

# Nontetha Nkwenwe

mad for spreading the gospel?

## Historical Sources – What is Madness?

In this lesson plan, learners are asked to decide on whether the prophetess Nontetha was incarcerated because the authorities thought she was mentally ill or whether they had political reasons for isolating her and branding her as mad. Learners will be examining a medical report, letters from Nontetha's followers and the response from the Native Affairs Department.



No Picture

### Nontetha Nkwenwe (24 May 1921)

Nontetha had her first visions after recovering from the 'flu that killed millions of people worldwide in 1918. She said that God was telling her to preach to black people. Her visions and preaching were in the tradition of a long line of Xhosa prophets, especially Ntsikana who was one of the first converts to Christianity at the beginning of the 19th century. He had tried to translate Christian ideas into language and images with which the Xhosa could identify.

Nontetha believed in remaining loyal to the Xhosa chiefs, but she wanted people to break out of their group mentality and unite. She attacked mission churches for being too interested in making money, and urged black people to look after their own affairs. By mid 1922, government authorities had begun to notice her and sent police spies to listen to what she was saying when she preached in rural locations near East London. She was opposed to the use of all alcohol and urged her followers to wear European clothes. But the police and government officials were scared that she might be anti-white. Witnesses said that she had told people not to go to work on the land or in the mines. They reported that she was predicting a Day of Judgment when Europeans would be overcome. We can see from the police reports of the time that there was wide-spread anxiety about threats to the government, often caused by the activities of the Communist Party.

The authorities decided that Nontetha's growing influence was dangerous so she was arrested in 1922. After being jailed she was sent to Fort Beaufort Mental Hospital for observation. She was released at the beginning of 1923. But because she went on preaching despite being prohibited her from doing so, she was recommitted to Fort Beaufort in April. Her followers visited her and, in December 1924, it was decided that she was too disruptive. She was sent far away to Weskoppies Mental Hospital in Pretoria. Her followers embarked on their first 'pilgrimage' to see her in Pretoria, which took 55 days. A second 'pilgrimage' aimed at getting her released was organised in 1930. Several of the men were arrested during the 'pilgrimage' for not having passes. Nontetha was not released. She died of cancer of the liver and stomach in 1935 and was buried in a pauper's grave. Her grave was located by historian Bob Edgar more than sixty years later in 1997. The remains were exhumed and returned to representatives of her family and followers. Her Church presently has 20 000 members. A huge funeral was held in October 1988 at her home in Khulile Village. Edgar, R & Sapire, H. 2000. *African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenwe, a Twentieth Century South African Prophet.*

### Source A: The Medical Report

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PHY. F.N. 359

Office of the Mental Hospital,  
Pretoria.  
2nd June, 1930.

The Commissioner for Mental Hygiene,  
Union Buildings,  
Pretoria.

With reference to the detention at this Hospital of Female Native patient Montete, No. 359, I have the honour to report as follows:-

At a Conference held at this Hospital on May 1st, 1930. Nontete was seen by all the medical staff, who were unanimous in the opinion that the patient was mentally disordered and properly detained in the Mental Hospital on the grounds that the following symptoms have been repeatedly and constantly observed during her detention here:-

1. Acute hallucinosis.
2. Delusions of a grandiose nature.
3. Delusions of poisoning.
4. Emotional attitude of religious exaltation with a state of restless excitement.

History and Description of Case.

The patient is aged 58 as nearly as can be ascertained. Her physical appearance is consistent with the stated age. She was first admitted to the Fort Beaufort Mental Hospital on the 9th December, 1922. According to the case records whilst at Fort Beaufort she was in a state of religious exaltation, stating that she was directly inspired by God who, himself, appears to her if she makes certain signs. God then enters her blood and puts writing into her head which she can

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It was found that her mental condition was much the same as at the commencement of her probationary leave. She stated that she was inspired directly by God, that she had to obey him and preach if he told her to do so. God had picked her to preach to the natives because all their sins would rest on her if she did not.

(sgd) F.D. Cronthwaite.  
PHYSICIAN SUPERINTENDENT.

Why should Nouteta be incarcerated in the asylum?

Dear Mr Editor,

Being a minister of the Gospel I am wondering whether the readers of your paper will not be taken back at my views concerning Nouteta.

All the time I have been searching for reasons for the arrest of Nouteta. I was under the impression that she was guilty of disturbing the peace. I find that it is not so. There has been no headman, or chief who has given her up to the authorities for either insanity or disloyalty as is customary, neither do her religious followers find a reason.

On studying her life closer I find that she had wonderful and remarkable powers of converting natives, the people loved her name with gratitude, and her congregation grew by leaps and bounds, much to the exasperation and disgust and annoyance of other religious missionary bodies whose success is very slow.

During her short working period she made many converts. Natives ceased their Kafir beer traffic. Stealing and robbing were put by, all this to the advantage of ourselves and the government.

I think I can say wrong information was given by other ministers concerning Nouteta, as their congregations were fast diminishing and a steady stream was flowing to Nouteta's open gatherings. I am perfectly certain

her under a great obligation. I should, therefore, esteem it a great favour if the government would release Mouteta and grant her permission to carry on her good and successful work. This fact, in itself would surely indicate that the reason for my writing this article is not a paltry one. You all must pray over the matter and whatever you decide is perfectly alright. You will agree with me brethren, that Mouteta as a preacher of the Gospel she has to preach as the Holy Spirit directs her.

In conclusion, I may remark, in the body of my article that I agree with Enoch Mngijina and Jimba, there are no credentials mentioned in the Bible. In the scriptures it is written: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." *Matth 28:19;* *Mark 16:15.*

What do the ministers say about this? <sup>nothing I suppose</sup> They are quite comfortable on their sofas. Live and let live.

I am,  
Sirs,  
Yours Sincerely,  
D.W. Ntsikana,  
Tswatwa,  
Fort Beaufort.

## Source C: Qoshe - is the Native Affairs Department for the Native?

Qekwane  
Tamacha P.O.,  
King Williamstown  
10<sup>th</sup> Jan, 33

Dear Sir

I ask you to allow me to repeat my words to you. Our application to you is to ask you to release the prophetess on leave, and if you don't please point out the reason why you should not let her out because first Government sent out ministers of the Gospel to preach to among the people now when the prophetess also came by the same way you imprisoned her and ~~she~~ said she's mad! Now I ask from our Authorities to point us out what is truth and what is error because I think if ~~the~~ what she preaches is an error the whole world must also be the same. Dear Sirs if our Authorities have sympathy with us must also realise all these expenses of coming up there yearly. Awaiting your reply

yours obedient servant  
Delanto Qoshe & Co.

*Delanto Qoshe  
10<sup>th</sup> Jan 1933  
the name of the prophetess*

Response to Delanto's request HP 1930

## Source D: Native Affairs responds

Mr. Delanto Qoshe,  
Qekwane,  
P.O. Tamacha,  
KINGWILLIAMSTOWN.

19 JAN 1933

Your letter of the 10th instant in which you ask for the release of Nonteta from the Pretoria Mental Hospital has been received and I have to inform you that your application cannot be granted.

Yours obediently,

R. S. MEDFORD

SECRETARY FOR NATIVE AFFAIRS.

Letter by Delanto Qoshe, 10 January, 1933. National Archives, Pretoria: BAO 6605 11/328

## Learner Activities

- Read the 'symptoms' listed by the Superintendent physician in *Source A*. They describe Nontetha as having visions, thinking the authorities were poisoning her, and being very religious. Pretend you are an expert psychiatrist and give your opinion on whether Nontetha is 'mentally disordered'.
- The author of *Source B*, DW Ntsikana was a minister of religion. What was his argument for why Nontetha should be released?
- What is author Qoshe's attitude to the authorities in *Source C*?
- What is the attitude of the Native Affairs Department official in *Source D*?
- Do you think the authorities wanted to keep Nontetha in the Mental Hospital because they believed she was mad – or was there another reason? Support your answer.

## Other Ideas

Find out how mentally ill people were treated in the 19th century in England.

Talk about why we no longer use words such as 'mad', 'lunatic', 'insane' to refer to people with mental illnesses.

## Criteria for Assessment

- Learners will be able to provide a reasoned argument for whether or not Nontetha exhibited the symptoms of mental illness.
- Learners will demonstrate understanding of the arguments made by Ntsikana and Qoshe for Nontetha's release.
- Learners will demonstrate understanding that the authorities were nervous about the aims of Nontetha's movement in the context of the 1920s and '30s.

## Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

LO 2; AS 2 & 3

LO 3; AS 2, 3 & 4

Grade 11 Content Link – How was segregation a foundation for apartheid?