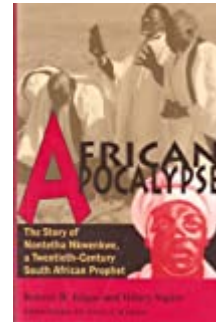


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Robert R. Edgar, Hilary Sapire. *African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, a Twentieth-Century South African Prophet.* Athens, Ohio and Johannesburg: Ohio University Press, 1999. xxiii + 190 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89680-208-7; (paper), ISBN 978-1-86814-337-5.



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Nontetha Nkwenkwe was a prophet who in the 1920s gained a dedicated following in the Eastern Cape. That she is little known today says much about the marginalization of rural women and the ways in which psychiatric practices were used against Africans perceived to be a danger to the monolithic nature of white rule. Historians Robert Edgar and Hilary Sapire have delivered her from obscurity, restored a dignity tarnished by officialdom, and literally reinserted her back into her community and into South African history with this book.

This is a fascinating book, not only for its intriguing heroine and the sequel of the discovery of her grave by the authors and the subsequent re-burial of her remains. It also raises important questions about the writing of South African history.

There are five chapters. The first introduces essential themes in the history of African resistance and accommodation to colonialism in the Eastern Cape; it also explicates African prophetic movements and their relationships to indigenous African religions, Christianity, and Xhosa culture. The second chapter describes Nontetha's rise, arrest, and committal, and places these events in the context of the 1920s. Chapter three analyses the racialized and gendered psychiatric system in South Africa. The fourth chapter recounts the "pilgrimages of grace" undertaken by Nontetha's followers in 1926 and 1930 to

see their incarcerated prophet. The final chapter tells how, in post-apartheid South Africa, historians, archaeologists, forensic specialists, church members, and others tracked down Nontetha's grave and arranged her re-burial. There also is a perceptive foreword by Shula Marks and an appendix of three official documents on the case – all of which reject her release. The text is complemented by reproductions of contemporary press clippings on Nontetha, a painted portrait (there are no photographs of her), and images of the asylums and the re-burial ceremony.

The book is packed with details of Nontetha's life, no mean feat as she left few written biographical sources. The authors draw on the limited available psychiatric and press reports as well as recollections by family and church members of her life, sermons and dreams, in order to construct a sensitive, if still incomplete, account of a complex woman who gained the respect of Africans and incurred the wrath of officials.

Nontetha was born in 1875 near King William's Town. When her migrant labourer husband died, she had to raise ten children alone. She never joined a Christian church, but baptized her children and was influenced by the Ethiopian church of Dwane as well as the American Methodist Episcopal Church. In the crisis years following the 1918 influenza pandemic (which devastated the

region) she began to preach salvation, articulating a synthesis of Christian and Xhosa spirituality and demanding abstinence from alcohol, dances, and other traditional customs. Earlier she had become famous in the region as a herbalist (*ixhwele* in Xhosa) and seer, and the authors suggest that her rise to prominence as a prophet paralleled the traditional transition of a seer to diviner (*igqira*) in Xhosa culture. What white psychiatrists would later diagnose as “hysteria” takes on the normal dimensions of a seer seeking to “become visible” to people as a diviner when considered in this light (p.5). Illiterate, with no formal schooling, she nevertheless preached the unity of both educated and “red” (“unschooled”) Africans. It was, perhaps, this emphasis on unity that aroused the suspicion of officials.

The movement grew rapidly in Ciskei rural districts around East London, Middledrift and King William’s Town, areas where one might expect that the lack of an industrial proletariat could incline black leaders to emphasize land or religion rather than class issues. Like Ntsikana, the better-known nineteenth century Xhosa prophet who sought ways to live with invading whites and their Christianity [1], Nontetha was no political radical. At first authorities were tolerant, viewing her as a potential ally due to her emphasis on temperance and law-abiding sermons. However, after the massacre of African Israelites at Bulhoek in 1921, white attitudes to any large-scale black gatherings were increasingly paranoid (the authors stress the coincidence of her rise with these events as influencing her harsh treatment). Officials reported that farm workers around Fort Beaufort (near Fort Hare) had been “enraptured by her message and were reluctant to return to work” (p.22) and that she was encouraging Africans to boycott white churches. She was now seen as subversive, arrested, and gaoled in 1922.

Hundreds of Nontetha’s followers gathered in solidarity, but rather than being charged, which may have made her into a hero, she was committed to Fort Beaufort Mental Hospital and, in 1924, transferred to Weskoppies asylum in Pretoria. In 1926 her devotees walked six hundred miles to see her but were arrested and charged under the pass laws. Another delegation in 1930 was put straight on a train and sent back to the Eastern Cape. Protests from African groups and white officials alike were dismissed and she spent the rest of her life there, dying in terrible isolation in 1935.[2]

Nonetha’s life and prophetic mission is analysed in the context of regional history, Xhosa culture, and

prevailing Christian, millennial, colonial, and psychiatric discourses. The discussion of gender and religion is particularly perceptive. Other writers have discussed women preachers in the mainstream churches [3], but few have treated women prophets of independent churches. The authors stress the appeal of redemptive messages for rural women and the importance of gender in religious movements. Nontetha was able to attract many local women (especially diviners) to her cause and they soon became prominent in her Church of the Prophetess Nontetha, which still exists today. Women could express gender, class and generational frustrations in such movements and secure a measure of independence, whilst the prophetic role offered the prospect of enhanced status. By the 1920s, Nontetha had gained respect in African society for she was not only a respected seer and herbalist but also a middle-aged and fully initiated woman and household head.

There is a further important gender dimension to this work. Nontetha’s gender was probably crucial in the official stigmatization of her as “mad.” The authors here delve into another until recently neglected field of South African history, that of the outcast, the excluded, the “mad.”

The fundamental difference between Western and African treatments of mental conditions is evinced in the book. African societies rarely ostracised the “mad” from society but sought to re-integrate them. Africans also developed imaginative ways of coping with the traumas of rapid change. Spirit possession cults in early twentieth century South East Africa, for instance, helped overcome the anxiety and insecurity felt by women facing increased family and work stresses as labour migration spread. Like Nontetha’s movement, these cults could act as vehicles of protest, fora for mutual aid, or alternative structures for women. Neither Nonetetha’s family, nor her followers, ever accepted the claim that she was deranged. Even her African opponents never described her as mad (*ubugeza*), but rather as subversive.

In contrast, western psychiatry sought to separate the “mad” from society. Its techniques were deployed as a means of colonial social control.[4] The authors outline the growth of psychiatry in South Africa. By the early twentieth century, Africans constituted an increasing proportion of inmates due to several factors: social disruption following conquest and crises such as epidemics; class (many were farm or urban workers considered disruptive by employers); prevailing hegemonic psychiatric and segregationist discourses which stigma-

tized Africans as inferior and ignored their cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Inmates such as Nontetha faced atrocious conditions: chronic shortages of food, heating, staff, and exercise, poor sanitation, overcrowding, neglect, and authoritarian, even violent, discipline.

Edgar and Sapire do not judge Nontetha's sanity but let the facts reveal the tangled web of official indifference and paranoia that conspired to keep her incarcerated for thirteen years. She was, the Commissioner for Mental Hygiene claimed in 1930, "a source of disturbance" who must be kept locked away from her people, among whom she was a "danger to the preservation of order"(p.134). Diagnoses by psychiatrists were far removed from relevant cultural, spiritual, and historical factors influencing her condition. The authors note how African patients tended to focus "uncomfortable attention on existing relations of power." Nontetha apparently claimed that she was in communication with Queen Victoria's family and that hospital authorities were interfering in this relationship. She employed the Queen's image as an "icon of liberty, justice and support for suppressed colonial peoples" (p.67-68). [5]

This book sheds some light on African Christianity for, as the authors argue, whilst Nontetha was a minor religious figure in a limited area with a relatively small following, local perspectives often mirror wider trends (p.109). They help us understand and envisage how grassroots Africans moulded Christianity for their own purposes, and how an individual prophet creatively crafted a Christian theology of comprehension to explicate the social traumas of the day.

What remains unclear is the appeal of Nontetha's rhetoric to other categories of people beside women and rural workers, and whether she had contact with African political figures. The nature of relations between rural millennial and political movements remains somewhat of a lacuna in South African history, though the authors discuss it cogently, if briefly. Nontetha tended to be apolitical. She did not directly challenge white rule or the status of chiefs. Yet, she criticised the disunity of the latter and siphoned Africans away from the churches of the former. Some chiefs and especially their wives supported her but most eventually sided with the government against her. She alluded to white hegemony in highly ambiguous language that suggests moderate political views. Nevertheless, she drew on shared traditions and her call for unity would have resonated with policies of African political groups. Here the authors suggest a "symbiotic relationship between prophets and political movements."

In this regard, they cite two similar cases of syncretism. Selina Bungane, an ICU member and prophet who, like Nontetha, invoked Ntsikana, and Zulu prophet Josephina who associated with the Transvaal African Congress in 1923 and, like Nontetha, began preaching in response to the 1918 pandemic(p.116).

It could be added that Nontetha probably gained a measure of support among rural peoples (including migrant labourer families) by using the rhetoric not only of the apocalypse but also of unity, and that her interactions with them would have made her aware of their problems. She may also have been exposed to proposed political solutions to their problems (land, passes) peddled by the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) and the African National Congress (ANC). However, in the period of her preaching (1918-21), these political groups were still only nascent in the Eastern Cape. The ICU in Port Elizabeth was smashed in 1920 and only resuscitated in 1921. The East London Native Employees' Association sought the support of the ANC in 1920, but little came of this proposal. It was only after Nontetha's arrest that the ICU became more active in the region, attracting millenarians as it went, and the more distant Transkeian African Congress (based in Tsomo and Cofimvaba) began to take up grievances of rural Africans, often wrapping their protest petitions in religious-millenarian garb.[6] Further detailed research into all these movements might unearth ties between local political groups and Nontetha's church. What can be agreed is that Nontetha and other protagonists of African unity helped keep alive a spirit of resistance at a time when African political bodies were weak, although the presence of competing churches also could militate against a broader unity.

Finally, attention should be drawn to the extra-literary labours of the authors. The book concludes with a special touch, revealing how in 1997 Edgar (ironically one of the "Americans" whom Nontetha's Church looked to for salvation), with the aid of various specialists, traced the unmarked grave of Nontetha. To examine options for re-burial, Edgar and Sapire connected with the family and surviving members of the church, and the post-apartheid drive to recover black history and dignity. They did it well (unlike some unfortunate attempts at re-burial of black heroes in the 1990s[7]): acting in a sensitive manner only as facilitators of family and church decisions. The finale is a splendid account of the exhumation of Nontetha's remains from a cemetery in Pretoria and the 1998 re-burial ceremony in Khulile Village. The involvement of diverse groups in these events, they conclude, raises significant "questions about public history

and memory, how future histories of South Africa are to be recorded and commemorated, who the custodians of the past are, and the relationship of professional historians to the creation and production of history" (p.xxiii)

The significance of this book is manifold. It is a most useful contribution to South African, and Eastern Cape regional, history as well as to the history of religious movements, gender, and psychiatry in South Africa. The authors foreshadow new paths of research and illuminate the role of female independent Christian and prophetic movements in rural Africa. I hope that it will spur new interest in the history of millennial movements and prophetic Christianity in South Africa and their relations with other movements, as well as renew interest in the history of marginalised African women and the handling of "madness" in colonial situations. Perhaps other forgotten African women leaders of the first half of the twentieth century, such as Minnie Bhola, might also find their biographers.

There seems little doubt that the authorities hoped to discredit Nontetha's movement by labeling her as mad. She could have, perhaps, if not banished to an asylum, become a celebrated hero, a South African Nehanda or Joan of Arc.

NOTES

[1]. On Ntsikana, see Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa: 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp.218-21, 368-71.

[2]. The Garveyite Wellington Buthelezi, active in the Transkei in the 1920s, visited Nontetha at Weskoppies. Wulf Sachs, author of *Black Hamlet* (London: Bles, 1935) also met her whilst working there. African American ac-

tivist Ralph Bunche lamented the "grotesque crowd of social debris" he saw at Weskoppies in 1937: R.J. Bunche, *An African American in South Africa: The Travel Notes of Ralph J. Bunche, 28 Sept. 1937-1 Jan. 1938*, ed. R. Edgar (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), pp.188-89.

[3]. See Deborah Gaitskell, "Power in Prayer and Service: Women's Christian Organizations" in Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (eds.) *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social & Cultural History* (Oxford: J. Currey; Cape Town: D. Philip, 1997), pp.253-67, p.263 ff.

[4]. See: Jock McCulloch, *Colonial Psychiatry and 'The African Mind'* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford University Press; London: Polity Press, 1991); Jonathan Sadowsky, *Imperial Bedlam: Institutions of Madness in Colonial Southwest Nigeria* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1999).

[5]. A powerful image among contemporary Africans, a point the authors acknowledge assistance on from colleagues via the medium of H-AFRICA (p.156).

[6]. On the Transkeian ANC, see Cape Archives, CMT 3/1471 file 42/C pt.1, "ANC" 1924-. On the ICU see Helen Braford, *A Taste of Freedom: the ICU in Rural South Africa 1924-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[7]. See Charles van Onselen, "Dead But Not Quite Buried" *London Review of Books* 20/21, 29 Oct. 1998, pp.23-24.

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