

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- University of Vermont Award for research on the Effect of grazing management on light quality within mixed pasture swards (1992)
- University of Georgia Award for research on Legume based technologies for improving and sustaining grain and forage production in humid and semi-arid ecosystems of West Africa (1989)
- Africa Educational Trust Award for research on Nutrient dynamics in grasses under different harvesting and fertilizer treatments (1978)

DEFINING MOMENT

When her father passed away: With family responsibilities weighing on her, Tau-Mzamane decided against pursuing her PhD studies. Through the stories of how the many strong women in her family cared for each other, her mother and aunts persuaded her to continue – and opened her eyes to gender roles in the economy.

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

She was a keen tennis player and is interested in house design.

A LIFE IN AGRICULTURE

Her parents were both teachers and Tau-Mzamane, the eldest of nine surviving children, was born on 10 November 1947 in Ha Koali village in Lesotho. During her primary school years her father became principal of the Holy Family Primary School near Teyateyaneng. In 1964, she matriculated from St Mary's High School in Roma. Those were difficult years in the region because of the increasingly oppressive South African apartheid system. After volunteering as a biology and mathematics teacher at Teyateyaneng Community Secondary School, she enrolled at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. There Tau-Mzamane embarked on the first of many anti-apartheid endeavours as a committee member of the Swiss-based World University Service.

"I later lectured in Nigeria and the United States, sensitising university and other communities about the politics of food, agriculture and natural resources in South Africa and the rest of the Third World". Tau-Mzamane also co-directed the Africa House Programme at the University of Vermont that exposed people

to socio-economic and political developments in Africa. She focused on the state of the continent's science and agriculture and the role of women.

Before receiving her BSc in 1970, she married South African refugee and author Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, who would later become the first post-apartheid Vice-Chancellor of Fort Hare University (UFH). They had three children and they adopted their fourth child upon their return to South Africa in the 1990s. "As the wife of a refugee, there was always a possibility that we would have to leave Lesotho. One needed a qualification that could put food on the table. There was then (as today) a shortage of science teachers, therefore one could work nearly anywhere," she says, explaining why she completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Education in 1972.

After three years as Curator of Lesotho's Herbarium she headed to the University of Wales and completed a Master's degree in science in 1974. Back in Lesotho, a certificate in project planning followed, before the family left for Botswana. She received her PhD from the University of Wales in 1981, while her husband completed his at the University of Sheffield. Although she had to leave her young family behind during her two terms in the United Kingdom, Tau-Mzamane says "it was worth it on so many different fronts."

She has since published on the morphology and chemistry of forage grasses and legumes and how these are affected by fertiliser applications, on grazing management and light quality, and about indigenous knowledge systems and the role of women in Lesotho's agriculture. After four years in Nigeria at the National Animal Production Research Institute and the Ahmadu Bello University, the family moved again, this time to the USA in 1986 where Tau-Mzamane did research and taught at the universities of Georgia (Athens) and Vermont.

Then came the Mandela era and in 1994 she became an agriculture professor at the University of Fort Hare (UFH) and then head and Deputy Director-General of the Limpopo Department of Agriculture, Land and Environment from 1996 to 2000. Tau-Mzamane and her colleagues had to reorganise and consolidate the departments, systems and staff of the former Transvaal, Gazankulu, Venda and Lebowa. "It was one of the most challenging jobs, and I spent many sleepless nights," she admits.



In 2000, Tau-Mzamane became Deputy Director-General of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, and a year later she became the first black woman to lead the Agricultural Research Council as President and Chief Executive Officer. She is satisfied that she restored financial stability and accountability within its ranks, expanded its research focus from commercial to small-scale farming, and created reserves to be made available to researchers wanting to address urgent emerging needs for new knowledge. These initiatives were, however, not always kindly accepted by some agricultural media.

A KNACK FOR INSTITUTIONS IN DISTRESS

In 2007, Tau-Mzamane served in the office of the Premier of Limpopo before becoming registrar of Walter Sisulu University from 2008 to 2013. The institution with its four campuses had been established three years earlier when the University of Transkei, the Border Technikon and Eastern Cape Technikon were merged. Again, she had to align policies, governance systems and procedures. "My children say I have a knack of picking up organisations in distress," smiles one of the founding members of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf).

She has been a member of various professional societies in the United Kingdom, the United States, Nigeria and locally. She served on the boards of the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture, the International Livestock Research Institute, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and the National Research Foundation, was an executive member of the National Science and Technology Forum and a member of the National Advisory Council for the then Minister of Science and Technology (now the Department of Science and Innovation).

After two decades of leadership, Tau-Mzamane says she understands the challenges and opportunities of science institutions, along with the broader national and international sectors within which they operate. They nurtured her understanding of financial accountability and how central human capital is to success. In this regard, she has always made a point of providing capacity training opportunities to her senior leadership teams. At the ARC, she fast-tracked a professional development programme for graduates to increase the numbers of black and women researchers.

Tau-Mzamane continues to promote science and maths education, to give talks, to support small-scale agricultural projects and to improve her knowl-

edge of matters relating to policy and urban agriculture. "I thought life would get less interesting as I grow older, but it is not so," says this agricultural scientist and author of science-based stories for children.



Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

ASSAf Research Repository

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A. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) Publications

C. ASSAf Policymakers' Booklets

2020

Legends of South African Science II

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), (2019). Legends of South African Science II.

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