

Mpofu, Jack Mahlatini (1887–1972)

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Early missionaries left us countless records about their service in Africa in the form of diaries, memoirs, logbooks, autobiographies, published articles, and books where their life-changing activities are documented. However, their African accomplices are often not mentioned by name. The aim of this biographical article is to shed more knowledge about the sacrificial and inspirational contributions of Jack Mahlatini Mpofu, one of the African teachers and pioneer missionaries of Rusangu Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia. Mpofu served as a Seventh-day Adventist pioneer, teacher, and pastor in both Southern and Northern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe and Zambia) respectively.

Early Life

According to family oral tradition stored up in the memory custody of Jack Mahlathin Mpofu's children, of whom the sixth born, Joel, and the seventh born, Norah, are the only surviving ones and live in Zimbabwe, have served to guide us back in time to "Who," "Where," "What," "When," "How," and "Why" of Jack Mpofu.¹ Personal information details written on Jack's passport show that Jack Mpofu was born in August 1887 in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe. Mabhunu Mpofu, Jack's father, is said to have informed the missionaries at Solusi Mission (about 51km west of Bulawayo) that he was going away to join the Ndebele war of resistance of 1893 to 1894 against colonization by Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company. Mabhunu Mpofu was never seen again by his son Jack who ended up being adopted by the missionaries at Solusi.² Joel and Norah concur that Jack's memory of his father was dim and that all he got to know about him was some bits of information he was given by some pioneer missionaries at Solusi Mission who received him at boyhood.³ It is said that Mabhunu walked the long way with his son, Jack, from their village home that used to be along the western boundary of Zimbabwe and Botswana in Tsholotsho District to get to Solusi Mission. Upon reaching Solusi Mabhunu spoke to the missionaries and freely offered Jack to them for both security and upbringing as part of their community.

Education at Solusi Mission and Pioneering Rusangu Mission

At Solusi Mission, the missionaries enrolled Jack into their school in which he learned to read, write, and got baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He also learned evangelism, teaching, basic skills in land husbandry, cropping, livestock rearing, building, carpentry, and metalwork. After completing Standard Three, he

was trained as a teacher.

It was in 1905 that the Pastor William Harrison Anderson, one of the founders of Solusi Mission in 1895, led a team of indigenous pioneers that he had assembled at Solusi Mission in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) to travel to Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) to establish Rusangu Mission on an area of land under Chief Monze Nchete. In the team of these pioneers were Pastor Anderson's wife, Norah Haysmer-Anderson, his daughter Naomi, his mother, and the Ndebele converts who included Jacob Detcha Sibanda, Philip Malomo Luphahla, Andrew Nyakana Mbuyisa, Jack Mahlathini Mpofu, Alvin Mulema Tshabangu, Elma Maduma Nkomo, and Albert Madambi Ndlovu. They used an ox-drawn wagon to carry their goods from Solusi Mission to the Bulawayo railway station. While the oxen were outspanned and driven back to Solusi Mission, the wagon was dismantled and its parts were loaded onto a railway carriage wagon together with the bulk of their cargo.

At that time the railway line from Bulawayo went as far north to Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River. Consequently, the group had to use a boat to carry all their goods across the Zambezi River. Upon crossing the great river, they assembled the parts of their ox-drawn wagon, bought some oxen from a local farmer, trained them with the yokes and leather ropes, and started off on Sunday evening on the long trek to the present site of Rusangu Mission. They rested and grazed the oxen during the day, maintained the wagon, and traveled in the night. Jack, who told his children that he was the youngest of the Ndebele men from Solusi Mission, had to endure the unenviable task of leading the span of sixteen oxen that pulled the wagon behind him as he held a lantern and a staff.⁴

Anderson wrote (1919):

There were no roads north of the Zambezi River at this time, only a crooked, winding, twisty native footpath through the tall grass and the woods. This we followed, dodging the trees if we could, cutting down those that blocked our path, and getting along the best way possible. The rivers had no bridges, the banks were steep, and while it was easy enough to slide down the bank into the river, it was often difficult to pull out on the other side.⁵

Anderson (1919) emphasizes on the ever-present threat from dangerous wild animals:

All that part of the country is infested with ravenous beasts - lions, leopards, hyenas, and wild dogs. One of our party was detailed each night to keep the fires blazing around the camp. When we were in the open prairie where we could get no wood, it was his work to look after the circle of lanterns placed about the camp for protection.⁶

The following Sabbath they rested at Kalomo. The next Sabbath they rested at Mbabala just north of Choma town. On the third Sabbath, which fell on July 1, 1905, they rested at the Tinti site, their destination-Rusangu Mission Farm. They gave thanks and praises to God. The farm beacon built of cement, sand, stones, and pieces of steel and a monument engraved with the group leaders' names was made and still stands to this day.

Jack Mpofu's surviving children, recall that their father told them that the long trip from Solusi Mission to Rusangu Mission, complete with all its disappointments and obstacles, always reminded the enthusiastic pioneers of the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan.⁷ Upon reaching the Rusangu Mission site and setting up their camp settlement, the pioneers were led by Anderson to make a courtesy visit to Chief Monze Nchete at his palace, and Anderson offered him gifts of friendship and goodwill. It took the pioneers individual effort and inner motivation to catch up with speaking the local Tonga language; after they enjoyed Ndebele-Tonga interpretation assistance from one of their number, the older and versatile Jacob Detcha who had earlier on in his life learned ciTonga language from former fellow mine workers. The seven African young men became the first Black missionaries in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia. Their descendants are partly the reason for the presence of Ndebele-speaking Zambians within the SDA Church congregations spreading in four provinces (Southern, Lusaka, Central, and Copperbelt) from Livingstone up to the copper mines.

With his Standard III education and training in evangelism, Jack Mpofu, alongside Detcha and Malomo, assisted Anderson in teaching, as pointed out by Snelson, "Zulu reading and writing and some elementary arithmetic. The Zulu Bible was the main textbook."⁸

Pupils did hands-on lessons on the preparation of farmland, training of oxen for draught power, using the plough and seed planter, application of organic manure collected from livestock enclosures, crop rotation, weeding, harvesting, shelling of maize, and groundnuts. Other practical lessons included brick molding and baking bricks in the kiln, building of granaries and rectangular houses, basic carpentry, driven thatch art, tailoring, driving of wagons and farm carts, cycling, maintenance of farm tools and simple machinery, and elementary first aid. The Ndebele evangelist-teachers who came with Anderson from Solusi Mission were sent out to nearby villages to recruit pupils, establish out schools, and take charge of them as teachers-cum-evangelists. Snelson elaborates on the involvement of African converts in taking Adventist education to the Tonga people as he writes: "Pastor Jack Mpofu, who accompanied Anderson as a wagon-boy in 1905 and was still active in the church in 1968, has recalled that his wages that year were: 'two shirts, two pairs of shorts, and all the food I could eat.'"⁹

African preachers and teachers were subjected to earning less than their European and American missionary colleagues because of discriminatory wage structures that were instituted by colonial authorities. Some church authorities acquiesced to this apparent economic inequality not wishing to oppose head-on the spreading of apartheid racism into their organizations. Jack Mpofu was among many gospel workers who received payment of their wages "in kind." After all, as Kanondo postulates: "... salaries in government schools were slightly higher than in mission schools, the latter experienced many problems of teacher resignation in search of green pastures."¹⁰ But Jack Mpofu, owing to his religious conviction, stuck through it all up to the very end.

The evident participation of African converts in preaching the gospel and literacy among their own communities is best appreciated by Anderson (1919):

Thus, ... out-schools become “feeders” for the home station, and much of the primary work is thrown back upon the natives themselves. It was said that (the White missionary) would rather set twenty men to work than attempt to do the twenty men’s work. So in the mission field, “the measure of the success of the missionary is his ability to multiply himself in native teachers and evangelists. We were now beginning to use our natives in helping us to carry the gospel to their own people, and their faithful labours were crowned with success.”¹¹

Family Life and Missionary Service

In 1917 Jack Mpofu got married to Judith Kunene who was working as a maid for Stokely, the missionary at Lower Gwelo Mission. Judith was born in 1893 and had originally come from Ladysmith in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Jack and Judith Mpofu were blessed with nine children who were born at different mission stations where they served in the southern region of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). The names of Jack Mpofu’s children are as follows: Fraser, Keziya, Ruth, Albert, Micah, Joel, Norah, Coster, and Nehemiah. At the time of writing this article, only Joel and Norah were still alive.

Mpofu’s long and illustrious career stretched into fifty years of service, of which the first twenty-five years were invested in teaching (1905-1938), starting at Mujika School (1918-1921); Kantengwa School (1924-1929); Kaumba School (1930-1933); Mbeza School (1934 to 1935); and Rusangu School (1936-1938). The next twenty-five years (1938-1963) were spent in pastoral service, starting from Kazungula District where he was ordained to the gospel ministry in 1938 and remained there until 1940. Then he was posted to Bweengwa in 1941 to 1942. In 1943 he was sent to Solusi Mission, possibly for further training. In 1947 Pastor A. V. Edwards met Pastor Mpofu at Luyaba campmeeting in the northwest of Monze, where, although by that time he was already on sustentation (in retirement), he was still active in working for others.¹² During this period, he was situated in Chitongo area in Namwala District, from where he finally stopped active service in 1963. Then Pastor Mpofu shifted from Chitongo to Mutandaalike in Choma District where he opened a Mutandaalike SDA congregation.

Contribution and Legacy

African participants, like Jack Mpofu, carried out the daunting tasks of providing missionary work to save the “lost sheep of Africa.” Mpofu’s service was characterized by tenderness as an Adventist educator and pastor and lasted fifty years. Pastor Mpofu fell sick and later died at Choma General Hospital in April 1972, and was buried at Rusangu Mission cemetery. Pastor E. H. B. Siamaundu, the Zambia Mission Field president at the time, preached the funeral sermon.¹³ Pastor Mpofu was survived by his wife, Judith, who died six years later in August 1978 at Macha Hospital north of Choma town. Both were 85 years of age at their time of death respectively.

On October 29, 2022, Rusangu University Church celebrated the Adventist Heritage Day at which the life of Pastor Jack Mahlatini Mpofu was commemorated. From their home in Gweru, Zimbabwe, Jack and Judith Mpofu's surviving children expressed their profound gratitude to the Rusangu University Church for keeping alive the memory of their beloved father who was among the pioneers of Rusangu Mission.¹⁴

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Joel and Norah, Jack Mpofu's surviving children, audio-taped interview by the author. Lower Gweru SDA Mission, Zimbabwe, October 28, 2022.
2. Irwin Victor Mpofu, Jack Mpofu's grandson, written interview and emailed to the author on October 28, 2022, Choma, Zambia.
3. Joel and Norah, Jack Mpofu's surviving children, audio-taped interview by the author. Lower Gweru SDA Mission, Zimbabwe, October 28, 2022.
4. See also W. Boyce Vail, "The Gospel Advance in the Zambesi Union," *The Church's Officers' Gazette for 1947*, September, 1947, 5.
5. W. H. Anderson, *On the Trail of Livingstone* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1919), 192.
6. Ibid., 194.
7. Joel and Norah, Jack Mpofu's surviving children, audio-taped interview by the author. Lower Gweru SDA Mission, Zimbabwe, October 28, 2022.
8. P. Snelson, *Educational Development in Northern Rhodesia 1883-1945* (Lusaka: Kenneth Kaunda Foundation, 1990), 95.
9. Ibid.
10. V. M. Kanondo, *The Story of Rusangu Mission 1903-2005: A Brief Review* (Monze, 2005), 22.
11. Anderson, *On the Trail of Livingstone*, 144-145. p.144-145.

12. A. V. Edwards, "Camp-meetings in the Rhodesias," *Southern African Division Outlook*, November 1, 1947, 1.

13. Irwin Victor Mpofu, written interview and emailed to the author on March 11, 2023, Choma, Zambia.

14. Joel and Norah, Jack Mpofu's surviving children, audio-taped interview by the author. Lower Gweru SDA Mission, Zimbabwe, October 28, 2022.

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