2020 ASR Distinguished Lecture: African Voices Matter: Reflections on Fifty Years of Historical Research in Southern Africa

Robert Edgar

Abstract: The recent racial reckoning has challenged scholars to recover Black voices that have been erased from historical accounts. This essay is my reflections on the challenges I faced in conducting research on African voices in politically and racially charged settings in Lesotho and South Africa over the past half century. After the political atmosphere began changing in South Africa in 1990, I served the individuals and communities I write about by rectifying historical injustices such as returning a holy relic to a religious group, the Israelites, and facilitating the return of remains of Nontetha Nkwenkwe from a pauper's grave in Pretoria to her home.

Résumé : La récente prise de conscience raciale a mis au défi les chercheurs de retrouver les voix noires qui ont été effacées des récits historiques. Cet essai est une réflexion sur les défis auxquels j'ai été confronté en menant des recherches sur les voix africaines dans des contextes politiquement et racialement chargés au Lesotho et en Afrique du Sud au cours du dernier demi-siècle. Après que l'atmosphère politique a commencé à changer en Afrique du Sud en 1990, j'ai rendu service aux individus et aux communautés sur lesquels j'écris en rectifiant des injustices historiques telles que la restitution d'une relique sacrée à un groupe religieux, les Israélites et en facilitant le retour des dépouilles mortelles de Nontetha Nkwenkwe d'une tombe de pauvre à Pretoria à sa ville natale.

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Resumo: O recente ajuste de contas racial desafiou os estudiosos a recuperar as vozes negras que foram apagadas dos relatos históricos. Este ensaio é a minha reflexão sobre os desafios que enfrentei ao conduzir uma investigação sobre vozes africanas em cenários de carga política e racial no Lesoto e na África do Sul ao longo do último meio século. Depois de a atmosfera política ter começado a mudar na África do Sul em 1990, servi os indivíduos e as comunidades sobre as quais escrevo retificando injustiças históricas, como a devolução de uma relíquia sagrada a um grupo religioso, os Israelitas, e a facilitação do regresso a casa dos restos mortais de Nontetha Nkwenkwe do túmulo de um indigente em Pretória.

Key words: African voices; apartheid; millenarian movements; Nontetha Nkwenkwe; Enoch Mgijima; Bulhoek Massacre; A.P. Mda; Edwin Thabo Mofutsanyana

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The years 2020 and 2021 have been traumatic, as we have been coping with not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also the racial reckoning known as COVID-1619, which is confronting racial justice issues in the United States and globally. One important dimension of the latter has been privileging Black voices of the past and present which have often been ignored, erased, or silenced. But identifying, retrieving, and recovering these voices is a challenging task, as my unconventional experiences over the past half-century as a historian of southern Africa illustrate.

Growing up in a small town in Oklahoma, my upbringing did not foreshadow my decision to study African history. As a youth, I was curious but blissfully ignorant about the rest of the world beyond what was happening in my town—or even my own neighborhood. I had no awareness of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 31 May–1 June 1921 or of the murders of Osage Indians in the 1920s in neighboring counties, but the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam war in the 1960s began puncturing holes in my provincial view of the world (Grann 2017; Hill 2021; Madigen 2001; Ellsworth 2021; Hirsch 2021).[1] When I entered Oklahoma State University in 1965 and declared a major in History, I took a conventional path and concentrated my studies on European history.

I had no awareness that Africa had such a rich past until my junior year, when I decided to explore African history as a possible field of study. However, aside from ties with Ethiopia through its School of Agriculture, the university had few connections with Africa and its cultures. Since there was no one on staff who taught African history, I took the initiative and compiled a list of books by Basil Davidson (Davidson 1964, 1967) and J.D. Fage and Roland Oliver (Fage & Oliver 1966), leading names in the field, and began reading their works in an independent study course. When I informed the history faculty that I intended to study African history at the

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graduate level, one pulled me aside and recommended that I read Hugh Trevor-Roper's infamous essay dismissing the idea that Africa had a history that could be reconstructed. Arguing that "we should not concern ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the world," he maintained that Africa had no history until Europeans, with written documentation, arrived on the continent (Fage 1981:31).[2] I was at an age when I was questioning advice from older people (this lecturer was not that much older than I). Therefore, I rejected Trevor-Roper's denialism of Africa's history and plunged ahead, going to Indiana University for an M.A. and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) for a PhD in African History.

Both schools were blessed with outstanding African historians who introduced me to the field. I was especially attracted to its openness to transcending disciplinary boundaries by utilizing a variety of methodologies (historical linguistics, oral traditions, anthropology, archaeology) in reconstructing Africa's history and its stress on Africans having agency in making their own history. I was influenced by UCLA historian Terry Ranger, who had recently published a book, *The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia*, which was largely based on rich documentation in the Zimbabwe National Archives (Ranger 1970). Engaging in interdisciplinary studies and collecting and recording African voices has inspired and energized me for almost five decades of research in southern Africa; it has taken me on some unconventional paths—decolonizing archives and libraries, seeking interviews in politically and racially charged environments, sifting through and evaluating different kinds of evidence and methodologies, and engaging with communities and individuals that I was researching to address historical injustices.

Inspired by a Ranger seminar on African Religious History, my dissertation focused on Africans drawn to millenarian movements in South Africa's Eastern Cape in the years after World War I.[3] My study's centerpiece was the Bulhoek Massacre of May 24, 1921, when a white police and army force massacred several hundred members of a group called the Israelites. This group was led by a prophet named Enoch Mgijima, who had established Ntabelanga, a holy village where his followers awaited the end of the world (Edgar 2018).

When I entered South Africa in 1973 to conduct research, apartheid was well entrenched (Posel 1991; Welsh 2009; O'Meara 1996; Worger & Clark 2016). It was a system that intensified racial segregation through laws that classified persons into races; these classifications determined their identities, where they could live, whom they could marry and have sexual relations with, what they might be taught, and what kind of work they could perform. It also imposed tighter controls over black migrant labor through "pass laws," which regulated the movements of blacks in urban areas and rural reserves officially known as "homelands." I had been exposed to Jim Crow when my family visited relatives in Arkansas in the 1950s and 1960s, but apartheid's in-your-face, pervasive racism was of a different magnitude.

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Within the archives, African voices were marginalized or ignored altogether. South African archives were repositories of official memory that defined who was and who was not included in history, and black people were often depicted as "the enemy" and "subversives." I had to think against the grain as I began critically examining official documentation in the holdings of these national and provincial archives and libraries.

The National Archive was then in the Union building, where the Prime Minister had his offices. Holdings were kept in the basement, and black workers pedaling carts brought files to the main reading room. Apartheid policy privileged whites, no matter their economic status, so I observed whites dusting bannisters and tilling the lush gardens (in work crews separate from black workers).[4] At the South African Library (now the National Library) in Cape Town, readers' desks were segregated, with signs in English and Afrikaans that read "Reserved for Whites" and "Reserved for Non-Whites."[5]

The archives were then operating under a fifty-year rule, which meant that researchers were restricted to looking at files whose documentation was older than 1923. For the Bulhoek massacre of 1921 I was fine, but for materials after that, I had to identify files that contained both pre- and post-1923 documents and hope that the archivists did not scrutinize them when I ordered them. Among the documents I requested were South African Police files which revealed that there were other millenarian movements in the Eastern Cape. I learned about a woman prophet named Nontetha Nkwenkwe, who had fallen into a deep coma as the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic (known as *Umbathalala* or "the great disaster" in isiXhosa) devastated her area around Middledrift. While she was unconscious, she received instructions from God to begin preaching and to warn people of an impending apocalypse.[6] Fearing that her activities might lead to another Bulhoek confrontation, government officials silenced and separated her from her followers by placing her in a series of mental asylums, where she died in 1935.

Sensitive to the fact that government documents had a strong official bias that could steer the narrative of my study in a distorted way, I understood that I needed to visit the areas in one of the "homelands," the Ciskei, where these millenarian movements had taken root, in order to gain alternative perspectives by interviewing people. There were only a handful of historians who were then collecting oral data in black areas. This was not an easy task, because I had to adhere to official regulations that hindered my access to black people. As a white person, I could not stay in a black area overnight; I had to check in with a white magistrate for a permit in every district I entered; I could not get involved in the political affairs of black people; and I had to refrain from making critical comments about the government. I got around the restriction on overnight stays by finding accommodations at mission stations, which officials accepted as neutral spots. That was important in a large area like the Transkei, where it would have been impossible for me to visit remote areas and leave in one day. Therefore, I made arrangements to stay at Federal Theological Seminary in Alice and Moravian, Anglican, and Catholic mission stations in the Ciskei and Transkei.

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In the Ciskei, I started collecting more information on Nontetha Nkwenkwe. Because police documentation and newspaper coverage of her were slim, I visited areas that were mentioned in the records and discovered that several of her children were still living. They informed me that the Church of the Prophetess Nontetha still existed, and that one of her leading followers when she was alive was its current bishop, Reuben Tsoko. After I had arranged to meet him, he invited me to a church service. He welcomed me, but then chided me for not having approached him first. He wanted me to acknowledge in front of his flock that I recognized his authority. Once I did that, he and his congregants were very cooperative and forthcoming.

However, I did not have enough written documentation after 1923 to know the full story about how the government had institutionalized Nontetha in mental asylums. When she died in 1935 in Weskoppies Mental Asylum in Pretoria, officials buried her in an unmarked pauper's grave in a nearby cemetery. When I left her followers, I knew that I had the outlines of a fascinating story, but I lacked enough evidence to piece it together fully. While I discussed her in my dissertation, I did not publish anything further about her and her movement, and I was not to have any direct contact with her followers again for over two decades.

With the Israelites, I had a slightly different experience. I stayed at Shiloh, a Moravian mission station, and contacted Israelites who lived there and nearby and in Queenstown and Bulhoek. They were cooperative and provided their own written accounts of their prophet leader and the events that had led to the Bulhoek massacre. I also met the group's historian, Gideon Ntloko, who would become a valued friend over the years. I shared documents with him that I had collected, and he introduced me to other church leaders and members, including a dozen persons who had been present at the massacre. I attended an emotional commemoration of the massacre at Bulhoek on May 24, 1974, the first time the group had organized a public memorial since 1921. At the same time as I was acquiring valuable details from them, I was alert to the fact that as a white outsider, some Israelite members were reticent about speaking openly about the massacre because of its political overtones. Thus, when I concluded my stay in the area, I knew I did not have the full story, but I had enough documentary and oral evidence to write up that section of my study.

I was very critical of apartheid before I entered South Africa, and the year I spent there reinforced my opposition to the regime. In the Ciskei and Transkei, I observed the underbelly of apartheid, in which poverty and exploitation were deliberate extensions of government policy. After returning to UCLA, I organized teach-ins on apartheid on campus and helped organize protests in the Los Angeles area against visiting white South African politicians and a Davis Cup tennis match between the U.S. and South Africa in Newport Beach in 1977 (Booth 1998). Because I was aware that the South African consulate in Beverly Hills was monitoring anti-apartheid activities, I was not surprised when my application for a visa to enter South Africa in 1977 was turned down.

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Desiring to carry on historical research in the region, I identified a project in Lesotho, a country surrounded by South Africa. I resolved that my views on apartheid would not be affected, even if the South African authorities allowed me to reenter the country. My move to Lesotho turned out to be rewarding because it opened up several rich—and unanticipated—lines of research. But it also meant that I would not have meaningful contact for many years with most of the people I had met in South Africa in 1973 and 1974.

In 1980, I went to Lesotho to research Lekhotla la Bafo (LLB), a Basotho anti-colonial movement. Lesotho at that time was in the midst of a political maelstrom. In 1970, the Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan had declared the results of an election that he was losing null and void. He suppressed the main opposition party, the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP), and any organization linked to the BCP such as LLB was suspect.[7] While I found ample documentary materials on LLB up to World War II in British colonial records in the National Archives of Lesotho, I realized that some LLB members were reticent to speak with me because of the political environment.[8] When I visited one member at his home, he covered the windows and shut the doors before engaging in a conversation. I did make one remarkable find. With another historian, I met Hlakane Mokhithi at a burned-out dwelling near Maputsoe. As we conversed, he dug into a pile of ashes and pulled out a handwritten LLB song book wrapped in a plastic cover. He loaned it to me to copy, and it became an important addition to my study (Edgar 1988:209–37).

Some of my most fruitful interviews in Lesotho were totally unexpected. Lesotho had become the home for many black opponents of the South African government who had fled across the border. One of them was Edwin Thabo Mofutsanyana, a long-time leader of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), who had been its liaison with LLB since the 1930s. With South African security police on his trail in 1959, he had fled to Lesotho, where LLB's president, Josiel Lefela, provided him with sanctuary in a remote mountainous area. Although I had no proof that he was still alive, I kept my antennae alert for any leads as to his whereabouts. I at last got confirmation that he was alive while talking to Gani Surtie, a moSotho-Indian Maseru businessman whose father, a trader, had befriended Mofutsanyana in the 1930s. He could not pinpoint precisely where Mofutsanyana was living, but told me that he was likely in Kota ha Pentsi, deep in the Maluti mountains.

Remember, this was long before the advent of cell phones, so I methodically had to conduct my search in person. One Saturday, I borrowed a friend's sturdy VW Beetle and went from one trading post to another on a rugged dirt track in the lowlands that paralleled Kota ha Pentsi. I inquired at each one whether anyone knew of Mofutsanyana. The track kept getting narrower, so when I reached the last trading post I could navigate, one person recognized Mofutsanyana's name and told me that Tente Majara, who lived a quarter mile up a steep hillside, knew him. I sent a handwritten message to Majara. When he came down to speak with me, I explained who I was and why I wanted to meet the old man. He agreed to go on horseback and take him a

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note that I scrawled out. A month or so later I was gratified by a letter from Mofutsanyana in which he designated a day to meet me at Majara's home. But the mail service had been so slow that the date had already passed when I received his letter. He stayed at Majara's place for three days before giving up and returning home. He then sent me another note:

> Having caused me a great anxiety to know more about your dear self and your intentions, you have just vanished mysteriously, as when you come, 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 [I] 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. (Edgar 2005:ix)

I proposed a later date—and this time, we connected at Majara's home. As we talked about his dealings with LLB, I recognized he would also be an excellent resource about his long political life in South Africa that stretched from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Because I had to resume teaching at Howard University, I waited another year to invite Mofutsanyana to meet me for a week of extended interviews at the National University of Lesotho at Roma. When we met, he explained the controversy that had erupted with his friends in Kota ha Pentsi when my first note had reached him. Fearing that I was a South African security policeman luring him into a trap, they totally opposed his meeting me. However, he made up his mind because of a vivid dream he had just had. In it, he and Josiel Lefela (who had died many years before) went on a walk in the mountains conversing about many issues. As they parted, Lefela turned to him and said, a stranger is soon going to appear to you and you must speak to him. My letter appeared the next day, and Mofutsanyana, who placed great stock in his dreams, decided to meet me.

The opportunity to interview Mofutsanyana was serendipitous, but in other situations, I had to negotiate the terms of interviews. One was with A.P. Mda, a founder of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) in 1944, along with other freedom struggle stalwarts such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu; he served as its president from 1947 to 1949. Mda had qualified as a lawyer at his home in Herschel district neighboring Lesotho. In 1961, with the security police hounding him, he had snuck across the border into Basutoland and eventually set up a law practice in Mafeteng. In 1983, I approached him in the capital city Maseru about conducting extended interviews about his life. He consulted with his political colleagues, who advised him to be wary since I was a white American and could not be automatically trusted. He told me later that he decided that since I was a diligent historian I would track down information about his life—especially letters published in black South African newspapers. He alerted me

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to obscure newspaper he contributed to and *nom de plumes* he occasionally used. He showed me copies (the only ones in existence) of an African Catholic teacher's magazine that published many of his essays.

However, when it came to the terms of an interview, he was very lawyer-like. He strictly insisted on one rule for all researchers who approached him —he would not be taped or filmed. When Gail Gerhart interviewed him in 1971, he allowed her to take notes. After the interview was over, she sat in a car for several hours, copiously writing down what he had said so she would not forget the details later. In my case, Mda agreed that I could tape him about anything in his life up to the age of twenty-one, when he had become active in politics—for anything after that age, I had to turn off the recorder and take notes in longhand. His concern—which I understood—was that if the South African security police confiscated any of my tapes, they could potentially be used against him in a court proceeding. If all they had was my notes, he could easily claim that I had misunderstood him. I scrupulously adhered to the note-taking rule when I began visiting him while I was teaching at the National University of Lesotho from 1984 to 1986. Over time, I established a relationship of trust with him, but I kept to the note-taking rule. He did grant one exception in 1986, when a Grenada Television crew from Great Britain was filming a documentary on the history of apartheid. Phil Bonner, a historian at Witwatersrand University, contacted me about interviewing both Mofutsanyana and Mda. They agreed to participate, and Mda stood out by delivering a theatrical performance.

The political landscape of South Africa changed dramatically in early 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and previously outlawed political parties were legalized. At the moment this was happening, I was given a visa to enter South Africa to attend a History Workshop conference at Witwatersrand University. I soon realized that the environment for interviewing black people was shifting dramatically. While I still had to approach people sensitively, I found that they were now more receptive to speaking openly about political issues.

Nevertheless, this did not mean that gathering information was still without some danger. Through our shared interest in Mda, Luyanda ka Msumza and I embarked on a study of Anton Lembede, a founder of the ANCYL and its president from 1944 to 1947. (Edgar & Msumza 1996, 2018).[9] In August 1992, we arranged to conduct interviews with Lembede family members at their homestead in Umbumbulu. However, most of the family lived in urban centers and were reluctant to visit the homestead because a civil war between the United Democratic Front and the Inkatha Freedom Party was engulfing KwaZulu Natal. Bands of Inkatha members were terrorizing blacks living in rural areas. Indeed, the day of the planned visit, the family tried to phone us (this was, of course, before cell phones) to call off the meeting, because they were worried about the possibility of an attack. They were unsuccessful in reaching us, so when we arrived at Umbumbulu, the burned-out homes we observed from the road were graphic evidence that the violence was taking a toll. The Lembedes warmly welcomed us, but with

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the warning that our meeting could not extend beyond mid-afternoon, because everyone had to leave the area before dark. The meeting was very fruitful, but as we drove out, we could see people on the road leading out of Umbumbulu warily eyeing us. We were relieved to get out without a violent incident.

On that same trip, we visited Sister Bernadette Sibeko, who had taught Lembede in primary school in the 1920s before she became a Catholic sister. She was living at a Catholic convent near Port Shepstone. She was in her 80s at that time, but she still had a clear memory of her star pupil and recited word for word a brief essay in English that he had composed for her. She then excused herself so she could retrieve a treasured memento. We had no idea what she was referring to and were totally surprised when she returned with a class photo that she had kept all those years featuring Lembede with folded arms and a stern look. Finding this rare photo was in keeping with my passion for collecting visual images. Whenever I establish relationships with families or individuals knowledgeable about events, I inquire about family albums and photos. These have become a standard feature of all my publications (Landau & Kaspin 2003; Hayes & Minkley 2019).

One of my concerns has been with the audiences for which professional historians write. We tend to target other historians—often with tenure and promotion in mind. This is understandable. However, the individuals and communities we study should be regarded as critical resources that we not only draw from but also serve. Many Africans regard archives as alien, intimidating places. How can historians, who have sophisticated skills and instincts for tracking down obscure documents, reach a wider audience and bridge the divide between academics and the communities, families, and individuals about whom we write? And how do we share our research and restore the history that has been lost or taken from them?

I would like to address these questions by discussing how my research on millenarian movements that spanned several decades addressed certain historical injustices. One way was by assisting in the return of a treasured Israelite artifact, the Ark of the Covenant, and the second was tracking down the grave of Nontetha Nkwenkwe in a pauper's field in a Pretoria cemetery and facilitating the return of her remains to her home.

In 1994, I was a research fellow for several months at Rhodes University in Grahamstown (now Makhanda) when I read a report by Denver Webb, who was promoting public history in the Eastern Cape, that identified an Israelite relic stored in the basement of the Albany Museum located next to the university. That piqued my interest. When I visited the museum, I found a long wooden box with a scroll inside on which the Ten Commandments were written ornately in isiXhosa. I knew I had found a valuable item, but was unsure about its significance. I communicated with Gideon Ntloko about my find, but since I was moving around the country that year, we did not have a chance to meet at the museum until 1995. As soon as he opened the box, he was overcome with emotion and knelt in prayer. He immediately recognized that it was the long-lost Israelite Ark of the Covenant that the police had

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confiscated after the Bulhoek massacre as "sacred plunder" and refused to return it. When he was a child, an uncle had told him about the Ark and described it in detail. It had made its way from police custody to the Albany Museum during World War II and had not been put on display since then.

Ntloko enjoined me to remain quiet about the find, because he wanted to carefully brief the other Israelite leaders about the discovery. At the same time, I offered to speak to the Albany Museum's director. Like other museum officials who believe that stolen material is still their institution's property, he contended that the museum was best suited to preserve it. Instead, they would produce facsimiles of the Ark that would be handed to the Israelites for display. He clearly did not understand the Ark's spiritual significance and the uproar it would create if the museum held on to it. However, since I was returning to America, I let the Israelites press the case (Witz, Minkley, & Rassool 2017). With some prodding from Eastern Cape government officials, the director eventually relented. He realized that the museum would gain positive publicity by arranging for a transfer. In late 1995, museum officials brought the Ark to the Israelite's main tabernacle in Queenstown for a celebratory homecoming.[10]

The following year, I was passing through Queenstown and stopped by to visit with Ntloko and several Israelite elders to get a sense of the impact of the Ark's return. Pondering why an American had been the one to find the Ark, they decided that an angel had possessed me and guided me to the museum basement. My deeply spiritual mother would have been overjoyed to hear their explanation—perhaps this crusty social scientist had actually been guided by a providential spirit.

This was not the last time I was called upon to assist the Israelites. In 2000, I met Israelite elders at the Queenstown tabernacle, where they asked me to search for the grave of Enoch Mgijima's brother, Charles, in a Kimberley cemetery. After the Bulhoek massacre, over a hundred Israelites were convicted of sedition and sentenced to jail terms in DeBeers Prison in Kimberley. Charles had died in prison in 1923. After he was buried in the local black cemetery, some Israelite leaders had known where the grave was located, but upon their deaths, that knowledge was lost. Subsequent searches for his grave had been fruitless.

By 2000, the church was deeply split into factions. As my meeting with the elders was concluding, one of them took me aside and explained the main reason they wanted me to look for Charles' grave. Because his remains had never been returned home, they believed that his angry spirit was still roaming the earth and contributing to the schisms in the church. Returning his remains would make it possible for a healing process to begin.

After agreeing to visit Kimberley and search for Charles' grave at Green Point cemetery, I checked for clues in municipal records and newspapers as to where his grave might be located; I found an official record of his death but nothing else. Moreover, both prison and cemetery records had been lost in fires. I went to the cemetery and found it in disrepair. There were very few grave markers. I walked through it several times, hoping there might be a

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marker that could offer a clue, but my efforts went for naught. I had to report to the Israelites that I was unable to fulfill their request.

The search for Nontetha Nkwenkwe's grave in a pauper's field in a Pretoria cemetery was more complex and involved consulting and coordinating with a range of actors. That effort was totally unanticipated. I was not planning additional research on Nontetha until I received a communication from Hilary Sapire, a historian at Birkbeck College, University of London. While conducting research on blacks in South African mental hospitals, she was alerted to a thick Native Affairs file on Nontetha in the National Archive. This file contained the documentation that I had been unable to access in 1973, which covered the government's dealings with Nontetha until her death in 1935. Aware of my original research on her, Sapire contacted me. After we examined and discussed the file's contents, we combined our research and drafted a joint article (Edgar & Sapire 2000).

In July 1997, I resurrected contact with Nontetha's church, almost twenty-five years after I had first met them. With my friend Luyanda Msumza, we visited the Ciskei locations where I had conducted my original interviews. We came across a group of men whom we asked if they knew anything about Nontetha. They pointed out an elderly woman who belonged to the church. When we approached her, she was apprehensive about speaking to strangers, and she directed us to a middle-aged woman's home. After we knocked on her door, she came out to greet us and began looking at me intently. She asked, "Aren't you Bob Edgar?" I was amazed that she recognized me and knew my name. She explained that she was a teenager when I had first visited her church. That I was an American who had come all the way to meet them had left a deep impression, and my visit had become part of the church's oral lore. She then chided me for disappearing for so many years and not staying in touch. I explained the political circumstances that had prevented me from maintaining contact. She also asked why my hair was turning white and why I had gained a few pounds. I had to laugh at that.

She directed us to a neighboring location to meet the church's bishop, Mzwandile Mabhelu. I did not expect what happened next. After I introduced myself, he repeated my name many times and exclaimed, "You're back! You're back!" As word began circulating in the village about my presence, people began streaming to Mabhelu's home to greet me and to learn about why I had returned. We agreed that I would come back in a week to attend a feast with the church members. This was an opportunity for them to question me and for me to catch up on what had been happening with the church. The original bishop, Reuben Tsoko, had long been dead, but a man and woman in their 90s who had known Nontetha were still alive. They had been among her faithful who had walked six hundred miles over two months to Pretoria in 1926 to meet her at the asylum. After presenting the church with a copy of an essay that Sapire and I had composed, they handed me a handwritten copy of their church's history. Most importantly, I learned that they were aggrieved by the fact that Nontetha's body was still interred in Pretoria. In the 1930s and 1950s,

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they had unsuccessfully petitioned the government several times to have her remains returned.

I then visited Pretoria to see if I could learn anything about her grave site, but I did not say anything to the church members because it was a long shot. All we knew from her government file was that she was buried in New Cemetery. When I determined that there was not a cemetery with that name, I planned on making a circuit of Pretoria cemeteries to see if I could unearth any leads. I started with the cemetery closest to Weskoppies asylum where Nontetha had been institutionalized and died. It is now called Rebecca Street Cemetery, but Johan Green, the cemetery superintendent, informed me that it had formerly gone by the name Newclare Cemetery. To me, that could not have been coincidental. And then he floored me by stating that even though the cemetery was segregated into white, Coloured, Indian, and African sections, the registers listed every burial in chronological order. Knowing she had died in May 1935, we checked that year and found an entry for her under the name "Nonteto." It included her cause of death as cancer, that she was buried with another person in the grave, and the plot number identifying where she was interred in a pauper's section with no grave markers. Remarkably, the superintendent revealed that he also had a surveyor's map which showed where each plot was. He took me there and assured me that he could pinpoint her grave site.

I conveyed this exciting discovery to Bishop Mabhelu and Nontetha's family as well as the Eastern Cape Province's Heritage Office. Sapire and I could not move forward with an exhumation without a buy-in from all these constituencies. Concerned whether we would have to deal with any splits within the church or family, we made a special trip to the eastern Cape to deal with any possible disputes. Fortunately, factions in the church were willing to cooperate with one another. We spent an evening in East London with Nontetha's extended family, who had many questions about our find. We were relieved that they were prepared to work with us and with each other. We also consulted with Heritage Office officials, who alerted us that an exhumation would require permits from four levels of officialdom—her home district, the Eastern Cape provincial government, the Gauteng government, and the Pretoria municipal government—and that these permits would not be issued quickly. Sapire also arranged for an archaeological team fro the University of Pretoria Medical School to perform the exhumation.

Hence, it was not until mid-1998 that the exhumation actually took place. The Heritage Office sponsored a delegation from the church and family that included 96-year-old Tobi Nokrawuzana, who had been one of the pilgrims who had walked to Pretoria in 1926 to visit Nontetha. However, when we all convened in Pretoria, we learned that one permit had still not been approved and the archaeological team was not prepared to begin its work without it. I was panic-stricken until church members assured me they had been praying for a successful outcome. That came mid-morning, when we received the green light to begin the exhumation. We all proceeded to the cemetery, where Johan Green, with a surveyor's assistance, had marked off Nontetha's

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grave with twine. After a prayer service, the archaeologists began their methodical and careful digging. By the end of the first day, they had dug down about a meter without finding any evidence of human remains. The cemetery register indicated that there was one other person buried under Nontetha in the grave, but I had still expected some evidence to show up that first day. The next day the team dug deeper, and by mid-afternoon, they found the first indication of her remains—the imprint of her feet bones, which had worn away. Then they uncovered the rest of her skeleton. She had been buried in a blanket, so over the years, her remains had sunk lower until they rested on top of the wood coffin of the person who was buried beneath her. The team planned on a detailed examination of her bones at a later date, but they confirmed that the bones were of a female of a certain height and an advanced age with traces of cancer in her arm bones. They were confident that the bones belonged to Nontetha. But their scientific certainty would have meant little if the church members and her family had not concurred. Scientific truth had to match cultural truth. Thankfully, the church and family representatives accepted that the bones were indeed those of Nontetha.

The archaeological team gathered the remains and preserved them until a reburial was organized in November 1998. This team specialized in Iron Age digs, but they had become so invested in the reburial that they brought Nontetha's remains to her home at Khulile for an emotional wake and service, which was attended by nearly a thousand persons (McNeil 1998).

In mid-1999, I returned to check on the Nontetha church and to learn their feelings about the experience. During our discussions, one elderly woman stood and related one of Nontetha's prophecies—that one day an American was going to appear and perform something miraculous (Vinson 2012).[11] When I showed up in 1974, they had wondered what I might do. But now in 1999, they determined that I was the one to fulfill her prophecy.

Conclusion

Reflecting on a half-century of recovering and restoring African voices in southern Africa, I am reminded of the approaches to reconstructing African history that I was introduced to as a graduate student and how they guided my studies on religious and political movements and individuals in South Africa and Lesotho. One was to give voice and agency to Africans in shaping their own history; and the second was to be open to innovative ways of identifying and retrieving sources.

Because of the dominance of Eurocentric primary sources, I had to re-envision how to interpret documentation from state and colonial archives and how to unearth new kinds of historical evidence. In other words, I had to think outside the box. In the case of the prophets Enoch Mgijima and Nontetha Nkwenkwe and their movements, I flipped official portrayals of

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them as enemies of the state and deluded fanatics who were objects of white actions and gave them independent voices that were resourceful and resilient.

Although recovering African voices was one of my primary goals, I was mindful of having to navigate racially and politically charged environments and how that affected my ability to collect materials. Nevertheless, I still found opportunities for gathering oral data, and often in unexpected ways. Rather than solely relating to me as a white male researcher from the United States, some people I interviewed interpreted my actions through a spiritual lens, which added a richer dimension to our relationships.

When the research environment in South Africa significantly changed in 1990 as the political system opened up, I was able to reestablish my relationships with religious groups that had languished since 1974. However, I now had the possibility to serve these groups by addressing historical injustices that had been festering since the 1920s and 1930s. That challenged me to develop and apply new skills for which there are no training manuals—listening sensitively to individuals, families, and church groups about their needs and determining how my skills as a historian could serve them, expanding the boundaries of archives by conducting searches in cemeteries, museum basements, and ash heaps for evidence, facilitating the exhumation of a body in a pauper's field, and cooperating with government agencies to secure permits and to return spiritual treasures and skeletons to their rightful places.

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Notes

1. In recent years I became aware of how Tulsa's business and political elite consciously suppressed knowledge of the Race Massacre.
2. The view that Africa has no history still has adherents (Green 2020:xx).
3. My inspiration for studying the Bulhoek massacre and Lekhotla la Bafo was Edward Roux's *Time Longer Than Rope*, which attempted to present

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South African history from the perspective of blacks with a focus on protest movements.

4. Since the 1920s, government policy guaranteed menial jobs to low income or "poor" whites.
5. I "borrowed" one of the signs and still have it in my possession. The National Library still has the signs and keeps them in a storage unit.
6. The Spanish influenza pandemic had a profound influence in shaping the millennial messages of both Nontetha and Mgijima. For an essay reflecting on Nontetha's message and the current coronavirus pandemic, see Mcebisi Jonas, "The Words of a Prophet Still Echo 100 Years on" (*Sunday Times* [South Africa], February 7, 2021).
7. To protect myself and the people I interviewed, I intentionally arranged an appointment with Prime Minister Jonathan, who had known Lefela and was willing to talk about him. If a government official or policeman queried me about my research, I could say I had the cooperation of the Prime Minister.
8. Basutoland's colonial records from World War II to the 1960s were kept at a secure facility in England until they were transferred to the British National Archives at Kew Gardens about a decade ago.
9. A friend of A.P. Mda and his family, Msumza and I first met through Mda.
10. My experience with the Albany Museum speaks to the larger issue of the hundreds of thousands of Africa's cultural artifacts—art works, ceremonial objects, human remains, natural history specimens, photographs, and archives that European conquerors looted from the continent and remain in European institutions. See Ciku Kimeria, "The battle to get Europe to return thousands of Africa's stolen artifacts is getting complicated." (https://qz.com/africa/1758619/europes-museums-are-fighting to-keep-africas-stolen-artifacts/) and Will Gompertz, "How UK Museums are responding to Black Lives Matter" (https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53219869).
11. Nontetha's prophecy of an American in the1920s was most likely shaped by a belief, inspired by the Marcus Garvey movement, circulating in southern Africa that African Americans were coming to liberate black South Africans.

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