

Performance, Power and Agency: Isaiah Shembe's Hymns and the Sacred Dance in the Church of the Nazarites

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This thesis is my own original work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration unless specifically indicated in the text.

Abstract

This study examines the sacred dance in the Nazaretha Church and Isaiah Shembe's hymns as "agency" and not "response" (Coplan, 1994: 27). A number of studies on the Nazaretha Church and Isaiah Shembe posit that Shembe created his popular texts (especially the sacred dance) as a response to colonialism and the oppression of black people. In countering such a proposition I argue that in exploring the sacred dance we need to look at the motivation for members to participate in the dance. With that view in mind, I examine the sacred dance and the hymns as examples of a popular culture which is both 'transnational' and 'transglobal', to use Hofmeyr's terms (2004). This is because it is common in the Nazaretha Church that members taking part in the sacred dance claim to be doing so on behalf of their dead relatives, as it is believed that ancestors are able to participate in those dances through the bodies of their living relatives. In return, those in the ancestral realm will reward the living performers by offering them 'blessings'. In the Nazaretha Church, and through performances like the sacred dance, the physical and spiritual worlds are perceived to be integrated. I therefore examine these hymns and performances as examples of popular culture "that is more than sub- or trans-national, [that] is trans-worldly and trans-global" (Hofmeyr, 2004: 9). In other words, I examine the sacred dance as performances and the hymns as texts whose audience is not only living people but also people in heaven.

This means my study goes beyond the view that Nazaretha performances are rituals of empowerment for the members, a majority of whom are economically, socially and politically marginalised (Muller, 1999), to look at them as significant on their own account. In undertaking the abovementioned task, I examine these hymns and performances in relation to "oral testimony of their significance to the people who [perform] and [listen] to them" (White, 1989: 37).

Oral testimony of dreams and miracles suggests that Nazaretha members who take part in the sacred dance do so primarily because of the imagined relationship between the individual and divine power. As Mbembe states, "it is the subject's relation to

divine sovereignty that serves as the main provider of meanings for most people” (2002: 270). I argue that Nazarite members take part in the sacred dance mainly as an attempt to “manage the ‘real world’ on the basis of the conviction that all symbolisation refers primarily to a system of the invisible, of a magical universe, the present belonging above all to a sequence that opens onto something different” (270).

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INTRODUCTION

In pre-colonial Zulu society song and dance featured very prominently in cultural and religious life. Even well-known kings like Shaka participated in some of the dances that took place in their kraals.¹ These events were still taking place in the time of Mpande, as M.A. Delegorgue gives a striking account of a performance he witnessed in Mpande's kraal in what he calls a "three day festival of dance and song". Delegorgue reports that it was only on the last day of the festival that Mpande took part in the dance:

[Mpande] sang marking the beat with both hands alternately, reinforcing it with straight gestures of the arms, directing his assegai in different directions understood by all, lifting it, lowering it, pointing it to the right, then to the left, and his gestures, his words, his movement were identical to those of every participant. The best drilled soldiers do not exercise with such precision; no hand was lifted higher than any other, nor was any tonga tilted more than another, never a delay, nor an error: it was of unequalled uniformity. (Larham, 1985: 4)

One cannot help noticing the tone of approval and appraisal evident in this account. It is clear that Delegorgue was amazed at and moved by the precision and the dexterity of the dancers. This precision means that a great deal of effort was put into performances like this one. If they did not spend time rehearsing, it means these dances happened so often that people got used to performing them so that they were able to perfect them as Delegorgue describes. But what is more striking here is Delegorgue's positive attitude towards the performance. His attitude differs significantly from that of many of the nonconformist missionaries who sought, in the words of the Comaroffs, "to 'civilise' the native by remaking his person and his context; by reconstructing his habit and habitus; by taking back the savage mind from Satan, who had emptied it of all traces of spirituality and reason" (1991:238). For these missionaries the dances described above represented savagery, and their mission was to educate and civilise the Africans so that they would jettison these ungodly

¹ For instance, Henry Fynn tells of a song and dance festival organised by Shaka to welcome them to the Zulu kraal. In this festival Shaka himself took part in the dance. See Larham (1985).

practices as well as other religious and cultural rituals that they [the missionaries] did not consider to be ‘civilised’ or Christian. My concern in this thesis is with the incorporation of forms of Zulu dancing and performance in the Nazarite Church (*ibandla lamaNazaretha*), a practice counter to that of mainstream mission churches, and one which characterises the Nazarite Church even today.

In this study I examine the sacred dance in the Nazarite Church and Isaiah Shembe’s hymns as examples of a popular culture which is both ‘transnational’ and ‘transglobal’, to use Hofmeyr’s terms (2004). It is common in the Nazarite Church that members taking part in the sacred dance claim to be doing so on behalf of their dead relatives, as it is believed that ancestors are able to participate in those dances through the bodies of their living relatives. In return, those in the ancestral realm will reward the living performers by offering them ‘blessings’. In the Nazarite Church, and through performances like the sacred dance, the physical and spiritual worlds are perceived to be integrated. I therefore examine these hymns and performances as examples of popular culture “that is more than sub- or trans-national, [that] is trans-worldly and trans-global” (Hofmeyr, 2004: 9). In other words, I examine the sacred dance as performances and the hymns as texts whose audience is not only living people but also people in heaven.

I also explore these popular texts and performances as “agency and not just as response” (Coplan, 1994: 27). This means my study goes beyond the view that Nazarite performances are rituals of empowerment for the members, a majority of whom are economically, socially and politically marginalised (Muller, 1999), to look at them as significant on their own account. In undertaking the abovementioned task, I examine these hymns and performances in relation to “oral testimony of their significance to the people who [perform] and [listen] to them” (White, 1989: 37).

Oral testimony of dreams and miracles suggests that Nazarite members who take part in the sacred dance do so primarily because of the imagined relationship between the individual and divine power. As Mbembe states, “it is the subject’s relation to divine sovereignty that serves as the main provider of meanings for most people” (2002: 270). I argue that Nazarite members take part in the sacred dance mainly as an attempt to “manage the ‘real world’ on the basis of the conviction that all

symbolisation refers primarily to a system of the invisible, of a magical universe, the present belonging above all to a sequence that opens onto something different” (270).

* * *

Isaiah Shembe founded the Nazarite Church (*Ibandla LamaNazaretha*) around 1910 in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. Although it started as a local and ethnically specific church, today the Nazarite church has a strong national following, attracting members from all walks of life across ethnic groups, and has members as far afield as Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The church is rapidly growing in numbers. According to preacher Sibisi, there are about seven million Nazaretha members. This growth, plus the church’s “success in creating a religious presence which is distinctively African”, causes Gunner to see it as a “force to be reckoned with in social, religious and political terms” (2002: 1).

But for many years this distinctively African identity has had a negative impact on the broader social perceptions of the church. Until fairly recently, the Nazarite Church has been regarded by many to be the church of backward, uneducated and rural people. For instance, Kivnick, in her study of traditional black music and its role in the struggle against apartheid, mentions a conversation she had with her ‘very Western’ friend, Thandi Mphahlele. She says that Thandi laughingly gossiped about the Nazarites, saying, “Though they live near the city, they do not live a city life. You will see them when we get there” (1990: 55). One of the features distinguishing the Nazarite Church as African is the sacred dance (*umgidi*) in which the performers’ dress includes loinskins, headties and other attire made from animal hides. The sacred dance itself involves the beating of cowhide drums and the singing of hymns composed by Isaiah Shembe, and is arguably an improvisation on the dances that took place in pre-colonial society described at the beginning of this Introduction.

Isaiah Shembe founded the Nazaretha Church at a time when the missionaries had achieved a measure of success in converting African people to Christianity. However, their endeavours were fruitful only with regards to a fraction of African society, and this led to the division amongst Africans between the *kholwa* (labelled *amambuka* (traitors), black Englishmen, *AmaRespectables* and *amazemtiti* (the exempted), and

the traditionalists (heathens, pagans)). Writing about the ambiguous position of the *Kholwa*, Paul La Hause maintains that:

Although many *Kholwa* could trace their ethnic origins to pre-colonial Hlubi, Tlokwa, Sotho, Zulu and Swazi lineage societies outside Natal, having accepted Christianity and the new way of life which went with it they typically found themselves excluded from the traditional societies of which they, or their parents, originally had been part. This was a form of marginality in which many *kholwa* were more than willing to collude since their emerging self-identity hinged on the self-conscious assertion of their collective distance from pre-colonial roots. And yet at the same time they remained without the political and legal rights required to defend their position within the colonial political economy. (1996: 10)

Among the most notable of the *kholwa* was John Langalibalele Dube, founder of the Zulu-English newspaper, *ILanga laseNatal*; first president of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) forerunner to the African National Congress (ANC); and founder of Ohlange, an industrial school based on Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute (with its strong principle of black self-help and upliftment). The relationship between Shembe and Dube was a complex one: the two men being regarded as friends by some², but constantly engaged in moral and ideological conflicts. Their relationship was entangled in the divide between the heathen and the converts, and the educated and the uneducated alluded to by La Hause above. About their relationship Joel Cabrita maintains, "it is then not surprising that their [John Dube and Isaiah Shembe] relationship should be marked by friendly co-operation and mutual respect as well as by rivalry and hostility" (2007: 47). This relationship between Isaiah Shembe and John Dube (as well as other *kholwa* ministers) still forms an important part of the Nazareth Baptist Church's repertoire in sermons even though it is more centred on 'rivalry and hostility' than 'friendly co-operation' and 'mutual respect'. In one of Isaiah Shembe's praises, this relationship is well captured:

² Brown refers to John Dube as "Shembe's friend and biographer". (1999: 212).

Undab'ezavel'obala
Zavel'emehlwen'amadoda
Ubuzwe yizazi kwelaseNanda
UJan Dube umfokaNgcobo
Lavum'i Bhayibheli, lavum'itestament wadana.
 [The news that came to the fore
 In the eyes of men.
 He was interrogated by the wise men of Inanda
 John Dube of the Ngcobo clan
 The Bible consented. The testament consented
 And he was disappointed.]³

* * *

In spite of its being “a force to be reckoned with in social, religious and political terms” as Gunner argues, the Nazarite Church is still insufficiently studied. Having examined some of the scholars’ opinions about Shembe and his work (including Sundkler’s claim that “Shembe is the greatest of Zulu prophets”), Brown concludes that, “[d]espite such critical claims made for Shembe, and his renown in popular culture in KwaZulu-Natal and beyond (almost all Zulu people in the province have some knowledge of Shembe’s church, and bumper stickers on minibus taxis proclaim ‘Shembe is the way’), little attention has been paid to this figure or his church in academic studies”(1999: 196). While there have been more recent studies conducted on the church of the Nazarites and its modes of expression, much more work needs to be done.

Apart from being an attempt to redress the lack Brown mentions, this study will also contribute to the task of revitalising the hitherto suppressed cultural history of black South Africans. In his introduction to *Oral Literature and Performance in Southern Africa*, Brown states that “the democratisation of South African society presents important challenges for southern African studies. Amongst the most pressing of these is the recuperation of a cultural history which has been suppressed

³ All translations in this thesis are my own, unless otherwise stated. See appendix A for my translation strategies.

by colonialism and apartheid” (1999: 1). Oral literature and performance are an important part of this cultural history. And the importance of the ‘oral’ in Africa (and the world over) cannot be gainsaid. As Ruth Finnegan reminds us, “Africa is celebrated above all for the treasure of her voiced and auditory arts, and as the home of oral literature, orature and orality, and the genesis and inspiration of the voiced traditions of the great diaspora” (2007: 1). Despite their centrality as means of social articulation during the time of colonialism and apartheid, the oral forms have until fairly recently occupied marginal roles in academic studies. The hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the sacred dance in the Nazarite Church are part of these oral performance forms and their study is one way of re-centering local, marginalized knowledge.

While any study aimed at recuperating such a cultural history is welcome, in postcolonial Africa there is a particular need for research conducted by African scholars. As Gilroy states, “the question of whose cultures are being studied is ... an important one as is the issue of where the instruments which will make that study possible are going to come from” (1993: 5). Said also points to the inevitability of scholarship being influenced by the subjectivity of a person who does it. Writing about ‘Orientalism’, he argues that “if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim the author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second”. (1978: 90). In a similar vein, Carol Muller, in her study of Nazarite women’s performances, laments the fact that Nazarite women cannot write their own stories: “Certainly, it will be better for all when Nazarite women begin to write their own stories, and to represent themselves” (1999: 15-16). Muller’s call is important because most of the studies done on the Nazarite Church have been by scholars outside the church and, as Becken has noted, despite their “intentions to present an unbiased interpretation, they inevitably looked at the life and history of Ibandla lamaNazaretha through their own glasses. As a result, they understood the church within the framework of their own concepts” (1996: x).

This study is an attempt at the self-representation that Muller calls for and tries to look at the Nazarite Church through the ‘glasses’ of one of its own members, as I myself belong to the church as well as being engaged in its academic study. I am, however, aware that my position as a member of the church does not make me “a representative consciousness (one representing consciousness adequately)” (Spivak, 1988: 275)⁴, and that this work will of necessity be influenced by my subjectivity as a member of the community I am investigating. While I attempt to be as ‘objective’ and self-reflective as possible, I nevertheless believe that if this work reflects greater ‘interestedness’ in the church as a result of my involvement, this may offer a necessary corrective to the tendency identified by Becken above.

Although the Nazarite Church is not sufficiently studied as mentioned above, there is some useful literature on the church published mostly in academic journals. This includes works by Brown (1995), Gunner (1982, 1986, 1988), Muller (1994b), Papini (1999), and West (2005; 2006; 2007). Some scholars have included Shembe and his church in studies that are not specifically about the Nazarite Church. Important among these is Bengt Sundkler’s *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (1948, revised 1961), which attempts to explain the development of separatist churches in South Africa, and *Zulu Zion* (1976) which comprises a comparative analysis of the Zionist churches in South Africa and Swaziland.

As I have argued elsewhere, *Bantu Prophets* was influenced by colonialist ideas of Africans being intellectually inferior others (see Sithole, 2005). The discussion of the hymns offered in that text serves to support Sundkler’s claim about the ‘Black Christ dogma’ (the idea that Shembe is for blacks what Jesus Christ was for the whites) and the significance of racism as the cause for the development of separatist churches. In *Zulu Zion*, Sundkler’s opinions about the church seem to have shifted. In this text Sundkler sets out to study “Shembe as prophet and preacher, poet and healer, at the same time attempting to draw his profile in such a way as to bring out the similarities, and the differences from, ordinary run of Zionist prophets” (1976: 162). But of greater importance for this project are his views about Isaiah Shembe, his hymns and the sacred dance in the Nazarite Church. While he acknowledges that other Zionists ‘feel

⁴ I discuss this issue in more detail in my MA thesis, *Testimony, Identity and Power: Oral Narratives of Near-Death Experiences in the Nazarite Church*.

embarrassed' to be categorised together with Shembe's *amaNazaretha* who, they claim, are misguided, Sundkler states that "Shembe is better known than any other Zulu prophet" (1976: 161).

One of Isaiah Shembe's accomplishments was the creation or composition of his original hymns, unlike other Zionists who adapted the hymns of the orthodox missionary churches from which they had seceded. Sundkler says about Isaiah Shembe's hymns: "Shembe's hymns of the Nazarites (*izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha*) is religious poetry of great beauty. It was born, not at the dogmatician's writing desk, but in song, carried by an incessant rhythm of drums, shaped in order to be sung while dancing" (1961: 186). This statement reveals a tremendous shift from Sundkler's earlier reading of the hymns to propagate his argument about what he terms 'the Black Christ dogma'. I suggest that it was his engagement with Vilakazi's MA thesis on Shembe and his church (completed in 1951) which effected in Sundkler a better understanding of the Nazarite Church and Vilakazi's criticism, coupled with the work of Oosthuizen, made him revise his views about the church.

The first monograph to be published on Shembe is G.C. Oosthuizen's *The Theology of a South African Messiah* (1967) which analyses the hymns of Isaiah Shembe from a theological point of view. Oosthuizen maintains that, "The *izihlabelelo* should be considered as the catechism of the movement and gives an insight into its theology" (1967: 6). Although the book is riddled with shortcomings emanating from the author's racial ideology, and the lack of knowledge of Zulu culture (see Sithole, 2005), Oosthuizen praises Isaiah Shembe for his contribution in the genre of hymns:

The *izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha*, the hymnal of the *ibandla lamaNazaretha*, published for the first time in 1940 in Zulu, is one of the most remarkable collection of indigenous hymns that has appeared in the continent of Africa and the most remarkable of its kind in South Africa. (1967: 1)

Vilakazi's MA thesis, completed in 1951, was revised with the help of two Nazarite members, Mthembeni Mpanza and the late Bongani Mthethwa, and was published as *Shembe: The Revitalisation of African Society* (1986). This book provides a sociological perspective on the Nazarite Church. The authors' thesis is that Shembe

created the Nazarite Church in order to revitalise Zulu society which had been morally destroyed by colonialism:

Shembe came on the scene when Zulu culture and many of its patterns like kinship grouping and family solidarity, respect for seniors, and the ideal Zulu womanhood ... were breaking down due to the contact with Western civilisation and Christianity...[T]he tribal Zulus, therefore, to whom the old values still meant something, found themselves in a spiritual desert...It is in this sense that Shembe, like many reformers before him, was the man of the hour. (1986: 28-29)

Interestingly, Vilakazi *et al* do not perceive the sacred dance and song in the Nazarite Church as forms of resistance against colonialism. Rather, they argue that Shembe incorporated dance and song in his church because these forms were integral to the cultural life of the Zulu people whom Shembe sought to convert: “Zulus have strong religious tendencies and a strong love for dancing, rhythm and song...Shembe exploited this love of song and rhythm in his organisation. They are closely interwoven into his whole organisational and cultic scheme” (1986: 30). Despite their worrying tendency towards essentialism, I think Vilakazi *et al* are possibly correct that oral performance and dance are crucial in the social and historical lives of the Zulus. However, Vilakazi *et al* do not downplay Shembe’s role as a political leader. They argue that Shembe need not be seen as only a religious leader, but also as a political leader because he strove to create a new social order for the Zulus.

Other scholars have published books based on testimony by Nazarite members. These scholars provide their analyses in the introductions and present the Nazarites’ ‘voices’ in the body of the text. Hexham’s and Oosthuizen’s *The Story of Isaiah Shembe: Histories and Traditions Centred at Ekuphakameni* (Vol. 1) (1996) and *The Story of Isaiah Shembe: Early Regional Traditions of the Acts of the Nazarites* (Vol. 2) (1999) are examples of these books. Gunner’s *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God* (2002) provides texts in both English and Zulu, and offers an illuminating introduction about the role of the Nazarite Church historically and in the present.

* * *

So far it is only Carol Muller who has extensively studied the performances and some of the hymns which I want to examine in this study. Muller's book, *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire* (1999), is a useful contribution to research on the Nazarite Church but has two significant weaknesses that I hope to address. Firstly, Muller's study deals only with women's performances and excludes men's. This causes her to underscore some features of the church as particular to women whereas they are in fact prevalent amongst men as well. Secondly, Muller's study is premised on the view that the Nazarite performances are forms of response to socio-economic and political difficulties: "In the face of domination and subsequent loss, Isaiah Shembe created new ritual forms in which the encounter between opposing cultures was memorialised. This was effected through a process of bricolage (Hebdige 1979; Comaroff 1985) in which opposing cultural ways were made to co-exist in dialectical tension with each other, or were amalgamated and ascribed new meanings" (1999: 63). As mentioned above, I want to study these hymns and performances as significant on their own account, not simply as response to colonialism. I shall examine them as forms of expression that "ask questions and create conditions" (Fabian, 1978: 19).

The main idea guiding this research is that religious movements like the Nazarite Church and their forms of expression, such as Isaiah Shembe's hymns with their accompanying sacred dance, need to be understood in terms of an emergent popular culture, not merely as response to socio-economic anomie. Looking at these movements as response not only curtails their agency, but it also results in their being treated negatively, "as a phenomenon of 'independency' or 'separatism'" (Fabian, 1978: 18), which implies that they exist only because their founders wanted to move away from more orthodox churches – that their overriding purpose is one of response to colonisation and missionisation. In contrast, examining these religious movements and art forms as an emergent popular culture is enabling because it provides a locus in

which they can be read as agency, since popular culture, as Fabian argues, “did not come about merely as a response to questions and conditions” (1978: 18).

While it is easy to classify art forms as examples of popular culture, it is not as easy to define what exactly popular art is. The problem emanates from the fact that popular art occupies the shifting space between what Barber terms “traditional” (rural, communally-created and mainly oral forms) and “elite” (individually created, high art) forms and it thus tends to be defined in terms of what it is not, “in terms of absences and deviations from the established categories”(1987: 11). Popular art (like Isaiah Shembe’s hymns and the sacred dance) draws from both traditional and elite forms to create new syncretic forms of expression. As Barber argues, “the aesthetic is hard to pin down because it is, precisely, an aesthetic of change, variety and novel conjunctures” (1987: 12).

* * *

In terms of approach, this study is informed and guided by Landeg White’s suggestions on interpreting oral texts and performance genres:

Ideally, in interpreting oral performance, one would wish to pay the closest attention to the actual meaning of the poems, supported by oral testimony of their significance to the people who performed and listened to them, and supplemented by investigation into the social position of the performers, into the context and contingencies of the performances and into the place of such poetry in the oral literature and general culture of the region as a whole. (1989: 37)

Addressing these areas is a complex but necessary task if one wants adequately examine Shembe’s hymns and the sacred dance in his church. Reading the hymns and performances on their own (outside their contexts) will be limiting because “cultural texts”, as Keesing has warned, “no matter how rich – perhaps even because they are so richly allusive – cannot in themselves serve as the basis for ethnographic interpretation” (quoted in Coplan, 1994: 21). Some of Shembe’s hymns cannot be

understood without knowledge of their historical contexts. An example is hymn 172 from *Izihlabelelo ZamaNazaretha*:

Adedele Aphume

We Mashi

Akekho Umsengi

We Mashi.

[Let them go

Mashi

The milker is away

Mashi]

Reading this text on its own, one can argue that the narrator is deliberating about the milking of cows, and the calves that have to be isolated from their mothers. This sense of isolation and alienation is an important one, but its meaning becomes more painfully clear if one reads this text against another text which is referred to as “The Prayer for Dingana’s Day”:

This is a terrible day today young girl of Zululand. The cow needed its milker that day ...Old women...shouted to the boys and said to them, let them go my boys, no one is to milk them, their milkers are dead. (Nazareth Baptist Church, 1993)

These in fact are the words Isaiah Shembe said on the commemoration of the battle of Blood River, and they enhance our understanding of the context of the hymn. By reading the ‘prayer’ one realises that Shembe was in fact referring to the killing of many Zulus by whites, and without the Prayer text one would be unable to link the hymn to the event.

This leads to the question of the composition of the hymns. About their composition, J.G. Shembe says: “*Eziningi zalezi zihlabelelo zazifika nezithunywa zaseZulwini. Imvama wayesuke ebhekile engalele.*” [Most of these hymns came with the messengers of Heaven. In most cases he was awake, not asleep.] While it may be true that some of these hymns are believed to have come with the messengers of

heaven (an *umkhokheli* [woman leader] of *Nhlanhleni* Temple in Edendale, MaSithole Hlela, said in one of her sermons in 2004 that Isaiah Shembe would stop on his way and call for his girl scribe to write a song that was being brought by the messengers of Heaven), and it is true that the hymn-book is sometimes used in the blessing of the water, Isaiah Shembe's hymns are much more than sanctified words that members of the Nazarite Church perceive them to be. They are, as Brown argues, "literary texts of extraordinary power and vision" (1999: 197). They convey Isaiah Shembe's own ideas and views about his experiences, and some are based on certain known events; it seems unquestionable that Isaiah Shembe, like other poets, utilised this form to voice his feelings. This is demonstrated in the poem "Let them Go Mashi" discussed above, and hymn No 3 in *iziHlabelelo* is also informative in this regard:

Nkosi Nkosi bubusise

Lobu buNazaretha

Uchoboze izitha zabo

Zingabu vukeli

Vuka Vuka wena Nkosi

Mabulwelwe nguwe

Uzuhambe phambi kwabo

Zingabuvukeli

Noma siya entabeni

Owasikhethela yona

Ethiwa yiNhlankakazi

Bungakhubeki.

[Nkosi Nkosi Bless

This Nazaretha movement

Crush its enemies

That they may not attack it.

Wake up, wake up, you Nkosi

Be the one who fights for it
And travel ahead of it
That they may not attack it.

Even as we travel to the mountain
The one you chose for us
Called Nhlangakazi
Let it not falter.]

This hymn is Isaiah Shembe's prayer to God for protection against his movement's enemies, and it also articulates a sense of defiance against the South African government of the early 1920s. According to Thembekile Mhlongo and Petros Dhlomo (in Hexham and Oosthuizen (1996: 93)), Shembe wanted to go to Nhlangakazi in 1922 (in fact, it was January 1923) but was not given permission to go so he called his followers and told them the problem, and then urged them to pray (and fast) and ask God what they had to do. The following day he called his followers again and asked if any of them had had an answer from God. The man who responded there was Macineka. He said, "I have seen last night in my dream an angel standing in the sea, who had a sharp sword in his hand. He lifted up his foot and stepped on the sand. Then the sand ran away into the forests, and a broad track opened up." Shembe took this man's dream to be a sign that they needed to go, for the angel of God was to protect them. He told his followers that they were going, and Dhlomo and Mhlongo continue their account: "[b]y that time, there came the hymn: Lord, bless this Nazareth movement; crush its enemies; that they may not attack it" (Hexham and Oosthuizen, 1996: 93).

That the hymn 'came' creates an impression that it was indeed brought about by the angels of heaven as J.G. Shembe states in the preface to the hymn-book, and results from Dhlomo and Mhlongo's belief about the composition of the hymns. But this understanding does not do justice to Shembe's creativity and agency. I think Isaiah created this hymn as he was forced to deal with the predicament of being prohibited from going on a spiritual journey which he had undergone for the last ten years. Shembe needed his followers (and himself) to have faith if they had to go on such a journey, and he created a hymn that was to act like a (holy) war song which would

eradicate (or minimise) fear from his followers, and give them spiritual power as they went on their pilgrimage. It is possible that Isaiah Shembe made his followers believe that this hymn (and others, for different reasons) came with the angels of God, so that they would feel protected. If the hymn was sung by the angels, it would mean that the members were speaking with the same voice as those (invincible?) angels. The speaker in the hymn could have been understood to be an angel like the one seen in a dream carrying a sharp sword, travelling in front of the congregation protecting it against the obstacle of its “enemies”: the government people.

A number of Isaiah Shembe’s hymns are said to be “prayers of the servant of sorrow” in their prefaces. These prefaces only appear in some of the later hymns, and I think that hymn No. 3 falls into this category, even though it does not have a preface stating this. The reference to hymn No.129 says: *“Umthandazo wesikhonzi senhlupheko uShembe wafika ngesifingo sokusa esegumbini lomthandazo eKuphakameni ngomhlaka Julayi 22, 1926”*. [The prayer of the servant of sorrow Shembe [which] came at dawn when he was in the place of prayer at eKuphakameni on 22 July 1926.] This suggests that Shembe was praying in the morning and his prayer formed the basis of this hymn just as “The Prayer for Dingana’s Day” formed the basis of “Let them Go, Mashi”.

Many members, especially older members, sing hymn No.129 in their prayers at four in the morning. The only reason for this is the fact that it started as Isaiah’s prayer at dawn. Unlike “Wake me up Lord, I have been Asleep” or “Wake with us, Father of Light” that are directly related to waking up, this one says nothing about the beginning of a new day. In the first stanza of this hymn the addressee is “the enemy” *“Ungangilibazisi/ Wena sitha sami/ uma uJehova engibiza/ Mangisuke ngimlandele.”* [Do not delay me/ You my enemy/ If Jehova calls me/ Let me follow Him]. Perhaps the enemy here is the very same one that the Lord is called upon to protect the movement from in hymn No. 3. But it may be referring to an inner conflict in Isaiah Shembe himself, as the second stanza suggests a persona who is feeling pain in his or her heart because of some wrong he/she has committed, and who has now lost hope (*Lihloma lingethwese/ Enhliziyweni enecala/ Ithemba lichithiwe/ Kumi ivuso lodwa.*) [Thunder clouds come out of season/ In the heart of the penitent/ Hope is destroyed/ Only apprehension remains.] But stanza three suggests that Isaiah was in fact

targeting deserters who had been discouraged by the government's endeavours and those of the mission churches (the enemy) to destroy the church: (*Akusibona Abangathandi/ Ukuza kuwe Nkosi/ Balahlekelwe ngamathemba/ Lwaphela uthando lwabo.*) [It's not that they do not like/ To come to you, Lord/ They have lost hope/ And their love has vanished.)

This point is validated by what is referred to as “the vaccination controversy” (Hexham and Oosthuizen, 1996), where John Mabuyakhulu tells of the arrival of medical doctors at eKuphakameni to vaccinate the Nazarites, against Shembe's wishes. Only one man, Dladla, who was from Ntanda, went with his family to be vaccinated even though Shembe did not approve. Dladla claimed that he did not want to be arrested with his family. The vaccination issue created a heated dispute between Shembe and the authorities, but Shembe was adamant that his people would not be vaccinated. Dladla's action angered him so much that when Shembe was in Mpondoland after the July festival, he sent word to, “Expel this man, who went for vaccination, from the village of God and also from his residence at Ntanda. I do not want to see him, and I do not want his site and his fields, where he was living in the place of God” (Hexham and Oosthuizen, 1996: 146).

My point here is that “Lord, Lord bless this Nazaretha Movement” can be seen as a prayer for the journey to Nhlankakazi as “Do not Delay Me” is said to be a prayer. However, in these prayers, as well as in other hymns, one realises an expression of Shembe's feelings about his situation and experience and those of other people around him. For him, the government that prevented his and his followers' freedom of movement and choice was an “enemy” and needed to be “crushed”. The government that forced people to accept medical help that they did not want (or he did not want) was delaying him. They were a disturbance to him and his mission.

However, my argument here is not that the Nazarite's perceptions about the hymns need to be ignored or discarded completely. Some hymns seem to me to be better explicable in accordance with the Nazarite exegesis which sees the hymns as having been brought by the heavenly spirits. Perhaps an important challenge for me in dealing with the exegesis of the hymns of Isaiah Shembe and how they were created is to mediate between the voice of a scholar, which sees these hymns as poetic

expressions of Isaiah Shembe's views, ideas and feelings, and the voice of a member of the Nazarite Church, viewing these hymns as sacred texts that came to Shembe in visions and spiritual visits to heaven. I think trying to suppress either of the two voices will deprive this work of its uniqueness as it is carried out by someone who is both a scholar and a member of the community being studied.

One of the striking things about some of Isaiah Shembe's hymns is their duality of meaning: the fact that they can have different meanings if they are viewed from the inside (according to how they are understood inside the church) or if looked at from a literary perspective (generally by people outside the church). Hymn No. 219 is an example:

Besilizwile we Babamkhulu
Sehlulwa wukwenza
We Babamkhulu
Thambisa izwi lakho
We Babamkhulu
Sozama ukulenza izwi lakho.

Izinkulungwane ngezigidi
Zimi lapha
We Babamkhulu
Zehlulwa yizwi lakho
We Babamkhulu
Thambisa izwi lakho
We Babamkhulu

Izwi leziboshwa
We Babamkhulu
Mawu lizwe izwi labo
We Babamkhulu
Zifuna umphumuzi
We Babamkhulu
Lezo ziboshwa ziphumuze.

Sihleli osizini

We Babamkhulu

Kuleli lizwe

We Babamkhulu

Yizinyembezi zodwa

We Babamkhulu

Kuleso sigodi sosizi.

[We have heard it, oh Babamkhulu

We could not comply

Oh Babamkhulu

Lighten your laws

Oh Babamkhulu

We will try to keep your laws.

Thousands and millions

Stand here

Oh Babamkhulu

They failed your laws

Oh Babamkhulu

Lighten your laws

Oh Babamkhulu.

The voice of the prisoners

Oh Babamkhulu

May you hear their voice

Oh Babamkhulu

They want a liberator (bringer of rest)

Oh Babamkhulu

Those prisoners give them rest.

We live in distress

Oh Babamkhulu

In this world
Oh Babamkhulu
It is only tears
Oh Babamkhulu
In this valley of distress.

Taking into consideration the context in which these hymns were created, a South Africa where Black people were oppressed and exploited, and looking especially at stanzas three and four, one hears the voice of a speaker who is concerned about the well-being of his or her people. The point of view of the speaker shifts from the first person to the third person, showing Isaiah Shembe's sense of self as separated from his followers and at the same time as part of them. The call for freedom, and the need for rest, meant so much to people whose lands had been stolen from them, and who were forced to work for the white farmers who had stolen their lands, or else to move to urban areas where the living conditions were no better. Brown says of this this hymn:

In the context of social and discursive rupture, forms of worship in the separatist churches become expressions of their own meaning and value on the part of the dispossessed and displaced communities. A hymn like Shembe's No. 219 expresses the pain of social and spiritual experience and the longing for solace and restitution, even as it serves as a means of social empowerment claiming for black people the right of biblical interpretation and divine intervention. (1999: 201)

The image of the prison is important, as it is a place devoid of freedom, and for Isaiah Shembe black people were forced to live like prisoners even if they were not incarcerated. The prison must have had special significance for Shembe since he himself was imprisoned on many occasions for his religious activities. The level of suffering and distress that black people at large felt was sometimes worse than that experienced by prisoners. Stanza four talks about "this" world of sorrow where at least some people are always in tears. Here, the image of the prison is taken further to be "the valley of distress" (*isigodi sosizi*), Isaiah Shembe's equivalent of hell, where even though people/spirits do not get burned, they live in constant suffering and pain:

Lapho abaning bemisiwe
Esigodini sosizi lokufa
Balindele umhla wokuphela
Ukukhala nokugedla kwamazinyo

[Where multitudes are stopped
In the valley of sorrow of death
Waiting for judgement day
The crying and the disappointment.] (Hymn No. 135)

However, this reading of hymn No. 219 is far removed from that of the Nazarites. The Nazarites' understanding of this hymn is linked to the view that Isaiah Shembe's hymns came with the angels from heaven. Even if we as literary scholars do not believe in such a reading, I think it would be unwise to discredit it without any thought. As Barber states, in understanding texts (she is referring to praise poems), "the first step must be to seek to establish as accurately as possible (always bearing in mind the impossibility of certainty and completeness in any such account) what the text *could have meant* or *could have been taken to mean*, in the context of its double relationship between its original author and audience" (1999: 27).

I think that we should not exclude this part of exegesis even though I am not sure about the importance of it being the first step, as Barber goes on to state that, "All other explanation, criticism or commentary must follow after this first indispensable step of interpreting the text 'on its own terms'"(27). What I have done here is interpret this hymn in terms of its historical context and in the way not understood by those who use it. In the Nazarite Church, rather than referring to the historical conditions in which black people were forced to live, this hymn's speakers are the late Nazarite members who could not make it to heaven because they failed to comply with the laws of heaven that Isaiah Shembe had taught them.

Oral tradition in the church tells that one day Isaiah Shembe told his followers that he had taken a spiritual journey to heaven with the intention of ascertaining whether

or not the Nazarites who passed away did make it to heaven. He wanted to know if they made it to the special place he talks about in hymn No. 10:

Umuzi wamaNazaretha

Lapha siyakhona

Ukhazimula ngaphezu

Kwelanga nenyanga

[The home of the Nazarites

Where we are headed

It is brighter than

The sun and the moon.]

According to this story, Shembe found many Nazarite members stranded in the valley of distress, and when this encounter happened the late members impugned Shembe for instituting laws so difficult that they could not comply with them. They were complaining that had he made the laws a little easier, they might have found themselves in heaven. In terms of this reading, the addressee of the hymn is Isaiah Shembe, generally referred to as “Babamkhulu” by the Nazarites. In stanza one and two these beings in the valley of distress are really begging Shembe to lighten the laws and allow them to enter heaven. They declaim that they did hear the laws, but these were too difficult for them. This hymn responds to another hymn in which Isaiah is the speaker, and he asks his followers why they failed to execute the laws of heaven because he shouted them day and night:

Ngamemeza ubusuku nemini

Awungizwanga ngani

Zizwe lalani uZulu ezwakale

Phambi ko msindisi [No. 45]

[I shouted day and night

Why did you not hear me,

Nations go to sleep so Zulu will be heard

Before the uMsindisi]

This hymn seems to suggest that it was the other nations that prevented the Nazarites from paying attention to what Shembe was teaching, while it also points to Zulu ethnicity in the church (I discuss this issue in chapter one). In hymn No. 45, the addressee is allowed a voice, but this voice tells a different story from that mentioned in hymn No. 219. In hymn No. 45, the other nations are blamed for the failure of the people to comply with Shembe's laws:

Ngavinjelwa yizo zonke izizwe
Eziphanzi kwezulu

[I was prevented by all the nations
Under the earth]

* * *

In this study I am interested in the role sacred song and dance play in the imagining of individual and collective identity, as it is in this imagining that the Nazarite performances become 'transglobal', to use Hofmeyr's term. Closely related to sacred song and dance are monthly meetings of *u-fotini* and *u-twenty-five* and *u-twenty-three* in which members share stories about Shembe's miracles and dreams relating to the significance of the sacred dance especially. It is here that individuals tell of dreams they have had in which their ancestors commended them for taking part in the sacred dance or warned them against failing to participate. Such narratives then become part of the collective imagination and inform the members' decisions about participating in the sacred dance.

As this is a study of cultural performance, I want to move beyond an understanding of culture as a repository of values and beliefs. Instead, I look at culture as a "whole system of signification by which a society or section of it understands itself and its relations with the world" (Williams, 1977: 13). The sacred performances I propose to examine here are but a part of Nazarite culture: they do not constitute a 'cultural whole'. Each performance is, to use Fabian's metaphor, "but a tip of an iceberg" (1990: 12). I find this image useful because, indeed, culture can only be represented

as a moment in the process: it cannot be represented in final or complete form as it keeps on changing:

Performance is the visible tip; rehearsal/repetition the submerged body [...] As the tip of an iceberg does not represent its submerged part, cultural performances do not symbolise the work of repetition and rehearsal. They are carried by that work; there is an unbroken, material connection which is metonymic, not metaphoric. As far as I can see, process can – productively – only be conceived of metonymically. (Fabian, 1990: 12)

This study explores consciousness as it is manifested in ritual performance. I investigate performances by men (these range from young boys aged ten to old men), women (these are married women, who can be as young as eighteen and as old as eighty), and virgin girls (these are unmarried girls and women ranging from twelve to seventy years) in great meetings in July and January as well as other meetings where M.V. Shembe, the present leader of the church, visits smaller temples around the year. While the performances being investigated include children as participants in the dances, my interviewees were only older men and women, mostly *abaphathi* (leaders), as they are the ones who know the history and customs of the church.

I also examine performances in less exclusive contexts, including weddings, *umemulo* (a ceremony performed for a young woman which means she is ready to get married) and practices/rehearsals. While the main purpose is to demonstrate how the physical and spiritual realms are integrated through song and dance, I also look at the differences and similarities in the three above-mentioned groups, exploring how each group challenges or confirms the commonly-held notions of manhood, womanhood and girlhood in the performances. This is important because, as Coplan argues, “performance is a rich, even indispensable, resource for understanding the role of consciousness and agency in the interplay of southern African forces, structures, processes, and events” (1994: xv).

In order to obtain the best possible understanding of the rich performances in the Nazarite Church, one needs to pay close attention to both the poetics of performance and the contextual details of the hymns and the sacred dance. Bauman and Briggs

argue that, “in order to avoid reifying ‘the context’ it is necessary to study the textual details that illuminate the manner in which participants are collectively constructing the world around them” (1990: 69). In the case of the poetics of performance, I look at the three dance styles in the Nazarite Church, namely, *isigekle*, standard, and *isikihli* styles (Vilakazi *et al*, 1986), exploring the choreography of each dance style.

I also examine the question of dress and its role in “the visual interest of the dance” (Brown, 1992: 100), its changes over the years and the significance of those changes. I hold the view that the approach of interpretive ethnography offers the best access to indigenous knowledge (Coplan, 1990). Thus, this study involves field work with some of the performance groups which meet regularly, usually on weekly bases, to practise and improvise. An examination of the monthly meetings of *ufotini*, *u*-twenty-three and *u*-twenty-five helped with both the performances and oral testimony relating to the significance of the sacred song and dance in this and the other world. In examining the ‘practice groups’ and performances in monthly meetings by different temples and gender groups, I am especially interested in exploring how, if at all, different groups create their own vernaculars by improving on or modifying the general dancing styles to create distinctive performances of the same songs.

* * *

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter One examines the hymns of Isaiah Shembe, showing how he appropriated both the biblical texts and Zulu cultural forms to create a medium in which he could articulate his experiences as an individual, as a Zulu and as a human being. I look at how his position oscillates between Zulu nationalism, Pan-Africanism and internationalism on the one hand, and otherworldliness (transglobalism) on the other. I argue that the broadness of Isaiah Shembe’s vision (taking into consideration the fact that he was never formally educated) shows that he utilised the ‘Western’ forms (Christianity and the Bible) because they were available to him and he found them enabling in his own pursuits. The hymns then (as well as the Nazarite Church and its sacred dance) are not simply a response to either colonialism or Christianity: they involve an articulation of identity in this world and beyond.

In Chapter Two I expand my examination of the question of the composition of the hymns by looking at how Isaiah Shembe appropriates the Bible in his hymns. This chapter tries to explore the way in which Isaiah Shembe utilises the Bible to define and imagine his sense of self not only as a Zulu, African or human being and as a spiritual leader of great prominence who was aware of his powers, both spiritual and political. I argue that Shembe's appropriation of the Bible in his hymns (he was renowned for his good command of the Bible) shows that he was consciously involved in the creation of the hymns in an attempt to understand his own life and environment.

Chapter Three looks at the notion of 'completeness' (*ukuphelela*) for both men and women, and the rituals that are associated with completeness. I will look at initiation as an integral part of manhood through which the roles of boy and man are sometimes inverted as an uncircumcised man is regarded as a boy and vice versa. Marriage is also important in this case because a man or woman who engages in sexual intercourse with a partner to whom he or she is not properly married is said to be incomplete and therefore cannot participate in the sacred dance. This is significant because while living people might not care how a person lives his or her life, as everybody is supposed to be 'bush-knifing' his or her way to heaven, the heavenly audience (the ancestors) is displeased if someone who is ritually unclean takes part in the dance because he or she defiles the whole dance according to them.

Chapter Four explores the significance of the sacred dance to the members of the Church who take part in it, and challenges the view of the sacred dance as a form of resistance to colonialism and the oppression of Blacks. In doing so it looks at oral narratives of dreams and miracles about the importance of *umgidi* in this world and in "heaven" for members of the Church. Testimony relating to the sacred dance shows that in the imagination of many *Nazaretha* members who take part in the dance, God, Shembe and the ancestors are the main audience. However, there are other contexts where the sacred dance is performed not to appease those in the other world but the performers themselves. Sacred dance competitions, for instance, compel performers to think about the judges and winning when they dance, rather than the approval of their ancestors and God.

Chapter Five I look at how different groups create their own particular styles of performing sacred songs. I shall argue that, although there are standard ways of performing every song, some groups create their own vernaculars by adding some minor changes to the standard styles of dancing so that even the adept dancer would be unable to dance together with a certain group if he or she has not been ‘practising’ with them. Here the focus is on the agency of the performers themselves. I argue that although the sacred dance is Isaiah Shembe’s creation, it is also to a large extent the work of the performers who keep modifying dancing styles to distinguish themselves from other performers, to perform better than the others so as to attract larger audiences and sometimes to please better the ancestors.

In Chapter Five I provide a comparative analysis of women and men’s performances. I look at whether or not there are particular songs favoured by either men or women, the significance of those songs in the constitution of manhood and womanhood, and how that links with what the ancestors are supposed to expect from women and men. Another important area of this chapter is the poetics of performance. I provide an analysis of *umgidi*, looking at the differences in terms of rhythm, movement and so on. The significance of this for the thesis of this study is that, for example, while men raise their feet high up when they dance, women are not allowed to do the same because they are respecting the ancestors as they dance.

In the conclusion I try to link the chapters to the thesis of the study and make suggestions about further research on the subject I have been dealing with.

CHAPTER ONE

GLOBALITY AND TRANSGLOBALITY IN ISAIAH SHEMBE'S HYMNS

Introduction

The *Hymns of the Nazarites (Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha)* is the most important text in the Nazarite Church, serving as a reference in church services, prayers, and sometimes in the sacred dance. The hymn-book is even believed to have miraculous capabilities. The photograph of Isaiah Shembe endows it with healing powers, according to members of the church, and many times when 'blessing' holy water for members and non-members in need, preachers turn to Isaiah Shembe's photograph on page xiii of the hymn-book and face it into the water. This is done in order to invoke Shembe's spirit to enter the water and to strengthen it, so that it will heal any kind of illness and exorcise people's homes of all kinds of evil spirits.

The hymns of Isaiah Shembe, said to be "religious poetry of great beauty" by Sundkler (1961: 186) and "literary texts of great power and vision" by Duncan Brown⁵, provided a medium for Shembe to articulate his views and sense of self. These hymns were and still are sung in church services and gatherings, and are an important part of the sacred dance. But it was through these hymns, among other media, that Shembe commented on and challenged what he saw as the ill-treatment of his fellow Africans. This genre of hymns provided Isaiah Shembe with a space where he could 'talk back' to colonialism and white domination, among other inequities. This is of utmost importance because the Nazaretha Church, together with other African Initiated Churches, has been accused by some scholars of being apolitical. In this chapter I look at the hymns of Isaiah Shembe, showing how he articulates his experiences as an individual, as a Zulu and as a human being. I look at how his position oscillates between Zulu nationalism, Pan-Africanism and internationalism on the one hand and otherworldliness (transglobalism) on the other. But, before such an examination of the hymns, it is necessary to start by engaging with the issue of the political acquiescence of the African Initiated Churches (AICs).

⁵ See introduction above.

The question as to whether the AICs were politically acquiescent or not is normally posed with regards to these movements' involvement or otherwise in the struggle against apartheid, not against white domination as such. Schoffeleers writes that as much as De Beer likes to give the AICs their due (which means giving them credit for their role in the struggle), "he feels nevertheless that he can describe them only as 'pietistic' and 'politically of little significance' in the sense that they never played a significant role in the *anti-apartheid movement*" (1991: 8, emphasis added). Elizabeth Gunner, having challenged Schoffeleers' stance on this matter, still concedes that, "yet the fact remains that the AICs as a whole (and in the South African context this includes the largest AICs, the Zion Christian Church and the Nazareth Baptist Church of Isaiah Shembe), seem to have played little overt part in the bitter struggle against the apartheid government which came to a head during the violent decade of the 1980s" (2002: 6). For Schoffeleers the 'significant role' De Beer writes about needs to be understood in terms of active participation: "we shall describe a church as 'acquiescent' if it is that Church's avowed policy to avoid political activism of a critical nature. The emphasis is on the word 'activism', for it is definitely not our intention to claim that healing Churches are never critical of the political order" (1991: 3). Within this definition of political acquiescence, implicit rather than explicit and symbolised rather than verbalised resistance has no place.

But Schoffeleers has been taken to task for limiting his sense of political involvement to what he calls activism, and as a result concluding in his paper that "the healing churches in South Africa (and elsewhere) are without exception politically acquiescent" (Schoffeleers, 1991: 18, quoted in Gunner, 2002: 6). Gunner refers to Colin Murray's article in which he criticises a tendency in writing about the AICs "to represent the Zionist Churches as politically conservative, without possible distinction between 'inside' or 'outside' perspectives, or between the attitudes of the leaders and of the followers" (Murray, 1999: 346; Gunner, 2002: 6). In his article, writes Gunner, Murray demonstrates (in the case of Solomon Lion and his congregation) "the way in which [Schoffeleers'] position vastly oversimplifies and even distorts a complex situation which involves resistance, healing and abuse of power on the part of a Zionist leader" (6).

The subtle or coded resistance which is given no space in Schoffeleers' formulation is (according to the scholars who propound this) expressed through performance and the AICs' tendency towards a counter-culture, where members of the AICs create for themselves an alternative world by blending African and Western culture elements (Comaroff, 1985; Muller, 1999). However, Schoffeleers challenges Comaroff's argument regarding protest in the Zion Christian Church: "one cannot but agree with Werbner and Kiernan that the concept of 'protest' as employed by her is so broad as to be almost meaningless" (Werbner, 1986; Keinan, 1987). The fact that the members of the Zion Christian Church wear white boots and khaki shorts, which Comaroff maintains represent protest, may, according to Schoffeleers, also be understood to symbolise accommodation to Western values. The way in which Isaiah Shembe has appropriated Western forms is in some way similar to that mentioned by Comaroff with regards to the Zion Christian Church. While Schoffeleers' accusations may hold true for the Nazaretha Church in so far as the blending of African and Western forms is concerned, the hymns offer a different dimension because they 'speak' directly to colonialism: through them one can clearly identify a sense of protest, and they serve as a wake-up call to African people regarding their socio-political and economic situation under white domination.

The main argument in Schoffeleers' article is that it is the practice of healing itself that explains the political acquiescence in the Zionist Churches. He considers a number of factors that have been put forward as causes of the AICs' tendency towards acquiescence and concludes that all are secondary. These include the pietistic character of the AICs; fear of the government; material conditions; the idea that within apartheid the AICs had an opportunity to boost their own forms of apartheid; and finally that the AICs are organised in small groups which render them inadequate to engage themselves in political activity. All these issues are challenged (convincingly, I would suggest) in Schoffeleers' essay. While his points regarding the above issues are convincing, his argument that healing is the root cause of political acquiescence is less convincing. He bases this argument on the fact that all the healing systems "tend to individualise – and thereby depoliticise – problems which more often than not are political" (1991: 12). The three healing systems Schoffeleers deals with, namely, biomedical, Zionist healing and traditional healing, all tend, in his opinion, towards this depoliticisation and individualisation. In all the three systems sickness is

associated with deviancy and healing with reintegration into society. This means healing aims towards changing the person's state to make him/her conform to society instead of altering the society itself.

But Schoffeleers also points to a shift from political involvement in the earlier part of the eighteenth century to political acquiescence in the period starting from around 1948. He refers to Sundkler's statement regarding the Zulu Churches:

During the period 1913-1948, the prophets' theme was protest: against the Natives' Land Act of 1913; against the denomination of missions; against the cultural patterns of the Whites in education and preservation of life. The interesting aspect of the development after 1945-48 is a tendency towards accommodation even in the culture dominated by the laws of apartheid. This accommodation can be seen in the fields of private enterprise, education, and care of the sick... (Sundkler, 1961: 306)

Assuming that this shift "from an emphasis on political protest to an emphasis on healing", a shift which according to Schoffeleers "appears to have received a major impetus from the tightening of the apartheid laws after WWII" (1991: 6), did take place, this point seems to me to negate rather than support Schoffeleers' claim that it is healing that renders these churches politically acquiescent. In the case of the Nazareth Baptist Church of Isaiah Shembe, for instance, healing formed an important part of the church from its inception (until the present) while it was indeed involved in 'protest' that Schoffeleers alludes to. Gunner has described the Nazareth Baptist Church as the church of narratives and testimonies: "apart from its presence as an important healing church, *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* is above all, a church of narratives and testimonies" (2002: 14). A great deal of these narratives and testimonies are about the founding of the church by Isaiah Shembe and his healing abilities as the foundation for the creation, if not of the church as an organisation, but certainly of its body of followers. In his testimony, Meshack Hadebe tells of a man who was brought to Shembe because of his illness:

Shembe pointed at that person and said, "You, illness that has struck this man of Father, I am your sickness now, illness, get away immediately!" The

man burped massively, then he burped again and again like a cow and straight after that he vomited thick red stuff which had an awful smell. Then out came red squishy stuff mixed with thick black blood. Shembe told people to hurry up and get manure and lay it down because the whole house stank. So they quickly brought manure, and threw it on the floor over the awful substance which had come out of this man and in no time all the sickness left that person. (Gunner, 2002: 161)

Like most people who were healed by Shembe, the sick man in Meshack's testimony converted, and when people were going to be baptized, "he too went and was baptized. *A great many people were converted on that occasion because the man of God, Shembe, had revealed himself to people so convincingly, and his works spoke for themselves that he was indeed a man sent by the Almighty*" (161, emphasis added). In Meshack's testimony there are other stories of healing by Isaiah Shembe: "The healing of the girl who was beaten by a mamba" (Gunner, 2002: 189) and "The healing of the wife of the Chief Mlomubomvu Nkuku Luthuli" (Gunner, 2002: 193) are headings of chapters 9 and 10, and each chapter deals, as the headings suggest, with healing. There are more stories of healing in Oosthuizen and Hexham (1996 and 1999). All these prove without doubt that healing played an important role in the life of the Nazareth Baptist Church from the very beginning. This means that Schoffeleers' statement that there was a shift from political involvement (or what he and Sundkler call "protest") to healing is false, at least in so far as the Nazareth Baptist Church of Isaiah Shembe is concerned. If we were to argue, convincingly, that the Nazareth Baptist Church was not involved in political protest whatsoever, then Schoffeleers' point could still hold ground because then we would maintain that the Nazareth Baptist Church has always been a healing church and as a result has always been politically acquiescent. The question then is, has the Nazareth Church always been politically acquiescent? Below I try to explore the hymns with this question in mind.

Zulu Ethnicity in Isaiah Shembe's Hymns

The present leader of the Nazarite Church, M.V. Shembe, made an important alteration to the hymnal, of which none of his predecessors had recognised the necessity. In the hymn-book that is used in the church today, verse 21 of the Sabbath Prayer reads: *“Ningabi njengokhokho benu, okhokho bethu abazenza lukhuni izindlebe zabo, uJehova waze wabajezisa kanje, namhla sesithwele izono zabo.”* [Do not be like your forefathers, our forefathers who hardened their hearts, God then punished them like this, now we are carrying the burden of their sins.] Isaiah Shembe had written this verse as: *“Ningabi njengokhokho benu oDingana noSenzangakhona, okhokho bethu abazenza lukhuni izinhliziyi zabo, uJehova waze wabajezisa kanje, namhla sesithwele izono zabo”.* [Do not be like your forefathers, Dinganas and Senzangakhonas, our forefathers who hardened their hearts, God then punished them like this, today we are carrying the burden of their sins.] The reason given by M.V. Shembe for this alteration is that it creates the impression that it was only the Zulu kings who carried the burden of sin while in fact all our forefathers sinned. He said he had seen the impact this verse had on one of the descendants of the Zulu kings, King Goodwill Zwelithini, when the King had visited Ebuhleni.

This reference to “our forefathers, Senzangakhonas and Dinganas” or “You descendants of Dingana and Senzangakhona” is common in Isaiah Shembe's hymnal. It points to the importance of the Zulu nation for Isaiah Shembe himself and the fact that he was believed, and he believed himself, to have been sent to liberate the Zulus. As hymn No. 214 suggests:

*Umkhululi wethu
Thina nzalo kaDingana
Simzwile ufikile.
Umkhululi ufikile
Umkhululi usefikile
WemaZulu sesimzwile.*

*Nzalo kaDingana
Beno Senzangakhona*

Phaphamani ufikile.
Umkhululi ufikile
Umkhululi usefikile
WemaZulu sesimzwile.

Ukudinga kwethu
Thina nzalo kaDingana
Sekuphelile ufikile.
Umkhululi ufikile
Umkhululi usefikile
WemaZulu sesimzwile.

Ukhumbule Nkosi
Umsebenzi wezandla zakho
Wenzalo kaDingana.
Umkhululi ufikile
Umkhululi usefikile
WemaZulu sesimzwile.

Zibike wena kuye
Wena nzalo ka Dingana
Beno Senzangakhona.
Umkhululi ufikile
Umkhululi usefikile
WemaZulu sesimzwile.

[Our Liberator
We descendants of Dingana
We heard him, he's come.
The Liberator, he's come
The Liberator, he's come
You Zulus, we have heard him.

Descendants of Dingana

And Senzangakhona
Wake up he has arrived.
The Liberator, he's come
The Liberator, he's come
You Zulus we have heard him.

Our being in need
We descendants of Dingana
It's gone, he has come.
The Liberator, he's come
The liberator, he's come
You Zulus we have heard him.

Do remember, Nkosi
The work of your own hands
Of the descendants of Dingana.
The Liberator, he's come
The Liberator, he's come
You Zulus, we have heard him.

Report yourselves to him
You descendants of Dingana
And Senzangakhona.
The Liberator, he's come
The liberator, he's come
You Zulus, we've heard him.]

What emerges strongly from this hymn is that Isaiah Shembe is not just the liberator, but he is a liberator of the Zulu nation. The hymn speaks to the descendants of Dingana and Senzangakhona, the Zulus, about the news that concerns them. The hymn serves as an announcement and a celebration of the great news that God has finally remembered the Zulus and sent them a prophet, and it calls on them to open their eyes so that they will see that through Shembe their wants will be provided for.

All they need to do is to tell Shembe their troubles, and he will solve those problems for them through his prayer.

Many scholars who have studied the Nazarite Church and Isaiah Shembe emphasise the fact that Isaiah Shembe was concerned with restoring Zulu society to its former state and glory. Hexham states that, “We can safely say that the mission of Isaiah Shembe was to restore the dignity of the Zulu person and the independence of their country... [His] aim was to restore his people to their 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” (1994: xxvii). In similar vein the argument of Vilakazi, Mthethwa and Mpanza is that in creating the Nazaretha Church Shembe was trying to forge a new Zulu society basing it on the old, pre-colonial one (1986). About some of the hymns, Mpanza has this to say:

La magama uShembe wabe ewaqambela isizwe samaZulu ukuba sithi uma sidumisa uNkulunkulu siwahlabelele, kodwa enomlayezo othile. Isihlabelelo 183 singumyalezo ngezizwe ezifuna izwe lakwaZulu. (1999: 228)

[These songs were created by Shembe for the Zulu nation to sing when they worship God, but they had a certain message. Hymn 183 is a message about the nations who want to take the land of the Zulu.]

Hymn No. 183 that Mpanza talks about is one of the most powerful and overtly political of Isaiah Shembe’s hymns. The first stanza is addressed to the Zulu people and tries to alert them to the problem of being led by outsiders in their native land: *Lalela Zulu/ Lalela abantu bengiphethe/ Ngezwe lethu. (Listen Zulu/ Listen to people ruling me/ About (In) our land.)* It is clear that Isaiah Shembe does not share the view of the white settlers and the missionaries that their mission in South Africa was to bring light (and therefore life) to the dark continent, or to ‘civilise the barbarians’; rather he sees their mission as destructive, certainly because it brings sorrow to the people and allows the outsiders to rule the native people. He likens them to the weaver bird (*ihlokohloko*), notorious for destroying people’s fields:

Siyazizwa izizwe zivungama

Zivungama ngawe

Njenge nyoni

Sish'izinyoni sish'amahlokhloko

Ayicekezel'insimu

Ka Dingana beno Senzangakhona.

Bayiqedile mamu

Sizwa ngoMnyayiza

Ka Ndabuko

[We hear the nations shouting

Shouting about you

Like a bird

We mean the birds, the weaver birds

They destroyed Dingana's field

And Senzangakhona.

Oh they destroyed it completely

We're told by Mnyayiza

Son of Ndabuko.]

The metaphor of the fields and the weaver birds refers to the South African land that the whites have made theirs by stealing as the weaver birds invade people's fields and feed on what is sowed there as if it is theirs. It also refers to the whole destruction caused by the colonial settlement on South African people. But according to the hymn the fields that are destroyed belong to Dingana and Senzangakhona, even though the white people lived all over South Africa and their actions impacted on all the black people.

According to H. Mncwanga and B. Zulu in Hexham and Oosthuizen, Shembe sat on a rock and sang hymn No. 183 on the morning on which he was going to be summoned to King Solomon kaDinuzulu. This occurred after Prince Mnyayiza of

Ndabuko had reported Shembe to the magistrate in Nongoma, who sent the prince to King Solomon. He told Solomon that Shembe was “taking their women” and that, “this your decision will result in that you will no longer be the king, because people will pay homage to this man and will no longer pay homage to you” (1999: 246). Shembe ended up being forced out of Nongoma by the magistrate, who said, “Go away, and never come back to this place of Nongoma.” (247).

Reading the hymn in the context of this conflict between Isaiah Shembe on one side and Mnyayiza kaNdabuko, King Solomon and the magistrate on the other, Joel Cabrita’s analysis is worth quoting at length:

The Zulu prince, “Mnyayiza, the son of Ndabuko”, and his associates are “weaver birds who destroy the fields” and thereby likened to the whites. The Zulu nation is the “field” destroyed by the weaver birds. The “field” references the Zulu defeat (under King Dingane) by the Boers at Ncome. It also suggests that the land given to Shembe by King Solomon might have been the “new field” of the nation, but it was wrongly robbed by “the weaver birds who destroy the field”. Solomon’s failure to support Shembe’s “field”, the true church of the Zulu, is explained by the pernicious influence of his advisors – Mnyayiza who allies with the whites in taking away the land which Solomon had given to Shembe. (2007: 90)

My problem with this reading of hymn No. 183 is that it seems to assume that the hymn was composed on the day in which Mncwanga and Zulu say Shembe “sat on the rock” and sang it, just before he was summoned to King Solomon. If that were the case, this reading would be a valid one, but it does not seem that the hymn was composed on that day. Cabrita herself says that Shembe “probably composed the hymn in the aftermath of the eLinde incidence as a retrospective reflection” (2007: 89). If this were the case, it would mean that Mncwanga and Zulu’s narrative is unreliable. If Shembe had not composed this hymn at that time, it means he was creating it there and then, and if both these statements are false, then the two narrators, as Cabrita claims, just “inserted the hymn to give theological meaning to Shembe’s conflict with the royal advisors at eLinde” (89), and in a way fabricated the detail of Shembe “sitting on a rock” and singing the hymn.

The fact that the two narrators mention that Isaiah Shembe actually sang this hymn (and they had no reason to say he did if he did not), and a close reading of the hymn itself, suggests to me that the hymn had already been created when Shembe “sat on a rock” and sang it. In stanza one the speaker is addressing the Zulus and informing them that “some” people are nagging him (Zulu) about his land. It is not mentioned in this stanza who these people are, and the translation that Cabrita worked with, in which the second line of stanza one says, “Listen, hear our people nagging me”, is incorrect and misleading, and is probably the reason why her analysis is incorrect. Line two says “people”, not “our people”, and it is only in the second stanza that we are told that these people are “other” nations (*izizwe*). These nations are “heard” conspiring against the Zulus, and this does not exclude royal advisors like Mnyayiza. The mention of Mnyayiza kaNdabuko in stanza four is as a spokesperson of the Zulus, not a traitor. He is the one who informed the speaker that the nations are grumbling about the Zulus: “we hear from Mnyayiza/ Son of Ndabuko”. Interestingly, even the last stanza of this hymn, which does not appear in the hymn book, but is mentioned in Mncwanga and Zulu’s narrative, confirms the view that this hymn talks to colonialism and that the metaphor of the weaver birds refers to the whites. The whites are the ones who are nagging the speaker about his land:

The whites will take the land
 Of Dingana away
 And it will never be returned.⁶

Hymn No. 183 is preceded by an equally political and interesting hymn:

Wo kusile
Wo kusile Zulu
Wena uthi makahlome!
USimakade.

[Oh it’s dawned

⁶ There is no Zulu version of this stanza as it does not appear in the hymnal.

Oh it's dawned Zulu
You say *Simakade* must arm!]

Prefacing this hymn is a text stating that this is the “song of the Zulu nation when dancing for God (*Nkulunkulu*)” (Shembe, 1940: 139). This is followed by a reference to the biblical text, Psalm 150. While this preface points to the influence of the Bible on Isaiah Shembe’s creation of the hymns and his introduction of the sacred dance in his Nazarite Church (I discuss the influence of the Bible on Isaiah Shembe’s hymns in the next chapter), what is striking in this hymn is the implied call to God (*Simakade*) to go to war. The reference to the Bible in the preface clearly relates to praising God with “tambourines and dancing” (verse 4), but the idea of God taking up arms is Isaiah Shembe’s own, even though it might have emanated from his reading of other texts in the Bible. This idea of God fighting for his (chosen) people is also prevalent in the hymns of the Sabbath prayer where the message seems to be that through God black people in South Africa would be able to win the war against oppression and injustice, and they would end up being the rulers of their own country:

3. *Wasibusisa phezu kwemizi*
Yezitha zethu
Ngokuba umusa wakhe
Uhlezi phakade
...
6. *Sabusa phezu kwamaagguma*
Nezintaba zawo
Ngokuba umusa wakhe
Uhlezi phakade.

[3. He let us rule over the homes
Of our enemies
Because his grace
Stands forever.
...
6. We ruled over hills
And their mountains

Because his grace
Stands forever.]

It seems that in all instances where the word “enemy” is used in the hymns it either refers to the white rulers of the country, or to both black church leaders and the white missionaries who tried to thwart Isaiah Shembe’s religious endeavours. In the above verses Shembe imagines black people living in the spacious and expensive homes in which white people lived. In other words, he imagines an inversion of the entire socio-economic situation in South Africa. As is the case with “*Wo Kusile*” [Oh Morning has Come], the idea of the enemy in the Sabbath hymn makes one think of a God who is partial towards the marginalized, the ones He loves as He loved the Israelites:

Wasikhulula ngokusithanda kwakhe
Ngokuba umusa wakhe
Uhlezi phakade.

[He liberated us with his love
Because his grace
Stands forever.]

The only difference between the two hymns is that in the Sabbath hymn the addressees are the Nazarite members (the opening verse says *Mbongeni uJehova maNazaretha/ Nezi zukulwane zenu*. [Praise Jehovah you Nazarites/ And your posterity.]), whereas in “*Wo Kusile*” the addressees are the Zulu people. In all the 21 verses of the Sabbath hymn there is no mention of either the Zulu people or the Zulu kings (though he may be referring to the Zulu kings in the verse which says, “He protected them with kings/Who are powerful” vs. 31). The only mention made of the Zulu kings is of Senzangakhona in verse 19 of the actual Sabbath prayer text and the part mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, which the present leader (Uthingo) has changed.

The hymn that signals the beginning of a meeting (it can be a big congregational meeting like the July or January meetings, or it can be an overnight meeting of *u-*

twenty-three, *u-twenty-five* and *ufotini*) is hymn No.173, “*Sidedele singene*” [Give way so we can Enter]. The singing of this hymn at the beginning of the above-mentioned meetings reflects the belief that people attending these meetings come with their past relatives. So when all the members (or most of them) expected to come to an overnight meeting have arrived or when word has been announced (in the case of an all congregational meeting), Nazarite members go to the gates of the place of worship to do what is called *ukungenisa umdedele* (literally meaning to let *mdedele* [let him be] in). Outside, they all pray and then one member starts hymn No. 173 and, beating the drums and blowing tambourines, the group enters the place of worship.

The speaker in the first stanza seems to be just a group of people who wish to worship their God:

Sidedele singene
Simkhonze uJehova
Sasi valelwe
Avuliwe amasango.

[Give way so we can enter
And worship God
We have been closed out
Today the gates are open.]

The last two lines suggest a sense of exclusion these people had been subjected to. In creating the Nazarite Church, Isaiah Shembe opened the space for black people (or Zulus) in which they can worship their God without having to alter their lifestyles, something they were expected to do if they wanted to join mainstream churches. Here the Zulus are allowed (even encouraged) to wear their loincloths, head-ties and other ‘traditional’ wear, and to beat drums, sing and dance as they worship their God. It is only in stanza two that we are made aware that the people spoken about here are the Zulus, the progeny of Dingana and Senzangakhona. While the point of view in the first stanza is the first person, in stanza two it has shifted to the third person, again pointing to Isaiah Shembe’s imagined identity as being both separate from his followers and also as part of them:

Mdedele angene
Wo nangu Zulu
Inzalo kaDingana
NoSenzangakhona.

[Let him/her enter
Oh! Here are the Zulus
The progeny of Dingana
And Senzangakhona.]

Stanza four introduces an important feature of Isaiah Shembe's vision: that at some level he seems to be concerned only about the Zulus, but at another he addresses all the nations (*Wozani nazo lezo zizwe/ Ziyalidinga lona lelo lizwi/ Elophezu konke*) [Come with them those nations/ They need this word/ Of the Almighty.] In the following section I examine Shembe's address, not just to the Zulus, but all nations.

African Nationalism in Isaiah Shembe's Hymns

In January 1923 Ndwedwe magistrate Mckenzie wrote: "It must be remembered that [Shembe] is the head of a large following of *mixed natives*, and there is always a danger, whatever Tshembe's present attitude may be, of his organisation, being in the future, *made use of by agitators for political purposes*" (Quoted in Papini, 1999: 250, emphasis in the original). The fact that Shembe was heading a large following of "mixed natives" is important for my argument in this section, because I wish to argue and demonstrate that Isaiah Shembe was not simply speaking to and about the Zulus. There is a sense in which he saw himself as an African speaking to other Africans. Writing about what he calls "Zulu specificity", I think Brown is correct to say that:

Isaiah Shembe's hymns seem to me themselves to call into question any simplistic co-option of Zulu history in the cause of ethnic separatism, however, since they place Zulu dispossession in a broader Africanist context. The early history of Shembe parallels that of the SANNC, forerunner to the

ANC, formed in 1912. Shembe's friend and biographer, John Dube, was a prominent member of the SANNC, and his vision of a nationalism across tribal divisions appears in certain ways to have impinged upon the church of the Nazarites, although without displacing the church's ethnic specificities. (1999: 212)

There is a tendency among Africans which seems to me to explain Brown's 'Zulu specificity'. This tendency is for Africans to refer to an African as *umZulu* for a Zulu person and as *umSotho* for a Sotho person. It is further exemplified in many people calling *umqombothi* (African beer) *utshwala besiZulu* (Zulu beer) if they are Zulu, and *joala baseSotho* (Sotho beer) if they are Sotho⁷. The point is that it might have been common currency at the time of Isaiah Shembe to emphasise particular ethnic references even when dealing with matters that go beyond those ethnic groups.

Another possibility is that some of the hymns happened to be addressed to people who considered themselves Zulus, so it made sense for Isaiah Shembe to speak to them in their 'own language'. An example is hymn No. 214 mentioned above. According to Muntuwezizwe Buthelezi's testimony in Oosthuizen and Hexham (1999), this hymn was composed by Isaiah Shembe in Msinga. Isaiah Shembe had sent Muntuwezizwe and Phelalasekhaya Maphumulo to go the Mountain eNtshoze to pray for people on the other side of eNtshoze. Shembe told them that when they got to the mountain they should shout: "All those who are suffering, come and see Shembe and you will be saved" (1999: 179). The two men did as they were told and many sick people were healed. When they came back they informed Shembe about what they had done, and Shembe was very pleased with them and "blessed them". He then sent Phelalasekhaya, who was his scribe, to go fetch his writing material. When Phela came back, Shembe told him to "sit down facing the east and write what I say". And thus came hymn No. 214:

Our Liberator has come

⁷ This point was driven home to me back in 1997 at Wits where we had an open day and the department of African Languages had prepared '*umqombothi*' to signify its representation of African culture. Interestingly, the woman who had brewed *umqombothi* was the only white member of staff at the time (I have forgotten her name). Being Zulu myself, I understood the beer she had brewed to be '*utshwala besiZulu*' (Zulu beer), so I was shocked when the then head of the department, Prof. Nhlanhla Maake drank the beer and said, "*Renoa joala baseSotho*" (We are drinking Sotho beer).

We the offspring of Dingane
We have heard him
The Liberator of the Zulus has come.⁸

Thereafter Shembe went to the house and called all the people to come and listen to him. He said: “I sent young men to the top of the mountain eNtshoze to save God’s suffering people there. When they came there, they saved those people, who were still living on earth. However, I wanted to save also those people who had already died. And these people came with this hymn, to thank their salvation with this hymn. Now these people, who died in war, have been liberated. God has dug them a hole and buried them there in the mountain and they praised God with this hymn” (1999: 180). It seems to me that the reason why this hymn is presented in a particularly Zulu ethnic language is that it was created in the land of the people who considered themselves Zulus and it talked about their experiences.

The point I am making here is that, as Brown points out, the statements mentioned above about Shembe being concerned about restoring Zulu society to its former state do not tell the whole truth. The hymns I discuss in this section show that Shembe’s work and concern went beyond Zulu specificity. Hymn No. 46, for instance, warns Africans about their oppression at the hands of colonialism: that it enslaves them and makes them a laughing stock to other nations:

Phakama Afrika
Funa uMsindisi
Kuseyisikhathi esihle
Ziyakushiay’izizwe.

Phakama Africa
Funa uMsindis
Namhla uyisihlekiso
Sazo zonk’izizwe.

⁸ No Zulu version is offered in Hexham and Oosthuizen’s book, and this stanza is different from the one in the hymnbook. The reason for this may be that the informant was just telling the story and inserted the hymn as he remembered it. But this English version can be translated as follows: *Umkhululi wethu, usefikile/ Thina nzalo kaDingane/ Sesimzwile/ Umkhululi wamaZulu ufikile.*

Phakama Africa
Funa uMsindisi
Namhla siyizigqili
Nezigqilikazi.

Phakama Africa
Funa uMsindisi
Namhla siyizigqwashu
Zokwesula izinyawo zezizwe.

Phakama Africa
Funa uMsindisi
Namhla amadodakazi akho
Ayizigqili zezizwe.

[Wake up, you Africa
Seek your Saviour
While it's still good time
Other nations are leaving you behind.

Wake up, you Africa
Seek your Saviour
Today you are a laughing stock
Of all other nations.

Wake up, you Africa
Seek your Saviour
Today we are slaves
And women slaves.

Wake up you Africa
Seek your Saviour
Today we are doormats

For wiping other people's feet.

Wake up, you Africa
Seek your Saviour
Today your daughters
Are other nations' slaves.]

This hymn tries to conscientise Africans about their situation, and proposes that it is a strong religious leader like Shembe who can help liberate them. It seems to me that one of the things that attracted Isaiah Shembe to the concept of the Zulu nation was the work that Shaka had done in forging a strong nationalism, and his vision of bringing all the black nations under one leadership. J.G. Shembe, Isaiah Shembe's son and successor, said this in his tape-recorded sermon in eKuphakameni in 1968:

Abanye abantu baye bathi uShaka kwakuwuSathane. Sonke nje sikhule kushiwo njalo ezikoleni kuthiwa wuSathane uShaka. Kodwa uShembe ufike wathi uShaka kwakuyingelosi kaNkulunkulu. Wayethunywe eZulwini ukuba azogeza abantu abamnyama ezonweni zabo. Wayengazike ukuthi kwenziwa kanjani lokho, wayekwenza ngomkhonto yena. Wayebageaza ngomkhonto. Ezobenza futhi bathandane. Badle ngakhezo lunye. Ngiye ngifise sengathi uShaka engabuye avuke, aphinde akwenze futhi lokho. Kulokhukwenyanyana kwabantu okungaka. Nalokhukuzondana okungaka. Kodwa uShaka wabashiya abantu bakwaZulu bethandana kumuntu munye.

[Some people say Shaka was Satan. When we all grew up it was said in schools that Shaka was Satan. But Shembe said Shaka was an Angel of God. He was sent from heaven to cleanse black people from their sins. He did not know how to do that so he did it by the spear. He cleansed them by the spear. He also came to make them love one another. Eat with one spoon. Sometimes I wish that Shaka could be resurrected and repeat what he did. In this hatred people have for one another! But Shaka left the Zulus loving each other as one person.]

While Shaka used force and violence in his attempt to create and expand his kingdom, an able religious leader would use spiritual power to attract people peacefully. Shembe loathed violence greatly, and one of the reasons why he disliked white colonialists was the pain and violence they inflicted on black people in the colonial wars, especially the battle of Blood River and the Anglo-Zulu war.

In the same way as the above hymn, hymn No. 17 “*Oshaywayo akalahlwa*” (The one who is Beaten is never Forsaken) talks to the Africans and urges them to open their eyes to see their predicament. While this hymn shows that Shembe did not see himself as just a Zulu prophet (if he saw himself as a prophet), but as one sent to all black people especially, it also points to his shifting state of reference to African people, at times calling them Zulus or South Africans or referring to them as Africans:

Oshaywayo akalahlwa
Makangazideli
Phaphamani phaphamani
Nina maAfrika

Imbombo zokhothamo
Zithobisa wean
Phaphamani phaphamani
Nina maAfrika.

[The one who is beaten is not forsaken
Let him not give up on himself
Wake up wake up
You Africans.

The archways of the doorway
Make you stoop
Wake up wake up
You Africans.]

It is worth noting that this hymn was actually not addressed to all Africans but to amaNazaretha. According to oral tradition in the church, some white people came to Shembe and offered to take him overseas where they would teach him about religion and theology. According to this story Shembe refused, stating that God is not studied in books (*UNkulunkulu akafundelwa*). Perhaps it was after that incident that Shembe said about himself: “If you had taught him in your schools you would have taken pride in him. But that God may demonstrate his wisdom, he sent Shembe, a child, so that he may speak like the wise and educated” (Quoted in Gunner, 1986: 182).

Trans-nationality and Trans-globality in Isaiah Shembe’s Hymns

However, Shembe’s ministry was not restricted to only the black people of Africa. The problems African people were faced with troubled Shembe a great deal, but his vision also extended to universal peace and harmony. In hymn No. 153 he makes it clear that his church is not meant to be only for black people:

*Nanti ilizwi elomemo
Liyamema bonke abantu
Alikhethi noma munye
Liyamema bonke abantu.*

*Abansundu nabamhlophe
Libamema kwana njalo
Alikhethi noma munye
Liyamema bonke abantu.*

*Zimpumputhe nani zinyonga
Sabelani niya bizwa
Lolu memo ngolwe zulu
Ziya menywa zonke izizwe
Alikhethi noma munye
Liya mema bonke abantu.*

[Here is the word of invitation
It invites all the people

It does not exclude even one
It invites all the people.

The brown ones and the white ones
It invites them always
It does not exclude even one
It invites all the people.

You blind people and you cripples
Respond you are called
This invitation is of heaven
All the nations are invited.
It does not exclude even one
It invites all the people.]

It is apparent from this hymn that Shembe did not intend to exclude anybody from his church regardless of their colour. It does not matter if the person is black or white, but all are invited to join the church because the church prepares people for the way to heaven and heaven does not discriminate. Interestingly, Thulani Kunene had a near-death experience in which he was spiritually transported to ‘heaven’ and he found the Nazaretha in ‘heaven’ walking to the temple and singing this hymn.⁹ According to Kunene’s account, despite the fact that the Nazaretha on the other side sang this hymn which suggests no existence of discrimination in heaven, he himself was prohibited from joining the Nazaretha. But of course the basis of that discrimination was not race but was rather denominational as he was “told” by his late grandmother (who herself had not been a member of the Nazaretha Church on earth) that he could not join the people in the white gowns because he did not have the “symbol” of *ubuNazaretha* (sense of being Nazaretha). In effect this means he could not enter because he was not a member of the Nazaretha Church. When he asked for that “symbol” from his grandmother, she told him that he had left that “symbol” on earth and had to come back to earth to find it (Undated tape-recorded sermon).

⁹ For a discussion of near-death experiences in the Nazaretha Church see Sithole (2005).

In another hymn, No. 178 “*Ziningi izizwe*” (There are Many Nations) Shembe questions racial and ethnic difference while at the same time lamenting their existence. He says that the only difference among the nations is language: *Ziningi izizwe/ Phansi kwelanga/ Zehlukana ngentetho/ Kumazwe ngamazwe*. [There are many nations/ Under the sun/ They are separated by speech/ In all places.] In stanza two he meditates about what might have caused this separation of nations, seemingly wondering if it was God’s creation or the creation of people: *Ziningi izizwe/ Phansi kwelanga/ Zehlukaniswe ngulani/ Kumazwe ngamazwe?* [There are many nations/ Under the sun/ Who separated them/ In all the places?] But what is more important is his attempt at uniting all the nations in his church as he asks, *Lizwi lini/ Elingahlanganisa/ Lezo zizwe/ Wozani maShaka nizwile*. [What word/ Can bring together/ Those nations/ Come you Shakas you have heard.] Clearly, Shembe’s universal vision was generally limited by his knowledge that his audience was only black people. Even though he wanted his church to include all the nations under the sun, his followers were only black people. That is why in stanza three and four where he involves his addressee, the language returns to nationalism not universality as he calls on the Shakas [Zulus] in the last line of stanza three, and in the third line of stanza four he calls the AmaBhaca. It is made clear, however, that these nations are mentioned because “they have heard”, not because the call is restricted to them. Stanza four offers a resolution that one can expect from a religious man like Shembe: that God is the only one who has an answer:

NguThixo yedwa
Ongahlanganisa lezo zizwe
Wozani maBhaca
Nilizwile izwi lakhe.

[It is God alone
 Who can unite those nations
 Come Bhacas
 You have heard his voice]

In an undated cassette, MaDlomo Mchunu tells of a time when Isaiah Shembe was travelling in the mountains of Ndwedwe on his way to Nhlangakazi. She says that

Shembe saw a young woman working in the fields. He said to her: “*Ngiyakuthanda mntanethu*” [I love you, *mntanethu*.¹⁰] The girl responded that she did not love Shembe. This happened three times and then Shembe left the girl and carried on with his journey. When Shembe had left, the girl was hit by lightning and passed away. Shembe told his followers that the girl had appeared to him in spirit and was singing a hymn which is No. 209 in the hymn book:

Duma besabe
Abasemhlabeni
AbaseZulwini
Balifezile idinga.

Webantu bomhlaba
Nesaba ngani
Lifezeni idinga
Uyanishiya umhlaba.

[Thunder and let them be scared
Those who are on earth
Those in heaven
Have done their due.

You people of the earth
Why are you afraid
You must do your due
The world is leaving you behind.]

While the story told by MaDlomo regarding the origination of this hymn echoes Thulani Kunene’s case about these hymns existing in this and the other world, the call here too is not nationalist but universal. It is all the people of the earth, not the Zulus or Africans, who are addressed here and are accused of not doing what is required. The punishment for these earthly people seems to be death by lightning and as a result they need to be scared of thunder and lightning. It may even be suggested here that

¹⁰ Like *mntakwethu*, *mntanethu* literally means child of my home but is used figuratively to refer to a lover.

potentially destructive natural forces like thunder and lightning happen because the people of the earth do not hear the word of God. In this hymn, then, Shembe uses natural forces that affect all human beings to show that he is not only concerned with the Zulus and Africans. All the people of the earth are contrasted with those of heaven, who are said to be doing what they should. However, it is not specified exactly what is it that earthly people are not doing right and those in heaven do right.

Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with Isaiah Shembe's hymns and explored the way in which Shembe speaks in different voices as a Zulu, an African and as a human being. I started by engaging with the question of the composition of the hymns, exploring the view within the Church that the hymns came with the messengers of heaven. I argued that such a view deprives Shembe of his agency as a composer/ author of the hymns. I posited that the hymns can be read in at least two different ways, as they are understood within the church, or as seen in terms of literary studies which sees them as poetic texts in which Shembe deals with the concerns of his time. With regards to Zulu specificity, I argued that the scholars who have studied Shembe seem to overemphasise his concern with Zuluness. I have shown instead that the recurrence of Zulu references emanates from the fact that Shembe's audience was mostly Zulus and that it was common currency at the time of Shembe to refer to 'African' concerns as if they were Zulu concerns if one was Zulu and as Sotho if one was Sotho.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bible as an Important Inter-Text in Isaiah Shembe's *Izihlabelelo*

Even though he was not educated in mission schools,¹¹ Isaiah Shembe had extensive knowledge of the Bible, and the Bible features prominently in his hymns and other foundational texts in his Nazaretha Church. A number of scholars have commented on Isaiah Shembe's command of the Bible and how remarkable that was since he was not an educated person. Gerald West states, "That Shembe was familiar with the Bible is plainly apparent to anyone who listens to or reads his hymns and teachings" (2006: 163). One of the earliest scholars to study Isaiah Shembe and his Nazaretha Church, Esther Roberts, writes that Isaiah Shembe was reported "to have been able to cite biblical references by chapter and verse, outwitting most European missionaries" (Quoted in West, 2006: 163). What made this even more remarkable, argues West, is that "there is no clarity on whether or to what extent Shembe was literate" (163). West's point that while Shembe "seized" and "reconstituted" the Bible, it "also [took] hold of him, drawing him and his female followers to its narrative [and here I think not just his female followers]" (2007: 498) is validated by the fact that the Bible still plays a significant role in the life of the Church. Rev. Khumalo of Newcastle always supports whatever he says about the Church with biblical references and maintains that, "There is nothing that Shembe did which is not here in the Book" (*Akukho uShembe akwenza okungekho lapha embhalweni*) (Personal communication, January 2009). In this chapter I look at how Shembe "seizes" the Bible and uses it in his *izihlabelelo* to negotiate his own identity in relation to colonialism, African traditional life, and the missionary Christians (white missionaries and black church leaders) of his time. This extends the issue dealt with in the Introduction about the composition of the hymns. The hymns discussed in this chapter and the references to the Bible in them reveal Shembe's active engagement with his material and his resources. This serves to prove that Isaiah Shembe consciously created the hymns.

¹¹ Esther Roberts states that he had "little mission" education, but from what I have heard and read, Isaiah Shembe never attended a mission school (Mpanza, 1993). According to J.G. Shembe, he learned to read and write at a later stage in his life (Oosthuizen and Hexham, 1996).

The Bible, the Hymns of amaNazaretha, and Shembe's Sense of Self

It is clear that Shembe spent some time in his life reflecting on his own identity not just as an African, Zulu or human being, but as a religious figure of great prominence. It is also apparent that in his endeavours to understand and articulate his own self he found that the Bible could offer some clues as to who or what he was (or might be). That he was aware of his (healing) abilities and wisdom is clear from his self delineation in his assertion that, “[i]f you had educated him in your schools you would have taken pride in him. But that God may demonstrate his wisdom, he sent Shembe, a child, so that he may speak like the wise and the educated” (Gunner, 1986: 182). Nellie Wells, ‘Special Representative’ of *The Natal Mercury* and Isaiah Shembe’s ardent admirer, reports that

Everywhere chapels, churches and schools were emptied as Shembe approached and the people crowded to listen with great joy. Immorality so prevalent among Christians who were living under false economic conditions was driven to shame, mental snobbery was pricked like a bubble, and a simple folk wearing skins or next to nothing accepted the gospel with great joy and were baptised, then the missionaries waged warfare, because, as they said, Shembe was undoing much if not most of what they had done. (Quoted in Mpanza 1999: 56)

The popularity that Shembe commanded and the conflict with the missionaries, the educated elites, and the state which resulted from such popularity made it important for Shembe to deal with the question of his identity. On a number of occasions he was interrogated with regards to his identity and praxis, and I suppose that rendered the question of his identity an important one even for himself.¹² In 1921 he was invited to give his life story to then assistant Magistrate C.N.C Barrett, and in 1923 he was interviewed by Magistrate Charles McKenzie in Ndwedwe Court (Papini, 1999: 254). He was also interviewed in 1929 by Carl Faye (see Papini, 1999) and in April 1931 by the Native Economic Commission. In these interviews he might have said what he

¹² I say that because I believe that he gave his interrogators the answers he thought were appropriate for particular contexts and would satisfy them.

thought would satisfy his interrogators. This is so because sometimes he misinformed them about what actually happened in his Church. As he indicated in the 1923 interview:

God has given me certain work to do amongst my people. I therefore realise that God has also placed the authorities over us, and those who disregard or defy the Government, disregard the will of God. (Quoted in Papini, 1999: 255)

While this is clearly a reference to Romans 13, it also echoes Jesus' words in Luke 20 verse 25, "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's". The kind of wisdom and powers that Shembe was believed and believed himself to have commanded are close to those which Jesus was believed to have commanded, and Shembe was aware of this similarity. Thus, in hymn 34 he tells the story of Jesus' birth in a way that implies that what Jesus was for the Israelites Shembe is for the Zulus or even Africans:

*Kwafika izazi
Ziphuma empumalanga
Zathi uphi lowo
Oyinkosi yabaJuda.*

Chorus: *Kunjalo-ke namhlanje
Emagqumeni as'Ohlange*

*Nawe-ke Betlehema
Muzi wakwaJuda
Awusiye omncinyane
Kunababusi bakwaJuda.*

Chorus

*Lanyakaza iJerusalema
Bathi niyayizwa lendaba*

*Evele phakathi kwethu
Efike nezazi
Sibutheleni abafundisi
Bahlole imibhalo.*

Chorus

*Bafike bathi yebo
Kulotshiwe kanjalo
Nawe Kuphakama
Magquma as'Ohlange*

Chorus

*Awusiye omncinyane
Kunababusi bakwaJuda
Kuyakuvela kuwe
AbaProfithi
Abayakusindisa
Umuzi was'Ohlange.*

Chorus.

[The wise men came
They came from the East
They said where is that one
Who is the King of the Jews.

Chorus: It is like that today
In the hills of Ohlange

And you Bethlehem
Village of Judah
You are not the smaller one

Than the rulers of Judah.

Chorus:

Jerusalem was moved
They said do you hear this news
Which happened amongst us
It came with the wise men,
Bring us the ministers
So they will examine the scripture.

Chorus:

They arrived and said yes
It is written so
And you Kuphakama
Hills of Ohlange

Chorus:

You are not the smaller one
Than the rulers of Judah
From you shall come forth
The prophets
Who will save
The village of Ohlange.

Chorus:]

One of the reasons why Shembe read the Bible so extensively was that he saw it as the only important religious scripture through which he could defend himself as a prophet and by which he or his work could be examined. It was only the educated and knowledgeable people who could examine the scripture and realise – by noticing the similarities between Shembe and other prophets – that Shembe himself was a prophet

and was sent by God. Thus he begins the hymn with the story of Jesus' birth at the time when the wise men were going to see and salute the young Jesus. In the first stanza Shembe emphasises that the wise men came with the question, "Where is that one who is the king of the Jews?" This challenges his enemies to enquire about who and what he is, instead of simply dismissing him as "the madman, son of Mayekisa" (Papini, 1999: 251). Rather than following the story of Jesus as it is told in the Bible, at this point he inserts the chorus which makes a statement about himself and places this narrative in the context of South Africa, using a location occupied by only black people (*Ohlange*) to emphasise the fact that he was sent to 'save' black people, or was 'the king of black people in South Africa'. But the emphasis here is not on himself as an individual but on the black people of Ohlange.

What Isaiah Shembe does with the Bible here is what West calls 're-membering' the Bible. West argues that ordinary people (as opposed to trained biblical scholars) have their own tools for 'reading' the Bible. Their 'reading' of the Bible is "more akin to 'rewriting' than reading in any scholarly sense" (2003: 78). However, what ordinary readers do with the Bible does not involve rewriting in the sense advocated by Canaan S. Banana (1993). What they do is to recreate the Bible, endowing it with new meaning particular to them and their contexts. As West goes on to argue, while the ordinary African interpreters of the Bible do not rewrite the Bible as such,

they are [also] not as transfixed and fixated by the text as their textually trained pastors and theologians; in Wimbush's words, their hermeneutics is characterised by "a looseness, even playfulness" towards the biblical text. If they do speak of the Bible as the 'Word of God', they do so in senses that are more metaphorical than literal; 'the Book' is more of a symbol than a text. The Bible they work with is always an already 're-membered text' – a text, both written and oral, that has been dismembered, taken apart, and then re-membered. (2003: 78)

How exactly does Isaiah Shembe 're-member' the story of Jesus' birth in his hymns? Apart from the fact that he appropriates a written story and makes it a predominantly oral one in the sense that a hymn is meant to be sung, which allows it to be received communally, the text itself is not 'borrowed' as it is from the Bible. Isaiah Shembe

omits certain parts and emphasises others as he sees appropriate for his own purpose. That the story of Jesus was important to Isaiah Shembe is exemplified by the fact that there are two hymns based on this story. Another hymn telling the story of Jesus' birth is No. 152 "*Jerusalema Betlehema*" (Jerusalem Bethlehem). Unlike hymn No. 34 where the speaker simply narrates the story, here in the first stanza Isaiah Shembe uses two crucial locales in the story of Jesus' birth, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, as the addressees. But here too the wise men take the position as the second most important characters in the story. Shembe did not see Jesus as important in and of himself, but what was important was what he did and what he stood for. That is why the name Jesus is not mentioned in this stanza. What is emphasised is the fact that he is the Saviour (*uMsindisi*):

Jerusalema Betlehema

Izazi zisitshelile

Umsindisi uselezelwe

Kwelasebetlehema.

[Jerusalem Bethlehem

The wise men told us

The Saviour is born

In Bethlehem.]

What Jesus does is important because of the people for whom it is done. The significance of the Saviour is dependent or reliant on the people who are saved, and I think that is why Shembe downplays or omits the name of Jesus in his re-membering of the biblical story of Jesus' birth. The text that both hymn No. 34 and hymn No. 152 are based on is Matthew 2. Interestingly, the name of Jesus, which Shembe avoids completely in hymn No. 34 and only mentions in the very last line of hymn No. 152, is the very first one in Matthew 2:

1. UJesu se e zelwe eBetlehema la seJudia, emihleni kaHerodi inkosi, kwafika eJerusalema izazi zivela empumalanga, zithi, 2. U pi lowo o zelwe e inkosi yabaJuda na? Sabona inkanyezi yakhe sisempumalanga, size kukhuleka kuye.

[When Jesus had been born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the time of King Herod, the wise men came to Jerusalem from the East, they said, 2 Where is the one born king of the Jews? We saw his star while we were in the East, we have come to salute him.]

The way in which Isaiah Shembe re-members this text (Matthew 2) in each of the two hymns mentioned above is different. Hymn No. 152 seems to be simply a re-telling of the narrative, albeit with certain omissions and alterations of some parts of the text. Hymn No. 34 in contrast is unapologetically claiming the story of Jesus for the amaNazaretha, for the Africans. Apart from the fact that immediately after the first stanza, in hymn No. 34, Isaiah Shembe inserts the chorus that claims that what happened in Jerusalem has happened in Ohlange too, the parts that Shembe selects from the biblical text are the ones that are relevant for him and his Nazaretha Church and are directly linked to eKuphakameni. For instance, stanza 3 talks about the stirring of the people in Jerusalem because of the news that the king of the Jews had been born, and a call is made that the ministers should examine the scripture to ascertain if what was happening was in accordance with what had happened or had been prophesied before. This call is Isaiah Shembe's own and is not part of Matthew 2. Through it Shembe is arguing that he and his work should be judged and examined in terms of what the scripture says. But what is even more telling is the fact that although the call to examine the scripture is with regards to Jesus' birth and Jerusalem, the ministers' examination shows that eKuphakameni (not Bethlehem), in the hills of Ohlange (not of Judah), is not smaller than the rulers of Judah, as Jerusalem was said not to have been. Here Shembe is claiming that the black people of Africa are God's chosen people as the Israelites were. As he states in another of his hymns (No. 101):

Akusiyo iJerusalema kuphela
Owayithandayo

[It is not only Jerusalem
That you loved]

The second stanza of hymn No. 34 is taken from Matthew 2 verse 6 which reads:

*Nawe Betlehema,
Lizwe lakwaJuda, a u mncinyane
Ku nababusi ba kwa Juda;
Kuya kuvela kuwe umbusi,
Oya kubusa abantu bami abaIsraeli.*

[And you Bethlehem,
land of Judah, you are not the small one
Of the rulers of Judah,
There shall come forth from you a ruler,
Who will rule my people of Israel.]

The biblical text that has been omitted runs from verse 2b to verse 5 of Matthew 2. In verse 2b the wise men say that they saw Jesus' star while they were in the East, and that they have come to salute him. Both these statements are not important to Isaiah Shembe because both of them are centred on Jesus as an individual rather than as a saviour. That the wise men saw Jesus' 'star' and that they are here to 'salute' him has little relevance for someone who is only interested in the well-being of the community. Again, I think verses 3 and 4 are omitted for the same reason that they foreground the upper classes. In these verses Herod is concerned about the news that Jesus is to be born, and consults high priests and demographers to find out where Jesus is likely to be born. The response of the high priests and demographers in verse 5, that Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem as it was written by the prophet, is less important to Shembe; what is important (verse 6) is what Jesus' birth means for Bethlehem: that because Jesus was to be born there, Bethlehem was to be amongst the highest rulers of Judah.

But even this verse (verse 6) that is included in the hymn is not without Isaiah Shembe's intervention. It is verse 6a that appeals to Shembe because it is addressed to the land which is occupied by all the people. The people of Bethlehem are not inferior to other people of Judah, and therefore Bethlehem itself is not inferior to other places of Judah. But the fact that there shall come forth a ruler who will rule the people of

Israel is not appealing to Shembe because in most cases it appears that he felt that what a ruler does benefits the ruler himself (and sometimes herself) more than it benefits the people who are ruled. While both the nouns “saviour” [*Umsindisi*] and “ruler” [*umbusi*] give agency to the individual as it is a single person who acts, “saviour” is a better translation because the saviour’s work benefits the people, in that they receive salvation, whereas the ruler normally takes from people, as in the taxes for instance.

As stated earlier, hymn No. 152 does not deviate a great deal from the biblical text on which it is based. Here Shembe does not make a statement about ubuNazaretha, at least not openly. It seems to me that even though hymn No. 34 comes before hymn No. 152 in the hymn book, it is the latter that was composed first. In “Jerusalem Bethlehem” Shembe repeats the Matthew 2 text although with a great deal of selection and very little alteration of the way in which the text is presented. I think when he composed this hymn, Shembe was still coming to terms with his own identity and spirituality, and this text appealed to him so much that he wanted it to be part of his church’s repertoire. He then worked on the story itself, selecting some parts and leaving out others without bringing in as many of his own ideas as he does in hymn No. 34. This is not to say that this hymn is without creativity on Shembe’s part. While the act of selecting itself is a creative process, Shembe presents the story in his own way. As mentioned above, the addressees of this hymn are “Jerusalem and Bethlehem”. It is to these two that the persona narrates the story. And while the beginning of hymn No. 34 is based on the biblical text itself, “the wise men came”, in hymn No. 152 the same idea is presented but here “the wise men told us” (l. 2) that the saviour is born.

“Jerusalem and Bethlehem” are the addressees only up to stanza 3. In stanza 4 Shembe returns to the text as it is in Matthew 2. This is the only stanza which is repeated in full in hymn No. 34, and it is the one that is based on Mathew 6 as mentioned above:

Nawe-ke Betlehema

Awusiye omuncinyane

Kunababusi bakwaJuda

Wena Bethlehemema.

[And you Bethlehem
You are not the smaller one
Than the rulers of Judah
You Bethlehem.]

What seems to attract Shembe to this verse is the idea that the presence of a strong religious leader in a country (as Jesus was to be) raises even the political status of that country. I mentioned in Chapter One that what interested Shembe in the Zulu kingdom was Shaka's idea of a strong, unified black nation, and that Shembe saw himself as filling the position of a leader who could bring about that unity, though differently from Shaka by not using force in order to bring those people together.

Isaiah Shembe and the Creation Story of Adam and Eve

The biblical story of creation is another one of Shembe's favourite texts as can be seen by the way in which he appropriates this story in his hymns and teachings. In the hymn book there are a number of references to his congregation as the progeny of Adam and Eve. Teaching about diligence in the "Morning Prayer" he says, particularly to the ministers:

Uma wena-ke uyisizukulwane sika Adam noEva, okwathiwa kuye ensimini yase Edeni lima ulinde, ubonakala uthatha isimo sobunja, uyazethuka wena ngokungathandi ukusebenza. (Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha 1940: 6)

[If you are the progeny of Adam and Eve, to whom it was said in the garden of Eden, that you should plough and wait, but you are seen to be following a dog's example, you insult yourself by not wanting to work.]

And in hymn No. 21 stanza 4:

*Thina sonkana siyinzalo yomuntu wakho
U Adam noEva*

Owabenza kuqala
WeNkosi yeSabatha usishiyelani.

[All of us, we are the progeny of your man
Adam and Eve
The ones you created first
You Lord of the Sabbath, why do you desert us.]

However, while this reference to Adam and Eve as the progenitors of all the people brings forth Shembe's universal voice, as a human being among human beings, what seems to be given more attention is the 'sin' story of the serpent, Eve and Adam, and the punishment from God that resulted from the 'sin'. Hymn No. 114 "*Wangidala Nkulunkulu*" [You Created me, God] espouses the idea of inherent 'sin' and presents God as the all graceful and loving one, and the human as the sinner:

Wangidala Nkulunkulu
Thixo Nkosi yamakhosi
Wangibeka kuleyo nsimu
Ngokungithanda okungaka.

Insimu eyayingadingi lutho
Insimu eyayinezithelo zayo
Wangiyalela ukuzidla zonke
Ngokungithanda okungaka.

Emzuzwini nesikhathi
Ngakhohliseka Nkosi yami
Ngaze ngawudla lowo muthi
Baphela bonk'ubuhle bami.

Ngingabuyiselwa nganina?
Ebhleni enganginabo
Ngingakayephuli imithetho
Ngokungithanda okungaka.

Ngiyadinga Nkosi yami
Insipho yokungigeza
Ngibuyele ngokushesha
Ebuhleni enganginabo.

[You created me, God
Lord, King of kings
You placed me in that garden
With so much love for me.

The garden that wanted of nothing
The garden which had its fruits
You urged me to eat them all
With so much love for me.

But in time [and minutes]
I was misled my Lord
I ate that plant/medicine
And all my beauty was finished.

How can I be returned
To the beauty I once had
Before I broke the laws
With so much love for me.

I do need, my Lord
The soap that can wash me
So I will return quickly
To the beauty I once had.]

From the text of Genesis 3 Shembe appropriates the idea of 'sin' (or breaking the law) and uses it in this hymn to warn his followers against committing sin and also to encourage them to repent. The story of Adam and Eve's sin is appropriated here to

speak to Shembe's present (and perhaps future) audience. Noticeable is the omission of all the characters in the biblical story and the way in which the blame is placed on no one other than the persona him/herself. This technique, coupled with the fact that the persona uses the first person, makes this hymn speak powerfully to anyone who sings or reads it.

While the punishment for Adam (and Eve) is exile from Eden in the biblical text, here the sinner loses his or her beauty. This may suggest that a human soul has inherent beauty that can only become damaged if a person sins. The hymn ends (on a positive note, I suggest) with the search for the lost beauty in the last two stanzas. What is positive about this is that, since a human being is essentially a beautiful soul, it is, or it may be, possible to reclaim one's beauty. In stanza four the persona asks God (or him- or herself, perhaps) how the lost beauty can be returned. This still leaves this person as someone who lacks knowledge, but the positive aspect is that he or she is searching for the answers. It is in the last stanza that the voice of the speaker is articulate and fearless, telling God what can bring back his beauty and demanding from Him to be given the soap that can bring back the lost beauty. The speaker here demands to be taken back to Eden!

Hymn No. 33 "*Kwezwakala ilizwi*" (The Voice was Heard) is based on the same text as hymn No. 114 and deals with the same issue but in a different way. Here the focus of the blame is on Adam, from whom it is constantly demanded in the chorus: "*Sewenzeni weAdam/ Sewonakele umhlaba*" [What have you done now, Adam/ The world has been spoiled.] This is a direct reference (although with omission of much of the text) to Genesis 3 verse 17: "*Wa ti kuAdamu, Ngokuba u lalele izwi lomkakho, udhlile umuti enga ku yala ngawo ukuti, U nga u dhli, wonakele umhlaba ngenxa yakho; uya kuzidhla izithelo zawo, uhlupeke zonke izinsuku zokupila kwako.*" [He said to Adam, because you listened to your wife's word, you ate the plant I warned you not to eat, the world has been spoiled because of you; you will eat its (the world's) fruits, and suffer all days of your life.] Adam here is representative of all (and only) men, and therefore Shembe makes a statement that men are stronger and have more responsibility than women, an issue which I discuss in more detail below. Interestingly, in the biblical text's (Genesis 3) characters' order of appearance, we encounter Adam after we have already met the serpent and Adam's wife. The serpent

is omitted completely from Shembe's hymn, and the woman is only mentioned in the last chorus:

*Kwezwakala ilizwi
Ekushoneni kwelanga
Ensimini yase Eden
Ekushoneni kwelanga.*

Chorus: *Sewenzeni weAdamu
Sewonakele umhlaba.*

*Izwi lezinyamazane
Ezazihlala e Eden
Lithi maye webaba
Namhla soshonaphi.*

Chorus:

*Sahlukana nobaba
Sewonakele umhlaba
Sisize Jehova umkhiphe uAdam
Wakhishwa-ke u Adam ensimini yaseEden.*

Chorus:

*Wakhala-ke uAdam
Esekhishwa esangweni
Wathi inhliziyo yami inosizi
Ngokwephula imithetho.*

Chorus: *Ngoniswe ngulomfazi
Owanginika yena.*

[The voice was heard

At the setting of the sun
In the garden of Eden
At the setting of the sun.

Chorus: What have you done now, Adam
The world has been spoilt

The voice of wild animals
That used to live at Eden
It says, oh my father
Where are we to go today.

Chorus:

We were separated from our father
The world has been spoilt
Help us Jehovah, expel Adam
Adam was then expelled from the garden of Eden.

Chorus:

Adam then cried
When he was forced out of the gate
He said my heart is filled with sorrow
Because of breaking the law.

Chorus: I was misled by this woman
You gave to me.]

Nightfall or sunset is associated with darkness which itself is associated with evil. Even though the mention of the setting of the sun in the first stanza alludes to Genesis 3 verse 8a, "*Bezwa izwi lika Jehova uTixo ehamba ensimini ntambama*" (They heard the voice of the Lord Jehovah walking in the field in the afternoon), Shembe seems to be making his own statement about the sin that Adam committed: that it creates chaos

and the whole of life is turned upside down because of it. To do this Shembe emphasises the time in which God spoke to Adam about what they had done, and instead of the afternoon which is stated in the Bible Shembe chooses sunset. In the first stanza prominence is given to the time (sunset) at which the event took place rather than the event itself (the voice [of God] which was heard) and the place where it took place (the garden of Eden). Shembe emphasises the time issue by repeating the same line twice in a stanza made up of only four lines. In doing so he tries to reinforce the impact of the sin on the life of the sinner and the lives of other beings close to him or her.

In addition to placing the blame on Adam as a man, this hymn also underscores the sense of alienation and exile Adam is subjected to. While Shembe omitted the serpent from the original biblical text, he has inserted his 'own' animals that are perhaps easier to sympathise with than the serpent because they are victims rather than perpetrators. This he does so that the responsibility for the sin is not directed away from Adam to the serpent. Instead, Shembe uses animals that had nothing to do with Adam and Eve's sin, and these are the ones who suffer the most because of the sin. However, the place of these animals in the whole text (Shembe's hymn this time) is unclear. At first, they complain about expulsion from the garden of Eden, but later, in stanza four, they are the ones who beg God to remove Adam from Eden. The last chorus, after stanza four, in which Adam places the blame on the woman (and by implication God, who gave her to him) references Genesis 3 verse 12 which reads: "*Wa ti uAdamu, Umfazi owanginika yena ukuba abe nami, wa ngipa umuti nga u dhla.*" [Adam said, the woman you gave to me to live with gave me the fruit and I ate it.]

Shembe's position about where the blame should be placed on this issue – that it is Adam, the man who is to blame – accords with his take on the issue of adultery in the "*Umthetho/ The law*" text (Gunner, 2002: 70-71). In this text Shembe unequivocally positions the man as the one responsible for preventing adultery and to whom blame needs to be apportioned should adultery take place: "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." I think that this part of 'the law' echoes an African cultural (and patriarchal) idea that a

man is the father of his children as well as his wife, or wives.¹³ It is in the second paragraph of ‘the law’ that Shembe begins to reference the biblical text related to the story of creation: “But in the case of woman, woman was created from man therefore she 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” (71). West argues that this text alludes “to 1 Timothy even though the citation that follows the next sentence refers to Genesis” (2006: 172). In ‘re-membering’ this text, as West goes on to argue, Shembe

draws on elements of this text [he is talking about 1 Tim 2:12-15], recasting them for his own purposes. In this case, he retains the interest in the male-female relationship, the first-person form of address, and the argumentative style. He shifts the focus, however, from issues of male and female roles to issues of marriage, desire and adultery. What allows Shembe to make this shift is the dependency of 1 Tim 2: 13- 15 on Gen 2:21-25 and Gen 3: 1-6. (172)

However, there is a problem with Shembe’s formulation (or his re-membering of the biblical text) even though it is interesting that he shifts the blame for adultery from a woman to a man, something which is against the grain of the traditional Christian church’s reading of 1 Timothy (Bal 1986, quoted in West 2006). Shembe’s formulation leaves women no space for action; they are allowed only a passive role in this formulation. As West argues, “it is the woman who is ‘assailed (-*ehlelwa*) by a man’s weakness’. The repetition of this verb repeats the point. The man (and temptation) are the active subjects, while the woman is the passive unless activated by the man” (2006: 174). What is interesting about this role of women as passive is its implication for the reading of Carol Muller’s virgin girls as central to Shembe’s church: “The apparently very passive view of women evident within Shembe’s teaching on this subject raises questions of how we reconcile such an understanding with Carol Muller’s location of women at the centre of Shembe’s enterprise. Though constructed differently from Paul’s women, Shembe’s women too are trapped

¹³ It is common for a woman in traditional African societies to refer to her husband as “Father”.

between a patriarchal Bible and patriarchal culture” (West, 2006: 179). In this statement West raises an important question which I touched on earlier in the project about the problem of Muller concentrating on women and thus emphasising certain aspects as particular to women while in fact they obtain in the case of both women and men. I think here the answer lies in the manner in which Shembe organised his church, separating women from men at certain times. This made it possible for him to focus his attention on a single gender group and make them feel they are responsible and at the centre of the church’s well being. My suggestion is that in reading Shembe’s texts, we need to be aware of the fact that Shembe was simply speaking to a particular group of people who were his prime focus at the time, and the writing down of the texts only took place later.

Jesus’ Voice in Isaiah Shembe’s Hymns

Contrary to what has been argued – that Shembe gives limited space to Jesus in his hymns – there is a great deal of reference to Jesus as a person (or Messiah) and to his words in Isaiah Shembe’s hymns. The reason why some scholars have thought differently is that sometimes Shembe talked about Jesus in his hymns without actually using his name. This might have been done as a mark of respect. For example in hymn No. 82, Shembe refers to Jesus as “*Nkosi*” (Lord):

Mangibenjengawe Nkosi

Ekulungeni kwakho

Kuhle ngibe njengawe

Ekulungeni kwakho.

Mangibenjengawe Nkosi

Ngezikhathi zonke

Ngibhekisise kahle

Ekuhambeni kwakho.

Mangibenjengawe Nkosi

Ekukhonzeni kwakho

Awesabanga lutho

Noma bekuhlupha.

Mangibenjengawe Nkosi

Noma bekuhlupha

Nasekufeni kwakho

Awushongo lutho.

Mangibenjengawe Nkosi

Ngaleyo misebenzi yakho

Ngibheke ngiqonde

Ekuhambeni kwakho.

[Let me be like you, Lord

In your righteousness

I better be like you

In your righteousness.

Let me be like you, Lord

In all times

I should look closely

At your actions.

Let me be like you, Lord

In your worshipping

You were not afraid

Even when they mistreated you.

Let me be like you, Lord

Even as they mistreated you

And in your death

You said nothing.

Let me be like you, Lord

With all your deeds

Let me watch and understand
From your actions.

That “Lord” refers to Jesus is not immediately clear in the hymn. The word *Nkosi* that is used in this hymn could also refer to God, as in hymn No. 71 “*Nkosi yami ubungithanda*” [My Lord/God you Loved Me], and it can even refer to a chief. As suggested above, the use of “Lord” instead of Jesus here is likely to reflect respect, since in Zulu and other Nguni languages and cultures the first name of the respected person or being is avoided in speech. This avoidance makes it hard to tell who this *iNkosi* is. It requires one to be familiar with the story of Jesus’ life, especially his crucifixion, in order to be able to tell that it is Jesus who is referred to here.

In this hymn Shembe sees Jesus as a righteous man and wants to follow his example. There are at least two reasons given in the hymn for claiming Jesus’ righteousness, and both of them had a bearing on Shembe’s life. The first one is that Jesus was treated badly but he never gave up. He was persistent in his ministry even though it went against the will of those who wielded power both in the state and in religious institutions. Shembe himself encountered a similar predicament of being opposed by the state and the church. Also, it is said that Jesus did not retaliate to his tormentors in a violent manner, but instead he kept quiet until the end of his life. This may explain Shembe’s stance of a non-violent resistance to the colonial government that mistreated him and all the black people.

But while in this hymn one hears Shembe’s voice speaking about what Jesus meant for him and what a good example he was, in other hymns it is Jesus’ own words that are appropriated or re-membered. Even though Shembe (like Jesus) taught his followers, or gave them guidelines as to how they needed to pray, Shembe seems to have been influenced by Jesus’ “Our Father” prayer. There are three hymns that begin with “*Baba wethu oseZulwini*” [Our Father who is in Heaven]. All these hymns are prayers to God even though the way they appropriate the “Lord’s Prayer” in Matthew 6 verse 9-13 is not the same. The first hymn, No. 35, is not based on the ‘prayer’ as such but appropriates the above address to God as “Our Father who is in heaven” to use it in dealing with Shembe’s own concerns. His concern here is repentance for himself and his followers. “Our Father who is in heaven” is only there as an opening

address, and what follows that is far removed from what Jesus taught his disciples in the “Lord’s Prayer”. Here the speaker is begging God not to stop loving him/her and not to forsake him/her even though he/she has sinned. In his defence, the speaker argues that he is powerless against the sins because they were there since the beginning of time. Here Shembe seems to suggest that we all inherit sins at our birth and that the sins stick to us wherever we go:

*Baba wethu oseZulwini
Ngibheke ungithande
Ungazibheki engize nazo
Zingijabhisile.*

Chorus: *Zazalwa kanye nami
Anginakuthukuza nasinye*

*Baba wethu oseZulwini
Nakhu sengigedla amazinyo
Ngobubi engibenzileyo
Ebusweni bakho.*

[Our Father who is in Heaven
Look at me and love me
Ignore those [sins] I have come with
They disappoint me.

Chorus: They were born the same time as I
I cannot hide even a single one of them.

Our Father who is in Heaven
Here I am being disappointed
Because of the evil I have done
Before your face.]

Another hymn which is based on the “Lord’s Prayer” is No. 133. Except for the refrain, “Amen Amen”, and the use of the demonstrative “*lapha*” (here) before the locative “*emhlabeni*”(on earth), this hymn seems to have been copied word for word from the biblical text mentioned above. The edition of the Bible this hymn follows is the 1883 one, even though the orthography used is the latest one. This has to do with the edition of the hymn book and the fact that these were published after Shembe had died which means the use of this orthography is the work of the editors rather than Isaiah Shembe. The way the hymn was sung was directly taken from the 1883 Bible, and I think the scribes who wrote the hymn in Shembe’s time wrote it as it is in the Bible:

Baba wethu oseZulwini
Malihlonishwe igama lakho
Umbuso wakho mawuze,
Intando yakho mayenziwe
Lapha emhlabeni njengaseZulwini.
Amen. Amen.

[Our Father who is in heaven
May your name be hallowed
Your kingdom come
Your will be done
Here on earth as it is in heaven.
Amen. Amen.]

The presence of this hymn in the hymn book, alongside the other ones, especially the one discussed below – hymn No. 58 – sheds some useful light on Shembe’s remembering of the Bible in his hymns. He took a biblical text and sang it. But since the biblical texts he sang were the ones that interested him more than others, he also reworked them to create the hymns that dealt with his own concerns, using such texts as the basis. Hymn No. 58 is one of those hymns Shembe appropriated from a biblical text and made speak to his own situation. It is used (and I think was used by Isaiah Shembe) in healing services, and draws upon not just Matthew 6: 9- 13 but also upon John 14, especially verses 16- 19:

*Baba wethu oseZulwini
Ngisebusweni bakho
Aliphathwe ngobungcwele
Lelo gama lakho*

Chorus: *Umoya wakho mawuze Nkosi
Ubaphilise abantu bakho.*

*Intando yakho mayenziwe
Lapha emhlabeni
NjengaseZulwini
Lapha siya khona.*

Chorus:

*Lowo owasethembisa wona
NgoJesu Krestu iNkosi
Wathi awuyukusishiya sisodwa
Uyosithumelela umoya oyingcwele.*

Chorus:

[Our Father who is in heaven
I am before you
May it be handled as holy
That name of yours.

Chorus: May your spirit come
And heal your people.

May your will be done
Here on earth
As in heaven

Where we are going.

Chorus:

That which you promised us
Through Jesus Christ the Lord
You said you wouldn't leave us by ourselves
But you would send us the Holy Spirit.

Chorus:]

The first stanza alludes to Matthew 6 verse 9, where the first line is adopted as it is from the Bible. But Shembe inserts his own words in the second line. The persona here speaks in the first person singular while in the biblical text the plural is used from beginning to end. This is a way of Shembe emphasising his singularity as a prophet even though he speaks on behalf of the others. In the next two lines he returns to the biblical text, but uses his own words to deliver the same meaning as that which is in the biblical text. The significance of this is unclear, but it may suggest that Shembe is claiming this text as his own: that it belongs to whomever else while it is in the Bible, but in his hymns it belongs to him. Perhaps as a way of showing that this is now his, he shifts from Matthew to John in inserting his chorus. But the chorus merely alludes to this text, asking for its fulfilment rather than anything else. Shembe is saying that Jesus made a promise and now is the time for that promise to be fulfilled. This chorus is important also because it locates the hymn in the context of its performance in the healing service. The holy spirit is not just called, but is called for the purpose of healing people.

Stanza two returns to Matthew 6 verse 10, but presents it in a 're-membered' manner. This text reads in the Bible: "*Umbuso wako ma u ze; intando yako ma e nziwe emhlabeni njengaseZulwini.*" [Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as in heaven.] In Shembe's hymn there is emphasis added in the form of demonstratives *lapha* (here) and *lapho* (there). Shembe emphasises the fact that as he speaks he is still on earth and is addressing God who is in Heaven where he and others will go sometime. In the hymn book the words are written incorrectly though.

It is “*lapho emhlabeni*” [there on earth] and “*lapha siyakhona*” [where we are headed/ here where we are headed]. But I have heard some members singing the hymn not as it is written but as it should be written. The third and last stanza moves forward to John 14 again. The Holy Spirit that is called for was promised by Jesus Christ, but Jesus Christ as he was inspired by God. In this statement Shembe is suggesting that Jesus and God are the same, that what Jesus said was in fact said by God. This is in fact Jesus’ own claim in John 14 verse 11: “*Kolwani imi ukuti ngikubaba, nobaba ukimi: uma kungenjalo, kolwani imi ngalemisebenzi*” [Believe me that I am in my father and my father is in me: if not so, believe me by these deeds.]

Shembe’s shift from one biblical text to the next which happens in the above hymn serves to prove that he indeed knew his Bible. This also happens in many other hymns. Hymn No. 5 is a good example. This is one of the few hymns in which Jesus is mentioned by his name and he seems to be foregrounded as an individual: this is the only hymn throughout the hymn book in which Jesus’ name appears in the first stanza: “*Nina abathanda ukuphila/Emhlambini kaJesu/ Khumbulani ingcindezi yendlela/Eya ngasekhaya.*” [Those of you who’d like to live/ Under Jesus’ flock/ Remember the strain/ Of the way home.] The first two lines are Shembe’s own words that identify and isolate the group for whom the whole hymn is intended. Shembe here is addressing the people who would like to live as Jesus’ followers, and at the same time is making a statement about his own Church: that it is an authentic Christian Church. Making such a statement was important for him because he was accused of leading people astray.

The rest of the stanza (lines four and five), as well as the whole hymn, draws upon Jesus’ words in his Sermon on the Mount. This is taken from different chapters and verses in Matthew’s text. Here Shembe reiterates Jesus’ words and in a way grounds those words as well as Jesus as the foundation for membership in his Church. To be a member of the Nazaretha Church, one has to be prepared for the difficulties involved. These may refer to the rules that have to be adhered to by the Nazaretha and the fact that ubuNazaretha itself was a kind of a struggle against the mission churches and the state. The last two lines of the first stanza aim to prepare members for the predicaments they may encounter, and these lines also encourage members to hold on until the end. But to give more strength to his message Shembe draws upon a biblical

idiom in the form of Jesus' teaching on the mountain. This is taken from Matthew 7 verse 13-14: "*Ngenani ngesango elincinyane; li kulu isango, nendhlela I banzi e ya ekubujisweni; bebaningi aba ngena ngalo. 14 Lincinyane isango, nendhlela i umcingo e ya ekupileni, ba incozana aba I fumanayo.*" [Enter through the small gate; the gate is small, and the path is wide that leads to hell; there are many who enter through it. 14 The gate is small, and the path that leads to life is narrow, there are few who find it.]

Stanza two also draws upon the above text. While in the last two lines of the first stanza Shembe urges his people to "remember" (*Kumbulani*) what Jesus said, in stanza two he expands on Jesus' words. As a result, the path is not just narrow, but because of its being small, it beats the cowards. And the gate is not just narrow, but since it is small, one has to enter through it with strength. This "*ngamandla*" (with strength) may also mean "using high speed", meaning one has to enter the gate quickly:

*Umkhondo mncinyane
Wehlula amagwala;
Nesango lincinyane
Lingenwa ngamandla.*

[The track is narrow
It beats the cowards;
And the gate is small
It is entered with strength.]

By expanding on what Jesus said, Shembe claims this text (as well as other texts) for himself: that he has as much right to interpret Jesus' words as anybody else and can give them his own meaning if need be. In the first line of stanza two Shembe chooses to use the noun "*umkhondo*" instead of "*indlela*" that is written in the Bible. The meaning of these nouns is related, but *umkhondo* has a deeper meaning as it does not just mean path as *indlela* does, but it means "track", which I think is harder to find than a path as it is less well defined. This may be Shembe's way of stating that his way, or the Nazaretha way, is more difficult than Jesus' way.

In stanza three Shembe continues to expand on Jesus' words. Here he draws upon Matthew 8 verse 20 where Jesus talks about his sense of alienation and homelessness. But here too, as Jesus in his text says the birds have places to stay but he does not, Shembe adds in his text that the birds, since they have shelter, live comfortably: "*Izinyoni zinezindlu/ Zihlala kamnandi/ Kepha uJesu kanandawo/ Lapha engahlala khona.*" [The birds have huts/ they live comfortably/ But Jesus has no place/ Where he can stay.] In this stanza Shembe talks about his own sense of alienation and homelessness. This stanza echoes hymn No. 1 "*Nkosi sikelela ubaba*" [Lord Protect Father] which laments the fact that Shembe wanders all over the place, having no place of his own:

*Nkosi sikelela ubaba
Noma ezula ezintabeni
Engenayo indawo yakhe
Elala emahlathini.*

[Lord protect Father
Even as he wanders in the mountains
Having no place of his own
Sleeping in the forests.]

Stanzas three and four allude to Matthew 10 verse 38, "*O nga tabati isipambano sake, angilandele ka ngi fanele*" [Whoever does not take his cross and follow me, is not suitable for me], and draw upon Matthew 16 verse 24 which reads: "*kona uJesu wa ti kubafundi bake, Uma umuntu e tanda ukuza emva kwami, a zidele, a tabate isipambano sake a ngi landele.*" [Then Jesus said to his disciples, if a person wants to follow me, he must dedicate himself, take his cross and follow me.]:

*Abathanda ukumlandela
Mabazidele kuqala.
Bangayesabi imiyalo
Ephelisa amandla.*

Bathabathe isiphambano

Emahlombe abo,

Basifele isethembiso

Abasethenjiswayo.

[Those who want to follow him
They must dedicate themselves first,
And fear not the rules
That drain one's strength.

They must take the cross
On their shoulders'
And die for the promise
They were promised.]

Conclusion

My purpose in examining the way in which Isaiah Shembe appropriates the Bible in his hymns is to show that the hymns are not a response to colonialism but they are Shembe's articulation of his own ideas and views about the issues that concerned him. He used and appropriated Christian forms because they were available to him, and did so in a way that empowered him and helped him articulate his views. I have shown in this chapter that Shembe did what West calls 're-membering' the Bible. This re-membering allows Shembe to claim the Bible for himself and his followers, and to interpret it in a manner relevant to him and his context. This reading accords with Musa Dube's assertion about post-colonial readings of the Bible, which she maintains must, "decolonize the biblical text, its interpretations, its readers, its institutions, as well as seeking ways of reading for liberating interdependence" (1998: 133). The implication of this appropriation of the Bible for the question of response and resistance to colonialism is that while Shembe rejected orthodox Christianity advocated by the missionaries, he accepted the Bible, even though he had his own way of understanding and interpreting it.

CHAPTER THREE

Circumcision, Marriage and the Notion of (In)Completeness

Because the sacred dance is regarded as a form of worship in the Nazaretha church, participation in it is exclusive to those members of the church who are considered ritually clean. This exclusivity only involves the sacred dance in great meetings where the congregation meets in the presence of the church's leader, Shembe. This dance is referred to as "*umgidi wabantu bonke*" (the dance of all people) which the leader announces following the afternoon service of the Sabbath¹⁴ preceding the Sunday of the dance. If the sacred dance is to be on Tuesday or Thursday, the evangelist who is the speaker of the church (or of the church's leader) announces it after the evening prayer of the day before the dance. Because the word for this dance can only come from the leader, he announces it on Shembe's behalf, saying: *Lithi izwi leNkosi, umgidi wabantu bonke kusasa*. (The word of the iNkosi says it's the sacred dance of all people tomorrow). This means it is the dance of all the three divisional groupings in the church: *inhlalisuthi* (men); *intaba yepheza* (virgin girls); and *ujamengweni* (married women).

Women who have husbands but are not 'properly' married to them, and girls who are no longer virgins (nowadays it is doubtful that all the girls who partake in the sacred dance are virgins, but those who do, do it unlawfully), and men who are not properly married to their wives or have children outside marriage are not supposed to dress in the dance attire of their group and to dance with them. They can only join the group to help with singing, hand clapping and playing the instruments. But in the overnight meetings of *u-twenty-three*, *ufotini* and *u-twenty-five*, in weddings and in *vukanathi* (wake up with us) meetings (where members of the church are invited to a particular home for the morning service, usually there is a sacred dance after these services), this law of limitation does not work.

The law of exclusion is maintained because the sacred dance in the Nazaretha church is regarded as occupying both the physical and the spiritual realms. As Mthethwa states, when the sacred dance has been announced (he is talking about the "sacred dance of all people"), it cannot be cancelled because "the call is made to both

¹⁴ The Sabbath for the Nazarites is on Saturday.

the living and the deceased members of the church. Once invited, they cannot be denied” (Mthethwa, 1996: 1). For this reason those who take part in the sacred dance of all people have to be complete, to be without blemish. In this chapter I look at two ritual forms that are related to the notion of completeness, namely, male circumcision and marriage.

One of the misrepresentations in Muller’s book that this study aims to correct is that she suggests that the “denial of sexual desire” is exclusive to virgin girls:

The prophet Isaiah Shembe used his knowledge of the mission bible and the mythical power of virgin girls to win his battles against the racist state. Political struggle assumed form as spiritual and moral warfare, with the virgin girls as the frontline warriors. The cost of this protection of female adherents, however, was the denial of sexual desire. In this context, sacrifice was reinvented in terms of an innovative combination of Old Testament and Nguni traditional practice, and located in the purity of young women’s bodies. (1999: xix)

With regards to her emphasis on Isaiah Shembe using women’s performances and rituals to “win his battles against the state”, West has challenged Muller, maintaining that, “Within the literary liturgical setting of the Rule, the enemies of Jephthah/Israel/Shembe/Ibandla lamaNazaretha are not given prominence. What is given prominence is the integral relationship between members of the community, specifically, Shembe, the Nazarite maidens, their parents, the coming generations, the indirectly invoked biblical witness of Moses, David, Jesus and the apostles, the directly cited presence of Jephthah and his daughter, and God” (West, 2006: 504). The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that in fact the sacrifice of sexual desire obtains in both women and men, and has to do with ritual performances having a physical and spiritual significance, the performers performing for the audience of both the living and the dead. I argue that Muller overemphasises the role these rituals and performances of young women (and men, in some cases) play in ‘political struggle’ and ignores the actual motivation for those who perform them.

The Sacrifice of Flesh and Blood: Male Circumcision

I stated elsewhere (Sithole, 2005) that some of the stories (I was referring to the narratives of near-death experiences) in the Nazaretha church, once told, cease to belong to the people who experienced them and become part of the church's cultural capital that circulates within the church in sermons and conversations. Some dream experiences take that form, depending on what they are about. One such story is of a man who went to be circumcised and when he came back he had a dream. He saw himself in a wild area where he was following a group of people he did not recognise. A voice asked him if he knew the people and he said he did not. The voice then told him that the people he saw were the spirits of his dead relatives. They had been 'living' in the cave for many years because the man's uncle had *thwala*-ed with them (an act of witchcraft which is like sacrificing people to the evil spirits, so that a dead person's soul does not go to heaven or to its ancestors but is kept and used by the person who did *ukuthwala*). But because this man had gone to be circumcised, he had freed them from his uncle's hold and they were now on the way to heaven.

As this story shows, dreams occupy an important role in the lives of amaNazaretha, and many of them are regarded as a form of communication with the ancestors. But this story also points to the sense in which through ritual practice (circumcision in this case) the divide between the physical and the spiritual realms is removed, so that the sacrifice of blood and flesh of a living person can bring about the liberation of the spiritual beings in their own realm. I suggest that here lies an important motivation for Nazaretha men, through a very painful experience, to sacrifice their own blood and flesh. They do it because they hope to create a heaven for their own relatives who have passed on and at the same time create a heaven for themselves. As the voice in the story mentioned above added: "You too will see heaven if you keep the rules of God".

However, circumcision in the Nazaretha Church is also explained in terms of Abraham's covenant with God in the book of Genesis in the Old Testament. In the 'old' Zulu version favoured in the church (published in 1883, West 2007), Genesis 17 verse 10-14 details this covenant as follows:

Lesi siyisivumelwano sami phakati kwami nawe nenzalo yako emva kwako, eni ya kusi gcina: Baya kusokwa bonke abesilisa bakini. 11 Niya kusoka inyama yejwabu lenu; ku be upau lwesivumelwano pakati kwami nani. 12 U ya kusokwa lowo wakini onezinsuku ezishiyagalombili, bonke abesilisa ezizukulwaneni zenu, lowo ozaliweyo endhlini, na lowo otengiweyo ngemali kubafokazi bonke, e ngesiyo inzalo yako. 13 U yakusokwa nokusokwa yena ozalwe endlini no tengwe ngemali yenu, si be yisivumelwano esinganqamukiyo. 14 Owesilisa o nga sokiwe, o nga soki inyama yejwabu lake, lomuntu u ya kukitywa kubantu ba kubo, weqe isivumelwano sami.

[This is my covenant between me and you and your posterity after you, which you will keep: All of your males will be circumcised. 11 You will circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; to be a symbol of the covenant between you and me. 12 He will be circumcised that of you who is eight days old, all the males in your posterity, the one born in the house, and the one bought with money from all foreigners, not being of your offspring. 13 He will be circumcised he who is born in the house and the one bought with your money, it will be a covenant that cannot break. 14 A male person who is not circumcised, who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, this person will be removed from his people, he broke my covenant.]

Muller has noted that Shembe combined “his deep knowledge of the mission bible with his respect for traditional Nguni ways, and with some knowledge of commodity capitalism, he constituted a new and hybrid regime of religious truth (Foucault 1980) in competition with ideologies of the state and Christian mission” (1999: 19). Circumcision is one form of ritual practice that Shembe appropriated and gave new meaning. As the biblical text above shows, circumcision in Israel was meant to be a symbol of a covenant between a person and God, and boys had to be circumcised at the age of eight days. In the Nazaretha Church the youngest boy circumcised is at least ten years old (which itself is very rare), but it is mostly matured young men (and adult men) who go for circumcision. This is because this ritual is not just an appropriation of the biblical text but it is also part of an African traditional rite. In pre-Shakan Zulu society young men used to be circumcised in the ‘African’ way. Here,

circumcision was a rite of passage in which young men of a certain age would go to the bush to be circumcised and taught the ways of the tribe, and then come back as men. Shaka thought this practice was weakening young men whom he wanted to conscript for his regiments and therefore he put an end to this tradition. As Funani puts it, “Shaka, having placed Zulu people on the war footing, could not afford to have armies incapacitated by circumcision and stopped it. But, great psychologist that he was, he substituted service in *amabutho* as a condition of entry into manhood. Note that Shaka and his generation were all circumcised” (Funani, 1990: vi). So in introducing circumcision Shembe was both importing a ritual practice from Israel and at the same time reinstating a tradition that had been lost in the time of Shaka.

In the Nazaretha church circumcision is a new hybrid form that does not fit either the kind of circumcision practised in Israel or the kind practised in pre-Shakan Zulu society and in the present day South African societies that still practise it. As the story mentioned above of a Nazaretha young man who went for circumcision and had a dream shows, circumcision in the Nazaretha Church is linked to African religion in a way that pre-Shakan circumcision and circumcision in other African societies was (and is) not. The next section of this chapter looks at circumcision in pre-colonial African society, and then I look at circumcision in the Nazaretha Church.

Circumcision among the South African Communities

Although there is not enough information about its distribution, circumcision in southern African societies was (and is) more of a social practice than a religious one. Writing in 1936, Krige had this to say about the distribution of circumcision in South Africa: “The present distribution of circumcision cannot be fully plotted out, owing to complete lack of information on many tribes” (Quoted in van der Vliet: 1974: 228). She goes on to list ethnic groups that still practised it. Among these are Xhosa, Thembu, Fingo and Bomvana, some of the Tswana tribes, the Southern Sotho, and the Pedi, to mention but a few. As for the Zulus, van der Vliet mentions that “the Zulu cut the string under the foreskin at about nine years of age, but this is not a ritual occasion” (228).

In most of the African societies in the subcontinent that practised it, circumcision was perceived to be the rite of passage through which a boy becomes a man. As Funani states, “In Africa circumcision is associated with male initiation into manhood” (1990: 22). Nelson Mandela, in *Long Walk to Freedom*, emphasises the same fact about the role of circumcision among the Xhosa:

When I was sixteen, the regent decided that it was time that I became a man. In Xhosa tradition, this is achieved through one means only: circumcision. In my tradition, an uncircumcised male cannot be heir to his father’s wealth, cannot marry or officiate in tribal rituals. An uncircumcised Xhosa man is a contradiction in terms, for he is not considered a man at all, but a boy. For the Xhosa people, circumcision represents the formal incorporation of males into society. It is not just a surgical procedure, but a lengthy and elaborate ritual in preparation for manhood. As a Xhosa, I count my years as a man from the date of my circumcision. (1994: 24)

Because circumcision represented incorporation into manhood, Mandela and his fellow initiates were urged to cry, “*Ndiyindoda!*” (I am a man!), after the actual operation and it was considered a disgrace (at least Nelson Mandela felt this way) if one succumbed to pain. Mandela admits that the pain he felt was so intense that it took seconds before he remembered to utter the word “*Ndiyindoda*” and this hurt his feelings: “But I felt ashamed because the other boys seemed much stronger and firmer than I had been; they had called out more promptly than I had. I was distressed that I was disabled, however briefly, by the pain, and I did my best to hide my agony. A boy may cry; a man conceals his pain” (1994: 26). And also the novices were subjected to different kinds of hardships and ordeals to test resilience against the trials of life and at the same time strengthen them for their future duties of manhood. These hardships included beatings, sleeping on the floor, bathing with cold water (the initiations were normally held in winter to ensure that the wounds healed quickly) and others.

Jean Comaroff states about initiation among the Tswana that, “On the evening when the moon of *Mophitlho* (March) was seen all the boys to be initiated proceeded in ward groups to the chief’s court, where they spent the night in song and dance”

(1985: 89-90). In the morning the boys were escorted to their lodge in the bush where they were circumcised on the day of arrival. No woman or uninitiated man was allowed even to see the lodge and their presence was considered defiling. Those who did come to the lodge were required to refrain from sexual intercourse for the duration of the initiation because “it was critical that initiates be kept away from the heat generated by adult sexuality” (90). Another important feature of initiation was the education bestowed on the novices. For the Sotho groups, including the Tswana, van der Vliet states that the education emphasized loyalty to the tribe and the values, rights and obligations of citizenship (1974).

Circumcision in the Nazaretha Church

In the Nazaretha church, apart from the link it creates between the physical and the ancestral worlds, circumcision is also a mode of personal cleansing and of creating a way to heaven. This understanding does not tally with either the biblical text mentioned above or circumcision in Xhosa and Tswana traditions. In both the Israelite and African traditions no link is made between circumcision and entering heaven, even though in the case of the Israelites it signifies a covenant between them and God. But since the Bible has a significant place in the church of amaNazaretha, and Isaiah Shembe “seized and reconstituted the bible” as much as it also took hold of him and drew him (and his followers, I argue) to its narrative (West, 2007: 494), and because African tradition plays an important role in the Church, the question of whether circumcision should be explained in African terms or in biblical terms is a complex one that is hard to resolve. Some members of the church view this practice as a biblical one and want it to be practised according to scripture. As a man called Mlaba said in an *u*-twenty-three meeting of February 2008 held in the homestead of the Chunu Chief of Mandleni in Mdubuzweni area near Mooi River:

Njengoba silapha sengathi uNkulunkulu engasisiza siphelele. Bese siya ebhekinqola. Kukhona into eshiwo ngabantu kodwa uNkulunkulu akayishongo. Uma ngabe sifunda incwadi kaGenesisi, uthi uGenesisi ingane uma ngabe kweyomfana iyozalwa, kuphele izinsuku zibe wuseveni, ngalolu luka eyithi, uthi ayihambe iye ebhekinqola iyosokwa. Usho njalo uNkulunkulu kodwa abantu bathi ayize ibe ndala. Bathi ayifanele ukuthi

ingane iye lapha. Okwethu-ke lokho, okwabantu. Ziyaya nje izingane sezindala laphaya? Azifuni, sezazi namalungelo. Sinayo nje ingqekana le ngeke usho ukuthi ayiye le. Kodwa ingane uma iseyingane, akekho zinsizwa njengoba silapha onelungelo lokwenza isono ngoba akayile ebhekinqola. Kukhona yini lapho kushiwo khona wuShembe lokho ukuthi uma umuntu engakayi ebhekinqola ena ukhululekile ukuthi akenze izono? Hhay, asimusukhohlisana. Asiyenzeni lento, njengoba uNkulunkulu eshilo. Uthi uNkulunkulu yenza uphawu lube yisivumelwane sakhe. Uma lengane ingasabi ndala? Uthi uNkulunkulu ingane ayizalwe wuNkosikazi, izinsuku eziwuseveni, ngalolu luka eyithi, ayihambe iyokhula. Kodwa-ke okwethu thina Bantu wukuthi ingane ayibe ndala.

[As we are here I wish God can help us be complete. And go to Bhekinqola (a place of circumcision in the Nazaretha Church). There is something that is said by people but God did not say it. If we read Genesis, Genesis says if a child is born a boy, he will be born, and after seven days, in this eighth one, He says [the child] should go to Bhekinqola to be circumcised. That is what God says, our people say [the child] needs to be grown. They say a child is not supposed to go there. That is of ours, it's of the people. Do the children when they are grown go there? They do not want, now that they have rights. We do have these gangs of children but you cannot tell them to go there. But if a child is still a child, there is no one, young men, as we are here who has a right to commit sin because he has not gone to Bhekinqola. Is it there where Shembe says that if a man has not gone to Bhekinqola he is free to commit sin? No. Let's not lie to each other, let's do this thing as God said. God says create a symbol to be His covenant. What if this child does not get old? God says a child be born by a woman, seven days, and in this eighth one, [the child] must go to *khula* (to grow up). But ours, we people, is that the child must be grown up.]

But even in this formulation of Mlaba's the role of circumcision is still linked to the traditional practice of circumcision. His comments about circumcision, for instance, are prefaced by a statement that links circumcision to the notion of completeness that obtains in both the African and the Nazaretha ways of understanding: that if a man

has not been circumcised, he is not a man, he is still a boy and he is incomplete. He also refers to it as *ukukhula*, meaning to grow up, also showing that this practice is seen as a rite of passage through which a boy becomes a man. This shifting understanding of circumcision, from the biblical to the traditional, is common in the Nazaretha Church. In an *u*-twenty-three meeting of April 2008, Moses Hadebe of Nkonzenjani Temple in Ntabamhlophe near Estcourt also talked about circumcision as something that Shembe appropriated from the Bible. But in his formulation he also relates circumcision to its significance as an African ritual practice:

Imithetho yalayikhaya inzima kabi ngoba sisenkolweni kaJesu. UShembe wazosifaka ngaphansi kwenkolo kaJesu kodwa abanye abazi ukuthi uShembe wazosifaka ngaphansi kwenkolo kaJesu. Izinkolo lezi eziningi azazi ukuthi safakwa ngaphansi komthetho kaJesu. UJesu wenziwa klini ene seven days. Enezinsuku eziwuseveni wase useyenziwa-ke lowomthetho. Nathi-ke uthe uma efika uShembe wasibuyisela kulowomthetho. Wokuthi asibuyele emthethweni kaJesu ngoba singaphansi kwenkolo kaJesu. Ngokufika kwalomthetho ubungavumi ukuthi noma wubani afunde umbhedesho wesabatha. Kwakufuneka umuntu okhulile. Kukhona ukukhula okwenziwayo kulenkonzongoba kuthiwa nenkosi uBabamkhulu watholakala eshleli le lapha kuya khona izinsizwa. Kukhona indawana lapha kuya khona izinsizwa, ziyaqiniswa ukhakhayi ukuba zibe yizinsizwa saka. Manje-ke sasithi uma sifika kwenye indawo eGoli ethi amaXhosa uyoze ufe uyikhwenkwe njengoyihlo. Manje-ke sesiyawaphikisa sithi cha noma ningasho nithi niyoze nife ningamakhwenkwe njengoyihlo kodwa ubaba akalona ihkwenkwe futhi nami angiselona ngoba kwafika uShembe wathi asenze kanje.

[The laws of this home are difficult because we are in Jesus' religion. Shembe came to put us under Jesus' religion but others do not know that Shembe came to put us under Jesus' religion. Jesus was made clean (was circumcised) when he was seven days old. When he was seven days then this law was performed. Here also when Shembe came he returned us to that law which means we should return to Jesus' law because we are under Jesus' law. Because of the coming of this law it was not allowed

for just anyone to read the hymn book. It had to be somebody who is grown up (circumcised). There is *ukukhula* that is done here, you Nazaretha, in this church because it is said that the *inkosi Babamkhulu* was found sitting there where the young men go. Now when we used to arrive in another place in Johannesburg the amaXhosa would say “you will die boys (*amakhwenkwe*) as your fathers”. Now we negate them saying, “no you can say we will die boys as our fathers, but our fathers are not boys and I also am no longer a boy because Shembe arrived and said we should do like this.”]

The last comment Hadebe made about the Xhosa and their circumcision is interesting here and may point us to one possible explanation for Shembe’s reincorporation of circumcision in the Nazaretha Church. It is clear from Mandela’s account, and others, that circumcision among the people who performed it was very important in the constitution of masculine identities, and an uncircumcised man was relegated to boyhood. So, for Shembe who was born a Zulu but grew up in the Free State among the Sotho who still practised circumcision, it is possible that he himself grew up under scorn as someone whose father was a boy and who himself would die a boy as happened to Hadebe and his fellow Zulus in Johannesburg.

In the Nazaretha Church, as is the case with the Xhosa according to Mandela, there are certain rituals that exclude everyone who is uncircumcised. Hadebe mentions one of these as reading the prayer in the hymnal. The communion is another ritual for only complete people, and this, for men, means both being properly married and being circumcised. Also, one is not allowed to take part in a number of chores in the church including the slaughtering of cows for the meeting if one is not circumcised.

But what seems to be unique in the Nazaretha Church is circumcision as ritual cleansing. The reason why Mlaba emphasises that no one is allowed to commit sin even if one is not circumcised is that it is considered worse to commit sin when you have been circumcised because when you are circumcised you are believed to be cleansed. You are cleansing yourself and your ancestors, and therefore defiling yourself defiles your ancestors as well because, as I mentioned earlier, the ritual of circumcision is believed to bridge the gap between the physical world and the

ancestral world. One way a man can defile himself and his ancestors is by sleeping with a woman he is not married to. This is called *ukuhlobonga* and is prohibited for any man in the church, but the prohibition is especially emphasised for those who have been circumcised. If a circumcised man engages in pre-marital sex, his sanctity attained through circumcision is lost. It is equal to “uncircumcising” oneself. As Minister Mthethwa said, drawing on the biblical narrative of Samson:

USamsoni wagundwa wuDelila. Yingakho kungafanele umfana walapha ekhaya alale nokadebenetha. Ngoba uma uke walala nokade benetha uzobuthatha bonke ubustrongi balesisihluthu, ukade benetha. Abuthathe ahambe. Nokusokwa kwakho kuzospaya. Walala nje nokade benetha, finish indaba yakho! Ushaywa wumuntu ngempama uwe. Ulale nokade benetha.

[Samson’s hair was cut by Delilah. That is why boys of this church/home should not sleep with *kadebenetha* (women who are not members of the church) because if he sleeps with *kadebenetha* she will take away all the strength of his long hair. *Kadebenetha* will take it and leave. And his circumcision too will be expired. If you sleep with *kadebenetha* you are finished. You will be slapped by a person in the face and you will fall. You slept with *kadebenetha*.] (Personal communication, July 2008).

Hymn No. 18 in the Nazaretha hymnal also talks about circumcision and links it with ritual cleansing and paving the path to heaven:

*Amaqhawwe kaThixo ayazikhethela
Asuke ashiye umlaza
Ngokwenele abangcwele
Ngamukele ngethemba
Gcwalisa inhliziyo yami.*

*Sengihlanjululwe nguwe wedwa
Angisamdingi omunye futhi
Ngamukele ngethemba
Gcwalisa inhliziyo yami*

*Abasokwa ngokwanele ngokuyithanda inkosi
Bachaba indlela eya ekhaya
Ngamukele ngethemba
Gcwalisa inhliziyo yami.*

*Wesihambi mawungesabi
Uzobelethwa nguThixo
Ngemihla yokuqala neyokuphela.
Ngamukele ngethemba
Gcwalisa inhliziyo yami.*

[God's heroes make their own choices
They tend to leave *umlaza*
As it suits the holy ones.
Receive me with hope
And fulfil my heart.

I've been cleansed by you alone
I do not need another one
Receive me with hope
And fulfil my heart.

Those circumcised enough
Because of their love for *iNkosi*.
They weed the path to the home
Receive me with hope
And fulfil my heart.

You traveller, don't be afraid
God will carry you on His back
During the first days and the last ones.
Receive me with hope

And fulfil my heart.]

According to this hymn, being circumcised makes one a hero because it is a very painful experience and one has to overcome fear before one can be circumcised (some people succumb to fear and return from Bhekinqola uncircumcised). But circumcised people are also heroes because if you get circumcised you commit yourself to living a holy life. Living a holy life means you do not eat unclean food like pork; you do not drink alcohol; you do not cut your hair; but most importantly, you do not sleep with a woman who is not your wife. As Mthethwa said above, engaging in pre- or extra-marital sex undoes (“expires it”, in his words) your being circumcised, and many people have been circumcised more than once because they had pre- or extra-marital sex and had to redo circumcision.

Those who join the church already circumcised have to be circumcised again in the Nazaretha way because in being circumcised outside the church they were not cleansed by Him (God of the Nazaretha) as stanza two says. This (cleansing in the Nazaretha Church) is the ultimate cleansing after which one does not need another cleanser. But one must confess before being circumcised so that all his sins (and those of his ancestors) will be cleansed. Thus when we were to be circumcised in 1999 (I was not doing it for research!) we had to start by confessing. We were told to wear our prayer gowns and one after the other we went to the circumciser, who was sitting few metres away from us, for confessions. Unlike normal confession where you volunteer what wrong you committed, here the circumciser asked me (and the others I presume) if I had ever slept with another man’s wife; if I had ever slept with a white person (or a person of another race)¹⁵; if I had ever engaged in pre-marital sex; if I had ever slept with another man; and lastly he asked if I had ever masturbated.

Where I answered in the negative, he said “God bless you”, and if I responded in the affirmative I had to pay a fine of between two and six rand. Then he ritually cleansed me. I had come with a flower and a container, which was an empty milk container, with water. I had to hold my hands together and he poured water on them twice, each time telling me to spill it. On the third time he told me to wash my hands.

¹⁵ Inter-racial sexual relationships and marriages are prohibited in the Nazaretha Church.

Then I had to hold the flower with both my hands and he held my hands in his and started praying. After this he said “God bless you” and I was ready to go and wait for the final moment.

Cleansing ensures that God is able to come closer to the person and even to carry him/her over to the next life. The metaphor of a traveller, in stanza four of the hymn quoted above, works in two related ways. The first one is that we as living people are only here on earth on a temporary basis, that at some point we will pass on to another realm. This is echoed in hymn No. 137 :

Kuhle inyama yami ihlupheke
Ukuze inhliziyo ikhumbule
Ukuthi akusilo ikhaya leli
Kuyidokodo lomhambi.

[It is fitting that my flesh suffers
So that my heart will remember
That this is not home
It is a makeshift room of a traveller.]

But even while we are still here on earth, if we are cleansed by “him alone” we are ensured an easier and better life in which God will carry our burdens and hardships. Related to this sense is the notion of a traveller in heaven. One of the tropes that characterises the narratives of near-death experiences in the Nazaretha Church is ‘the journey’ in which the person having a near-death experience sees/feels him- or herself travelling, sometimes through green pastures and sometimes having to cross rivers and climb mountains. So according to stanza four, if you are cleansed the spirit of God will carry your spirit on the way to heaven. But if you are defiled, you cannot be in close proximity with God. Not even with Shembe.¹⁶

¹⁶ There is a story of a girl of Dlamini near Estcourt who passed away for a few hours and then was resurrected. It is said that she called her father and told everyone there that she had passed away and had seen Shembe on the other side. Shembe said he was going to show her jails in heaven but he ordered her to maintain a distance from him because he said she was unclean (she had two illegitimate children).

Now I complete this section by telling the rest of my story of circumcision, hoping to show how this practice is similar to and different from circumcision in African society¹⁷. So after cleansing it was time for the actual operation which is the most challenging part of the process. There were only four of us because it was Tuesday and many had been circumcised on Saturday afternoon. We enviously watched these moving up and down, limping, due to their wounds, and wearing their towels. Reflecting on that experience now, and each time I visit the initiates at Bhekinqola, I am fascinated by the commitment and determination one has to command in order to stay there till the end. When we went to our initiator to receive two bandages each, one fastened around the waist and the other anointed with some antiseptic that we were to take to the ‘place of operation’, I could feel my heart pounding and my legs felt as if they were going to collapse.

If those who undergo circumcision do it for the love of their *iNkosi* as suggested by stanza three, it means their love is really strong. And this love is indeed for the *iNkosi* of heaven whom they are hoping to meet when they pass away. As you are standing there waiting for your turn, you think about pain, you think about death, you think about running away! But the heroes of God make their own choices. The four of us, like the thousands who had gone before us, chose to stay and face whatever was coming. The three of us were singing as one man had gone into the little forest where our circumciser was waiting for us with his razor blade.

When it was my turn (I went in second) I had not thought about safety measures and diseases like AIDS that one can contract if cut with a razor blade that had cut a person who had it. But I was pleasantly surprised when I saw our initiator wearing clean gloves and putting away those that he had worn while ‘working’ on the man who went in first. He also took out a new razor blade. By this time I had lost control of my body. I was very tense and even today I do not know why, and how was it that I was smiling. All I know is that it was not me!

The cutting was so fast and sharp that for a second I did not feel the pain. When it did come it was so intense it felt as if it was not just coming from the cutting of the

¹⁷ Note especially the uttering of the words “Stay here boy I am now a man” when burying the foreskin, and the way this is similar to what Mandela and other Xhosas said immediately after the operation.

foreskin, it was as if my body was cut in half. But it lasted for a surprisingly short time. As he was bandaging me, I was feeling the pain one feels from a normal cut. Then, covered in a white cloth that had red spots of my own blood, our initiator gave me my foreskin. I went out of the forest, and as told, looked for little holes that had been dug just outside the forest. I found them and chose one that was to be the grave of my foreskin. I buried it, and as my initiator had instructed me, I said: *Sala mfana sengiyindoda!* [Stay here boy I am now a man!] And indeed I felt like a man as I went to join the other initiates who had already been circumcised. As I went, with my legs wider apart than usual, I was thinking about God. I was thinking about God the creator who created all things and all that is in the world. I was thinking about God who created me and my parents and my grand parents and theirs. I thought about a group of many spirits who might be saved as a result of my pain. I felt spiritually empowered. I was a complete *Nazaretha* man!

Marriage and Completeness

Marriage is important in the Nazaretha Church both as an institution and as a ritual. It is through marriage that men can become complete because even if one is circumcised, there is always a question of whether or not one is married. Not being married does not mean that one cannot take part in the sacred dance or the holy communion. If one has a child with a woman one is not married to, or is living with a woman one is not properly married to, then one is considered unfit to take part in those holy gatherings. Also, the way in which a man who had a child with a woman he is not married to or a woman who had a child out of wedlock can become complete is to get married. But it is important to examine the institution of marriage as it happened in Zulu society before *ubuNazaretha*. The reason for this is that such an examination can help us understand what Shembe appropriated from the ‘traditional’ marriage and maybe from the ‘Western’ one.

Marriage in Precolonial Nguni Society and its Appropriation in the Nazaretha Church

Muller (1999) states, drawing on Jeff Guy's work, that the institution of marriage played an important role in the African precolonial homestead economy. She quotes at length Guy's description of this African precolonial homestead economy:

The homestead was made up of a man, his cattle, and small stock, his wife or wives and their children, grouped in their different houses, each with its own arable land. Materially these homesteads were self-sufficient, subsisting on the cereals produced by the agricultural labour of women as well as the milk products of the homestead's herd. Animal husbandry was the domain of men, most of the labour time being expended by boys in herding. There was a clear sexual division of labour under the control of the husband/father, who allocated arable land for the use of various houses to which his wives belonged, on which they worked with their children for their own support and for that of the homestead. [Guy, 1990: 34.] (Muller, 1999: 27.)

For Guy, even the word 'marriage' is inappropriate for the kind of union that took place between a man and a woman, even though he concedes that this union was an essential element of the homestead: "Working backwards in the search for analytical priorities, we have to note that marriage presupposed the pledge or the passing of cattle from husband's father's homestead to wife's father" (1990: 36). The transfer of cattle from the home of the prospective husband to the home of the wife is called *ilobolo* (brideprice/bridewealth) in isiZulu. It is the brideprice that Guy sees as important in understanding the oppression of women in African precolonial Nguni society. He accuses other observers/critics who have written about this transaction of bridewealth of failing to note that *ilobolo* "united two great male concerns – the control of women and of cattle – in a dynamic totality" (36). He goes on to argue that this failure to see the link between bridewealth and the two above-mentioned male concerns resulted in them [the observers] being "unable to show *why* bridewealth was so important, or to understand its role in appropriation and exploitation of women" (36).

Important in Guy's formulation is the concept of labour power which he acknowledges Marx used to explain capitalism. Some scholars view this concept as inappropriate in analysing precolonial societies. But for Guy, the concept of labour power is "an applicable, indeed essential, concept for understanding these societies" (1990: 38). He says labour power is a concept devised and used by Marx in referring to the productive and creative potential of people. It is realised "in productive activity and in the products of labour" (38). Marriage then was a social institution devised by men in order to control the labour power as well as reproductive power of women as it was important that a man's wife be physically fit to produce agriculturally as well as to give birth to children who would also work for him and, if they were girls, whom he would exchange for cattle. The cattle were an object of accumulation in these societies, but with a clear gender dimension in that "cattle [were] the means by which men acquired and accumulated the labour power of women" (1990: 40).

However, it seems to me that Guy overemphasises the role of cattle in bridewealth and ignores the fact that it was only towards the end of the precolonial period (with an increase in cattle raids and the giving of cattle to honour heroism in battle) that cattle became the main means of giving bridewealth. Before this, the Zulu people gave anything as *ilobolo*, as Krige states: "There was, before the codification of the Zulu law, no fixed amount of *lobola*, and when the husband's people had no cattle they could even produce two or three stones, and their suit could not be refused on this account" (1950 [1936]: 121). It was an honour though to *lobola* with many cattle. But by many cattle it is meant about four or five head of cattle, only half of what had to be given after bridewealth was fixed during the colonial period. This fixing only happened during Shepstone's rule under his Natives' Customary Law (Msimang 1975). It was then that the number of cattle for a daughter of a common man was set at ten; sixteen for a headman; twenty for a chief; while for the king's daughter, especially the first born, they amounted to fifty.

Also disturbing about Guy's formulation is that he tries to explain an institution which involved a long process, but limits his discussion to what he can manipulate for his own purpose. Even when brideprice was fixed and it became a debt that could be paid even after marriage, it was still a decision between a man and a woman to be

married that presupposed marriage. While it is true that sometimes parents did influence their sons' and daughters' choices about whom to marry, forced marriages, if they happened at all, were not the norm. What did happen was a lengthy process and rituals that culminated in a wedding ceremony. This process started with the girls' being given permission firstly to respond to and secondly to accept suitors (*ukujutshwa*) they liked and the whole act of "courting" and the rituals that went with accepted proposals.¹⁸ Guy also chooses to ignore the spiritual side of marriage ceremonies and the rituals that were meant to join the marrying woman to the ancestors of the husband's family. What follows here is an examination of marriage in the Nazaretha Church and how it is linked (or not linked) to precolonial marriage and to the notion of completeness and the sacred dance.

The Marriage Process in the Nazaretha Church

On the 14th September 2008, the Nazareth's Tertiary Students' Association (NATESA) of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Pietermaritzburg, hosted a workshop in which Minister Mvubu and Evangelist Mpanza spoke about the overnight meetings of *u-twenty-three*, *u-twenty-five* and *ufotini*. The sacred dance competition followed later. One of the things that Mvubu talked about was the problem of male leaders who ignore young boys in their teaching and preaching in these religious meetings. He said his younger brother complained to him one day that he was not interested in going to *u-twenty-three* meetings because the people who preach there always talk about completing the men's marriages, going to *Bhekinqola* (to be circumcised); he said that nothing relevant for him as a young boy is ever talked about. My own experience has been that what Mvubu's brother has said about completing marriages and being circumcised is true, but also it is quite rare to attend an overnight meeting for men and not to hear that a Nazaretha man does not pursue or court women, does not have an affair. In other words, young Nazaretha men are taught to sacrifice their sexual desire as is the case with young women. The following excerpt from an *u-23* meeting of August 2008 (on the opening day, 22) serves as an example:

¹⁸ For a discussion of these processes see Krige (1936) and Msimang (1975).

...Lapha eKuphakameni side sikhuluma njalo ukuthi insizwa yaseKuphakameni iyahamba iye ebhentshini iyocela. Ayimi emakhonini manazaretha. Insizwa ka 23 ithatha inkosazane ishade. Kubonakale ukuthi kuthathe isosha elisha. Uma-ke uyinsizwa, uhamba uyothatha endaweni yamakhehla, asazi ukuthi nawe uyikhehla yini. Ngoba kufanele uthathe umuntu ozothi uma eqhamuka la abantu babone ukuthi cha lensizwa ithathile. Bakubongele abantu, nabakini abangasekho bayabonga ukuthi wenze into enhle. (Memela)

[Here at eKuphakameni we always talk about it that the young man of eKuphakameni goes to *ebhentshini* to get engaged. He does not stand on the corners you Nazarites. The young man of twenty-three takes the girl and gets married. It becomes clear that it's a young soldier who married. Now if you are a young man, and go to get your wife where the old men should, we do not know whether you are also an old man. Because you have to marry someone who, if you appear with her people, will see that no this young man is really married. People should congratulate you, and your ancestors thank you that you did the right thing.]

As the above passage shows, what is emphasised is that young men should choose girls they like from the *amakhosazane* (virgin girls) and propose to them in what is called *ukucela ebhentshini*. This is a process headed by *Abaphathi* (girls' leaders), who are Shembe's appropriation of what in Nguni society was called *amaqhikiza*. These were older girls who acted as teachers/advisers to and leaders of other girls. If a girl wanted to accept a young man, she told the *amaqhikiza* and they were the ones who gave the girl's lover a bead called *ucu*, which was a symbol of love. However, in the Nazaretha Church a man is not allowed to approach the girl directly. While in Zulu society the girls were given permission at some point to talk to the young men who courted them, and at another time given permission to accept those they like, and young men who had reached puberty were allowed to court girls (*ukushela*), in the Nazaretha Church 'courting' is not allowed.

What is allowed is *ukucela ebhentshini* which goes as follows. A man who has seen the girl he would like to marry approaches *abaphathi* or *o-anti* (literally meaning aunts, but referring to the adult women who never married) on the evening of the last

Sabbath of the meeting or on the following Sunday, and writes the girl's name and temple and his name and his temple on the list of prospective engagements. For this he pays a fee which is now R20. After this, contrary to what Muller says, that the leaders fetch the girl to the girl's enclosure (*Esipholi*), it is the man's duty to ensure that the girl comes to the girl's enclosure. The man brings the sitting mat that they are both to sit on and then the leader speaks to the girl on behalf of the man. As a rule, the girl need not know the man, or that he intends to marry her, until this day. As one of the leaders, MaDuma, said, "a man must see a flower from a distance and pick it up without it knowing" (Personal communication, July 2008). But sadly for MaDuma, most prospective couples come to *ebhentshini* having agreed among themselves. They only go there as a routine and MaDuma claims that such a deed is a sin and it is equal to lying to God.

In her account of this process, Muller says, "I was told that the girl had an option of refusing the man, although it seems to me to be an extremely charged situation – one in which it would be difficult to say no" (1999: 206-207). Muller is correct about it being difficult for girls to refuse men, but the girls do have other options. Perhaps the most effective one is for a girl simply to refuse to go there. Since it is up to the man and his helpers to ensure that the girl comes to *esipholi*, if a girl does not want to marry that man she just refuses to go there at all. This, and the fact that prospective husbands prefer to talk to the girls before they go to *ebhentshini* (this tends to be done because it is very humiliating to be refused in that very public situation, and it is preferred by most men to go there knowing that they will be accepted), explains why Muller did not see any man being refused.

But if it does happen that a girl cannot evade going to *ebhentshini* and maybe she is pressured to accept the proposal, one other option she has is to accept a man in *ebhentshini* and then reject him later on. In one such case a girl accepted because of the pressure and tried to reject the man, but he kept sending his marriage negotiators, showing that he did not accept her rejection. The girl then decided to fall pregnant, in which case the man had no option but to let her go. There are so many engagements that get annulled in the church that a minister (Minister Ntombela) has been appointed just to announce those annulments. As a rule, if a man gets engaged in the church and he takes too long to pay *ilobolo* and other things he may be required to pay, the girl

may reject him. To do this, she and her parent (usually the mother) should consult the Minister of that man and tell him how many years have passed and what the man had done or had not done. If the Minister thinks the claim is justified, he writes a letter which the girl and her parent take to Minister Ntombela who will then read it in the temple (another huge disgrace).

Previously, the annulments had been announced in the same way: that such and such a girl is now free to be engaged because such and such a man has failed to pay the required *ilobolo* and other things. Usually they would say the number of years that have passed since the couple got engaged. But what has happened in the last few years is that there have been complaints by men that the announcements are always about men who fail to pay *ilobolo*, while in many cases couples are parted because the girl was found to be having an affair or became pregnant by another man (mainly caused by the fact that engaged couples are not supposed to talk to each other, let alone spend some time together). Now, although the majority of the annulments are still those of men who fail to pay *ilobolo*, there are those that happen because of the reasons mentioned above. Sometimes if the parents do not like a man or perhaps their daughter complains that she does not like him, they can simply demand too much *lobolo* and *izibizo* [gifts] so that the man cannot afford to pay.¹⁹ The point I am making here is that, while this institution of *ukucela ebhentshini* may seem to be unfairly in favour of male suitors, there is a great deal that happens behind the scenes before and after the proposals.

However, most engagements that happen in *ibhentshi* do end in marriage. The time that passes between the engagement in *ibhentshi* and the actual wedding varies from three months to five years, depending on how well prepared the groom was when getting engaged. The two years suggested by Muller may be reliable as an average. Muller also describes the Nazaretha Church's wedding ceremonies in so much detail that it would be redundant to repeat the process here. But of greater interest for this project is what she does not include at all (probably due to her being ignorant about it): the final wedding ceremony that takes place in the groom's home. But before I

¹⁹ A man I know had clashes with his fiancé and his in-laws, which led to the couple getting separated. The parents of the girl reported the matter to the ministers and the man was forced to continue with the marriage and then the in-laws demanded R39 000 *lobolo*.

look at this ceremony, it is necessary to comment on an important question Muller raises concerning what she calls “a fascinating twist to Isaiah’s formulation of the Nazarite marriage rite” (1999: 209).

This “fascinating twist” is that Isaiah Shembe had no state authority to perform legal marriages, but he remarried all the converts who had been married by the missionaries. An interesting question for Muller (and for me) is “why would people want or need to remarry if they had been married by state approved marriage officers?” (209). Her ‘simple’ answer, that people needed to remarry because “marriage by state officials was characterised by cultural inappropriateness” (209), is correct. But her point that “Isaiah Shembe refashioned marriage after his own image, an image that reincorporated both the religious dance and drumming”, and that both “the drum and the dance are believed to embody the spirit and patterns of the ancestors [and in] this context the dancing and the drumming constitute a musical metaphor for the unification of the ancestral lineage believed to occur in the sacralization of marriage”, does not fully explain why Nazaretha converts remarried (and still remarry) if they had been married by the state’s marriage officers.

Muller’s point is based on Mthethwa’s statement that “no religious rite is complete without its culmination in *ukusina*, the sacred dance by means of which the ancestors meet with living Nazarite members” (1999: 206), and that “it is not so much the speaking of vows and the laying of hands on the bible that solemnize the marriage as it is the moment in which the bride and groom dance the festival dance accompanied by the beating of the drum” (Muller, 1999: 209). While the importance of the sacred dance cannot be overstated, it is not the dance that (for lack of a better word) finishes the marriage. In other words, when dealing with the question of completeness, the question asked is not whether the bride (or groom) danced or not, but the question asked is whether a cow called *umqhoyiso* has been or was slaughtered for the bride/wife. A woman for whom *umqhoyiso* has not been slaughtered is considered incomplete and cannot participate in the sacred dance, in the communion and most importantly, she cannot wear a black belt worn by women on their waist over their prayer gowns. Similarly, a man who has not slaughtered *umqhoyiso* for his wife is considered incomplete and cannot take part in some of the holy rituals in the church.

My contention here then is that the answer to Muller's question of why it was (is) that people married by officers authorised by the state still needed to remarry when they joined the Nazaretha Church is that if you join the church having been married but *umqholiso* has not been slaughtered then you are considered incomplete. In contrast people who were married in a mixed Western and African wedding, in which case they are wedded by the state's marriage officers, and they wore Western kinds of dress (veils and suits) but the necessary slaughtering, especially *umqholiso*, happens, are not expected to remarry because they are considered complete even if they did not dance the sacred dance or any traditional dance that might connect the living people being married with the ancestral realm.

The rest of this chapter explores a wedding of iNkosi Nduna Mchunu which took place on the 7th of August 2008 in the Mandleni Homestead in Mdubuzweni near Mooi River. I am looking at this wedding as both singular and representative of Nazaretha marriage. I choose to explore in detail one wedding ceremony instead of talking about marriage in general because I hope in this way my work can avoid the trap of writing about 'the other' in the timeless present tense, thus denying them "coevalness" (Fabian 1990). I also want to emphasise the fact that most of the time marriages have their own particularities so that it is better to talk about an individual marriage than to talk about marriage in general. This is because there is a great deal that happens 'behind the scenes' that informs what happens in the wedding (or the marriage itself). As mentioned earlier, the marriage process is long and involves extensive negotiations before the final wedding. But the following description begins with the final wedding ceremony itself.

Saturday evening, 06/09/08 10: 49

The bridal party arrives. It is the bride and a group of about twenty girls accompanying her. They sing hymn No. 153 "*Nanti ilizwi elomemo/ Liyamema bonke abantu/ alikhethi noma munye/ Liyamema bonke abantu.*" [Here is the word of invitation/ It invites all the people/ It does not exclude any one/ It invites all the people.] The song is sung in the dancing style and the bridal party is beating the drum and blowing the *imbomu* (kudu horn) as they enter. The girls accompanying the bride

escort her to the room where her 'mothers' are staying.²⁰ As they enter, the members of the chief's family collect the grass from an old demolished hut and they burn it to create light so they can see the bridal party. The bride is to spend the night with these women who have been appointed by the bride's mother who herself is not allowed to attend her daughter's wedding. The bride has to stay here with her kist because she cannot be separated from it. The other girls move to another rondavel where they sing and dance for the most part of what is left of the night.

Sunday morning: 07/09/08 05: 45

The bride moves around the homestead performing *isigwiyo*, leading a group of young men from her side of the family. The performance goes like this:

Bride: *Hebe!*

Party: *WuSuthu!*

Bride: *Hebe!*

Party: *WuSuthu!*

Bride: *Babengaphi?*

Party: *Babengapha singapha!*

Bride: *Babengaphi?*

Party: *Babengapha singapha!*

[Bride: Hebe!

Party: It's uSuthu

Bride: Hebe!

Party: It's uSuthu

Bride: Which side were they on?

Party: They were this side we were that side!

Bride: Which side were they on?

Party: They were this side we were that side!]

²⁰ These women escorting the bride arrived a little earlier, at about eight.

Having circled the homestead they leave. The bride goes back to the river where her bridesmaids are.

06: 30

The women and girls are called to the kraal to be shown the cow that is being given to the bride as *umqholiso*. (By this time, the men with the bridal party are already skinning the cow referred to as the cow of the bride's father. This should have been slaughtered on the previous day so it is the first thing they did when they woke up.) The women, all wearing shawls, give thanks to the chief who is the one pointing at the cow. They then go back to their place and the girls remain to watch as the negotiator stabs their sister's cow (their cow). There is a fine (it is negotiable between the girls and the negotiator) for every wound he stabs after the first one, therefore the girls shout, "*Vuka Nkomo*" [Wake up Cow] as he stabs it.²¹ The cow falls down and dies after the third wound and, having decided that the fine will be ten rand, the girls go back to the river to join the bride and other girls who remained with her.

08: 42

In the kraal the *umqholiso* cow has been skinned and its legs cut off (leaving the thighs) but everything else untouched. The bride comes from the river with her group, singing hymn No. 106, "*Thixo Nkosi yamakhosi*" [Lord, King of Kings]. She is dressed in a black skin-skirt. On top she wears a white t-shirt and a top-knot on her head. She carries a knife in her right hand and a string of white beadwork which is about one metre in length. At the gate of the kraal the group stops and the bride enters with two escorts. They walk to where the skinned cow is. She kneels down when she is next to the cow and moves towards it on her knees. She places the knife on the chest line of the cow and moves it down to the stomach. As she does this, the women in the homestead ululate, some saying, "the wife is entering the home!" She places the beadwork where she moved the knife and then she puts a two rand coin on the cord of the cow. She stands up and with her escorts she leaves the kraal.

12: 48

²¹ In most cases the sisters and other girls on the groom's side would sing, "*Lala Nkomo*" [Fall Cow] in competition with the bridal party.

The bride comes from the river with a group of women and girls, singing hymn No. 153 “*Nanti ilizwi elomemo*” [Here is the Word of Invitation]. She, as well as four bridesmaids, is wearing a black skin-skirt, white t-shirt and top-knot covered with coloured beads. On their waists, on top of the t-shirts, they wear grass belts called *amaxhama*. On their ankles they wear a bead covering called *amadavathi*. They approach singing the hymn and dancing to it, with the drum beating and the trumpet blowing. They enter the kraal and start dancing. They make a line facing the homestead and continue dancing. The kist, *ibhokisi*, is in front of them as they dance.

As this is happening, the groom is in his house getting dressed. There are eight other men dressing with him (one of them his first-born son from the first wife).

1: 07

The groom’s party comes out of the room. One man starts singing hymn No. 106 “*Thixo, Nkosi yamakhosi*” [Lord, King of Kings]. Outside the room three men from the Chunu clan approach the chief and suggest they should sing the Chunu tribal song as they march to the kraal. The Nazaretha hymn is ignored for a while and one non-Nazaretha man starts singing the song of the Chunu clan which is sung in a call-and-response style. It goes like this:

Leader: *Awu! Awu!*

Group: *Uyinsingizi yamakhosi uyinsingizi*

Leader: *Awu! Awu!*

Group: *Uyinsingizi yamakhosi uyinsingizi*

[Leader: *Awu! Awu!*

Group: You are a *nsingizi*²² of the chiefs You are *insingizi*.

Leader: *Awu! Awu!*

Group: You are the *insingizi* of the chiefs. You are *insingizi*.

²² This is a kind of bird associated with royalty.

As they sing this song they march slowly, as if counting their foot steps. In front is the praise singer, invoking the spirits of the late Chunu chiefs. When they reach the main rondavel of the homestead, *kwagogo* (at grandmother's), the leader stops singing the song and starts the performance called *ukukhuza* which is a call-and-response but is not sung, it is shouted:

Leader: Elavutha!

Group: Elavutha! Izul'elavutha

Leader: Elavutha!

Group: Elavutha! Izul'elavutha

Leader: Kwakunjani?

Group: Kwakumnyama kuthe bhuge!

Leader: Kwakunjani?

Group: Kwakumnyama kuthe bhuge!

Leader: Isibhamu sazo!

Group: Isibhamu sazo! Esadubula sathi zhi zhi!

Leader: Isibhamu sazo!

Group: Isibhamu sazo! Esadubula sathi zhi zhi!

Leader: Isibhamu sazo!

Group: Isibhamu sazo! Esadubula sathi zhi zhi!

[Leader: That which burned!

Group: That which burned! The storm that burned!

[Leader: That which burned!

Group: That which burned! The storm that burned!

Leader: Their gun!

Group: Their gun! That fired, saying zhi zhi!

Leader: Their gun!

Group: Their gun! That fired, saying zhi zhi!

Leader: Their gun!

Group: Their gun! That fired, saying zhi zhi!]

Thereafter the groom's party resumes the clan song "Awu! Awu!". They stride on to the kraal and at the gate the leader stops them and starts *ukukhuza* again. They enter

the kraal, turning to the left as they enter, leaving the bridal party (dancing faster now) on the right hand side. They proceed to occupy the northern part of the kraal, near the smaller gate facing the rondavel *kwagogo*. Here, the leader finishes his role by starting the *ukukhuza* again. After this, the Nazaretha resume control of the stage. They sing hymn No. 5 (*Abathanda ukuphila/ Emhlambini kaJesu*) “Those who want to Live/ In Jesus’ Flock”. Now the bridal party is stopped from their own performance. Temporarily they become part spectators. As the groom’s party’s dance intensifies, they march forward to the bridal party. They proceed till they reach it. Here, the two groups join to make one. The bride and the groom occupy the centre of the dancing line, with all the women dressed with the bride being on her left hand side and those with the groom on his right. Now the bride is wearing the leopard-skin shoulder covering called *amambatha* over the t-shirt. It is this piece of dress that separates her from the other women dressed in the skin skirts. The hymn is still No. 5.

After dancing to this hymn, the groom leaves the dancing group to sit on the chair near the small gate of the homestead. The bride also leaves to sit next to the goods she has brought to give to her in-laws in the part of the wedding called *umabo* (Giving of gifts). The other women who were with the bride take a background position and now it is only the men who are dancing. Even those not dressed in the sacred dance attire take part. The giving of gifts and the dancing (which now is more akin to entertainment than worship) take place concurrently. In the homestead the food is beginning to be served to those not engaged in the activities.

An Interpretation of the Chunu Chief’s Wedding

Through this wedding of a Chunu chief, I propose to explore marriage in the Nazaretha (and perhaps Zulu/Nguni/African) society as a complex institution that is characterised by conflict and negotiation. The marriage under discussion here is one of the many marriages that are not initiated according to the Nazaretha tradition: where the bride and the groom get engaged in the church. This is not an ideal marriage according to the church. It resulted from an ‘illegal’ love affair between a member of the church (who was a designated chief) and a woman who was not a

member of the church.²³ Chief Nduna Mchunu had been taking part in the sacred dance and after he started the process of getting married to his new wife (the third), who is referred to as MaMajola (Daughter of Majola), he could not take part in the sacred dance before he was properly married, because his love affair made him ritually unclean and his taking part in the sacred dance would make the ancestors unhappy.

The wedding of this kind, which was not initiated in the church and in which the bride is no longer a virgin is not very different from that of a virgin girl.²⁴ The process described above would have obtained even if this wedding was of an *inkosazane*. The only difference concerns two features of dress: one on the part of the bride and another on the part of the groom. As for the groom, if he had been married through the church, he would have worn a long string of beads across his left shoulder to the right thigh and around his back. These beads are called *ucu*. They were used as a symbol of love in pre-colonial Nguni society, and a girl gave her suitor *ucu* as a sign that she was accepting him.

As for the bride, instead of wearing a white t-shirt with a grass belt, *ixhama*, she would have worn only the skin top covering, *amambatha*. There are many animals from whose skins *amambatha* can be made but the leopard skin is the most favoured one. Muller's suggestion that "this leopard skin embodies the relationship between young girls and Shembe, in terms of the praise name for Shembe as the 'leopard' written into the text of Hymn 84, the hymn Isaiah gave to the girls as a reward for their obedience and moral goodness" (1999: 211) is incorrect because it assumes that this "covering" is always made from the leopard skin. Also she does not realise that no girl ever owns *amambatha* but they are always borrowed for the sake of the wedding. This means if they were to embody any relationship it would be between men and Shembe, not virgin girls and Shembe.

²³ For this discussion I draw on the interview with the chief (two weeks before the wedding) which was conducted for another project concerned with the history of the Chunu people and their relationship with the Nazaretha Church.

²⁴ It is, however, very different in terms of status. A woman married as a virgin girl wears a blue shawl, *inansuka eluhlaza*, which symbolises her status as a wife married the 'right' way.

I think the reason why a woman who marries as a virgin wears only the skin covering while the one who is not a virgin wears a t-shirt suggests that it is acceptable for a virgin girl to show her upper body, especially the breasts, while it is not acceptable for someone who is not. Put differently, the breasts of a virgin (as well as her body) represent purity and cleanliness and therefore are a public sight, while those of a non-virgin represent uncleanness and shame. The reason for this is that sex in general is considered defiling. That is why members are expected to abstain from sex in the evenings preceding the days designated for holy gatherings like the Sabbath, overnight meetings of twenty-three, twenty-five and fourteen; and during the holy monthly meetings of January and July members are not expected to have sex even if they are not in the meeting. It is therefore fitting in Nazaretha belief that virgin girls, whose bodies are not defiled, should wear close to nothing on their upper body, only some beads above the breasts and on the waist, and women, whose bodies are perceived to be defiled by sexual intercourse, must cover all their body, showing only the face, the hands and the feet.

Interestingly, while the main point of the wedding is to incorporate the bride into her groom's family, her position as an outsider is always maintained. This is symbolised by the fact that she has to leave her father's homestead at night and also arrive at the groom's homestead at night. In this case, the night represents both the fact that she herself is being 'stolen' from her own home and also that she comes to this home as a thief, stealing membership of it.²⁵ A reference to the fact that the wife came at night is always made when members feel the need to invoke her status as an outsider, referring to her as *umafika ebusuku* (the one who came at night). However, this points to the ambiguous position of women in the church in general: that they are regarded as outsiders in their own homes because they are meant to leave and create a home for someone else, while in their home by marriage they are regarded as outsiders because they came (at night) from another home. It is better though to be marginalised as a married woman than to be marginalised as an unmarried one because married wives have their solid position in the home but unmarried women are marginalised even by their sisters in law, saying they should "be married and making laws in their 'own' homes".

²⁵ It is interesting to note that, when a woman is engaged, she is expected to respect her in-laws and present herself as a good wife to be, a practice called *ukuntshontsha izinkomo* (stealing cattle).

What is also noteworthy with regards to the chief's wedding is the contestation of 'public' space between the Nazaretha and the non-Nazaretha, with their different but related expressive forms. This is shown in the way the non-Nazaretha Chunu demanded a Chunu clan song to be sung when the groom was leaving his room for the kraal. Isaiah Shembe's negotiation of traditional and new forms shapes many Nazaretha rituals even today. It was Shembe's embracing of traditional forms that made his ministry appeal to many people. But some traditionalists wanted their forms 'pure' and unchanged, and Shembe's hybrid forms did not appeal to them. The same thing was happening in this wedding. While many people like the Nazaretha Church for its upholding of African values, those who want their 'pure' precolonial forms felt sidelined and demanded their own space. Had the Nazaretha song been sung, many non-Nazaretha who ended up taking part in the performance would have been mere spectators. But even though the Nazaretha were part of the 'Chunu clan' singing, they occupied a marginal role. This was significant because the wedding was supposed to be a Nazaretha wedding. It was only in the kraal that the Nazaretha and their performance of the sacred dance took centre stage.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at the two important rituals in the Nazaretha Church that deal with completeness, namely male circumcision and marriage. Being complete is important because it enables people to take part in the sacred dance especially, and in other holy gatherings. Circumcision as a ritual is performed in a way similar in some senses to the way it was/is performed in African societies, but it is explained in terms of the biblical narrative of the covenant between Abraham and God. It is, however, a new form that is unique to the church because of its combination of the two strands and also because it is given another dimension which does not obtain in both the biblical and the African traditional understandings of circumcision. This is circumcision as a way of cleansing and of paving a way to heaven.

I have dealt with marriage as an institution characterised by conflict and negotiation. Members not properly married (those who have partners) are considered

unclean and incomplete, and marriage is the only way for a woman and a man who had a child out of wedlock to become complete again. But marriage is supposed to begin with an engagement in the church where a man chooses a virgin and proposes to her in *ebhentshini*. However, not all engagements end in marriage. Sometimes the girl accepts the man because of the pressure in *ebhentshini* but rejects him later on. Sometimes a girl falls pregnant while the man is struggling with the demands of her family: the bride price and gifts (*izibizo*).

CHAPTER FOUR

The Sacred Dance and the Question of Resistance

The growing membership of the Nazaretha Church mentioned in the Introduction happens in tandem with the increasing popularity of the sacred dance both in terms of performers and spectators. Today, a number of dance regiments or groups have been established to make it possible for all the participants to get the opportunity to dance. In large meetings in July and January that take place in Ebuhleni, there are now about ten regiments (*izigcawu*) for men that are made up of people ranging in number from approximately two hundred to five hundred each (during weekdays these become smaller as many people are at work). Married women make up about twenty-five regiments while *amakhosazane* make five regiments. This growing popularity of the sacred dance, post-apartheid, challenges scholars who posit that the sacred dance as well as other Nazaretha expressive forms were a response to the racial state. One of these, Muller, maintains that “Isaiah Shembe built a religious empire whose cultural truth facilitated a notion of power in opposition to the repressive and debilitating force of the state. For Isaiah’s membership, power was induced as a creative force, enabling women and men to foster notions of hope, and thereby to survive the devastation and violation of their communities” (1999: 20). In a similar vein Brown has argued that, “The performance of the hymns constituted a ritual of empowerment for Shembe’s followers, almost all of whom had been politically and economically marginalised” (1999: 211).

In her paper “Figures of Colonial Resistance” (1989), Jenny Sharpe deals with an important issue of articulating resistance to colonialism. “Are the colonised indeed passive actors of a Western script?”, she asks. In response to her question she suggests tentatively that, “It might well be argued that studies expounding the domination of dominant discourses merely add to their totalizing effects, for they show colonizers to have the power that even they were incapable of enforcing” (1989: 138). However, she also warns, in a way more relevant for my argument here, that “the correction of such readings with the simple presentation of native voices can equally impose a Western authority upon non-Western texts” (138). My contention here is along those lines: that in trying to find resistance to colonialism by simply equating events like the

sacred dance with resistance or response to colonialism, without examining if these performances are indeed connected to colonialism in the way they are said to be, such postulations end up offering undue power to colonialism itself. At the same time, their tendency deprives people of their agency as actors in their own history since all they do can only be reactive.

So much has been said about the importance of context in social sciences. Bauman and Briggs maintain that, “Attempts to identify the meaning of texts, performances, or entire genres in terms of purely symbolic, context-free content disregard the multiplicity of indexical connections that enable verbal art to transform, not simply reflect, social life” (1990: 69). I am not arguing against a consideration of context in ethnographic studies. What I am strongly against are formulations like the ones stated above that tend to restrict their investigations to the surfaces, not going deep enough to find out exactly why people do what they do. Or to demonstrate, beyond reasonable doubt, that such connections as they are making do exist.

In other words, my worry is that their methodology, which allows them to study the historical context on its own and then use their findings to explain events that take place in other contexts, offers them an easy way out. If they know that people engaged in a particular event are oppressed, then it goes without saying that their participation in that event is in response to their circumstances. This is done without asking what people would have done had those circumstances not been in existence. The demonstrations and strikes that were the order of the day during the years of apartheid decreased significantly after the end of apartheid. So, one would expect the same to happen to the sacred dance if its overriding function had been as response to the socio-economic and political problems of the people who performed it. And while I do acknowledge that the economic conditions of many South Africans still remain unchanged, it would be opportunistic to say that these performances are now a response to those economic challenges.

What I am trying to demonstrate in this chapter in particular, and in this project in general, is that there are particular motivations for people to take part in the sacred dance performances, and it is through searching for and exploring these motivations that we can begin to understand the role and meaning of these performances for the

people involved. Here I look at oral narratives of dreams and miracles about the importance of *umgidi* in this world and in 'heaven'. Oral testimony relating to the sacred dance shows that in the imagination of many Nazarite members who take part in the dance, God, Shembe and the ancestors are the main audience. I argue that, while the sacred dance is meant to be a form of worship, and members take part in order to appease their ancestors as well as Shembe, it is also (in actuality) a form of entertainment, and provides performers with the space in which they can define their individual and collective identities. As a result, the presence of the living audience has an impact on the way in which the performers perform. However, in dealing with these narratives, I am not interested in their "truth claims" (Brown, 1999: 199). Instead, I treat these narratives as sources that have the capacity to reveal the forms of consciousness that would otherwise be hidden (Bozzoli, 1991).

The Sacred Dance as a Miraculous Practice

In one of the testimonies in Hexham and Oosthuizen (1996: 110), Qambelabantu Ngidi tells of his arrival at eKuphakameni. Like many people, he came to eKuphakameni because he was sick. It is not stated in the testimony but I suspect that (from listening to and reading other stories and testimonies) he had tried a number of traditional and Western doctors without success. But what is interesting for this chapter is what he saw when he had got to eKuphakameni:

When I arrived there, I looked at the dancing. There I saw in the midst of the dancers my late brother coming up. I saw him in daylight. I was not asleep. Then I remembered what people had said that there is Malay magic in this place. Now my brother was there before my eyes and laughed at me. I pinched myself to see if I was still alive. Then I ran away from the dancing ground, and I ran as far as Durban. On another day, I met one of my brothers from home and told him what I had seen at eKuphakameni. My brother was perplexed and said: "Hau, they had fetched this brother from McCord Hospital, where he had been a patient, to bring him home. They had pulled the seats in the car flat and laid him on them. When they were at Vokwe, he said to them: "Tell me, when we shall come to the fork, where the way branches off to eKuphakameni."

However, when they got there, they forgot to tell him. When they had already passed that place, he said the same request again... Then he said to them, “When I shall be better, I shall go there to the hills of eKuphakameni.” They were astonished, how he could speak of his recovery, since he was so sick. This was my brother, whom I had seen at Ekuphakameni, who had said these words. He had come home and passed there away. Then I began to see the events at eKuphakameni in another way. (Hexham and Oosthuizen, 1996: 110)

In another story, an Indian man travelled to eKuphakameni in the 1940s to tell the congregation that Isaiah Shembe had come to him in a dream. Shembe told the man to come to eKuphakameni to tell amaNazaretha that they were no longer dancing the dance of heaven. He said men were dancing to attract women, not to worship God. The Indian man told AmaNazaretha that when Shembe came to him while in India, sending him to South Africa, he (the Indian man) told Shembe that he had no money to go to South Africa. Shembe then told him to go fish in the sea, and that the first fish he would catch would have enough money inside it for him to travel to South Africa and back. When he went to fish the following day, he caught a fish and as promised he found the money inside the fish, and he used it to come to Ekuphakameni. His story was recorded by the then secretary and archivist of the Church, Petros Dhlomo, but was lost in the fire after the split in the Church in 1977 (Minister Khumalo, personal communication, 10 January 2009). This story echoes a biblical narrative in Matthew 17: 24-27 where the temple-tax collectors find Jesus with Peter in Capernaum. Jesus urges Peter to go and cast a line in the lake. He tells him that if he opens the mouth of the first fish he catches he will find a silver coin and give it to the tax collectors for both of them.

Both these stories are representative of the narrative culture that characterises the Nazaretha Church. They are part of the Church’s cultural capital that circulates in sermons, tape and video records, and in conversations. These two in particular testify to the importance of the sacred dance as a ritual practised in the church by and for both the living and the dead. As stated earlier, the sacred dance is imagined to bridge the gap between the physical and the spiritual worlds.

In the Nazaretha Church the sacred dance is not just taken to be a physical act that an onlooker would perceive it to be. It is considered to be a means of worship, and even the audiences themselves, by watching the sacred dance, are involved in worship. Thus when the Nazaretha go to watch the sacred dance, they wear their prayer gowns (*iminazaretha*) and are urged to sit down when they watch. And when the performance is finishing for the day, the virgin girls' leader, Masangweni, or Shembe himself, blesses the dancers and when this happens, all the dancers and the audience kneel to accept the blessing by uttering "amen", even though the person giving the blessing would be facing those who had been dancing.

Both watching and participating in the sacred dance are believed to have healing powers. J.G. Shembe is reported to have sent people who had come to him sick to watch the sacred dance. One man by the name of Mbambo was very infuriated when he was told to go and watch the sacred dance when he had come to eKuphakameni because he was sick. He kept complaining that "I'm so sick but he (J.G. Shembe) says I should sit here?" But when the dance was completed and Shembe said "*Inkosi inibusise*" (God bless you) Mbambo claims he felt as though a burden was being lifted from his shoulders and his illness ended (Bheki Mchunu, Personal communication, 15 Nov. 2008). In a similar story, a white girl from England had a dream in which Shembe told her to come to eKuphakameni to be healed. The family left England for South Africa when they had been told that the man who came to their daughter in a dream could be in Africa. In Cape Town they continued their enquiry and they heard about the presence of Shembe in Durban. When they arrived at eKuphakameni J.G. Shembe told the girl to take part in the sacred dance with virgin girls:

She danced for a while. Shembe said, "*Hawu*, have you ever seen a white person dance? Bring her back here." And so the Lord Shembe said to the parents, "Take her away, she is healed." And so they took the girl to Durban and booked a place in one of the hotels. They wanted to see the truth of what the God's prophet had said without even praying for, or laying hands on, the girl. (Muller, 1999: 160)

The girl's menstrual problem came to an end after three months. Her parents went to eKuphakameni to find out how much they could pay for the help they had received,

but Shembe told them that “God’s gift is not to be bought by money”. He told them to go back to their country and tell other white people there that the saviour had arrived and he was at eKuphakameni. When they were overseas the white couple sent gifts to Shembe in the form of a flag, a watch and a bell. In the letter accompanying the gifts, they wrote: “Remember us when the bell rings, the clock will tell the time for the beginning of the service. May the Lord remember us when he calls the people into church. With the flag I am saying that Africa has triumphed... The nations of the world have been waiting for the Lord. Now they have heard that he is at eKuphakameni” (Muller, 1999: 160).

Predictably, in her interpretation of this narrative, Muller emphasises the fact that it was the dance of the virgin girls which the white girl was urged to join: “A provocative narrative, Mrs Ntuli’s telling of this Nazarite cultural treasure powerfully links together Isaiah Shembe’s ability to heal *with the ritual purity of the dancing bodies of virgin girls*. He did not even lay hands on her. All she had to do was participate in the sacred dance of virgin girls, and wait for her body to heal” (160, emphasis added). As Mbambo’s story, and many others, show, it is not so much the purity of the bodies of virgin girls that is emphasised in this story, but the sacred dance itself. In other words, a sick person could have been a man and he would have been told to join the sacred dance of men, or simply to watch it.

There are stories told in the church in which a person merely watches the sacred dance without having been instructed to do so and is healed in the process. An example is that of a woman who used to live near George Koch Hostel. This woman is said to have gone to watch the Nazaretha men doing ‘practice’ there and as she watched, she claimed she saw lightning coming out of the *amashoba*²⁶ as the men were dancing. When she left, she realised that her bleeding sickness had stopped. She went the following weekend to tell the dancers what had happened (Bhekinkosi Mhlongo, Personal Communication, Dec. 2008).

Two of Isaiah Shembe’s hymns, Hymn No. 124 “*Ngiyahamba weGuqabadele*” [I am Travelling, oh *Guqabadele*] and Hymn No. 135 “*Baba Ngikuloluhambo*” [Father I

²⁶ *Ishoba* (singular). A stick decorated with the skin from the tail of a cow, leaving the furred end of the tail at the point of the stick.

am in this Journey], talk about a journey to heaven, and touch on perhaps the most important function of *umgidi* in the imagination of the Nazaretha members. *Umgidi* is viewed as playing an important role in the journey to heaven. The heavenly spirits who come to fetch the soul of a dying person come beating the drums and singing dance hymns. Bongani Mthethwa in Muller (1996: 8) tells the story of a member of the Nazaretha Church who had died and encountered demons on his way to heaven. The demons said the man belonged to them:

But, it was pointed out to the demons that the good deeds of that man far outweighed his sins. Then the angels, who were dressed in full *ukusina* regalia, arrived, singing and playing the drums, to rescue this man's spirit from the demons. When the demons heard the sounds of the approaching drums, they vanished in great fear!

One of the common teachings of the overnight meetings of *ufotini*, *u-twenty-three* and *u-twenty-five* is that a person needs to be able to dance, sing dance songs and 'play' the sacred dance instruments like beating the drum and blowing the *imbomu* (kudu horn trumpet) because sometimes these spirits are believed to ask the person they have come to fetch to do either of these things as a test of whether that person is worthy of travelling with the spirits from heaven. Hymn No. 124 points to the obstacles one encounters on the journey to heaven. The journey to heaven is a dangerous one, and anyone taking it should dedicate him- or herself to serving God; and in return God will stretch out his arms and protect the person from the dangers to be encountered on the way. If the person is proven to be a true Nazaretha, having dedicated him- or herself to singing and dancing for Jehovah here on earth, then that person will do the same on the way to heaven, thus pleasing those who have come to fetch him/her, and it is the same singing and dancing which will open the gates to heaven for that person:

Basinda ngokuphephisa

Abahamba engozini

Baphunyuzwa wukuzidela

Balithande elizayo.

Chorus: *Ngiyahamba weGuqabadele*

Ngalolu hambo lwakho

Yelula isandla sakho

Ulubusise uhambo lwami

Ngesifingo sokusa

Ngiyongena eKuphakameni

Amasango ayovuleka

Ngokungena kwami.

Chorus:

Ngohlabelela ngentokozo

Emzini oyingcwele

Bajabule abahlangabezi bami

Ngokungena kwami.

Chorus:

Ngomsinela obongekayo

Ngingasenahloni

Phakamani masango

Phakamani singene.

[It is only by chance that they escape

Those who travel in danger

Respite for them is through dedication

And loving the world to come.

Chorus: I am travelling, oh *Guqabadele*

In this journey of yours

Stretch out your arms

And bless my journey

At the break of day
I will enter eKuphakameni
The gates will open
Upon my entry.

Chorus:

I will sing with joy
In the Holy village
Those fetching my soul will rejoice
At my entrance.

Chorus:

I will dance for the praiseworthy one
Having no shyness
Lift up, you gates
Lift up so we may enter.]

In a similar vein, the greater part of hymn No. 135 talks about the difficulty of the way to heaven. In the first four stanzas, the words “sorrow”, “tears”, “death”, and “fear” abound. The journey is said to be of sorrow and tears, and the speaker begs God, the Beautiful One, to keep him or her company in ‘this’ wilderness which is a journey to heaven. In stanza three, the speaker is overwhelmed by fear and wishes God may give him/her strength to stand the suffering one encounters in the valley of sorrow which is spoken about in stanza four. It is in this valley that those who did not do well on earth will stay and suffer till judgement day which itself is likely to bring more sorrow and suffering:

Ukwesaba kungembethe
Kepha ngawe mangingesabi
Thela kimi umoya wamandla
Ngiyakwedlula esigodini sosizi.

Lapho abaningi bemisiwe
Esigodini sosizi lokufa
Balindele umhla wokuphela
Ukukhala nokugedla amazinyo.

[Fear has engulfed me
But through you, may I not be afraid
Fill me with the spirit of strength
So I may pass through the valley of sorrow

Where multitudes are stopped
In the valley of sorrow of death
Waiting for judgement day
The crying and the disappointment.]

The hymn concludes on a positive note in stanza five where the triumphant ones enter heaven. These ones become heirs of heaven and enter the gates dancing. This dance is both a celebration of victory over the earth and its whims and is proof that this person worshipped God on earth and is worthy to enter heaven:

Izindlamafa zonke zimenyiwe
Ziyongena ngokusina emasangweni
Makabongwe uJehova
Inkosi enamandla.

[The heirs are all invited
They will enter the gates dancing
May Jehovah be praised
The Almighty One.]

One member of the church mentioned above, Bheki Mchunu, believes that the sacred dance happens on earth and in heaven at the same time. It is Shembe who mediates between these two worlds. In elaboration of his statement he narrated to me two stories. The first one happened in Ekuphakameni in the time of J.G. Shembe. It was

the July festival and the church members were going to dance. As a rule they waited for the word that they had to go. Before this word, which says, “*Lithi izwi leNkosi, ayiphume imigidi*” [The word of the iNkosi says the dance regiments may go to dance], the dancing cannot start. So this day they waited and waited and there was no announcement that the dancing should start. Later, when the word did come that the dancing should start, some dancers heard the drums and singing underground as if leading the way to *esigcawini* (the dancing ground). Mchunu concludes from this narrative that Shembe, in not giving the word that the dancing should begin, knew that the heavenly spirits were not ready yet.

In another story, J.G. Shembe was watching the sacred dance of the virgin girls. After some time, he sent someone to tell one girl that “God bless her, she may stop dancing”. The girl, like everyone else who saw what happened, was astonished by what Shembe had done. In the following service, Shembe asked the congregation if they knew why he had urged that girl to stop dancing. The congregation said they did not, and he said her dancing was too close to that of heaven. She was dancing with heavenly spirits and if he had let her continue, she could have died. This story echoes the story of Mthethwa’s aunt, MaTembe Nzuza. Mthethwa says she had reproached her for taking part in both the morning and afternoon sacred dance performances while her health was not good due to her old age; “She replied that she had actually hoped to die during that *ukusina* event. She claimed that while she was dancing she had reached the gates of heaven, and was sorely disappointed at having been returned to the earth” (quoted in Muller, 1996: 8).

While all these miraculous stories relating to the sacred dance are important in understanding what the sacred dance is in the Nazareth Church, and they inform people’s decisions about taking part in the sacred dance and the way they dance the sacred dance, an examination of the sacred dance as practised shows that there are other motivations for Nazareth members to take part in the sacred dance and there are other factors that influence the way they perform. In his study of gender and performance in Swahili, Ntarangwi points to the discrepancy between what is stated as ideal and what actually happens in practice: “That lived experiences and practices form the crux of a culture, and not the expressed ideals that are constantly negotiated through practice, is now a truism in the social sciences. Thus it is by looking at

Swahili life as practised rather than as stated that I have been able to understand the social contradictions and contingencies reflected in Swahili musical expression” (2003: 105). A similar scenario exists in the Nazaretha Church with regards to the sacred dance and what it stands for. The rest of this chapter looks at the discrepancy between what *umgidi* should be and how it is practised.

The Sacred Dance as a Ticket to ‘Hell’

Ideally, since the sacred dance is meant to be solely for worshipping God, it has to be performed in the same way every time. In other words, if members dance for the same song, they should do the same thing, so that even someone who comes from a far-away area would be able to participate if he or she knew how to dance for that particular song. To achieve this similarity, it is important that the dance is kept unchanged. It should be done the way Isaiah Shembe taught it. However, there are many people and groups who improvise on the standard dance styles to create their own vernaculars, so that anyone who does not ‘practise’ with them would be unable to dance with them. In most cases it is the younger members, especially young men, who meet on some days to teach each other the sacred dance, and it is they who tend to improvise on the standard dance style. Many older members of the church are against this improvisation, although one can tell from the story of the Indian man (mentioned above) that this tendency to improvise the sacred dance started many years ago. Many older members in higher positions in the church criticise this ‘alteration’ of the sacred dance. The title for this section comes from the speech given by one of the most influential intellectual leaders of the church, Evangelist M. Mpanza, in the workshop organised by the Nazaretha Tertiary Student’s Association (NATESA) on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal on the 14th September 2008:

Ukusina kwethu lapha ku 23 naku 14 naku25 akunginamisi mina. Because siyasina nje. The way okusinwa ngayo ayingitshengisi ukuthi sifundisiwe ukuthi ukusina kuyini. You have to be taught firstly about i-religious significance yokusina. That’s why ukusina kwethu...Mvangeli baningi abantu abayongena esihogweni ngokusina. Kunabantu abayongena esihongweni bengeniswa wukusina. Bahambe baye emgidini besina zonke izinsuku bese

bengena esihogweni bengenela lokho kusina kwabo. Because they have no idea ukuthi ukusina kuyini. Ukusina bacabanga ukuthi yinto eyenzelwa abantu. Immidiately uthatha ukusina ukuthi yinto yakho okufanele ubukwe ngabantu, you are gone. That's why kukhona...lento eniyenzayo, ikakhulukazi intsha...ukube kusekhona ubaba iLanga, thina saphila ngaphansi kwababa iLanga. Ukusina akushintshwa. Njengamanje njena sekuthiwa kukhona isikotshi. Lapho uthola ukuthi ngisho ukuhlabelela akusahlatshelelwa ngalendlela lena uma kuthiwa kuhlatshelelwa isikotshi. Isigubhu asisa...ayikho leyonto. Ukusina kukodwa, akudingi ukuthi kuthiwe kukhona ukusina kwensizwa kukhona ukusina kwabantu abadala. Ukusina kunesitep esisodwa. Uma sisina kufanele sikwenze ukusina kube yinto yasezulwini. Uma siko²³ sifundisane ukusina.

[Our dancing here in twenty-three, fourteen and twenty-five meetings does not make me happy. Because we just dance. The way the dance happens does not show me that we were taught what the sacred dance is. You have to be taught firstly about the religious significance of the sacred dance. That is why our dancing... Evangelist, there are many people who will go to hell because of the sacred dance. There are people who will enter hell as a result of the dance. They go to the dance and dance everyday and enter hell because of that dance. Because they have no idea what the sacred dance is. They think the sacred dance is something that is done for people. As soon as you take the sacred dance to be something you can use to attract people's attention, you are gone. That is why there is... this thing you do, especially the youth... if the iLanga [J.G. Shembe] was still alive... we lived under the leadership of Father iLanga. The sacred dance is never changed. Nowadays it is said that there is the dance of the scotch. Where you find that even the singing it is no longer the way if they sing for the scotch. The drums are no longer... that is not it. The sacred dance is the same, it should not be that there is the sacred dance for young men and the other for older men. There is one step of the dance. If we dance we should make the dance to be the dance of heaven. If we are in twenty-three meetings, we should teach each other to dance.]

Mpanza's talk incorporates many of the issues concerning the sacred dance that were discussed in the previous section. An important issue which is raised here that I have not touched on in the previous section is that of the conflicting ideologies of young and old members of the church and the struggle for the definition of personal identities and the identity of the church as such.²⁷ An interesting shift in his formulation is that, instead of transporting a person to heaven, if performed incorrectly, the sacred dance will send or will cause a person to go to hell. Also, he maintains that the sacred dance should be treated as something that is of heaven, meaning that it belongs to the spirits of heaven. If the living beings do it, they do it on behalf of their dead relatives, so they should be aware of that fact.

But what comes out even more strongly from this speech is that the way the sacred dance is performed is not as Mpanza and many others think it should be performed. Another Evangelist present in the workshop also voiced his concern about the present state of the sacred dance. His main point too was that the dance styles should be the same because Shembe taught his followers the same style. To expand on his point he told of the dream an *umkhokheli* (leader of women) had about the sacred dance. In his story, as in that of an Indian man, men are accused of using the sacred dance to attract women:

Ake nginixoxele lomzekelo maNazaretha. Uthi omunye unkosikazi, Usengu umkhokheli manje, owale kwaZulu, kodwa ngokuzalwa owaseMkhambathini. Uthi inkosikazi yasezweni lakubo kwaZulu ivuke nesibonakaliso. Kwalalwa ngesikhathi nje esejwayelekile, kwaze kwashaya o 9 10 lenkosikazi ingavuki. Ithe uma seyivuka lenkosikazi, ithe lenkosikazi ibikade ihambile ihambe neNkosi iNyanga yeZulu. Ithi iNyanga yeZulu "Woza lapha mntanami ngizokukhombisa ongakwazi ngikukhombise nokwaziyo. Okwaziyo yilokhu kusina osekusinwa amaNazaretha inhlayisuthi isinela ukuqonywa. Yikona-ke engizokukhombis kona ngoba yikona oye ukubone. Inhlayisithi incintisana ngo...isigcawu sisinye inkundla iyinye ulayini nolayini usine okunye okungasinwa hhabanye, kodwa isihlabelelo sine sifana."Uthi lomama iNyanga yeZulu ithe basinela ukuqonywa. Wathi "Woza ngikukhombise!"

²⁷ I look at this issue in more detail in the following chapter.

Uthi ngempela wazibona esehamba, kwakusasinelwa esigcawini esingenzansi kungakayiwa phezulu. Uthi bathi uma befika lapho wathi “Yima-ke lapha mntanami ungabe saqhubeka kakhulu. Bheka ngasesangweni.” Uthi zaqhamuka izimoto kwaqhamuka amabhasi. Babe wukwehla nja, ibe wukwehla nje inhlalisuthi isine. Ibe wukwehla nje ikhiphe ulayini. Nabanye besasina laba baqhamuke abanye. Uthi ukusina kwakwehlukile kodwa isihlabelelo sasisisodwa. Uthi yathi iNyanga yeZulu, “Mntanami buka ukuthi lokhu kusina kuyefana na?” Uthi yayiphethe ipeni. Ilokhu idweba nje. Ihambe isigcawu nesigcawu ifike kulabo abasinayo ibabuke ibabuke besine ithi uma isiqedile ukudweba iqhubekele kwabanye. Uthi yaziqeda zonke izigcawu uthi ithe isuka yayililahla phansi lelobhuku, yathi lelibhuku lingcolile aliyi kuShembe.

[Let me tell you a tale, you Nazaretha. A certain woman, she is a woman leader now, she lives in Zululand but she was born at Mkhambathini. She says a woman of their area in Zululand woke up with a dream. They went to bed at the normal time and nine/ten struck while this woman had not woken up. When she had woken up she said she had gone with *Inyanga Yezulu* (The Moon of Heaven, referring to Amos Shembe, the third leader). *INyanga Yezulu* says, “Come here you child so I will show you what you know and I will show you what you do not know. What you do know is this dance that is performed by the AmaNazaretha, the men, who dance in order to attract women. It is it that I will show you because you are used to seeing it.” The *inhlalisuthi* (men) competing about... in one regiment each and every line dances its own dance different from that of others but the hymn is the same.” This woman says *Inyanga Yezulu* said they dance so as to attract women. He said, “Come let me show you!” She says indeed she saw herself walking, by then the dances took place in the dancing ground below, not high up. She says when they arrived at the gate, he said stop here my child, do not go on any further. Look at the gate. “She says the cars appeared, buses appeared. As soon as they got off, as soon as the men alighted, they danced. As soon as they alighted they made a line. As the ones are still dancing, the others came and started dancing. She says the dancing was different but the hymn was the same. She says the *INyanga Yezulu* said, “Look my child, see if this dance is

the same or not?” She says he was carrying a pen. Always putting crosses. He went to every regiment, watching them as they dance and after making a cross, moved to another regiment. She says he went to all the regiments and then she says he threw away that book. He said “This book is dirty; it will not go to Shembe.”

One of the challenges facing the church today is trying to restore the sacred dance to what it used to be or to what it should be. The present leader, uThingo, is reported to have told Ministers to ‘correct’ the sacred dance so that he will also take part in it.²⁸ The problem though is that there are not many people who know how exactly the sacred dance was performed during the time of Isaiah Shembe. The oldest men still dancing today used to dance in the 1940s, and while they claim that the real dance is what they perform, this is questionable when one considers that the accusation that men were dancing to attract women, not what Shembe had taught, started in the 1940s and is exemplified in the story of the Indian man.

A question asked by one member of the audience in the workshop was “Who is responsible for teaching the sacred dance?”, and there was no helpful answer. According to Mpanza, there should be a leader who will be able to go around all the regiments inspecting how they dance and stopping those who dance the ‘wrong’ way. He said the present leader of all men, Minister Mathunjwa, is a quiet person by nature and does not confront people who abuse the sacred dance. But even if Mathunjwa was a different person and did confront dancers, it is still questionable to what extent his dance style is the one taught by Isaiah Shembe himself.

For my purposes what is important about this issue of the sacred dance being not what it should be is not the fact that dancers may ‘go to hell’, as Mpanza stated in his speech, but the implication of this issue with regards to the agency of the members as the creators of their own dance styles. The sacred dance in the Nazaretha Church is one of the forms of expression that is used in the constitution of selfhood. The problem stated above, of there being no one who can help teach the sacred dance as it was taught by Isaiah Shembe, worries only some of the Nazaretha members. There

²⁸ I heard this from a man called Phungula who used to live in Gauteng, at George Koch Hostel.

are many sacred dance performers who spend time improvising the sacred dance styles so that they create their own vernaculars.²⁹ The idea behind these improvisations is both the perfection of the sacred dance, performing it in the best possible way, and the creation of difference through competition.

Competition involves declared competitions where different groups openly compete with each other in dancing for a given dance hymn, and it also involves undeclared competition where different groups or regiments and different lines in each regiment (as stated in Mngwengwe's story) compete with each other in the sacred dance of all people. Both these senses of competition include a definition of the self, which involves, "a poetics of social action' (Herzfeld, 1985), an attention to the performance itself, in which it is the way things are done, rather than things themselves, which are foregrounded" (Erlmann, 1996: 226).

Competition in the Sacred Dance and Sacred Dance Competitions

Before every sacred dance performance, the leader of all males in the Nazaretha Church, Minister Mathunjwa, (mentioned by Mpanza above) spends time advising dancers about the importance of the sacred dance for the members' ancestors and their guardian angels, and warning them against 'changing' the sacred dance from what Isaiah Shembe made it to be. Put differently, he warns them against abusing the sacred dance. But it is not all the members who are interested in hearing what the minister has to say. Some see Mathunjwa's talks as a waste of time. Many do not join in his admonishing, but prefer to spread around the dancing ground, waiting for Mathunjwa to let the others go so that the dancing can begin. In the final dance of the 2007 January meeting on the 28th, this is what Mathunjwa said to the dancers:

Njengoba silapha nje phambi kukaNkulunkulu kumele ukuthi uma sekushaywa ifodo, nelakho liphume ebuhleni. Lingaphumi eubini. Ngoba phela njoba silapha nje, kukhona nakho okunguSathane kulokhu kukuxabanisa. Njalo nje uyathuka abantu...Uyababonake abantu

²⁹ I look at this issue in more detail in the following chapter.

abangawazi umthetho? Uyababona labantu abaphuma bebheka le? Abawazi umthetho. Abazothi bebuya bebe begwabula abanye...

[As we are here in front of God, it is necessary that when the photo (of heaven) is taken, yours should appear on the good side. Not on the bad side. Because as we are here Satan is also present, causing us to quarrel. Always you find people... Do you see people who do not know the law?³⁰ Do you see these people who are going in the other direction? They do not know the law. They are the ones who will come back to push others.]

As Minister Mathunjwa was speaking, one of those who did not attend to his admonitions shouted: “*Zidedele zibulalane!*” (“Let them be so they will kill each other!”) This remark reminds one of Veit Erlmann’s chapter entitled, “Attacking with Song: The Aesthetics of Power and Competition” (1996: 224) where he deals with *isicathamiya* competitions. He traces these competitions to the idea of civilised advancement through “friendly rivalry” (226), where he argues that *isicathamiya* competitions need to be understood in terms of the economic situation of the majority of black people:

Given the limited opportunities for economic competition that, it will be recalled, reduced them to low paid and heavily policed labourers or frustrated white-collar workers with no prospects for upward mobility, Africans in Natal and elsewhere in South Africa developed new arenas in which to accumulate “symbolic capital”. Choral competitions were among the most marked compensatory strategies. (1996: 226)

While this notion does inform the ideology behind *isicathamiya* competitions today, regional conflicts are perhaps the more powerful basis through which *isicathamiya* competitions can be explained. Drawing on the work of Jonathan Clegg, Erlmann states that *isicathamiya* competitions need to be seen as a form ritually expressing the regional conflicts in Natal, especially in the Msinga district where Clegg did his study. This conflict came after the destruction of the Zulu kingdom in 1879 when the

³⁰ He was referring to those who did not come to listen to him.

system of age regiments lost its function “to counteract ‘horizontal’ opposition and territorial conflict” (1996: 226). The precolonial territorial conflicts, exacerbated by the shortage of land, could no longer be contained by the age regiment system and therefore they spilled over into conflicts where families and clans were pitted against each other.

A form of expression called *umgangela* (an inter-district competition of playful stick fighting) was developed as a mechanism to defuse these conflicts. The strict rules governing these *imgangela* events included the prohibition of stabbing and the use of other lethal weapons. However, in Msinga there were new territorial boundaries that had been set in place. This meant that people who used to belong to different districts might find themselves competing for jobs and grazing rights on the same white-owned farm. Consequently, there were many instances of conflict in these districts and institutions like *umgangela* could lead to serious confrontation. Thus, Erlmann maintains:

It was in yet another attempt to mitigate these conflicts, that *ingoma* dance competitions arose (Clegg, 1982: 9). Stick fighting and *ingoma* were, of course, the creation of migrant workers. And it was migrant workers who transported these ritualised conflicts into the cities and transformed them to expressions of competition between rural territorial units for urban resources... *isicathamiya* competitions, as I have indeed said, have to be seen as possibly the most recent form through which migrants give ritual expression to these conflicts. (1996: 228)

Both these senses of understanding about the origins of *isicathamiya* competitions may help explain sacred dance competitions in the Nazaretha Church. Firstly, there are many people who are now amaNazaretha who used to be engaged in conflicts between regions and between opposing political parties in their communities.³¹ The reference to people having been involved in regional conflicts is common in

³¹ I heard the story of two men I know who had been fighting on opposite sides. When they saw each other on opposing sides they were both so amazed and one of them promised that he would not close his eyes when praying because he was afraid that the other might kill him then.

Nazaretha sermons. UThingo, the present leader of the church, touched on this topic in his sermon on 28 October 2008 at Judea Temple near Gingindlovu:

La manje sekuvikw'impini la. EBuhleni ngo Julayi ngasizwa wukuthi ngingene endlini kaBabomkhulu. Ngambiz'uBhombela, "Babomkhulu awuchithe nanguSathane usefikile la. Umi futhi ngezinzwane akabekile nezithende phansi." Ngaya futhi nakwekababa iLanga. "Baba nay'inhlekelele bo! Ngiphebezeleni." Ngaya nakweye Nyanga yeZulu ngafike ngasho into efanayo. Sayibona yehla lento. Siyayibong'iNkosi yaseKuphakameni! (Ibandla: Amen! Uyingcwele! Amen!) Senifun'ukulwelani manje ngoba niphuma ezimpini. UNkulunkulu kaShembe wasithanda wasikhipha kukho konke lokho. Abanye benu angabe abasekho manje. Nami angabe angisekho. Kodwa manje niyonelani kanje lento. Yini nifunukulwa manje?

[Here we are now trying to stop the war. In Euhleni in July what helped me was to enter into Babamkhulu's room: "Babamkhulu please destroy this Satan, for he has come here. He is standing on tiptoe. His heels are not touching the ground." I entered Father *iLanga's* room (Galilee) and I said: "Father there is chaos here. Stop it for me." I went to Father *iNyanga YeZulu's* room and said the same thing. Then we saw this thing diminishing. We thank the lord of eKuphakameni.

(Congregation: Amen! He is Holy! Amen!)

Why do you want to fight now because you are from the wars? Shembe's God loved us and removed us from all that. Some of you would have left this world by now, and me too I would have gone. Why are you spoiling this thing like this now? Why do you want to fight?]

While it is true that many amaNazaretha members have a history of territorial fighting, it does not seem to me that these conflicts are an important explanatory factor of competition in the sacred dance. Erlmann and Clegg's argument is not convincing even with regards to *isicathamiya*, because competition existed even in pre-colonial Africa and was manifested in many forms. *Ukuqhatha* and stick fighting (which Erlmann incorrectly claims is the creation of migrant workers) existed before colonialism and were rituals aimed at teaching young men self defence and were

performed by young men and men in general for entertainment reasons. Also, men would try to excel in stick fighting or in fighting in general in order to attract women because it was considered valuable knowledge. Even in the time of Shaka, people who excelled in battle were popular with women, and competing for the attention of women involved both fighting and dancing, among other things. Some men would compete in dance so as to attract women as the most adept dancers. They would also fight playfully (this is called *umgangela*, if it is between different districts, and it is called *ukuthabela* if it is between two men who may come from the same area), displaying their abilities in fighting, and they might fight seriously over a woman³². This links well with competition in the Nazaretha sacred dance and the idea that men dance in order to attract women.

Another more relevant form of competition is found in weddings. Nazaretha weddings, as well as African weddings in general, are characterised by dance competitions between the groom's and the bride's parties. This is playful competition created to add fun and interest in the dancing. But in the Nazaretha Church, perhaps because the sacred dance is important in both the initial wedding (taking place in Temples of big congregational meetings where the leader of the church is present) and the final wedding that normally takes place at the home of the groom, this competition extends to even the bride and the groom. While this is a kind of undeclared competition where there are no judges and written judging criteria, the question of whether the groom beat the bride or vice versa in the dance is the one that is always asked. This, however, becomes more interesting news if the bride beat the groom.

Even though I have argued in this chapter that sacred dance competitions are not always practised as they were ideally meant to be – a practice that is meant solely for worshipping God and is performed with the heavenly audience in mind – but that sometimes people perform in order to articulate their own personal identities, the third type of competition was designed in order to rectify the problem of the sacred dance

³² There are many stories of women who married their men because they were good fighters. My own maternal grandmother is reported to have had an abusive boyfriend who beat her and anyone who courted her. She used to tell her children (and others) how she felt sorry for a poor man who was about to be beaten by her former boyfriend. But when my grandfather beat the bully, he won the love of my grandmother.

being used for purposes other than worshipping God and honouring the ancestors.³³ These are declared competitions where all the participants are aware of the fact that they are competing; they are given the hymn to be used in the competition so that they can practise beforehand and there are prizes to be won in the competition. These competitions were first organised by NABACHU³⁴, which was started in 1990 at the bidding of the then leader, Amos Shembe. The purpose of forming this organisation was “to strengthen and revive the culture of respect and of *ubuNazaretha* (the sense of being Nazaretha) to the youth of the church” (Evangelist Mkhize, Personal Communication April 2009). Put differently, the formation of NABACHU was an attempt to get the children of *amaNazaretha* interested in the Church as they were seen to be falling away: “If they were tired [of the church] while we were still alive, what was going to happen to *ubuNazaretha* when we were gone?”. To tackle this problem, the organisers of this body tried to find ways to interest the young. They sought to bring together aspects of the church that were likely to interest the youth, and they also looked around them for help. A programme aired on UKhozi FM every Sunday, “*UNkulunkulu nomuntomusha*” [God and the Youth], became a role model for NABACHU, and slogans used in “*UNkulunkulu nomuntomusha*” were copied and used by NABACHU. One of these, which became like the trademark of *UNkulunkulu nomuntomusha*, went like this:

Leader: *Kumnand'ukuba lapha!*

Group: It's nice to be here!

Leader: It's nice to be here!

Group: *Kumnand'ukuba lapha!*

When addressing the youth, especially members of NABACHU, the leaders of this organisation often used this slogan as it was used in “*UNkulunkulu nomuntomusha*” with a little addition at the end which went like:

Leader: *Ameni-ke!* [Amen, then]

Group: Amen!

³³ Personal communication with Evangelist Mkhize, President and founder of the Nazaretha youth organisation generally known as NABACHU [YO FO SHE] (Short for Nazareth Baptist Church Youth for Shembe).

³⁴ See footnote 33 above.

Within the Church the sacred dance was on top of the list of things that could be used to interest the young. Thus sacred dance competitions were started with the aim of attracting the youth as well as standardising the sacred dance. As Mkhize maintains, competitions “are not merely competitions, they were started in order to bring about the correct way of dancing the sacred dance”. This meant bringing an end to dancers having different styles of dancing. To achieve all this, the competition organisers used older knowledgeable people as judges, and designed their scoring grids in such a way that the competitions promoted the “correct” way of dancing. The features that were looked for by the judges included:

1. Connectedness between group and leader. Here they are looking at how the leader is able to communicate with the rest of the group and at whether or not the group hears and understands the leader.³⁵
2. Steps for dancing the hymn. This looks at whether or not the group follows all the correct steps for that particular hymn and also how well they go about moving from one step to the next.
3. The positioning of the shields. Here a group receives points for holding up and lowering their shields at the correct points of the hymn. The judges also look at whether the group hold their shields in the same way i.e. if the shields are raised, are they raised by all the dancers at the same time?
4. The positioning of *ishoba*³⁶. What is marked in *ishoba* is the same as with the shield.
5. The rhythm/stamping of feet. At times when dancing one is expected to touch the ground softly and at other times to stamp hard on the ground. Points are given for doing this at the right places.
6. Facial expression. This is perhaps the most interesting feature and it encourages dancers to relate their performance to the meaning of the hymn. The facial expression of the dancer has to correspond with what the hymn is saying, so that, says Mkhize, if the hymn says “the sun has arisen and set/

³⁵ The leader is the one who uses the flute to tell the rest of the group what to do.

³⁶ This is the short stick used for dancing. It is decorated with the skin from the tail of the cow, with its furred end. This fur is called *ishoba* and gives its name to the stick. If it is not decorated like this it is simply called *induku* (stick) and if the stick has a knob at its point it is called *iqabanga*.

While I have done nothing good”, the dancer is not supposed to be smiling because what is said in the song is not good.³⁷

While it is true that the marking criteria (and therefore the competitions) can promote the ‘correct’ performance of the sacred dance, they also promote dancing the sacred dance not with God and the ancestors in mind. As the dancers prepare for and dance in the competition, what they think about is impressing the judges (and the whole audience) and winning the trophies.

NABACHU’s sister organisation, NATESA (Nazaretha Tertiary Students’ Association), also organises functions in which sacred dance competitions feature as part of the programmes. In the workshop held in September 2008 mentioned above, the main parts of the programme were a talk by Minister Mvubu about the practice and importance of overnight meetings of *u-twenty-three*, *ufotini* and *u-twenty-five*, and the sacred dance competition in which representatives from seven campuses took part, of which three (University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg; Durban University of Technology, Durban and Pietermaritzburg campuses) were represented by both male and female dancers. The score sheets used by the judges to allocate points were the same for both the young women’s and the young men’s competitions, except for the headings stating “*Inhlalisuthi*” for young men and “*Intabayepheza*” for young women. The criteria used for evaluating the dancers (see below) were markedly different from the ones used by NABANCHU:

CRITERIA FOR JUDGING RELIGIOUS DANCE (*Umgidi*)³⁸

INTABAYEPHEZA [Virgin Girls]

To be Judged	Marks	UKZN DBN	DUT PMB	UKZN EDGW	UKZN PMB	DUT DBN	UNIZUL	MUT
Uniform	10							
Line Co-ordination	15							
Steps Followed	15							

³⁷ I think the idea for this may have been borrowed from *isicathamiya* as it is here that performers tend to demonstrate what their songs say, and their facial expressions are in line with what they are singing.

³⁸ I am grateful to Ndumiso Zuma, chairperson of NATESA in Pmb campus (2008/2009), for giving me this ‘score’ sheet.

Singing	10
TOTAL	50

Even though points 1, 3 and 4 in NABACHU's competitions could be classified as "line co-ordination" in the NATESA one, and the one about steps followed is the same for both, I think the inclusion of uniform in NATESA's and its exclusion in NABACHU's score sheets (even though it is allocated lower marks than 'line co-ordination' and 'steps followed') emphasises different purpose on the part of the designers. The question of dress is an important one for NATESA members, whose tertiary education culture imposes on them certain dress codes.³⁹As stated in the Introduction, amaNazaretha have until fairly recently been regarded as backward and uneducated, and both these bodies of Nazaretha youth engage with these criticisms (consciously and unconsciously) in their respective activities. Most Nazaretha members in tertiary institutions (and those who did not reach that level of education) I have spoken to were marginalised while they were still at school as Nazaretha children. They were ridiculed as people who worshipped a human being and whose leader was believed to have created artificial wings and attempted to fly. They are also aware of the fact that they are seen to be backward and try to present themselves otherwise. While in the original score sheets of NATESA photos of a man and a virgin girl wearing *umgidi* attire were inserted, the designers were not expecting those when they included "uniform". They were thinking of more 'modern' and acceptable kind of dress (in the context of the University).

This leads to my argument with regards to this 'declared' competition in the sacred dance. While it is hard to explain where the first types of 'undeclared' competition are coming from, this one is more clear-cut because as these are declared, one can gain clues from things like criteria used for judging and the identities of the bodies that organised the competitions as well as the participants. The idea of sacred dance competitions offers organisers a chance to develop interest in the Church because the sacred dance is popular with the youth (as a means of entertainment, not worship) and the idea of 'friendly' competition and the prospect of winning add more attraction to

³⁹ There are a number of Nazaretha girls who succumb to peer pressure and start wearing trousers when they are in tertiary institutions even though these are prohibited in the Church and they had not been wearing them before.

the dance. These competitions are also linked to the need for the youth of the church to articulate their own identity as the members of the Nazaretha Church. The sacred dance competition on the Pietermaritzburg campus allowed Nazaretha students to leave the closed doors of the lecture theatre where the talks were taking place and occupy an open space on the university lawns where all could see them. As they were beating the drums, blowing the kudu-horn trumpets and dancing, they were declaring that they were Nazaretha members and they were proud of it.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have been concerned with showing that, according to the members of the Nazaretha Church, there are acceptable and unacceptable ways of performing the sacred dance. I have attempted to show that while the sacred dance is ideally meant to remain unchanged and to be uniformly performed at all times, this tends not to be the case in reality. I argued that even though this is an ideal generally accepted by many older members and members in higher positions, in reality there are many other motivations for people to take part in the sacred dance and there are many other factors that influence the performance of the sacred dance. It is through competitions, both declared and undeclared, that one actually encounters the sacred dance being used for purposes other than worshipping God and appeasing the ancestors. In exploring the ideals about what the sacred dance is and how it should be performed, and the motivation for people to take part in the sacred dance – which may or may not be to worship God and appease the ancestors – I have been trying to challenge the view that the Nazaretha expressive forms, including the sacred dance, were intended to challenge the state or were a response to colonialism. The reason why these scholars hold this view is that they “[understand] the church within the framework of their own concepts” (Becken, 1996: x). And because of this, in Spivak’s terms now, in representing amaNazaretha, these scholars “represent themselves as transparent” (1988: 275).

CHAPTER FIVE

Dress Codes and the Poetics of Performance in the Sacred Dance

In an obvious challenge to missionary ideology concerning dress and Christianity, Isaiah Shembe asserted to Nelly Wells that, “Natives need not wear clothes nor pass Std VII to get to heaven” (Brown, 1992: 101). This was indeed against the grain of the teaching of the missionaries in Zululand and Natal, who thought that, “if some of the externals of the Christian life were assumed, Christian faith and goodness would follow” (Unterhalter, 1981: 124; quoted in Brown, 1992: 97). As a result of this belief, Unterhalter argues, “Christian life came to be associated with conforming to manners, dress and aspirations of the missionaries” (97). One of the things which characterises Isaiah Shembe’s Nazareth Church is its deviation from or its non-conformance with such aspirations of the missionaries in terms of dress and practice. Shembe was critical of the missionaries’ equating of dress with Christianity. For Shembe, what mattered was the inside of a person, not the appearance. Thus, he is reported to have told his followers that “You must not think that because you cover your bodies with clothing that you are Christians. You are not. Before you can claim to be a Christian, you must put evil things from you, and live as Christians” (Brown, 1992: 98).

However, despite Shembe’s claims about the lack of importance of clothing in Christianity, he dedicated a great deal of time to designing the outfits for his followers to use in church services and especially to use when performing the sacred dance. In this chapter I look at the kind of dress Shembe chose for his followers, its significance and meaning, and how these changed over time. The second part of the chapter looks at the poetics of performing the sacred dance, exploring the different dance styles performed in the Nazareth Church, namely, *isigekle* and *amagxalaba* (Shembe style). I argue that both the dress and the sacred dance are improvisations on the old pre-colonial features. As shown in the introduction, dance played an important role in the lives of the Africans, and in the Nazareth Church it was indeed given new meaning. But that new meaning was/is not political in the sense advocated by Brown and Muller as stated in the previous chapter. In the pre-colonial period dance was more of a social phenomenon and in the Nazareth Church it is first and foremost a religious

phenomenon. As many members would say, “*Umgidi uyinkonzo*” (Sacred dance is worship).

Dress and the Sacred Dance

In the twenty-three meeting of November 2008, Chief Simakade Mchunu requested the opportunity to give advice to the *inhlayisuthi* (male members) gathered in his homestead in Msinga near Greytown. His talk incorporated the poetics of the sacred dance (although he did not go into the details of how each song is performed) and the importance of dress codes. His speech forms the foundation of this chapter so that it needs to be reproduced at length here:

Njengoba kuwu 23 omkhulu ohlale uba khona, ngithi ake ngibeke lokhu. Ngake ngaya emgidini. Uma ungakakwazi ukuzisinela ngokwakho, ungabongena phakathi nendawo. Ufike uwone uwuqede umgidi, ngoba awukakwazi ukuzisinela ngokwakho. Ukuba njengoba lomkhandlu kaNkulunkulu ungaka nje, ungake ushayelwe isigubhu kuhlatshelelwe, bese kuthiwa ake usinele leligama, awukwazi ukuthi uzobukela kubani. Pho manje ungenelani phakathi? Ngoba phela usuzolokhu uzaza nje phakathi. Kahlenini bakwethu. Futhi-ke okunye, sasicelile nhlayisuthi ukuthi izingane zazike ziphathe nezikhumba nje zembeleko. Manje na akubukeki umgidi omkhulu kangaka abanye baphume bheka (ephakamisa isandla)baphakamise izibhakela angathi bayoshayana egroundini. Asikucabange lokho. Kanti futhi kukhona engikubukayo, ukuthi uma uhla luphuma, kulandele ingane, kulandele nabadala baxubane, kuye kuthi uma selumile uhla, into engiyibukayo wukuthi izingane zibe sezima lapho. Akuwona umthetho lowo. Ngisho angabe uyigagu kangakanani akuwona umthetho ukuthi ingane ime phakathi kwamadoda. Okokugcina yilokhu. Ngizocela ukuthi ngisukume nginikhombise (esukuma ephinda umnazaretha awufake ngaphakathi kwebhulukwe). Uthi akubukweni? Yini lena othi ayibukwe njenga wenze nje? Wawungakhacwa kabi yizinsizwa zaseKuphakameni kuqala. Zithi “Owakabani lomfana?” Cha bobo musani ukuthatha iminazaretha niyishutheke la...Yilokho nje ebengithi nami angikubeke, ukuthi ake

kulandelwe okunye okwaziwa yithi esibadala. (Amen) Lokhu ukuthi akekho umuntu omdala esontweni...Sikhona! (Bayede!)...

[As this is an important twenty-three meeting, I want to say this. I once went to the sacred dance. If you are still unable to dance on your own, do not stay at the centre of a line. If you do that you spoil the dance completely, because you cannot dance on your own. Let us say as this congregation of God is this big, if they beat the drum for you and sing, and you are told to dance for that particular song, but you do not know who to watch from. But now why do you enter the line in the centre? Because you are going to look this way and that way [not knowing what to do]. No, do not, my folks. And another thing, we had requested from you *nhlayisuthi* that the children used to carry the hides of goats. Now it does not look good in this important sacred dance if some enter [the dancing stage] (raising his hand) having their fists raised as if they are going to fight in the play grounds. And again there is something I am observing, that if a line is entering, the children are followed by the adults, they are mixed, when the group is standing, what I have noticed is that the children keep the positions they entered in. That is against the law. No matter how adept you are it is against the law that a child stands in the middle of men. The last thing is this. I want to stand up so I can show you (he folds his *umnazaretha* and shoves it under his trousers on the right hip). What do you want people to see? What is it that you want people to see as you are doing this? In the olden days the men of *eKuphakameni* would have shouted at you, saying “What’s the surname of that boy?” No. Do not take your prayer gowns and shove them under your trousers. That is all I wanted to say; that let there be something done that is known by us the older members. (Amen) The saying that there is no old person in the church... We are there! (*Bayede*)]

The above text opens with perhaps the most important feature of the sacred dance: that each and every hymn has its particular form or style of dance that a person can either know or not know. This means every member has to learn and master the different steps of each song. However, this does not mean that all the 242 hymns in the hymn book have their own styles, but one has to know which songs are performed

in a particular way. For instance, hymn No. 4 “*Yiza namuhla*” (Come Today), hymn No. 5 “*Nina abathanda ukuphila*” (Those of you who want to Live), hymn No. 87 “*Inhlanhla yesoni*” (A Sinner’s Luck) and a number of other hymns are danced in the same way. This means if one knows how to dance for hymn No. 4, then it follows that one can also dance for hymn No 5 and No 87. The only difference is the words of the hymns, but the singing, the pitch of the song, and its performance are the same. So if the group is very large, it happens that people cannot hear what the leader of a song is saying; but by hearing the tune, they know it is one of the hymns that is sung and danced in that particular way. If then the leader sings the first part of hymn No. 4 and someone in the group cannot hear properly, that person can sing the first part of hymn No 5 (if he thinks that is what is being sung) and the dance would not be disturbed because the change in words does not mean a change in performance, as long as the rhythm is the same.

I stated elsewhere (Sithole, 2005) that it is every dancer’s desire to be in the centre of a line because the centre is the heart of the sacred dance where the lead singer, the drums, the trumpets, and ‘audible’ singing from the group all converge to help the dancers feel the beat. The centre of a line is thus a locus or domain of the most powerful and adept dancers. Sometimes when the dancing is about to begin there is shoving and pushing among the dancers, all trying to be as close to the centre as they can possibly manage. The young members, the new converts and the un-ordained members are relegated to the far sides of the line, the least fortunate occupying the furthest spot. This spot is called *iqhulu*, and nobody likes it. These issues are incorporated in the first and third points of Chief Mchunu’s speech. They have to do with perfecting the sacred dance and the hierarchy in the church where the young and the lowly have always to know their position.

The second and fourth points concern the appearance of the dance or dancers. The shields that Mchunu mentions are part of the features of the sacred dance, along with the umbrellas that, according to Bongani Mthethwa, were added in order to enhance “the visual interest of the dance” (see Brown, 1992: 100). In the twenty-three meeting of January 2008, Minister Magwaza of Nkandla preached about the importance of taking part in the sacred dance and owning the sacred dance shield. According to Magwaza, the shield protects the person and the home of a person who owns and uses

it in the sacred dance. He told the male congregants that he had travelled from Durban (where he worked) to Judea Temple near Gingindlovu with all his dance regalia. On the Saturday night preceding the Sunday on which they were to dance, he had a dream. In the dream a voice he did not know told him to look at the mountain and there he saw his father's homestead with his shield, now extremely large, floating over the homestead. For Magwaza, what the dream meant was that the shield protects not just the person who owns it but also the rest of his or her home against all the evil spirits and things that can befall that given home. He was thus urging members to buy their own shields.

The introduction of umbrellas occurred even earlier, in the 1930s, and Brown claims that "They might have once been considered prestige items – and they also appear in photographs from the 30s of traditionalists in festive dress" (1992: 100). While today the umbrellas are exclusively carried by married women and virgin girls, in the time of Isaiah Shembe men also carried umbrellas. In one photograph inserted in the church's calendar of 2003, Isaiah Shembe stands with five men who are dressed in *amabheshu* (loinskins). Isaiah Shembe is clad in his black robe and carries what looks like a basket with flowers in his left hand; his right hand might be carrying something but it is obscured. Three of the five men are carrying umbrellas and one of them is carrying a small shield⁴⁰ as well.

An interesting contradiction with regards to dress for the sacred dance and dress in general is that while with the actual dance change is discouraged and criticised by the older leaders of the church, no one postulates a return in the dance regalia to what it was during the time of Isaiah Shembe. But dance dress has certainly changed over the years. There are even some features of dress that obtained in the time of Isaiah Shembe which are prohibited today. For instance, today a man would not be allowed to dance carrying an umbrella. And the loinskins worn by the men with Isaiah Shembe in the photograph are much shorter than the ones generally worn today. The front parts of the men's loinskins, called *isinene/izinene*, only reach to the middle of the thighs but today men generally wear *izinene* that reach to the knee and the back parts, *amabheshu*, sometimes almost reach to the ankles.

⁴⁰ A shield like this one is now carried by women. Men carry much larger shields which are designed differently from the one carried by the man in the photograph.

The men in the photograph belong to the group of male dancers called *injobo* in the Nazaretha Church. Today's dress for this group is much richer and more complicated than that worn by the men in the time of Isaiah Shembe. Beside the differences mentioned above, there are a number of other features that distinguish what was worn then and what is worn now.⁴¹ The most visible difference is that the men in the photograph wear close to nothing on their torsos while today men of the *injobo* group wear a garment made from cowhide around their shoulders covering the entire chest and a part of the stomach. These are called *amambatha*, and are made from the skins of wild animals, especially those of the cat family like the leopard and the *indlonzi* (cheetah). Around the calves another piece is worn, a band usually made from animal skin called *izikhono*, and around the ankles there is a band made from beads or some plastic material. These are called *izihlakala*. The men in the picture wear thin head-ties, *ongiyane*, which are seldom worn today. Today men wear around their heads thicker head-ties called *imiqhele* usually made from leopard skin, buck skin or *indlonzi* skin. Some also wear a plumed headdress called *isidlodlo* or *idlokolo*. It is difficult to account for these developments in the dance attire, but I think that it has to do with increased communication, with people copying and borrowing from each other, and has also to do with the creativity of the makers of the dance attire, who develop ways to expand their businesses and make the sacred dance attire more attractive to the eye and at the same time more expensive.⁴²

An alternative sacred dance attire for men is *isikotshi*.⁴³ Unlike the dance attire for married women and virgin girls which combine traditional and European features, this is an entirely European attire with not a single pre-colonial feature. This costume consists of the knee-length pleated cotton kilt and a hip-length, long-sleeved white smock which has a white tasseled border at its hem. On their heads members of this group wear white pith helmets and on their feet wear black and white football socks and black army boots. The younger members of this group, of the adolescent age and

⁴¹ This is assuming that what the men are wearing in the photograph is what they would wear for the sacred dance. It is clear that they are not dancing in the photograph, but the fact that they are carrying umbrellas and one is carrying a shield suggests that they would have dressed the same way if they were dancing the sacred dance.

⁴² One thing that separates the dance regalia for *injobo* from that of *isikotshi* is that *injobo* regalia can be very expensive, the full regalia costing up to R 5000 depending on the quality one chooses.

⁴³ This is also a name given to the kind dance or dance style of the group who wear this attire.

younger, wear a pink and white checked kilt and instead of a pith helmet they wear a headband with a pompon motif.

Women in the church are divided into three groups according to age and marital status. The group of young women not of marriageable age (about fifteen years and younger) is called *utubhana*. This group is identified by the bright red, pleated cotton skirt they wear. Another distinguishing feature for this group is that they wear nothing on their heads, except for a little piece of beadwork that is fastened in the hair. The other features of dress worn by this group are the same as those worn by the group of virgin girls and women of marriageable age (I discuss this group below). These consist entirely of beadwork. Fastened around the waist and the chest are thick bands made of three rolls of beadwork and at the hips are equally thin bands but made of nine rolls of beadwork. There are also two flat pieces of beadwork. The smaller one, about five by fifteen centimetres, is fastened below the rolled bands on the chest. This beadwork touches but does not cover the breasts. The bigger flat beadwork starts from the waist, just below the rolled bands, reaching to the bottom of the nine rolled pieces of beadwork covering the hip. Other rolls of beadwork fastened around the hip are made of thinner rolls of beads put together to make rolls thicker than the ones mentioned above. These are of red, blue and yellow colours and are only visible on the sides and back since in front they are covered by the flat beadwork. There are also thinner bands of beads on the calves, and covering the ankles.

The other group of women and virgin girls of marriageable age is distinguished from the turban group by the black cotton skirts with layers made of strands of wool overlapping in four to five rows. On their heads these virgin girls wear tight fitting hair-nets around which are headbands with red motifs. This group is sub-divided into the *isidwaba esincane* (small loinskirt) and *isidwaba esikhulu* (big loinskirt). The younger girls, ranging from sixteen to nineteen, belong to *isidwaba esincane*, and older girls and women to *isidwaba esikhulu*. The only feature of dance attire attributable to the pre-colonial period is the shields that are carried by all the dance groups. All female groups carry their shields along with umbrellas.

The last group is of married women called *ujamengweni* or *ingudlungudlu*. Larlham calls this group *ubuhlalu* (1985). This term may have been used at the time he

conducted his research but now it is not used. This group wears pleated leather skirts, *izidwaba*, that are precolonial in origin. Worn over the leather skirts is the red cotton wrap called *isicwayo*. This was introduced during the time of J.G. Shembe and covers the entire torso. Another semi-traditional feature in the costume of married women is beadwork called *amagxaba*. This is a black cotton skirt worn over *izidwaba*, and is decorated with beadwork at the hem. The black cotton is covered by the *isicwayo*, so that it is only the beadwork of the *amagxaba* that appears below the *isicwayo* over the *izidwaba*. Over *isicwayo* on the waist is a grass, beaded belt called *ixhama*.

The headdress, *isicholo*, can either be cylindrical or cone-shaped, narrow at the base and broadening to the rim. The former used to be worn by Zululand women while Natal women preferred the latter. However, nowadays that distinction is not as clear as it used to be. Perhaps the reason for this is that all of the Church's accessories are sold by members who travel all over South Africa with the congregation, and one can choose whichever headdress one likes. Fastened around the headdress is a beaded band resembling that which the virgin girls tie over their hairnets. The *ikhulu* (one hundred) is named after the number of strings of beads which make it. This is attached beneath the *isicholo* and hangs over the shoulders. The last feature of dress for married women is called *ibhayi*. This is a long black cotton cloak which is fastened around the neck and hangs down the back to the bottom of *izidwaba*.

What is clearly noticeable from the above discussion is that dress in Isaiah Shembe's Nazareth Church incorporated both precolonial and colonial features. In her article "Dress, Ideology and Practice: Clothing in the Nazareth Baptist Church in the 1920s and 1930s" quoted above, Karen Brown poses the question regarding dress in the Nazareth Church: "What was the reason or reasons behind Isaiah Shembe permitting or reintroducing traditional dress?" (1992: 101). A possible answer for Brown is that maybe he wanted to attract new members: "Certainly one cannot deny that it must have been very attractive to prospective members, most of whom were traditionalists living in the rural areas who had suffered severe ruptures to their traditional way of life" (101). There is, indeed, a certain amount of truth in this statement. One of the early converts to the Nazareth Church, Mjadu, is reported to have asked Isaiah Shembe if he would make them take off their traditional dress were they to convert to his church. Shembe reassured him, and others, that they did not

need to take off their loinskins if they had to join his church (Themba Masinga, undated audio cassette) Also, Chief Silwane Mchunu of Msinga is said to have told his family (in a rather prophetic tone) that a minister will arrive in his land who would not require them to take off their traditional dress. He said he would only convert to the church of that man.

However, I think that the question Brown poses above need not be restricted to the reasons for Shembe permitting traditional dress in his church, but can be expanded to: Why did Shembe, having told Wells that “natives need not wear clothes to be Christians”, still insist on designing special clothing for his followers? The answer is in some way similar to the one above: that perhaps Shembe designed these clothes to attract new members, but that he was aiming for people who were living their lives in a way different from that of traditionalists. This is especially true if a police report of 1921 is anything to go by: “Shembe’s success in attracting females is the dress and spectacular shows which he arranges, all dress in white, wear a band around the head and carry palm leaves, they then go in procession to the places where the so called religious rites take place accompanied by dancing” (Quoted in Brown, 1992: 98). This point is also supported by Roberts (1936) who suggested that those members who were traditionalists were more likely to wear traditional dress, while the more Westernised members were less likely to do so.



Young men of the Nazaretha Church dancing at eBuhleni in July 2008. Younger boys on the sides wear pink skirts while older ones in the middle wear black ones.



Isaiah Shembe and his followers dressed in loinskins.



Men wearing *injobo* at eKuthuthukeni Temple in Gauteng, April 2008.



Virgin girls wearing *isiZulu* dance attire in eBuhleni, July 2009.



Married women wearing sacred dance attire in eKuthuthukeni, April 2008.



Ikhulu beadwork hanging at the back of a married woman.

The Poetics of Performing the Sacred Dance

In the introduction I mentioned an account of the festival of dance and song that took place in Mpande's kraal, as described by Delegorgue. A. F. Gardiner, who visited Zululand earlier than Delegorgue, offers his own account, in Dingaan's kraal this time, which is in many respects similar to that given by Delegorgue:

Each man is provided with a short stick, knobbed at the end, and it is by the direction that he gives to this, the motion of his other hand, and the turns of his body, that the action and pathos of the song is indicated; the correspondence is often very beautiful, while the feet regulate the time, and impart that locomotive effect in which they so much delight; sometimes the feet are merely lifted, to descend with a stamp; sometimes, a leaping stride is taken on either side; at others, a combination of both; but they have yet a more violent gesture; forming four deep, in open order, they make short runs to and fro, leaping, prancing, and crossing each other's paths, brandishing their sticks, and raising such a cloud of dust by the vehemence and rapidity of the exercise, that to a bystander it has all the effect of the wildest battle scene of savage life, and which it is doubtless intended to imitate. (Quoted in Larlham, 1985: 3-4)

Gardiner's account, as well as that of Delegorgue, describes performances that are not very far removed from the ones performed in the Nazaretha Church today. This similarity and relatedness between dance and song that took place in pre-colonial period and the sacred dance taking place in the Nazaretha Church today is important for the argument of this chapter and of the thesis as a whole. The dances that are taking place in the Nazaretha Church today are improvisations on the dances that took place in the precolonial period and are the same as the ones that took place during the colonial and apartheid period. So any explanation given for the performances that took place during the time of apartheid and colonialism should in some way be related to (even though not necessarily the same as) the performances that took place before and are taking place after colonialism and apartheid. With this thought in mind, in this part of the chapter I examine the poetics of performing the sacred dance in the Nazaretha Church, focusing my attention on the sacred performances of Nazaretha

festivals in what is called the sacred dance of all people (*umgidi wabantu bonke*). These are exclusive dances where only the ‘complete’ members of the church can take part. But the reason for my choosing these performances, instead of the ones taking place in overnight meetings for instance, is that the sacred dance of all people is structured in a way similar to that described by both Delegorgue and Gardiner above.

All Decisions about the Sacred Dance are Made by the Leader

Larlham suggests that the massed dancing that took place in the times of Shaka, Dingaan, and Mpande described above “[displayed] the power of the king and the allegiance of his followers” (1985: 4). These dances were organised, especially the one that took place in Shaka’s kraal, “to honour and impress the British settlers who had arrived in [Shaka’s] land” (4). While in the Nazareth Church the dances are part of the Church’s life, and are not organised to impress any visitor, they do, however, seem to display the power of the leader and the allegiance of his followers. In the Nazareth Church the sacred dance can only take place if the leader has given word that it is to take place. For the bigger Sunday dances, it is the leader himself who announces after the afternoon Sabbath service that there is going to be dancing the following day. This goes like this: “*Umgidi wabantu bonke kusasa.*” [It’s the sacred dance of all people tomorrow.] For the dances that take place during the week, on Tuesday and on Thursday, it is the church’s announcer who tells the congregation in the evening service of the previous day that there is going to be the sacred dance the following day. This he does on behalf of the leader, saying: “*Lithi izwi leNkosi, umgidi wabantu bonke kusasa.*” [The word of the iNkosi says, it’s the sacred dance of all people tomorrow.] On the actual day of the dance, the word has to come from the leader that those prepared to dance can now go to the dancing ground and dance. It is the virgin girls who are sent to announce: “*Lithi izwi leNkosi, ayiphume imigidi*” [The word of the iNkosi says the dancers can go to dance (literally: let the dancers leave).] In all this total allegiance to the leader is encouraged and emphasised. Even in sermons this allegiance to the leader, embodied in abiding by the rules of the sacred dance, is preached.

Preaching about disobedience in the Church as a whole, but especially against Shembe and ordained members who are said to be Shembe's right-hand men (and women), Minister Mthethwa in his sermon of July 2008 travelled back in time to the years of J.G. Shembe, better known to his followers as *iLanga* (Sun). He preached about the sacredness of the dance and other rituals, and the importance of Shembe and his word in all that is done in the Church, especially the sacred dance. Below I present an extract from Mthethwa's sermon. It is lengthy but very important for our understanding of power relations in the Church and the role of the sacred dance in negotiating power relations:

Imigidi lena iyingcwele, yingakho beqeqeshwa abantu ngaphambi kokuba baye emgidini. Uma laphaya uMathunjwa kuqeqeshwe abantu. Abanye bese bethi "Hhawu uMathunjwa uyasibambezele." Ha ha ha! Ngangikhona Masina eKuphakameni! Ngangikhona. Mhla kudalek'umonakalo. Umkhokheli uNtombela ethi uyakhuluma ethunywa yiNkosi iLanga, lithi iLanga lithuma umphathi uNtombela uHlalekudeni lithi "Hamba ungibuzele kulabafana baseThekwini nabaseGoli ukuthi izintshebe lezi zishonephi. Ubusubabekela umthetho uthi ngithe lezintshebe namakhanda abawaphungula eGoli naseThekwini abangisize bakhe amakopi katinjam bawabhobose ngapha nangapha abe nebambo, bese uma beshefa bafake uboya phakathi nalobu ababuphungula emakhanda babufake phakathi bese beza nabo lapha ngoJulayi ngoba buyangihlupha lobu boya lobu. Kwaqhamuk'oyedwa namanje ngeke ngimkhombe. Kwaqhamuka oyedwa phakathi esijwini wathi kuNtombela, "Hhawu, kanti uyabheda lo?" Kwakuqala ngqa kulelibandla... Yilelo langa-ke lapho kwaqhamuka khona izimpempe zokusinisa. Kanti sihleli nje izimpempe sezigcwele amaphakethe kuwowonke umuntu. Bafuna nje ukusinisa. Kuthiwa uteleke nemfengwane. 'Shaya imfengwane wena sobanibani sambe. Wabe eseyishaya omunye pepe pe base bemlandela. Sasala nabanye bahambe baya phesheya bayosina... Lase lifika iSabatha elingaliyo. Lase lima, liwakhapha amehlo. Lase lithi iLanga "Sekunogalajane laph'ekhaya. Sekunogalajane." Lase lithi "Lensangu kodwa eniyibhemayo, izophela." Lase lithi, "Kukhona abafana lapha asebehlubukile." ...Labe selithi, "Labafana kusasa wumgidi wabo. Niyophuma ngokubona kwenu, nifike

nisine ngokubona kwenu, nihlale phansi ngokubona kwenu. Uma kuthi buyani niyobuya ngokubona kwenu. Bathi "Amen!"...Kwase kungena inyanga yeZulu. Ithi iNyanga yeZulu siseLinda,iqhamuka sithi shaya imfengwane ngoba sesijwayele phela "Shayimfengwane wena! Shayimfengwane sambe." Sasingasadli kanti sijahe ukuya edimonini. Yathi "Wowu!" Kusho iNyanga yeZulu. Yathi "Yini le ethi pepepe?" Yase ithi "Ha ha ha! Namanje noma sengikhona nisahlubukile? Nisalandela izwi lesiqalekiso leli inkosi eyaniduba?Namanje ngikhona nifuna ukuzenzela umathanda?"Yase ithi "Kusukela namhlanje ngingaphinde ngiyizwe into ethi pepepe. Nihambela uNkulunkulu phambili. Ubani othe sinani? Anisaphethwe ngezwi?... Kwathi ngo 11 o'clock kwaqhamuk'uMamashi iNkosazane. Asimuzwa ukuthi uthini wayengenalo izwi uMamashi. Kanti uthi, "Lithi izwi leNkosi, ayiphume imigidi."Njengoba nizwa kwenzeka nanamuhla lokhu nje.

[These dances are sacred, that is why people are trained before going to dance. Mathunjwa stands there and trains people. Then others say "Hhawu, Mathunjwa is delaying us." Ha ha ha! I was there Masina in eKuphakameni. I was there when chaos was started. When Leader Ntombela tried to speak, having been sent by iLanga. ILanga said, sending Leader Ntombela, Hlalekudeni (his first name) saying, "Go and ask for me from the boys who live in Durban and Johannesburg where are their beards? Then set the rule for them, say these beards and heads they cut in Johannesburg and Durban they must help me by making tins from "tinjam" and make holes on either side of them to make handles. When they shave, they should put the hair inside and the hair they cut from their heads they should put inside and then bring them to me in July because that hair worries me." One man appeared and even now I will not point at him. One man appeared in the middle of the group and said to Leader Ntombela, "Hawu, he is talking nonsense!" It was for the very first time in this Church. It was that day that there appeared flutes for directing the sacred dance. We did not know them. [We did not know] that as we were staying, there were flutes in people's pockets. All because they wanted to lead the dance. They were saying he is refusing with the flute. "This man is talking nonsense. Blow the flute you so and so and let

us go.” Then another one blew the flute *pe pe pe* and they left. We remained with the others and they went over there to dance. Then the Sabbath came. The *iLanga* stood, opened his eyes and then said, “There are now crooks here at home.” Then he said, “But this *dagga* of yours you are smoking will be finished.” Then he said “There are boys here who have fallen away.”... Then he said “These boys tomorrow it’s their sacred dance. You will leave as you see fit, dance as you see fit, rest as you see fit. And come back as you see fit.” They said, “Amen!” Then *iLanga* passed away and *iNyanga Yezulu* came. The *iNyanga* said when we were at eLinda, saying “blow the flute” because now we were used to it. “Blow the flute and let us go.” Then *iNyanga* appeared with the ministers. When he appeared, by then we were no longer eating, we were on the rush to the demon. He said “*Hawu!*” *iNyanga Yezulu* said. “What is it that says *pe pe pe*? Ministers, what is saying *pe pe pe*?” Then he said, “Ha ha ha! Even when I am here you are still dissenting? You are still following the word of the curse the *iNkosi* gave you? Even now that I am here you still want to do as you please?” Then he said, “As of today, let me not hear anything saying *pe pe pe* again. Who told you to dance? Aren’t you led by the word now? Stop! Go back and eat!”... Then at eleven o’clock there appeared Mamashi, the virgin girl. We did not hear what she was saying. She had an inaudible voice. What is this *inkosazane* saying? She was saying, “The word of the *iNkosi* says, let the dances start!” As you hear it happens even today. The dancing does not start without the word.]

This text shows that if the sacred dance in the Nazaretha Church displays the power of the leader, Shembe, as Larlham claims was the case with regards to the Zulu Kings, Shaka, Dingaan and Mpande, that power is highly contested in the Nazaretha Church. The above text is characterised by conflict which obtains in the Nazaretha Church between the church’s leaders, J.G. Shembe and Amos Shembe on the one hand and the members (or some of them) on the other. The conflict is also between ordained members and ordinary members. In both cases the issue is power and control. In both cases the leaders try to exert their power over their subjects, and the subjects challenge the leaders’ attempts. The sacred dance becomes a locus in which this power game is played out. The point Mthethwa makes is that the dance is sacred so the minister, the leader, has to teach people about it. But some people see

Mathunjwa's admonitions as a waste of time because for them the sacred dance represents something else. That is why they do not attend to his teachings, and in a way they challenge him.

The more interesting case, however, is that of *iLanga* and the members. After the incident between Ntombela and the members, the power is swayed in favour of the members. At first it seems as if it is Ntombela who is defied, but the reality is that he was bringing the word of *iLanga*; he was *iLanga's* messenger. That is why *iLanga* felt insulted and told the men to do as they pleased, thus openly giving his power away to them. An intended or hoped-for response was remorse, but the congregation responded with a huge "Amen", which meant they welcomed the news.⁴⁴ The power and control that were lost by J.G. Shembe were only regained in the time of Amos, when he confronted the men at eLinda and told them not to do as they please. This, I hope, puts into perspective Larlham's statement that, "All decisions – where the dancing is to take place or whether it is to take place at all – are made by the leader" (1985: 36).

Perhaps one of the reasons why the sacred dance has been viewed as a form of resistance against colonialism and apartheid is that the dancing groups are arranged in regiments that resemble the 'war regiments' of pre-colonial society. One striking feature of Gardiner's and Delegorgue's accounts above is that the performances they describe could be 'war dances' performed by warriors going to war or they could be peaceful dances performed at certain rituals. Or they could be both.

Two Main Styles of Sacred Dance

There are two main styles or types of sacred dance in the Nazaretha Church. The first is *isigekle*, which is performed by the men's groups in the second part of the dance, (*umgidi wantambama/* the afternoon dance), and by the girls in the first part of the dance. The second style is *amagxalaba* and the men's groups can only perform this style in the first section of the sacred dance and the girls in the second. This means there are songs that are danced in a particular way called *isigekle* and *amagxalaba*,

⁴⁴ Mthethwa says this in a negative way, implying that they (the congregation) should not have said "Amen", that it was like accepting a curse.

but these also have certain little variations depending on which group is performing. For instance, the way *isikotshi* dancers would dance an *isigekle* song is not exactly the same as the way the *injobo* group would. The singing and the speed in movements are different.

Isigekle

Isigekle is the style of dance in the Nazaretha Church that is closely linked to the traditional Zulu dance that was witnessed by the Europeans who first came to Zululand. Isaiah Shembe adopted *isigekle* from the isiZulu dance of the same name. In an interview, Mthembeni Mpanza had this to say about *isigekle*:

Isigekle amaculo aqalwa wubabamkhulu esathathelwa esiZulwini. Igama elithi isigekle lalivele likhona esiZulwini. Amaculo awuBunazaretha kodwa asinwa kakhulu njengamaculo esiZulu. Ngisho ukuhlabelela kwakhona kuhlatshelwa njengamaculo esiZulu ngisho ukusinwa kwakhona. Uma uke ubabone abantu abangamabhinca besina, uyabona uma ungake uye emaNgwaneni ufike kusinwa khona, amaNgwane asina njengamaNazaretha, asina isigekle. Ngisho amadoda akhona ngisho amakhosikazi asina ngempela njengoba kusuke kusina amaNazaretha. Umehluko phakathi kwesigekle sakwaShembe nesakwaZulu yi meaning yegama. Kodwa i-rhythm, isitayela sokuhlabelela kufana nokwesiZulu. Kodwa okwehlukayo yi-message. I- message i-heavenly.

[*Isigekle* are songs composed by Isaiah Shembe adopting them from isiZulu. The name *isigekle* has always been there in isiZulu. These are Nazaretha songs that are danced like Zulu songs. Even their singing is like that of Zulu songs and even the dancing. If you have ever seen non-believers dancing, you see if you can go to maNgwaneni and find dancing taking place there, the amaNgwane dance like amaNazaretha, they dance *isigekle*. Even the men there and the women they really dance as you would see amaNazaretha dancing. The difference between the *isigekle* of the Zulu and that of amaNazaretha is the meaning of the song. But the rhythm, the style of

singing, is like that of Zulu. What differs is the message. The message [of Nazaretha songs] is heavenly.

While this gives a sense of where *isigekle* comes from, Mpanza claims he cannot put into words the actual movement and actions of the dancers of *isigekle*, or even that of *amagxalaba* (he calls this the Shembe style). For the purposes of this chapter, I will give an account of the dancing that took place in Ebuhleni on Sunday 13 July 2008. The group of men had been divided into about ten regiments, called *izigcawu*. One of the regiments known for its perfection of the sacred dance, especially *isigekle*, is called *Mbelebeleni* (after the hostel in kwaMashu where most of the dancers stay and where they practise the sacred dance) or *Magumbomane*, (All the Corners of the Earth, because people who dance there come from different areas). The time is 12: 25, which means it is still the first part of the sacred dance, before lunch. All the men's groups are dancing *amagxalaba* style, but this group is dancing *isigekle*. It is their favourite and they know that no other group perfects *isigekle* like they do. So they dance it even when it is time to dance the *amagxalaba* style. There are many spectators who want to see uMbelebele dancing *isigekle*!

When I come to record them, the line that is dancing is in the final step, the one with the highest momentum and which interests both the dancers and the spectators the most. The dancers are more agile and lively, their agility enhanced by the sounds of approval from the audience. It is now that they can bring their own particular flavour or their personal vernacular to bear. As they dance, they are more aware that their time of prominence is almost over. Soon the next group will take over. So they should leave a mark in the minds of the spectators, even if these could be the beings of heaven as well as of this earth. The dancers commit themselves body and soul to the dance. Every part of the body has a role to play. The positioning of the head; the facial expression, the smile; the left hand playing with the shield; the right hand playing with *ishoba*; sometimes they stand still and only move their toes up and down with their torso moving sideways. Then they start dragging their feet forward, to land down with a stamp. Left, right, left, right, and forward they move. Sometimes as the one foot hits the ground, the other is immediately lifted, to be held dangling until its turn of hitting/beating the ground. They march forward and sideways, their shields

and *amashoba* being raised and lowered, raised and lowered, sometimes held high up while the feet are stamping and dangling.

As all this is happening, the next group to dance moves in the line led by the leader of this *isigcawu*. They march from the left of the regiment towards the direction of the spectators, creating a circle as they move to join in front of the dancing line from the right hand side. They move in the rhythm of the song and its accompanying instruments: the drums and the kudu-horn trumpets (*izimbomu*). When the leader has reached the far left, where the entering line started, he comes to the centre and leads the new line forward towards the spectators, still in the high momentum of the line they are substituting. They come back to the starting position of dance. Here the leader plays his flute and all the singing and the instruments stop to give way to the new song for the new line. This is another *isigekle* song. It is called “*Lwaduma ulwandle*” (The Sea Rumbles). It is one of those hymns/songs that do not appear in the hymn book, perhaps because of its potentially political undertones. It is based on the biblical story of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt:

Lead Singer : *Wo lwaduma ulwandle*

Group : *Nang’ uFaro*

Lead Singer : *Olubomvu*

Group : *Eshon’ emfuleni*

Lead Singer : *Emfulen’uzobuya*

Group : *Nempi yakhe*

Lead singer : *Oh nempi yakhe*

Group : *Nenqola zomlilo*

[Lead Singer : Oh the sea rumbles

Group : Here is Pharaoh

Lead Singer : That which is red

Group : He is heading towards the river

Lead Singer : From the river he will return

Group : With his army

Lead Singer : Oh! With his army

Group : And the wagons of fire.]

The song is sung in a call-and-response style. Most of the time the lead singer says something and the group say something else. Or put differently, what the lead singer is saying can be taken apart to make its own sense, and what the group says makes its own sense or meaning. This is more noticeable in the songs that are written in the hymn book and have two or more stanzas. While each stanza has its own ‘independent’ meaning, the leader will sing from either the first or the second stanza and the group will respond by singing the lines from whichever stanza the leader did not sing. For instance, Hymn No. 207 “*Thuthuka Thuthuka*” [Develop! Develop!] is sung and performed exactly like the above hymn. In the hymn book it is written as follows:

Thuthuka Thuthuka

WebuNazaretha

Thuthuka nazi

Izizwe zomile

Sizwa ngendaba

Besitshela bethi

ENazaretha

Sokholwa sichichime.

[Develop! Develop!

You Nazaretha

Develop, here are

The thirsty nations.

We hear rumours

They tell us that

In Nazaretha

We will saturate with faith.]

The hymn will be performed like this in the sacred dance:

Lead Singer : *Thuthuka Thuthuka*
 Group : *Sizwa ngendaba*
 LS : *WebuNazaretha*
 Group : *Besitshela bethi*
 LS : *Thuthuka nazi*
 Group : *ENazaretha*
 LS : *Izizwe zomile*
 Group : *Sokholwa sichichime.*

[Lead Singer : Develop! Develop!
 Group : We hear rumours
 Lead Singer : You Nazaretha
 Group : They tell us that
 Lead Singer : Develop [because] here are
 Group : In Nazaretha
 Lead Singer : The thirsty nations
 Group : We will saturate with faith.]

As mentioned above, the above songs/hymns are performed alike. They have a similar ‘basic step’. It is this basic step that makes it possible for sacred dancers from different places to be able to participate in the same dance performance. It is when the dancers stray away from this basic step that they run the risk of “going to hell because of their dancing” (Mthembeni Mpanza, Personal Communication, July 31 2009). The performance of most *isigekle* songs/hymns comprises four basic steps. The second step, which is a much slower version of the final one, is omitted in the main sacred dance performances where there are many people who need to give each other a chance. The first step is important in that it is the one that differentiates between the dancing of hymns like the ones above and others like hymn No. 210 “*Waqala izitha*” [You’ve Annoyed the Enemies] and “*Vuk’umkhalele uZulu*” [Wake up and Wail for the Zulus] which do not appear in the hymn book. The second, third and fourth steps for these hymns are the same, but the first step of the former two, “*Thuthuka! Thuthuka!*” and “*Lwaduma ulwandle*” is different from that of either “*Waqala izitha*” or “*Vuk’umkhalele uZulu*”. The latter two hymns have their own particular styles for performing the first step. In other words one can tell which hymn is being performed

by looking at the first step, but after the first step one cannot tell by looking at the performance because it can be either of the above hymns.

An important characteristic of the sacred dance is that each move the dancers make is in time to the song. This is more the case with the first step of every song (especially *isigekle* songs) than with the subsequent steps. In the case of the song sung by the Mbelebele group, “*Lwaduma ulwandle*” [The Sea Rumbles], the dancers beat right left (with the right foot and then with the left one) with their shields down (and *amashoba* held up) in tune to the first two lines of the song, and then repeat the same beats with the shields up (the *amashoba* are still up but are behind the shields, it is the shields that are given prominence) in tune to the third and fourth lines. The right foot beats coincide with the parts sung by the lead singer while the left foot beats coincide with the part sung by the group. During the fifth line, sung by the lead singer, “*Uzobuya*” [He will return], the beat is with the right foot, and here the *ishoba* is projected forward and held up, while the shield is down. In the sixth line, the beat is on the left foot, with both the *ishoba* and the shield held down just in front of the knees. From this, in the seventh line, there is a pause on the part of the dancers, with only a retreating movement of the torso, getting ready for the next move which coincides with line eight sung by the group. Here, the dancers lean their heads to the right and then to the left with the shield and *ishoba* pushed to whichever direction the head leans to. After this the song begins again and the same steps are repeated as many times as the regiment leader (*umsinisi*) allows the dancers, taking into consideration the time left for the other steps and for other ‘lines’ still to perform.



Photo 1. shows *inhlalisuthi* from Mbelebeleni dancing *isigekle*. Note the right hands holding *amashoba* and the left hands with the shields down. This position shows that they are in the first two lines of the hymn. But the same position obtains if the song is in line five as well.



Photo 2. Note that the shields are up and projected forward while the *amashoba* are held back. Here the song is in line three and four.



Photo 3. The shields are down, just ahead of the knees and the *amashoba* a little higher than the shields. The song is in line six.

The second, third and fourth steps are much simpler and the moves are not performed in time to the song the way it is done with the first step above. In other words, one cannot look at the performance or movement of the dancers and tell the exact words the dancers are singing at that particular moment. As mentioned above, the second step is a slower version of the fourth step. This involves slow right left beats that are sometimes followed by a small tap of the heel before the beat of the other leg. The dancers move forward and backwards as well as sideways, raising and lowering their shields according to the lead dancer's decisions rather than the song itself. In the third step the forward-backward moves are the same, but sometimes in the side moves each dancer places his *ishoba* on the right shoulder of the person in front of him. Here the momentum is more than in the first and second steps, with double beats of each foot comprising of forward backward, forward backward beats of each foot. The fourth and final step is characterised by the highest momentum and liveliness of the dancers. As described above, at this stage what is important is the movement of the whole body, but the basic step is a much faster right left right left beat.

Amagxalaba (or Shembe style)

While *isigekle* is actually a Zulu traditional dance style which Isaiah Shembe ‘borrowed’ and used in performing his own religious songs (also sung in old *isigekle* form), *amagxalaba* is his own style developed from and influenced by other emerging forms like *indlamu* dance. There are a number of hymns and variations of *amagxalaba* style as there are of *isigekle*. The difference between *isigekle* and *amagxalaba* is not that marked, and an onlooker who does not know the sacred dance will not be able to tell that these are different choreographies. Identifying the exact features that differentiate the two choreographies is not easy for even the most experienced dancers, even though they can easily tell you whether this is *isigekle* or *amagxalaba* being performed. The difference between the two has to do with the minor details about the style of singing, the pace, the changes and the movement as well as the shields and *amashoba*. While with *amagxalaba* too one can say that the singing is the call-and-response style, as the voices of the lead singer and of the group are clearly separate, it is not the kind that one finds in *isigekle*. In *amagxalaba* the lead singer leads and the group follows with the same words the leader sings and at some point the singing is unified, unlike in *isigekle* where the leader and the group almost always say different things.

In the sacred dance of July 2009, one of the dancing regiments danced for hymn No. 155 which reads as follows:

Ngilandela ngemuva
Indlela yinde kangaka
Ngophelelwa ngamandla
Okuya eKuphakameni.

Abaningi bangishiyile
Ngidinga ngeswele
Ngosizwa ngubani
Ngiye eKuphakameni.

[I am lagging behind

The journey is so long
I'll run out of strength
To get to eKuphakameni.

Many have left me behind
I have nothing, I'm needy
Who will help me
Go to eKuphameni.]

This is sung as follows:

Lead singer : *O ngemuva ngilandela*
Group : *Ngilandela ngemuva*
Lead singer : *Ngemuva indlela*
Group : *Indlela inde kangaka*
Lead singer : *Ngophelelwa*
Group : *Ngophelelwa ngamandla*
Lead singer : *Ngophela mandla okuya*
Group : *Okuya eKuphakameni.*

Lead singer : *Abaningi*
Group : *Abaningi bangishiyile*
Lead singer : *Bangishiyile ngidinga*
Group : *Ngidinga wo ngeswele*
Lead singer : *Wo ngeswele ngosizwa*
Group : *Ngosizwa ngubani*
Lead singer : *Sizwa ngubani ngiye*
Group : *Ngiye eKuphakameni*

[Lead Singer : Oh Behind, I follow
Group : I lag behind
Lead Singer : Behind, The way
Goup : The way is so long
Lead Singer : I will run out

Group : I will run out of strength
Lead Singer : I'll lose the strength to go
Group : Of heading to eKuphakameni.

Lead Singer : The many
Group : The many have left me
Lead Singer : They left me, I am in need
Group : I'm in need and I want
Lead Singer : Oh, I'm wanting, I'll be helped
Group : I'll be helped by whom?
Lead Singer : Helped by whom, to go
Group : To go to eKuphakameni.]

In *amagxalaba* the shields are held up for the duration of the verse of the song, except when the verse ends. They are used as markers of the ending of the verse and signal the *start* of a similar verse or the beginning of the new step. It is this style that is more open to improvisation and group's and individuals' creation of own vernaculars. This was visible in one of the regiments dancing in July 2009 in eBuhleni. The dancing group or line is one of the latest ones in which only the young men dance. This line is charged with competition among the individual dancers, each trying to beat the others, to present themselves as the best, or one of the best, and attracting the attention of the audience. This competitive individuality is most noticeable in the centre of the line, among the four central dancers. While the first step here is characterised by the double beats of each foot, the first being softer and the second harder, the central four dancers of this group add to this their own particular formations that differentiate each one of them from the others. In contrast with the Mbelebeleni regiment it was clear that even though they added their own personal vernacular, what they did they did as a group. As a group that meets on regular basis to practise, their performance was characterised by the advanced kind of uniformity.

Even though dancers in this group or line all follow the same basic step, there is a way in which each dancer does his own thing. The double beats with each foot, which characterise the basic first step, are meant to be done in the same spot, with dancers

only taking one or two steps forward at the turn of or the ending of the verse.⁴⁵ But some dancers execute this beat by performing a soft beat first (which is the norm) and then charge forward in a leap to land with a harder stamp for the second beat (which is not the norm). At first the two dancers who do this only do it when the verse ends, but as the performance progresses they do it more often.

After 9min 22sec the first part of the song comes to an end, and the second verse and second step starts. This is supposed to be a faster version of the first step, except when the tune ends and is to start again. Here the dancers execute four soft beats with the left foot and then one right and one left, which is then followed by the double beats starting from the right foot. However, comprising young men who must recently have been dancing in *isikotshi* or some of them are still dancing in both *injobo* and *isikotshi*, this line performs in a slower than usual pace for *injobo*, a pace characteristic of *isikotshi*. When the leader of all Nazaretha men, Mathunjwa, notices how they dance, he stops the dance and joins the line in the centre, to teach and guide the young men as to the correct way of performing this part of the song. I suspect that he was not happy with the first step either but let them continue, only to realise he could not take it anymore when they were in the second step. Under Mathunjwa's guidance, the song is started again, with the drums now beating a little faster than before and the dance following the new beat of drums. After 4min the dancers have moved forward and back. Now they start the same verse in an even faster beat, the drums also following suit. The beat is still the same double beat but now the dancers turn to the right and to the left as they dance.

When the fourth and final step commences, Mathunjwa leaves the dancers. The movement for this part of the dance is very swift and Mathunjwa realises that he cannot keep pace with the younger dancers. This is the most popular part of the song with the liveliness and agility it calls for on the part of the dancers. The name for this choreography, *amagxalaba*, comes from this part of the dance. This fourth step is called *amagxalaba*.⁴⁶ Dancers, especially younger ones, like this step so much that they perform it even when it is not allowed. In the performance by Mathunjwa's

⁴⁵ This is only done because the dancers are supposed to move forward and then come back to their original spot. It is when they have returned to their original position that they change to the next step.

⁴⁶ *Amagxalaba* are shoulders, and I do not know why this step is called *amagxalaba*.

group the final step was the correct one for that particular song. But sometimes, because they like this step so much, some dancers would include it even when dancing for songs like “*Nina abathanda ukuphila*” (Those of You who Like to Live) and others that need not include this step in their performance.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at the poetics of performing the sacred dance as well as the nature of, meaning and importance of dress in the sacred dance. I have argued with regards to dress that even though Isaiah Shembe was ostensibly concerned with the inside of a person rather than the looks, he dedicated a great deal of time to designing outfits for his followers to wear when performing the sacred dance. I also stated that the kind of dress worn by dancers today is more complex and is richer than what was worn by the dancers in the time of Isaiah Shembe, and that there is no call to change the dress to what it used to be in the times of Isaiah Shembe.

CHAPTER SIX

Gender, Consciousness and Performance in the Nazaretha Church

Introduction

Since its inception, the Nazaretha Church's followers were mainly women and girls. Many, if not most, of these women and girls were joining the church against the wishes of their husbands and fathers. Joel Cabrita points to the dialogic relationship between Isaiah Shembe and the headmen, the chiefs, and the state regarding women who deserted their homes to follow Shembe: "Chief Msebenzie of the Lower Umzimkhulu complained in 1915 to the Magistrate that since 1913 Shembe has drawn 'women and children, (who) have gone away with these preachers to Ixopo and Durban for two and sometimes three months at a time, without the permission of their husbands and fathers'" (2007: 114). There are many other accounts of conflict between women who wanted to follow Shembe and their men who tried to stop them. In one case, Chief Mthengeni of Eshowe District appeared in court for assaulting a Nazaretha preacher. In his defence, Mthengeni claimed that, the Nazaretha "induce our womenfolk to their kraal and they co-habit with them... we object to our women going to them but they persist" (Cabrita, 2007: 115). Despite these objections from men and chiefs, women continued to follow Shembe. The members of the Nazaretha Church are reported to have been 95% female in a report of 1921.⁴⁷

While the Nazaretha Church has certainly never been an egalitarian community in terms of gender and other social categories, women followers of Shembe, especially virgin girls, have always played a significant role in the life of the Church. The significant space that virgin girls occupy in the Nazaretha Church is exemplified in the number of special rituals for them alone. I wish to focus on two rituals, *iNtanda* and *umgonqo*, which are linked to and continuous with each other. The first one, *iNtanda*, commences on the seventh of July with virgin girls leaving *Ebuhleni* for *iNtanda*, and ends on the eighth when the girls return to *Ebuhleni* to march around the home carrying long sticks (*izintingo*) they cut from *Ntanda*. Before they leave for *Ntanda*, the girls hold a service which involves the reading of the Jephtah story. *Umgonqo* ideally begins on the eve of the 25th of July and ends on the 25th of

⁴⁷ Cabrita 2007: 114. See also SAB (NTS 1431, 24/214 Sergt Craddock to District officer, South African Police, 10 September 1921).

September. On the 25th of July and on the 25th of September *amakhosazane* (virgin girls) go to the river (*ezibukweni*).

The *Ntanda* Ritual

The ritual now referred to as *iNtanda* or *oThingweni*⁴⁸ (long stick) appears to have started after Shembe had a problem acquiring the land which is now called *Ntanda*. One of my interviewees, MaNtanzi Mhlongo, tells that Shembe was promised by a Frenchman that he would sell him the farm. When the Frenchman spoke to other white people, they told him that he should not sell his farm to a black person. When Shembe came with the money to pay for the farm, the Frenchman was not present. Shembe found a black man who worked for the Frenchman who told him that he should not leave the money because he [the worker] overheard the whites saying that the farm should not be sold to a black person. Shembe was saddened by this and went back to his congregation. He requested that the girls go to the farm to pray that the church should acquire it. He told the *amakhosazane* to make grass coils and sleep on them instead of using sitting mats. The Frenchman then sold the farm to Shembe and, as a way of thanking God, Shembe made a vow that virgin girls would go to worship at *Ntanda* every July seventh. In this way, Shembe was offering his girls to God even though they were not to be a burnt offering like Jephthah's daughter.

In terms of the actual practice of this ritual, the girls go to *eNtanda* on the seventh of July where they cut the long sticks and go to sleep. They wake up early in the morning and go to bathe in the river. At nine they hold a morning service and then the leader, referred to as *Mphathi* or *Anti* (aunt), advises them on how to behave as *amakhosazane*, emphasising the fact that *iNtanda* is for virgin girls only. She then tells (or reads) the girls the story of how the land which is now *iNtanda* was acquired and also the story of Jephthah and his daughter. The *iNtanda* story goes as follows:

Indaba Yomlando waseNtanda

Inkosi yaseZulwini yakhuluma noNkulunkulu. Wathi akazi ukuthi uzobabekaphi abafelokazi nezintandane. UNkulunkulu wathi, "Ngiyezwa mntanami". Emveni kwalokho, kwafika umFrench wathembisa ukudayisela

⁴⁸ Because it is where virgin girls get their long sticks (*izintingo*).

uShembe indawo. INkosi yaseKuphakameni yajabula kakhulu. Wathi, “Ngempela Baba uhlale ungizwa.” Wabe esehamba umFrench, eseyithathile inxenye yemali. Abamhlophe bambuza bathi, “Kungani umnikeza umhlaba? Kade kwashiwo ukuthi umhlaba akumele uthengwe ngumuntu omnyama.” Babesho lokhu bengazi ukuthi bakhuluma ngoNkulunkulu. UmFrench wase eya kuShembe nemali ayeseyithathile kuyo iNkosi yaseKuphakameni. Wathi, “Umthetho eMgungundlovu uyayingiphikisa”. INkosi yaseKuphakameni yathi, “Ungangiqambeli amanga ngoba uzobona ukuthi ngingumphrofithi.”

Wadumala kakhulu. UNkulunkulu wakhuluma kuye wathi, “Usungikhohliwe na? Udumaleleni?”

UShembe akamphendulanga umFrenchi. Wathi uzothumela izingane ziyohlakula ukhula emasimini akhe umFrenchi. Eyokuqala inkosazane yafika. Yaaphotha izinkatha ezanele amakhosazane ayekhona lapho. UNkulunkulu wathi, “Zinike amakhosazane ahlale phezu kwazo uma ethandaza.” Umphrofithi uShembe wabe esekhipha elinye izwi, ethi inkosazane eyaziyo ukuthi ayiphelele emthethweni kaNkulunkulu akumele iphathe inkatha.

Emveni kwalokho kwabe sekufika isihlabelelo esaqanjwa mayelana nalesosenzo. Loso yisihlabelelo 84. Wathi amakhosazane kumele ahlale ezinkatheni hhayi emacansini. Uma sebesukuma kumele bathathe izinkatha zabo bazikhweze endaweni ekhethekile, eyaziwa yibo bodwa. Uma sebebuya, bayothatha izinkatha zabo kuleyondawo abazibeke kuzo. Umphrofithi njengoba ayekhuluma wayazi ukuthi kukhona inkosazane engafanele ukwenza lokhu, ukuthatha inkatha. Ngesikhathi amakhosazane esebuya, kwaba khona inkosazane eyayilokhu ifuna eyayo inkatha, ingasazi ukuthi iyibekephi.

Kanti izingelosi zaseZulwini zasezifikile zayithatha zayoyilahla. Ngoba ngesikhathi zithandazela amakhosazane, lena enye inkosazane ayitholakalanga ezulwini. Izingelosi zasuka zaqonda kumFrench owayedayisele ubaba indawo. Zambuza ukuthi uyazi yini ukuthi ulwisana nobani njengoba engasafuni ukudayisa indawo. Zathi zihamba kwase kushayisana amazinyo kumFrenchi. Wathi, “Ngizoyibuyisa imali. Ngizohamba ngiyoyifuna.” Ngosuku olulandelayo wahamba waze wayofika

eKuphakameni, eyobona uShembe. Wathi, “Ngikhulume iphutha kumprofithi ngendawo, iNkosi ngozoyinika indawo.” Ngakho iNkosi yaseKuphakameni yatshela amakhosazane ayethandazile, yathi, “UJehova unizwelile. Ngakho nina zingane kumele nibonge lendawo kuNkulunkulu njalo ngomhlaka 7 Julayi. Kumele nibonge lendawo kuNkulunkulu. Inkosazane kumele iphinde inikele ngomarandi amane. Amakhosazane aphelele kuphela okumele ahambe. Igama lalendawo kuseSensabathandwa.”

[Historical Narrative of Ntanda]

The king of heaven spoke to God. He said he did not know where he could put the widows and orphans. God said, “I understand, my child.” Thereafter a Frenchman arrived and offered land to Shembe. The King of *eKuphakameni* was so happy. He said, “Yes indeed, my father, you always hear me.” Then the Frenchman went away, having taken half of the money. The white men asked the Frenchman, “Why do you sell him land. It has been said that a black man cannot buy land.” They said this not knowing that they were talking about God. Then the Frenchman went back to Shembe with the money he had received from the King of *eKuphakameni*. He said, “The law is against me in Pietermaritzburg.” The King of *eKuphakameni* said, “Do not lie to me, for you will see that I am the prophet.”

[Shembe] was very sad. Then God spoke to him, saying, “Have you forgotten me? Why are you so sad?”

Shembe did not respond to the Frenchman. He said he would send the children to weed the fields of the Frenchman. The first maiden arrived and twined together enough grass coils for all the girls present. God said, “Give them to the maidens so they will sit on them while praying.” Then the prophet Shembe issued another rule, saying that the maiden who knows she is not perfect in terms of God’s principles should not take this grass coil.

Thereafter, a hymn came which was created in accordance with these happenings. This is hymn number 84. Shembe said that these maidens should sit on the grass coils [*izinkatha*] not on the sitting mats. When they stand up, they should take their grass coil and place it in a special space known only to them. When they come back, they will take the grass coil from that special place. As he was speaking, the Lord of *eKuphakameni* knew that there was

one maiden who was not supposed to be taking the grass coil. So when the maidens returned, there was one maiden who kept looking for her grass coil, not knowing where she had put it. The messengers of heaven had come and thrown it away because when they had prayed for the girls one of them was not there. The angels then went straight to the Frenchman who had sold the land to my Father. They asked if he knew whom he was going against as he would not sell the land. When they left, the Frenchman's teeth began to chatter. Then he said, "I will return the money. I will go and fetch it." The following day the Frenchman walked until he came to *eKuphakameni*, to see Prophet Shembe. He said, "I lied to the Prophet about the land. I will give it to the king." Thus the King of *eKuphakameni* decreed to the maidens who had prayed, saying, "Jehovah has responded on your behalf. Thus, you, the young children, must give thanks to God on the 7th of July. You must thank God for the land. A maiden must then pay four rand, this is for those who are yet to be born, the coming generations. Only those maidens who are morally upright may go. The name of the Temple is *Sensabathandwa*."

This is an important and complex text that sheds some useful light on the Nazaretha consciousness and their belief about God, Shembe and the role of virgin girls. About this text Muller writes that, "At first glance this letter from the prophet Isaiah Shembe might seem to be no more than a confused set of messages transcribed rather poorly into written form" (1999: 194). She goes on to state that, "I suggest that it is a document that outlines a complex discourse on the [re-]creation of ritualized performance as a mechanism for the enactment and transformation of historical moment in time, a moment when Isaiah wished to purchase land for the widows and orphans, the poor, and dispossessed" (1999: 194). While Muller's statement may be valid, it needs to be emphasised that this text was written by one of Shembe's followers (perhaps even after Isaiah Shembe had passed away⁴⁹), not Isaiah Shembe himself. As such, this is an edited transcription of an originally oral text that Shembe must have narrated to his followers. This means the text is an attempt to represent Isaiah Shembe's actions and belief on a number of issues: the importance of caring for the orphans and widows; the role of virgin girls (and their purity) in

⁴⁹ In his time Isaiah Shembe was referred to as *iNceku kaNkulunkulu* (messenger of God). The tendency to say Shembe is God started later, after Isaiah had passed away.

communicating with God; and the need to challenge injustice on the spiritual and physical levels. However, the text ends up offering us something in between Shembe's and his followers' consciousness. This is worth noting because, as Murray (1999) has argued, in dealing with the Zionist churches like the Nazaretha Church (he is writing about Solomon Lion and his church) we need to make a distinction between the attitudes of the leaders and those of their followers.

That the significance placed on virginity and the role of virgin girls in protecting the Nazaretha community originated with Isaiah Shembe himself or is an idea he himself shared is exemplified in his words at Msinga (Machunwini) in 1933. He called upon parents to inspect their daughters for virginity so that they "may be worthy to stand before God" (Papini and Hexham, 2002: 119). He went on to recommend that, "in all the large temples, there should be twenty-four maidens who are virgins, and in medium-sized temples there should be twelve maidens and in small temples there should be six maidens who are virgins" (119). This recommendation is quite telling, in that it seems to suggest that virgin girls are the most important component of the Temple, for without a particular number of virgin girls, a temple cannot exist. There is no such stipulation with regards to men, boys and young men, and married women.

As mentioned in chapter two, for a maiden to be complete⁵⁰ she has to be a virgin, and it is as a virgin that she is allowed to take part in the sacred dance and other important rituals for maidens. If she takes part but is not a virgin she annoys God, the Angels, and her own ancestors. The belief in the Nazaretha Church is that even though living people may not see that a maiden is no longer a virgin, those in heaven (God, the Angels and the ancestors) can see it. Thus the above text tells that the maiden who had lost her virginity but still took part in the *Ntanda* ritual could not find her grass coil because the Angels had taken it and thrown it away. However, that it is the Angels who had taken the maiden's grass coil and thrown it away appear to be the narrator's voice and idea, not Isaiah Shembe's. This is because this idea reflects more

⁵⁰ Other scholars use 'perfect' for *ukuphelele* but I use 'complete' which is a literal translation. This is because a maiden may be a virgin, but fail to attend all the 25th meetings, all the sacred dance ceremonies, and the holy communion. That maiden would be 'complete' (because she is a virgin) but not 'perfect' because she does not take part in all the required rituals.

of the Nazaretha members' consciousness and belief than that of Isaiah Shembe.⁵¹ The same is true about the fact that the maiden who had lost her virginity was not found in heaven. The above text oscillates between earth and heaven, with God speaking to Shembe and the Angels talking to the Frenchman. This reveals the Nazaretha perception mentioned in the Introduction with regards to the sacred dance that the the spiritual and physical worlds can be integrated. The same happens with this text and *iNtanda* ritual.

* * *

After the service in which the above text is read, on the 8th, the girls travel back from *Ntanda* to *eBuhleni*. But this is not how it happened in the time of Isaiah Shembe. *Mphathi* (leader of virgin girls) MaDuma told me in an interview that in Isaiah Shembe's time the maidens used to go to *eNtanda* on the 7th of July, spend the whole of the following day there worshipping, and only came back on the 9th :

Ngalolusuku, lwesibili, sasiba nenkonzo ekuseni, sibe nenkonzo emini sibe nenkonzo ntambama. Njengoba sesihamba ngomhlaka 7 sibuye ngomhlaka 8 akushintshwanga amakhosazane. Kwashintshwa yiNkosi iLanga. Wakushintsha ngoba leyandawo ibanda kakhulu, inamanzi. Wathi kumele sihambe usuku olulodwa kuphela bese sibuya ngolwesibili. Manje njengoba sesilala kanye, siyafika khona sithandaze bese siyalala. Ekuseni ngonayini siya emthandazweni. Uma umthandazo usuphelile siyabuya. Ngalesi sikhathi sisenesikhathi esiningi, sasiba nanesikhathi sokugida. Yize sasingayigqoki imvunulo kodwa sasidumisa uNkulunkulu ngokusina nangenkonzo.

[During this day, the second day, we would go for the service in the morning and the service in the afternoon and in the evening. That we're now going on the 7th and coming back on the 8th was not changed by *amakhosazana*. It was J.G., *iNkosi iLanga*, who changed it. He changed it because that place is very

⁵¹ The consciousness and belief of *amaNazaretha* are not always the same as those of the leaders of the Church, from Isaiah Shembe to the present leader, *uThingo*. For instance, in the past few years there has been a subtle debate in sermons between *uThingo* and Nazaretha members, especially ministers, about who Shembe is. *UThingo* was maintaining that he is not God, and members claimed that he was because only God can perform the miracles that he performs.

cold, it has water (i.e. small rivers which make it wet). He said we should go and spend only one night, and then come back the following day. So now that we are going for only one day, we just get there and then we pray and then sleep. So in the morning, at nine, we go to the service. When the service is finished, then we come back. That time when there was plenty of time, we would even have time to dance. Even if we won't be wearing the *umgidi* attire, we would praise God by dancing and by the service.^{52]}

For the final *uthingo* ritual the girls leave their long sticks just outside *eBuhleni*, and go to their *amadokodo* (makeshift accommodation) to wash and put on clean dresses called *amahiye*. They go outside *eBuhleni*, to collect their sticks. Then they are divided into groups (or regiments) of about one to two hundred. In these groups they march from the entrance to *eBuhleni* to the present dance area for girls, near *uThingo's* house. (In the 2009 ceremony, this happened inside the new Temple next to where *uThingo's* new house has been built.) As they march, they sing “*Qubula Nkosi*” (Lift O Chief)⁵³, one of the hymns not included in the hymn book. This is sung in the call and response style resembling that of *isigekle* songs. It goes as follows:

Lead Singer⁵⁴: *EHlobane*

Group: *Qubula Nkosi*

Lead Singer: *Qubula Nkosi*

Group: *OkaMpande samshiy'eHlobane*

Lead Singer: *EHlobane*

Group: *Impi*

Lead Singer: *O! Impi*

Group: *Zinyane lendlovu*

Lead Singer: *Elendlovu*

Group: *Samshiy'eHlobane.*

⁵² This is an interview I conducted along with Joel Cabrita (a Postdoctoral Fellow from Cambridge University) on the 21st July 2008. She may use this source in her own work as well.

⁵³ Muller translates this as “Perform a War Dance”. She is correct to say that the hymn is difficult to translate because it uses a deep form of isiZulu. But this is the only line that is unclear, others are simply incorrect in Muller’s text. Here I have used “lift” which is meant by the word “*qubula*”, instead of Muller’s “perform a war dance”.

⁵⁴ Due to the large number of girls participating in the ritual, the lead singer uses a loud speaker to ensure that all the girls in the regiment ready to go and make a circle (creating an image of a rondavel) can hear the song.

[Lead Singer: At Hlobane
 Group: Lift O Chief
 Lead Singer: Lift O Chief
 Group: The son of Mpande, we left him at Hlobane
 Lead Singer: At Hlobane
 Group: The war
 Lead Singer: O the war
 Group: Baby elephant
 Lead Singer: (Calf) Of elephant
 Group: We left him at Hlobane.

About this hymn Muller asserts that it “was not a song arbitrarily selected by the girls, but one that invoked the words of the ancestors themselves” (1999: 195). This assertion is correct in that this song is a standard one for the *Ntanda* ritual. There is no other song/hymn sung in this ritual other than “*Qubula Nkosi*”, even though there are many that may ‘invoke the words of the ancestors’. The older members of the church, and even virgin girls’ leaders,⁵⁵ do not know why this song came to be used in the ritual. The meaning of the song is unclear, but according to Muller the song was a praise to King Cetshwayo “who was believed to cause thunder, lightning, and rain immediately after it was sung” (1999: 195).

But this hymn, even though Shembe seems deliberately to have hidden its meaning, is a prayer for King Cetshwayo rather than his praise. In it Shembe remembers Cetshwayo and laments his death. In the first line, “*Nkosi*” refers to God, who is requested (or commanded) to “lift” Cetshwayo. It is Cetshwayo’s spirit that God is asked to lift. This relates to the tradition among the Zulus of slaughtering a cow for a dead person. The first such ceremony is called cleansing (*ihlambo*), and cleanses the homestead and its inhabitants, while the second, called *ukubuyisa* (to bring back) or *ukukhuphula* (to raise), is particularly important for the spirit of the late person as it is meant to remove it from the place of darkness and sorrow, to the place of light and

⁵⁵ Cabrita and I asked one of the oldest and most senior leaders of the virgin girls, MaDuma, and she did not know.

happiness higher up. Here Shembe calls for such a removal of Cetshwayo's spirit from the valley of sorrow to the place of rest and tranquility.

When performing an *ukukhuphula* ritual for a dead person, it is important to know where the person died and where he or she was buried, because that is from where the spirit will be fetched: that is, those who are performing the ritual go to the person's grave to communicate with him or her. Thus it is important for Shembe to state that Cetshwayo was buried at Hlobane.⁵⁶ This is where his spirit is supposed to be lingering, waiting to be fetched. Clearly though, it is because of his fight against white domination in the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879 that Cetshwayo is remembered and revered by Shembe. This is so because after stating that Cetshwayo died in Hlobane, the line that follows says "*impi*" (the war) and then the last one salutes the king as the calf of an elephant. But it is the word *impi* that is controversial and may be the reason why this hymn was omitted from the hymn book. It may refer to the fact that Cetshwayo was caught in battle, or more radically it may be Shembe's call to the present king, Solomon, to go to war to avenge Cetshwayo's death.

A less radical version of this hymn appears in the hymn-book as hymn No. 111. This hymn confirms my earlier suggestion that in fact "*Nkosi*" in the hymn performed by the virgin girls refers to God, and if that is the case then the word "*Qubula*" is unlikely to mean "perform the war dance"⁵⁷ as suggested in Muller's book. In hymn No. 111 Shembe asks God to remember his Zulu nation. Here God is referred to as "*Nkulunkulu*" (which is less ambiguous than *Nkosi* which may mean chief/king) and instead of God being requested to "lift" Cetshwayo, he is asked to remember him as well as all the Zulus:

Sikhumbule Nkulunkulu

Thixo wethu

Ngoba uyasithanda wena

Nkulunkulu wethu.

⁵⁶ This may be the place where he died.

⁵⁷ Also, "*isiqubulo*" is a noun which may be translated as "war dance", but if you want to denote the act of performing the war dance you do not create the verb "*qubula*" but you say "*ukusho*" or "*ukuhaya isiqubulo*".

*Oka Mpande samshiya eHlobane
Mkhumbule Thixo wethu
Ngokumthanda.*

*Ungasilibali isizwe sakho
Nkulunkulu wethu
Owasidala ngomsa wakho
Ngokusithanda.*

*Sikhumbule isizwe sakho
Nkulunkulu wethu
Indlu kaSenzangakhona
Nkulunkulu wethu.*

[Remember us, O! God
Our Lord,
Because you love us,
Our God.

The son of Mpande, we left him at Hlobane
Remember him, Our Lord
With love.

Do not forget your nation
Our God
Which you created with your grace
With your love.

Remember your nation
Our God
The progeny of Senzangakhona
Our God.]

But all this does not explain why Shembe standardised this hymn as the only one for the *Ntanda* ritual. Perhaps the reason lies in the link with the war which is mentioned in the hymn the girls sing and the fact that the story of Jephtah's daughter is based on Jephtah fighting and winning the war with the aid of God.

I wish now to return to the virgin girls' performance. As they march, the leaders (*abaphathi*) run around the area in pairs, occasionally jumping up and moving backwards from each other, exclaiming "*Nang'umntwana!*" (Here is the child!) as they do. In the dance area each regiment makes an imaginary rondavel by forming themselves into a circle, raises their sticks up, and then moves forward and then backwards. Muller says this is "build[ing] a house for Shembe" (1999: 190).⁵⁸ After that the group/regiment marches on to the 'inside area' where Shembe's house is. Since there are normally thousands of girls taking part, many girls remain in the temple because they cannot fit into the area. When most groups had come in, in the July 2008 ceremony, they sang hymn No. 69:

Ilizwi leNkosi
Selifikile phezu kwethube
Nathi masilamukele
Ngenhliziyo ezimhlophe

Bongani webangane
Ngalezoziqhamo
Ujehova inkosi yethu
Aziletha phezu kwethu.

Nithini webantu
Ngalezo zibusiso
Esinazo thina
Nabantwana bethu?

[The word of the *iNkosi*

⁵⁸ I comment on this and the whole ritual below.

Has come to us
Let us accept it
With open (white) hearts.

Give thanks my friends
For all those rewards
That Jehovah, our Lord
Has given to us.

What do you say people
About those blessings
Which we and our children have?]

After the hymn they prayed, and UThingo said the last prayer which is called *ukuvala* (to close) or *ukubusisa* (to bless). Then he addressed the girls who had gathered in the open area in his living quarters (where his house, the huts of his ancestors, the house for the girls who help him, and those for other people living with him are all situated). But the loudspeaker allowed even those who were not inside the living quarters to hear his address. It went as follows:

Ewu! Siyabonga bantwana bethu uma kuya ngoba lento enhle kangaka yesizwe esinsundu nisayigcinile. Abamnakanga ubabamkhulu ozala obaba ngesikhathi ekhuluma ethi intombazane nomfana abahlangani, baze bashade, kulotsholwe kushadwe bese beyahlangana. Ngoba sivikela isifo esingeke silapheke esizayo. Ngoba kwakuyisikhathi eside kakhulu, akekho owakhohwa ukuthi lendoda kukhona into eyikhulumayo. Bambukela phansi. Abantu baye bambukele phansi umuntu uma engafundile... ISilo-ke samaZulu sanibonga, sathi awu baba ngiyabonga. Sesizwile ukuthi njengoba kufike lesisifo esibhuqabhuqa isizwe nje, cha eNazareth sithembile ukuthi isizwe sakithi ngeke siphela. Sithembele kinina Ntaba yepheza. Siyazicelela-ke ukuthi abaphathi benu laba nisize nibahloniphe bantwana bethu uma beniyala ngezinto ezithile eziqondene nokuphatha. Nibalalele nibahloniphe. Niyokhula nakhe isizwe esibusisekile. INkosi inibusise.

[*Ewu!* We thank you our children if you are still keeping this beautiful thing of our brown nation. They took no notice of *Babamkhulu* (Isaiah Shembe) who is the father of my fathers when he said that a girl and a boy should not come together (have sex) until they get married, until the *lobolo* is paid and they get married then they have sex. “Because we are preventing a disease that is coming which will not be curable.” Because it was a long time ago, no one believed that this man was making any sense. They looked down upon him. People look down upon a person who is uneducated... The Zulu king thanked you, saying, “*Awu!* Father, I thank you. We have heard that as there is now this disease which kills the nation, here in Nazareth we have hope that our nation is not going to end. Our hope is in you mountains of abstinence. We request that you listen to your leaders if they advise you on certain matters relating to behaviour. You should listen to them and respect them. You will grow up and create a blessed nation. May God bless you”.]

What is interesting in this speech by the church’s leader and grandson of Isaiah Shembe is that the rule against sex before marriage (the importance for girls to keep their virginity), which has been part of the church since its inception, is interpreted as having been set in place to protect amaNazareth against HIV/AIDS. It suggests that this issue (HIV/AIDS) had been a concern of the church, of the church’s founder at least, and had been prophetically spoken about even before the pandemic actually started. This is an interestingly pragmatic interpretation or rendering of the otherwise ethereal texts of Isaiah Shembe, in which the loss of virginity causes a maiden to be unworthy to stand before God. What is also telling is the fact that the two voices in the text, of *uThingo* and King Goodwill (both revered in the Nazareth Church), talk about AIDS as a strange disease that is taboo. But *uThingo*’s representation of the church’s old text allows him to talk about this otherwise avoided subject.

After Shembe’s address the virgin girls’ leader, MaDuma, spoke. She told the girls that they were to disperse for a while. They were going to meet later to pay donations of R14. Ten rand was for the ball, which would be in September and four rand was for *Ntanda*, where they came from (which is written about in the *Ntanda* narrative above). MaDuma also told the girls that on the following day (Wednesday) would

begin the sacred dance that would last for the rest of the week⁵⁹. Members of the group would wear two different forms of attire on Wednesday and on Friday (this means one group will wear one form of attire and the other will wear a different one) so that when the week ended they would have worn all five dresses, and Sunday would be a sacred dance of all people.



A group of maidens marching with their sticks in the temple (worship area) in eBuhleni. They are heading towards the spot where they will make an imaginary rondavel.

⁵⁹ This is the virgin girls' only dance that takes place immediately after *iNtanda*. The sacred dance of all people (where men and married women can take part) cannot happen before the virgin girls have finished their own dance where they wear Western dance attire (*imvunulo yesilungu*).



Maidens creating an imaginary rondavel.



Maidens' leaders running around and hopping in front of the maidens coming to create an imaginary rondavel.



Maidens' leader, MaDuma, marching with the maidens. She is wearing a red hat. On her right is another leader who uses the loudspeaker to lead the song.

Umgonqo

As stated above, *umgonqo* is ideally a two-month ritual commencing on the 25th of July and running until the 25th of September. During this period, the girls are supposed to be closeted in their area and must have no contact at all with men. This does not happen due to other commitments of the Church and of the individual girls. As Mphathi MaDuma states:

Kushukuthi umhlaka 25 Julayi uyisango lokungena emgonqweni. Abanye ababe besahamba emva kumhlaka 25, bayahlala nje balinde uSeptember. Bavele sebesemgonqweni. Kodwa manje akwenzeki ngoba abanye bayahamba beyolanda ukudla emakhaya ukuze babuye bezohlala la. Manje kunezindawo eziningi uShembe aya kuzo, manje nje uma kuphela uJulayi uzoya kwenye indawo. Futhi akakwazi ukuhamba ngaphandle kokuthi nathi sibe khona. Manje-ke abazohlala lapha yilabo abazoya emakhaya beyolanda ukudla, okothi uma sesibuya nomhlangano sibafice la. Bazobuya bangene emgonqweni. Emgonqweni siyadumisa bese sikhuluma ngomthetho wesonto.

[It means the 25th of July is like the gate of entering to *umgonqo*. Some don't go back to their homes after the 25th, they just stay and wait for September. They are already in *umgonqo*. But now it doesn't happen because some go to fetch food from their homes to come and stay here. And now there are many places where Shembe goes to, now at the end of July he'll be going somewhere else. And he can't go without us also coming. So the only ones who will be staying are the ones who will go to their homes to get the food, and when we come back here we will find them. They will come back and enter in *umgonqo*. So in *umgonqo* we worship and then we talk about the law of the church.]

Central to *umgonqo* ritual is the biblical narrative of Jephtah, which, to use Gerald West's term, is "re-membered"⁶⁰ from the book of Judges 11. It is represented as follows:

Abahluli 11: 30-40

1. *UJafethi wenza isifungo kuJehova, wathi: "Uma uJehova enikela abaka Amoni esandleni sami, lowo oyokuqhamuka kwabendlu yami ukungihlangabeza uma sengibuya empini, uyakuma wumnikelo wokushiswa kaJehova ophuma esandleni sami." Nangempela uJehova wanikela abaka Amoni esandleni sikaJafethi.*
2. *UJafethi wabuyela emzini wakhe eMizpa, bheka indodakaza yaphuma ukumhlangabeza, iza nezigubhu nokusina, kwakukuphela kwayo, ngaphandle kwayo engenaye omunye umntwana. Wathi ukuba ayibone, wadabula izingubo zakhe, wathi, "Awu, mntanami, uyangithobisa kakhulu, ungowabangihluphayo. Ngivulile umlomo wami kuJehova, ngingebuye.*
3. *Indodakazi yakhe yathi, "Baba, yenza kimi njengokuba ukhulumile kuJehova, ngoba uJehova unikele izitha zakho esandleni sakho. Ngiyavuma ukuba ngibe wumhlatshelo kaJehova. Kodwa ngicela ungededele izinyanga ezimbili ukuze ngiye ezintabeni ngililele ubuntombi bami kanye nabangani bami.*

⁶⁰ See West (1999 and 2006).

[Judges 11: 30-40

1. Jephthah made a vow before Jehovah, saying, “If Jehovah will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes forth from my house to meet me, when I return victorious from war, shall be a burnt offering to Jehovah from my hand.” And indeed, Jehovah gave the Ammonites into the hands of Jephthah.

2. Jephthah came back to his home in Mizpah. Behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and dances. She was his only daughter; besides her he had no children. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said: “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me down, and you are one of my tormenters. I have opened my mouth to Jehovah and I cannot go back on my word.”

3. His daughter said: “Father, do to me what you promised Jehovah, for Jehovah has given your enemies into your hands. I agree to be an offering to Jehovah. But, I ask you to let me alone for two months, that I may to the mountains and lament my virginity together with my companions.”]

This ritual draws on both the biblical narrative of Jephthah and his daughter, and on the traditional rite called *umgonqo*. It is a commemoration and a lament of the death of Jephthah’s daughter. The ritual commences with the virgin girls going to *ezibukweni*⁶¹. Here too the Jephthah narrative mentioned above is read. After that the girls then travel back to *eBuhleni* where they sing, beat drums, and march around home wearing white gowns (which have collars) called *imiJafethi*, after the biblical character, Jephthah. Perhaps because this dress is linked to lament, the girls change to the traditional dance attire when they go to dance. They do not dance wearing *imiJafethi*. The girls meet again on the 24th of September, and on the 25th they go to *ezibukweni* again. Here the Jephthah text is read after the girls have readied themselves for a return to *eBuhleni* to march around the home as in July. But in September, after marching around *eBuhleni*, the girls do not go change for the sacred dance, rather, they do what is called ‘playing the ball’, which in effect is an exchange of gifts between the girls and Shembe (even the late Shembes are given gifts). With the R10 donations made at *iNtanda*, the girls buy a gift for Shembe which can be anything they want. But Shembe always gives an

⁶¹ This is a river in which girls participating in *umgonqo*, both the traditional ritual and that appropriated by Isaiah Shembe, go to bathe to prepare for the public dance. They rise before dawn on the morning of the final day of *umgonqo* and go to the river.

ox to the girls. Muller (1999: 189) states wrongly that the ox was given to Shembe by the girls and even goes on to state, in the endnote that, “Kriege (1988 [1950]: 102) mentions in her account that traditionally, a father of the girl in seclusion offers an ox on the day of her coming out. There has obviously been some kind of reversal in terms of the giver and receiver of an ox in the case of Shembe.”

Interpreting the *Ntanda* and *Umgonqo* rituals

It seems to me that these rituals, even though sometimes they are said to lament the death of Jephthah’s daughter, are a celebration of the maidens’ spiritual virtue. The Judges 11 text on the narrative of Jephthah’s daughter is used to denote the strength she displayed both in keeping her virginity and in accepting death so as to allow for the fulfilment of her father’s promise to God. This is done to encourage the Nazaretha maidens to follow her example by keeping their virginity until they get married as *uThingo* stated in his talk to the girls. But it is also used to encourage the whole Nazaretha community to have the same spiritual virtue. Isaiah Shembe started his religious movement against a great deal of adversity from the state and the missionaries, and this created in him a belief that to be a person of God one needs to persevere and be willing and ready to worship God against the odds.

Hymn No. 38, which is included in the Catechism under the heading, “Rules Concerning the Maidens of Nazaretha on the Sabbath Day, 27 July, 1933” (Papini and Hexham, 2002: 118), calls for such spiritual virtue and bravery. Even though this hymn is included in the section “Concerning the Maidens”, it speaks to the whole community and actually deals with death and the difficulties associated with the heavenly journey. Since all the members die, all can learn from the bravery and spiritual commitment displayed by Jephthah’s daughter. Thus in the chorus “give me the strength/ Of Jephthah’s daughter”, the speaker deliberates about the difficulties he or she may face when death comes. It is in such time that s/he will require strength and bravery equal to those of Jephthah’s daughter:

Ngiyohamba ngingedwa

Esigodini sosizi.

*Chorus: Nginikele lesa sibindi
Sentombi kaJafethe*

*Futhi ngongena ngingedwa
Ethuneni lami.*

*Chorus: Nginikele lesa sibindi
Sentombi kaJafethe*

*Ngiyakusikhala ngingedwa isililo sami
Ngobe ngingenabani mina soni*

*Chorus: Nginikele lesa sibindi
Sentombi kaJafethe*

*Indlela yethuna iyesabeka
Noma ihanjwa ngabaningi abayithandi*

*Chorus: Nginikele lesa sibindi
Sentombi kaJafethe*

[I shall travel alone
In the valley of sorrow.

Chorus: Give me that strength
Of Jephtah's daughter.

And I will enter alone
Into my grave.

Chorus: Give me that strength
Of Jephtah's daughter.

I will cry my tears alone

I will have no one, me the sinner.

Chorus: Give me the strength
Of Jephthah's daughter

The way of the grave is fearsome
Although many walk through it, they don't like it.

Chorus: Give me that strength
Of Jephthah's daughter.]

Shembe saw being a person of God as something so difficult it required real strength to persevere. The valley of sorrow spoken about in stanza one refers to the place in the afterlife which is like hell, where those who did not do well on earth will end up.⁶² The idea is that through her religious strength in keeping her virginity and in consenting to be a sacrifice to God, Jephthah's daughter must have made it to heaven, and whoever wants to avoid the valley of sorrow, and instead go straight to heaven, must follow her example in being truthful to their faith.

The translation of stanza two in Papini and Hexham (2002: 120), "I too shall go alone/ Into my grave", implies that the speaker here is different from the one in the first stanza and suggests that like Jephthah's daughter the speaker will go alone to his/her grave. But the correct translation of the hymn is "Also, I shall go alone/ Into my grave" (*Futhi ngongena ngingedwa/ Ethuneni lami*) emphasising the fact that this hymn is about the afterlife and the hardships one is likely to encounter on one's journey. The message put across in Hymn No. 38 is the same as the one in Hymn No. 143, for instance, which points to the difficulty of being a Nazaretha and calls on all who want to join the faith to have religious strength because the Nazaretha way is difficult. According to the speaker in the hymn, being a Nazaretha is like a slippery rock on which most people cannot manage to walk:

Ukukholwa kwethu

⁶² The valley of distress is also mentioned in Hymn No. 218 which also talks about the difficulty of the laws of Shembe and the suffering of those who failed to keep those laws.

Kulobu buNazaretha
Kuyidwala elibushelelezi
Lehlula abaningi.

Wena uyathanda ukusilandela
Lapha siya khona
Uboqala uthenge isibindi
Lapha siya khona.

[Our faith
In this Nazaretha
It's a slippery rock
It beats many people.

If you like to follow us
Where we are going
You must first buy valour.
Where we are going.]

In terms of the actual practice of these rituals, especially *iNtanda*, they celebrate the virginity of the girls and they look forward to or anticipate the fact that these girls are going to get married. The performance of the leaders, where they run-hop in front of the girls and jump and then say “*Nang’umntwana!*” (literally meaning, “here is the child” but actually saying, “here is the bride”), suggests that these are the future wives. “*Umntwana*” is used in weddings to refer to the bride.⁶³ The imaginary rondavel they create with their sticks points to the fact that they are meant to build the homes of the men they are going to marry. In the Nazaretha Church, as in Nguni society more broadly, when men propose they say they want the girl to ‘build a home’ (*ukwakha umuzi*) or to ‘re-build a home’ (*ukuvusa umuzi*) of their fathers. The suggestion by Muller that Shembe protects the *amakhosazane* at the cost of the denial of sexual desire (1999: xix) is an overstatement and creates an impression that these girls are urged or even encouraged to remain virgins forever. The truth here is that

⁶³ When a bride is about to come to the groom’s home for the wedding, she is heralded by a group of young men who go to the home singing. This is called *ukubika umntwana* (announcing the bride).

they are urged to wait until they get married (as *uThingo* was saying above); in fact not getting married is so discouraged that those who choose to stay unmarried forever are regarded as depriving their homesteads of the cattle they would have received in the form of *lobola*.

Participating in these rituals as well as other performances like the sacred dance – all of which are considered worship – provides the space for the girls to move closer to God spiritually, and they use this space to pray for marriage, among other things. One of the virgin girls who attended the *iNtanda* ritual in 2009 had a dream in which she saw Shembe, *uThingo*, offering her a gift. She did not know what the gift was since it was wrapped. But when she was ‘chosen’⁶⁴ she interpreted the dream to mean that the gift was a husband or marriage. This belief was strengthened by another virgin girl’s vision which she saw on the last Sabbath of July (after which proposals happen). This girl is one of Nokwanda’s (my informant’s) companions, and her name is Sindi. During the Sabbath service they were some distance apart. Sindi told Nokwanda that as the service was progressing, she saw a vision in which *u-anti* (literally meaning ‘aunt’, but referring to those women who did not get married) approached them with a small sitting mat (*isicephu*). She could see that there was something wrapped in the sitting mat. The Aunt placed the sitting mat in front of Sindi and the other girls who were next to her. But in the vision she felt as if at her side was not the girl who was actually there but Nokwanda. Thus, she said, “Open it, Nokwanda, because it’s yours.” When Nokwanda opened the sitting mat, in it there was a piece of beadwork (she did not know what beadwork it was but they interpreted it as “*ucu*”, a beadwork piece given by the bride to her groom on the day of the initial wedding taking place in the church site); the ring; and the blue *inansook* (worn by recently-married virgin girls).

So if *amakhosazane* do lament their sexual loneliness, it is not during the *Ntanda* and *umgonqo* rituals. Being a virgin in the Nazaretha Church is something to be proud of, and there is no better place to show off one’s virginity than by taking part in the

⁶⁴ As stated in chapter two, the way men are supposed to get married is that they choose the girl they would like to marry and, in the process called “*ukucela ebhentshini*”, they propose to the girl, having ascertained her details (name, place where she lives and temple). If a girl is proposed to and she accepts, she says, “I have been chosen” (*Ngikhethiwe*).

iNtanda and *umgonqo* rituals and the sacred dance.⁶⁵ The hope that the virgin girls dance with in Hymn No. 92 comes from the knowledge that being true virgins they are worthy to stand before Jehovah. The hope is that they will be appreciated by both God and the Nazaretha community for keeping their virginity. Again, the translation in Papini and Hexham (2002: 120) is inaccurate. The maiden of Nazaretha shall not fear nothing because she is ‘perfect’ but because she is ‘complete’ (*Angiyukwesaba lutho/ Ngoba mina ngiphelele*): *ukuphelele* means to be complete, not to be perfect, and in the case of *inkosazane* it means she is a virgin. The “We” in the second stanza can be misconstrued as referring to the maidens like the “I” in stanza one. But in stanza two the speaker is the Nazaretha community who confirm that they also trust the singing maiden in stanza one. They trust that she is a ‘complete’ virgin girl as she claims:

Ngiyosina nginethemba
Ngiyintombi yomnazaretha
Angiyikwesaba lutho
Ngoba mina ngiphelele.

Nathi siyakwethemba
Nayizolo besikwethembe
Nanamuhla siyakwethemba
Nakusasa siyokwethemba.

[I shall dance with hope
 Being a maiden of Nazaretha
 I shall fear nothing
 For I am complete.

We too trust you
 Even yesterday we trusted you
 And today we trust you
 And tomorrow we shall trust you.]

⁶⁵ Nowadays there is virginity testing that takes place in July in eBuhleni and in December in smaller temples. In July the girls are offered certificates if they are found to be virgins.

Virgin Girls and the Sacred Dance

As stated above, the maidens in the Nazaretha Church have their special dance after the *Ntanda* ritual. This dance is like a herald to the sacred dance of all people because before this girls-only dance, the dance for all the people cannot take place. It is this dance that other members of the church, married women and men, can watch because during its performance they are not supposed to be performing their own sacred dance.⁶⁶ It is mainly during this dance that Nazaretha men search for potential wives. The duration of this dance is ideally five days, and that is because there are five types of dance attire that the maidens have to wear. Only when they have worn all the five types of dance attire can the sacred dance of all people start.⁶⁷ This dance is similar to any other dance the girls perform except that their attire is mainly Western, with occasional use of some beads from the *isidwaba* dance attire. Thus it is called *imvunulo yesilungu* (English/Western attire).

The first of the *isilungu* outfits is called *upinki* (pink), from the colour of the long blouses the dancers wear. The skirt and the top of this blouse are linked at the waist by a white coloured cloth. With this the maidens wear hair nets on their heads, with a white belt in front. They also wear white gloves. The second *isilungu* outfit is *iveyili* (veil). This consists of red pleated skirts, with a thin black line at the bottom, and blue shirts on the top. The dancers wear purple hats with long veils of the same colour covering the face. On the upper arm they wear white beads. A third form of *isilungu* attire is called *isikotshi* (scotch). These are red checked skirts with red tops, and are worn with all the beads associated with the 'traditional' attire mentioned in the previous chapter. The fourth outfit resembles that worn by members of the Church of England (*Sheshi*), comprising black skirts with white tops. This attire is called

⁶⁶ One of the rules for the sacred dance (though it is not strictly adhered to) is that the sacred dance is never watched by members of the church because they are supposed to be taking part in it. Those who do not have the necessary attire to participate and those who are 'incomplete' are supposed to join the dancers and sing with them and beat the drums and blow the trumpets for them.

⁶⁷ In special circumstances the sacred dance of all people happens even before the girls have completed their own dance. In 2009, for instance, the girls returned from eNtanda on Wednesday and started the dance on Thursday. They used two types of dance attire a day on Thursday and Friday, and were left with one more. But on Sunday the sacred dance of all people took place and the girls finished their own dance on Monday. This was done because, had the dance for all people not started then, there would have been much less time for it because it would have to start the following week which was to be the last one.

igwababa. The fifth one is called *insephe*. This consists of black skirts and pink tops. On the head they wear the same as they do with *upinki* above.



Maidens wearing *upinki*.



Maidens wearing *isikotshi*.



Maidens wearing *insephe*.



Maidens wearing *iveyili*



Maidens wearing *igwababa*.

The point made in the previous chapter about some dancers creating their own personal vernaculars in the sacred dance usually does not apply to virgin girls. For virgin girls the sacred dance does not provide a space to define the self as is the case with some men, and they do not create “difference through competition” as was discussed in chapter three. Instead of defining the self, virgin girls use the space afforded by the sacred dance to present themselves to God, Shembe, ancestors and especially to potential husbands. It is usually in the sacred dance that a man will choose a girl to marry and many men when watching the sacred dance of virgin girls are not interested in how they dance but in how they look, for most men watching are looking for potential wives. While there are comments about a girl who dances well, most of the comments male spectators make are about the beauty of the girl, some even going so far as to search for the particulars of a specific girl if they think they might want to propose to her at the end of the meeting.

It is therefore not common in the sacred dance for virgin girls to fight for positions in the centre of the line.⁶⁸ The centre is reserved for older maidens who have been dancing for many years. The rule is that, as years pass by and the person participates in the dance, that person moves closer to the centre. This happens because other girls get married or, unfortunately, fall pregnant, leaving their spaces open for other girls further from the centre to occupy. And the lines are much longer than those one finds in men's dances, perhaps three times as long. Mpanza maintains that the sacred dance for virgin girls is the same as that of married women and men:

“Umgidi uyefana, ngisho angabe owamakhosikazi, uma sikhuluma ngomgidi sisuke sikhuluma ngomgidi osuke wenziwa emhlanganweni ongcwele. Uyabo? So umgidi noma ngabe owamakhosikazi noma ngabe owamakhosazane noma angabe owamakhosana uyafana. I-value yawo iyafana.”

[‘The sacred dance is the same, be it for women [or other groups], because here we are talking about the sacred dance that takes place in the holy congregation. You see? So the sacred dance is the same, be it for married women, for virgin girls or for men. Its value [significance] is the same.’]

(Mthembeni Mpanza, Personal communication, August 2009)

In spite of this assertion by Mpanza, there are some differences in terms of what actually happens in the performance, rather than what is supposed to happen. Some of these differences are mentioned above, but perhaps the most important one relates to the point made earlier that the sacred dance does not allow virgin girls a space to create their own personal vernaculars, but rather that it provides them with the space in which they can present themselves as potential wives. So the actual performance of the sacred dance for virgin girls is without the force noticeable in men's and, to a lesser extent, in the married women's dance. Their performance is characterised by the stealth of movement and the softness of their beatings on the ground. As for the steps, they are the same for them as for the married women and for men.

⁶⁸ These days, because the number of girls who participate in the sacred dance has increased dramatically, one does witness some shoving and pushing for positions. But it is normally for girls trying to avoid being at the far ends rather than trying to secure spaces in the centre as such. The problem of the increasing number of girls participating is compounded by the fact that the number of lines and regiments does not increase with the number of dancers as is the case with men and married women.

On the 10th July 2008, a group of virgin girls was wearing *isikotshi* dance attire for their post-*iNtanda* dance. They danced for hymn No. 6, *Sakubona Kuphakama* (Greeting *Kuphakama*). Gunner says this about this hymn: “Hymn 6, an early work, speaks vocatively, as if addressing the bearer of a praise poem, to both the Holy City (*eKuphakameni*) and northern Judea, near Gingindlovu” (2002: 29). These are the first two verses of the hymn that the virgin girls sang interchangeably:

Sakubona Kuphakama

Sakubona Judia

Ubabekephi abafowethu

Ababethunyelwe kuwe.

Babalekile bakushiya

Baxoshwa wubungcwele.

Masango okuphakama

Phakamani singene.

[Greetings *Kuphakama*

Greetings Judea

Where did you leave my brothers

Who were sent to you.

They ran and left you behind

They were chased by holiness.

Gates of *Kuphakama*

Rise up so we can enter.]

While the hymn does speak vocatively as Gunner asserts, when choosing a hymn for performance in the sacred dance, it is not the meaning or the words that are important but the way that particular hymn is performed in the dance. This hymn is not one of the common ones in the sacred dance, but it is one of the most favoured by those who know how to perform it. It is one of those hymns that encourages liveliness on the part of the dancers when they perform it. Even the virgin girls when dancing for this

hymn (and others like it) tend to move to the point of commitment and feeling to the extent that one can say they are “mesmerised” by the performance. They give themselves to the dance, so much so that it is as if they are in a kind of ‘trance’ .

Yet even though they have given themselves to the dance, that softness of touch to the ground and refusal to succumb to complete agility still remains. The forty or more girls who were performing in the girls-only dance on the 10th of July 2008 reached this point of flowing with the dance when the tune had changed to the second stanza. This entailed changing from the step of the first stanza, which is characterised by the double beats of the left and right foot, with the right foot moving forward and back and the rising and falling of the shields at certain particular intervals. In the second stanza the move changes: the girls still do the double step but this is different from the one performed earlier. Here the raising and lowering of the shields is not controlled by the hymn but is at the discretion of the dance leader or *umshayi ndweba* (flute blower).

However, new developments like the establishment of dance competitions by NABACHU and NATESA in which girls also take part has made it important for participating girls to dance in such a way as to differentiate themselves from others. In the dance competition that took place in October 2008 on the Pietermaritzburg campus of UKZN, the competition was divided between that of *inhlalisuthi* (men) and that of (*intabayepheza*) virgin girls. Although the criteria used for judging were the same, girls’ groups were competing with each other, while the young men of the church were pitted against those of their own sex. Most importantly perhaps, the song used by *intabayepheza* in their competition was different from that of *inhlalisuthi*. The girls danced for hymn No 18 “*Amaqhawwe kaThixo*” (God’s Victors). What comes out prominently with regards this dance is the force of the performance, which is uncharacteristic of the virgin girls’ dance. The first group, from the the host campus UKZN Pietermaritzburg, were the ones whose performance was most agile; and the ones who won the competition! In their performance they raised their legs in a way uncharacteristic of the virgin girls’ dance and their stamping on the ground was harder. (See the picture below.)

The Pietermaritzburg girls' group comprised four girls, three of whom wore black skirts and white shirts, and one who wore a black skirt and black shirt. The one with the black shirt was the lead singer, and her difference in dress from the others reminded one of *isicathamiya* groups where the leader always dressed differently from the others. This is not surprising considering the fact that these competitions are influenced by *isicathamiya* competitions. It is important to note also that this kind of difference on the part of the leader does not occur in the sacred dance taking place within the church. Another difference with the girls dancing in the formal sacred dance is that here the dancers start the song themselves. In the case of the Pietermaritzburg group, the song leader sang at quite a high pitch and speed, and this leads the instrument players (trumpets and drums) to follow suit, thus creating a kind of experience to the knowing audience that is both similar to and different from the usual sacred dance that takes place in the church.

Except for the high pitch and speed, the song they danced for was performed in a way similar to that done in the church context. But it was when the tune changed, from the first part of stanza one to the third part, which marked the change of step as well, that the pitch and speed of song were markedly higher than usual. The hymn is represented as follows in the hymn-book:

Amaqhawwe kaThixo ayazikhethela

Asuke ashiye umlaza

Ngokwanele abangcwele.

Ngamukele ngethemba

Gcwalisa inhliziyo yami.

Sengihanjululwe nguwe wedwa Nkosi

Angisamdingi omunye futhi.

Ngamukele ngethemba

Gcwalisa inhliziyo yami.

[The heroes of Jehovah make their own choices

They tend to avoid *umlaza*

As befits the holy ones.

Accept me with hope
Fulfil my heart.

I have been cleansed by you only
I do not need anyone anymore.
Accept me with hope
Fulfil my heart.]

In terms of performance, this can be represented as follows:

1. Lead Singer : *Amaqhawee kaThixo, akaThixo Aya...*
2. Group : *Ayazi...*
3. Lead Singer : *Awu ayazi (khethele)*
4. Group : *...Khethele.*
1. Lead Singer : *Ayazikhethela, amaqhawe*
2. Group : *Amaqhawe akaThixo*
3. Lead Singer : *O kaThixo aya*
4. Group : *Ayazi...*
5. Lead Singer : *Awu ayazi (khethele)*
6. Group : *...Khethele.*

- [1. Lead Singer : The heroes of Jehovah, [those] of Jehovah they...
2. Group : They...
3. Lead Singer : *Awu* They (make their choices)
4. Group : Make their choices
1. Lead Singer : They make their choices, the heroes
2. Group : The heroes of Jehovah
3. Lead Singer : Of Jehovah they...
4. Group : They...
5. Lead Singer : *Awu* They (make their choices)
6. Group : Make their choices.]

The part from 1 to 4 serves as a prelude, in which the performers, as well as those who play the drums and the trumpets, prepare themselves to commence the dance. It is

when the song starts again that the drums start to beat, the trumpets blow and dancing begins. The dancing and the singing start more slowly, with the dancers performing double beats with each foot, and during this first step each beat takes about three seconds to be accomplished. The foot is raised to about twenty-five centimetres from the ground (in the sacred dance taking place in congregations, the foot is raised to about ten centimetres or less) and the whole body rises and falls with each beat. This rise and fall is this group's own improvisation that is meant to 'spice up' their performance, setting them apart from the other groups. As I stated with regards to the girls' performance within the church, that the girls seem to be presenting themselves as potential wives (in addition to praising God), the performance here redirects the attention of the audience, especially the judges, to the performance itself.

This setting here is one of those few occasions where males and females in the Nazareth Church share the same performance space. While this sharing of space is welcome, it comes with the price of time constraints and having prematurely to change the tune to allow space for not only other girls but for boys as well. Thus, after only two minutes thirty seconds the performance changes to the next step. The song changes to the last part or the last two lines of the first stanza, ("I have been cleansed by you alone/I do not want another one") but the singing is the same as above. The second part of stanza one ("They tend to omit *umlaza* As befits the holy ones") is omitted because it does not lend itself well to performance. Here the momentum increases and the pitch of the song, especially the lead singer's, rises. The step comprises alternative turnings to the right and to the left, with alternating hard and soft beats. The hard beats are executed with the right foot when facing the right and with the left foot when facing left. These hard beats are repeated three times before changing to the other foot. As each foot hits, the heel of the other leg is raised, leaving only the front part of the foot touching the ground. This is also not part of this step's church choreography, but is brought by this group to bear on their performance to differentiate them from others.

The third step is performed with the fastest speed, and offers the girls a last chance to make a mark or to impress the audience and the judges. With this step it is the agility and the liveliness the dancers give to the dance that matter. The step is the easiest to perform in terms of the beat, which is one step with each foot. But this is

performed with a kind of playfulness that is interesting to watch. While here the performer makes use of her whole body (more than in the previous steps where the focus was on the stamping of the foot), it is the hands that take centre stage. The girls play with the shields and umbrellas, moving left and right, back and forth as they do. Sometimes they raise their shields and charge forward, as if going to a fight, and then they lower them and revert to their former position. Sometimes when they are a few metres from the judges they turn and go back to the *isigcawu* (dancing space) in a similar movement or performance. Sometimes they imitate a stabbing action with their umbrellas, the right hands carrying the shields moving forward and backward, and as they do this they march forward in the direction of the judges. When they have turned they march back to the *isigcawu*, and here they make a few turns, and then leave the stage to give others the chance. One of the judges, Evangelist Mngwengwe, used the interval to give advice to the drumbeaters:

Anilalele la, nina abashaya izigubhu. Niyezwa nina abashaya izigubhu, qaphelisisani ukuba ningashiyani. Ngoba uma nishiyana niyabaphazamisa. Isandla senu asishaye kanyekanye. Ngale kwalokho niyeke kusale oyedwa.

[Listen here you drumbeaters. Do you hear, you who are beating the drums, make sure that you do not beat in disharmony. Because if you do, you disturb them. Your hand should hit at the same time. Or else you should quit and let one person beat the drum.]

After this the second group started dancing and, though their performance was not exactly the same as the previous one, the differences are so minor that they do not merit close examination. The point that one can make here is that these were less confident about their performance, and they lacked the zest that characterised the preceding group. The third group to compete performed better than the second, and maybe better even than the first group, although they attained second place. Their performance was not so far removed from the usual sacred dance for virgin girls. It was characterised by the stealth and sluggishness which is so absorbing when done with the kind of adeptness that the girls of Durban University of Technology (Pietermaritzburg) displayed in their performance. But an interesting point to make with regards to this group is that while they worked as a team trying to win the

competition, there was another kind of competition internal within the group. The group was doing the same thing while at the same time each dancer was doing her own thing. This kind of competition within the group was also happening with regards to the first group where one member seemed bent on outperforming the others. But, as the first group collectively spiced up their dance, with the third group the little details of performing that spiced up the dance were done individually, each girl setting herself apart from the others.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the question of gender and identity in the Nazaretha Church, dealing specifically with virgin girls' performances and rituals that demonstrate the significant role they play in the life of the Nazaretha Church. While the church is itself not egalitarian in terms of leadership especially, when it comes to performance virgin girls seem to take centre stage. This says something about their position in the Church since these religious performances, especially the sacred dance, are very important for members of the church, men included. I have also dealt with the maidens' sacred dance in two different contexts, showing how the introduction of virgin girls to dance competitions has influenced the way they dance and the motivation for taking part in the dance, or the purpose of performing the sacred dance.



Maidens from UKZN (PMB)



Maidens from DUT (PMB)



Maidens from DUT (DBN)

CONCLUSION

The main argument this thesis has propounded is that what motivates members to take part in the sacred dance is the belief that the sacred dance is celestial; it belongs to the unknown world of the ancestors and God. They hold the view that participating in the sacred dance appeases their late relatives, and that the sacred dance takes place both in the physical and the ancestral realms. Closely linked to this is the belief that the ancestors are able to participate through the bodies of their living relatives. Thus, borrowing Isabel Hofmeyr's term, I have argued that the sacred dance in the Nazaretha Church is believed to be "trans-global"; that is, it oscillates between this world and the next. What is the implication of this with regards to the argument that has been put forward that the sacred dance is a response to colonialism? I have argued that not only does this view lead such churches and their practices to being treated negatively, as a phenomenon of 'independency' and 'separatism', but it also gives undue credit to colonialism itself, making it the centre of everything that happens in the periphery.

In pursuing the above argument I have dealt with two prominent rituals in the Nazaretha Church that relate to completeness and taking part in important religious events, including the sacred dance. These are circumcision and marriage. Both these rituals are linked to the ancestors' presence, and their execution is mainly intended to appease the ancestors and to render the person ritually clean so that he or she may be worthy of participating in the sacred dance, not just for her- or himself but for the ancestors as well, either as spectators or as active, yet invisible, participants. This is exemplified in the story of the man who saw his late brother performing the sacred dance when he had first come to eKuphakameni. In dealing with these phenomena I have sought to correct some of the misconceptions held by Carol Muller especially, particularly her argument that virgin girls have to sacrifice their sexual desire in order to attain Shembe's protection, and her linking this to the central position virgin girls occupy in the Nazaretha Church. It has been argued in this thesis that the significance attached to virginity is closely linked with the importance of marriage, so that what is espoused is not celibacy but sexual abstinence before marriage, and this obtains with regards to virgin girls as well as boys and men.

The texts that have been the focus of this study are so baffling that one wonders how one can approach them academically. The challenge these texts pose is similar to that Hilary Mantel was confronted with when she dealt with the life of an Italian saint, Gemma Galgani, about whom she asserted that, “When you look at her strange life, you wonder what kind of language you can use to talk about her – through which discipline will you approach her?” (Mantel 2004: 3). In my case I have employed an interdisciplinary approach to examine Isaiah Shembe’s hymns and the sacred dance in his Nazareth Church. As Karin Barber has argued, oral studies are characteristically interdisciplinary:

There is an obvious and very good reason for taking an interdisciplinary approach to African oral texts, and that is that the texts themselves can combine ‘literature’, ‘history’, ‘medicine’, ‘religion’ and other things. The unity of these fields in oral texts suggests that the method of interpretation should also be unified. (1989: 13)

Engaging with these texts has required an approach that involves literary studies, religion and theology, anthropology, history, and ethnomusicology. It would be fallacious to claim that I have done justice to all these disciplines. Like David Coplan I have been no “respector of academic boundaries”, and my work is likely to be “doomed to be praised by reviewers for its coverage of every area except that of their own specialisation” (1994: xvii). My problem was compounded by the fact that I have also been trying to be true to the people who regard these texts (the hymns and the sacred dance) as sanctified and miraculous, while at the same time offering an academically challenging piece of work which is critical of such views.

In conclusion I want to refer to the comments made by one foreign spectator after he had witnessed the sacred dance. This is a white man who had come to eKuphakameni and witnessed members of the Nazareth Church performing the sacred dance. This man came to have a conversation with J.G. Shembe about his experience. He wanted to know how the sacred dance was choreographed. And when J.G. Shembe informed him that it was his late Father, the founder of the Church, who

had initiated it, the white man refused to accept that. J.G. Shembe describes their conversation in an undated tape. It goes as follows:

Wathi yena “Hhayi, angizwa kahle uma usho njalo, uthini? Akekho umuntu ongayenza lento. Wayengabe ekuthathaphi konke lokhu?” Wayesho yena ebona abantu bevunule, babeyingcosana ngalelolanga ababefake ingubo emhlaphe. Angazi ukuthi uma engahle afike namhlanje angathini. Kumbe sewafa angazi. Ngoba kwakuyisosha eya empini. Le eJapan. Uthi “Cha bo, ngitshela iqiniso. Ukuthi lento ivelaphi. Ayizange ibekhona into enje emhlabeni. Umhlaba wonke waziwa yimi, ngoba ngihamba nempi. Umhlaba wonke uhanjwa yimi... Wathi ngiyakwazi konke ukusina kwabantu, kodwa angingaze ngingakhala mina. Angize ngingafikelwa wusizi, angize ngingafikelwa yinyembezi. Konke ngiyakwazi nezintombi ngiye ngizibone nezinsizwa ngiye ngizibone, nabantu abavunule ngezimvunulo ezinhle kunalezi ngiye ngibanone. Kodwa lokhu selokhu ngifikile lapha kuthi angikhale. Sengike ngakhala ngaze ngaphuma ngasithela ngale. Ngakhala izinyembezi, manje-ke uma uthi kwavela kumuntu, hhayi angizwa kahle.” Ngathi, “Wayaye athi uma simbuzisisa, kuyazifikela kuvela eZulwini. UNkulunkulu uyaye akulethe noma elele noma ebhekile. Akubone bese kuthiwa Shembe yenza lokhu, abesekwenza. Njengoba ubabona benje nje ekuqaleni kwabo babengayithandi lento lababantu. Abashumayeli babo bathi uShembe uyahlubuka. Mhlambe uthanda ukubona imizimba yabantu. Kodwa akaze anganaka yena. Waqala kancane, amantombazane amabili amane. Namuhla asemaningi. Uthi-ke lomlungu, “Ngiyezwa-ke uma usho kanjalo. Uthi lendaba ivela ezilwini, ngiyakholwa. Ngoba ayikho into eyenziwayo lapha emhlabeni eke ingifikisele izinyembezi. Noma ngibona abantu befa empini angikhali. Noma ngibona, ngiye ngibone nobukhosi obukhulu bamangisi. Namacilongo ngiyawazi nezigubhu ngiyazazi, kodwa angiyen ngingakhala. Kodwa le nto eniyenzayo ingifikisela izinyembezi.”

[He said, “I don’t understand if you say that, what do you say? There is no human being who can create this. Where would he have got this?” He was saying this as he saw people wearing their dance attire. There were few people that day who were wearing white robes. He said, “No, tell me the truth. Where is this thing coming from? Never before has there been

something like this in the world. I know the whole world because I travel with the army..." He said, "I know all the dances of people, but I do not cry. I never feel sorrow and shed tears [when I see it]. I know it all, the maidens, I have seen them, the young men, I have seen them, and even people who adorn themselves in better attire than this I have seen them. But this, ever since I arrived here I have been feeling like crying. I have even cried and went on the side and shed tears. Now if you say this came with a human being, I don't understand." I said [to him] "He [Isaiah Shembe] used to tell us when we asked him that this comes on its own accord. It comes from heaven. God brings it, sometimes when he is asleep, sometimes when he is awake. He would see it and then be told, 'Shembe do this.' And he would do it. As you see them looking like this, at first they did not like it. Their preachers said Shembe is deserting. Perhaps [they said] he likes to see people's bodies. But he did not mind them. He started small; there were two or four girls. But today there are many of them." This white man then said, "I do hear if you say so, that this thing comes from heaven because I believe that. Because there is nothing that is done here on earth that makes me cry. Even when I see people die, I do not cry. I have seen the big kingdom of the English but I never cry. I have seen saxophones and I have seen drums, but I never cry. But this thing you are doing here makes me feel emotional.]

This conversation between J.G. Shembe and the white man casts some light on the reasons for the belief that the hymns were created from heaven. In one sense the sacred dance is unprecedented and ineffable, and thus it can only be explained in celestial terms. The white man found himself in a position that he had never before found himself. He had thought that he had seen it all because he had travelled the world, but when he came to *eKuphakameni* and witnessed the sacred dance, his response was mindboggling even to himself. He had seen better things and worse things, but he had never cried. He claims that he had witnessed all the dances that were more 'sophisticated' than the sacred dance and had perceived dancers dressed more elegantly than the Nazaretha dancers, but he had not cried. He had not been affected the way he was when he saw the Nazaretha perform the sacred dance. This man was confronted with something that he did not know how to make sense of; he

did not know in what language he could talk about the sacred dance so he elevated it (or should I say he relegated it?) to the celestial, to the unknown.

In a more recent encounter, Robert Young was also struck by the sacred dance and looked at it in academic terms:

What the Shembe experience brought sharply home to me is that outside the issue of linguistic translation there are issues of cultural translation that hardly feature in Western forms of postcolonial studies... the neglect of the power of spirituality... (Quoted in Chapman 2006a: 207-8)

The “power of spirituality” Young invokes here, I suspect, is what overwhelmed the man in conversation with J.G. Shembe above and caused him to cry in spite of himself. But, more importantly, I hope this project has succeeded, to a certain extent, to provide the cultural translation Young calls for. For in my case, in dealing with these sacred texts (the hymns and the sacred dance), I have attempted to strike a balance between what they seem like to the outsider (mostly scholars who have looked at these in relation to colonialism and how these can be seen to be a response to colonialism) and to the members of the church who perceive them to be miraculous texts that came with the messengers of heaven. However, the above conversation between J.G. Shembe and the white man shows that this insider/outsider divide is not always as marked as it may seem to be. If anything, the fact that someone outside the Church sees these as nothing but heavenly inspired performances serves to confirm the importance of not disregarding the inside perceptions regarding these texts. And I believe the suggestion I have put forward that blindly accepting the idea that the hymns came with the messengers of heaven entails an injustice against Isaiah Shembe’s creativity and agency still holds.

With regards to the sacred dance, I have shown that the question of agency involves the role performers themselves play in the creation of the sacred dance even though ideally everyone is supposed to perform the same way as the dancers in Isaiah Shembe’s time performed. I have delineated the tendency amongst performers to create their own personal vernaculars through improvisation and development of the sacred dance. The existence of competitions, both declared and undeclared, makes

nonsense of the ideal of the uniformity of purpose on the part of the dancers. Even though the overriding motivation is to appease God and the ancestors, the sacred dance also offers dancers a space for self expression and identity creation. Thus, I have suggested that it is important to mark the difference between ideals and what actually happens in practice.

It is with regards to the members' role in the creation of the hymns that this thesis has been silent and I think it is propitious to say more about this issue here. While it is undoubted that Isaiah Shembe composed all the hymns in the *Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha* (The Hymns of the Nazaretes) except those marked as J.G. Shembe's compositions, there is a hitherto unacknowledged role that members played in the composition of the hymns, or in inspiring the creation of the hymns. An example of this is hymn No 71 which deals with creation and Shembe's divinity.

One of the earliest members who joined the Nazaretha Church as a boy in the time of Isaiah Shembe, Meshack Hadebe, tells of his vision he had one night in 1922. In this dream Meshack saw Shembe divided into three forms. The first form was in the middle of the land, the second form, which seemed to shine like the morning star, was up in the north, while the third one was at the edges of heaven in the east (Gunner 2002: 155). Having witnessed this, the boy heard a great voice saying, "Do you see Shembe? Listen! Before your Father Nyathi was born Shembe was already there, a man of the size he is now – just as you see him in these three partitions of land. I say, when your Father was not yet born Shembe was already there, and he was that very size" (155). The boy was perplexed, thinking that if Shembe was so much older than his father then he should have been very old but he did not look so old. Then the boy felt himself floating on the firmament, "like the book", and perceived the earth "poured out like porridge", the rocks soft as they must have been before solidification. After this he saw the Shembe in the middle walking over the land, treading down the pieces of porridge here and there. Then the voice spoke again, telling Meshack that, "Do you see Shembe? When the world was still just porridge Shembe was already there and was the same size that he is now" (155).

Hymn No. 71 is a direct reference to this dream narrative narrated by Meshack Hadebe, first to his father Nyathi and then to Isaiah Shembe, and later to the whole

congregation. Before this dream happened, hymn No. 71 had not yet been composed and Meshack Hadebe maintains in his testimony that, “Jehovah was preparing the way for that hymn through that vision” (2002: 157). This statement is informed by Hadebe’s belief about the composition of the hymns: that they are celestially composed and ‘brought’ down from heaven to earth. This issue was tackled amply in the Introduction. Suffice it to say here that this hymn seems to support such a claim, especially if we are to concede that dreams are a medium through which heavenly spirits communicate with the living. But even so, an interesting twist here is that it is through an ordinary member of the church, a mere boy, that this hymn is transported from heaven to earth. And even if it was this-worldly inspired, the role of the boy and his dream in the creation of hymn No. 71 are tremendously important. Here I invoke the point I made earlier, in Chapter Two, about Shembe’s sense of self. I pointed out that Shembe was prompted by the interrogations he was subjected to by the state to spend time ruminating about his sense of self. Now I want to expand this point further by stating that the views of his followers concerning his identity played a significant role in informing his self imagining, and Meshack Hadebe’s vision and hymn No. 71 are a case in point.

The premise of hymn No. 71, like that of Meshack Hadebe’s vision, is that Shembe existed in spirit long before he was physically conceived. His presence in the universe precedes the creation of the earth, which seems to place him on the par with God. Yet God’s precedence and power over Shembe are not disputed. Drawing directly from the vision, Shembe is the first one of God’s creations. As Jesus in the Bible claims to be God’s first born and only son, Shembe in hymn No. 71 claims to be among many of God’s creations, but the first one (or among the very first). Everything else, including the earth, the hills, the rivers, was created after him:

*Nkosi yami ubungithanda
Zingakaqini izintaba
Kwaphakade wangigcoba
Ngiwukuqala kwendlela yakho.*

*Ngiwumsebenzi wakho wasendulo
Ingakaqini imimango;*

*Nemithombo yamanzi
Ingakampompozi ngamandla.*

*Nemithombo yemifula
Ingakampompozi ngamandla,
UJehova wangidala
Ngaphambi kwendlela yakhe.*

*Ukujula kungakabibikho
Kukade sengizelwe,
Engakalenzi lelizulu
Kanye nalomhlaba.*

*Nelanga lingakakhanyi
Emkhathini walelizulu.
Nenyanga ingakakhanyi
Emkhathini walomhlaba.*

[My Lord you loved me
Before the mountains solidified.
From eternity you anointed me
I am the beginning of your journey.

I'm your work of long ago
Before the hills solidified,
And the fountains of water
Before they flew with power.

And the fountains of the rivers
Before they flowed powerfully,
Jehovah created me
Ahead of his journey.

Before depth existed

I was long born
Before he created this heaven
And this earth.

Even before the sun shone
In the firmament of this heaven,
And before the moon shone
In the firmament of this earth.]

But the vision Hadebe saw was only an influence. It is Shembe who created the hymn. On the question of the influences, I dedicated a whole chapter to how Shembe utilised the Bible in his creation of the hymns. I argued that the substantial ‘presence’ of the Bible in the hymns and Isaiah Shembe’s being an avid reader of and his tremendous knowledge of the Bible serve to support the claim made earlier that Shembe was creatively involved in the composition of the hymns. For this reason I suggest that they should be regarded as “literary texts of extraordinary power and vision” (Brown, 1999: 197). And, in the words of Elizabeth Gunner this time, they are, “the finest South African religious poetry of the twentieth century” and they “[signify] new ways of belonging in a modern age, and [give] people access to new ways of splicing past history with the consciousness of the present” (Gunner, 2002: 29).

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