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TITLE: **Bones of Contention: The Return of Nonteta, an Eastern Cape Prophet**

BY: **R. Edgar and H. Sapire**

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# BONES OF CONTENTION: THE RETURN OF NONTETA, AN EASTERN CAPE PROPHET

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> The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, thou knowest." Again, he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.
>
> Ezekiel 37: 1-5

> "Nonteta told us that she would not return in the same way she left."
>
> Comment of a member of the Church of the Prophetess Nonteta at the exhumation of Nonteta's grave, July 1998.

Bones and burial places have been invested with special meanings in South Africa's recent political history. Before 1994 funerals of anti-apartheid martyrs often created public spaces for activists to renew resistance against the apartheid regime. Since 1994, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has highlighted the iniquities of apartheid government hit squads by locating the graves of their victims and returning their remains to their families. However, as the public outcries over Saartje Baartman and Chief Hintsa indicate, the interest in the fate of remains extends back into previous centuries.

Over the past year we have been privileged to participate in

returning the remains of another person from an earlier era - Nonteta, a woman prophet from the Eastern Cape who was unjustly institutionalized in mental hospitals and who on her death in 1935 was buried anonymously in a pauper's grave in a Pretoria cemetery. This essay explains the circumstances of Nonteta's burial, how we became involved in searching for her grave, and how we facilitated exhuming her remains and returning them to her family and church.

Born around 1875 in a rural location in the Ciskei, Nonteta ("someone who speaks a lot") began her prophetic career during the devastating influenza pandemic of 1918 that killed thousands of Africans in Nonteta's home area. When Nonteta herself fell ill, she had a series of dreams in which God revealed that he had sent the flu as isibeto, a punishment for sins that people had been committing. She had a special mission to reform her society, to preach the Bible to the uneducated, to stress the unity of the African people, and to warn that judgement day was imminent.

Once she accepted her mission, Nonteta took her message to rural locations stretching from Middledrift to East London. Although her message was not revolutionary, she had the misfortune of attracting the attention of government officials in the wake of the Bullhoek massacre of May 1921. Expecting the end of the world, Enoch Mgijima's Israelites had camped out in their holy village Ntabelanga near Queenstown and resolutely refused to disband. The government, after protracted negotiations with the Israelites, sent out a police force to evict them, The confrontation ended in a massacre in which about 200 Israelites

died. Thereafter officials, fearful of a repeat of Bullhoek, were deeply suspicious of any prophet who appeared on the scene. Although they were not of one mind about how to deal with Nonteta and her followers, they decided to silence her voice before her movement could gain momentum by committing her to the mental asylum at Fort Beaufort some 40 miles away from her home. Following her release for a brief period, she refused to adhere to the condition that she refrain from further preaching, and she was recommitted to the Fort Beaufort asylum. When her followers continued to visit her at the asylum, officials took the drastic step of removing her even farther away to Weskoppies Mental Asylum in Pretoria in 1924.

This did not reduce the devotion of her followers. In 1927 and 1930 bands of her faithful set out on pilgrimages in attempts to meet her and convince the authorities to release her. Their efforts prompted psychiatrists at Weskoppies to review her case. Although they concluded "there is no reason why she should not be so discharged having regard only to her mental condition," they concurred with government officials that she would play a troublesome role on the outside. As a consequence, no further consideration was given to her release and she would spend the remaining five years of her life within the walls of Weskoppies.

Isolated from all but a few visitors and suffering from a terminal illness, Nonteta's must have spent her last years in pain. Surely she found little relief from anguish in the confines of Weskoppies. Apart from the peculiarly repressive character of

mental hospitals for black South Africans, it is generally acknowledged that protracted confinement in 'total institutions' such as asylums tends to exacerbate, rather than treat mental pain. The loss of personal autonomy, the unpredictability of the environment, the coercive practices and the isolation from a truly therapeutic community are in themselves likely to lead to the kind of depression described by the psychiatrists.[1]

On 20 May 1935 Nonteta died of cancer of the liver and stomach at Weskoppies hospital.[2] The Superintendent of Weskoppies sent her family a telegram informing them of her death and instructing them to make immediate arrangements for claiming her body in Pretoria. Communication by telegram to the African reserves was notoriously slow, so it was not until 4 June that Reuben Tsoko wired a response: 'SEND NONTETA DOWN WE WANT TO BURY BY OURSELVES'. By then she had already been buried. Citing public health codes, two days after her death, officials had wrapped her in a blanket and placed her body in an unmarked pauper's grave at Pretoria's Newclare Cemetery.

Since the miserable state of communications in the rural areas was no secret, it is hard to imagine that hospital officials expected a reply from Nonteta's family or church leaders within two days. When Tsoko did contact them, they resorted to bureaucratic evasions, claiming that the cost of returning her body was too high and that they were prevented from doing so, in any case, by a regulation prohibiting exhumation for a period of two years.[3]

Despite requests from her family and church leaders for the return of Nonteta's remains, the government year after year resolutely refused. In 1955 Tsoko, Dumalisile Bungu, one of Nonteta's sons, Simon Nxepe and Joseph Zumane contacted the government. This time they repeated their contention that Nonteta had never been mentally ill and demanded that the government open an enquiry into why her rights had been denied and why she had never been released. They expressed their belief that since no prior inquiry had ever been initiated, the government wanted to suppress the matter. Contending that correct procedures had been followed at the time, the government replied that it saw no reason to reopen the case, especially since Nonteta had been dead for two decades.[4]

From that point on, the issue of a final resting place for Nonteta festered until July 1997 when one of the authors, Robert Edgar, paid a visit to members of the Church of the Prophetess Nonteta at Tamarha Location near King William's Town. He had met them over two decades earlier while doing fieldwork on millennial movements in the eastern Cape and Transkei, and although the church had split into three factions, the Tamarha branch claimed 1,000 members, primarily in rural districts stretching from Middledrift to East London. Despite the passage of time, church members remembered Edgar well and welcomed him back warmly. During the course of his conversations with the congregation, he learned that government's handling of Nonteta's burial and their recalcitrant attitude was still a source of great anguish and

anger to her family and church members. Edgar privately resolved to see if her grave could be located, though he wondered whether 60 years later there was even the remotest possibility not only of finding the grave but persuading bureaucrats to assist in arranging for the return of her remains.

However, the elections of April 1994 and the change in government had transformed the political climate for making such inquiries, and there were a few leads from official documents in the State Archives in Pretoria already in hand. For one, it was known that Nonteta died in May 1935 and that she had been buried in "New" Cemetery in Pretoria. After calling all the cemeteries in Pretoria, no cemetery with that name could be found. But talking to Johan Green, supervisor of Rebecca Street Cemetery, Edgar learned that it had previously been known as Newclare Cemetery. Not only did the name fit but the old Newclare was the closest cemetery to Weskoppies where it was possible to bury Africans, albeit in a segregated section. This was a very promising lead.

Fortunately the cemetery had very detailed records of all burials. Therefore, it was a simple matter to ask Green to bring out the oversized burial register for the time period when Nonteta died and turn to the pages where burials for May of 1935 were recorded. Without too much searching a handwritten entry for "Nonteto" appeared, dated 22 May 1935. The burial register also noted that she had died in the Mental Hospital and that she was 62 years old, roughly the age we estimated for her.

Paupers were usually buried two to three deep in a single grave. According to the register, the day before, on 21 May, the body of an 86-year old inmate of the Pretoria jail had been buried, and Nonteta's body was put on top of his. Had she been buried at a lower level, a complex process of securing permission to exhume the other body would have been necessary.

The cemetery that became Nonteta's resting place had been located, but the task of precisely pinpointing her grave remained. The register identified plot numbers for each burial, but graves in the pauper's section had no headstones. In fact, in the entire section for Africans in which Nonteta was buried, there is but one row of graves with the headstones of Pretoria notables. One is for William Nkomo, a founder of the ANC Youth League, and another is for Nimrod Tantsi, an AME minister who was chaplain to the ANC for many years. Green showed Edgar a detailed map of every plot in Nonteta's section, and then he escorted him to an area where he pointed to a patch of land. He was confident that this was the place where Nonteta was buried, and was convinced that once they located reference points, he and his assistants would be able to pinpoint the exact location of her grave.

At this point, Edgar contacted his co-author Hilary Sapire to update her on his discovery at Rebecca Street Cemetery. Since Edgar had to return to Washington, D.C. and Sapire resides in London, neither could pursue the matter at first hand. They decided the best course of action was to gather relevant documents, including a photocopy of the burial register page

bearing Nonteta's name, and have a friend who grew up in King William's Town, Luyanda ka Msumza, hand carry them to Nonteta's church and family. When Msumza passed on the documents and information, they caused much excitement. In addition, the authors contacted the Ministry of Sports, Arts and Culture for the Eastern Cape Provincial Government in King William's Town. Once ministry officials learned about Nonteta's story and her fate in Pretoria, they were intensely interested in pursuing the matter.

In subsequent months close communication was maintained so all parties could be briefed on developments. Plans were made by Edgar and Sapire to travel to the eastern Cape in March 1998. The trip was scheduled in order to deal with a host of issues related to exhuming the remains and returning them to Nonteta's home. Many questions had to be addressed. Could her plot in the Rebecca Street Cemetery really be identified? How could one be absolutely sure that the remains dug up were hers? What is the procedure for exhuming remains? Who would pay for the costs of exhumation and transporting her remains in a casket back to the eastern Cape? Would a ceremony be held to celebrate her return home? How much publicity did her family want and at what stage should media coverage begin?

During the interim, telephone conversations and communications by fax with the provincial government, the family, and members of Nonteta's church were finely tuned, but the authors were still prepared for last-minute glitches. And, just before they departed Johannesburg for the eastern Cape, one such problem

arose when family and church members informed them that they had to attend a funeral on the Sunday that had been scheduled for meetings with them. They graciously changed the date to Saturday, and allowed Edgar and Sapire to meet with them then. Nosabata Morley, Similo Grootboom and Sitati Gitywa, officials from the office of Museum and Heritage Resources of the Eastern Cape government met Edgar and Sapire at the homestead of Rev. Mzwandile Mabhelu, Bishop of one branch of the church, at Tamarha in the Ciskei. Despite a warm welcome, it was obvious that a number of sensitive issues had to be addressed. After prayers and hymn singing, the discussions with church elders began. The presence of government officials was useful because they understood what need to be clarified and what lay within their jurisdiction. Mindful of their roles as historians, the authors knew they were there to serve only as facilitators. All decisions ultimately had to be made by Nonteta's family.

After discussing the main issues with church elders, the group attended a gathering of Nonteta's descendants at Vuyani Bungu's home in an East London suburb. Bungu is a great grandson of Nonteta but a well known celebrity. In a country where boxing has gained enormous popularity among blacks, he has been world featherweight boxing champion of the International Boxing Federation for the past three years. Again, hymn singing and prayer were a prelude to a lengthy round of discussions. First off, Edgar and Sapire had to tender an apology for initially meeting with the church elders because in matters such as these,

the concerns of the family are paramount.

At both the meetings, the two most vexing issues raised concerned responsibility for the various costs and the certainty of confirming that the remains exhumed in Pretoria are actually Nonteta's. Government officials felt that the government of the Eastern Cape government had a moral obligation to assist the process, but wondered what they could pay for in the face of limited resources. They wanted to make it clear that they could cover the costs of exhuming Nonteta's remains and paying for a casket, but could not assume the costs of reburial, a gravestone, and a ceremony.

How to be absolutely certain that the remains truly belong to Nonteta was a more contentious issue due to a highly publicized and embarrassing attempt to recover the skullbones of the Gcaleka Xhosa Chief Hintsa. In 1835, in the midst of a war between the British and Xhosa chiefdoms, the British had lured Hintsa into a trap on the pretence of initiating talks with him. The British threatened to hang Hintsa unless he betrayed other Xhosa leaders. When Hintsa tried to escape, he was shot and killed. British soldiers cut off his ears and mutilated his skull. Later a popular belief developed that Hintsa was beheaded and that his skull was spirited back to England. Because Hintsa was not properly buried, it was believed that his spirit roamed the land and was responsible for continuing strife. Over the years, the fate of Hintsa's skull had become "a running sore," according to Mda Mda, a lawyer representing the interests of a group of Xhosa

chiefs.

In 1996, a sangoma (medicine man), Chief Nicholas Gcaleka, seized on the story and set off to Britain on a search for Hintsa's skull. He found one with a hole in it near Inverness, Scotland that he claimed was Hintsa's, but when he returned home with the skull, he was greeted with a great deal of skepticism. He was invited to an imbizo (assembly) of 30 senior Xhosa chiefs at the great place of Gcaleka paramount chief, Xoliliswe Sigcau. They were dubious about Nicholas's claims, especially because they understood Hintsa's head had been shattered when he fled. They confiscated the skull and turned it over to leading scientists such as paleo-anthropologist Philip Tobias and forensic geneticist Trevor Jenkins to run tests on its authenticity. Their investigation concluded that the bones were more likely to be those of a Scottish nanny than Hintsa.[5]

With this fiasco in mind, Sapire and Edgar knew that they had to confirm that the remains exhumed from Nonteta's grave are really hers. There is an irony is using modern scientific investigative tools to rectify an injustice perpetrated by a previous generation of scientists who justified their actions with scientific rectitude. Sapire consulted with experienced scientists at medical schools in Pretoria and Johannesburg, who cautioned us about the complexity of this kind of investigation. They pointed out any testing depends on the condition of the skeletal remains that are uncovered. They stressed that family members should be present to validate the credibility of the

investigation. Moreover, the scientists had to take great care retrieving any remains from the grave, the bones had to be carefully cleaned, and photographs had to be taken at every stage of the process.

Then several options existed for examining her remains. One is to have a physical anthropologist or a medical specialist examine the bones to determine demographic characteristics - age, sex, cause of death, and racial group - and to see if they match the facts we know about Nonteta. The family would then have to decide whether this is sufficient proof for them.

A longer and more expensive process is to conduct DNA testing on the bones, but the reliability of DNA testing rests on the conditions of the bones and whether a match can be made with a living descendant. For instance, the soil condition of her grave determines how much her bones have deteriorated over the years and whether there is enough protein in them for tests. In addition, the DNA of the bones has to be matched with a family member, and there are problems of whether the descendants are male or female, their sex, and other factors.

After consultations with experts in the field, we decided to ask a team from the University of Pretoria's Department of Anatomy whether they would oversee the exhumation. Dr. Maryna Steyn, a Professor of Anatomy, and Mr. Coen Nienaber, an archaeologist, have a great deal of experience in exhuming graves and analyzing remains. Nienaber also had knowledge of the complex procedures for obtaining official permission to exhume a body, and he

consulted with the Bungu family and the Eastern Cape government about the host of steps that had to be taken.

Edgar returned to South Africa in early June and consulted with Steyn and Nienaber about when their schedules allowed for an exhumation. Nienaber set 13 and 14 July as possible dates, and after consultations with the Bungu family about their availability, we decided to proceed with those dates. We needed a lengthy lead time since it was not clear how long it would take to obtain all the official approvals. First the Bungu family had to send a letter requesting the exhumation. Next the Eastern Cape Department of Health and the eMnqaba community authority (the home of the Bungu family) had to approve reinterring her remains once they had been exhumed in Pretoria. Then the National Department of Health and Gauteng Province's Department of Health had to approve the exhumation. Finally the Office of Gauteng's MEC for Development and Planning, which oversees cemeteries, had to add their endorsement.

We also conferred with Johan Green at Rebecca Street Cemetery since he had the task of pinpointing Nonteta's grave. Fortunately he had much more specific information to work with than the reseearchers who searched for the grave of Enoch Sontonga, composer of Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika, several years ago. They knew that Sontonga had been buried in Braamfontein Cemetery in Johannesburg, but there were discrepancies in various publications on the date of his death. Someone located his obituary notice in Imvo Zabantsundu, a leading African newspaper, and then an entry

for an "Enoch" was found in the cemetery register for 1905. It was not uncommon for the surnames of Africans to be omitted in entries. The register also noted a plot number 4885 in the Christian African section. However, in the absence of a detailed map of individual plots, researchers had to rely on an infra-red photograph of the cemetery taken in 1970, a shallow dig by archaeologists to identify where paths and graves were in the Christian African section, and a number plate from another grave to locate what they are confident is Sontonga's grave.[6] In the case of Nonteta's grave, Green not only had a plot number, but he also could refer to a detailed map of the African section specifying individual plots. Over a two week period, he had surveyors locate reference pins and carefully mark off the distances to plot "99".

Nienaber took the lead in working through obtaining permits for the exhumation. However, his task was complicated by adverse publicity generated by another set of exhumations - those of six Umkhonto we Sizwe cadres hanged in the Pretoria Central Prison in 1964 and 1965 and buried in Pretoria's Mamelodi and Rebecca Street cemeteries. Their families had long desired to have their bodies returned to a place near their homes in the Port Elizabeth area. The government agreed to reinter their remains at a Heroes Memorial and to hold a commemoration service on their behalf on 27 June. The directive went out to the Pretoria Metropolitan Council to exhume their graves and transport them back to Port Elizabeth in time for the commemoration. However, when relatives,

government officials, Truth and Reconciliation officials, and Pretoria City Council officials showed up at Mamelodi cemetery on 22 to exhume the graves of Daniel Ndongeni, Noali Petse and Samuel Jonasi, they had not followed the procedures laid down by law. Although the City Council had not been duly notified that permission had been granted by the Metropolitan Council for the exhumations and they had not notified the police who routinely supervise exhumations. They also did not bother to consult with Willie Matsoko, supervisor of Mamelodi cemetery, about the location of the graves. After he objected to the process for ignoring regulations, he went back to his office to identify the precise location of the graves. In his absence, the earth moving machines went ahead with excavating what was thought were the right graves with the tragic result that the wrong bodies were exhumed. Embarrassed officials had to rebury the bodies and find the right graves.[7]

The exhumations of Vuyusile Mini, Mkhaba and Khanyinge at Rebecca Street also ended in controversy, as Green was also bypassed. This time the right graves were exhumed, but in a crude fashion so that little care was taken in removing the bodies. Several observers knowledgeable about these operations believe that it is likely that a number of bones were left in the mounds of earth piled next to their graves.

We resolved that for the sake of Nonteta's memory and her family that we would not allow a repetition of these incidents when it came time for exhuming her grave. At the same time we

realized that Gauteng provincial officials charged with approving exhumations would scrutinize the next request with extra care. A week before Nonteta's exhumation was due to take place, we still lacked the signature of Gauteng's MEC of Development and Planning who was out of town that week. By week's end, although the paperwork had reached the MEC's desk and despite promises that a signature was forthcoming the following Monday, we were concerned enough to entertain a proposal to postphone the exhumation for two weeks. However, too many expectations had been built up in Nonteta's family and church to delay the exhumation any further. After Eastern Cape officials attended a religious service with family and church members on 11 July, a decision was made to leave for Pretoria. On 12 July a minibus set off for the long journey to Pretoria. Accompanying three government officials were three leaders of Nonteta's church, a granddaughter and two grandsons of Nonteta, and 98 year old Sosepha Saleni who had been one of the band of pilgrims who had walked for two months to visit Nonteta at Weskoppies Hospital in 1927. This time the journey would take one day, but the minibus followed virtually the same path as the pilgrims had six decades before.

Fortunately the last signature approving the exhumation came the morning of 13 July. Then Nienaber took the last official step - calling the local police so that a policeman could observe the exhumation. By late morning, family members, church leaders, government officials, journalists, a playwright, a historian, a policeman, and aarchaeolgists were at graveside. After prayers

were offered in remembrance of the spirit of Nonteta, Nienaber and his Nienaber and his team began the initial phase of clearing the grave of a layer of debris that had accumulated over the years. Then one could clearly see the outlines of a grave framed in ash that had been partly used to fill the grave. This area had been a landfill before, so as earth was removed from the grave, a variety of animal bones and pottery fragments surfaced.

The basic strategy of Nienaber's team was straight out of an archaeology textbook. They knew that bodies were buried in the Rebecca Street cemetery with heads facing the west, so they estimated where it was likely to find a femur and began carefully digging shallow test pits or trenches with trowels. The femur is a strong bone and less prone to break on contact with a digging tool. If the test pit turned up no evidence of bones, then another layer of earth was removed from the whole grave. Our initial hypothesis was that since the top body buried in a pauper's grave was usually buried about 2 1/2 feet beneath the ground, we expected to find some remains about that depth. But by day's end, the archaeologists had gone down about 3 feet with no results.

The next day work resumed at 8 a.m. Nienaber and Marius Loots were even more careful with each test pit they dug. When they reached four feet down with no bones surfacing, we did some rechecking with the cemetery register to confirm that there were indeed only two bodies placed in grave 99. We then calculated that since grave diggers typically dug a grave 2 meters deep - as

the standard practice was - it was likely that the two bodies were placed at the lower end of the grave. This meant that Ninenaber's team had to dig deeper before coming across any bones.

Our surmise was correct. Another foot down and fragments of a wooden coffin and iron nails began to appear in the red earth. Then Nienaber found the first indication of remains - the imprint of a tibia that had turned to dust. At the other end of the grave, Loots made an even more dramatic discovery - a largely intact skull.

The next day as Nienaber's team continued the process of uncovering and retrieving the remains, they learned that some of the bones on top had co-mingled with the bones of the body on the bottom. Nienaber's hypothesis is that since the person on bottom was buried in a coffin, as it disintegrated, the body on top, which was not buried in a coffin, sank even deeper and shared some of the same space with the lower body. Nienaber's preliminary analysis of the bones of the person on top is that they belong to a women.

Now that the remains of grave 99 have been gathered, they are awaiting an examination by Prof. Steyn. We will see whether they add further weight to the consensus of those who attended this remarkable exhumation - that Nonteta's remains have indeed been found and that in the near future they will be returned to her home. "Now at last we can rest in peace," said Nonteta's grandson Mzimkulu Bungu, "knowing that we will not die without seeing that our prophet reaches her rightful resting place."[9]

1. See Shula Marks' comments in this regard in her 'The Context of Personal Narrative. Reflections on "Not Either an Experimental Doll" - The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women', Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives, ed. Personal Narrative Group (Bloomington, 1989), 39-55.

2. Newclare Cemetery Register, Pretoria.

3. Interview, Reuben Tsoko. The government was opposed to paying about 12 pounds for a coffin made of sheet-metal, 5 pounds for the cemetery fee and 15 pounds for transporting the body to Middledrift. The government also balked at releasing her body because they had to observe official authorization and a Department of Health rule that stipulated that 'except in special circumstances...no recommendation for the issue of a permit for exhumation will be made...by the Union Health Department until at least two years after interment' (NTS 6605 11/328).

4. Undated, unsigned memorandum of 1955 (NTS 6605 11/328).

5. Weekly Mail and Guardian (Johannesburg), 15 March 1996 and 29 March 1996.

6. "Unearthing Our Hidden History: Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika," The Teacher Resource Pages, September 1996; A.E. Buff, "In Search of Enoch Sontonga: Author and Composer of Nkosi Sikelel'i Africa," Report for the Greater Johannesburg Transitional Metropolitan Council, April 1996.

7. Sowetan, 29 June 1998; Cape Times, 26 June 1998; and Pretoria News, 23 June 1998.

8. Maureen Isaacson, "The Search for a Lost Prophet," Sunday Independent (Johannesburg), 19 July 1998, 15.