevance to African people and their independence.

AICs are growing steadily in southern Africa. Projections show that 35 per cent of the black population were members of this movement of diverse groups and churches in 2000. More people belong to this group than to any historical denomination in South Africa (Nel and Le Roux 2005, 127). Furthermore the number of AICs in the country rose from 30 in 1913; to 600 in 1939; to over 1 000 in 1955; and from 2 000 in 1960 to 3 000 in 1970. The proliferation since 1970 has been even more impressive, as by 1990 there were at least 6 000 AICs in South Africa (Anderson 1999, 286).

These are churches which, to a large extent, have developed without the influence of Western churches (Coertze 2005, 10). The early AICs were generally regarded as Ethiopian because they invoked the idea that there exists an African Christian experience that is independent of the West and thus sought to rubbish the idea that Africans have to be grateful and submissive to white colonisers who are their parents in the Lord (Matika 2004, 85). AICs have thus especially emphasised indigenisation/contextualisation in their practice and theology in order to live out a gospel which is especially relevant for Africans (Austnaberg 2010, 221).

Africans have realised that they do not necessarily need the white missionaries to be their supervisors but can on their own operate churches. AICs were not born out of rebellion to the West but in a quest to be relevant to Africans. They saw a need to

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1 AIC is an acronym that refers traditionally to "African Independent Churches" but some scholars have replaced the "I" in the "AIC" with different words to convey different perspectives of "AIC" whilst using the same acronym (AIC), such as: "African Indigenous Churches"; "African Initiated Churches"; or "African Instituted Churches" (Park 2014, 10). This article uses "AIC" as "African Independent Church" to refer to churches started by black leaders in Africa.

contextualise the gospel message to an African context. In the AICs, Africans have found a platform to express their spirituality to the fullest. In addition, AICs are a true reflection of the way Africans conduct liturgy.

In the words of Omenyo (2000, 233), it is the perception and interpretation of scholars that see AICs as a protest against and as a challenge to the Eurocentric disposition of the mainline/historic churches in Africa. On the contrary, the beliefs and practices of the AICs clearly epitomise the resilience of the African indigenous worldview. AICs are the authentic African expression of Christianity. The narrative of the AICs, Vellem (2014, 2) concurs, is an expression of the spirituality of sanity in the context of a political, economic, spatial and cultural domination of a Salvationist religion of the West, ironically experienced as terror by black Africans

AICs are African solutions for African problems. They provide answers for misfortune and illness, for the decline of traditional explanatory systems. They are also a system containing multiple alternatives that allow pragmatic decisions (Da Silva 1993, 401). The AICs have, from the end of the nineteenth century, been building communities at the margins of larger communities based on mutual care and concern. In these counter-cultures they have learned to critique and reject the ethos of Western individualistic and secularised societies based on the spirit of colonialism and imperialism (Duncan 2014, 9).

## **Women Leadership in AICs**

Women in the AICs face different challenges that already exist in black communities—even before they come to the church. They face the challenge of patriarchy that is not necessarily AICs' problem but a societal problem. Women face a culture that sees women as ordinary members of the church and not holding any influential position. By virtue of being women they are excluded from decision-making bodies in the community. Women are not afforded equal opportunities in comparison to their male counterparts. In the church, according to Aquina (1969, 119), the lowest rank is held by newcomers and by women. Whereas any man may move up the hierarchy, almost no women can hold any (major) office in the church.

Women in the AICs, according to Sibeko and Haddad (1997, 85), are excluded from performing baptisms and distributing Holy Communion, and there is a pervasive attitude arising from a complex interplay of cultural practice and the Levitical texts that women are “unclean” as a result of menstruation. Those that are in lay leadership are prevented from performing duties when they are menstruating. Modiko (2011, 140) adds that during the menstruation cycle, women are no longer allowed to work in the ministry of healing. They are allowed to prophesy and do other ministries, except for healing the sick.

Furthermore, women in the AICs according to Masondo (2001, 222), are treated as second-class citizens. Numerically they are the majority but the decision-making structures are still male dominated. Women are relegated to minor positions or heads of women's organisations. They are known for their financial contribution but they have no platform to make ecclesiastical or theological contributions. They can exercise leadership in a small area but once it becomes important, it requires male leadership. Masondo continues to say that the tradition of leadership structure that is followed by most AICs, where a woman founder appoints a male to act as a leader, is indicative of the fact that women's leadership is not trusted (Masondo 2001, 222).

Not all women are deprived of leadership positions. Thomas (1995, 20) argues that although women are excluded from the hierarchy of direct political decision making, they who constitute the majority of members are affirmed for their expressive, prophetic and healing powers. Thomas goes further to say that some are prophets able to challenge decisions made by the male council of elders. Others have ceremonial authority as judges in the choice of marriage partners. Still others are midwives, healers, and singers. Other writers attest to key functions of women AIC leaders, including founders of churches (Thomas 1995, 20).

Omenyo (2000, 243) concurs that true to its identity as an indigenous, authentically African church, the AICs tend to highly recognise women in full-time ministry, particularly the prophetic ministry, provided they have the charisma. Oduro (2008, 67) adds that AICs have indeed accorded women the dignity they deserve despite the poor perception and marginalisation of women in African societies. Oduro continues to say that whilst churches planted by Western missionaries were debating on the scriptural appropriateness of ordaining women, the AICs were placing more emphasis on the giftedness of women rather than their gender. As a result, thousands of people, including men, followed female founders of AICs (Oduro 2008, 67).

Mwaura (2005, 441) maintains that women are marginalised in the leadership of the AICs. They only lead based on the principle of co-dependency. Women may therefore hold positions of authority because of their husbands' positions as bishops. Where a woman may be the permanent head, a male may exist as a nominal head. Wives and even daughters of bishops may be ordained pastors due to positions of their husbands or fathers. Such women may exert tremendous influence, for they may have a free hand in the formation of organisations and setting up projects that benefit women.

Furthermore, prophets are often women who do not hold office in the formal hierarchy of most AICs, except in a very few cases in which men are only nominal leaders. Women prophets are therefore not a threat to the established male hierarchy that prevails in these churches (Dube 2008, 9). It means that women can continue to prophesy, heal the sick and deliver demons but are still not involved when it comes to decision making in AICs. Moreover, they can work hard to establish institutions that they will not lead in the end.

There are different reasons for the marginalisation of women in the AICs. Molobi (2008, 7) points out that men in the AICs are patriarchal, and their behaviour in the home is carried forward into the church. As a result, women are forced to hide their potential because their husbands deny them the opportunity to express their abilities. The laws of the church were formulated by men, who were very strict on women: thus, despite being in the majority, women have been marginalised. Molobi continues to say that assertive women are few, and in consequence knowledge, power, strength and education are reserved for only a small number (Molobi 2008, 8).

AICs need to rise above these reasons. They need to rise above the challenges that already exist in black communities in order to empower women to occupy leadership positions. They need to overcome the challenge of patriarchy in society. They need to overcome a culture that supports the dominance of men over women. It is only then that women will not merely become ordinary members of the church but also hold influential positions. AICs need to value women the same way they value men. They need to perceive women as true images of God in order to afford them equal opportunities as men.

## **Leadership of Christina Nku**

### **Early Life**

Christina Nku was born to farm labourers in the Viljoensdrift district, Heilbron, and baptised in the NG Sendingkerk. She was troubled by ill-health and experienced visions. In her constant search for health she joined the AFM and was in contact with other Zionist leaders who had been part of the original Dowie le Roux congregation in the 1920s (Masondo 2015, 233). Nku later left the AFM to start her own church under the name St John's Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM).

According to Park (2014, 209), Nku was the fifth child in the family of eight. Her life as a child astonished her parents. She was seldom found in the midst of her peers. She attended school and went as far as standard three. Park continues to say that she never was exposed to the outside world like her other sisters. From her childhood she kept indoors and was always found praying in dark corners of the house, so as not to be heard because she feared her father. Since 1906, she has been seeing visions up to the time she was called to rest. She prophesied, healed the sick and founded a church (Park 2014, 209).

Nku was the calibre of a woman who was well established and she was an outstanding leader. She also became strong financially and in evangelic outreach. She demonstrated her unwillingness to subjugate herself to male domination in the church, raising her voice loud enough to be heard both in and outside the church (Molobi 2008, 4). As the founder of St John's AFM, one of the largest AICs in South Africa, Nku was admired for her healing ministry, her upliftment of the poor and destitute, starting from Everton

Township where the main church is situated, and for relentlessly enhancing education among church members (Landman 2012, 5).

### **Family Woman**

Christina Nku was 22 years old when she married Lazarus Mosioa Nku in 1916. People said that Lazarus Nku had married a demented person because of her visions and the “illnesses” accompanying them. In “Visions” (undated) Nku relates that this was because she was able to tell people what was troubling them, and she revealed their secrets in public. The couple subsequently moved to the Free State. Within the next 20 years, between 1917 and 1936, Nku bore eight children, just as the visions had told her (Landman 2006, 9).

Nku’s children from the first born to the last born include: Johannes born in March 1917; Anna Dorah born in May 1919; Obed born in December 1921; Mary born in March 1924; Lydia—later the famous educationist Lydia August—born in December 1925; Joel born in December 1928; Magdeline born in October 1932; and Selina born in May 1936 (Landman 2006, 9). Nku continued to be submissive to her husband, Lazarus Nku, and raised her children in the love of God. Almost all of Nku’s eight children became involved in the ministry and the activities of the church.

Furthermore, Nku’s family and the church were directly involved in the activities of the AICs, including the Organisation of African Independent Churches (OAIC) as an ecumenical body. The family of Nku played a highly significant role in the development of both the AICs and the OAIC. It would be unfair not to position Nku’s family within the history of the AICs’ organisational development (Molobi 2006, 42). The involvement of Nku’s family in the AICs and the OAIC is evidence that her family supported her work. It is also a sign that Nku was a leader, even in her family, and an example to her children.

### **Prophet**

Christina Nku was 12 years old when, in 1906, she was called through a vision to become a prophet. Twelve years later, in 1918, she received a further vision giving her instructions on how to live a holy life. At the time she was working in the field when a burning coal fell from heaven right in front of her. She fainted and experienced a vision in which she was told not to touch alcohol or do any work on Sundays (Landman 2006, 10).

Nku received signs and visions that she must be a prophet. One of the signs, according to Masondo (2001, 120), is that she became seriously ill and her family took her to a prophet who realised that her time to start “working” was overdue and organised that she be baptised quickly and start the process of becoming a healer. Masondo goes further to say that Nku prophesied that a man from the east with amazing prophetic powers would come. No person will ever work like him and the heaven will use him

mightily. When Masango was brought to St John's in 1941 it was confirmed that he was the man in the prophecy. Since he was a sick man, Nku put him through all the healing and cleansing processes until he was fully restored and healthy (Masondo 2015, 239).

In 1966 at the sea of Tiberias in Israel, she prophesied before a multiracial group the war that was approaching in Israel. She prophesied that the divisions in the church and conspiracy will be ongoing. In 1970 the church was divided as prophesied. She saw the bloody figure of Dr Verwoerd before her and two weeks later he was assassinated. Before passing, she foretold many deaths; on 12 August her son, Joel Zachariah Nku, died (Park 2014, 209). In addition Nku ensured to empower the enthusiastic women who came from her ministry. These women were also spiritually empowered to the same level as Nku and they also grew prophetic and healing Apostolic churches that attracted great following in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Swaziland (Modiko 2011, 93).

These accurate prophecies show that Nku was a true prophet in every sense of the word. The fact that she empowered other women to work with her, demonstrates that Nku was not selfish in her ministry. There were other women prophets in the AICs, but what was unique about Nku is that every prophecy came to pass. The dreams and visions that Nku saw became a reality in many people's lives. Furthermore, Nku's prophetic ministry was not full of drama and gimmicks but was genuine and addressed the real problems in society.

## **Church Founder**

### *The beginning of St John's Apostolic Faith Mission*

Christina Nku had a vision of a big church with 12 doors and she was told to follow the baptism of John and Jesus. She had another vision in which she was shown the exact place where she was to build the church near Everton in Johannesburg (Anderson 1991, 106). In 1938 the powerful AIC was established following the vision that Nku, the black female founder, had received from God (Thomas 1997, 13). Nku, who took the title "Founder and General President" of the Saint John's AFM, gathered thousands into her church (Roy 2000, 118). Since then, branches of the church have spread throughout southern Africa (Kgatle 2016, 6).

Nku was a pioneer, one of a few women who founded her own AIC. She also followed a stream of Africans who grew tired of being dominated by white Protestant Christianity and separated from mission churches to create new religious cosmologies that blended Christian symbols and practices into well-established pre-colonial religious systems (Thomas 1999, 5).

In addition, St John's AFM is a type of AIC that is relevant to divine healing and deliverance. St John's AFM and all its splinter groups can be theorised as presenting a crisis model for managing change (Masondo 2013, 157). Masondo continues to say that these churches provide their members with a well worked out path of inclusion through

baptism and related rituals, as well as alleviation of crisis through an assortment of healing, cleansing and deliverance rituals (Masondo 2013, 157).

### *The Split in St John's Apostolic Faith Mission*

Nku and other church members had visions about the split that will eventually occur in St John's AFM. According to Landman (2006, 13), in 1939 Nku had a vision that, after the church had spread "all over the world" (i.e. South and Southwest Africa), she would be fighting a war that she was not sure she would win. Landman continues to say that two elders in the church had similar visions: in 1941 Father Asele said that a dust storm would come, which would rip off part of the church "on the western side." Then Father Moloi said that the roof would fall on people "on the station and De Deur." A snake would appear and chase the people. They would try to climb on top of buildings, but the snake would chase them down. The spirit of the snake would be everywhere (Landman 2006, 13).

While Nku was the effective leader of the church, it had an archbishop, who was constitutionally head of the church. Nku worked in partnership with her husband in this regard. She remained the leader while Lazarus Nku was the archbishop. In the words of West (1975, 52) the problems started after the death of her husband when he was involved in an accident in 1967. During her husband's lifetime, Nku had full control of the church because he was her appointee. It was logical for her to want someone in position who would recognise her as the sole leader. Nku then appointed her son, Johannes Nku, to this position. West continues to say that the church did not receive Nku's son, but instead elected Masango. Nku did not receive Masango too, because she could not control him as she would her son (West 1975, 67).

In fact, Masango, according to Masondo (2001, 220), was not prepared to be a nominal leader, he wanted real power and he went to court to challenge the decision by Nku to shorten his term as archbishop. The church was eventually split between Everton (Nku) and Germiston (Masango). Masondo continues to say that in this, males went through courts of law to wrestle authority of the female founder from her church. Though she claimed divine authority, the courts only interpreted the constitution of her church and made a ruling based on that (Masondo 2001, 220).

The main reason the church disagreed with the appointment of Nku's son, Johannes, as the archbishop was because he practised polygamy despite holding a senior office in the church. This raised many questions among the church members, which led to the split. In fact, the church had already voted against the practice of polygamy in 1969 (Park 2014, 29). Masango retained the administrative position but Nku continued to be the "spiritual mother" of the church. Though the church had a large membership by the time Masango and Nku died in 1984 and 1988 respectively, it subsequently splintered. Dr Lydia August, Nku's daughter, continued her mother's work of healing until she died in 1997 (Mwaura 2005, 428).



## **Faith Healer**

Prophets in the AICs are called to become healers, a decision that does not come from the individual. Rather, this is a calling that comes to the healer from other sources or powers greater than the ego of the individual (Johnson 1994, 166). Prophets are also called to be “faith healers” through prophecy and prayer (Park 2014, 111). Christina Nku, a prophet in the AIC, became famous as a faith healer and prayed for bottles and buckets of water which were used for healing (Anderson 1991, 106).

Nku did her healing through prayer and by dispensing the indigenous wisdom that she received through visions. The only “ancillary” to her healing were the bottles of water she blessed and thus, this water acquired healing powers. Nku expanded her healing ministry with love towards other people and the advocacy of a healthy moral lifestyle (Landman 2006, 16). Landman continues to say that her church was a place for those who are ill and no one goes there willingly but through a special calling (Landman 2006, 16). Healing, through the use of holy water, was central to the theology and practice of the AICs (Masondo 2013, 163).

Nku adopted the use of water, among other natural resources, to facilitate the completion of respective procedures and processes such as baptism and cleansing. One of the reasons for the use of water in the AICs is that it was and continues to be regarded as sacred in the Apostolic tradition. Nku also used water to facilitate the completion of divine healing (Kunnie 1992, 6). The purpose of going into and using these sources was mainly to wash themselves in water in the belief that their wounds would be healed, pains eased and so forth. During those times, diseases were thought to be a sign of divine wrath. Washing and bathing in sacred waters was seen as serving a dual function, namely that of serving a rite of placating the gods and as a means of healing and curing the body (Lebeloane and Mokhele 2006, 147).

## **Educator**

As the church grew, Nku’s ministry expanded through the establishment of schools for children and programmes for youth and adults. People’s lives were transformed, and this directly benefited the community. Nku’s ministry was subversive in that it functioned as a hidden transcript that was a response to systems that dominated the poor (Thomas 1997, 63 cf Landman 2006, 14).

Mother Christina Nku seems to have been very conscious of education; this comes out very clearly in her attachment to institutions of learning, albeit at a primary level. For instance, St John’s AFM founded three primary schools: Mosioa Community School, which was named after the late Archbishop Lazarus Mosioa Nku in Sebokeng Vaal Triangle; Mokotuli Higher Primary School, which was named after Mother Christina Nku in Everton in the Vaal; and Motlollo Primary School, built by the late Archbishop Johannes Tieho Ralentsoana Nku at Ma Nku’s resting place in Vogelstruisdraai (Motlollo). St John’s AFM trained its ministers at the R. R. Wright School of Religion,

commonly known as the Wilberforce Theological Seminary in Everton. Interestingly, St John's AFM also established a bursary fund known as the "Christina Nku Bursary Fund" (Molobi 2006, 35)

## **A Remarkable Woman in African Independent Churches**

Christina Nku was a remarkable woman in the AICs because she was destined to be a leader early in her life. Nku was noticed by prophets and other people around her, and they could see that she would be a prophet. Ministry, in the life of Nku, was not necessarily a career but a calling upon her life that she could not resist. Like many other prophets in the Bible, God formed her in her mother's womb to be a prophet. It is for this reason that Nku was never motivated by money and material things in her ministry, but served people with diligence. She was always passionate about what she was doing because it came naturally to her.

Nku was a remarkable woman in the AICs because she valued family structure. Most successful career women, including those who are in ministry, do not have a successful family life. In addition, there are few women who are able to tackle the pressures of leadership and still be submissive at home. Nku was an exception in this regard; she was willing to allow her husband to be the head of the church while she was the founder of the same church. She loved her husband until death separated them. Most importantly, she raised her children in the love of God; hence many of them joined her in the work of ministry, while others excelled in other fields and areas of influence.

Another area that made her a remarkable woman in the AICs is her calling as a prophet to the nation. She did not prophesy to please the audience but spoke as she heard God in her life. It is important to note that most of these prophecies came to pass. A true prophet is one who hears from God and their prophecies are fulfilled. She was not only a prophet in St John's AFM but she could prophesy issues of national interest like the death of Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, the former South African prime minister and the pioneer of apartheid. She was also able to prophesy the death of her own son and the secession of her own church. She was a prophet par excellence.

Nku was a remarkable woman in the AICs because she founded her own church under the name St John's AFM in her drive to be more relevant to her people. The church was founded under difficult conditions of apartheid and women oppression. It means that it was not easy for a woman, especially an African woman, to be a founder of the church. Nonetheless, because Nku received the vision from the Lord, she was able to accomplish such a vision of building the church. Although the church unfortunately split into two, Nku is still recognised as the spiritual mother of both factions.

Nku founded the church and led it as a prophet, yet her husband held the formal title of Archbishop (Dube 2008, 9). Nku, pioneer of the AICs' prophetic church, St John's AFM became a role model for other women in the AICs. It is now common tradition among

the AICs for women to start their own churches (Modiko 2011, 140). Moreover, out of her ministry came many such AIC healing and prophetic churches (Modiko 2011, 102).

The distinct gift of Nku was faith healing. People could travel for long distances just to attend her meetings in order to be healed of their sicknesses and diseases. Although Nku used substances in her practice of healing, it was still recognised as faith healing. Nku used usual substances like water and oil after praying for the sick, but she was still differentiated from “faith herbalists” who used ashes, salt and vinegar to pray for people. In addition, people could be healed under Nku’s ministry, even if she did not pray for them.

Moreover, Nku believed in education; hence under her name and in the church many schools and institutions were started to empower the community of Everton and the surrounding areas. It takes a dedicated leader of vision to build schools for the community. In addition, Nku continued to teach people—especially her family members—real life values. She taught her children principles of love, unity and faith. When she passed on, people were ready to live according to such principles.

## Conclusion

African Independent Churches (AICs) are independent from Western influence and relevant to indigenous people in Africa. This type of church has grown in quantity and quality in the past and continues to make impact in African Christianity. However, leadership in the AICs still remains patriarchal, whereby women only occupy menial positions. Christina Nku was a remarkable woman in the AICs because she was able to rise above the challenges of leadership in the AICs. Furthermore, she demonstrated leadership as a family woman, prophet, church founder, faith healer and educator in St John’s AFM. She was an example to other women in the AICs that indeed women can occupy important positions. She remains an example to society and the world at large that one’s gender should not be an obstacle to achieve greatness in life.

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