

João Nlemvo

João Mantantu Dundulu, First New Testament Kikongo translator.

Mantantu Dundulu (1865 - February 1938) best known as Nlemvo, was the first Protestant Christian in the Congo¹, and William H. Bentley's close associate in writing in Kikongo language.

Source: muanadamba.net (translated by **BRI**)



Born in Padwa Angola , Mantantu Dundulu, orphaned since his birth was raised by his uncle Tulante Mbidi and grew up according to the traditions of his society. His uncle was chief of a village called Lemvo, a slaves and ivory trader.

In 1879, King Pedro V of Kongo, accompanied by WH Bentley, a missionary of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), traveled to Lemvo. It was in this village that Bentley, who was learning Kikongo, discovered Mantantu, who spoke the language very well. Bentley found in him an excellent translator and has done so with the blessing of his uncle, who was his collaborator.

Rapidly learnt to read and write, Mantantu followed Bentley on most of his trips. It is thought that the name Nlemvo, which means obedience and also indicates his native village, was given by Bentley.

On April 30, 1882, Nlemvo became Christian. His baptism, however, only occurred until six years later, on February 19, 1888. Thus he became the first person to be baptized at Wathen mission station (now Ngombe-Lutete), located 50 km (30 miles) north of Mbanza Ngungu.

Earlier, Nlemvo helped English missionaries to build a school in the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kongo, San Salvador, and in 1883 he helped to build the BMS mission station at Stanley Pool (now Malebo). Then he worked with Bentley for compiling a "Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language." In this work, he followed Bentley to England in April 1884. During his stay in Europe, Nlemvo was received, with

eight other "Congolese" by King Leopold II of Belgium. As a result of his prolonged absence, his family was worried, thinking he had been sold into slavery.

Then at the end of his translation work, he returned to his village until Bentley was back. Later, he participated in the exploration of the tributaries of the Kasai, in the company of missionaries George Grenfell and Bentley.

After his baptism, in 1888, Nlemvo married Kalombo, a Christian woman originally from Kasongo region in eastern Congo, where missionaries freed, the population of slavery. Nlemvo and Kalombo lived in Kivianga a Christian town created during land granted to BMS mission station in Ngombe-Lutete in 1882. This village is like most newly founded Christian villages, grouped a population ethnically heterogeneous. Before his marriage, Nlemvo had lived there with his three sisters. Nlemvo interethnic and religious marriage was just one example of a profound transformation established by missionaries in Kongo society. Nlemvo had become a "a non-tribalist man" true as evidenced in his refusal to become chief of his village after the death of his uncle in 1887.

Nlemvo helped in translating the New Testament into Kikongo. To help Bentley in this difficult task, he went to England for the second time, between December 1892 and September 1893. So when Bentley, was weakened by illness and work, returned to England permanently, Nlemvo accompanied him to complete the translation of the entire Bible from English to Kikongo. During his third time European stay, he underwent eye surgery aimed to correct a disease that threatens his sight. Unfortunately, the operation ended in failure and Nlemvo returned home in 1905 without having been cured.

Despite his sight problems Nlemvo continued his rich literary career. He assisted in the revision of the Bible in Kikongo, published in 1926, he actively participated in the translation of Bentley's works, books of Proverbs and Psalms, he worked with M. Jennings in translating Stakler's book on the life of St. Paul and the Acts of the Apostles into Kikongo, and he translated, from English to Kikongo, the book entitled "dawn." Finally, Nlemvo wrote an autobiographical sketch entitled "Mpungwilu."

In November 1937, the colonial administration reported to the first Protestant Christian of his intention to honor him with the Gold Medal of the Royal Order of the Lion in recognition of his services to the State. Unfortunately Nlemvo died in February 1938, so the medal was presented posthumously to his son in July 1938.

A specialist in African great literary Mlemvo main contribution was the translation work, the importance of which continues to be appreciated even today.

Sabakinu Kivilu

¹ Readers should be aware that before Africa partition (1884-1885) by Western powers, roughly 80 percent of Africa south of the Sahara Desert was governed by indigenous kings, chiefs, and other rulers.

It is misleading to refer to the ancient African kingdoms in terms of modern African countries, all of which were created by colonial powers after 1885.

(Notes written above are from Bakongo Research Institute - **BRI**)