Girls of the Gate

QUESTIONS OF PURITY AND PIETY
AT THE MTSHABEZI GIRLS’ PRIMARY BOARDING SCHOOL IN COLONIAL ZIMBABWE, 1908-1940

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The «girls of the gate» (intombi zegetini)² are a discreet generation of girls, recognized for their purity and piety, who attended the Brethren in Christ Church’s (BICC) Mtshabezi boarding primary school in the 1920s and 1930s. Church historian and reporter Doris Dube summarized the almost legendary status which has come to be associated with the girls of the gate:

[N]ews had started filtering down about a girls’ school which had been set up by missionaries of the Brethren in Christ Church at a place called Mtshabezi. It had been established in 1906 and among the priorities of the mission tasks was its service to the community as a refuge for girls who were fleeing marriage to undesirable characters imposed on them by their fathers. Many girls found refuge at the mission school. Sometimes irate fathers followed them and tried to withdraw them by force. At other times, when withdrawal failed, the fathers gave their daughters the beating of their lives, then denounced them and left them half dead. Many of these...

¹ For acknowledgments and sources, see the note at the end of the article.
² I prefer to use the informal «intombi zegetini» rather than the more grammatically correct form used by Doris Dube, «izintombi zegetini» since «intombi zegetini» was the version I most commonly heard in oral testimonies.
girls made Mtshabezi their permanent home. At the end of the year when the others went home, many remained working there because their homes were no longer opened to them. Their legendary name was «izintombi zegetini» (girls within the gate). This was because suitors proposing to talk to any of them at any odd times were kept out of their living quarters by a gateway. Visiting with any of these girls had to be under great supervision. These girls were known to stand no nonsense from possible suitors. Jokes were told of how some young men referred to a group of these girls as «a gate» even when they were away from their enclosure.3

Even though today Mtshabezi is still referred to as «eGetini» (at the Gate), the actual «girls of the gate» were those who attended the primary boarding school at that time. The still-repeated legend of Mtshabezi Mission’s «girls of the gate» emphasizes the fact that it was a haven for girls escaping arranged marriages, and that it sought to prepare these same girls for life as Christian matrons. «Girls of the gate» remained an orally communicated legend until it first appeared in print in Doris Dube’s 1992 devotional book compiling profiling notable BICC African women. This article, the first scholarly treatment of the «girls of the gate,» attempts to place this legend in its historical context. 5

4 Since missionaries wrote the vast majority of documents available to researchers of the history of the BICC in Zimbabwe, it is difficult to discern how African girls and young women who attended perceived the importance of Mtshabezi in the lives of the African girls and young women who attended the school, making it important to include perspectives available only through the oral testimonies of African members of the church.