

Doreen Nteta (1939-2014)

By Fred Morton



The Botswana Society (TBS) has lost one of its founding members and major contributors over its more than forty years of existence. ‘Doreen’ as we always knew her, was present at the creation of our Society in 1968 and went on to serve in many capacities. For nearly three decades she served on the TBS board and as Chief Editor, she edited (often with close friend, the late Janet Hermans) the Society’s major publications, including *Botswana Notes and Records* and several conference proceedings. These efforts were entirely voluntary and carried out while in the full employment of the Botswana government, as curator and director of the National Museum and Art Gallery (1968-1981) and undersecretary of the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs (1981-1996), as well as raising a family of three with her husband Phophi. She was, in other words, the embodiment of volunteerism, one who devoted much of her spare time without the expectation of a financial return.

Her joy derived from her promotion of Botswana and African culture through education. She also published many articles on this subject. After her retirement, in spite of declining health, she remained committed to the Society, even when it was in its doldrums, raising funds and the spirits of her fellow committee members, when the future of the Society looked bleak. Its recent recovery is in large measure testimony to her resolve, optimism and devotion to others.

Doreen Nteta (néé Gumede) was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and excelled as a student. She graduated from Fort Hare and went on to complete her BA at Rhodes (majoring in English, Zulu and Social Anthropology) and, in 2000, she received an MEd in Adult Education from the University of Witwatersrand. She began her professional career as a teacher at Durban’s Inanda Seminary, a senior secondary school for girls. But, typical of her forthrightness and spunk, she soon fell out with the authorities, and following a confrontation with a Natal policeman, packed her bags and made her way to Botswana, where between 1965 and 1968 she taught at Lobatse Teacher Training College and Moeding Senior Secondary College.

By then married, and starting a family, Doreen began her long career at the new National Museum and Art Gallery, where as its first curator, she set up its library and developed divisions of Art, Ethnography, Archaeology and Natural History. Among her many contributions was the promotion of art education in the schools, the mobile museum service, and the periodical ‘The Zebra’s Voice’. Perhaps, her crowning achievement came in 1982, when the Museum hosted the 1982 Culture and Resistance Festival in collaboration with the MEDU Art Ensemble. The gathering brought artists of many genres from all over South Africa, including such luminaries as Nadine Gordimer and Abdullah Ibrahim. Arguably the largest conference of creative artists in southern Africa ever assembled before or since, the festival also put Botswana on the international map.

Between 1997 and 2002, Doreen returned to her (now democratic) homeland to become the founding chief executive officer of the National Arts Council of South Africa. She oversaw the channeling of millions into the development of artists and cultural initiatives, from small to large, in all provinces. She became a founding board member and sometimes chair, of the International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies, who made her an honorary life member. Doreen served, too, on the interim board of the First World Summit on Arts and Culture.

Somehow, as always, she found yet other outlets for her passion in arts and culture. Over the years, her many active roles included, at different times, the Commonwealth Association of Museums, Botswana Cultural Activities Support Trust, Botswana National Cultural Council, the National UNESCO Commission, SADCC group incorporating gender issues, the 1985 World Conference on Women and Development, and the Teenage Pregnancy Research Reference Group. And, in her beloved Botswana Society, she coordinated a string of conferences, oversaw the editing of the proceedings, and contributed to the *Botswana Notes and Records*.

In her twilight years, when 'MmaNteta' gradually supplanted 'Doreen' in attributions, she graced Society functions with splendid African style gowns and jewelry, kept her humour, and had a ready smile (and soft laugh). Weeks before her passing, she was dancing in Zulu attire at her 75th birthday party. She drew attention even then, though, not to herself but to others with whom she happened to be sharing the moment.

She fully supported the Society and its efforts to promote cultural heritage, and lately, cultural heritage tourism. She still knew how to cajole influential members of government and the private sector to do their part to help our old and ever underfunded NGO, enlivened executive meetings, which she attended faithfully, and gave us all a 'lift'.