

The Ash Heap of History: Reflections on Historical Research in Southern Africa

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Abstract: When I began conducting research as a graduate student in southern Africa in 1973, I was following in the wake of an intrepid group of American scholars - Gwendolyn Carter, Tom Karis, Dan Johns and Gail Gerhart - who were amassing a remarkable collection of documents on the South African freedom struggle for their *From Protest to Challenge* (1972-1977) series. They challenged archival/library research that favored government or establishment sources by creating an alternative archive that laid the foundation for reconstructing modern South Africa's freedom struggle. My own experience with documentary collecting on political and religious movements over the past three decades has been unconventional to say the least - and has even involved sifting through dustbins to retrieve documents. Because of my extended relationships with individuals, groups, and communities, my own efforts at documentary collection and retrieval have yielded totally unexpected and often surprising results. This essay is a reflection on the methodology of documentary collection with a focus on two case studies from the eastern Cape: 1) the discovery and return of the long-lost Ark of the Covenant of the Israelite church group and 2) the search for the burial site of the African woman prophet Nontetha in Pretoria and the return and reburial of her remains at her home.

In 1980, I was conducting research in Lesotho on Lekhotla la Bafo (LLB), a Basotho anti-colonial movement that had been the precursor of the modern political party, the Basotho Congress Party (BCP). A decade earlier, the BCP was on its way to winning the country's first post-independence election when Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan declared the election results null and void. After the BCP staged an abortive coup in 1973, many BCP leaders fled into exile and any group linked to it in any fashion was targeted for retribution by the Jonathan regime. Hence, when I began interviewing the elderly members of Lekhotla la Bafo, they were naturally reluctant to divulge much. In one case, a person closed all the curtains and doors in his home before he spoke to me. Shortly after that encounter, I stumbled across rich source material when another historian and I located a LLB veteran, Hlakane Mokhithi, on the outskirts of Maputsoe. Although Mokhithi's memory had dimmed, he was willing to share a document that he had preserved for decades. He rummaged in an ash-heap in the burnt-out shell of a building and pulled out a piece of piece of plastic sheeting wrapped around a hand-written notebook of

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v9/v9i4a4.pdf>

LLB songs.¹ This was a major find since members had not been willing to sing any of their songs to me.²

During the decades that I have been researching history in southern Africa, I experienced many other occasions when I retrieved evidence through persistently digging through other kinds of ash heaps. Whether in Lesotho or South Africa, I operated in a super-charged political environment in which I had to develop instincts and skills - not taught in the classroom - for tracking down new sources of documentation in unorthodox ways and places and coping sensitively and tactfully with a basic reality - that the "politics of inequality," as Gwendolyn Carter put it, erected barriers that impinged on all research undertakings.

For example, many Africans had an absolute skepticism of any researcher - especially a white researcher - who came into their lives. Based on long and painful experiences with political authority, their assumption was that anyone asking questions was not likely to be gathering evidence that would benefit them. There was not much I could do to overcome this stigma except to be honest and forthright and hope that with time people would begin to trust and open up to me. In some cases that took a long time. One schoolteacher who assisted me in the Ciskei and Transkei in 1974 told me years later that he had remained skeptical of me for months and kept a close eye on my behavior before he began to trust me.

Nevertheless, there were occasions when someone agreed to talk with me that I fully expected to be reticent. One such case was a venerable Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) veteran, Edwin Mofutsanyana, who was living deep in the rugged Maluti mountains in Lesotho. He had been the CPSA's primary liaison with LLB and its leader, Josiel Lefela, since the 1930s. In 1959, as the political crisis in South Africa was reaching a boiling point, Mofutsanyana concluded that he would likely be arrested soon. He weighed his options of staying within the country or fleeing into exile. After choosing the latter, he rejected heading north in favor of seeking sanctuary in northern Lesotho, a mere twenty miles from his birthplace in Qwa Qwa. After his Nhlapho kinsmen hid him in a village nestled on Lesotho's border with South Africa, he hopped on a bus to look for Lefela at his home in Mapoteng. By coincidence, Lefela was holding court on the bus and took him in, eventually finding him a place to hide out. After working closely with Lefela and Lesotho's Communist Party during the 1960s, Mofutsanyana moved to a remote area to live, as he phrased it, "with the monkeys in the mountains."³

Over time Mofutsanyana disappeared from sight. When I became aware of his links to LLB, I had few clues to his whereabouts. Gani Surtie, a Maseru businessman whose Indian trader father had known Mofutsanyana since the 1930s, was certain he was still alive (at least he had not heard that he had died) and pinpointed the area, Kota ha Pentsi in the Leribe district, where he was most likely to be living. Armed with that scant information, I set off on a crisp wintry day in a sturdy Volkswagen Beetle on a rugged track that eventually turned into little more than a horse trail. At each trading store I made inquiries about Mofutsanyana. Just when I was ready to give up and turn back, I encountered some people who volunteered that there was a man, Tente Majara, who lived on a nearby hillside, who knew him. Indeed, when Majara, a longtime LLB member, came down to meet me, he confirmed that he knew Mofutsanyana well. After I explained my reasons for wanting to speak with him, Majara agreed to take my hastily scribbled note of introduction to Mofutsanyana on horseback.

When my note reached Mofutsanyana, it touched off a fierce debate among the villagers that he did not reveal to me for several years. Sensing a trap, some villagers warned him that I must be from the South Africa Special Branch and that my research interest in him was really a ruse to kidnap him and consign him to prison in South Africa. However, he decided to take a chance because of a recent dream in which Lefela, who died in 1965, appeared to him. The pair took off on a long jaunt in the mountains. They discussed many issues, and the end of their trek, Lefela turned to Mofutsanyana and advised him that a stranger was going to appear soon in his life and that he must speak with him. By a fortuitous stroke of luck, my note appeared the next day. Although a hardened Bolshevik in his Party heyday, Mofutsanyana culturally was a person who placed great stock in his dreams throughout his life. He ignored the cautions to steer clear of me and instead sent me a note: "I do welcome your providence given appointment whole heartedly." I did not appreciate the reference to "providence" until much later.

He set a date to meet me at Tente Majara's place in about three weeks, but given the glacial pace of mail delivery in Lesotho, his letter did not reach me until the date of the appointment had passed. After patiently waiting three days for me to show up, he rode back to his village and dispatched another letter:

Having caused me a great anxiety to know more about your dear self and your intentions, you have just vanished mysteriously, as when you came, and left me guessing about what might have taken place or happened to you .

You may probably have been trying to find out for your self if I am still in the world of the living, for which thank you most sincerely. I am still alive and more enthusiastic than ever before. If you are still in the territory, I am at your disposal - at any time. If you are on your way now I can only say it is a thousand times pities that we have not been able to know each other.

If the fates are willing.

Aurivoir tots siens.

Ed. T. Mofutsanyana⁴

After another exchange of letters, we managed to get together at Majara's place. Mofutsanyana tactfully answered my questions on *Lekhotla la Bafo*. I knew then that I wanted to talk with him more extensively about his life experiences. The following year he accepted my invitation to spend a week with me at the National University of Lesotho at Roma, and we recorded 15 hours of interviews. In subsequent years we developed a close friendship.

Although my introduction to Mofutsanyana had an unexpected and providential twist to it, I had a more conventional introduction to A.P. Mda, one of the founders of the ANC Youth League who had gone into exile in Lesotho in the early 1960s. Since I had directed my research interests to Lesotho in the late 1970s, I decided to look him up and inquire whether he would allow me to interview him about his life history. Although he had granted an interview in the early 1970s to Gail Gerhart and had appeared briefly in the now classic documentary *Generations of Resistance*, he had a reputation for being reticent to talk to academics. When we

first met in Maseru in 1983, he was coy about doing an interview but agreed that if I contacted him the following year when I was taking up a lectureship at the National University of Lesotho, he would talk to me. When we met next at his modest law office in Mafeteng, he operated in a lawyerly mode. He agreed to talk to me but set ground rules for what we could cover in interviews. I could tape him about any event in his life up to 21, but for anything after that, I had to rely on my notes. Mda's logic was that if my tapes ever fell into the wrong hands, he did not want them played back to him in court. He could more easily defend himself if it were a question of the reliability of my notes.

I learned much later that Mda, like Mofutsanyana, had consulted with his associates who gave him conflicting advice about how to deal with this American fellow and whether he should give me any time. Some advised him to proceed but with caution, while others were deeply suspicious of any American researcher. Mda later informed me that he had gone ahead with the interviews because he thought I was an energetic and thorough researcher who would systematically track down pieces he had written in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, he often pointed me in the right direction, telling me about letters that he had sent to obscure black newspapers and periodicals as a young man or alerting me to *nom de plumes* he used over the years. Over time we became good friends and I convinced him to be filmed in 1986 for a documentary on apartheid by a British Grenada television team. However, even after he agreed to a taped interview with another scholar, I kept my contract and continued to make handwritten notes on our exchanges.⁵

RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, ACT I

Although the political environment in southern Africa constrained my research in multiple ways, I diligently worked to develop social networks that over time established enduring relationships with people and groups that contributed to subsequent research projects. As I did with Edwin Mofutsanyana and A.P. Mda, I attempted to sustain contact with other people I interviewed. I also as much as possible paid return visits whenever I was in their area. These relationships often yielded unexpected dividends for my research - even decades later - but what I did not anticipate was how I inadvertently became part of the historical narrative of some groups and how they interpreted my research in spiritual terms.

Inadvertently becoming part of the historical narrative was especially the case with my dissertation study on post-World War I millennial movements in the Eastern Cape.⁶ It centered on an Old Testament group known as the Israelites that followed the prophecies of Enoch Mgijima. In 1919, he had called his followers to gather at his home at Bullhoek near Queenstown and await the end of the world. By settling on crown land, they came into conflict with the government. After local and national officials negotiated for many months to convince them to leave the land peacefully, they finally concluded that the Israelites had no intention of compromising and assembled a force of 800 police and soldiers to forcibly remove them. In the showdown on 24 May 1921, the Israelites were no match for the heavily armed police. Around 200 Israelites were slaughtered in 20 minutes in what has come to be known as the Bullhoek Massacre.

Gathering material on Bullhoek in the State Archives in Pretoria, I came across documents on other millennial movements that I had not encountered before. One was led by a prophetess, Nontetha Nkwenkwe of the King Williams Town area, who fell into a deep coma during the influenza pandemic of 1918 that killed hundreds of thousands of people in southern Africa.⁷ She had a vision in which God instructed her that he had sent this cataclysm as punishment for people's sinful practices, and more suffering would follow unless they followed a righteous path. All of this was a prelude to a doomsday that was drawing nigh. God also directed her to preach to the *amaqaba* (the 'red' or illiterate people) and to convince the present and future generations to acquire education. Although she was not inciting her followers to resist the government, Native Affairs Department officials, wanting to head off another confrontation like they had had with the Israelites, judged her to be a threat to peace and order. Since they had no grounds on which to arrest her, however, they attempted to silence her by directing a magistrate to declare her insane and commit her in late 1922 to a mental hospital fifty miles away at Fort Beaufort. A month later she was released on the understanding that she should not resume her preaching. When she violated the order in 1924, the authorities moved her six hundred miles away to Weskoppies Mental Hospital in Pretoria. Although their intent was to isolate her from her followers who regularly visited her in Fort Beaufort, that did not stop almost a hundred of her followers in 1927 from participating in a 'Pilgrimage of Grace'. They walked six hundred miles over a two-month period to visit her at Weskoppies. She remained institutionalized until her death of cancer in 1935. She was buried in a pauper's grave without a marker and officials resolutely refused to hand over her remains to her family and followers in subsequent decades.

After completing my research on these and other millennial movements in the archives and libraries, I shifted my research to two eastern Cape Bantustans, the Ciskei and Transkei, and interviewed numerous people who had first-hand knowledge of these movements. At a time when most historians were conducting their studies almost exclusively in the confines of archives and libraries, I was one of the few historians to conduct interviews in these areas. But because apartheid was in high season, I had to conform to the rules of racial engagement that the government set for researchers working in 'Bantu' or African areas. The government issued me a permit that I had to submit to the local magistrate in each district that I visited. The permit stipulated that "Lodging with Bantu is not permitted" and that I "had to behave in a dignified manner and refrain from any criticism of the administration of the Government or any of its officials."⁸ Government officials and chiefs and headmen scrutinized me wherever I went. Indeed, on several occasions, local people pulled me aside to inform me that security police were making inquiries about what I was up to. Although the permit restricted me from staying with Africans (and South African whites often warned me that I would have my throat slit in my sleep if I did so), I was allowed to reside in African areas so long as I was housed in a 'white spot', typically mission stations that were mostly staffed by German missionaries and priests.

The Israelites generally were prepared to talk with me but with some reservations. Although the Israelites had welcomed several anthropologists in their midst in previous decades, some of them questioned my motivations for digging into what had happened at Bullhoek. Why was I resurrecting such a painful episode in their past that might reopen wounds and that might lead to more unwanted government attention? Some Israelite

elders, however, were keen on relating the history of their church and took me under their wing. They introduced me to a dozen or so members who had extensive knowledge of their church's history or who had been at Bullhoek the day of the massacre. I attended a number of services, including a service of remembrance held on May 24, 1974 at Bullhoek for those who died in 1921. Although I knew that most of the Israelites I spoke to were restrained in their recollections, I was confident that I had enough written and oral documentation for my study.

For several periods of time - 1977 to 1980 and 1985 to 1990 - I was prohibited from entering South Africa, but I maintained contact with the church's historian, Gideon Ntloko, and shared with him my documentation on the Israelites. On one of the times I was *persona non grata* in South Africa, I took advantage of the government's policy of granting a bogus independence to the Transkei in 1976. Even though I did not have a visa for entering South Africa, I could cross the Lesotho border at Telle bridge into Transkei's Herschel district which was separate from the rest of the Transkei. I had no choice but to travel through South Africa before reentering Transkei. Since there were only a handful of border posts for entering Transkei, as long as the police did not stop me at a roadblock, I could make discreet detours to visit people in South Africa. One was with Ntloko in Queenstown who let me know that the security police had recently warned him against speaking with some foreign researchers who were in Port Elizabeth intending to do research on the Israelites. Not wishing to compromise the Israelites, following that incident I refrained from further visits with them until after I was allowed to reenter South Africa in 1990.

My ties to the Israelites resumed in late 1994 when I was affiliated to the Institute for Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. My curiosity was piqued by an essay by Denver Webb, a leading eastern Cape heritage specialist. He related to me that an Israelite artifact, a "wooden box containing a large parchment scroll with religious texts," was stored in the basement of the Albany Museum. When museum officials allowed me to examine the box, I found it contained a 6-foot long parchment scroll on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed in ornate script in isiXhosa.

Although I was not sure of the box's provenance, I knew that as the Israelite dwellings at Bullhoek were demolished and as the Israelites were dispersed after the massacre, the police confiscated personal and church items from Mgijima's home and the Tabernacle. These included the prophet's red gown, hats, and walking sticks, silver vessels and plates, brass bugles, lamps, and, most importantly, the Israelite Ark of the Covenant, which had originally been brought from the Orange Free State by Adonijah Ntloko and was a revered holy relic.

In late 1921, the government tried over a hundred Israelites for sedition but placed the primary blame on Enoch Mgijima, his brother Charles, and Gilbert Matshoba. They were sentenced to six-year terms with hard labor at DeBeer's Convict Station in Kimberley. Following Enoch's release from prison in May 1924, he wrote the Queenstown magistrate requesting the return of the confiscated items from the police, but they claimed that they did not have them in their possession.⁹ We now know that they were lying when they made this statement. While we do not know how long the Ark remained in their hands, the staff at the Albany Museum documented that around World War II an anonymous person donated the Ark to the museum. Although the box containing the scroll had a tag stating that it was the property of Enoch and museum officials were vaguely aware that it was something from the Israelites,

they had no idea of its significance and never displayed it in public. The Ark remained forgotten in the museum basement for over a half-century.

I was also unclear of the box's significance, so I decided to consult Gideon Ntloko in Queenstown. As I was describing my find in detail, he grew visibly excited. As a young man he had heard his uncles describing the box and scroll, and he was sure that I had discovered the missing Ark of the Covenant. Because he was concerned that the Israelite faithful would be extremely excited about this find and might have unrealistic expectations about its immediate return, he enjoined me to keep the news to myself until he had a chance to look at the Ark in person. When we met some months later in mid-1995 at the Albany Museum and viewed the Ark, he nearly passed out on the spot. He knelt and went into an extended prayer. We agreed that he would convey the good news at an appropriate moment to the Israelite leadership, and that I would talk to museum officials about what they had in the basement.

At a meeting with the museum's director, Wouter Holleman, I related the story of the Bullhoek massacre and how the Ark had eventually been deposited in his museum and what its significance was to the Israelites. Since I was leaving soon for the United States, I did not see myself as an intermediary between the museum and the Israelites. My hope was that he and other museum officials would not treat the Ark as the museum's private property even if they had no hand in its seizure from the Israelites.¹⁰ I also suggested that it would be a major public relations coup for the museum, especially in the context of post-1994 South Africa, if they cooperated with the Israelites and facilitated a transfer of the Ark. Otherwise I envisioned a scenario in which the aggrieved Israelites would be staging protests at the museum. I was elated months later when I learned that the Ark had been transferred to the Israelites in late 1995 in a moving ceremony at the Israelites' main Tabernacle in Queenstown. The Israelites re-consecrated the Ark and placed it in a vault in the Tabernacle to be displayed every three years.

I did not pick up the whole story about the transfer until the following year when I learned that museum officials initially had refused to surrender the Ark to the Israelites and instead offered to restore and display it at the museum and create a facsimile of the Ark for the Israelites. They believed that the Ark would be preserved better under their oversight. As might be expected, their stance threatened to inflame the situation, but eventually they backed down and arranged for the transfer.

After the transfer, Israelite elders debated my role in discovering the Ark. When I stopped in Queenstown in mid-1996 several elders sat down with me and related their discussions about why I, an American, was the one who had solved the mystery of what had happened to the Ark and set in motion the process for its return. Their interpretation was that an angel had possessed me without my knowledge and guided me to the Ark's location. I may have thought that I was acting out of curiosity, but they knew better.

TWO HISTORIANS IN SEARCH OF A PLOT

My study on Nontetha Nkwenkwe featured even more profound and unexpected methodological twists and turns. I had first learned of her through Native Affairs and police files that I located in 1973 in the State Archives in Pretoria. Because of the fifty-year rule then in effect, researchers were prevented from looking at documents written after 1925. I could piece

together the early stages of Nontetha's movement after she began preaching, but not what happened to her after the state committed her to a series of mental hospitals. I decided that I would follow through on leads from the documents and visit the African locations mentioned in official dispatches. Since I was going to work in the Ciskei, I arranged for accommodation at the Federal Theological Seminary in Alice. After securing permission from local chiefs in the Debe Nek area, I learned that two of Nontetha's children were still alive. In turn they informed me of the existence of the Church of the Prophetess Nontetha headed by Bishop Reuben Tsoko, one of Nontetha's leading disciples since the 1920s. After contacting him, he invited me to attend a church service, where I explained my research and arranged to interview him and church members both individually and collectively. By the time I left the area, I knew that I had gathered enough information to reconstruct the main outlines of the story. There were still remained enormous gaps, however, that were going to be difficult to fill until I had access to all the government files. Indeed, after returning to the United States to write up my dissertation, I found that I had enough source material to discuss Nontetha and her movement, but too little to write up a full study. I had it in mind to return to the story in the future, but that took another two decades, and I lost contact with Tsoko and his church.

In 1994-95 I was on sabbatical leave in South Africa when another historian, Hilary Sapire, contacted me with the news that a colleague had alerted her to a substantial file on Nontetha in the State Archives that I had not seen in 1973. Because of her interest in Africans, western psychiatry, and mental hospitals, Sapire was preparing to do a study on Nontetha's (and other Africans') experiences in the mental hospitals and with the diagnoses of European psychiatrists. Hence, she desired to consult me about my previous research. After communicating with each other we decided to pool our research findings and write an extended essay on Nontetha's story. Having consulted the new government documentation, I decided to return to the same rural locations I had visited in 1974 to see whether I could unearth any fresh sources of information. I had no idea whether the church was still in existence, but thought that it was worth a try since the climate for interviewing people had dramatically improved since South Africa's independence in May 1994.¹¹

With a close friend, Luyanda ka Msumza, I set out on an overcast Sunday in mid-1997 to an area about ten miles from King Williams Town. We first visited the homestead of a prominent faith healer, Nomthunzi 'MaNgconde' Mali, who practices a few miles from Nontetha's home village. We observed license plates of cars from all over southern Africa, a testament to her widespread fame as a healer. While we watched one of her mass blessings, we were not in a position to penetrate her inner circle to approach her. We then drove to a nearby village where I conducted interviews in 1974 and asked some men on the side of the road if they knew whether Nontetha's church was still in existence. After confirming that it was, they directed us to an elderly woman standing nearby. Although acknowledging her membership in the church, she was reticent to speak with us. She pointed to the home of another member, a middle-aged woman, and recommended that we should talk to her.

When she appeared at the front door of her home, we did not have a chance to introduce ourselves before she began looking at me intently. She asked, "But aren't you Bob Edgar?" Her question took me by surprise. After acknowledging that I was indeed Bob Edgar, she chided me: "But what happened to you? You left many years ago and we did not hear any more from

you." She had been a teenager when I attended church services in 1974 and had a clear memory of me. She said church members placed a great stock in my visit and were very disappointed that I had disappeared and not remained in contact. She also queried me about my appearance. "Your beard is now getting gray and you're not as thin as you once were." I laughed and explained how the decades had altered my appearance. She advised us to go next to the home of the church's head, Bishop Mzwandile Mabhelu, Tsoko's successor, at nearby Thamarha Location.

I had not met Mabhelu on my initial visit in 1974, but on reaching his place and introducing myself, his eyes immediately lit up. He was visibly excited that I had returned and warmly welcomed me. Word circulated quickly in the village that I was around and, within a short time, a stream of people flocked to Mabhelu's home. I was once again surprised to learn that I had become part of their community's oral history - "the American who had visited many years before" - and I was heartened by their gracious reception. We agreed that I would return in a week's time for a feast and a meeting with the congregation, where we both would have a chance to catch up on what had happened over the course of the years. The following Sunday they shared a history of Nontetha's life that they had compiled, and they introduced me to two people, both in their nineties, who had known Nontetha as young people and who had participated in the "pilgrimage of grace" in 1927. The congregation conveyed how anguished they remained over how government officials had mistreated and institutionalized Nontetha and then refused to return her remains to her family after her death. I shared with them the documents that we had recently collected and the essay on Nontetha that Sapire and I had drafted.

After leaving them that day, I reflected on the occasion and determined that at the very least I was going to look for Nontetha's burial place in Pretoria regardless of how remote my chances were of finding it. Even if I could locate the cemetery where she was buried, what chance did I have of finding her grave in a pauper's field with no gravestones? I had two pieces of information to work with - the date of her death in May 1935 and the name of the cemetery, New, where she was buried. However, once I arrived in Pretoria and called around to the main cemeteries, I learned that there was no cemetery still bearing that name. I then decided to visit each of the cemeteries in turn beginning with Rebecca Street Cemetery, the one nearest Weskoppies Mental Hospital. When that cemetery's superintendent, Johan Green, volunteered that his cemetery's original name was Newclare, I knew I had probably found the right place. In line with segregationist policy, the cemetery had maintained separate burial areas for Europeans, Coloureds, Indians and Africans, but its register listed all burials in chronological order regardless of racial classification. After Green brought out an oversized ledger for 1935, we soon found a listing for a "Nontetho" with a burial date of 22 May. The entry noted that she had died at age 62 of liver and stomach cancer. The entry mistakenly listed her as a male, but we speculated that since she was wrapped in a blanket when she was brought to the cemetery, officials probably did not bother to determine whether she was male or female. Three bodies were normally placed in a pauper's grave, but we located the name of one other man who had been buried below her a few days earlier and ascertained that no one had been buried above her.

More importantly the ledger identified Nontetha's burial plot. Although I assumed that would not be helpful in a pauper's field, Green not only informed me that he had a detailed map of every plot in that area, but also that, with the help of surveyor's pins, he could pinpoint the precise location of her grave. Driving to that area, he showed me roughly where he thought her grave should be. Since this remarkable discovery came as I was preparing to return to the U.S., I called on Mzumza to report this news directly to Bishop Mabhelu and to Nontetha's family. As I anticipated they were ecstatic to hear about these developments.

The next year was spent preparing the groundwork for an exhumation of Nontetha's grave. The Heritage Office of the Eastern Cape provincial government was exceptionally cooperative. Its staff had considerable experience in working with local communities to memorialize historical events and was sensitive to the cultural issues with which we would have to contend. They advised that we should put Nontetha's family foremost in our consultations before bringing the church or anyone else into the dialogue. In spring 1998, Hilary Sapire and I met Nontetha's descendants from several branches of her family at the East London home of Vuyani Bungu, a world champion boxer and Nontetha's great-grandson. We were fortunate that all the branches were in agreement about how to proceed.

I returned to South Africa in mid-1998 to prepare the way for the exhumation. Sapire had made contact with Coen Nienaber and his team of archaeologists, who were attached to the University of Pretoria's Department of Anatomy, about conducting the exhumation.¹² Although their specialty was Iron Age archaeology, they were receptive to performing an exhumation of a person from the recent past. They were also well versed in the complex bureaucratic process of securing the necessary permits from offices at four different levels of government in the Eastern Cape and Gauteng provinces.

All the stakeholders in the process - family members, church leaders (including 93-year old Tobi Mokrawuzana), government officials, archaeologists, a journalist, and myself - finally converged on Pretoria at the Holiday Inn on the morning of 13 July. But since Gauteng province had not issued the last permit for the exhumation, the archaeological team was not prepared to commence work until all the paperwork was in order, including having a policeman at the gravesite. Since they had only a small window for conducting the exhumation, they would not be able to reschedule for the foreseeable future. I was a nervous wreck since I felt responsible for bringing all these people together. The church leaders, however, calmed me down by assuring me that their prayers and Nontetha's spirit would see to it that the last permit was issued. Indeed, within the hour, the permit arrived and we drove immediately to the cemetery, where Green had marked off with twine a rectangular area that he was confident was Nontetha's grave.

After Nontetha's family and church leaders held a prayer service at the gravesite, a laborer cleared off a foot or so of topsoil, and Nienaber's team began their patient work. They dug six-inch trenches at the end of the grave where they expected the femurs, the strongest bones, to be. When struck, those bones would not crumble as would more fragile bones. If they did not uncover any skeletal remains, they then cleared off the six-inch layer for the whole grave. As they methodically dug down, they turned up many bones. To my untrained eye, they had to be human remains, but the archaeologists quickly identified them as animal bones that were strewn throughout the landfill that had been spread throughout the pauper's field. By the end

of the first day they had dug down three feet without any indication that there might be any bodies in the grave. I was getting very nervous about the whole undertaking.

The next day, as the archaeologists inched deeper, my sense of foreboding grew deeper since I anticipated that at least some evidence should have turned up by then. We had to wait until mid-afternoon before a team member unearthed evidence of the foot bones. With a whiskbroom, he meticulously exposed the imprints where foot bones had been before decomposing, as another team member began uncovering the skull at the grave's opposite end. Within an hour they uncovered what was left of the skeleton and made some preliminary observations of what those remains told them. They determined the rough height (a little over 5 feet), the general age (at least over 50), and the sex (female) of the person and noted that there were traces of cancer on the arm bones. They also found the remains of a second skeleton below the first. That confirmed what we knew about there being two bodies in this grave. They reasoned that since Nontetha was wrapped in a blanket when she was buried, she was likely placed on top of the wooden casket of the other person. Then, as the casket decomposed - and evidence was found of the casket - her body sank lower and lower.

The archaeologists carefully placed her remains in a storage box to be examined further by an anatomist at the University of Pretoria. Their reading of the evidence led them to determine that the remains were indeed Nontetha's. Her family and church leaders, on the other hand, were faithful to their own cultural and spiritual truths. They, too, accepted that the remains were those of their beloved prophet. In this case scientific and cultural logic came to the same conclusion.

We left that day with a great deal of satisfaction (and relief on my part). Plans were set in motion for the remains to be returned to Nontetha's home at Khulile in a few months for a reburial service. The archaeological team, which had previously worked primarily on Iron Age digs, had become personally invested in Nontetha's story and insisted that some of them accompany her remains on the long trek from Pretoria to the Eastern Cape. In a moving October 1998 ceremony attended by several thousand people, Nontetha was finally laid to rest.

Even though I was personally involved in the process, I was not fully aware of how the church interpreted my actions. In August 1999, I attended a service of the Church of the Prophetess Nontetha so that we could review all that had taken place. In a discussion after the service, a woman stood up and divulged something that they had not revealed to me before. In the 1920s Nontetha had prophesied that her followers should look to the Americans because one day they would do something miraculous for them. Her prediction then was most likely influenced by the ideas of Marcus Garvey and a popular myth that was widely circulating in the Ciskei and Transkei that African-Americans were arriving soon to liberate South Africa from white oppression. To her followers, my appearance and disappearance in 1974 was a source of discussion and disappointment precisely because I was an American. When I reappeared almost a quarter century later and played a critical role in locating Nontetha's grave, they interpreted my actions as the fulfillment of her prophecy.

RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, ACT II

The story of Nontetha's exhumation and reburial was featured on a news magazine on SABC-TV's evening English and Xhosa language services. These programs are religiously watched, especially in the Eastern Cape. Among the viewers were Israelite elders who remembered my earlier intervention in the return of their Ark and decided to call on me again to solve the mystery of the location of Charles Mgijima's grave. He had died in a Kimberley prison of Bright's disease on 12 March 1924 and had been buried in a Kimberley cemetery. Although his widow and a few Israelite leaders knew where his grave was, they had not followed through with a request by the prophet Enoch to erect a gravestone with his name on it. Only an iron rod marked his grave site, and they carried the knowledge of the exact place with them when they died.

After several Israelite leaders requested my assistance in locating Charles' grave, I agreed to attend an Israelite religious ceremony and to hold a meeting with a group of elders to learn all I could before agreeing to take on this project. Because of my previous involvement in helping to return the Ark, I did not want their expectations to be unrealistic. Although I may have acquired a reputation for achieving miraculous feats, I never lost sight of the fact that I was relying on my investigative skills and that I was following whatever factual leads were at hand.

The twenty-five elders and I talked for three hours on a wintry Saturday evening in the chilly Queenstown Tabernacle. They offered compelling reasons for why they wanted to locate Charles' grave. One was his pivotal leadership in the early years of the Israelites, his central role in the negotiations with the government in 1920 and 1921, and his actions as the Israelites' commander during the Bullhoek massacre, where he had been prepared to sacrifice his life. When he fell gravely ill in prison, Enoch had prayed that the Lord should take him instead so that his brother could return and hold the church together. Another reason was that they wanted his remains buried with other church leaders at Bullhoek so that he could be reunited with his ancestors. Finally, they noted that since they were involved in a partnership with the Department of Arts and Culture of the Eastern Cape provincial government to develop the site of the massacre (and a new memorial was dedicated to those slain at Bullhoek on the massacre's 80th anniversary on 25 May 2001), it was crucial for his remains to be returned to complete the process.

As our deliberations wound down, one elder took me aside and explained an unstated but crucial reason - and one that would not be voiced publicly-why locating Charles' grave was so important to them. Before Enoch died, he enjoined his followers to bring Charles' remains to Bullhoek in the family cemetery. Since that had not happened, they interpreted that as a breach of Enoch's wish and eventually the cause of generations of turmoil in the church. The Israelites split into two factions in 1947 over the laying of a stone to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Enoch's first prophecy; the forty represented their decades in the wilderness. One faction led by S.P. Mgijima of Shiloh favored laying the stone on Wednesday, 9 April, the actual date of Enoch's prophecy, while the Queenstown Tabernacle pragmatically supported holding the ceremony on the 13th, a Sunday when those who worked on weekdays could attend. Over the decades the rift between the factions grew bitter. By the 1990s, the rivalries over leadership between and within Israelite branches had grown so destructive that fistfights were breaking out in tabernacles and some members were even being killed. Israelite leaders attributed the

troubles to Charles' restless spirit, and that no healing could take place until his grave was located and his remains were brought home.

During our discussions I quizzed the elders about the availability of any documentation that might give me clues to work on. They had none, but they volunteered that a few years before, several Israelites had traveled to Kimberley to search for the grave. Their inquiries had been fruitless. Armed with a few scraps of information, I set out for Kimberley, where I consulted with officials of the Northwest Province Heritage Office and librarians at the Africana Library. The latter held municipal records and death notices, but aside from a listing with the date and cause of Charles' death, there were no other leads about where his grave might be. DuToitspan Prison, where the Israelite leaders served their jail terms, had subsequently been converted into a mining compound and its records destroyed.

My next stop was Green Point Cemetery several miles from the city center. Unlike the segregated Rebecca Street Cemetery which maintained detailed records of burials, the Green Point Cemetery was for blacks only and most of its records had been destroyed in a fire at some point. A few surviving records that were deposited in a nearby school contained no leads. The cemetery itself had fallen into disrepair. Few gravestones were still erect, and only a handful had names on them. I walked around an older section hoping to stumble on some overlooked clue, but I gave up after several hours. My search this time had faltered, but as I reflected on my experiences with the searches for the Ark and Nontetha's grave, I understood what remarkable undertakings those had been.

Conclusion

During the apartheid era, whether I was interrogating official records or negotiating with people to talk about their recollections of the past, the "politics of inequality" set the ground rules and boundaries for my research undertakings. With South Africa's independence in May 1994, however, the research landscape underwent a seismic shift. Independence unlocked the memories of many black people who previously had been unwilling or reticent to speak with me openly. While collecting oral data is challenging even in the best of circumstances, at least the apartheid state's repressive machinery was no longer such an intimidating and intrusive factor.

May 1994 also created opportunities for rectifying some of the injustices of the past that were amply documented in my researches. Although historians are encouraged to maintain their objectivity by keeping a distance from their subjects, my personal relationships with individuals and church groups compelled me to take a different path. I applied my investigative skills to search for the Israelite's holy relic, the Ark of the Covenant, which the police confiscated after the Bullhoek massacre, and Nontetha Nkwekwe's anonymous grave in a Pretoria cemetery. Those experiences exposed both the limits and possibilities of South Africa's changing landscape as South Africans grappled with the legacy of the old order and the possibilities opened up by transformation and the reconciliation process. While Albany Museum officials were initially reluctant to concede their ownership of the Ark, eventually they recognized that it belonged in the hands of the Israelites. Joined by provincial officials, they fully supported transferring it. In the case of Nontetha's remains, government officials,

archaeologists, and a cemetery superintendent as well as her descendents and church members all embraced the efforts to identify her grave, exhume her remains, and return them to her home. These experiences provide an African validation for William Faulkner's brilliant insight in *Requiem for a Nun* - "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

Notes:

1. This reference to an ash-heap also has special meaning to me because I had a Marxist colleague at the National University of Lesotho who was fond of quoting Lenin whenever he wanted to consign his enemies to the "ash-heap of history."
2. Many of the songs were translated and published in Robert Edgar, 1986: 213-37. In the early 1990s I interviewed Ntsu Mokhehle who had received his early political education under the tutelage of the LLB president, Josiel Lefela. After expressing his pleasure that I had published the volume, which he had read in exile, he gave me another LLB song which I had not collected before.
3. Robert Edgar, 2005: xi.
4. Edgar, 2005: xi-xii.
5. Gail Gerhart informed me that when she interviewed Mda in an extended session in the early 1970s he also asked her to take notes for the same reason. Ultimately I made one exception to my agreement. When Luyanda Msumza and I were collecting the writings of Mda's close friend, Anton Lembede, for an edited volume, I recorded Mda's comments on Lembede that we edited into a forward. See Edgar and Msumza.
6. Edgar, 1977; see also Edgar, 1987.
7. Edgar and Hilary Sapire.
8. Permit (Under 24 (1) of Act No. 18 of 1936). Original in possession of author.
9. Enoch Mgijima to Magistrate, Queenstown, 29 January 1925 (South African Police Archive, Pretoria).
10. The debate over who owns artifacts, museums or indigenous peoples, is explored in Cohen.
11. The conventional date for South African independence is with the formation of the first government of the Union of South Africa on 31 May 1910. Given, however, the lack of franchise rights for over two-thirds of the population at that time and the blossoming of the politics of inequality into the full blown racial domination of the apartheid era, 1948-1994, I consider the inauguration of the Mandela government on 10 May 1994 as marking the true independence of South Africa.
12. Nienaber and Steyn. The Eastern Cape Heritage Office has called on this archaeological team on several more occasions to exhume the remains of political prisoners executed by the South African state and to return them to their homes for reburial.

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