**CITATION: BRIGALIA NTOMBEMHLOPHE BAM**

Brigalia Ntombemhlophe Bam was born on January 2nd, 1933 at Tsolo in the former Transkei, Eastern Cape South Africa. She studied at Shaw Bury Methodist Institute and Lovedale Teachers College in South Africa. She thereafter pursued studies in Social Work at the University of Chigago with a Masters in 1973.

Although Brigalia Bam was trained in social work and education, her career and work trajectory have straddled varied responsibilities. She has worked as a teacher, a social worker, a feminist and gender justice advocate, an Ecumenist and a Democrat who has played a central role in the re-imagination and transition of South Africa from apartheid reign to post-apartheid democratic era.

As a feminist and an advocate for justice, Brigalia worked in the 1980s for the Women’s Workers Programme (Africa Region) which was part of the International Food and Allied Workers Association in Geneva. She later took executive and leadership positions in a variety of International Ecumenical Organisations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and The World Young Women’s Association (YWCA). In 1988, she was elected as the Secretary General of the South African Council of Churches, a position she held until 1997, when she became the commissioner with the Independent Electoral Commission.

During her time at the World Council of Churches (WCC), she steered women’s and anti-racism work as part of the program to combat racism in South Africa and the world over. It was at this moment that she also joined the Ghanaian Feminist Theologian and New Testament Scholar to promote the establishment of an intellectual and epistemic community referred to as the Circle of Concerned Women Theologians. This movement was central to the training and mentorship of emerging and established Theologians, especially to help them write and publish scholarly work, from the perspectives of African women feminist experiences in Africa and in the Diaspora. In particular, Mercy Oduyoye and Brigalia Bam promoted the idea or methodological approach referred to as “Doing Theology" which in essence called for an engaged, contextually grounded theology with a strong theoretical articulation. Her books, ‘Angry for Peace’, ‘What is Ordination Coming to? / Report of a Consultation on the Ordination of Women Held in Cartingny Geneva, Switzerland / 21st-26th September 1970’, and ‘Democracy: More Than Just Elections’ demonstrate this lens and approach to theological work. Equally important in her work are the recurring themes of justice, freedom, gender equality and democracy.

Bam has demonstrated a commitment to the broad development of South Africa and the continent through her varied interests in women’s empowerment, demonstrated by her participation as one of the founding members of the Women’s Development Foundation. In 1998, she became the foundation’s president. She was actively involved in the democratisation of South Africa, and used her role in the leadership of the South African Council of Churches to establish it as one of the foremost organisations, which agitated for social justice, reconciliation, social cohesion and improved relations between the churches, state and civil society.

Upon her return to South Africa, she became the first woman appointed to the position of General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches. During her tenure, she promoted critical dialogues on church and state, resulting in the South African Council of Churches members deciding on the notion of critical Solidarity with the state." This resulted in the South African Council of Churches acknowledging that the democratic state is a government of the people, by the people, unlike the authoritarian apartheid regime.

Given this, they agreed to work with the state critically calling for justice and speaking truth to power in instances where they felt the state was unjust. This was Bam’s key contribution to South African Ecumenical thought and views on engagement in a democratic Era.

Bam went on to become the Chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa. Dr Bam’s leadership entrenched the principle of regular ‘Free and Fair’ elections with electoral outcomes accepted by all political parties and local and international observer missions. Her continued leadership of the commission entrenched the principles of democracy in South Africa, laying a solid foundation for future elections.

She has gained prominence through her work as General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, the Chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa and one of the prominent women leaders in the ecumenical movement. She has also taken leadership through participation of numerous board’s in Higher Education, Civil society and Ecumenical movements where she continues to play a pivotal role in deepening democracy, promoting gender, equality and justice; and mentoring emergent leaders locally and globally. These include membership of the Matla Trust, the SABC, International Ideas, Seaview Properties, The Thabo Mbeki Foundation, Tiso Foundation Board, Vodacom Foundation Board, Friends of the Panel of the Wise, Southern African Development Community (SADEC) amongst others.

She has served as the Chancellor of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University as well as of Walter Sisulu University. Furthermore, has been a recipient of several honorary doctorates from UNISA, CPUT and Fort Hare. She has received several prestigious awards, including The National Order of the Baobab in silver, for the role she played in the upliftment of women and her contribution for democracy in South Africa. She also received The Mahatma Ghandi and Simon of Cyrene award, which is the highest award given to a lay person in the Anglican Church. She received many awards for her achievements including but not limited to the Shoprite Checkers Women of the Year Lifetime Achievement Award; the Chancellors Medal – awarded by the University of Pretoria and Grand Counsellor of the Baobab for Distinguished Service in 2004 awarded by Former President Thabo Mbeki for her role in the upliftment of women and her contribution about democracy in South Africa.

Although in retirement, Bam is still one of the foremost South African women social activists and leaders, both in and outside of the church, and still consults various African countries on electoral matters. It is therefore befitting that the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg bestow an Honorary Degree on Brigalia Ntombemhlophe Bam.