African apocalypse: the story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, a twentieth century South African prophet


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Abstract

Book synopsis: The devastating influenza epidemic of 1918 ripped through southern Africa. In its aftermath, revivalist and millenarian movements sprouted. Prophets appeared bearing messages of resistance, redemption, and renewal. African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, A Twentieth-Century Prophet is the remarkable story of one such prophet, a middle-aged Xhosa woman named Nontetha. After surviving the deadly virus, Nontetha proclaimed that a series of dreams revealed to her that the influenza had been a punishment from God. Consequently, she embarked on a mission to reform her society. She imposed numerous prohibitions and rules on her followers. In a parallel movement, in 1919, millenarian Israelites congregated in the holy village of Ntabelanga, 100 miles north of Nontetha's area, to await the end of the world. In May 1921, police killed nearly 200 Israelites near Queenstown in a showdown over attempts to expel the settlers. Accused of sedition by an alarmed government, Nontetha was committed to Fort Beaufort Mental Hospital in 1922. On Nontetha's death in 1935, officials buried her in an unmarked pauper's grave. In 1997, Edgar and Sapire located Nontetha's grave. Of Edgar's efforts to return Nontetha to her home, the New York Times said, "One would not expect, perhaps, that a mild-mannered professor from Howard University would turn out to be the Indiana Jones of South Africa." African Apocalypse touches on a variety of themes, including African Christianity, gender, protest, the social history of madness, and the engagement of professional historians in contemporary issues.

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Nontetha Nkwenkwe (c. 1875 - May 20, 1935) was a Xhosa prophetess who lived in colonial South Africa and began a religious movement that caused her to be committed to asylums by the South African government from 1923 until her death in 1935. She is regarded as one of the most remarkable female religious leaders associated with independent churches in the 1920s. Robert R. Edgar, Hilary Sapire. African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, A Twentieth-century South African Prophet. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. xxiii + 190 pp. Reviewed by Robert Ross (Afrikanistiek, Leiden Universiteit) Published on H-SAfrica (June, 2000). It describes the activities of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, an illiterate monolingual Xhosa woman who, in middle age, widowed and with five children, recovered from the influenza pandemic of 1919. After this, she underwent a transformation, in a way that is totally consistent with the expectations of Xhosa ideas, into a healer and prophet – she had earlier been a herbalist. Edgar, R. and Sapire, Hilary (1999) African apocalypse: the story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, a twentieth century South African prophet. Ohio University Press. ISBN 9780896802087. Full text not available from this repository. Prophets appeared bearing messages of resistance, redemption, and renewal. African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, A Twentieth-Century Prophet is the remarkable story of one such prophet, a middle-aged Xhosa woman named Nontetha. After surviving the deadly virus, Nontetha proclaimed that a series of dreams revealed to her that the influenza had been a punishment from God. Consequently, she embarked on a mission to reform her society. She imposed numerous prohibitions and rules on her followers.