

Jonathan “Kablan” L. BURMEISTER (1943–2016)¹

Born in Milwaukee, Jonathan Burmeister attended the University of Wisconsin. 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 French, Jonathan and his wife, Nancy, arrived in Côte d’Ivoire in November 1973 with their first daughter, Elisabeth. They moved to the village of Assouba, not far from Aboisso, where they began learning and analyzing Anyi, a Kwa language closely related to Baoulé.

Jonathan spent over 25 years working on the Anvi-Sanvi dialect, establishing an orthography and dictionary and leading a translation team to the completion of the Anyi New Testament (1997). He served as a Bible translation consultant for SIL from 2001 to 2015, working on the Dioula Bible and Scriptures in many other West African languages, and training consultants, such as Yegbe Antoine and Ouattara Matthieu. For years Jonathan did his best to get mother-tongue speakers into leadership positions in linguistic and translation programs across the continent.

Serving was Jonathan’s gift: as director of SIL Côte d’Ivoire from 1978–1981, and as an active member and strong supporter of WALs, playing a key role in monitoring elections. One of his fondest memories was giving assistance to the first-lady-to-be Simone Gbagbo on her M.A. thesis treating drum language in Abouré. Whenever asked, he was ready to lend a helping hand, to assist mother-tongue speakers figure out a linguistic problem, write a primer, or set up an entire language program. He willingly accepted to teach courses at FATEAC in Abidjan, and, of course, led many SIL workshops on various subjects.

At his death, memorials were held in the US and at the SIL headquarters in Abidjan. University professors such as Doyen Jérémie Kouadio, along with high ranking village officials and loving friends came to pay their respects—through tears but also smiles at the stories told from the life of this dynamic and dedicated man.

Jonathan was 100 percent Ivorian, able to talk Ivorian politics with the best of them. At the end of the memorial in Abidjan, one man who had welcomed Jonathan to the village as a young boy so many years ago, went to the front and sang, with a young Agni woman, the Ivorian national anthem in Anyi!

Many said they owe to Kablan their interest in and use of their mother tongue. At his passing, Jonathan left a bilingual Anyi-French dictionary with over 4,500 entries.

Jonathan “Kablan” Burmeister is survived by his wife, Nancy, and their five children: Elisabeth, David, Paul, Mary, and Martin, who all grew up speaking Anyi.

¹ Thanks to Professor Koffi Ettien of the University of Saint Cloud, a fellow Anyi, Marlin Leaders (SIL), and Nancy Burmeister for providing some of this information.

Plans are for Nancy and the children to bring Jonathan's ashes back to Côte d'Ivoire before the end of 2017 to bury them in Assouba, his beloved village.

—Lynell Marchese Zogbo
Abidjan, 2017



Aka Albert (NT translator), his wife Cécile, Nancy, and Jonathan Burmeister (1985)

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