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In Memoriam: Jonathan Kablan L. Burmeister

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Jonathan Kablan L. Burmeister

The baobab tree has fallen! The baobab tree has fallen! The baobab tree has fallen!

When I was a little boy in an Anyi village in eastern Côte d’Ivoire, this is how the village crier would announce the passing of an Anyi nobleman. It is fitting to announce the passing of Jonathan Burmeister in this way since he was indeed an Anyi nobleman. Jonathan was born on April 13, 1943 in Milwaukee and went to be with his Maker on November 8, 2016 at the age of 73. He became an Anyi nobleman not by birth, nor by marriage, nor by the legal process of naturalization, but simply because he (along with his wife Nancy) loved and became one with the Anyi people. The obituary in the West Chicago newspaper says that Jonathan L. Burmeister:

...grew up in Elkhorn and Marinette, WI, and attended the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. After receiving his M.A. from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, he joined Wycliffe Bible Translators in 1971. After further training in linguistics and in French, he and his wife Nancy began working in the Anyi language of Cote d’Ivoire, West Africa, in November 1973. For the next twenty-five years, Jonathan devoted himself to learning the language, helping to develop a written form of the language, and leading a team of Anyi Christians in translating the New Testament. Along the way, he helped to train a number of Anyi Methodist lay preachers and to assist translation teams in related languages.

Though this summarizes Jonathan’s work among the Anyi people, it does not tell the whole story of how this man, better known as “Kablan”, became a true Anyi nobleman, whose life and work greatly impacted Anyi language and culture, and as well as the lives of so many Ivoirians.

I first met Jonathan Kablan in 1982, when I was just a sophomore at the University of Abidjan. He was the first person I ever knew who studied Anyi and described it linguistically. As an undergraduate in linguistics, I was in awe of his understanding of Anyi phonology, especially Anyi tones. But his knowledge of Anyi encompassed many domains anthropology, history, sociology, etc. When I came to study in the US, we remained in touch and would reconnect each time the Burmeisters would come to the US on furloughs. On my own visits back, Jonathan was excited to have me take part in testing the New Testament in Anyi Sanvi in his village of Assouba. The times that I spent with him and his translation team fueled my passion for the translation of the New Testament into my own dialect, Anyi Morofou.

Kablan was a source of encouragement not just to me, but to many. I joined him in several Wycliffe Associates banquets where he was the keynote speaker. He always talked with boundless enthusiasm about his translation and literacy work among the Anyi Sanvi. Though the political and social crises of the early 2000’s in Côte d’Ivoire forced him and Nancy to relocate to Bamako, and later, Jonathan’s serious illness forced them to relocate to Chicago, Kablan never lost touch with Africa nor the Anyi. Thanks to Skype, he was able to continually provide translation advice

to teams in Côte d’Ivoire and elsewhere. We were delighted to see Kablan and Nancy twice in recent years, once when they came to Saint Cloud, MN for a wedding, and very recently when he and Nancy swung by our place for lunch on their way to Chicago. What a wonderful time my wife Kim and I had with them. He came bearing rare Anyi books. Indeed, Kablan was many things to me: an Anyi linguist with whom I brainstormed, a reviewer and proofreader of my publications on Anyi, and a lender of rare and coveted books...

Following his passing, a fellow colleague, Lynell Marchese Zogbo, who has known Kablan far longer than I, wrote in tribute some personal words to some of his close family and friends¹: “Jonathan liked to talk and he talked a lot. And sometimes you were at a loss as to how to get a word in edgewise. He talked because he was always thrilled: thrilled about a project, thrilled about doors the Lord had opened, thrilled about the part he was allowed to play in the great scheme of things. He talked always with a wide smile on his face, and would punctuate his comments with a little giggle of delight. Kablan was one of the few white people—and in the last years, his skin was so transparently white—who was truly Ivorian. He thought like an Ivorian, understood politics like an Ivorian, acted like an Ivorian, a rare thing in this top down world. I was the one who had to give the news of his passing to many on this side, and each time, there was a gasp and an immediate sadness, and often, real tears. I tried to think of where I could go to look for Jonathan’s writings (and there are a few here and there), but this led me to realize that this man, despite his academic competence, was a man devoted to linguistic fieldwork, completely practical, feet on the ground, investing all his energy, spreading himself thin in fighting (and setting in place concrete structures) for the cause of mother tongue and the translation of the Word of God. All human beings fight for life but Jonathan fought exceptionally hard—to stay alive, to continue his work, to keep on, despite all obstacles. His wife Nancy, his children, his many colleagues—each will have a unique take on a man who lived life with a passion, in weakness and in strength. On this side, we will miss a presence, a fellow co-worker who fought alongside us, sharing the same vision. But what I will remember most is Jonathan’s determination, his utter thrill and pride of commitment, flowing out in non-stop words and that giggle of delight.”

Indeed, Jonathan touched many lives in Côte d’Ivoire. The outpouring of emotions was palpable during the memorial service held in his honor at headquarters of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Abidjan. Again, I quote a few words from Lynell who attended that gathering, summarized for his wife Nancy, which help show why Kablan is beloved by his Anyi brothers and his sisters, and by many others who are not Anyi:²

“I wanted to let you know (and probably some have already told you) about the memorial held this Friday at SIL, in the Jacob Krebs hall. It was a very intimate somewhat informal ceremony that lasted about one and a half hours. It was led by Pierrette (the new director of SIL, Cote d’Ivoire, herself raised as an Anyi speaker³) who gave her own testimony and led some songs and some of the speeches in Agni. It was attended by a mix of people, including the personnel of SIL...Ambroise, the little brother of Koffi was also there. Added onto the SIL personnel were the

¹ Zogbo, Lynell M. 2016. On the Passing of Jonathan Burmeister. Used with permission. Email sent on November 24, 2016. Quoted with permission.

² Zogbo, Lynell M. 2016. Heavy Hearts but Hope and Joy. Personal Communication. Email sent on December 11, 2016. Quoted with permission.

³ I have enclosed some information between parentheses to help identify some people better.

dignitaries, in the front row Jeremie Kouadio (the former dean of the Linguistics Department at the University) and two other people... from the Institute of Applied Linguistics....And then a whole group of men, clearly noblemen... from Assouba. The ceremony was simple but very moving. There were tears. Those speaking (Pierrette, Yegbe, a man who said Jonathan was his father) all had to stop while talking, and compose themselves before continuing their words. People stopped, swallowed, were silent and then continued.

There is so much--I cannot remember all, but what especially marked me was how many said **Jonathan was their father**. One man who said you arrived when he was ten said he (and a few others) vowed to take up the OT work and finish the Bible in Sanvi (the Morofou version is ongoing). Pierrette said Jonathan was the person who brought her to Bible translation cause. Jeremie Kouadio...visibly moved...remembered many meetings and work to valorize mother tongue...Yegbe (a translation consultant for SIL) spoke of Jonathan's encouragement, when he was still in high school, at a workshop. Yegbe thought 'it wasn't his place to be there' but Jonathan encouraged him. He also mentioned Jonathan's role in training him as a Translation Consultant, a job I had the privilege of finishing (to Jonathan's delight). An Ivorian professor talked about the context in the country when Jonathan arrived, how Jeremie was the first black professor at the Institute of Applied Linguistics, and how Jonathan 'gave the Agni their language.' He kept saying in a very loud voice, 'We learned from him that **we can talk to God in Agni** and God can talk to us in Agni'....this was very, very moving.

One of the men who said Jonathan was his father got up and gave a testimony and then, at the end of service, got up with a young girl and **sang the Ivorian national anthem in Agni**. Everyone stood up, and they said it was because Jonathan wrote their language, that they were able today to sing this in Agni.... All the service was 'punctuated' with songs in French and Agni, and prayers in Agni and French. Afterwards, there was a collation and a book was there, for people to write in. Jonathan's picture was there and a few young pictures, one of you with Elizabeth in your arms, in front of the famous blue Volkswagen van. It was good.

They asked me to speak too. I decided to speak about some more personal and lighter things, how I was there when you and Jonathan arrived, how much you and Jonathan love Côte d'Ivoire, his passion for all, I told a funny story about Carol and my time with him on a linguistic survey, his willingness to help the FATEAC (a seminary for training Bible translators and pastors), his determination to come to the Dioula dedication, seeing him the last time in Dallas, etc. I said it is a **sad day but it is a day of joy** because we are celebrating Jonathan and all he did for Côte d'Ivoire. Yegbe came after me and underlined how much he fought for Ivoirians, for Africans...All these men and women testified to the role Jonathan played in their lives and really it was sobering, what an incredible legacy he left....”

Indeed, Jonathan was a capable linguist who would rather spend his precious time solving orthography or translation problems than write papers for scholarly publications. This does not mean that he did not publish anything at all. He published a few articles (see references below) but spent most of his time translating the New Testament in Anyi Sanvi (1997) and writing orthography guides for Sanvi and many languages in Côte d'Ivoire. He liked to tell people he helped the former first lady Simone Gbagbo write her own MA thesis on talking drums. He also embarked on an Anyi-French bilingual dictionary. By the time of his passing, the dictionary

contained 4,539 entries.⁴ Jonathan was about helping others ‘do the job’. He recruited and trained a team of competent translators and literacy teachers. Below is a picture of his main language consultant and the main translator of the Sanvi New Testament, the late Aka Lambert who passed away in 1985, his wife, Nancy, and Jonathan.



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But the legacy of the baobab tree lives on in the hearts and minds of Nancy and his children. Kablan is survived by his wife of 46 years, Nancy; their five children, Elisabeth, David, Paul, Mary, Martin and their spouses; four grandchildren; his mother, Florence; two sisters, and several nieces and cousins. His legacy also lives on in hearts and minds of the Anyi noblemen who came to honor him, as well as hundreds of Anyi people who knew him and thousands more who will benefit from his translation and literacy work in their native tongue. Nancy and her children plan to bring Kablan’s ashes to Assouba, his adopted village, where he will rest among his people. On behalf of all the Anyi people, I say:

Bɔɔɔfɔɔ Kablan, ye da wɔ asɪ kpáa,

which translated means,

White man Kablan, we thank you forever”!

⁴ It will be available when the journal is published online.

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