

# **A Theoretical Discourse of Queen Nonesi of Abathembu: A Pioneer Woman Leader Brought Back to Memory**

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## **Abstract**

Queen Nonesi of Abathembu was one of the outstanding women leaders from amongst the Xhosa people during the difficult days of the colonial epoch. She led her people with bravery and fortitude during those turbulent times. She was also able to save her people from losing their land more than once through her negotiation and diplomatic skills. She died in 1880 at the age of 65 after leading her people for almost 40 years. Thus, a juxtaposition of the current narrative on women leadership against the portrayal of her life history and leadership acumen, tenacity and intentionality warrants the foregoing research question: Can Queen Nonesi be celebrated as a champion of women leadership by contemporary African women as they seek to assert their God-given right to lead?

Using a narrative synthesis hinged upon Ubuntu philosophy, this piece is the first of a sequel that focusses on Southern Women Leaders and their impact on contemporary leadership strategies. This study holds several significant implications. Firstly, it aims to shed light on the historical contributions of women leaders from the Xhosa people, challenging the dominant narrative that often overlooks or marginalizes their roles. By highlighting Queen Nonesi's achievements, the study seeks to foster a greater appreciation for the leadership capabilities of African women.

Secondly, the study seeks to inspire contemporary African women who are striving to assert their right to lead. By examining Queen Nonesi's leadership qualities and strategies, the research aims to provide valuable insights and lessons that can inform and empower women leaders today.

Lastly, the study's utilization of Ubuntu philosophy as a guiding framework offers a unique perspective on leadership. By emphasizing the communal aspects of leadership and the interconnectedness of individuals, the research aims to promote a more inclusive and collaborative approach to leadership in contemporary African contexts.

**Key Words:** African women, Leadership Capabilities, Leadership Development, patriarchy, colonialism

## Introduction

The remarkable story of Queen Nonesi of the AbaThembu who became a Regent in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century looks colossal in history as she fought patriarchy and colonialism. She led bravely and resisted killing of cattle after the famous Nongqause controversial prophecies. Nongqause led to the cattle killing and suffering of her people and thus she is often described as the one who was misled to bring tragedy to her people (Dubow, 2013). Queen Nonesi is known to be one of these leaders who emerged and were against this cattle killing (Saavedra, 2017).

Queen Nonesi's regent tenure brings to the fore the notion of African women leadership which has been in existence for centuries, contrary to popular belief that it is foreign to African societies. Her leadership and convictions will continue to live in memory as an astounding invitation to Africans to continue working towards a more just and equal society (Rassool, 2003). Revisiting her story is even made more urgent because Africa, like many parts of the world, still struggle to create more spaces for women leaders. While many strides have been made in this regard, there is still a lot that needs to be done. Queen Nonesi's nurturing presence and pioneering leadership can be a good reminder of the best of African women leaders.

Her rise to become the AbaThembu Regent in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century can be described as a mark of incandescent bravery that marks the human spirit. She didn't have room to indulge the unhinged patriarchy and colonialism which were prevalent at her time and era. She can be easily described as one of the transcendental African women at the same level of MaNtantise, Mkabayi (Saavedra, 2017).

Queen Nonesi of the AbaThembu was a remarkable figure in 19<sup>th</sup>-century history, whose story stands as a testament to her resilience, bravery, and unwavering dedication to her people. As a regent, she defied the oppressive forces of patriarchy and colonialism, leading her community with strength and determination. Her pivotal role in resisting the disastrous consequences of the Nongqause prophecies, which resulted in the mass killing of cattle and immense suffering for her people, further highlights her courage and wisdom (Dubow, 2013).

In the aftermath of the Nongqause tragedy, Queen Nonesi emerged as a leader who advocated for a different path, one that prioritized the well-being and preservation of her people. Contrary to popular belief, African women have long been at the forefront of leadership within their communities, and Queen Nonesi's regency serves as a powerful reminder of this fact (Saavedra, 2017). Her legacy challenges prevailing misconceptions and demonstrates the existence of African women leaders throughout history.

The story of Queen Nonesi's regency invites contemplation on the notion of African women's leadership, which has been deeply rooted in African societies for centuries. Her unwavering conviction and fearless leadership continue to inspire and call for a more just and equal society. As Africa, along with many other regions of the world, grapples with the need to create more spaces for women leaders, Queen Nonesi's story gains even greater relevance (Rassool, 2003). Her nurturing presence and pioneering spirit serve as a powerful reminder of the immense potential and contributions of African women leaders.

Queen Nonesi's rise to power as the AbaThembu Regent in the 19th century is a testament to the indomitable human spirit. In an era marked by rampant patriarchy and colonial domination, she refused to succumb to these oppressive forces. Her resilience and determination place her among the transcendent African women leaders of her time, alongside figures such as MaNtantise and Mkabayi (Saavedra, 2017).

Revisiting Queen Nonesi's story is not only an act of remembrance but also a call to action. It prompts us to reflect on the progress that has been made in creating spaces for women leaders, while acknowledging that there is still much work to be done. By celebrating Queen Nonesi's nurturing presence and pioneering leadership, we honor the best of African women leaders and embrace the potential for positive change.

The significance of Queen Nonesi's story extends beyond the AbaThembu community. It serves as a reminder that women have played critical roles in shaping history and influencing the course of societies. By recognizing and amplifying their contributions, we promote a more inclusive and equitable world.

Finally, Queen Nonesi's legacy stands as a testament to her extraordinary leadership and unwavering commitment to her people. Her story challenges prevailing narratives and sheds light on the long-standing tradition of African women's leadership. As we continue to strive for greater gender equality and inclusivity, Queen Nonesi's example serves as an inspiration and a reminder of the immense potential of African women leaders. By honoring her memory and celebrating her achievements, we pave the way for a more just and equal society.

### **Core Objective**

The core objective of this paper is to examine Queen Nonesi of the AbaThembu and by extension African women leadership. To understand better her role and perspectives on sexism and colonialism. This is achieved by exploration of the following questions:

- i. Can her success in fighting the male contenders to the throne such as Joyi and others be a lesson to proponents of patriarchy that women have the power to win these battles?
- ii. Can her story serve as an inspiration in the struggle for gender equality and in the battle against gender-based violence?
- iii. Is she the woman leader we have been waiting for from the Eastern Cape to retell the story of heroism of the Xhosa people?
- iv. Is she the epitome of black women leadership excellence that liberated men and women can look back to with pride because she represents our people's ability to accept leadership from any person regardless of their gender?

## Methods

This narrative theoretical paper employed a combination of literature analysis and historical research methods to explore the life and leadership of Queen Nonesi of the AbaThembu. The following steps will be undertaken:

- i. **Literature Review:** A comprehensive review of existing literature on Queen Nonesi, African women leadership, sexism, and colonialism was conducted. This will include scholarly articles, books, historical records, and oral traditions to gather a wide range of perspectives and insights.
- ii. **Data Collection:** Relevant information and narratives about Queen Nonesi's life and leadership will be collected from primary and secondary sources. This may include historical accounts, biographies, interviews, and cultural records.
- iii. **Analysis:** The collected data will be analyzed using narrative synthesis, which involves organizing and synthesizing the information to create a coherent narrative. The analysis will focus on identifying key themes, patterns, and lessons from Queen Nonesi's story, particularly in relation to her fight against patriarchy and colonialism.
- iv. **Theoretical Framework:** The paper will utilize a narrative theoretical approach to explore the significance of Queen Nonesi's leadership in the context of African women's leadership. This framework will provide a lens through which to examine the impact of her story on gender equality, gender-based violence, and the retelling of the heroism of the Xhosa people.

## Findings

Queen Nonesi's leadership qualities, as revealed through the narrative synthesis, make her a potential champion of women's leadership. Her bravery and fortitude during turbulent times demonstrate her resilience and determination. Despite facing patriarchal and colonial oppression, Queen Nonesi stood strong and refused to succumb to these forces. This unwavering courage is a testament to her leadership qualities and serves as an inspiration for women leaders today (Saavedra, 2017).

In addition to her bravery, Queen Nonesi showcased exceptional negotiation and diplomatic skills. One notable example of her strategic thinking was her successful efforts in saving her people's land. She navigated the complex political landscape of the time, engaging in negotiations and diplomatic maneuvers to secure the land rights of the AbaThembu community. This demonstrates her ability to effectively advocate for her people and protect their interests (Dubow, 2013).

Furthermore, Queen Nonesi's remarkable leadership tenure of almost 40 years is a testament to her longevity and commitment to her people. Leading effectively for such a significant period requires not only skill but also the ability to gain and maintain the respect and support of the community. Queen Nonesi's enduring leadership suggests that she possessed qualities that inspired loyalty and trust among her people (Rassool, 2003).

The findings from the narrative synthesis provide valuable insights into the leadership attributes of Queen Nonesi and their implications for women's leadership. By expanding on these findings, we can further appreciate the significance of her leadership and its relevance in today's world.

Queen Nonesi's bravery in the face of adversity serves as a powerful example for women leaders. It highlights the importance of resilience and determination in overcoming challenges. In a society often characterized by gender inequality and discrimination, Queen Nonesi's unwavering courage encourages women to break barriers and pursue leadership positions with confidence (Saavedra, 2017).

Her negotiation and diplomatic skills are equally noteworthy. They demonstrate the importance of strategic thinking and the ability to navigate complex situations. In today's globalized and interconnected world, leaders must possess these skills to address multifaceted challenges and find effective solutions. Queen Nonesi's example encourages

women to develop their negotiation and diplomatic competencies, empowering them to thrive in leadership roles (Dubow, 2013).

Queen Nonesi's long tenure as a leader is a testament to her ability to gain and maintain the respect and support of her community. This underscores the significance of building trust and fostering strong relationships with followers. Effective leadership requires not only competence but also the ability to inspire and engage others. Queen Nonesi's success in leading for almost four decades highlights the importance of cultivating these leadership qualities (Rassool, 2003).

The findings from the narrative synthesis have important implications for advancing the cause of women's leadership. By recognizing and celebrating the leadership attributes exhibited by Queen Nonesi, we can challenge the prevailing gender stereotypes and biases that hinder women's progress in leadership roles. Her story serves as a reminder that women possess the necessary qualities and capabilities to excel in leadership positions (Saavedra, 2017).

Moreover, Queen Nonesi's leadership offers valuable lessons for organizations and institutions seeking to promote gender equality and inclusivity. Her example emphasizes the importance of creating supportive environments that encourage and nurture women's leadership potential. Organizations can foster leadership development programs, mentorship initiatives, and inclusive policies to provide women with the necessary tools and opportunities for leadership success (Dubow, 2013).

In conclusion, the narrative synthesis of Queen Nonesi's leadership qualities reveals her potential as a champion of women's leadership. Her bravery, negotiation skills, and long tenure as a leader highlight her resilience, strategic thinking, and ability to gain the respect and support of her community. These findings offer valuable insights and lessons for advancing the cause of women's inclusion in leadership. By recognizing and celebrating the leadership attributes demonstrated by Queen Nonesi, we can challenge gender stereotypes, promote gender equality, and create more inclusive leadership environments.

## **Discussion**

This paper was born from this one pertinent question, is there any woman leader from the Xhosa people in the history of the Eastern Cape whose contribution can be paralleled to that of Mmanthatisi of the Sothos, Mkabayi of the Zulus, Labotsibeni of Swazis and Modjadji of the

Bulobedu of the Northern part of SA? The Eastern Cape fondly known as the home of legends have many women leaders who deserve to be celebrated just as we do to these other women leaders.

My research led me to Queen Nonesi of the Xhosa people (Thembus to be specific) kept coming up. She was born in 1815, just a year after Mkabayi had handed the Zulu throne to King Shaka and two years after Queen Mmanthatisi had ascended the throne as ruler of the Tlokwa people as regent for her son Sekonyela. This was about two centuries since the Modjadji Queens have been ruling.

Nonesi was the daughter of King Faku who went on to become the wife of the great king Ngubengcuka. She became a regent of her people in 1849, a decade before the birth of Queen Labotsibeni of Swaziland. Queen Nonesi fought sexism and patriarchy from her own people in order to lead them and succeeded. This was during the most turbulent times of conquest when the colonialists' repression and dispossession of people of their land and cattle was at its highest point but she was able to navigate the path to saving them from total dispossession, loss of kingdom and identity. Her preferred strategy was diplomacy, building of alliances, passive resistance, negotiation, appeasement by paying of tributaries where necessary and minimal military resistance. Faced with Pharaohs from both sides of the river e.g sexism from her own people and annexation by the whites she fought to assert her role as a legitimate leader. She saved her people from taking part in the killing of their cattle as preached by Nongqause, thus evading the tragic consequences of that unfortunate event.

She was also able to save her people from losing their land more than once through her negotiation and diplomatic skills. She died in 1880 at the age of 65 after leading her people for almost 40 years. Can Queen Nonesi be celebrated as a champion of women leadership by contemporary African women as they seek to assert their God-given right to lead? Can her success in fighting the male contenders to the throne such as Joyi and others be a lesson to proponents of patriarchy that women have the power to win these battles? Can her story serve as an inspiration in the struggle for gender equality and in the battle against gender-based violence? Is she the woman leader we have been waiting for from the Eastern Cape to retell the story of heroism of the Xhosa people? Is she the epitome of black women leadership excellence, that liberated men and women can look back to with pride because she represents our people's ability to accept leadership from any person irregardless of their gender? Or if she is not the one, then who is it amongst the Xhosa people fits this category?

## Implication and lessons learnt from Queen Nonesi's Leadership

Queen Nonesi's story offers valuable implications and lessons for advancing the cause of women's inclusion in leadership positions. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives, we can explore the significance of her experiences and identify key lessons that can inform efforts towards greater gender equality in leadership.

- **Challenging Stereotypes and Breaking Barriers:** Queen Nonesi's regency challenges the prevailing stereotypes and assumptions about women's leadership capabilities. Her resilience and determination in the face of patriarchy and colonialism highlight the need to challenge societal norms and break down barriers that hinder women's progress. This aligns with the theory of social constructionism, which emphasizes that gender roles and expectations are socially constructed and can be redefined through collective efforts.
- **Recognizing the Value of Diverse Perspectives:** Queen Nonesi's leadership demonstrates the importance of diverse perspectives in decision-making processes. By resisting the catastrophic consequences of the Nongqause prophecies, she showcased alternative approaches and prioritized the well-being of her people. This aligns with the theory of intersectionality, which recognizes that individuals have multiple social identities that shape their experiences and perspectives. Embracing diverse leadership can lead to more inclusive and effective decision-making.
- **Empowering Women through Education and Knowledge:** Queen Nonesi's ability to navigate complex challenges and lead her community was likely influenced by her knowledge and education. Her story underscores the importance of empowering women through education, providing them with the skills and knowledge necessary for leadership roles. This aligns with the theory of human capital, which suggests that investing in individuals' education and skills enhances their ability to contribute to society and take on leadership positions.
- **Fostering Supportive Networks and Mentorship:** Queen Nonesi's regency was likely supported by a network of allies and mentors who recognized her potential and provided guidance. This highlights the significance of fostering supportive networks and mentorship opportunities for women aspiring to leadership roles. The theory of social capital emphasizes the value of social connections and networks in accessing resources, opportunities, and support. Creating mentorship programs and networks can help women navigate challenges and build the necessary skills and confidence for leadership.
- **Addressing Structural and Systemic Barriers:** Queen Nonesi's story also highlights the need to address structural and systemic barriers that impede women's progress in

leadership. Patriarchy and colonialism were powerful forces during her time, and overcoming them required a concerted effort. This aligns with the theory of feminist institutionalism, which emphasizes the importance of transforming institutions to promote gender equality. Efforts should focus on addressing biases, promoting inclusive policies, and creating supportive environments that enable women to thrive in leadership positions.

## **Conclusion**

Queen Nonesi's story provides valuable lessons and implications for advancing the cause of women's inclusion in leadership. One important implication is the need to challenge stereotypes and biases that hinder women's progress in leadership roles. Society often holds preconceived notions about gender roles and capabilities, which can limit women's opportunities for advancement. By challenging and debunking these stereotypes, we can create a more inclusive environment where women are recognized for their leadership potential.

Recognizing the value of diverse perspectives is another crucial lesson from Queen Nonesi's leadership. Diversity in leadership brings different experiences, insights, and approaches to problem-solving, leading to better decision-making and innovation. Organizations should actively seek to include women from various backgrounds and communities to ensure a more comprehensive and representative leadership.

Empowering women through education is another important aspect that emerges from Queen Nonesi's story. Education provides women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to pursue leadership roles. Investing in girls' education and providing opportunities for continuous learning and development can help break down barriers and enable more women to take on leadership positions.

Fostering supportive networks and mentorship programs is also essential. Queen Nonesi's leadership success can be attributed in part to the support she received from her community. Establishing networks and mentorship programs that connect aspiring women leaders with experienced mentors can provide guidance, support, and opportunities for growth.

Addressing structural barriers is another key recommendation for advancing women's inclusion in leadership. Structural barriers, such as gender bias in hiring and promotion

practices, lack of work-life balance policies, and unequal access to resources and opportunities, need to be identified and addressed. Organizations and policymakers should implement policies and practices that promote gender equality and create a level playing field for women in leadership.

Future research should focus on further exploring the factors that contribute to women's leadership success and the barriers they face. Understanding the intersectionality of gender with other social identities, such as race, ethnicity, and class, can provide insights into the unique challenges faced by different groups of women. Additionally, research on the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives, can inform best practices for promoting women's inclusion in leadership.

In conclusion, Queen Nonesi's story serves as an inspiration and a reminder of the significant contributions women have made throughout history. By challenging stereotypes, recognizing the value of diversity, empowering women through education, fostering supportive networks, and addressing structural barriers, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society where women can thrive in leadership positions. Continued research and practice in these areas are essential for achieving gender equality in leadership and building a better future for all.

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