

The Other Side of the Story: Attempts by Missionaries to Facilitate Landownership by Africans during the Colonial Era

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Abstract

This article provides a critique of the role played by progressive missionaries in securing land for the African people in some selected mission stations in South Africa. It argues that, in spite of the dominant narrative that the missionaries played a role in the dispossession of the African people of their land, there are those who refused to participate in the dispossession. Instead, they used their status, colour and privilege to subvert the policy of land dispossession. It critically examines the work done by four progressive missionaries from different denominations in their attempt to subvert the laws of land dispossession by facilitating land ownership for Africans. The article interacts with the work of Revs John Philip (LMS), James Allison (Methodist), William Wilcox and John Langalibalele Dube (American Zulu Mission [AZM]), who devised land redistributive mechanisms as part of their mission strategies to benefit the disenfranchised Africans.

Keywords: London Missionary Society; land dispossession; Khoisan; mission stations; Congregational Church; Inanda; Edendale; Indaleni; Mahamba

UNISA 
university
of south africa
PRESS

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae

<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>

Volume 46 | Number 2 | 2020 | #6800 | 17 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/6800>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online) ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)

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Introduction

In our African culture, we are integrally connected to the land from the time of our birth. That is why as soon as we are born our umbilical cords are buried into the soil of our homesteads, thus making an eternal union between the land and us. (Winnie Mandela¹)

The debate around land ownership, dispossession, redistribution and expropriation without compensation has intensified in South Africa. Attempts by the democratic government to redress the injustice stemming from dispossession during the colonial era, has not yielded satisfactory results. The issue of land ownership and landlessness is a very emotive one for African people. As Winnie Mandela observed in the quotation stated above, African people have an eternal link and identification with their land because their umbilical cords are buried in their land from the moment they are born and remain there for the rest of their lives. It is for that reason that in spite of all the achievements of the new South Africa, the issue of land ownership and redress has remained the biggest threat to democracy.

The church has been affected by the debate around dispossession and the need for redress. Missionaries used different methods to acquire vast portions of land during the colonial era. As a result, large portions of land are in the hands of the churches. This raises questions on the role played by the church around land dispossession by the African people during the colonial era. There is ample evidence that the colonial governments ruthlessly uprooted people from their ancestral land and went further to pass legislation that barred them from purchasing land. The 1913 Land Act is a case in hand, which led to the impoverishment of the Africans. In his letter to the Prime Minister in 1914, John Dube expressed his dismay regarding the impact of the Land Act on the African people:

It is only a man with a heart of stone who could hear and see what I hear and see, and remain callous and unmoved. It would break your hearts did you know, as I know, the cruel and undeserved afflictions wrought by the hateful enactment on numberless aged, poor and tender children of my race in their new native land.²

The role of the missionaries in the conquest of the African people, including the dispossession of their land, features prominently in almost every page of Nosipho Majeke's book, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*.³ Majeke did most of her research in the Cape by looking at the role played by different missionaries from a

1 Winnie Mandela. Interview with young journalists from Africa. U-Tube, 13 July 2019.

2 Quoted in Adhikari, M. 2005. "John Langalibalele Dube." <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/dube-jl.htm> 2009/01/23. Also from Allan Paton Archives, 2019/07/24.

3 N. Majeke, 1952. *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest* (Cumberwood: APDUSA). Majeke's real name was Dora Taylor.

number of denominations or missionary agencies and how they collaborated with the colonial government in the subjugation of the African people. She posits that one of the biggest areas of injustice by the missionaries was enabling the colonial leaders to dispossess Africans of their land. She argues: “Whatever the differences and conflicts between the various elements amongst the Europeans, they all had a common aim: the confiscation of the land and the establishment of white supremacy.”⁴

Majeke notes that African kings and chiefs waged wars of resistance against the dispossession of their land, but they did not get the required assistance from the missionaries, most of who were on the side of the settlers.⁵ Instead, the missionaries were “preparing the way, disarming the chiefs with their message of God’s peace—at the same time the God of an all-powerful nation prepared to be their friend. Thus they make easy the negotiations between the Governor and the Chief; they act as the Governor’s advisers and assist in drawing up the terms of the treaties.”⁶ She notes their struggle against this invasion, but omits the role played by a few cadres of missionaries who did not participate in this dispossession and instead sought to reverse and undermine it. There was a group of missionaries who longed to do, in the words of David Livingstone, “only what would be good for Africa” and its people.⁷

Majeke notes the resistance of the people against this domination, while at the same time noting the continued collaboration between white missionaries and settlers. She concludes that the missionaries were used as vehicles of conquest, not liberation for the African people. However, this is not the complete story. There is another side to it. There were missionaries like Livingstone, described by Northcott as follows:

He was concerned about Africa and not about prestige and position, whether ecclesiastical or political. ... He would welcome any Christian provided his devotion to “doing some good for Africa” was undoubted.⁸

John and Jean Camaroff wrote about the interaction between missionaries and early converts. They argued that there was mutual influence between the missionaries and the early converts. Unlike the dominant thinking by the missionaries and others who came after them—who tend to argue that missionaries were conquerors and early converts their victims—the relationship between these two groups was more complex than that. The Camaroffs argue that there were a mutual influence and shaping of the other. Therefore, the indigenous people were not just passive recipients of the missionaries’ teachings and domination, but they found their own way of engaging and responding to the friendships, ministry and influence they presented them. The Camaroffs observe

4 Majeke, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, 6.

5 Majeke, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, 33.

6 Majeke, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, 7.

7 C. Northcott, *Livingstone in Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957), 64.

8 Northcott, *Livingstone in Africa*, 64.

that the Africans saw the advantages that came with the missionaries and that motivated them to embrace the gospel, while at the same time they resisted forms of domination and dispossession.⁹

Another important publication on the issue of land in South Africa is the most recent publication by Thembeke Ngcukaithobi, *The Land is Ours*.¹⁰ Ngcukaithobi dedicates a whole chapter on how the land was taken from black people.¹¹ He does not allude to the loss of land by black people to the missionaries. Instead, he highlights the contribution of the mission churches to the conscientisation of the African peoples, through the rise of the Ethiopianism movement based on Psalm 68 verse 31 (Ps 68:31).¹²

All this demonstrates that the role played by the missionaries during the colonial era was not homogeneous. On the one hand there were those who collaborated with the colonialists and assisted in their projects. However, there were missionaries who had a profound influence on the resistance against brutal laws of the colonial governments against the Africans. Tony Balcomb notes: “That they (missionaries) associated Christian redemption with political freedom is equally clear.”¹³

With the recent change of attitudes towards land ownership, has come a renewed interest in questions around the role of the church in land ownership, dispossession and redistribution. All churches have been calling for the redistribution of land for the benefit of previously marginalised people, but not all of them have been open about the role they played during the period of dispossession—especially how they colluded with the colonial government. Even the few that have spoken about their role, like the Uniting Reformed Church, have not shared stories about the role of their missionaries in the dispossession or resistance against land dispossession. They simply confessed to the sin of complicity so as to move on and not open the wounds or guilt of the past.¹⁴ This shift has also meant that the stories of missionaries who did not collude with the colonial government remain obscured and untold.

The purpose of this study is to discover the role played by progressive missionaries to facilitate landownership by Africans in the context of dispossession. This exploration

9 J. J. Camaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6.

10 T. Ngcukaithobi, *The Land is Ours: South Africa's First Black Lawyers and the Birth of Constitutionalism* (Cape Town: Penguin Books 2018a), 28.

11 T. Ngcukaithobi, “Land Expropriation without compensation. ‘The Land is ours: An Extract from Tembeka Ngcukaithobi’s new Book, March 15, 2018. <https://mg.co.za/tag/land-expropriation-without-compensation/page/9/>, *Mail and Guardian*, 2018b.

12 Ngcukaithobi. *The Land is Ours*, 28.

13 T. Balcomb, “From Apartheid to the New Dispensation: Evangelicals and the democratization of South Africa.” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34 (6) (2003): 5.

14 F. Chikane and A. Lou ed. *The Road to Rustenburg. The Church Looking Forward to a New South Africa* (Cape Town: Struik Christian Books 1991), 2.

will use the stories of John Philip, James Allison, William Wilcox and John Dube, and their models of land ownership for the African people.

Methodology

The study explored archives, papers, minutes and books about the interaction of the missionaries with the African people during the colonial era, especially regarding the issues of land.¹⁵ These materials have many stories about the interaction between the missionaries and the indigenous people of Africa. Stories reveal our experiences and our aspirations as a people; and so they are important for this paper.

The Structure of the Article

The researcher acknowledges the complexity of Christianity's relationship with the land. It is for that reason that the study developed a typology of four responses by different missionaries to the land problem in South Africa during the colonial era. Each response is illustrated by a case study of a missionary leader and his response to the land question. With each case study, the study presents an assessment of each type of missionary's contribution to the land question, based on four aspects:

- 1) Relationship with the African people and the extent to which his approach to the gospel had their interest at heart.
- 2) Position towards the laws that dispossessed the African people.
- 3) Role in creating strategies that subverted the laws of dispossession.
- 4) Extent to which he facilitated landownership by the African people.

Typology of Four Responses

In Case Study 1, the study presents the response of those who resisted the dispossession of the Africans of their land by the Cape government and the Dutch through invasion, removals and the patrol system. These missionaries mediated between the government and the indigenous people (Africans and Khoikhoi) and petitioned the government through courts in order to protect the rights of the people to their land, cattle and freedoms. I call these the *petitionists* and in this discussion they are represented by Dr John Philip of the London Missionary Society (LMS).

In Case Study 2, we analyse the response by those who sought to develop an alternative community from both the government and the traditional leadership system, which facilitated shared land ownership by the mission station and the African converts. James Allison of the Methodist Church represents these. They stood between the government

15 The Killie Campbell Library, University of KwaZulu-Natal, has archives on the life and work of J. L. Dube, William Wilcox and many more others. I consulted this depository during the writing of this paper.

and the people to get land grants and between the church and the people to facilitate the sharing and distribution of land. I call them the *collaborationists*.

In Case Study 3, the study looks at the response by those who resisted the colonial government by mobilising resources and strategies of buying land on behalf of the African people, so that they could get full ownership of the land. Their representative in this discussion is William C. Wilcox of the American Board Mission. I call them the *progressives*.

In Case Study 4, we discuss the response by those who confronted the government by forming organisations that would resist the dispossession of the land directly by working with the African people together with their traditional leaders to hang onto their land, buy back land that was already lost and fight for their civil rights and complete freedom. John Langalibalele Dube, of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM), Founder and Principal of Ohlange Institute and first president of the African National Congress (ANC), represents these. They are the *liberationists*.

These leaders were chosen because: their interventions shaped the responses of the church to the issues of land ownership in South Africa; all of them were ordained Christian leaders, but they represent different modes of response to the land issue; and these Christian leaders represent wider groupings within South African mainline Christianity.

Case Study 1. Dr John Philip: Petitionists

The London Missionary Society (LMS) was the first to send missionaries to work in South Africa. Its first group of missionaries arrived in 1799. It is also associated with the most radical missionaries, known for their dissent and non-conformist attitudes. Amongst these missionaries was the Rev. Dr John Philip, who arrived in South Africa in 1819 to take up the post of Director or Superintendent of the LMS. Ironically, very little is written or known about Philip, who happens to be one of the most radical and important figures in the development of race, politics and church in colonial South Africa. There are only two books about him, namely *John Philip 1775–1851: Mission, Race and Politics in South Africa* (Ross 1986); and most recently, *Dr Philip's Empire: One Man's Struggle for Justice in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (Keegan 2016).

Dr John Philip was born in April 1775 in Kirkcaldy Scotland. He was the son of weavers who were moderate Christians; non-conformist liberals who believed in the equality and freedom of all human beings influenced him. After school, he worked as a weaver and rose to management positions. However, after three years he went to Hoxton to train as a minister of the Congregational Church. Soon after completing his studies, he received a call to be an assistant minister of a congregation at Newbury in Berkshire. In 1804, he received a call from the First Congregational Church in Aberdeen, which was one of the most influential churches of the Congregational Union of Scotland.

It was while in this congregation that he grew in stature as one of the most influential evangelical preachers in Scotland. His congregation and those who admired him as a preacher made applications for him to be awarded honorary degrees by Princeton (New Jersey) and Glasgow Universities (Scotland). These requests were accepted and he was awarded the honorary doctorates. Soon after that came a request from the LMS for him to take the post of Director of LMS in South Africa. After much consideration, he arrived in SA in 1819 to take up this post at a time when the LMS's work was at its lowest point, needing leadership and coordination. Like most dissenters, he was opposed to church hierarchies and rigid institutions but committed to a simple church system that evangelised people to personal faith in God.¹⁶ He embraced the values of "liberty and equality."¹⁷

He became a champion for the rights of the African peoples and mediator between the colonial government and the indigenous people of South Africa, the Khoikhoi, Xhosas and others. It was because of his constant opposition to the Cape government and petitioning to the British government, that he became an enemy—not only of those in government but also of the white establishment in the country, both British and Dutch who did not approve of him representing the Africans.

Although, like most Europeans, his point of view was framed by belief in the supremacy of the British Empire, for him, "education, evangelical Christianity and freedom from feudal restraints created prosperity."¹⁸ However, he also believed in the liberty and equality of humanity, including black people and Hottentots. For him, black people were as good as the colonialists or even better than some of them; what they needed was a change of culture through education and civilisation.¹⁹ Sometimes he believed that "the Hottentots were even of superior capacities than some of the colonists."²⁰ It was for this reason that he called upon the British government to grant equal civil rights to the Khoikhoi people and all people of colour. For him, the responsibility of the British Empire to the indigenous people was education and civilisation, which would enable them to reach their fullest potential.

Dr Philip's attitude towards the government was cordial yet critical. In typical non-conformist fashion, he was suspicious of the British government's intentions, especially the way they dealt with the Khoikhoi and Xhosa people. He believed that the government must protect the Africans from ill treatment by the Dutch, while asserting its paternalistic tolerance of colonising them. He was always prepared to offer advice to

16 A. Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851: Mission, Race and Politics in South Africa* (Scotland: Aberdeen University Press 1986), 97.

17 T. Keegan, *Dr Philip's Empire: One Man's Struggle for Justice in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2016), 1.

18 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 66.

19 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 66.

20 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 95.

the government on how to deal with the African people. He commented: “The British government always seeks advice from me.”²¹

He protested vigorously when Lord Somerset gave land to the Dutch, which he had taken from the Khoikhoi. He protested the ill-treatment of the Khoikhoi to the point of laying charges with the British Parliament.²² His opponents like Rev. Robert Moffatt criticised him for being “political.”²³

Leaning on the support he received from both the LMS Directors in London and the Anti-Slavery Society, he campaigned for the civil rights and liberties of the Khoikhoi people to be observed and respected.²⁴ He believed the mission station must provide protection for land from the government, which might give it to the wrong people at the expense of the indigenous people.²⁵ Like Van der Kemp, he “was opposed to the master-servant system,” of the relationship between the whites and the Khoisan.²⁶ He “clearly articulated the moral equality of all people, a principle which was enshrined in Ordinance 50 of 1828.”²⁷ Thus, he set the tone for the role of missionaries who were to come to South Africa. For him it was the role of the missionary to protect the civil rights and liberties of the African people, “halt the forces of dispossession that (albeit under British protection) could still belong to Africans, eventually owned by Africans for their own benefit.”²⁸

For his campaign against the mistreatment of the indigenous people, Philip earned the title “Protestant Pope of South Africa” by other missionary institutions and colleagues.²⁹ He was also dubbed the “Defender of the Khoi.”³⁰ Other missionary societies from different denominations came to him for advice and guidance on how to approach their mission work in the country. This was because of the cases he had in his defence of the rights of the indigenous people against the Dutch Cape Government and other colonists.³¹

21 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 66.

22 Majeke, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, 15.

23 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*.

24 Keegan, *Dr Philip’s Empire*, 275.

25 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 107.

26 Elphick, R. and H. Giliomee. *The Shaping of South African Society 1652–1840*, 341 (CapeTown: Maskew Miller Longman), 1989.

27 Elphick and Giliomee. *The Shaping of South African Society 1652–1840*, 554.

28 Keegan, *Dr Philip’s Empire*, 3.

29 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 111.

30 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 111.

31 He also lost some cases against antagonistic whites like the case of McKay who sued him for what he had written in his book *The White population* (112). This book was seen as “an anti-white diatribe” leading to the Governor refusing him audiences (Ross *John Philip 1775–1851*), 112.

The Xhosa and Khoisan people lived “in constant fear of losing their land and ultimately their livelihoods as a result of the patrol system which invaded their land and took people’s cattle from them continuously.”³² Philip was opposed to this system and protested legally about it. He also protested the driving away of King Maqoma from his people and land. As a result, Xhosa chiefs such as Maqoma, Bhotomane and Tyali looked upon Philip as an ally to help them deal with the antagonistic government and white people in general.³³ During the time of the Great Trek, Philip worked hard in persuading the Trekkers not to undermine the civil rights of the indigenous people along the way and went on to ask the Cape Government to ensure that the Trekkers do not attack the people in the process of their journey. He said that he was afraid that the Great Trek would become “a Bondage in Egypt rather than a promised land for the African people.”³⁴

Throughout his missionary career, John Philip had hoped, prayed and worked for the Cape to have an elected legislature that included people of colour. This dream was fulfilled in 1853, two years after his death. So, notwithstanding his failures, weaknesses and prejudices in other areas of life and work, John Philip will go down in history as a “Defender of the African people, Pope of the Protestant Church. ... Most ardent Champion of the Khoisan” and a campaigner of the rights of indigenous people against imperialism and land dispossession.³⁵

Case Study 2, James Allison: Collaborationist

James Allison arrived in South Africa with the 1820 settlers as an 18-year-old young man.³⁶ He holds the record of having founded five mission stations in three different countries. These were Mpharane (Lesotho), Mahamba (Swaziland), Indaleni, Edendale and Mpolweni (South Africa). In all the mission stations that he founded he had to deal with issues of land to the advantage of the African people. In 1827, he married Dorothy Thackwrays. In 1832, he joined the Methodist missionaries who went to Thaba Nchu to minister amongst the Barolong. He was assigned to start mission work at Lishuani and in uMpharani, where he worked as a prospective candidate for the ministry under Rev. John Edwards.³⁷ He was ordained in 1842 while in Thaba Nchu where the mission station had been allocated land by Chief Moroka. Here they built a church and some residential houses. The Sotho-Tswana and some Zulu refugees who were converts of Methodism moved into the station to build their homes and they would get sites for this purpose. When outside the mission station, people lived under the leadership of the chief

32 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 124.

33 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 133.

34 Ross, *John Philip 1775–1851*, 159.

35 Elphick and Giliomee. *The Shaping of South African Society 1652–1840*, 40.

36 G. Mears, *The Rev. James Allison: Missionary* (Methodist Church of Southern Africa: Durban, 1967), 1.

37 Mears, *The Rev. James Allison*, 4.

who owned and controlled the land, but once they moved to the mission station the mission station owned the land and shared it with the people.

In 1844, Allison was sent by the Methodist Church to Swaziland to start mission work there. The Methodists were the first to arrive in that country in response to a call by King Sobhuza I.³⁸ When he arrived, he was given land at kaDlovunga, which is modern day Mahamba, where he started building a mission station. Here again the arrangement was that land was made available to converts, so they moved to the mission station and were given land and had to give their loyalty to the minister. Therefore, people had an alternative whether to belong to the traditional system under the king, or to the mission station.

In 1847, the church had grown and the mission station was flourishing. However, there was conflict between the king and some princes. This led to the attack of the rebels who ran to the mission station in search of refuge. The warriors invaded the mission station and burned it down. On 17 September 1846, Allison took his converts totalling “not less than one thousand women and children and old men left Swaziland for Natal.”³⁹ In September 1847 he arrived in Indaleni, next to the Lovu River, and settled amongst the Amakhuze people. He bought the land with money raised from amongst the converts and out of his own pocket. He also sold his own house in Grahamstown in order to build a mission house in Indaleni, where he would stay.⁴⁰ Therefore, the mission station in this case opened opportunities to people who would otherwise have had no right to own land.

The leadership of the Methodist Church resolved to move him to another station as per the discipline of the church that ministers are itinerant. Allison refused to go and then decided to secede from the Methodist Church. It was for that reason that in 1850 he led a group of 450 people to Pietermaritzburg to start a new mission station. On 19 November 1851 he bought a farm known as Welverdiend, which was owned by the Voortrekker leader Andries Pretorius, with a grant from Sir George Gray, for a sum of P1, 300.⁴¹ Rev. Allison “undertook the sole legal and financial responsibility for the purchase thereof.”⁴² The debt was settled in four annual instalments at an interest rate of 6%. This farm was 6120 hectares big. Ngcukaithobi notes: “The land was sub-divided among the new owners, who comprised groups such as the Griqua, the Barolong, the

38 J. S. Matsebula, *A History of Swaziland* (London: Longman, 1978).

39 Mears, *The Rev. James Allison*, 11.

40 Mears, *The Rev. James Allison*, 12.

41 S. Meintjes, “Edendale 1851–1930. A Case Study of Rural Transformation and Class Formation in an African Mission in Natal.” Unpublished Doctoral thesis, University of London, 1988.

42 Meintjes, “Edendale 1851–1930,” 108.

Basotho, the Batlokwa, the Hlubi and the Swazi.”⁴³ “Allison planned to sell to “selected native purchasers [who] surveyed lots to which title would be given.”⁴⁴

In 1861, Allison’s relationship with the Methodist Church and the converts at Edendale had become untenable and he reached an agreement with the residents of the mission station that they part amicably; he left to join the Church of Scotland and went to establish the Mpolweni Mission. Even here he got land and settled people. Therefore, Allison is an example of a person who collaborated with the government to settle people in land with limited or shared ownership between the church and the people. At the same time, he collaborated with the people to meet their aspirations of freedom, dignity and land ownership.

Case Study 3, William Wilcox: Progressive

William Cullinan Wilcox, also referred to as *Mbuyabathwa* (prickly plant) by his Zulu admirers, was born in California in the United States in 1850.⁴⁵ He became a missionary of the American Board Mission, arrived in South Africa in 1881 with wife Idah Bella Wilcox, and they were placed at Adams College in Amanzimtoti.⁴⁶ Then they moved to Mozambique to start mission work in Inhambane. In the Escort area, he facilitated land ownership amongst the Zulu people through the Zulu Industrial Improvement Company (ZIIC), a company formed in order to facilitate economic improvement for the African people, including buying land on their behalf. He mobilised the people to contribute cattle to buy land. He bought two farms from white owners. These he turned into settlements named Cornfields (because they planted corn) and Thembalihle (place of hope). Then he subdivided the land according to the families that had contributed to the funds. These two communities were amongst the first where black people owned land directly, not through the church or traditional leader. Even today, this community still owns their land.

In my opinion, the only way to encourage people to industry and self-dependence. ... Therefore when a number of Natives came to me with their hard-earned savings and begged me to help them secure places for them, which they would call their own, I consented. Why not? As I heard Sir Richard More say, why, should the Natives not be free to buy land where they want to in the land of their birth ...?⁴⁷

Wilcox and his wife’s ministry undertook a prophetic and deliberative approach of shaking the roots and subjugation of the African people. Wilcox’s approach included mediating between the whites and ordinary African people, leading campaigns for the

43 Ngcukaithobi. *The Land is Ours*, 116.

44 Mears, *The Rev. James Allison*, 13.

45 C. Keita, *Rebel Missionary in South Africa. A Documentary Story*. December 2009.

46 H. Hughes, *First President. A Life and Legacy of John L. Dube the Founding President of the ANC* (Johannesburg: Jacana Press, 2011), 37.

47 Wilcox, W. *The Native Land. Ilanga lase Natali*, March 17, 1917, 6.

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rights of people and mobilising them to collect money and cattle to buy land from white people.

He opposed the 1913 Land Act by saying that:

Is it proposed to give them better land where they can do more for themselves and thus be less dependent on the charity of missionaries and colonists? No! I venture to say without fear of contradiction, if such had been the thought this unjust law would never have been heard of.⁴⁸

His efforts to represent the African people in Natal against the oppressive laws of the colonial government and the church left a significant mark throughout the province. He also collaborated with J. L. Dube and Pixley Seme in their attempts to help black people to purchase land. In the ABCFM, he became a voice of conscience against the church's tendency to buy land and charge money to tenants without having involved the people in discussion about this. He called this "taxation without representation." He held that black people had the capacity to live on their own, run their governments and build their institutions. For Wilcox, the gospel had to relate to political issues that affected people on a daily basis and the ministry of the church was to change reality for the better. Most of the people in Cornfield and Thembalihle remember with pride and satisfaction the work done by Mbuyabathwa (the prickly plant) who helped their forbears to own land, which even today still belong to them, Most of these beneficiaries did not necessarily become rich with land but they look back with pride that they have owned land for generations now because of Rev. Wilcox's representation.

Wilcox will go down in history as one of the missionaries who had a very positive and affirming view of Africa and its people. For him, Africa was not a dark continent, occupied by ignorant and barbaric inferior beings, which needed a dose of European civilisation and Christianity to gain some degree of humanness. However, they needed Christianity and freedom, to be left alone to run their affairs without the interference of the Europeans.⁴⁹ Finally, Rev. Wilcox left South Africa in 1919, bowing down to the pressure of the opponents of his radical mission work, which took the side of the poor and oppressed.

Case Study 4. John Langalibalele Dube: Liberationist

John Langalibalele Dube (also known as *uMafukuzela onjengezulu*, meaning one who toils without end like rain that does not stop), was born in 1871 of the Ngcobo people, *amaQadi*. His father was the Rev. James Dube Ngcobo, the third Zulu ordained by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), and his mother

48 Quoted from R., Simangaliso Kumalo, *Pastor and Politician: Essays on the Life and Legacy of J. L. Dube, the First President of the African National Congress* (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications 2012).

49 Hughes, *First President*, 38.

was Elizabeth (uMashangase).⁵⁰ He was also a prince from the House of Chiefs of the *AmaQadi* people of uMzinyathi. He grew up at Inanda Mission Reserve *Emakholweni*. The Rev. William Wilcox adopted him. He was educated at Adams College, Oberlin and Missionary Theology School in Brooklyn, New York. The decision to include John Langalibalele Dube in this essay may be questioned because he was not a missionary but a black South African. John Dube was an ordained minister of the ABCFM who lived and worked as a pastor during the missionary era. Most importantly, he worked with Chief Mqhawe and other chiefs to purchase land on which to settle families from Inanda so that they could own land.⁵¹

In 1894, Dube and his wife, Nokuthela, moved to Incwadi to start a mission station there and they built two schools, Incwadi Primary and Ijubane Primary. They also founded the Incwadi Congregational Church. In 1900, after spending three years in America, he founded the Ohlange Institution and *Ilanga LaseNatal*, which was the first Zulu newspaper. In 1912, he became the co-founder of the South African Native Congress (SANCO), which later became the African National Congress (ANC), and was its first president.⁵² Dube fought both the missionaries and government for dispossessing the African people of their land. He believed that the responsibility of the church was to empower people to own and use their land profitably and not dispossessing them.⁵³ He engaged himself in the work of acquiring land rights for black people, working closely with William Wilcox (his mentor) and Pixley la Isaka Seme. This work brought Dube to the issues of land. Cherif Keita notes that Dube's work was informed by "the teachings of the American Board and mission school education in Inanda and Adams."⁵⁴ Heather Hughes has posited that the non-conformist tradition of the American Board was responsible for Dube's work and commitment to the liberation of his people.⁵⁵

Dube was not happy with the collaboration between the church and the colonial government on dispossessing Africans of their land. He petitioned the government because he objected to the disadvantaging of the African people by making them tenants and refusing them the right to buy land. He led a delegation to England to appeal to the British government against land dispossession. He was willing to accommodate the Hertzog Segregation Bills as long as they enabled people financially and gave them land to make a living. This led to him being replaced as a leader of the South African Native

50 Hughes, *First President*, 39.

51 Hughes, *First President*, 60.

52 Hughes, *First President*, 4.

53 Hughes, *First President*.

54 C. Keita. <https://twitter.com/africasacountry/status/1228044966523473927>. 2020/02/16

55 Hughes, *First President*, 12.

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National Congress by hardliner Sefako Makgatho.⁵⁶ He also supported the Zulu king as counsellor in his struggle to retain his position and land.⁵⁷ Therefore, he facilitated land ownership by Africans by bringing together the missionary and traditional systems. One of the incorrect allegations against Dube is that he compromised when it came to the land issue. He wrote to the Prime Minister, saying:

For the above reasons your petitioner humbly protests against the summary prohibition of the sale of land to natives and prays that you, Sir, may exercise your power as a Minister of Native Affairs to bring about an amendment to the effect that there may be no prohibition of the sale of land to natives till after the report of the commission has been accepted by Parliament and the natives adequately provided with land.⁵⁸

After having used the Ohlange Industrial School to train Africans to use modern methods of farming, and observing how those who lived in the Inanda mission stations were getting involved in agriculture, he wrote:

The converted native will be taught to build a better house than the hut in which he now lives and to make the most of the land by the intelligent use of modern machinery and up-to-date methods of farming.⁵⁹

It is also noteworthy that Dube's work included giving counsel to the kings of the Zulu people, who at the time were very concerned with the loss of their land and authority over their people. In his quest to live out his faith, Dube challenged not only the government to protect the people's rights over their land, but he also challenged the missionaries for charging black people rent for settling on their farms. He was opposed to that and saw it as a displacement of the people from their ancestral land. He protested:

What I have seen in Inanda is worse than anything I have seen in Natal. People who could not pay rent at a given time were taken to court and fined P2.10.0, and if they did not find the money they were compelled to be put in prison, and after they came out they would still have to pay the P3.⁶⁰

56 The Hertzog Bills were three bills, aimed at settling the issues concerning black people at the time, known as Natives. They included issues around their right to own land. His contemporaries in the ANC blamed Dube of being sympathetic to the Hertzog Bills. See J. Haines, "The Opposition to General J.B.M. Hertzog's Segregation Bill's, 1925-1936: A Study in Extra-parliamentary Protest." Unpublished Master of Arts thesis, University of Natal, 1978, 13.

57 Hughes, *First President*, 101.

58 J. L. Dube, "Petition to the Prime Minister Louis Botha on the Native Land Act." *Cape Argus* February 14, 1914. ⁵⁸

59 Dube, *The Native Viewpoint*. Address by the Rev. JLDube, presented at the Missionary Conference in 1926 at Durban City Hall, 2.

60 Hughes, *First President*, 122.

Dube was able to convince kings and chiefs to fight for their land instead of making them tenants in the country of their birth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we look at the key points that have emerged from this analysis. Despite the fact that the missionaries were of European descent, shared the same commitment of spreading the gospel to the African people, and generally agreed on the importance of the gospel for the Christianisation and civilisation of the African people, their responses to the issues of land differed completely. As a result, even today the contemporary church differs on their attitudes towards the land that is owned, how they acquired it, and what they must do with it.

First, we have also seen that some missionaries put up a formidable fight on behalf of the African people, calling for them to be given the right to own land. These are missionaries such as Dr John Philip. We have called them *petitionists* because of their commitment to challenging the government through petitions and other legal means. A second group of missionaries, represented by James Allison, are those who resorted to standing between the people and government in order to enable the Africans to get something good out of a bad situation. Therefore, they would buy land for the mission station so that they could enable Africans to own a piece of land for them to build their homes and places for the children. We have observed that this land was co-owned between the minister and the people. At best this system preserved land for present and future generations by keeping it under the trusteeship of the church instead of giving full ownership to individuals. We have called them *collaborationists*. Thirdly, we have been introduced to a group of missionaries who adopted a progressive approach, represented by William Wilcox, and enabled black people to buy and own land. We have seen that there are communities such as Cornfields and Thembalihle, which are critical examples of land bought from white people to promote black ownership. We have called these the *progressives*. The last group of missionaries are the ones who are termed as the liberal radicals, who called for the full liberation of the African people, including their acquiring the rights to own land. These are people like John Langalibalele Dube. We called these the *liberationists*.

It has been argued in this paper that the land issue and the issues around expropriation and compensation are very complex. It is a fact that the missionaries did not just embark on a process of stealing land. Churches acquired land through two methods. The kings, chiefs and rulers gave land to the churches. The understanding was that the land would be used for public benefit, by the building of institutions such as churches, schools and hospitals. Most of such land remains in the hands of the church—even today. The church is not expected to sell land it did not buy but was just given to promote community development. Then there is land that the church bought with its own resources and then distributed according to families who participated in the scheme as converts of the mission station. For this category of land, the church needs to ensure that it is used for the expansion of the mission projects. It is encouraging that there are churches that are

willing to return land to the people. For instance, the Dutch Reformed churches have embarked on a strategy of returning the land to the people. A case in hand is the work the church is doing in Dundee in KwaZulu-Natal, of returning land to the surrounding communities and helping them with training so that they can work the land. However, this process needs to be transparent, with all stakeholders involved to ensure sustainability.

In conclusion, we can say with confidence that the role of the missionaries during the colonial and dispossession period is very complex and ambivalent, yet important. Some missionaries, such as James Allison, Daniel Msimang and William Wilcox, were convinced that they wanted to do work that would “be good for Africa.”⁶¹ A fair assessment of their role in the mission field presents another side of the story from the one of dispossession, which is the dominant narrative, upheld by Nosipho Majeke and others. The article has shared the struggles waged by some mission churches to protect the land of the African people. It has proven that, indeed, there is another side of the story of land dispossession, an alternative narrative that has not been told. These are stories of some missionaries who, although limited by knowledge and means at their disposal, tried to take the side of the African people who were resisting land dispossession.

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