

**RECEPTION OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICAN PROPHECY: WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ISALAH SHEMBE**

BY

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Declaration

I hereby declare that with the exception of the sources specifically acknowledged in the text, this dissertation is my original work. It has not been submitted to any other University for examination. I now submit it for the first time in the School of Religion and Theology of the University of Kwazulu-Natal (PMB) for the degree of Master of Theology

Abstract

African encounter with the Bible is different from their encounter with Christianity. This thesis looks at different stages of African reception and appropriation of the Bible in African prophecy. The appropriation of the Bible by Africans is important to look at because it allows them to use their own thought pattern in order to understand the Word of God. Isaiah Shembe (1870-1935) is one of the AIC's prophets who sought to revitalize his Zulu community after the dispossession of their cultural identity in the name of Christianity. He did this through his different hermeneutical interpretation of *imibhalo eNgcwele* (Holy Scriptures) and through his maintenance and revival of social customs.

When missionaries came with the Bible in Africa there also came with them colonialists and it is evident that the two went together. Africans did not only see the Bible as a tool for western colonialism but also as a book of numinous powers. However, it was not long before Africans realized that there was nothing wrong about the “Book” because when they could read it for themselves they realized that the Book portrays a life that is similar to theirs. The researcher sought to separate the Bible from Christianity in order to understand different stages of the reception of the Bible in Africa. This thesis, then looks at the appropriation of the Bible in African prophecy. It argues that in African prophecy the Bible is used to renew African society. This is done by examining and contrasting the material of two Zulu prophets Isaiah Shembe and George Khambule. These two prophets who emerge in the time of the destruction of the Zulu society have a religious experience that sought to restore and renew Zulu community. This is seen in the way they interpreted and enacted the promise of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation among their communities.

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Chapter One

1. Introduction

Biblical scholarship in Africa has been done mostly by Western scholars and therefore reflects their thought patterns and worldviews. In this scholarship there has been a tendency to undervalue the contributions of Africans to biblical hermeneutics. While the Bible and Christianity have been viewed suspiciously by some African scholars most of them agree that the Bible plays an important role in the lives of many people in Africa. In his acute statement West (1999:81) wrote:

An important task awaiting an African biblical hermeneutics is a comprehensive account of the transactions that constitute the history of the encounters between Africa and the Bible. While the encounters between Africa and Christianity are well documented, the encounters between Africa and *the Bible* are fragmentary.

This statement is my premise as this research seeks to explore different kinds of African responses to the Bible in the colonial period and to the present. The researcher uses Isaiah Shembe appropriation of the Bible as a case study of how Africans have accepted and interpreted the Bible. It needs to be mentioned that the reception study of the Bible among Africans cannot ignore the fact that by that time there was semi-literate and literate society. Bediako (1994: 246), is correct when he says:

The possession of the Christian Scriptures in African languages became thus probably the single most important element of the Western missionary legacy. In some cases, the Scriptures became the foundation for a new literacy culture which did not exist previously, and ensured that there did take place an effectual rooting of the Christian faith in African consciousness.

I think the study of the reception of the Bible in the Nazarites Church of Shembe should take its oral base seriously. "One must note that the Shembe faith intends to operate within the broad framework of conventional Christianity and the Bible, as is witnessed by many statements in their hymn book" (Loubser 1993:77). I fully agree with Loubser (Ibid: 78), that Shembe faith cannot be explained merely by means of socio-political theories or "Western" theological criteria because it also includes an expression of faith in terms which corresponded to his specific cultural convention.

1.1. Motivation for the research

My reading of the series of articles in the book edited by G.O. West and Musa Dube entitled *The Bible in Africa* has alerted me to the fact that the reception of the Bible in Africa, to use West's words, does not amount to the same as the reception of Christianity. Even though the two are interconnected, they are not inseparable. In his article entitled *The Bible as a poison onion, icon and oracle: The Reception of the printed sacred text in oral and residual-oral South Africa*, Draper (2002:9-55) sees three different kinds of responses to the Bible in the colonial period (in South Africa): the first views it as a dangerous and poisonous novelty; the second sees it as a numinous object and source of the power of the White people, and the third internalizes and transforms it as a prophetic word in resistance to colonialism.

I have found this work most suggestive for my research because it asserts that illiterate people did not just accept everything in the Bible as White missionaries taught them, but they have been engaging with the Bible, making it their own book. I hope this study have opened more space for African biblical scholarship. While in the past decades researchers have monopolized biblical scholarship for the West, I am motivated by the realization that pluralism in South Africa gives us a chance to listen to each other's stories. It is therefore expedient that the African stories of their encounters with the Bible are brought to the surface. Thus it is the explication of this research to try and give a thick detailed analysis of the encounters between Africa (South Africa) and the Bible through a case study of Shembe and the Bible, and to outline the task facing African biblical scholarship.

1.2. Preliminary literature and the location of the research within the existing literature

The Bible is among the most popular books of Africans. It is the book in which many people in Africa hope to find answers for their being, morals, ethics, and all other life interests. However, Maluleke (2000:97) warns us that:

The massive public displays of African "attachment" to the Bible must not be taken only at face value. Both Christianity and the Bible may not, in and on themselves, be as important for Africans as it may appear. To put the same point differently, the "Bible" and the "Christianity" of poor Black Africans may not

necessarily be the same “Bible” and the same “Christianity” as that of the Euro-American, the rich and the White.

Black and African theologians, he argued, need to be careful in their assumption of massive Christianity and the massive significance of the Bible in Africa. Reality seems to point out that both the Bible and Christianity in Africa (if one may separate them for a moment) are aspects of a thickly syncretistic mix of beliefs, rites, rituals and a whole range of survival and resistance strategies (: 97).

The work of Draper where he examines three ways in which Africans, coming out of oral culture, responded to the missionaries’ presentation of the Bible in their early encounters forms preliminary framework for this research. Draper uses Nomguqo Paulina Dlamini and Isaiah Shembe as his examples of how Africans, particularly the Zulus, responded to their encounters with the Bible. Draper himself points out that these examples he gives are not intended to be exhaustive, nor are the categories intended to watertight. Instead, they are intended to open up the question of the early reception of the Bible in Southern Africa to further discussions (2002:40).

This is what the researcher hopes to bring into surface and analyses in *a thick description*, to use Clifford Geertz’s (1973, pp.3-30) term. Two Books of John Mbiti are of great help in giving direction for this research. The first one *The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology* (1979, pp.83-94) gives a good survey of the place of the Bible in the developing methodology of African Theology in the formative period. The second one, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (1989), has a wide-ranging survey, recognizing the significance of “orality” in the African appropriation of the Bible.

Furthermore, the timing of the emergence of *amaNazaretha* Church of Shembe during the time of domination of Zulu society by White settlers gives weight to what Maluleke and Draper say about the early encounters between Africa and the Bible. The work of Abraham Vilakazi, *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society* (1986), where he tries to locate the Church of Shembe among the AIC's that seek to revive African society and culture, will be consulted.

1.3. Research problem

It needs to be stated that Western missionaries came to South Africa with the Bible as one of their tools for evangelization.¹ To be sure the Zulus were living in an oral culture and were an illiterate community. So what collocations did this book (the Bible) have among these illiterate people? I think a close reading of the material on Shembe and a study of the way he uses Scriptures will be of great importance in this study.

One of the problems that I would like to pose as I use Shembe as my case study is, why Shembe on the one hand seems to reject the Bible and on the other hand seems to seek its support as an authority for his calling and activities? How can we use African prophetic interpretations of the Bible as resources for developing African biblical scholarship in Africa? Do these have something to contribute to counter the Western hegemony of biblical scholarship?

1.4. Theoretical framework

This research uses a contextual model for analyzing data. So in every piece of work, missionary records, interviews and information from other sources the researcher takes their life situation or context very seriously. This is the model employed by modern scholars such as Duncan Brown. According to Brown (1998:120) Isaiah Shembe was a messianic Zulu evangelist working between 1911 and 1935, a period in which the social, political, and economic structures of Zulu society were breaking down as a result of colonial occupation and rapid urbanization. Shembe founded the Church of the Nazarites (*iBandla lamaNazaretha*), an independent Church, which sought to revitalize Zulu society through the maintenance and revival of social customs, and mores, many of which were rejected by the mission Churches. In taking the context of the emergence of African Independent Churches, such as the Nazarites Church of Shembe, this model sees them as a form of resistance to colonial imperialism and as a quest for African affirmation (Brown 1998:120; Draper 2002:51; Muller 1999: 25-26).

¹ I have use the term “evangelism” to denote that Africans were already religious people when missionaries came to Africa. For an elaborate definition of mission and evangelism see Bosch 1991, pp. 409-420.

1.5. Research Methods

The research adopted various research methods. The first method is based on literary sources. This covers a series of articles in the book entitled *The Bible in Africa* (edited by Gerald West and Musa Dube) and other sources on the reception of the Bible in Africa. The former reflects trends in which Africans have been trying to interpret the Bible for themselves. I have used these articles to show how their claims of development of biblical scholarship in Africa can be seen clearly in the way Shembe used and interpreted the Bible for his context. I have also focused on the material written by Shembe and about him as a typical example of how African prophecy reflects the way the Bible was accepted in its early encounters. In order to accomplish this, archival material on Shembe have been consulted. There are many documents on Shembe that were collected by Bengt Sundkler who has written extensively on Shembe and his Church. These are kept in the archive at Uppsala in Sweden. Even though funds were limited, I was able to spend two weeks in Uppsala in order to collect that data and do more research and I was able to meet Axel-Ivar Berglund who helped me with information and clarity on Shembe. Berglund himself has written extensively on Shembe and Zulu thought. Moreover, he personally has met Johannes Galilee Shembe (the successor of Isaiah Shembe) and they had been friends.

The researcher has conducted a fieldwork at *Ekuphakameni* among the leaders and the members of the Nazarites Church of Shembe in order to get an impression on how people understand Shembe in relation to the Bible and to find out the authenticity of the material collected on Shembe.

1.6. Delimitation

As I have already indicated above my research is based mainly on literary resources, archival material and fieldwork I have conducted among the people of the Shembe Church. I am aware of the fact that in our modern society oral culture co-exists with literacy and at some points it becomes difficult to separate the two. The “outsiders” wrote the larger parts of the documents. It is, therefore, likely that they reflect to a great extent their worldviews and prejudice concerning African culture and African contributions to

the process of biblical interpretation. Therefore, this research is limited by the very fact that the data to be analyzed was written by the dominant groups. So as I read and analyze it I have tried to listen and hear those untold stories of African encounters with the Bible and this limits me.

Lastly, it would have been interesting to analyze in depth the materials of several other Indigenous African Church leaders. However, I have limited my self to a study of George Khambule as a contrast to Shembe.

1.7. Outline of chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the research to be undertaken by the researcher. It introduces the problem of the encounters between Africa and the Bible, which is often neglected in the study of African Christianity. Because Africa is big with very diverse nations the researcher has chosen to limit himself within the Zulus represented by the Zulu prophet Isaiah Shembe because it is my own culture and language. The researcher uses Isaiah Shembe's appropriation of the Bible as a case study of how Africans have accepted and interpreted the Bible. The thesis looks at different stages of African encounters with the Bible as a written text.

Moreover, the chapter gives motivation for the research, literature previews, and theoretical framework and research methodology. The chapter also raises research rhetorical questions such as, "What collocations did the Bible have among this illiterate community? To put the same question in another way what things at first, did Africans connect the Bible with? In short this chapter points to what is meant to be undertaken by this study and how the researcher will conduct it to fulfill the desired goal.

Chapter 2: Historical arrival of the Bible in South Africa: European collocations

This chapter goes into details with the historical arrival of the Bible in South Africa and its European collocations. By European collocations I mean the things that Africans

connected or grouped the Bible with. For example, they might have connected it with western literacy or western culture, etc. This chapter attempts to separate the Bible from Christianity in order to analyze the roles that have been played by Africans in the interpretation of the Bible. Nevertheless, the researcher acknowledges that this is a difficult exercise to do.

The thesis assumes that there were three remarkable stages in the reception of the Bible in Africa but acknowledges that there could be more stages than these. It is argued here that the Bible and colonialism went together. As Lamin Sanneh (1984:4) states: "Modern historiography has established a tradition that mission was the surrogate of Western colonialism". Lastly, the chapter outlines the historical development in the interpretation of the Bible.

Chapter 3: Renewal and Indigenous revitalization of African society: Isaiah Shembe

Having looked at the historical arrival of the Bible in Africa, this chapter focuses on the African response to the way the gospel message has been presented to them. It does this by referring to African Independent Churches (AIC's). It sees the AIC's as a reaction to restore African culture and identity in the face of the hegemony of White missionary culture. The chapter introduces Shembe and his Nazarites Church and argues along with Vilakazi (1986:1) that the ministry of Shembe should be seen as African revitalization. The Nazarites Church of Shembe and other AIC's are seen as a form of protest against western colonialism. Shembe uses of African traditional clothing in his Church and many African practices that he utilizes in his Church such as dance and healing are all indications of what he sought to do. The chapter ends with the assertion that the Nazarites Church of Shembe is about renewal of African society, more specially the Zulus. The chapter is descriptive of what Shembe and other AIC's have done in the process of renewal and indigenous revitalization of African society.

Chapter 4: The Bible in the Amanazaretha

Chapter four deals specifically with the interpretation and the appropriation of the Bible by the Church of the Nazarites. It contends that it will be an overstatement to reduce the Nazarites Church of Shembe only into a political movement. It needs to be mentioned that, apart from political maladjustment that led to the emergence of the AIC's movements in South Africa and elsewhere, leaders or founders of these Churches have had religious experience. Thus it is both social and religious experience that led to the emergence of AIC's.

The way Shembe organizes his Church practices is solely based on the Scriptures and his understanding of the Zulu culture. The Bible and his Zulu world-view of reality shape both his understanding of God and his relationship to him. We can see through reading this chapter that *amanazaretha* appropriated the Bible to themselves according to their needs and concerns and they allow the Scriptures to shape their lives and seek to practice what is said in it. Hence we note the keeping of the Sabbath and other cleansing rituals. The chapter also analyzes some selected sermons and hymns of the Nazarites and seeks to understand the way the Scriptures have been integrated in them.

Chapter 5: Comparisons between Isaiah Shembe and George Khambule

The chapter looks at the two Zulu prophets who emerge almost in the same period of African marginalization and oppression by western colonialism, Isaiah Shembe and George Khambule. In this chapter the researcher will evaluate the findings and observations in the reception and appropriation of the Bible in African prophecy.

Chapter six: Women and the laws of the Nazarites Church of Shembe

Chapter six contains *imithetho*, the laws of the Nazarites Church. It contends that Shembe reverts to his Zulu culture and weaves it together with his Biblical knowledge of the Scriptures in order to make women connect to their culture. The chapter asserts that while Shembe found some liberative aspects in his Zulu culture he also found that there are

some aspects that are irredeemable and have continued to perpetuate women oppression. These have been used to marginalized and oppressed women.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the findings of the researcher. Here the researcher argues that Shembe has found new way of appropriating the Scriptures that is meaningful and that appeals to many of African readers. He does this without directly quoting relevant texts from the Bible but by alluding to images and hints of language. Hymns and the sermon of Shembe show his deep knowledge of the Bible. In other words hymns and the sermons of Shembe show that he lived in the world of the Bible. He knows it. He has internalized it. It is the gospel message that he preaches not the printed text.

Chapter Two

2. Historical arrival of the Bible in South Africa: European collocations

2.1. Introduction

The arrival of the Bible in South Africa is a topic which has not been dealt with in detail, even by African scholars. I am aware of the fact that there are numerous volumes of books on the Bible in Africa such as, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (1969) edited by Kwesi Dickson; *Race, Class And Gender As Hermeneutical Factors In The African Independent Churches' Appropriation of the Bible* (1996) by Itumeleng Mosala, and *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History And The Role Of The Bible in Africa* by Ype Schaaf, etc, but none of them seems to treat the subject in depth. In this chapter I would like to argue along with scholars such as West that the reception of the Bible in Africa can be separated from the reception of Christianity (2000:81). I am doing this because I think it can help to separate the Bible from Christianity so that the role that has been played by Africans in their acceptance of the Bible can be clearly analyzed. This chapter will argue that the Bible, not the missionaries, has become very much important in African prophecy. The Bible whether opened or closed still speaks to the Africans (West 2000:48).

2.2. European collocations

The most important question to ask would be “What things did the Africans connect the Bible with?” This question becomes even more important when one recalls that by the time the missionaries came with the Bible to Africa, Africans were living in an oral culture; they could not read and write. One also needs to bear in mind that those who brought the Bible to Africa were not merely ministers, but were agents of imperialism. Lamin Sanneh rightly observes “Modern historiography has established a tradition that mission was the surrogate of Western colonialism” (1989:4).

In fact in the whole of his book Lamin Sanneh argues that mission and Western colonialists combined to destroy indigenous cultures. So one cannot speak of the reception of the Bible in Africa apart from Western colonialism. Lamin Sanneh (1989:173) contends that:

Missionaries and Africans played complementary roles in the establishment of the religion. Consequently, a certain double entendre came to characterize the history of Christianity in Africa: indigenous aspirations were promoted by the vernacular prospects of scriptural translation, while missionaries were committed to translation from numerical success. This difference in perception, arising from a common source in translation, allowed two apparently divergent tendencies to develop. In the first place, missionaries continued to be committed to the development of the vernacular as a foil to the establishment of the Christianity they knew and trusted. In the second place, Africans acquired from vernacular resources a strengthened determination to reject foreign interpretations of the religion.

When missionaries thought they were in control of translation and literacy Africans find opportunity to use the scriptures for themselves. I fully agree with Bosch (1991:302-303; 228) that the term “mission” presupposes the ambience of the West’s colonization of overseas territories and its subjugation of their inhabitants. Therefore, since the sixteenth century, if one said, “mission”, one in a sense also said “colonialism”.

To go back to the question I have raised at the beginning of this paper, “What did the Africans associate or connect the Bible with?” We know that at first they did not know what was inside this book since they could not read and write. However it would be wrong to assume that Africans did not make any connection of this book with other things the missionaries came with. The first thing to note is that it would be very easy for Africans to connect the Bible with white male western missionaries, including their life style. Thus Goba (1998:50) is significantly correct when he cites Benjamin Ray as saying:

... The establishment of Christianity went hand in hand with the process of acculturation of the colonialist order. Christian missionaries may have believed that they were merely converting Africans to the gospel of Christ, but in fact they were converting them to a whole range of Western values, including literacy, medicine, clerical and industrial education, town life, wage earning, and social mobility, as well as instilling in them a distaste for traditional values.

It is clear that missionaries were actively involved in the maintenance of the imperial status quo. In most cases they collaborated with colonialists. So Draper (2003:2) rightly observes that in colonial Africa the missionaries occupied a pivotal position as agents of imperial culture, even outside the boundaries of the empire. It seems to me that at the early stage of African encounter with the Bible there was a very strong link between the Bible and the annexation of land. Poignant to this view is the following quotation from Draper (2002:42):

The Bible masks the fact that the colonialist hides a gun behind his back. Manisi scathingly describes the English settlers as, 'those who coursed the seas with Bible in hand, hiding muskets under their cassocks'. But the Bible is also the repository of the cultural values of the settlers, and therefore also represents this culture in its power to be grasped and hence paradoxically its vulnerability.

The quotation cited above affirms the hypothesis that the Bible was associated with the gun of the white men, which to Africans was a magic responsible for their conquest by the whites. So using the Bible and the gun white settlers were able to conquer and dominate Africans. Thus it comes as no surprise that Africans associated western victory over them with the powers drawn from both the Bible and the gun.

It also needs to be noted that Africans would have associated the Bible with Western literacy. In a second stage of development there was a deliberate rejection of the Bible as a book but a return to its oral form. A typical example is that of Isaiah Shembe. When he was asked in the Native Commission Court in Pietermaritzburg whether could he read and write. He answered, "I was not taught to read and write, but I can read the Bible a little bit" (Gunner 1988:41). In this answer of Shembe one can see that it seems that Shembe wants to deny western literacy and argue that his ability to read is not because of western school but a direct revelation from God. "In its textual form, the Bible was experienced as alienating, determined by the culture of the West. But in its oral form, repeated, sung, danced, preached, acted out, the Word became African and was experienced as liberating" (Draper 2002:50). The latter point is the target of this thesis.

2.3. The Bible as an object of numinous power

The fact is that the Bible was among other objects white people used to subjugate Africans, it was regarded as having very dangerous powers. We would expect that Africans orientated in the belief in magic may as well have thought of that “Black book” (the Bible) as possessing magic powers. Opland (1999:102) argued that in the poetry of Mqgqetho one could see both the affirmation and denial of the Bible. He further argued that Mqgqetho's denunciations deploy well-established images of the book and the rifle as white agents of Xhosa dispossession. This is clearly displayed in Notsizi Mqgqetho's praise (:102):

They clapped shackles on Africa,
With Bible and gun they brought her down;
Africa wails its laments.
Where is that Bible now, O Christians?

Now its breath of fire
Scorches those who embraced it.
What does the prophet Isaiah say?
Having plundered, you will be plundered.

From the praises above, it is clear that the Bible was seen as one of those military tools the Western powers used to defeat Africans. I personally have an experience of someone rejecting the Bible. My late elder brother used to tell me that he does not think the Bible was a book which is genuinely related to faith in God. What he thinks was that it is a book written by the whites in order to tame Africans so that they can take their land and make them their slaves. However, he did not object to the fact that there is God (the Supreme Being) whom all people should worship.

2.4. Historical development in the interpretation of the Bible

We have seen what Africans associated the Bible with and how they responded towards it at its first encounter. In spite of the rejection of the Bible and its being viewed with suspicion, the Bible then was to play an important part in the lives of many Africans. The glimpse of this can be seen in the following quotation by Holter (2000:51), “There is a famous story that is told in east Africa: a village woman used to walk around always carrying her Bible. 'Why always the Bible?' her neighbors asked teasingly. 'There are so

many other books you can read.' The woman knelt down, held the Bible above her head and said. 'Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book which reads me'.

At this point I think Africans were beginning to understand that the problem was not necessarily with the Bible, but with those who brought it. In fact Maboea (in Oosthuizen 1994:134) notes significantly that when Africans broke away from the mission Churches to form their own Churches, their basic purpose was to consult the scriptures to hear what God says. Indeed, through their efforts to hear from God Himself out of the Bible, many discovered that the Word of God did not always correspond with what was brought by the missionaries. They discovered that the God of the Bible was interested in their affairs. They learned about a God who loved and a God who wanted justice and righteousness for all people. From the Bible, they heard about a God who told them to do to others, as they would expect others to do to them.

It seems to me that this attitude towards the Bible made it a new mine for hearing the Word of God to Africans. It was by this discovery that they learned from that Bible that many of their cultural practices were similar to those related by the Bible. Let us take as an example, the question of polygamy and *lobola*, which the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, one of the earliest entries into the field of Zulu mission, described as "the twin pillars of heathenism" and prohibited. However, when their converts began to hear, read and study the Bible for themselves, they understood it differently to the missionaries. To the dismay and disconcertion of their teachers, they found an essential "cultural continuity" with the Bible, especially the New Testament which presupposed the Old (Draper, J. A. 2005). "The Bible and Culture in Africa". Forthcoming in J. Sawyer (ed), *Companion to the Bible and culture*).

When Africans read the Bible "they hear and see a confirmation of their own cultural, social and religious life in the life and history of Jewish people as portrayed and recorded in the pages of the Bible" (Mbiti: 1986:26). They now could read and understand the Bible using their own cultural experience or African resources. Daneel (1987:90) notes

significantly that to Protestant Africans, the Bible was a higher authority than the missionary. They could therefore turn their backs on the missionary and follow the Bible fairly easily, if it seemed that the missionary's conduct and teaching conflicted with the Bible. According to Maboea (in Oosthuizen 1994:134):

They (Africans) realized that not all about their culture was not good and they started to serve God within their own context. Africans were then exposed to God direct, not via western culture. Then only did the Africans appreciate their Africanness. From the Bible, they learned to discover God as God for all people; not as one who associate himself with a certain group of people alone. Through their own way of Bible study, they realized that God loved them as they were.

While we talk about historical developments in the interpretation of the Bible by Africans, it needs to be noted that most members and leaders of African prophecy did not acquire theological education as Pastors in mission Churches. In his piece master of work Mosala (1989:16) finds that many members of African Independent Churches do not have a literate knowledge of the Bible. He also notes that the members' source of their knowledge of the Bible is not the biblical texts themselves. Members have an oral knowledge of the Bible. Most of their information about the Bible comes from socialization in the Churches themselves as they listen to prayers and to sermons. It is not appropriated in terms of what it says, but in terms of what it stands for- a canonical authority. There is a very important point noted by Mosala pertaining to the use of the Bible among African Independent Churches (AIC's). Even though his focus is on working class members of AIC's, it is true of most members of the AIC's including their prophets. He argued, "working class members of the AIC's do not search their contemporary historical experience to find tools with which to unlock the mysteries of the Bible. Rather, they appropriate the mysteries of the Bible and indeed of traditional African society in order to 'live through' their problematic as members of a subordinate class" (: 17).

In fact, during the apartheid regime in South Africa (SA), in the words of West (1993:61), "Black Christians have found in the Bible ancient symbols of their present suffering and struggle. Their readings of the Bible have enabled them to resist dehumanization and destruction of their faith in God the Liberator. This is another story

then, a story in which the Bible is a book with a message of survival, resistance, and hope.”

I think the development of the Bible interpretation and appropriation by Africans began when missionaries translated the Bible into their indigenous languages. West (2000: 97) argues convincingly that when missionaries or mission societies made the Bible available to an African people in that people's own language, their grip on the gospel was loosened and so too their proprietary claim on Christianity. Translation enabled the Bible to become an independent yardstick by which to test and sometimes to reject what Western missionaries taught and practiced ‘and in so doing’ provided the basis for developing new, indigenous forms of Christianity.

Dube (1997) writes that the Bible is a Western and therefore a colonial construct, designed to take possession of the minds and lands of those who are different. Dube takes the Bible as an imperial weapon in the hands of oppressors and colonialists, whose interpretations are biased against the Black race and its women. However, I do not completely agree with her. Her assertion implies that Africans were observers in the process of the reception of the Bible in Africa. I do not think this is correct as we have argued above there have been reciprocity and by this reciprocity we are not overlooking areas of tension and challenge that it came with (Sanneh 1989:173).

Oosthuizen (1992:47-48) in his studies of the practice of the AIC's found that:

All the prophets stated that they do not use the Bible when healing people. The New Testament is the book of healing, for in Jesus' ministry healing was a central function, is very seldom used at the healing sessions conducted at the sea. Usually a service precedes the healing session when it takes place in the house, in Church or in the open spaces in urban areas, and here the Bible has a place. But it is not read during the healing sessions. Thus, the history of healing of centuries ago, even by Jesus, gets no precedence, but healing history is made in the here and now.

I think that the concern of Oosthuizen about why the Bible is not read during healing session is rather unnecessary, because healing practices are recorded in the Bible. To say it is not read does not mean it is not important.

However, it is the utmost importance to note that Oosthuizen does not discard the fact that the Bible is used and is of great importance among the AIC's. For he went on to stress that:

It would be a distortion to maintain that the Bible has no role to play at healing sessions. These sessions are usually the last part of a service where the Bible has been read-often several times-and the sections read contemplated upon. Many of the groups who come to the beach for exorcism or healing in general, bring a Bible with them, although they seldom read from it. It is nevertheless present during their healing activities (: 48).

This observation is important and in fact, is the premise of this thesis. To say that the Bible is seldom read in African prophecy need not make us think that it is ignored in these Churches. Wimbush (quoted by West 2003:41-42) argues that not only can the reception of the Bible among African Americans, that is, African slaves in America, be separated from the reception of missionaries and Christianity but that early African American encounters with the Bible have functioned as “phenomenological, socio-political and cultural foundation” for subsequent periods.

According to West (: 42), “if Wimbush is right in asserting that the array of appropriate and interpretative strategies forged in the earliest encounters of African Americans with the Bible are foundational, in the sense that all other subsequent African American readings are in some sense built upon and judged by them, then historical hermeneutical analysis has tremendous significance for our current hermeneutical context”. I think what Wimbush observes among African Americans slaves is also true of Africans here. Maluleke (2000:91-92) makes the following statement concerning the Bible:

It [the Bible] is the most accessible basic vernacular literature text, a storybook, a compilation of novels and short stories, a book of prose and poetry, a book of spiritual devotions (i.e. the “Word of God”) as well as a “science” that “explains” the origin of all creatures. In some parts of Africa, the dead are buried with the Bible on their chests, and the Bible is buried into the concrete foundations on which new houses are to be built. In many African Independent Churches it is the physical contact between the sick and the Bible that is believed to hasten healing.

Maluleke went on to warn us that the fact that the Bible is popular among Africans should not deceive us to think that Africans have uncritically accepted it. According to Maluleke (1997a: 14-15), “African Christians are far more innovative and subversive in

their appropriation of the Bible than they appear". I think here the important thing will be to look at which texts are most used? In other words, which texts have gained popular attention among them? Why those texts and not the others. It seems clear to me that Africans³ have their own particular way of relating to the scripture. Now it is for us biblical scholars to observe and analyze how they did or do this. To put the same point in a different way, in West's words, "we must recognize and analyze the diverse ways in which ordinary Africans actually engaged with the Bible" (West 2003:50).

It seems to me that there are two dimensions to be taken into account when one really wants to unlock the reception of the Bible in African prophecy. The first, is the role of scholars or of trained people, those who have received theological education. The second, is the role of those who have not been trained to read the Bible⁴. I think these two poles are important but the second needs to be more closely examined. So this thesis seeks to look at that contribution of people like Isaiah Shembe who were not "taught to read and write" by the West, but claim to have received it from heaven as a revelation. What is their contribution to the reception of the Bible?

2.5. Ukpong's The Three Phases of Biblical Interpretation

In making an overview of the historical arrival of the Bible in South Africa I will depend heavily on the work of Ukpong who to me seems to have correctly articulated this process. According to Ukpong (2000:12) African biblical interpretation has taken three phases. Phase one covers the period between the 1930s and the 1970s. This phase was a response to the tendency of Western missionaries to prejudice and condemn African culture and religion as a demonic and immoral and therefore to be exterminated before Christianity could take roots in Africa.

³ Even though I use the word Africans in a general sense here, I have in mind the Zulu Prophet Isaiah Shembe who to me become an example of indigenous interpretation of the Bible.

⁴ West calls those who have been trained to read the Bible as "Ordinary readers". Although this term makes it easier to follow or to facilitate the argument I am not comfortable with using it because it presupposes superiority among the readers of the Bible. Nevertheless, it is the reality that most Christians who read the Bible are not trained to do so.

This Western approach to the evangelization of Africa unnecessarily alienated the gospel message from Africans. However, it needs to be stated that this Western call for Africans to abandon their cultural practices as a first step towards accepting the gospel message met with resistance. Hence, “in response to this, some Westerners who were sympathetic to the African cause and later on Africans themselves undertook researches that sought to legitimize African religion and culture. This was done by a way of *comparative studies* carried out within the frame work Comparative Religion” (: 12). One would imagine how interesting this comparative study was, since there are a number of resonances in the Bible particularly in the Old Testament with the African religious practices. The examples of these resonances are sacrifices, polygamy, and rituals. However, one need not think that this method was affirming everything that is African found in the biblical text, but was evaluative.

I think phase one of the historical arrival of the Bible in South Africa or Africa can be clearly captured in the following extract from Anum (2000:468):

In sum, the comparative method arose as a response to colonial conception of African Traditional Religion and culture on the part of Missionaries who believed that African cultures were satanic and pagan and needed to be totally abandoned if Christianity was to thrive in Africa. Thus what African biblical scholars tried to do was to identify similarities between the biblical world and African religio-cultural practices and to use their scholarly and scientific tools to show the relationship between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. The outcome of the comparative approach is the thesis that African Traditional Religion constitutes a *praeparatio evangelica*, preparation of the gospel.

The second phase covers the 1970s to the 1990s. According to Ukpong (: 14) in the second phase “the reactive approach of the first phase gradually gives way to a proactive approach. The African context is used as a resource in the hermeneutic encounter with the Bible, and the religious studies framework characteristic of the former phase gives way to a more theological framework.” West recognized that in this phase African life interests are consciously and explicitly a part of the interpretative process (West, 2000). I find this phase very useful in the African context, since it makes the gospel speak to our immediate situation.

It is my conviction that Jesus' message was not addressed to a vacuum but to a particular concrete social situation and it is in recognizing our context that we can hear the voice of Jesus speaking to us. It is in this phase where we find development of the biblical interpretation in the form of inculturation.

The third and the last phase suggested by Ukpong covers the period of the 1990s. It is proactive, is interested in highlighting the way the *ordinary reader* uses African context as the subject of biblical interpretation, and is dominated by liberation and inculturation methodologies. The two main methodologies of *inculturation* and *liberation* which had crystallized in the second phase are carried forward with new orientations. One is the orientation that recognizes the *ordinary* African readers (that is, non-biblical scholars) as important partners in academic Bible reading, and seeks to integrate their perspectives in the process of the academic interpretation of the Bible (: 23).

I think in this phase a challenge is posed to African biblical scholarship. The challenge is the question of how to integrate academic reading of the Bible and untrained readers. I also feel that Ukpong has not clearly articulated the role that the “ordinary readers” of the Bible play in the process of interpretation. In fact this is an area which needs African biblical scholarship to focus on. It is urgent because most of the African readers of the Bible are people without any training in reading it and yet it is the book in which many seek answers to their lives' experiences. West (1993) elsewhere in his book entitled, *Contextual Bible Study*, has given an important analysis of the contribution of the “ordinary readers” of the Bible to the academic biblical scholarship. In the process of the contextual bible study the “trained reader” reads the bible *with* the ordinary readers allowing and recognizing the significant contribution and experience of the ordinary readers.

It is my conviction that in our context we have not yet reached a point where we can say the interaction between the academic and non-academic interpretation of the Bible is balanced. Instead the former still dominates. We need to create a safe space where these can interact or dialogue and be useful to the development of African biblical scholarship.

And I think studying the reception of the Bible in African prophecy is one way to do this. It is recognition of African interpretation of the Bible.

2.6. Summary and conclusion

This chapter has focused on the different stages in the early encounters of the Bible with Africans. It looks closely at the things which Africans have associated the Bible with. To say at the time of the early encounters of the Africans with the Bible, Africans could not read and write does not mean that they did not try to interpret this “book” from the hands of the missionaries. We have discussed different interpretative methodologies that were employed by the Africans to interpret the Bible. Among these, was a comparative study whereby Africans compare the stories related in the Bible with theirs. The result was that most of the stories in the Bible especially in the Old Testament echoed their stories. We have noted different development stages in the reception of the Bible in Africa. First, “it was frightful and absurd, thereafter... awesome and fascinating” (West 2000:84).

In this chapter it has clearly come out that Africans were not passive participants in the reception of the Bible. They have, to use West's words (2000:97), “forged their own ways of interpreting and appropriating the Bible.” I want to believe, as I have argued here, that they did not forge their ways only but they combined or interacted their interpretations with those of the missionaries. It seems to me that during these phases or stages of encounter with the Bible there was a mutual exchange of western interpretations and African interpretations. In the next chapter I will look at this in detail and with concrete examples from Isaiah Shembe and his Nazarites Church.

Chapter Three

3. Renewal and Indigenous Revitalization of African Society

3.1. Introduction

The study of the work and the contribution of Isaiah Shembe in the reception of the Bible in Africa cannot overlook the South African context that shapes his understanding of the Bible. The ministry of Shembe should be seen in the light of what Vilakazi (1986:1) calls “an African revitalization” or “African reformation”. Africans or to be more specific Black South Africans became conscious of what the White missionaries and their colonial masters were doing, that is, to suppress their world view and culture in the name of the gospel message. It was for this reason, according to Vezi (1992:11-12) that “in the face of this rejection of the African by the white man in the social political and economic life of the country and by the White missionaries in the church, the African has withdrawn into his shell. He is forced to create and to inhabit his own world hence separatism in the churches”.

When Africans saw that they were not only rejected in the political and social arena, but also in white missionary churches, they decided to start their own Churches independent of the Western control. It is clear that some members of the AIC's also found the teaching of mission churches alienating to them. Perhaps this is one of the reasons Isaiah Shembe started his own church. According to the records of Sundkler, he (Isaiah Shembe) detected certain practices which he considered wrong in the Baptist Church to which he belonged. He said the wearing of shoes in church and giving of communion during the day were not in agreement with the Bible's teaching. When he went about preaching, if his converts requested baptism, he would send them to a local Christian Church but they were not received there because they had no clothing- so he was compelled to accept these people into baptism¹.

¹From the script of Dr. Bengt Sundker (box no. 97) located in the *Rediviva Carolina* archive, in Uppsala.

Another example is that of polygamy. According to Vezi (1992:13) “when the missionaries condemn polygamy, to the African it looks as if they condemn it because it is an African institution- just as they condemn African beer while they keep their wines and brandies and even use wine for sacramental purposes”. So the AIC's should be seen as a reaction to restore African culture and identity in the threat of the hegemony of White missionary culture. It is, as I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, a quest for African affirmation. In AIC's an African is allowed to be a Christian without abandoning African culture. In other words an African does not need to be White before becoming a Christian.

In this thesis, therefore, we will look at Isaiah Shembe and his Church of the Nazarites in order to ascertain how renewal and indigenous revitalization takes place. We will look at his profile, his church practice, and rituals. We will also look at his immediate context. This is an important task to do because it will help us to understand the reality that shapes Shembe's understanding of the Bible. I think there were circumstances which influenced Shembe to have a particular understanding of the Bible and to have ordered his converts to live in a particular way.

3.2. The profile of Isaiah Shembe (1867or1870 to 1935)

I would like to begin by acknowledging the difficulties in giving the exact date of the birth of Isaiah Shembe. This is because Zulus did not have their birth dates recorded. What happened was that a birth of a particular person would be remembered in connection with a specific event in history. For example, it is not uncommon in some parts of the rural areas in Kwazulu-Natal to hear an elderly person saying, “I was born during the Bhambatha rebellion”. Then, you can only reconstruct the date of birth by recalling the date of Bhambatha rebellion.

According to Vilakazi (1986:23) “Isaiah Shembe, the founder of the Church of the Nazarites (*iBandla lamaNazarethā*) was born into a Zulu polygamous family. Sundkler gives the year of his birth as 1870. Dube, however, is more, cautious and contents himself with stating that he was born about 1867”.

The following letter dated Tuesday 5 November 1929, which is said to be Shembe's testimony gives us a glimpse of who Shembe was and where he came from:

Tuesday 5 November 1929

My name is Isaya Shembe... of Mayekisa, my sub surname Nhlanzi, at Mzimkhulu, Tazela. My father was Nhliziyo of Nyathikazi. I was born at Ntabamhlophe in the district of Langalibalele Mthimkhulu. I was born when Langalibalele was still alive. I heard from my father that I was about three or four years old when Langalibalele was deposed. I stayed with my father Mayekisa at home until I came of age. I remember when I left home; I also remember when God's voice first came to me. My father Mayekisa left Ntabamhlophe and migrated to the Free State near Ntabazwe (Harrismith). He builds a home on the farm of Coenraad Grabe, called Bruwelshoek. I was an adolescent then. We arrived and build our home there. The war between the English and Cetshwayo was fought while we were at Coenraad's. We were uprooted by the Anglo-Boer War. My father died before the fight between Dinuzulu and Zibhebhu (occurred June 1888). I am just thinking, I don't recall very well (Kau 1999:14).

According to Vezi (1992:22):

Shembe's youth was, however, marked by emotional conflicts, and he seems to have been unhappy in spite of the fact that he was an ideal young man and that no moral stigma attached to his behavior. The account of his life given by Dr. Dube would seem to suggest that he was not well adjusted to his culture, or that he rebelled against certain aspects of that culture. As a youth he has disturbing dreams.

There are a number of occasions in the life of Isaiah Shembe that were perceived to be signs for his calling. When Shembe was still a boy he stole the belt of the man who had visited them at home. After they have left Shembe felt great remorse in such a way that he perceived seeing tearful eyes on the heart and hearing a voice telling him that this was the sorrowful heart of the man who had his belt stolen (Hexham and Oosthuizen 1996:8-9). Nevertheless, after all Shembe responded to his calling and became a famous and powerful preacher and healer.

Sundkler (1961:110) speaking of Shembe's reputation said, "There is very probably no Zulu in modern times who has had such an intense influence over such a large number of people as Shembe". One of Sundkler's informants also said of him, "I have never met his parallel among Africans, and with all his tremendous influence over people, he was a

man of great charm of manner, benevolence, and tolerance” (: 110).

3.3. Shembe's conversion

According to Hexham and Oosthuizen (1996:10-12) “Shembe's life was characterized by visions and dreams. He also developed a habit of praying at all times”. Recounting the history of Shembe's conversion experience Vilakazi (1986:24) states that:

On one occasion he (Shembe) had a vision whilst praying in a cattle kraal. There was a thunderstorm and a word appeared to be brought to him by lightning: “Cease from immorality!” On one occasion he had a dream when he had gone to pray on the mountain. He fell asleep and dreamed his disembodied soul was being transported to heaven. He then saw a crowd of people but could not reach them. A voice asked him to look down at his sleeping body and it was covered with filth. He remembered an earlier order to free from fornication. He was further told that as long as he did not stop his unclean ways he could not join the heavenly crowd.

Hexham and Oosthuizen (quoted by Kau 1999:14) tell us about the last event that happened which convinced Shembe to listen to the calling:

As Shembe was working on a farm on one afternoon whilst he was at his employer's farm, lightning flashed from the sky and struck his favorite ox, Kolberi. That day the ox has behaved indifferently refusing to be harnessed. The lightning also burned Shembe's thigh leaving a terrible scar. He heard a voice telling him to go and preach the gospel and obey the command to leave his wives. The voice also told him that he should not use any medicine to heal the wound, it would be healed by the word of God. Shembe was shaken, and he became ill for three weeks. When a traditional doctor came to attend to him, he thanked him for his concern and gave him a head of cattle, but told him God alone without any medicine would heal him. And he was eventually healed.

After all these experiences Shembe started to go about preaching. According to Dube (1936:23,27) when Shembe started preaching he was not yet baptized, but could preach in such a way that many people were converted and requested baptism. These he would refer to a local pastor. But when Shembe was finally baptized his power to heal and cast out demons and evil spirits was strengthened.

The following account of Shembe's preaching and baptizing seems to me to be very similar to the account of Jesus' same activities in John's Gospel. Thus, I would like to write as it is in Zulu and then translate it into English.

Abantu bathokoza kakhulu nxa bezwa kutiwa sengibapatiziwe, labo ekade ngihamba kubo. kwaguquka nengangingbashumayezi, balandela izwi lami. Sengibazisile abefundisi base-Boksburg ukuti izizwe ziyaphenduka. Abafundisi bathuma uNtuli ukuba azobapatiza abantu eMpola naseMolwane nakwaSunduzwayo, lapo ngangishumayela kona, kuguquka abantu abaningi. Sabapatiza kona noMvangeli uNtuli; kodwa mina angibapatizanga, ngoba ngangingenawo lawomandla; kwabapatiza uMvangeli uNtuli wase Boksburg owayeyisandla somfundisi omkhulu (Dube 1936:27).

The paragraph cited-above states that Shembe was preaching and many people were converted. After he himself was baptized he continued to preach and he was given more power to heal and cast out demons and evil spirits. But then when it comes to baptizing people it is said the pastors sent Ntuli, the Evangelist, to assist Shembe. The important line to note in the above paragraph reads as follows: "There together with the Evangelist Ntuli we were baptizing; but I did not baptize Ntuli was baptizing...." If we compare this with John 4:1 we see parallelism between Shembe and Jesus. "Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John'- Although it was not Jesus himself but his Disciples who baptized-." One puzzled whether this is a deliberate parallelism of Shembe to Jesus. If so could this be what Sundkler elsewhere in his book "*Bantu Prophet in Southern Africa*" calls a Black Messiah? While I am struck by this parallelism and many others, which I am going to point out, I am not convinced that Shembe thought of Himself as Messiah or Jesus. I think Shembe, as an *inceku* (servant) of Jesus, thinks of himself as embodied Christ. As an *inceku* of Jesus he speaks on his behalf or with his authority.

3.4. Shembe and the iBandla lamaNazaretha

In our discussion about Shembe's conversion experience it has become clear that initially Shembe did not intend to start a new Church, but it was the alienation of his converts in White mission Churches that led to this separation. Shembe was driven by the need to accept people to the Church as they are. For example, people in White mission Churches were not allowed to come to Church in their traditional attire such as *ibheshu* and *isidwaba*. It needs to be said repeatedly that Shembe started his ministry in the time when Africans were dispossessed and at the same time there was a growing spirit of nationalism, and this was threatening the ruling authorities.

During the time Shembe started his Church, the Zulu Kingdom was breaking down. The hegemony of the western culture was threatening the local culture to the point that it demonized African culture. So Vezi (1992:28) rightly comments, "Shembe came on the scene when the Zulu culture and many of its patterns like kinship grouping and family solidarity, the respect for seniors and the ideal of the Zulu womanhood which insisted that a Zulu young woman should be a virgin when she marries and which strongly condemned pre-marital sex altogether, were breaking down due to the contact with western civilization and Christianity".

According to Sundkler (1961:153) "Shembe built the headquarters of the Nazarites Church 18 miles North of Durban². It is a big village, capable of accommodating more than 1500 people during the July festival month, when the followers of the prophet congregate there from all over Zululand and Natal and even from other parts of the union". I think today these houses can accommodate more than 1500 people especially that the number of the Nazarites has grown rapidly since Sundkler wrote. Vezi (1992:37) significantly notes that at Ekuphakameni Shembe had acquired a large piece of land for him to invite all his followers to live with him. From then on the Ekuphakameni village became the Mecca of all the Nazarites. People came to him from all parts of the country to be healed of diseases. Many women came to be prayed for by him so that they might have children, and they all say that after they had been prayed for, they conceived.

Hexham and Oosthuizen (1996:179) record that "Shembe's healing methods included the use of a special cloth to ward off sickness, and a staff. He in some instances insisted on confession before he could pray. In some cases he just told the said person that they were now healed. At times he would go to the particular place of danger and remove the cause of danger." This of course, would have attracted many of black people since they believe in magic and evil powers. Even White Church missionaries complained about Shembe

² Ekuphakameni headquarters of the Nazarites was founded by Isaiah Shembe. However, after the death of his successor Galilee a conflict arose between Londa, Galilee's son and Amos, Galilee's brother. On the one hand, some of *Abefundisi* who were very close to Galilee claimed that while he was alive he appointed Amos as his successor. On the other hand, Londa claimed to be the legitimate successor of his father. The Church was divided into two factions. The conflict was inevitable and resulted in a number of killings

and his movement. They claimed that Shembe was taking their converts. He was accused of driving people out of their Churches to his own. As a result in 1921 his work and that of his preachers was particularly disturbing to those in authority so that his Church was put under police surveillance (Gunner 1988:214).

The way of worship in the Nazarites Church of Shembe includes dancing, seeing of visions, uses of healing objects such as blue seal Vaseline, water and sunlight. Usually in the service young girls who are virgins will clothe their faces with a white garment throughout the service. Before the service starts members may begin by undertaking a purity ritual whereby they come to *Mfundisi*, just outside the temple with their offerings and request to be made clean by Shembe. Offerings vary from person to person. From what I have seen, in most cases people will come with fifty cents or two rands coins. The *Mfundisi* with certain kinds of branches will pour water on the hands of the worshipper and wash them together with the money they offer.

Towards the end of the service the congregation may bring their offerings to *Mfundisi* or the prophet. Each person will approach the prophet on his or her knees put the offering on the altar and tell the prophet his/her problems. The prophet listens to each and every request and does not respond, if he does he will just say "yes" and then the person will return back to his/her place. After this people will just have to wait for results of their requests (Service at *eKuphumuleni* temple, 9th October 2004). Members of the Nazarites Church of Shembe usually wear traditional clothes even when they attend a Church service. They also wear a white robe called *umnazaretha*. In one service I attended at Edendale in the temple called *Enhlanhleni* the preacher said, "Some Nazarites members are having misfortunes because they did not report their *iminazaretha* to their ancestors." This sounds as if the minister is cautious of the link between the traditional clothes and the ancestors, so that the *umnazaretha* as European clothing needs to be presented to the ancestors before the worshipper could freely wear it.

between the two factions. As a result in 1978 Amos' part left *eKuphakameni* and built its headquarters at Amatabetulu, and it became known as *eBuhleni*. Today *eBuhleni* has more followers than *eKuphakameni*.

The Nazarites Church of Shembe, as one of the AIC's, became a problem to the authorities. Gunner (1988:215) tells us how the Secretary for Native affairs, in Pretoria, wrote an important note to the Chief Native Commissioner to remind him of a report requested the previous October on a religious sect styling itself, "the Nazarites". In some official communications, Shembe was described as a "particularly tiresome and undesirable man". In other instances the authorities tried to gain control over him and frustrate his efforts at buying land. He was subjected to hostile questioning, warnings and several personal evictions and those of his followers. The buying of land by Shembe for his followers was an important move in his reformation process. Firstly, because it provided them with a space. Secondly, because it gave them the sense of belonging.

It is not just that I want to link Shembe with the political situation of his day but because it is true that religion plays a major role in politics as Paul Gifford (1998:26) puts it:

A religion provides definitions, principles of judgment and criteria of perception. It offers a reading of the world, of history, of society, of time, of space, of power, of authority, of justice and of ultimate truth. Religion limits or increases the conceptual tools available, restricts or enlarges emotional responses, or channels them, and withdraws certain issues from inquiry. It inculcates a particular way of perceiving, experiencing and responding to reality. Religion can legitimize new aspirations, new forms of organization, new relations and new social order. Every religion involves struggles to conquer, monopolize or transform the symbolic structures, which order reality.

If Gifford is correct, then one will expect to see some of these features of religion in the Nazarites Church of Shembe. Anthropologists, such as Crossman (unpublished paper 2003), have commented on the way Shembe built his headquarters, as it is built exactly like the Zulu Royal House (*isigodlo*). I do not think that this is just a mere coincidence. So we can no longer talk of Shembe and his Church's activities apart from his particular historical and socio-economic environment. Itumeleng Mosala (1989:8) has argued that, "African Independent Churches arose out of different historical periods and mostly draw their character from historical circumstances to which they are a response. Thus a historically relativising perspective is necessary in understanding these churches".

The context is that of African dehumanization by the White man. Amongst the nine points of Bosch which he thinks are most important to be considered when one studies the formation of the AIC's (quoted by Daneel 1987:81) is:

The spectrum of Black-White relations. South Africa occupies a special position in this respect. Comparatively speaking, the number of Whites in South Africa was infinitively larger than elsewhere. The bulk of the country's area (87 percent) eventually came into the hands of Whites, and Bantu in these "Whites" areas were regarded as aliens and temporary workers. Factors such as job reservation, and the scant opportunity for advancement (political, economic, and even ecclesiastic) for the Bantu made the situation even more critical. Here the churches must be singled out: even though there were no legal restrictions, there were virtually no attempts to place Black ministers in responsible positions. Thus the entire situation paved the way for schism.

It was in this context that Hopkins (1994:79) significantly notes that:

Self-identity language of Blackness and Africans grips the poor and helps them to see, with new eyes, the reality and the future possibilities of new heaven on earth. If the social and the language structures of the dominating white society have been subverted by the good news of a new kingdom, then poor Black people no longer feel defined by a White ruling culture. They claim and name themselves in the liberated space created by Jesus' liberating spirit. To say who you are is part of waging war against satanic labels that deny your full humanity. Culture,... then, is an important aspect of Black theology's transformative spirituality.

3.5. Renewal or resistance?

The context into which Shembe started his Nazarites Church fueled great nationalism and a quest for African identity. It was a context of asymmetric power relations, whereby the few Whites were enjoying many rights over and against the Black majority. As a result many Black people saw a need to create an alternative community/society. If one recalls the situation under the apartheid regime in South Africa, one will recognize that it was not easy for the Blacks to openly rise and criticize the government. Spies of the apartheid government were all over searching to report those who spoke or planned evil against the ruling government. Those who were found doing so were imprisoned, tortured, brutally assassinated, or exiled. Thus only a mad person could confront such a hegemonic colonial government. However, Africans found new strategies of coping with these dominant and oppressive powers.

Elizondo Virgil writing from the context of the Mexican-American has found that religion or religious symbols play an important role in the process of self-identity or I can even say in the process of normalization. Elizondo Virgil (1994:56) puts it in this way:

The popular expressions³ of the faith function in totally different ways for various peoples and depend on their history and socio-cultural status. For the dominant culture, the popular expressions of the faith serve to legitimize their way of life as God's true way for humanity. They tranquilize the moral conscience and blind people from seeing the injustices, which exist in daily life. For a colonized/oppresed/dominated group, they are the ultimate resistance to the attempts of the dominant culture to destroy them as a distinct group either through annihilation or through absorption and total assimilation. They maintain alive the sense of injustice to which the people are subjected in their daily lives.

I think what Elizondo notes is significantly important and indisputable. This was also the situation in South Africa. There were two dominant theologies in South Africa, that is, Church theology and State theology. State theology maintained the status quo while Church theology tend to be concerned about "heavenly things" and claim to have nothing to do with social issues of the day. In fact, Church theology was used by the state to brain wash Africans. Mugambi (1997:9) in his analysis of the relationship between the state and the missionaries notes that:

The colonial state expected the missionary enterprise to turn the colonized Africans into docile, obedient subjects. In return, the colonial state gave grants in aid to the missionary agencies for educational work and for social services such as health, agriculture and vocational training. If Africans protested against the colonial establishment through spontaneous action or organized campaigns, the missionary enterprise was expected to cool the agitation through the pulpit and the classroom. From this perspective, the missionary-directed African Churches were an integral part of the colonial establishment. It was for this reason that Africans formed independent Churches, which would serve their cultural and political interests.

Although what Mugambi says is true and is clearly seen in the way the AIC's conduct their services, I think the AIC's cannot only be reduced to independence struggles and this is made clear by the fact that, even after independence, AIC's still grow in numbers

³ Elizondo makes it clear that by popular expressions he does not refer to the private or individual devotions of a few people but to the ensemble of beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, devotions, and prayers which are commonly practiced by people at large (p.56).

and this I think has to do with African spirituality. Here I am not trying to dismiss the role of AIC's in the struggle for Independence and African identity. Nevertheless, "Both the colonial establishment and Africans considered the Independent Churches to be an extension of the anti-colonial struggle. In the Belgian Congo (Zaire), Simon Kibangu was imprisoned for life in 1921 because of starting a religious movement that was critical of the missionary establishment"(Mugambi 1997:9).

Itumeleng Mosala (1989:8) makes an immensely powerful statement that,

Positions of leadership in these churches (African Independent Churches) are attained to not by following a formal route of either educational study or birth. On the contrary leadership is a product of the work of the Holy Spirit, it is rooted in a spiritual democracy crucial to the life of these formations. This is as it should be given the resistance basis of the African Independent Churches. In this aspect of their life they reflect their character as anti-colonial cultural movements. They represent a cultural subversion of official and 'normal' Christianity and its structure and procedures.

It is not that the AIC's are the only people who were concerned about liberation, the mainline Churches too were concerned. Hence among the latter emerges a theology that was concerned about human predicament. One may call this theology prophetic theology. This theology was articulated and preserved in the *Kairos Document*⁴. The *Kairos Document* claims that God always takes the side of the poor and the oppressed. The Document was an effort by those who endeavor to open the eyes of the white Christians to see the evils of racism. The Nazarites Church of Shembe falls within this period of historical dispossession of Africans, and to be specifically the Zulu nation. The Zulus had lost the wars of resistance against their colonizers, like the Bhambatha⁵ rebellion in 1906. After the Bhambatha rebellion in 1909 King Dinuzulu was "convicted and committed to

⁴ The *Kairos Document* is a document that was written through collaboration of theologians, ministers, and Church workers. It reflects on the Black experience during apartheid era in South Africa. The theology that emerged out of this was prophetic in the sense that, "it denounced sin and announce salvation, that is, it confronted apartheid, injustice, oppression in South Africa". For an elaborate exposition of the *Kairos Document* see McAfee Brown, *Kairos*, 1990, pp. 48-60.

⁵ Bhambatha rebellion of 1906 was an anti-colonial revolt, which was aimed at resisting the poll-tax (*imali yamakhanda*) imposed on the Zulus by the British colonial government. According to Carton (1996:2) during this rebellion young men attacked both the elders they regarded as "traitorous" and the colonial troops were dispatched to quell the violence. After white soldiers quickly crushed the insurrection, the Natal government convened treason trials. Fathers of rebels came forward to testify against their sons. In "*Blood from your Sons*" (1996, p.2)

prison in Pietermaritzburg, together with a number of other Zulus who were convicted of serious crimes. It was not long after his imprisonment in Pietermaritzburg that the Prince Dinuzulu was sent up to the Transvaal to be imprisoned at the Bhalule, Middleburg” (Fuze 1979:144-145). And his royal house at kwaNongoma, known as oSuthu was destroyed by the British government in 1910 (*Ilanga News paper*, October 7-9, 2004). It is important to note that this happened in 1910, a year before Shembe started his Church. To be without *isigodlo* among the Zulus is like being without Jerusalem among the Jews and this should be addressed in a particular way. *Isigodlo* serves as a communal place where the Zulus will meet for important ceremonies. For example, *Umkhosi womhlanga* (a Zulu ritual where by the girls after having been undergone a virginity test bring the reeds to the King) is always held at one of the Zulu King’s *isigodlo*. Already in 1878 (1879) the “European had invaded Natal” (Fuze: 1979:110).

The challenge facing the Zulu community was how they should relate to these social conflicts which were breaking down their community, kinship, space, and place. The *isigodlo* is about their identity, culture, and unity. I would like to argue that both features of renewal and resistance could be found in the Nazarites Church of Shembe.

Vezi (1992:40) argued that:

Shembe's magnetic personality and his strict adherence to Zulu patterns, other than those, which conflicted with biblical teaching, attracted many Zulus with the traditional outlook. He insisted on respect for seniors and on traditional patterns of respect between men and women and between parents and children. He also insisted on marriage customs and practices according to Zulu tradition. However, he introduced a new feature in his moral behavior. He forbade pre-marital sexual intercourse and upheld chastity as an ideal for both men and women. Traditional modes of Zulu dress were expected to be worn especially on ceremonial occasions.

The most important point which Vezi (: 40) notes concerning eKuphakameni is that it has become like a museum of old African customs and practices. I think this is emphasizing the fact that Shembe sought to revive and renew his community. We need to remember that westerners were not only undermining the African (Zulu) culture but were also imposing their culture as the only legitimate way of living. So I think the Nazarites Church of Shembe's practices were a direct reaction to the disintegration of local village communities.

It needs to be viewed, as Itumeleng Mosala (1989:1-2) has argued, from the point of view of being black in South Africa under apartheid, capitalism and White western cultural imperialism. In fact, in the words of Itumeleng Mosala (:1-2) “The term African Independent Churches connotes a specifically religious version of the wider African struggle for liberation from colonialism, capitalism, racism and cultural chauvinism.” I think if we take Shembe and his Nazarites Church from this perspective we can understand better the role that has been played by AIC's in the encounter with the Bible. What is the significance of eKuphakameni? It is both a religious space and a political one. Here I am going to discuss the political one and then later in the next chapter I will be discussing the religious one even though the two are intertwined in the African religion.

What happened in the Nazarites Church of Shembe is what the *Kairos Document* advocated. The *Kairos Document* advocated a theology that emerged from the life experience of a particular community. The following paragraph from the *Kairos Document* written in the context of apartheid is more informative and suggestive:

To be truly prophetic, our response would have to be, in the first place, solidly grounded in the Bible. Our Kairos impels us *to return to the Bible* and to search the Word of God for a message that is relevant to what we are experiencing in South Africa today. This will be no mere academic exercise. Prophetic theology differs from academic theology in that, whereas academic theology deals with all biblical themes in a systematic manner and formulates general Christian principles and doctrines, prophetic theology concentrates on those aspects of the Word of God that have an immediate bearing upon the critical situation in which we find ourselves (Brown 1989: 49).

When one studies the practices of the Nazarites Church of Shembe, one may be tempted to reduce the movement to a “nativistic to traditional Zulu culture” (Sundkler 1976:178). I think the life and the worship of the Nazarites Church of Shembe is about the renewal of the Zulu community and resistance to dominant powers. The hymns of the Nazarites are sung in a very similar way to how Zulu will sing *amahubo*, traditional hymns. This makes people feel at home in the Church. The emphasis on the good relationship between

the worshipper and the ancestors⁶ also contributes to the number of people attracted by the Shembe Church. It needs to be stated unambiguously that Shembe did not incorporate everything that was African culture to his Church but he has used those aspects of culture that he feels are compatible with the Bible. It seems to me that there was a great concern on the part of Shembe for his Zulu community.

I have attended Sabbath services in different temples, such as, *Enhlanhleni*, *eKuphumuleni*, and at *Mpophomeni*, and noticed that the way these temples are designed is interesting. I do not think the setting is coincidental but a deliberate one and has a particular meaning. First the place of worship is clearly marked by white stones. This is really a sacred space. The temple itself is also marked by white stones with two entrances one for women and the other for men. In some temples with a prophet there will be a different entrance for the prophet. When the prophet enters all the Nazarites kneel and keep silence till he sits. When he leaves the service they kneel and shout *uYingcwele* (you are holy). I have noticed that when he enters no one dares to look at his face but they all bow their heads in respect. This is similar to what a Zulu would do to a chief or King. No wonder elsewhere Hexham and Oosthuizen have argued that there was no person who was so much respected among the Zulus as Shembe.

Most of the Shembe temples are marked in the fashion of the kraal in a typical Zulu homestead. I think Sundkler (1978:178-179) is, therefore, correct when he says:

As is the case with any great religious personality, we must ask, what was Shembe's concern? His concern for his Zulu, in race-torn South Africa, was to extol the glory of God-... and to express the need to turn, and to return, to the God of all men. The sight of Jehovah, Shembe insisted, had made him into another man, a new man, set aside for a unique task. He was inspired by the visions of the Holy Book, and, for all that, gloriously free to interpret the hunger of his own soul and of that of his people, in genuine Zulu words.

The above-cited paragraph is very important in a meaningful study of the prophet Isaiah Shembe and his Church because it seeks to take seriously the condition that led to the

⁶ This was said on the Sabbath service I attended at the temple called *eNhlanhleni* at Edendale in Pietermaritzburg on the 10th July 2004.

calling and the practice of the prophet. I also think that Isaiah Shembe was not doing anything unthinkingly but had a particular program to achieve. I would imagine that Shembe's program includes renewal of community and kinship in the light of the social conflicts caused by western cultural hegemony. Western missionaries had alienated Africans from the God they knew. They marginalized everything that was African. The implication of this was that African identity became obscured. Bolaji Idowu in Bediako (1999:269) rightly observes that:

It was a serious mistake that the Church took no account of the indigenous beliefs and customs of Africa when she began her work of evangelization. It is now obvious that by a misguided purpose, a completely new God who had had nothing to do with the past of Africa was introduced to her peoples. Thus there was no proper foundation laid for the Gospel message in the hearts of the people and no bridge built between the old and the new; the Church has in consequence been speaking to Africans in strange tongues because there was no adequate communication. In consequence, the Church has on her hand communities of believers who, by and large, live ambivalent spiritual lives.

From the paragraph cited above we can deduce that the Gospel message was not presented to Africans with symbols, language, and thought pattern, that Africans could understand. Ever since, this has had far reaching implications for Christianity in Africa. For example, most Africans are living two lives. They go to Church by day and to *izangoma* by night. This shows that they have a feeling that what is said in the Church is not addressing their daily concerns, fears, wellness, etc. I think Shembe picks up these concerns and addresses them in his Church. For example, it does not take time for a Zulu to feel at home in the Nazarites Church of Shembe.

The dancing in the Church is more like Zulu traditional dance. The hymns are sung like *amahubo* among the Zulus. Sitting inside the temple, where men and women sit separately, is also the same as would be in a Zulu house. Before one could enter inside the temple has to pray or ask the ancestors to enter and this is done in a very respectful way with one kneeling. Shembe has taken Zulu traditional practices and utilized them for the Church service. On the one hand, I argue that Shembe was concerned about the renewal of his Zulu community because he uses some aspects of its culture to instill this "new religion". On the other hand, he has to refute the hegemony of Western

imperialism. One may think that Shembe's interpretations of the Bible, such as taking off of shoes in the temple and worshipping on the Sabbath, are a result of literal readings of the Bible. But I think these are deliberate to show that western missionaries who claim to know everything inside the Bible does not read it properly. This is echoed in a sermon of a Shembite prophet, which says, "You cannot worship a God who does not know your ancestors". This is a direct attack on those who criticize veneration of the ancestors in the name of Christianity, namely the White missionaries.

3.6. Conclusion

In this chapter it has become apparent that Shembe and his Nazarites Church had sought to revive the Zulu community. This renewal and revitalization of African community was important in the face of dehumanization by the West. The Nazarites Church of Shembe has become an advocate of African culture. Practices of the Nazarites Church of Shembe shows some elements of protest movement against Black discrimination. They protest against alienation of Black people in all spheres of life. It can be properly said that Shembe wages war against western imperialism, which manifested itself in all spheres of life, even in Church places. The affirmation of African culture even in the Church is a challenge to those who despise it. So rituals that are practiced in the Shembe Church are aimed at restoring the human dignity of Africans by affirming their culture. We have seen that in the Shembe Church one can trace both elements of renewal and resistance.

Chapter Four

4. The use of the Bible among the Nazarites Church of Shembe

4.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter we have spent a number of pages trying to argue that Shembe sought to revive the Zulu community. In fact, this assertion was also perceived by Londa Shembe as one of the main aims of Isaiah Shembe. He contended that his grandfather's theology must be seen in the context of the whole of South Africa and its enslavement under a racist ideology, not just the liberation of the Zulu (Hexham 1994:xxv).

Hexham (: xxvii) rightly concludes:

We can safely say that the mission of Isaiah Shembe was to restore the dignity of the Zulu person and the independence of the Zulu nation who suffered greatly when they resisted the invasions of their country by first the Boers and later the British. The aim of Isaiah Shembe was to restore his people to the previous glory, and this he believed could be done on the basis of God's presence among the Zulu people in the same way as God had revealed his presence to ancient Israel.

This chapter will now try to give an analysis of the uses of the Bible among the Nazarites Church of Shembe. This is important because we must not think of the Nazarites Church of Shembe as a political movement only, it is first a religious experience that drove Shembe to start his Church. Now we will focus on how the Bible is appropriated and interpreted by the Shembe people. I would like to argue that the appropriation of the Bible in the Nazarites Church of Shembe takes seriously the faith experience of the believer. Perhaps this chapter should try to answer the question, how much weight should be given to African indigenous people like Shembe's interpretation of the Bible, taking into account that these interpretations come from their everyday life experience and religious experience? I think Bediako (1999:359) puts it well when he says:

If the Church presents itself as a total socio-religious reality, then it cannot ignore the socio-religious experience of the people it seeks to bring within its ambit. The Church in that case must meet, satisfy and transcend the socio-religious aspirations of the people concerned. In other words, the Church must address itself to questions which belong to the socio-religious experience of the people, and communicate its message in terms and categories not extraneous to that experience, but rather derived from it.

We will see as we continue to analyze the way Shembe uses the Bible that he seems to be doing exactly what Bediako suggests in order to make the gospel message relevant to Africans. And today there is an overwhelming agreement among scholars such as West (1999:68-70; of Bediako 1999:240) that “African resources such as African traditions and cultures offer enormous potential for recovering African tools and concepts with which to read the Bible”. In this chapter we will also try to analyze different sermons preached by the Nazarites, selected hymns of the Nazarites, and some interviews done at different temples of the Nazarites.

4.2. Shembe and the Bible

Ever since the arrival of the Bible in Africa western interpretations have been recognized as the only legitimate interpretations. This happened because no one among scholars was interested in an African enterprise. I think over the past decade we have seen some work about the history of Christianity in South Africa, the history of how missionaries related the gospel message to Africans and I think it is equally important that we also reflect upon the experience of reading the Bible as Africans. This last point has usually been overlooked and not dealt with thoroughly.

The Tomlinson commission which tried to investigate the list of reasons for the growth of AIC's is informative in giving us what white missionaries thought of AIC's interpretations of the Bible. In one of its statements, the commission lays a charge of a corrupt exposition of the Bible (Makhubu 1988:38). In a very fair apology in response to this Makhubu (:38) wrote:

The charge of a corrupt exposition of the Bible should apply to all Churches, mainline or independent. Each Church or denomination interprets Scripture the way it understands it. Whether its leaders are trained or not. These 'corruptions' have been copied from mainline Churches. The same applies to the 'twisting' of biblical texts and truths. Among AICs, we have conservatives, liberals, evangelicals, traditionalists, etc. The mainline Churches themselves are also divided in doctrine, dogma, ethics and liturgy. This has led to breakaways, forming of different organizations and sects. The same applies to AICs who are new, not educated and not theologically trained. They interpret Scripture as God reveals it to them through the Holy Spirit. Revelation plays a great part here.

We shall now turn to Shembe and the way he uses the Bible. First, it is important to know what role the Bible plays in the Nazarites Church of Shembe. To what extent does it influence the lives of believers and even of Shembe himself? How does Shembe understand his position and his relationship to the Bible and Jesus. During a conversation with Dr. Axel-Ivar Berglund, he told me that Shembe had a high respect of the Bible in such a way that he never uses the name 'Bible' instead, he call it *imibhalo engcwele* (Holy Scriptures). Berglund told me that Shembe had three *imibhalo engcwele* which used to be covered nicely in his temple. These Holy Scriptures were respected and not everyone was allowed to touch them. It was only those who were appointed by him at that particular time who were able to read it for the congregation¹ (Axel-Ivar Berglund, interview conducted by Khawulani Ntuli on 23 June 2004 in Uppsala).

What strikes me most with the use of the Bible in the Nazarites Church of Shembe is the way the Story of Shembe becomes the story of each member. In fact I have observed that before one preaches, the person begins by telling a story. It can be his story or someone's story that at the end points towards Shembe. The Bible is used to back up the story of Shembe. Sundkler (1976:184-185) records Galilee's sermon on Matthew 11:28-30. The sermon goes as follows:

We all have our burdens, burdens which we have inherited from our parents, which others have placed on us, and burdens which we have caused ourselves. Jesus does not choose he receive all. Jesus will lift off your burden and give you rest. No yoke is easy. If it were easy, Jesus would not use the term 'yoke'. There are certain things which burden the heart. The heart can have wounds which no doctor can heal, no inyanga, no isangoma, neither any purifying water. But Jesus says, come unto me, with your burdens. Give him your burdens. There was a girl who became pregnant, and people wanted her to reveal the father's identity. She refused to do so, until in the end she broke down and said, 'Ask father'. Her own father had caused this pregnancy. She had a heavy yoke to carry. Some people hang themselves because of such things.....

¹ It is the practice among the Amanazaretha that the prophet will come to the service and appoint anyman as he pleases, to lead the service and to preach without any prior consultation. My observations of this practice is that those who were appointed felt very much honoured and grasp the opportunity with joy. They even mentioned it during their leading of liturgy.

When Isaiah Shembe was a boy, he climbed the Boer's peach tree in order to take some peaches. Just then the Boer came riding that way on his horse and stopped under the tree and Shembe said in his heart, "I died today" (Ngafa namhlanje). But there came a word, saying: "Do not look at the white man; look at me and pray to me". After eternities, the white man ride off, not having discovered the boy in the tree. Shembe climbed down with those peaches in the hand... But as fear subsided, he thanked God, "I thank God, thou heard me and save me from my great need!" Shembe was born of the Spirit, he was Spirit. So the Scriptures say. "That which is born of the Spirit, is Spirit." Now the learned people of this earth come with their rulers and scales and they compare their own teaching with that of the others. Shembe was *Thunyiwe kaNkulunkulu*, "sent by God". All come to eKuphakameni to receive this teaching. Sweden and England, and America and India.... Shẽmbe was sent to them all....

There are a number of interesting observations one could make out of this sermon. First, it is Sundkler who presented this text first and who determined its theme. I think the choice of this text by Sundkler may have been influenced by prejudice and misunderstanding of Shembe's role. In the text people are invited to come to Jesus who will take off their burdens. Note the emphasis on Jesus. This raises a question who is Shembe? Is Shembe God? It seems to me that Galilee Shembe and perhaps Isaiah Shembe himself would have answered this question by saying Shembe is the messenger of God. In other words Shembe is Jesus. This is not to say Shembe replaces Jesus. He is Jesus in the sense that he embodied Jesus so that there is no difference in calling him Jesus. This understanding is not new in Zulu thought pattern because among the Zulus badly treating of the *Induna* (mesenger) of the chief is the same as treating badly the chief himself. When Johannes Galilee preached on the same text he made it clear why people should come to Shembe because he is born not of the flesh but of the Spirit and he is *Thunyiwe kaNkulunkulu*. Johannes Galilee's sermon also addressed this important white man (Sundkler) present among the Nazarites when he said that Shembe is sent to all people Blacks and White.

Clearly the sermon moves from Jesus to God and then to Shembe. The sermon also critiques unequal power relations of the day. The text says, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavily laden". Jesus invites his listeners to believe in him and the same invitation is extended by Shembe to his listeners. All people are invited to come to eKuphakameni. Shembe can invite them and he can lift off their burdens too because he

is *Thunyiwe kaNkulunkulu*. He is born not of the flesh but of the Spirit (:185). Shembe was sent to all people Blacks and White. His mission is inclusive. This is in opposition to the apartheid government which advocated for exclusion of other people. The same idea is echoed in hymn 153:

<p><i>Nanti ilizwi elomemo</i> <i>Liyamema bonke abantu</i> <i>Alikhethi noma munye</i></p>	<p>Here is the word of invitation It invites all people It does not discriminate against a single person, It invites all people</p>
<p><i>Liyamema bonke abantu</i></p> <p><i>Abansundu nabamhlophe</i> <i>Libamema kwana njalo;</i> <i>Alikhethi noma munye</i></p> <p><i>Liyamema bonke abantu</i></p>	<p>The Brown and the White It invites them like wise; It does not discriminate against a single person, It invites all (Trans. Muller 1996:81).</p>

The above-cited hymn shows that Shembe understood himself as being sent by God to all nations. He is not just sent to the Zulus. This is indicated by the fact that people come from all parts of the world to see Shembe and the presence of Sundkler himself bear witness to this reality. Sundkler (1976:197) rightly observes: “The contents of Shembe’s hymns have two foci: *Ekuphakameni* and *the human condition*. There are of course, other aspects, too, but they are secondary..”

It is also interesting that in his sermon Shembe did not regard the act of taking Boer’s peaches as stealing. I think there was no understanding that taking Boer’s peaches constitutes stealing at all. Perhaps this is because Shembe did not regard the Boers as the legitimate owners of the land in South Africa. The sermon in a way is a protest against annexation of land by the white people. Clearly, “the burdens which others have placed on us” refers to the white man. I cannot speculate in what way but this is picked up towards the end of the sermon where a narrative about Isaiah Shembe is told. Shembe climbed the Boer’s tree in order to take some peaches at that time the Boer came riding in a horse and Shembe knew what was to happen next. But there came a voice that said to him, “Do not look at the white man”, “Pray to me”.

I think this story was put here at the end of this sermon to say something that is important. It is not the white man you must focus on, but God. So one can see how the invitation of Jesus to those who are weary and heavy laden is reinterpreted by Shembe (Johannes Galilee) in such away that it has bearings for his father (Isaiah Shembe) and to what is being done at eKuphakameni, that is to ease the burdens of a weary society.

4.3. Shembe's understanding of God

It is often very easy for an outsider to think that Shembe claimed to be God. I have also witnessed such an impression on one of the researchers (this was one of a group of Norwegian researchers who were conducting field work research project at Mpophomeni from the 1st of October to the 31st 2004) about Independent Churches who finds it difficult to classify Shembe as still within Christian circles. I think this perception is rather misleading. Shembe thought of himself as *inceku* (a servant) or as *Thunyiwe kaNkulunkulu* (a messenger of God). In most of the hymns Shembe wrote he begins by describing himself as *inceku*.

Therefore, I concur with Sundkler (1976:196) when he contends: "To Shembe himself and his followers there was never any hesitation in their realization of the fundamental difference between God and his "servant". God remains God the exalted, also to them. But in his mercy, God allows this Zulu servant of his to reveal to his African children his power and love".

It needs to be stated that all that Shembe fought for was to worship God in his own African way. When it to come to God Shembe employs the Zulu name of God. Brown (1999:203) significantly notes:

Shembe's concept of the deity also syncretised Christian and African cosmology, and the terms of address *Mvelinqangi* and *Nkulunkulu* evoke equally the biblical God and the originating figures of Zulu belief. Further, the more common term of address for God amongst Zulu converts, *Nkosi*, suggests that God has the attributes of a Zulu King.

The Zulu term for God *Mvelinqangi* means that God pre-existed. No one is greater than him. Shembe express his belief in God through concrete concepts such as *Mvelinqangi*

and *Nkulunkulu*. His belief in God is also expressed in the service.

Shembe refers to God as the God of Adam. According to Sundkler (:197) this is a challenging and noble concept and name: the God of all men. This was indeed a meaningful invocation to make in South Africa, here divisions between men were wide and deep. While I was in the Seminary I was taught that some of the learned white theologians, trusting in their Hebrew scholarship, knew God as *Hannabdil*, the Divider- didn't Genesis teach, after all, that God "divided" the waters and divided day from night; the fundamental pattern in creation seemed thus to be clear. Division was a divine ordinance. In contrast to this, Shembe's "God of Adam" was inclusive.

One of the prominent leaders in the Shembe Church, Evangelist Ntuli, argued that it is not Shembe who said he is God but it is his followers. But he finds no problem in people calling Shembe their God. For him when people say Shembe is God they do not really mean that he is God in the sense that we understand God the Supreme Being. In fact it is like when God said Moses will be God to Aaron. "He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him" (Exodus 4:16). Thus Shembe is God in the same way as Moses is to Aaron (Evangelist Ntuli, interview conducted by Khawulani Ntuli on the 29th May 2004 at Edendale in Pietermaritzburg). The passage just cited above does not mean that Moses is God. Some people among the Nazarites argued that we call Shembe "God" because of the works he performs. However, God is the foundation of all the works that Shembe performs. He believed that it is the Spirit of God who works in him. According to Dube (1936:31) Shembe believed very much in the Bible. He believed that Jesus was God who became incarnate on earth and that Jesus is the foundation of all the miraculous works he did.²

So among the Nazarites Church of Shembe there is not really confusion between God and Shembe. Hence, according to Becken (1992:7) "in the Nazareth Baptist Church, Christ Jesus has a central position in the teachings. Therefore, for the theological concept of Shembe, healing, baptism, Holy Communion in the evening and washing of the feet- all

² This is my own translation of the Zulu version of Dube's account of Isaiah Shembe in the Book entitled *uShembe*, 1936, p.31.

these actions are performed in imitation of Christ and on his authority". I think the understanding of God in the Nazarites Church of Shembe is a complex one and to some extent is influenced by the Zulu understanding of the Supreme Being. Nelson (1996:77) contends that it could be said that the Trinitarian God, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, are not perceived as distinct persons in the Nazarites Church. He further argued that this is made apparent by Johannes Galilee's (Isaiah's Son) sermon as cited by Sundkler (1976:196):

Shembe always said, God and Jesus Christ are the same, they are not to be separated. When he said Jesus Christ, he meant God-and vice versa. What Shembe did, he did in the name of God. Shembe believed in Jesus Christ. If you believe –do the works of Christ and the "greater things" which he has promised! When we are told that this is not 'Christian', we are simply not interested. But I know that as a Christian I shall one day stand in the presence of God. I shall have to give account for all my acts and all my sermons. If I have told lies, I shall be judged.

In the paragraph cited above, it has become apparent that God the Father and Jesus Christ are not seen as distinct persons; rather they are perceived as one person. Jesus and presumably the Holy Spirit are seen as emanations of God the Father. One could rightly say that with regard to this understanding the names Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit were perceived as role names of God. When Mpanza was asked about Shembe (Lwandle 1996:78) he said:

The name Shembe denotes the Holy Spirit of eKuphakameni (headquarters of the Nazarite Church). Mpanza contends that the Holy Spirit of Ekuphakameni is none other than the God of Ekuphakameni, the biblical Jehovah, the creator God of Africa. There are cases when the Nazarites speak of Shembe, not referring to the prophet but to the Holy Spirit, that is God himself. Thus Shembe as the Holy Spirit is distinct from Shembe the prophet and Shembe the son of Mayekisa of Nhliziyo. Shembe, the son of Mayekisa of Nhliziyo, is a human being whereas Shembe, the Holy Spirit, is God, Jehovah.

When Mpanza was asked about the identity of the Holy Spirit by Lwandle (:78-79) he responded as follows:

The Christians say the Holy Spirit's name is the "Comforter" according to their reading of John 15. But that is not his name. The same applies to the Son of God who is known as "Savior". The word "savior" is not his name. His name is "Jesus". The word Savior denotes the role he plays. The Holy Spirit also has a name. The Nazarites have a name for him. Christians do not have a name for him because they did not know him but only believe that he exists. The Nazarites

know him because his name was revealed to the Nazarite prophet Isaiah Shembe. The Holy Spirit is “Shembe”. Jesus did promise to ask the father to send him. The Spirit is not a force but person since Jesus in the Gospel of John refers to him as “He”³

For Sundkler (1976:197), Shembe’s hymn make it impossible for anybody to make that square and unconditional statement that Shembe “claimed” that he is God or Jehovah or “the Supreme Being” or Jesus Christ.

He quotes hymn 91 as supporting the understanding of Shembe as a servant or *Thunyiwe kaNkulunkulu*:

Sengiya ku Baba ongithumileyo
I am going to my Father who sent me,
I leave you.
I go to my Father,
May you keep me in hope.

The above quoted hymn is very similar to John’s Gospel farewell discourse of Jesus. This is not surprising because Jesus too was sent by God. When the Nazarites pray to God they always pray through Shembe or they pray to the God of Shembe (*uNkulunkulu kaShembe*). According to Vilakazi (1986:75):

The general Shembite argument is that God sends to every people a savior, and that he does not send a white man to deliver a Black man, nor a yellow man to deliver a White man. The only difference between the two men (Christ and Shembe), they say, is that one was white and the other was Black. If you should protest that Christ performed miracles, and rose from the dead, they point out that Shembe healed many people, exorcised people of demons, and did many miracles.

Other members use the passage which says I will send you a prophet like you (Deuteronomy 18:18) to refer to Shembe as the prophet sent among the Zulu community. According to Mpanza (in Oosthuizen 1992:94) Shembe did not know God from the Bible. He points out that he lived and behaved as he did, not because he had read the Bible but because God had taught and directed him according to the ways and principles

³ Note that the argument that the gender of the Holy Spirit is masculine is rather superficial because the Greek text of the Gospel of John 14:26 has τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον (The Holy Spirit), This Greek word is neuter which means that is not masculine nor feminine. Again in Zulu where the Nazarites based their translation there is no gender at all. Elsewhere in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit is depicted as feminine.

found in the Bible. Now we shall look exactly in the sermons preached by Shembites in order to ascertain what kind of thinking they have about Shembe and God.

4.4. The Sermons of the Nazarites Church of Shembe

I was struck by the words of Mr. Zondi of Edendale who began his Sabbath sermon by saying, "I am not going to start this service by reading from the Scripture (the Bible) because we Shembites have our own Bible and if we were to write our own Bible it can exceed the one we are familiar with" (Sabbath service attended on the 23rd October 2004, at kwa Haza, Mpophomeni). The Sabbath service began with a chorus: *We Baba Shembe senzele umusa*, meaning "Our father Shembe give us grace". Then the sermon went like this:

We are praying to/through Shembe and we know that Shembe is a human being. It is because of his works that we call him God. Shembe himself did not say he is God. Just in the morning when we were coming to this service it was raining and as you know the road we are using is not tarred. The truck was stuck and we prayed to Shembe saying, "Baba Shembe pull this truck out" and after this prayer the truck just moved smoothly out of the mud and slippery road!! This is the kind of works we are talking about. I would like to speak about the prophet J.G. Shembe. One day J.G. Shembe invited the Nazarites at Ekuphakameni to work on his farm. It happens that Mkhokheli maMxina did not expect many people to turn out for this ilimo. So as she was a cooker she prepared food that was enough to feed people who can fit on one truck.

Now on the contrary people turned out in numbers to this *ilimo* and maMxina has cooked very little food. She went to Shembe and said to him, "the food would not be enough for these people". Shembe answered and said, "When the food is ready come and tell me. I will come". She did as Shembe commanded her. When the food was ready, Shembe came and started to eat first and then he commanded maMxina not to let people queue for food as usual but to let them sit down and dish for them. To her surprise the food became plenty in such a way that she had to ask people to have some more food. But even this did not work because there was still more food remaining.

The preacher went on to ask those who know the text where Jesus fed five thousand men. One of the members got it from the Gospel of John chapter 6 and read it for the congregation.

I think it is important to note that both genders male and female can correctly be attached to the person of

The preacher easily quoted Scriptures that are similar to this act of feeding many people. For example, he quotes I Kings 17:8ff. where the Prophet Elijah helped the widow by increasing the meal and oil. He also referred to Mark 8:1 where Jesus fed 4000 men. Now he asked the congregants to make a comparison between Jesus and Shembe. People did not want to accept him as some do with Shembe. These acts that Shembe performs always find continuity with the Bible. It seems to me that the Nazarites have found appropriation of Jesus' acts in Shembe. If one takes a look at how the Shembites have structured their sermons, one can see that they contain a rich text of what has happened in their lives and of what Shembe the servant of God has done. He intervenes in difficult situations and helps. Shembe is Jesus at work. Perhaps for the community of Shembe this is the fulfillment of Jesus' words, "he who believes in me will do more wonders than this" (Matthew 21:21).

Sermons of the Nazarites make the preacher relate the story of Isaiah Shembe to the story of each member. Everyone has something to say about this prophet of God. In other words the story of Shembe becomes their story. They act it, dance it, and sing it. *Mfundisi Mbatha* of the Nazarites Church said in his sermon:

Here at Ekuphakameni we see the image of Jesus whom we do not know but we only heard about him. But here in this place we know him. One day I remember that I went with a man who was crippled. He could not walk because his feet were swollen. So he used walking sticks. When we arrived at Ekuphakameni *iNkosi* (meaning Shembe) blessed water, Vaseline, and soap. He gave these to the man so he could use them. As they were returning back home, when they were near the taxi rank, the man was healed and he threw away his walking sticks and he started to walk. That is why we are saying Shembe is Jesus at work. In the person of Shembe we see Jesus Christ the healer.

In a number of witnesses I have heard in the Nazarites Church of Shembe all that is said about him relates or has something in common with the stories found in the Bible. These stories are not abstracts but they come from the life experience of the people. I think these stories that are told emerge from contexts of abrupt social disjuncture and they are reflecting the interpenetrating between an indigenous and a foreign culture.

the Holy Spirit.

In a way the life experience of the believer is related to the Bible in a particular way. Anderson (2000:18) observes the following about AIC's among which Shembe is classified:

AIC members relate the Bible directly to their troubles. The hermeneutical process essentially begins in the context of felt needs. Church members said that affliction and trouble came from various sources: from Satan, from failure to keep the instructions of the Bible or of the Church leaders, from hatred and fear of other people, from witchcraft and sorcery, from ancestors and even from God.

Thus, "the understanding of biblical salvation proclaimed in these AIC's has to do with deliverance from the experience of evil forces ranged against people's existence" (:139). This is not expected in the future but here and now. Through the prophet God's people are delivered from all their troubles. It seems to me that healing activities are not just necessary but they are performed by the prophet in the Shembe Church because they are seen as biblical:

There is no doubt that the numerous miracles of Jesus, the healing activities and exorcisms reported in the New Testament, have influenced and encouraged the faith-healing mission in the Independent Churches. Certain biblical passages, including Mark 16.17ff; Luke 4.18ff; Luke 10...., are often cited as support. Jesus' power over demon and over sickness, and the same supernatural power conferred on his disciples, the coming of the Holy Spirit, are but clear manifestations of God's intervention in history, an intervention by which at last, an envoy of God is able to confront all the evil and spiritual forces causing man so much anxiety in this life (Anderson 2000:138).

I think it is this awareness that makes the Shembe Church relevant to many people especially the Zulus. In this Church they find relief and they are sure Shembe the prophet of God is concerned about the problems they encounter daily in life. I think it is for this reason that some people in the main line Churches decide to go to the Sangomas or Zionists by night. Milingo (1992:151, quoted by Kau) stresses that:

Healing is a basic act of liberation. It is the continuation of the liberating work of Christ. The healing ministry then brings the gospel back to the heart of the Church. It restores the presence of Christ to that central place. It also restores a person to his or her original wholeness and dignity. This implies taking away every form of oppression and disturbance in life which prevents one from being their true self. It means releasing people from any obstacles on the road to human fulfillment.

It is beyond doubt that members of AIC's believe that the Bible reveals a God who is concerned with all the troubles with which humans are faced. So demons, evil spirits, and all other misfortunes are exorcised by the power of the Word of God, the Bible.

It seems to me that the sermons of the Nazarites are relevant to the life situation of the people. They are never abstract or speaking about unknown concepts and some hope in the future. Instead, God intervenes in human situations directly through his servant Isaiah Shembe. While Shembe was also concerned for the liberation of the Brown people (*Abantu abansundu*), he trusted in the liberating power of the Word of God and he advises his followers to refrain from armed struggle and bloodshed to achieve their ambitions (Hexham and Oosthuizen 1999: xiii).

4.5. The use of Holy Scriptures in the Hymns of the Nazarites

One cannot conclude a study of the Bible in the Nazarites Church of Shembe without looking at the hymns of the Nazarites Church. What validates this enterprise of looking at the hymns of the Nazarites Church of Shembe is that:

As spiritual and poetic texts, Shembe's hymns are remarkable for the way in which they weave together Biblical Christianity, traditional Nguni beliefs and expressive forms, and the political context in which Isaiah Shembe and his followers were located. He combined the function of traditional Nguni praise poetry which was to both critique and honour political leadership –with the expressive form of the Biblical psalms to create a completely new and hybrid cultural form. Isaiah integrated his deep knowledge of the Old and New Testaments of the mission Bible with both the cultural practices and the severe socio-political experiences of his contemporaries to create a body of texts that poignantly articulated deep emotional responses to the historical moment (Muller 1996: x).

In the hymns of the Nazarites we can capture the convictions and the beliefs of the Nazarites. Mbiti (1969:67) who has studied African religion and philosophy found that among Africans:

God is often worshipped through songs, and African peoples are very fond of singing. Many of the religious gatherings and ceremonies are accompanied by singing which not only helps to pass on religious knowledge from one person or group to another, but helps create and strengthen corporate feeling and solidarity.

So in the hymns of the Nazarites we can get a glimpse of what Shembe believed and hoped for. The hymns of the Nazarites also give us the context and highlight the problems that Shembe and his community was experiencing. For example, hymn 46:

<i>Phakama Africa</i>	Rise, Africa,
<i>Funa uMsindisi,</i>	Seek the Saviour
<i>Kuse isikhathi esihle</i>	While there is still time,
<i>Ziyakushiyi zizwe</i>	The nations are surpassing you.

<i>Phakama Africa</i>	Rise, Africa,
<i>Funa uMsindisi,</i>	Seek the saviour.
<i>Namhla uyisihlekiso</i>	Today you are the scorn
<i>Sazo zonke izizwe.</i>	Of all nations

<i>Phakama Africa</i>	Rise, Africa,
<i>Funa uMsindisi,</i>	Seek the saviour
<i>Namhla siyizigqili</i>	Today we are slaves
<i>Nezigqilakazi</i>	Of both sexes.

<i>Phakama Africa</i>	Rise, Africa,
<i>Funa uMsindisi,</i>	Seek the Saviour
<i>Namhla siyizigqwashu</i>	Today we are doormats
<i>Zokwelusa izinyawo zezizwe</i>	For the nations to wipe off their feet
	(Trans. Muller 1967:48).

The hymn calls upon Africa to rise and look for the Savior in due course. There is a lament that Africa is a laughing stock of other nations. The hymn beseeches Africa to rise and look for the Saviour because she has become a slave of other nations. The context in which this hymn comes from is obvious. It is contexts by where Africans are made servants of the White man. This hymn and many others place Zulu dispossession in a broader context. Brown (1999:213) is correct when he says, “in its language of protest and resistance, this hymn looks forward to the Black Consciousness rhetoric of poets like Ingoapele Madingoane, Mongane Serote,..”. Some of Shembe’s hymns have a sense of resistance or social revolt, as Brown (:213) notes that in hymn 28 Shembe’s vision emphasises its biblical rather than political overtones (he draws particularly on the ‘trumpet’ imagery of Revelation).

The Nazarites' association of Jehovah with liberation and upliftment gives the imagery profound political reverberations:

<i>Icilongo lokuqala</i>	The first trumpet
<i>Selizwakele,</i>	Has been sounded
<i>Umhlaba wonke</i>	All the earth
<i>Wazamazama</i>	Quaked.
<i>Uyogijima uzifihlephi</i>	Where will you run and hide yourself,
<i>Nanti izwe selisongwa</i>	Here is the world already being folded.
<i>We mhlaba uzozifihlaphi</i>	You earth, where will you hide yourself,
<i>Nazo zonke lezo zoni,</i>	And all those sinners;
<i>Balekani zidindi</i>	Run away ye strangers
<i>Uyeza uJehova</i>	Jehovah is coming
	(Trans. Brown 1999:213).

However, other hymns convey a sense of hope in that if Africa finds a Savior she will be emancipated. Africa cannot look anywhere for a savior other than Ekuphakameni:

God, King of Kings,
Look upon us in your mercy,
We, your destitute people.
You are cloaked in uKuphakama
Like a blanket
Chorus
Come all of you, come all of you (Hymn 106, Muller 1996:65).

It seems to me that Ekuphakameni is paralleled to Jerusalem in the biblical sense. But it is important to note that none of Shembe's hymns quote the Bible directly. Usually Shembe uses the Bible only indirectly alluding to images or hints of language with no direct citation. I think this is because Shembe was illiterate. So he draw his resources from the traditional oral culture of the Zulu and yet was finding new models in the structures and beliefs of a colonizing Christianity (Brown 1998:129). I will return to this point in the next chapter where I will compare and contrast Shembe with George Khambule. As Sundkler (1976:203) notes in the case of the Africans in the country of South Africa the burden of existence is heavier than that of others:

You lass of Nazaretha,
Cry like a flowing stream
Because of the shame which is yours
In your own country.
You lad of Nazaretha,

Cry like a rapid stream
Because of the shame which has come over you,
You lad of Shaka.

It needs to be noted that neither of these hymns quoted above use the Bible directly. This is because Shembe was illiterate. He alludes to images or hints of language but no direct citation of the Bible. Take for example, the hymn just cited above where the name Nazareth is used. This name comes from the Bible. According to Brown (1999:208) the *izihlabelelo* of Shembe bring Zulu oral forms into new contexts of meaning, and they reveal the prophet's drawing upon the extensive cultural resources of traditional Zulu society. Unlike Christian hymns, many of the *izihlabelelo* are not directed towards the deity, but explore social and spiritual problems. But there are those hymns which are concerned with God. A number of these adopt the forms of address of the royal *izibongo* (:208). Shembe's hymns also contains some passages from the Scriptures. But these are not directly cited. For example, Hymn 139 which Shembe wrote when he was in the Cape Town at Nzwabethi on the 6th of January, 1927. Verses 4 and 5 in these hymns refers to the promise of Jesus that he would not leave his followers alone, he will sent the comforter (John 14):

Ufikile uMthokozisi
Mlandeleni zizwe nonke;
Mlandeleni makhosikazi akithi
Mlandeleni zintombi zakithi.

He, the Comforter, has arrived.
Follow him all you nations;
Follow him our married women,
Follow him, our maidens

Kwathiwa asiyikushiywa sisodwa,
Ufikile simzwile.
Mlandeleni bantu nonke
Ufikile simzwile

It was said we would never be left alone,
He has arrived, we have heard about him
Follow him all people
He has arrived, we heard about him
(Trans. Muller 1996:76).

The hymn said, "*Mthokozisi* has come, follow him all you nations. It was said that we will not be left alone". In this hymn it becomes apparent that Shembe sees himself as the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send the comforter to his disciples.

Those who come to him will no longer have sorrow and will be saved, as in hymn 74:

<i>Abangena bejabhile</i>	Those who enter with sorrow
<i>Baphuma bethokoza,</i>	They leave rejoicing
<i>Lalelani zizwe nonke</i>	Listen all ye nations
<i>Wozani nisindiswe</i>	Come and be saved

(Trans. Muller 1996:76).

Here we need to note again the indirect use of the Bible in the above hymn. The hymn is echoing Psalm 126:6. I think hymn 214 is more socially and politically orientated when it talks about *uMkhululi*, a liberator. But this liberator has come for the Zulus, for the generation of Dingana:

<i>UMkhululi wethu-</i>	Our Liberator,
<i>Thina nzalo kaDingana</i>	We, the descendents of Dingaan,
<i>Simzwile ufikile.</i>	We have heard about him, he has arrived
<i>UMkhululi ufikile!</i>	The Liberator has arrived!
<i>Umkhululi usefikile!</i>	The liberator has arrived now
<i>WemaZulu sesimzwile.</i>	Oh, heavens, we have heard about him

(Trans. Muller 1996:100).

Given the context of Shembe and the Nazarites Church we can reconstruct what the *uMkhululi* the liberator is needed for in among the Zulu community. The *uMkhululi* will set them free and restore their dignity and identity. The hymns of Isaiah Shembe work the same way as the Psalms of the Bible in the history of Israel. The Psalms expressed the life experience of the people, their faith and their hope. They were also sung and danced. Psalms are expression of how people felt about their God. Vilakazi (1986: 147-148) makes the following observations about the hymns of the *izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha*:

Whilst dancing as a religious form was not Shembe's unique idea among the Zulu, songs of worship in Zulu culture were accompanied by the respective dance forms. Shembe was unique in his courage to take what was looked upon by missionaries as evil heathen dances and incorporating them into the ritual of Christian worship. Shembe also personally taught his Church members to do the dancing as they were singing along. Consequently, the *ukusina* styles varied amongs men, married women, maidens and young men. The divisions are deeply rooted in Zulu culture. Shembe also introduced different *ukusina* uniforms for all the different groups. These were worn during the *ukusina* ceremonies like the annual festivals in January and July.

I have find it very fascinating that Shembe who was not educated like Martin Luther, the founder of the reformation (1521-1532), has equally done the same in bringing about reformation of the Zulu people. The way Shembe weaves together the African traditional way of doing things with his biblical knowledge is fascinating. For example, in his Hymns he uses the forms of traditional Zulu *amahubo* and *ukusina* and also the Psalm form from the Bible This is modified to suit the respect needed in the service. In fact, even *ukuhlonipha*, respect, is one of the very important cores of the Zulu culture.

Biblical themes run through out the whole of *izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha*. These themes are put together to make a religious claim. In fact some of Shembe's hymns are full of the language of the Psalms of the Bible. Take for example, hymn 60 verse two which echoes Psalm 106, 107 and more particularly Psalm 118:

<i>Wayikhumbula iAfrica</i>	He remembered Africa
<i>Ngoba elungile,</i>	Because he is righteous,
<i>Akalibalanga abantu bakhe</i>	He did not forget his people
<i>Ngoba elungile.</i>	Because he is righteous.
	(Trans. Muller 1996:52)

This hymn sounds exactly like the psalm of Zechariah in Luke 1:67ff. "The Lord has remembered his people and sent them a Savior". Note that Zechariah is also echoing the Psalms, since the language he uses is that of Psalms 106-107 and 118 from the Bible. The above quoted hymn shows Shembe's deep knowledge of the Bible. The Lord has not just remembered his people Israel, but also the Zulus and he sent them Shembe his servant at Ekuphakameni. We can see in these hymns that the understanding of Shembe about his position has not changed. He is the *Thunyiwe kaNkulunkulu* not God.

The hymns are full Shembe's understanding of *imibhalo eNgcwele* and they are mixed with Zulu traditional forms that shaped them.

4.6. Conclusion

We have seen that Shembe and his Nazarites Church used and appropriated the Bible in their own immediate context. The context is characterized by European invasion and the marginalization of the indigenous people, to be specific the Zulus. Nevertheless, people like the prophet Isaiah Shembe were not willing to sacrifice their identity just like that. They have fought not by armed struggle but by the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Shembe did not allow the West to alienate his people from God whom they have worshipped since their existence. Whatever Shembe introduced in his Church seems to be heavily grounded in the *imibhalo eNgcwele*. Therefore, Brown is correct when he says:

In the sermon and the hymns of the Church, Shembe's life has the force of Christ's and is used to illustrate biblical messages and religious doctrine. A number of hymns present Shembe in this light... and it is clear by reference to the particular practices and taboos of the Church of the Nazarites that they are people chosen by God: shoes not to be worn in sacred places-'Those who put nothing/on their feet'; Shaving or cutting their hair forbidden..

All these practices of the Nazarites Church of Shembe seem to be in line with those people who were chosen by God in the Bible. For example, Moses in Exodus 3ff. was told to take off his shoes when God appeared to him and chose him to liberate his people Israel from Egypt. Another person who was not to shave his head because he was the Nazarite to God was Samson (Judges 16:17). So Shembe carefully exploited his religious experience to address his contemporary situation and this he did by reinterpreting the *imibhalo eNgcwele* and by implementing certain practices in his Church.

Chapter Five

5. Women, the Bible and the laws of the Nazarites Church of Shembe

5.1. Introduction

I believe that a study on the Nazarites Church of Shembe cannot be sufficient if it does not take into account the role and the place of women in this Church and their relationship to the Bible. The role of women needs to be clearly articulated not only in the Nazarites Church of Shembe, but also in different spheres of our communities. This is important because women have been marginalized and oppressed in our community. In most cases tradition, culture and scriptures are used to perpetuate marginalization of women. For example, West (1991:75) notes that “the history of the Bible and its interpretation has been a history of silenced women. Women of the Bible have been silenced and women who have interpreted the Bible have been silenced”. The Bible is also blamed for the continuation of women’s oppression both in community and in the Church. This happens despite the fact that, “Women constitute a significant proportion of those people who regularly attend the services and Bible study programs in our Churches” (Sampson 1991:55). However, I think the same Bible can be used as a tool to liberate women. In this chapter we will look at the acts of the Nazarites women and their positions in the Church.

Muller (1999:162), who has done an invaluable study on Nazarites women, argued that:

Throughout colonized Africa indigenous cultural constructions have drawn on the stories and myths of the biblical Old Testament. These have provided a rich store of analogous sociocultural and political contexts for the integration of African traditional beliefs with those of Western Christianity. The religious culture of Isaiah Shembe is no exception. Isaiah combined the Biblical story of Jephthah the warrior and his daughter (Judges 11) with Zulu traditional cosmological values to create the Nazarites religious epistemology pertaining to virgin girls.

It is interesting to note that most of African prophets backed up their claim in most cases with the Old Testament. I would like to pick up and exegete the Story of Jephthah’s daughter which Muller thinks is used by Shembe to promote virginity of girls.

5.2. Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11)

First, it needs to be stated that the story of Jephthah and his daughter has been critiqued by feminists as promoting violence against women. Fuchs (1993:116) notes that:

The brief narrative of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11: 34-40 has usually been understood as a tragic story about the fatal results of a rash vow. Jephthah vows to sacrifice to Yahweh whoever comes out of his house upon his victorious return from his war with the Ammonites (Judges 11:30-31). To his terror and dismay, it is his daughter who comes out to greet him 'with tambrels and dances' (V. 34).

When one reads the text itself it does not look like the narrator intends to critique Jephthah's rash vow, instead Jephthah shifts the blame to his innocent daughter. When he realized that it was his daughter who came first to meet him he said, "You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me" (Judges 11:35). According to Jephthah the source of his trouble is not his rash vow but his daughter. In this story the daughter of Jephthah is not named. In this reading, Jephthah's nameless daughter is yet another one of the forgotten women of the Bible, who have been abused and consigned to oblivion. She is denied a subject position in the story. This is the reason she is not named (Fuchs 1993:117; Exum 1995:75).

In this very fascinating story the daughter of Jephthah is the one who made consent to her father's vow. The daughter of Jephthah is depicted as the willing victim of her father's vow. She agreed to be sacrificed to death because of her complete obedience to her father. Although the death of Jephthah's daughter is directly linked to his vow of victory the writer shows that it was not his wish to sacrifice his daughter. In other words this passage pushes the idea that it was Jephthah's daughter who was responsible for her own death (Fuchs 1993:121)

Clearly the story of Jephthah and his daughter is not a good story for women. This is because it confines Jephthah's daughter to a receiving position:

Notice how the narrator has the young woman speak against her own interests here. She neither questions the man who has consigned her to death nor blames him for her misfortune. Like her father, she accepts the vow as irrevocable and unalterable. In encouraging her father to fulfil his vow, she subordinates her life to her community importance, accepting her role as a sacrificial victim so that the

sacrifice might be performed. The seriousness of the vow is thus upheld, the sacrifice promised to the deity is performed, and paternal authority goes unchallenged (Exum 1995:76).

I think if the daughter of Jephthah had responded differently it would have made her to be in the center of the story and would have drawn our focus to the brutality of Jephthah. Fuchs (1993:126) rhetorically comments:

The daughter's calm response and subsequent silence permit the reader to remain focused on the father's grief. Had Jephthah's daughter been shown to ask for a plea for mercy, the narrative would have tipped the scales too much in her favor, so much so that Jephthah's refusal to grant her freedom would have cast both him and Yahweh in a questionable role. The daughter's outcry or protest would have necessitated the father's recourse to force. This scenario, however, would have cast Jephthah in the role of a heartless villain and elicited too much sympathy for the daughter.

If Isaiah Shembe had used such a biblical text to create his Nazarites religious epistemology pertaining to virgin girls, as Muller assumes, then his Nazarites Church could not escape criticism in our modern society where women are given equal rights as men. I concur with Exum (1995:77) that:

If we allow the women's ceremonial remembrance to encourage glorification of the victim, we perpetuate the crime against Bat-jiftah (Jephthah's daughter). How, then, do we reject the concept of honoring the victim without also sacrificing the woman? Recognizing that the narrator uses the women of Israel to elevate the willing victim to honored status allows us to expose the text's valorization of submission and glorification of the victim as serving androcentric interests.

I think today when one reads text like this needs to be careful of the androcentric culture that permeates most of Bible's stories. In this text we need to try and hear the real voice of Jephthah's daughter. For example, Exum (Ibid: 78) notes that, "whereas Jephthah shifts the blame to his daughter when he calls her the source of his trouble (v.35), Bat-jiftah reminds him-and us-of his responsibility: "You have opened your mouth to the Lord; do to me according to what has gone forth from your mouth" (v.36). When we read this story of the daughter of Jephthah, we need to give her "a voice that protests her marginalization and victimization-one that claims for her a measure of that autonomy denied her by the narrative that sacrificed her to the father's word" (Exum 1993:144).

As far as I know every practice in a Zulu community is gendered. For example, when there is a feast, particularly a wedding, a cow, which has been slaughtered, will be divided according to gender. There are parts of the cow, which are known to be eaten only by men and some only by women. The head is usually for men while the lower part of the cow is for women. Because Isaiah Shembe incorporated some aspects of Zulu culture in his new religious movement, I think studying his laws of the Nazarites will give us directions towards his understanding and interpretation of women and the Bible. We would expect that Shembe, as constantly in a fight to preserve and to renew his cultural identity, would revert to his culture for any role pertaining to women in his Church. However, I think, as we will see that Shembe does not merely revert to his Zulu culture but reformed and renewed it. The important question though is was he able to undermine the prejudices of African culture towards women or did he find some liberating aspects in it? In this chapter we will look at Shembe's uses of the laws (*imithetho*) on women. We will also look at those areas of tension and critical challenge.

5.3. Gender divisions and the Bible

In the previous chapter I have mentioned that people in the temples of the Nazarites Church sit according to gender and hierarchy. Muller (1999: 68) is correct in saying:

All Nazarites space is divided according to gender and marital status, and beliefs about ritual purity and authority. For example, when there is a linear arrangement of members, as in ritual processions, the men are in front, with the young girls next, and the married women at the end. In circular arrangements, such as in the temple or in the residential patterns at *Ebuhleni*, the girls are always closest to Shembe on the right, with the men on his left.

I find it interesting that Shembe puts the girls on his right because usually in a Zulu society, as Berglund (1976: 363) notes, "women are generally associated with the left, men with the right. Women occupy the left side of the hut as one enters through the doorway, men sit to the right and opposite the women". Berglund (: 363) contends that the "Zulu claim that women, and therefore the left side, are not regarded as necessarily inferior to men and the right side. Nor are men superior to women. It is rather a matter of opposites which complement each other". I think that while what Berglund says is true but it has been corrupted and used by many Zulu men to suppress women.

Gender hierarchy in the Nazarites Church of Shembe is most evident in ritual leadership, and embodied in the seating patterns of each group (Muller 1999:68). It needs to be stated that as in most other Churches women constitute a large number in the Nazarites Church. Muller (: 68) contends:

Despite the predominance of women in Isaiah's early following, *iBandla lamaNazaretha* currently adheres to the precolonial and mission structures of political leadership by vesting authority in its male membership.

This does not mean that women play no role in the Nazarites Church of Shembe. Again Muller (1999:69) mentioned two kinds of leadership roles ascribed to women- *abaphathi*, who are the leaders of the young girls, and *abakhokheli*, the leaders of women at local temples. I have also noticed that in some temples women work as mediators between the prophet and the people or visitors. I have not witnessed any women preaching during the Sabbath, except when giving testimonies. In fact Muller (: 69) states that, "Women leaders do not participate in corporate services by reading the liturgy, leading prayers, or preaching sermons". It seems to me that gender division in the Nazarites Church of Shembe is arranged in a similar fashion as that of a Zulu homestead. In a Zulu homestead the house is divided into two. Males sit on the right hand side and females on the left-hand side. These barriers are strictly observed particularly when there is *umsebenzi* (literally work), a ritual slaughtering (Berglund 1976:220).

It seems to me that Shembe has altered this rule when it comes to his virgin girls because they sit on his right hand side. I have tried to get answers as to why virgin girls sit on his right hand side but there was no straight answer to this. However, I think Shembe finds no problem with virgins sitting on his right hand side because they are not a threat to his purity. By their virtue of being virgins they cannot defile him or men sitting behind them.

I do not think that Shembe women like being excluded in the leading of the service and other important things in the Church. I must mention that most of the women I talked to were not comfortable to discuss this. In fact, it seems to me that they have internalized and accepted their position in the Church as the same as in their homes.

Most of girls I talked to appreciated the way they are taught to behave as good and helping them not to be victims of HIV/AIDS. Nevertheless, I do not think virgin girls are willing victims of some rules that they have to adhere to, such as covering their face during the service.

The Nazarites Church of Shembe is well known for its emphasis on the virginity of young girls. Vilakazi (1986:61) reiterates this point: “Many young girls are sent to Ekuphakameni by their parents because it offers them a sanctuary against the sexual inclinations of men outside”. This in particular is linked to the rituals performed among the Nazarites. What is remarkable in the Nazarites Church of Shembe is that *inhlonipho* (respect) is more important. No woman will speak to a man while standing. Usually the Nazarites woman will bow when speaking to man to show their respect.

I shall now move to the laws of the Nazarites as edited by Gunner because they have a lot to say about women and I think here they are very important for our study.

5.4. The laws of the Nazarites on women and men

Shembe has designed laws which every member of his Church should follow. The laws of the Nazarites speak largely on how women and men should behave both in the Church and at home. Isaiah Shembe has laid down some laws on different sensitive issues pertaining to women and men. Here I would like to quote those I think are important. Gunner (2002:71) has the following records of Shembe’s laws:

I have placed the weight of the law on adultery on the man’s shoulders, as it is he who ought to use most control in that matter because a woman is but a child in bodily strength compared to a man. But in the case of woman, woman was created from man therefore a woman lacks the strength to hold herself back if she is assailed by a man’s weakness because she herself is formed from man. If a man lures her through the tricks of love she will succumb quickly because man is the father of woman. When woman was created man suckled her, she grew, and she was nurtured through the expertise of the man (Genesis 2 v 21).

Man has been twice responsible for woman, he has been both father and mother, and this is how it still is. If a man feels tempted by a certain woman, the woman will quickly be tempted too. The strength to stand fast in the face of that temptation is the man’s. That is why I say that the law concerning adultery rests most heavily on the man. It is he who most needs to control himself. Adam was

superior to his wife because from the beginning woman came from below man's head (Genesis 2 v 22).

The above mentioned law is interesting for the following reasons. First, we would expect that on the issue of adultery Shembe would hold a woman responsible as many other readers of the Bible do. For example, in John 8:1 ff., the woman who is caught in the act of committing adultery stands alone responsible for the act. In this text the law in Leviticus 20:10 has been used to victimize a woman. The law states clearly that both the man and the woman who are found guilty of adultery should be killed. But she is brought forward as if she has committed adultery on her own. Even though I have found Shembe's reading of the creation story in Genesis 2 to be very traditional and often read to perpetuate women's subordination to men, I am surprised by the way Shembe uses the same text to protect and guide men for their moral responsibility towards women. Traditionally the woman is seen as the one who tempts man. This is usually supported from the cursory reading of Genesis 3:1-16 to mean that it was Eve who sinned and caused Adam to sin. But on the contrary to this Shembe asserts "it is he who most needs to control himself" (Gunner 2002:71).

I do not here want to rule out the fact that in what Shembe said or laid down as his laws there are far reaching implications for Nazarite women and women in general in South Africa. Women theologians have argued convincingly that the text in Genesis 2 silences or perpetuates women's subordination to men; hence it asserts that man was created first and then women. I think that if we want to avoid a cursory reading of Genesis 2 we must remember that there is Genesis 1 before Genesis 2. Here I do not want to enter into a theological debate raised by reading Paul's contradictory statements on creation and women.

And again if one looks at what has been called the law for the leaders who wish to marry one can see how Shembe has dealt with the issue of polygamy:

If someone who is a preacher desires more than anything else to marry a second wife, and then does just that, if he marries with the agreement of his [first] wife, it should not disrupt his actual preaching, if we go by the precedent of Laban and Jacob. Laban made Jacob swear that he would never again marry other women

and would from then on marry Laban's daughters (Genesis 31 verse 43). Laban ignored the case of Bilha who was not his daughter, she was Jacob's junior wife whom he married not of his own free choice. David then married Rachel, his senior wife (Genesis 30 v 3-16).

So those are the reasons weighing against a preacher being removed from his post if he takes another wife. But if with the passage of time, the senior wife becomes jealous about her husband and his junior wife, and quarrels start, the man should remove the junior wife and build a house for her a day's journey away from the other homestead (Gunner 2002: 75).

It is clear from the passage above that Shembe, though he himself heard a voice that told him to leave his polygamous life, still thinks of it as something that can be utilized effectively. One notes that even though this law on marriage does not give much choice on women, Shembe still tried to use it in a new way. Shembe added a new element in the well-known Zulu culture of polygamy when he says a man should ask for the consent of his wife if he wants to marry another women. Vilakazi (1986:46-45) therefore is correct when he says:

Shembe's magnetic personality and his strict adherence to Zulu socio-cultural thought patterns, other than those which conflicted with Biblical teaching, attracted many Zulus with the traditional outlook. He insisted on respect for seniors and on traditional patterns of respect between men and women and between parents and children. He also insisted on proper marriage customs and practices according to Zulu tradition. However, he introduced a new feature in his moral behavior. He forbade premarital intercourse, and upheld chastity as an ideal for both men and women.

The emphasis on virginity among the young unmarried women (*amantombazane*) is not unique to Shembe himself. This was an old Zulu custom. Apart from this law on virginity there are a number of taboos associated with women in the Nazarites Church of Shembe. For instance, if a woman is in her menstrual circle she is not expected to cook food for a man. I think Mary Douglas is correct when she says pollution and purity rules show the concerns of the community about social order and social boundaries. And those concerns of the social body are inscribed in the bodies of individuals (1970:71). So this law reflects the concern of the Shembe community to preserve and restore the boundaries of Zulu society.

I think the emphasis on virginity among the Nazarites Church of Shembe today needs to take into account gender equity. Bruce (2004:9) warns the Church that when dealing with virginity “needs to be aware of the fact that anthropologists argue that virginity is usually highly valued in societies that seek to control women. The Church needs to avoid replicating attitudes harmful to women if our context of HIV/AIDS leads to an active promotion of virginity on religious and cultural grounds as part of the strategy in the fight against the virus”. Muller (1999:63) writes:

The memorialization of the demise and destruction of African society was effected through three mechanisms. First, Isaiah constructed the boundaries of his community through the formulations of clear, ritualized distinctions between the Nazarites’ sense of self and other. These distinctions came to be embodied in the Nazarites’ configuration of the opposition notions of purity and pollution. This occurred at a number of levels. In its broadest terms, pollution was equated with any outside action that contravened the moral bounds of African society... More specifically, Nazarites members could incur defilement/sinfulness by breaking any of a number of rules and taboos-such as eating pork, engaging in sexual intercourse during a holy month, lighting fires on the Sabbath, and wearing footgear on Nazarites religious space. Perhaps the most dangerous form of pollution to the Nazarites community as a whole was that brought on by the loss of control of the fertility of young female virgins.

Those who broke virginity laws are regarded as outcast. Their sitting position is clearly marked and known in the Church. They sit next to the widows who are also regarded as impure during their time of mourning. Those young girls who had lost their virginity can be given to any older man who wants to get married at a low priced *lobola*. Muller (1999:161) contends that:

To move African peoples of KwaZulu Natal into a selective involvement with the emergent industrial economy in the early twentieth century, Isaiah Shembe blended the archaic with the new. The bodies of these virgin girls thus became the vessels of this tricky transformation.

We have heard a call from traditional leaders and from the Zulu King to try and revive virginity test. Those who called for this culture insist that it would lower the growing impact of HIV/AIDS. The Nazarites Church of Shembe is praised for being able to encourage the youth to remain virgins. But the concern from women’s rights groups, which ask why young men are not given the same consideration as young girls, is valid.

This call gives the impression that it is women who spread the HIV/AIDS. If one can control them one can be able to deal effectively with the spread of HIV/AIDS.

From the discussions of Muller it become apparent to me that Muller perceived Shembe's rituals and taboos on women as an alternative for young girls to remake and reconnect to the sacred traditions disrupted by colonialism and apartheid (Muller 1999). While this cannot be completely ruled out, it needs to be stated that it comes at a certain cost to women. On the one hand, the laws pertaining to the marrying of a second wife by a man who wishes to do so were pretty good in the old times and in a culture that sought to protect the vulnerability of women who may have lost their husbands. We know that in those times men provided shelter, protection, and survival for women. However, in the modern world this model does not seem to fit well. Women have discovered that their human rights were ignored by patriarchal systems and their dignity as human beings in their own rights were hampered. What do we do with all these things? The challenge is that "the Church is supposed to provide an alternative community in situations where the society has kept people apart" (Govinden 1991:284).

Nevertheless, Shembe saw some gaps in the traditional way of dealing with women and sought to close these. According to Muller (1999:212):

While marriage may traditionally have been the social ideal, it is quite clear from Shembe's formation of *iBandla lamaNazaretha* that for many of his early membership, marriage failed to provide the necessary economic, political, and social security. In response to this Isaiah created his religious spaces (or villages, as they were called) for the widows and orphans, those customarily marginalized by death, divorce, and marital estrangement. Likened to an Nguni homestead head, Isaiah played the role of husband for many women- he acquired land, which enabled women to create an economic base; he structured a form of social organization into which they could find a place- and he functioned as a political leader or chief in terms of the control he wielded over the space.

We have seen that in most cases Shembe provided an alternative for his community or to be specifically for women. While this may have helped those women in the time of Shembe it goes without saying that given our South African context much needs to be done for the emancipation of women. The Bible and its interpreters old and new need to be scrutinized for their bias interpretations against women.

We need to constantly ask a question when we read the Bible, “whose interests are being served?” By doing this we will be able to detect the dominant male voice in the text.

5.5. Conclusion

Shembe has been able to move Nazarites women from the point of observers to participants. It seems to me that Shembe found some aspects of African culture liberative and he combined these with his Biblical knowledge of the scriptures to form his new laws for his community. He is able to weave together the interaction between men and women through the social code of *inhlonipho* (respect). However, we have noted that, “The sacralization of the female virgin body was made at great cost. In obedience to the words of their prophet, these girls were expected to sacrifice sexual desire” (Muller 1999:69) While Shembe’s interpretation of the biblical text and his uses of Zulu traditional cultural aspect was good and sustainable during his time, I think in our modern time it needs to be reviewed, questioned and criticized for not giving enough room for women to express their thinking. Women should be given space to define themselves and their role in the Church. Those women who have been silenced and sidelined by the stories of the Bible like the daughter of Jephthah should be given names and be allowed to speak for themselves.

Chapter Six

6. Comparisons and contrasts between Isaiah Shembe and George Khambule

6.1. Introduction

This study has sought to explore how Africans in general and Isaiah Shembe in particular have appropriated and interpreted the Bible to themselves as they understand it. We have looked at the historicity of the arrival of the Bible. I have argued elsewhere that the conditions that Africans found themselves in fuelled a great need for them to confirm their identity and to protect it. I think it is fitting that in this chapter we compare and contrast Shembe and George Khambule because these two Zulu prophets emerged during the time of Black South African dispossession. I think Khambule is interesting because he participated in the First World War overseas as a soldier in France (Draper 2004:250). Khambule is even more interesting because he comes from a very small and rural area of Telezini at Nquthu. I have given much of Shembe in this study. Now I shall give the background to George Khambule and then move to contrast him with Isaiah Shembe. In doing this work I will rely heavily on the work of Bengt Sundkler (1976) and Draper (2004) because as far as I know they are the only ones who have published the material on George Khambule.

6.2. Background of George Khambule (1884-1949)

According to Draper (2004:252) the family of George Khambule were prominent members of a group of a hundred families of Christian converts of Griqua, Rolong, Sotho, Tlokwa, Hlubi and Swazi origin who settled in the Edendale valley outside Pietermaritzburg under the leadership of a renegade Methodist missionary. The Khambule family and other residents of Edendale intermarried with the followers of the mercenary Chief Hlubi Molife of Nqutu, who had been rewarded by the British with a swathe of land and jurisdiction in Zululand after the defeat of King Cetshwayo in 1879.

The father of George Khambule was Isaac. "George's father, Isaac Khambule moved to Nqutu during a period of economic recession in Edendale some time before 1883, when the territory of Hlubi was incorporated into the Zulu Reserve and Melmoth Osborne, the Administrator, closed the reserve to the emigration of Zulu people from the Colony. It was at Nqutu in 1884 that George Khambule was born" (Draper 2004:252-253). In an interview with his granddaughter, Busisiwe Bhengu, it was revealed that George Khambule once joined the British forces in the First World war as a volunteer in the South African Native Labour Corps, probably in 1917 (: 252).

6.3. The call of George Khambule as a Prophet

George Khambule was called first in a vision seen by Mtanti, a schoolteacher from Telezini, while in a classroom. Sundkler (1976:124-125) records his vision as follows:

The school children were frightened when their teacher suddenly appeared only to cry "*Nakho! Nakho!*"- "Woe, woe!". He left his school, for he felt he had now to search for the one thing that could save the world from utter destruction: holy stones with which to build the new Jerusalem. In streams nearby he found some of them. They looked like ordinary stones to ordinary people, but Mtanti discovered a message in them, or rather on them. But this message was so great that it required a more prominent prophet than himself to proclaim it. Again, his dreams showed him the way. A man appeared in these dreams, and he recognized the face and stature of a neighbour of his, George Khambule from the same Telezini village, now working as a mine captain in Johannesburg.

When this vision was reported to George Khambule in Johannesburg at first he ignored it. But then later he was to see a vision himself that forced him to be obedient to the call. Mhlungu quoted by Draper (2004: 254) records the call of Khambule in a vision like this:

And then Kambule was so sick that he was rushed to the hospital where he died around 8-9, until he woke up at 4 in the morning. While he was dead he had a voice of his secret lover (the second woman) across in the river where the smoke was billowing. He saw his younger sister, Agrineth Kambule, who had died, shouting, "Lord his time has not yet come". Standing before him were the angels of Satan waiting to take him and throw him into the fire with forks. And then something huge appeared, turning like a wheel. Whenever it turned there appeared something written in bold letters, "Our father who art in heaven". When the wheel turned again it said, "Let your name be holy". This went on and on until it came to the part where it says, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". The wheel then stopped and the words appeared, "Do you forgive those who wrong you?". These words appeared three times and I could not

answer. Then I saw the corpses of many people whom I have murdered, and then I spread my hands saying, Lord I have never handled poison.” The voice said, “You killed them with your mouth”. It passed there and I saw many young women. I saw myself in their midst doing all that I used to do with them while I was on earth. Then I saw a stone, which had the shape of the cross. The voice said, “Take that stone,” and when I took it I saw my corpse stinking down on earth. My mother and my wife, Masikhakhane, were moaning next to it. All this was happening while the voice of the girl was crying out, “Lord his time has not yet come.” Then I saw pastors receiving money and the voice said, “Go back to earth. Your works are evil. The only good thing you did was to sent this girl, Agrineth, to school, the one who is crying out”

It was after this religious experience that Khambule became the prophet. He went back to Telezini and started a Church called *iBandla labaNgcwele* (Church of the Saints). His death and resurrection experience and his entry into heaven became the foundation for his call and his attempt to build the new community (Draper 2004:255). Draper (: 255) has found connection between the *iBandla labaNgcwele* and the New Jerusalem of Revelation in the Bible. Using Khambule’s diaries which contains the liturgy of the Church he find the language as echoing the language of Revelation. He then concludes: this community is the New Jerusalem come down out of heaven from God, adorned as a bride for her husband, the Lamb of God (Revelation 21:1-4, 9).

Having given this short background of George Khambule and his *iBandla labaNgcwele* at Telezini, Nquthu I would like to give the practices and the appropriation of the Bible by this Church in comparison with *iBandla lamaNazaretha* of Isaiah Shembe.

6.4. Comparisons and contrasts of Isaiah Shembe and George Khambule

The first and foremost observation to make between these two men is that if we were take the date of 1870 as the day in which Isaiah Shembe was born (Sundkler 1948:110) and 1884 the day Khambule was born we can see that the difference in age between these men is 14. I think this observation is important in giving us the insight that these two men lived in the period of Western colonial domination. It remains uncertain whether George Khambule has met Isaiah Shembe in his lifetime. However, the probability is that if they had not met George Khambule might have heard about this famous man, Isaiah Shembe.

Hence, Oosthuizen said Shembe became very popular for his healing activities. These stories of Shembe's healing are recorded in the Book of Hexham and Oosthuizen (1999).

6.5. The calling of the Prophets

What seems to be the same with the calling of Isaiah Shembe and George Khambule is that they are both called through dreams or visions. Khambule saw a vision in which he died and rose. This happened when he was still working in Johannesburg (Draper 2004:254). Sundkler (1976:163) records a vision of Isaiah Shembe's call:

...Overcome by sleep in the cave he had a dream: he was trying to reach certain people, who walked in front of him, but all the time he seemed to be too late. Then lightning appeared and he was asked to survey the earth. As he looked down on the earth of men, he had a terrible vision of his own putrefying corpse. The voice went on to warn him: "If you do not leave ukhlobonga (sexual sins) you will never see me. It is this which hinders your spirit from unity with our spirit. Because you dwell in a filthy carcass, you may not unite with us.

They were both told in a vision to go and preach. For example for Khambule to build a New Jerusalem at Telezini. The same could be said of Shembe who also build his New Jerusalem at Ekuphakameni. What once happened through Jesus, among the Jews and for their salvation, is now being re-enacted through Shembe among the Zulu and for their salvation. God in his wisdom is now using his Bantu mask as he turns to his Black children. Ekuphakameni has a miraculous effect on the faithful:

Those who enter with sorrow
They leave rejoicing.
Listen all ye nations
Come and be saved (Sundkler 1976:200).

There are similarities in some details about the call of these prophets with the call of prophets elsewhere in the Bible. For example, prophet Isaiah was called in a vision in Isaiah 6:1ff. We can see that here visions form the background of the call of a prophet. I think both Khambule and Shembe are empowered through their visions to confront the ruling powers. Though they do not confront them directly but instead do this in a subversive way. This we see in some of their Church practices. In their calling we can deduce that they are all called to preach and the Bible plays an important role in what they are to do.

Draper (2004:256) notes that when appropriating the account of the temptation of Jesus before his commissioning at the Jordan, Khambule is presented as the only one who can read the Bible, in this liturgical recital of one of the prophecies of the community:

Congregation: Jesus was tempted by Satan for forty days.

Priest: During those days he was tested but he did not fail. He at nothing . Satan said to him, “If you are a Son of God tell this stone to become bread”. Jesus answered and said, “it is written [that a man cannot only live by bread”. Holy angels came and ministered to him.] St. Itengirrah, Nazar came and told us that he saw people. Jesus the Lord called him and said, “Here is the Bible which you were opposing.”

Chorus: That Bible was written in the tongues of angels.

Priest: There was no one who could read it, except St. Nazar to whom was given. Over the river they will sing a new song thanking St. Nazar for what he has done (Diary II, 31-32).

Draper (: 256-257), contends that this text is a closed and inanimate object like stone until it becomes living bread by the mediation of angels and the words of prophecy. This is characteristic of Khambule’s exegesis: although the explicit reference is to the temptation of Jesus, the governing idea is from the book of Revelation. The Bible is seen as he sealed scroll, “written in the tongues of angels,” from Rev 5:4, which no one is worthy to open except the Lamb which is the Lion of Judah.

The same sentiment is shared in the hymn of *iBandla labaNgcwele*:

Priest: Nazar came and told us that he saw a large number of people and the Lord Jesus said to him, here is the Bible you contradicting.

Chorus: Hallelua we will thank Christ and St. Itengirrah when we crossed Jordan.

Priest: This Bible was written in the language of angels and there was no one who could read it except St. Nazar who was given it.

Chorus: Hallelua will thank Christ and St. Itengirrah when we cross over Jordan (My own translation of *iculo leBandla labaNgcwele* hymn Book 2 page 8)

6.6. Church practices

Both George Khambule and Isaiah Shembe introduced certain practices in their Churches. It is interesting to note that the name given to their Churches are also biblical. In Church practices we see that they intergrate African worldview with Western Christianity.

For example, while healing is not given much focus in the *iBandla labaNgcwele* as with the *iBandla lamaNazaretha* is important. In fact, in the *iBandla lamaNazaretha* the whole service focuses on healing. I have here included a collection of healing stories that were recorded by Hexham and Oosthuizen. During my fieldwork research at eNhlanhleni temple I have asked several members how members of the Nazarites Church are recruited or what one must do to become a member? From their responses it became apparent that a large number of members came to be Nazarites because they were ill. After having been cured by the Prophet they decide to be members. However, Shembe himself does not force anyone to be a Nazarites just because he or she has received help from him. The choice is entirely left to the healed person to decide.

Shembe uses several of objects for healing. The most popular objects are Vaseline, water, and soap. Water is also used for purification rituals. For example, Vilakazi (1986:86) notes that during the Holy Communion service which is always held in the evening because Christ held his last supper in the evening. The people who come to receive Holy Communion, which is received in both forms, must be ritually pure, so that there is the ritual washing of feet which is done by Shembe himself.

Mofokeng, the *Mfundisi* in the temple at eKuphumuleni just outside Howick said that sometimes a patient comes to Shembe and asks for healing and Shembe would not even see that person. He might just send his messenger to tell that particular person to go back home. Usually the person will complain, "Why he does not give me something or say something?", only to find that on his/her way home he will be healed. Mofokeng's Bible reference is John 5: 49ff. where Jesus heals the son of the official. In this instance Jesus just said the word and the official son was healed.

What Enang (in Mbiti 1986:146) notes about healing and salvation among the AIC's is true of the Nazarites Church of Shembe:

The power and the presence of the Holy Spirit exhibited in external occurrences in prophetic predictions are made much more evident in the healing of the sick... For most of the clients, especially those who deviate from our old established churches to the Independent churches, healing is almost the only motive behind

their change of allegiance... For the new church owners, interest in healing outweighs almost all other concerns... In Annang, the majority of the churches are popularly titled by people 'Ufok Unyanga', a house for help, a healing house. They are houses where the sick are believed to be cured of different ailment by the Holy Spirit through the instrumentality of the healing personnel... In the eyes of the Christians in these churches, a church is a healing clinic.

On the one hand most of Nazarites Church members are people who were healed and those who saw the visions. Healing in this Church is central. And I think here healing is equated with salvation. On the other hand in the *iBandla labaNgcwele* the important thing seems to me that is *umshado wewundlu* (the marriage of the lamb). To be a member of George Khambule's Church you must enter the marriage of the lamb. Draper (2004:266-267) notes:

If the Kingdom of God has come to dwell among human beings, then those who enter become members of *isigodlo* (royal harem) of King Jesus and must enter the marriage of the lamb. Every person joining the Church had to go through the traditional Zulu period of isolation for two weeks on attaining puberty (*umgonqo*). They were married with white robes and given a silver ring. After this they were forbidden to have sex ever again or to marry. They were to be the virgins who followed the lamb (Rev 14:4), male or female young or old,.

The marriage of the lamb in Khambule's Church, according to Draper (: 267) applied even if a person was already married: they left home and joined his *isigodlo*, even his own wife and children were expected to undergo initiation in this way. This was the way Khambule interpreted and understood the coming down of New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and the marriage of the lamb. I think Draper (: 256) is right when he contends that the marriage of the lamb has resonance in Zulu culture, since a King must have an *isigodlo*, a royal harem.

If one looks both at the Shembe Church and Khambule's Church one can see that these two prophets are concerned about the renewal of Zulu community. It is interesting to ask a question why Khambule's reading of Revelation would make him think of a royal harem. Especially if we consider that the Zulus had lost battles over the whites (Fuze 1979: 114-115). This threatened their identity and cultures. What Khambule tried to do was to build a New Jerusalem at Telezini that was to restore the Zulu people. Nevertheless his emphasis on the marriage of the lamb caused substantial disruption in

the community since young girls and wives have to leave their homes and stay with Khambule (Draper 2004:267). In the Shembe Church this idea of virgins is slightly different from that of Khambule. According to Dube (1936:84), Shembe used to pay *lobola* for some of the girls who belonged to his Church and they had to come and stay with him at eKuphakameni. After he had paid *lobola* for them they become like his daughters.¹

Ekuphakameni can be contrasted with Telezini. These two are sacred space and all those who enter them should purify themselves. In the case of Shembe through purification rite and in the case of Khambule through *umgonqo*, a period of seclusion. We observe that whenever these Zulu prophets interpret the Bible they employ culture as a hermeneutic device. Vilakazi (1986:45) writes:

Shembe insisted on respect for elders and on traditional patterns of respect between men and women and between parents and children. He insisted on proper marriage customs and practices according to Zulu tradition. He forbade premarital sex and upheld chastity as an ideal for both men and women. Traditional Zulu dress was encouraged, and was to be worn especially on ceremonial occasions. He brought in the festival, dancing, and singing that were compatible with the Zulu way of life and people could easily relate to them.

Even today the Nazarites Church of Shembe is known of its way of imposing *inhlonipho* (respect). A Nazarites woman cannot speak to a male person standing but she would bow in an old Zulu fashion of *inhlonipho*. I have witnessed this kind of *inhlonipho* among the Nazarites Church of Shembe. Respect among the Zulus is an important aspect. We see this in the fact that respect for parents or elders is extended even after death. They are honored and remembered. Mbiti (1970:229) is correct when he says: "Elders are given a place of great respect in Traditional African societies. Leading and taking part in religious functions are among their many duties. Even where priests exist, elders often

¹ When Shembe has paid *lobola* for the girl she belongs to him and he will decide what he does with her. For example he may make her an *inhlanzi*, this is a girl in a Zulu culture which accompanied the bride when she goes for the first time to *emzini*, her new home. In some instances this girl may end up having affairs with the bridegroom. According to Dube (1936:84) Shembe would also allow these girls to marry if someone came and asked them from him. That particular person would have to repay Shembe's *lobola*.

take part in some or all of the ceremonies, in addition to conducting domestic and minor rituals”.

Shembe and George Khambule also wrote songs and liturgies for their services. Their liturgies and hymns contain their interpretations of some biblical texts.

Take for example, a hymn of George Khambule written for Thursday 30th September 1926, as quoted by Draper (2004:267):

Let us rejoice and be glad!

We praise the Lord
Because the marriage of the Lamb
Has come down to earth

Chorus:

It is written saying
Write and say
Blessed are those invited
To the Wedding of the Lamb (Diary III, 96).

The biblical reference of this hymn is the Book of Revelation 14:4 where it talks about the marriage of the lamb. A cursory reading of Shembe’s hymns and George Khambule’s diaries might lead to a misconception that these prophets claimed to be God. Those who want to assert that Shembe claimed to be God do not understand the culture where Shembe comes from as Brown (1999:215) puts it:

Proceeding from the evidence of such hymns and from the testimony of followers, a number of critics have argued that Shembe is God or Christ in the Nazarite theology. Oosthuizen claims that ‘Shembe... is not only Mediator but is Messiah, the manifestation of God’ (1967:4), and Gerard states: ‘The Zulu Messiah is Shembe, and in later years the adherents of the sect even came increasingly to believe that the prophet was God himself’ (1971:153). Similarly Muller refers repeatedly to ‘the Nazarite God, Shembe’ or ‘their God Shembe’. Such critical statements and assumptions appear to simplify a more complex symbolic identification, and to remain insufficiently alert to the ambiguities and polyvalencies of religious and poetic language.

I fully agree with Brown because from the material and sermons I have examined, I have not found the argument that Shembe is God sustainable. What has become apparent is that Shembe is the servant of God. Perhaps a messenger of God. This does not makes him God at all. It seems to me that this thinking is a result of failure to understand African

worldview, African way of perceiving or reconstructing reality. We need to note that those people who advocated for this view were usually the white missionaries. Maluleke (2000:91), writing about similar problem of AIC's being misunderstood by the white missionaries said:

What is the meaning of such massive and durable negative evaluation? We cannot understand its meaning until we recognize that many AICs studies were not about the AICs at all- but about the researchers and their churches. To put it differently, it was not so much the AICs that were being studied; rather, it was 'our mission' negatively mirrored in the separatist movement.

It seems to me that Khambule and Shembe used their biblical knowledge in rituals as a way of renewing African society. We have seen in particular with Shembe that in his services he promoted Zulu culture. Shembe, as Vilakazi (1986:17-19) pointed out, was determined in asserting African identity in the face of disempowerment under colonial forces which threatened total destruction of African pride and nationhood.

Even though the Church of the Saints (*iBandla labaNgcwele*) did not continue very long, it has left some marks on the way Africans can contribute to the hermeneutical tools for the study and appropriation of the Bible. After having given much deliberation about Khambule's appropriation of the Book of Revelation to his Church, Draper (2004:271) concludes:

It is not surprising in a context of imperial control and oppression, that the book of Revelation should become a central text for study and interpretation in African communities in the colonial era. Khambule's *iBandla labaNgcwele* is one community which tried to model its life and its behaviour consistently on that basis. In the end, it proved impossible to sustain in that form. Yet many of Khambule's ideas passed into the general stock of traditions and practices in the African Initiated Churches in South Africa. Zulu cultural traditions submerge and surface, shift form and come to life in new and vibrant ways in these churches, a process vital for the survival of indigenous knowledge systems after the missionary era.

It needs to be stated that in *iBandla labaNgcwele* (George Khambule's Church) women were not just maidens but played important roles in the Church and in the service. For example, they prophecy and participated in healing rituals. In a research on *iBandla labaNgcwele* Draper has found out that Masithole was a captain of *isigodlo* of *iBandla*

labaNgcwele. This is different from the Nazarites Church of Shembe where women are only expected to show respect (*inhlonipho*) and sing. They are never given important roles in the Church.

6.7. Conclusion

Here we have looked at the comparison between Shembe and Khambule. These two men and their churches are examples of what happens if the Bible is left to the Africans to appropriate among themselves. Their interpretation and appropriation of the *imibhalo eNgcwele* seems to appeal to their communities. This is so, because their use of the Bible takes seriously the life experience and the culture of their community. They wage war against oppressive forces at religious cultural level by reinterpreting the Scriptures for themselves. In this chapter it has become apparent that culture and African worldview become a key hermeneutical device in the appropriation of the Bible in Africa.

Chapter Seven

7. Concluding observations

The enterprise of this paper was to investigate the reception of the Bible in African prophecy. This was done by looking at the Nazarites Church of Shembe and contrasting practices of this Church with the Church of the Saints (*ibandla labaNgcwele*) of George Khambule. We have looked here at a large number of concrete examples from the Nazarites Church of Shembe on how the Bible has been used and appropriated by Africans.

I have observed that the theology of AIC's is a theology that emerges from the grassroots. It emerges from a particular context and in a way is a response to that context. In our case it is the context of African dehumanization and dispossession by the white man. In African prophecy it is evident that the Bible and the Christian faith is enacted in the way that is meaningful and relevant to Africans. I think the words of Mbiti (1986:127) clearly describe what happens in the Church of the Nazarites, which is an example of African prophecy:

Instead of reciting creeds- and many Christians do exactly that, following the tradition from some Churches of the West- African Christians are more at home in dancing their faith, in celebrating their faith, n shouting their faith (through jubilation), singing their faith, being possessed by the Holy Spirit of their faith and demonstrating the frontiers of their faith.

The Nazarites Church of Shembe seems to have found a way of interpreting the Scriptures that is meaningful and that appeals to many of African readers of the Bible. This is in opposition to the way the Bible was presented to Africans by Western missionaries. In their presentation of the Bible to Africans they made it unnecessarily alienating to them by forcing Africans to abandon their culture in order to become Christians. In contrary to this, 'Shembe's hymns comprise texts and rituals of empowerment and resistance which draw both upon forms of colonial discourse and the cultural resources of traditional Zulu society' (Brown 1999:215).

I think the AIC's in general and the Church of Shembe in particular have been successful in waging struggle against Western hegemony over both Christianity and the Bible and this has helped Africans to relate better to the Word of God. But I observe that while African contribution to the interpretation of the Bible is liberating to Africans at the same time it can be oppressive to women. For example, the way Shembe weaves together African culture and biblical texts is not liberating to women. For to women it only means subscribing to the old subservient Zulu culture. We have observed this with Shembe's imposing of *inhlonipho* (respect) and in his act of paying *lobola* for the girls of Ekuphakameni. I am not saying all African aspects of culture are oppressive to women but I think this field needs to be taken seriously. I think Bediako (2001:6) made an important statement that:

If the gospel and culture engagement is about the process of coming together, the meeting of life with life, then, it should be evident that the process of the gospel and culture engagement as a process of conversion is rarely completed within one generation. Several generations of believers are needed to firm up and reap the fruits of that engagement. We are not going to find once and for all the biblical answer to a particular cultural problem. It does not work like that because gospel and culture engagement is not about the biblical 'answers' to issues. It is about how community and people come to see themselves as called into the people of God and how they come to participate in that community.

This research does not seek to romanticize African cultures but advocates a biblical interpretation that takes life experience and the worldview of the people concerned seriously as a starting point. I believe that some aspects of African traditions need to be transformed in order to accommodate our new context and changing cultures. The hymns, sermons, and practices of the Nazarites Church of Shembe are typical examples of how both aspects of Western and African practices can be integrated for the renewal of our communities.

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