

**Testimony, Identity and Power:
Oral Narratives of Near-Death Experiences
in the Nazarite Church**

by

Nkosinathi Sithole

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

of the Degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS (ENGLISH)

in the school of

LITERARY STUDIES, MEDIA AND CREATIVE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

PIETERMARITZBURG

2005

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, unless otherwise stated in the text, is my own original work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to Professor Duncan Brown for his guidance and unending patience in helping me through the daunting task of crafting this work.

I also want to thank Chief Mfungelwa Mchunu, Preacher Bongani Njoko (may his soul rest in peace), Preacher Magumeni Gumede, Zimele Mngadi, Makhandeni Zwane, and Preacher Jimmy Khwela for sharing their stories with me and for allowing me to use their experiences in this study. I am also grateful to Mbil'emhlophe Zuma, for lending me Thulani Kunene's cassette; Preacher Sibusiso Dlamini, for telling me the story of the woman who was a member of the St John's Church; Bhekinkosi Mhlongo, for lending me Amos Shembe's cassette; and Lova (oyinyoni) Zondi, for the text called "Indaba kaZulu wakwa-P eMlazi".

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Identity, Power and the Near-Death Narrative	18
Chapter Two: The Poetics of Performing the Near-Death Experiences	36
Chapter Three: Recurring Features of Near-Death Experiences in the Nazarite Church.....	61
Chapter Four: Nazarite and Global Near-Death Experiences: A Comparative Study.....	84
Conclusion	105

ABSTRACT

In this study I investigate the narratives of near-death experiences in the Nazarite Church as one way in which this community grapples with the question of death and the after-life. However, I am particularly interested in the manner in which Nazarite members deploy these experiences to define individual and collective identities. I argue that in the Nazarite Church the significance of near-death experiences is neither rooted in the future nor in the past, but it is something of the here and now. As Biesele states, “ Old stories are powerful not because they come from the past, but because they are told in the present” (1999: 167).

Nazarite members are not only regarded by many as backward, uneducated, and unemployed rural people, they are also accused of worshipping another human being like themselves, Shembe. For the Nazarites then near-death narratives are important because they serve as proof that Shembe is not just an ordinary human being, he is the one sent from above. Many near-death experiencers testify that they have met Shembe on their spiritual journeys. While this does give the Nazarites a sense of what may happen to them when they die, it is more important as a tool for confirming or defending their faith against the people who criticise and look down upon them and their church.

However, Nazarite members, especially those who have had near-death experiences, also use these experiences to imagine individual identities. Since the church has grown rapidly in the past decades, there has been a growing need to define the self in relation to the group. Newcomers (there are many of them) are regarded as ignorant of the ways of the church and are sometimes called by pejorative names like *Qhawe*, (Braveman) and *Khethankosi* (Converts). The near-death experience provides those

'newcomers' who have experienced it with a means to assert their agency in that they have been to the other world and have witnessed what many only hear about. Even for those who were already members of the church when they had the experience, this make them important. They have seen 'home'. Their stories are recorded and disseminated in the church, thus becoming part of the church's cultural capital. Sometimes ministers and preachers invite those who have had near-death experiences to come and share their stories in the Temples they oversee.

Introduction

It was Friday when the Christians, of the Presbyterian denomination, went to a river to baptize two hundred and fifty-two of their members. Unfortunately, the last person to get into the water did not come out. The serpent, which the congregants had mistaken for a rock, swallowed him. The Christians spent the rest of that day and the following Saturday waiting and praying on the bank of the river. It was at about four in the afternoon on Saturday that the worried Christians saw the body of Thulani Kunene floating in the water. They called for an ambulance and the medics said that if he was floating, it meant his gall bladder had exploded. He was dead! They advised the Christians to call the police because they are the ones who collect bodies of dead people. The police arrived and when they had ascertained that he was dead, they placed Thulani in a white plastic bag and took him to King Edward Hospital. On Sunday his parents went there to collect the body for burial on Monday and they were told that their son was still alive. His father fainted and was unconscious for the next three days.

What the doctors, and everybody else, did not know was that Thulani believed he died when the snake swallowed him, and he spent more than twenty-four hours in its belly. He states in his undated tape-recorded sermon that the last time he felt the pain was when the snake licked him, preparing him for eating. It was the excruciating pain caused by that burning tongue that caused his 'death'. He felt his 'spirit' leave his body through his fingers and toes. Through his spirit, Thulani took the journey, which affected him so much that when he was resurrected, he changed his lifestyle considerably.

This narrative is one of the many narratives that circulate in the Church of the

Nazarites. The Nazarite Church is one of the oldest and best-known African - Initiated Churches in South Africa. Isaiah Shembe founded it around 1910 in what is now the province of KwaZulu-Natal. This study investigates the narratives of near-death experiences in the Nazarite Church as a locus for defining both individual and collective identities in the church. I look at the narratives presented in sermons, which I collected in my field research, and the others that are recorded by Nazarite members and sold in the church. Some of the narratives I collected through interviews with the near-death experiencers. I do not propose to investigate these narratives as 'nuggets' of facts about particular events in these people's lives, rather I examine them as memories constructed and reconstructed to form part of a contemporary consciousness of the narrators (Johnson and Dawson, 1998). To this end, I will look at these narratives as performed texts that are "decontextualized" and recontextualized", to use Bauman and Briggs' terms (1990). While I believe that the contents (or texts) of these narratives are important, a great deal of attention will be paid to their contexts.

In order to be able fully to grasp the meaning of these narratives, which I believe is necessary if one wants to investigate them as "unsurpassed sources for revealing the otherwise hidden forms of consciousness"(Bozzoli, 1991:7), I will look at the context on two levels. Firstly, I will examine the context in which the experience took place. This involves questions like, "How does a person's consciousness and identity influence the actual experience?", and "How does the same consciousness and experience influence a person's construction and reconstruction of memory with regards to these experiences?" The second level of context is that of performance. It concerns questions like, "Who is the audience and what relationship is there between

the performer and audience, and how does that influence the way each performer presents his/her narrative?" It is impossible to ignore the fact that my relationship with my informants is not one of equality as I am an educated scholar conducting research among mostly uneducated individuals. As Shostak states, an interview is "an interaction between two people: one, with unique personality traits and interests at a particular time of life, answers a specific set of questions asked by another person with unique personality traits at a particular time of life"(1998: 405).

The fact that I belong to the group I am studying should help bridge the gap between the researcher and interlocutor, because in many instances I meet my informants as a fellow member of the church. That is, I do not come to them simply as a researcher, rather I go to church to worship and then talk to them about my research. I also understand their language and culture.

But that alone cannot completely remove the problem of unequal power relations. I remain a recorder collecting these narratives for my purpose: to obtain a degree; whereas my informants tell their stories for different reasons. To avoid this conflict of interests influencing my informants' performances, I rely as much as possible on performances in sermons where the audience is not the individual researcher, but the congregation who share a great deal in terms of beliefs and identity.

Because this work is interested in these narratives as performed texts, the work of Bauman and Briggs has been chosen to inform this investigation. Important for this study is the shift from the poetics of language to performance that Bauman and Briggs (1990) propose. With regards to the debate about the importance of text versus context, the stance I take is that envisaged by these two scholars, which accommodates both text and context. 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). This means that this study will not only look at the ‘text’ as a narrated story, but also the poetics of performance (the way in which individual performers tell their stories and the involvement or otherwise of the audience).

However, Bauman and Briggs are aware that it is equally harmful to completely ignore the wider social contexts in which these performances take place. Thus they argue 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 to reflect, social life” (1990: 69).

Transcription of the spoken word and translation of the transcribed texts from Zulu to English form an integral part of this study. I acknowledge Samuel’s point that it is inevitable that the word will be ‘mutilated’ if it is transcribed into writing: “Some distortion is bound to arise despite the intention of the writer, simply by cutting out pauses and repetitions, a concession which writers very generally feel bound to make in the interest of readability” (1998: 389). While recognising the fact that such ‘mutilation’ is inevitable, I attempt, following Samuel’s suggestion, not simply to transcribe the spoken word “according to conventions and constrictions of written prose” (1998: 189). This means attention will be paid to things like repetition, pauses, and especially the rise and fall of tone which plays an important role in the performance of sermons in the Nazarite Church.

The question of translation has its own complications and dilemmas. There are

scholars who see translation from an indigenous language to 'the language of power' as a form of violence, and some even propose a ban on translation into the dominant linguistic and cultural system because, they argue, this exacerbates the inequalities created by colonialism (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999). The irony here is that I am involved in the process of self-representation as a member of the formerly marginalised group, but I have to 'represent' myself in the language of the 'coloniser' and even go so far as to translate texts from the indigenous language (Zulu) to English. However, it is necessary to remember that in South Africa and Africa in general, some earlier translations that were part of the civilizing mission were from the dominant language to indigenous languages, i.e. the Bible and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The direction of translation is thus not singular, and the kind I am undertaking may be seen as a subversion rather than perpetuation of colonial inequality.

* * *

In postcolonial studies there is a need for research conducted from the perspective of the postcolony itself. This is because the identity and context of the person conducting research influence the way that research is done. This is articulated by Said in *Orientalism* (1978) where he argues that any production of knowledge in the humanities is influenced by the individual identity of the person concerned. This means that scholars from the first world countries studying third world communities (the Orient in Said's case), will come to those communities as Europeans and/or Americans first, and as individuals second. He says about Orientalism:

It is, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly

different (or alternative and novel) world, it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by exchange with power political (as with colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what “we” do and what “they” cannot do or understand as “we” do). (1995: 90)

While this study will make a contribution to the body of literature on the Nazarite Church, which has attracted scholars across disciplines, it provides the unique perspective of an ‘insider’, as I am a member of the church. This is necessary because a great deal of research hitherto done on the Nazarite Church has been by the people who ‘come up against’ the church as researchers with their own personal interests. 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 concepts” (1996:x).

However, the purpose of this project is not to evaluate work already done on the Nazarite Church, or to revisit areas covered by other scholars in their research. Instead, it investigates the narratives of near-death experiences because they are part of an important cultural capital of the Church, which has been insufficiently studied. The narratives of near-death experiences are not important in the Nazarite Church

alone. This phenomenon has attracted a number of scholars the world over and the reason for this is not hard to find. Death affects every living person, although some people choose not to think about it. Everybody knows that they are going to die some day and many people spend at least some time thinking about what will happen to them when they die. Many scholars of near-death experiences (NDEs) consider this question in their studies. R. J. Moody's seminal work on the subject of NDE, *Life After Life* (1975), looks at this phenomenon as challenging our scientific understanding of the world and ponders the question of life after death in relation to these experiences. Other scholars suggest that, perhaps, these experiences are culturally and religiously conditioned. Although this study is conducted on a fraction of the South African population, its findings may assist in ascertaining whether NDEs are culturally and religiously conditioned or not, and will certainly be a contribution to the scholarship on NDEs in other contexts.

* * *

Writings on the Nazarite Church date back to the 1930s with the publication of Dube's book, *UShembe* (1936). This is a biographical account of Isaiah Shembe written in isiZulu. Although it is not an academic study, it has provided scholars with invaluable information regarding Shembe and his church. However, having read the book against Isaiah Shembe's interview with Carl Faye, Gunner states that, "Dube's biography is in many ways an anomalous and contested document. It has probably drawn heavily on writings compiled by church scribes at the behest of Shembe" (2002:16).

Of considerable significance for my study is Bengt Sundkler's *Bantu Prophets in*

South Africa (1961) which deals with the question of the Separatist Churches in South Africa and offers some interesting yet disturbing ideas about Shembe and his church (I discuss Sundkler's more recent book, *Zulu Zion* (1976), later). This is arguably a contribution to colonial discourse, and presents the African as an intellectually inferior 'Other'. The book is written for a European audience and its aim is to explain why Africans, having received the true gospel of Christianity, resorted to heathenism. The text is riddled with errors resulting from the author's ignorance and his colonialist bias.

He states, for example, that there are two stages of what he calls the 'Black Christ dogma' in the Nazarite Church. The first is Shembe's self-testimony as a prophet, and the second is "The vision-inspired declarations by the media and the need of the mass to worship and to believe in a Man of Miracles" (1961: 282). With regard to Shembe's self-testimony, Sundkler distinguishes two stages again. The first is Shembe's claim to be the prophet of the Zulus and the second is his claim to be something more than a prophet, a "Promised One". According to Sundkler, there is a contradiction here which the Zulus do not realise because, he states, "It is of course easier for the Bantu than it is for a more analytical Western mind, to combine and interweave these two sets of dogma without feeling the contradiction" (1961: 282, my emphasis).

As I have mentioned above, little of the work done on the Nazarite Church has dealt with the near-death experience. Sundkler dismisses these narratives as "gross exaggerations of the fact: the 'death' and 'resurrection' refer to visions in a dream-visit to heaven during the crisis of a serious illness" (1961: 286). In most of these accounts, as in the ones I investigate here, the experiencers claim to have seen

Shembe at the 'gate' of heaven. Sundkler relates this fact to his notion of 'the Black Christ Dogma' and maintains that it is an extension of the colour-bar to heaven. While this study is not aimed at ascertaining the factuality or otherwise of these experiences, it will problematise Sundkler's views by relating narratives by people who did not belong to the Nazarite faith when the experience took place.

A similarly disturbing and colonialist account is Oosthuizen's *The Theology of an African Messiah* (1967), compromising an analysis of Isaiah Shembe's hymns. Oosthuizen argues, in the same vein as Sundkler, that in the Nazarite Church Shembe has usurped the position held by Jesus in orthodox Christianity. Both Sundkler and Oosthuizen are challenged by Vilakazi et al in *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society* (1986). They say of Oosthuizen:

There are several problems with Oosthuizen's work which arise, firstly, from his improper grasp of Zulu language and idiom, and secondly from Christian bias. Thus it is altogether erroneous to refer to Shembe as "umvelinqangi" and if Dr. Sundkler, as quoted by Oosthuizen, says the word is used to refer to Shembe, he is in error. (1986: 89)

Even more disturbing is Oosthuizen's statement which follows Sundkler's example in suggesting a collective Zulu mind which is of doubtful capacity: "The Zulu mind, as expressed in the *izihlabelelo*, does not distinguish between physical and spiritual power"(1986: 61). I agree with Vilakazi *et al's* view that this generalization about the 'Zulu mind' is "unacceptable and, in fact, borders on racism" (1986:106).

Sundkler's later book, *Zulu Zion* (1976) offers a more balanced analysis of the

church than *Bantu Prophets*. This book was published when Sundkler had read Vilakazi's MA Thesis, entitled *The Church of the Nazarites*, which formed the basis of *Shembe: The Revitalization of Africa Society*, and I believe it is Vilakazi's work which helped him gain a better understanding of the church. In the chapter about the Nazarite Church he explores the hymns, sermons and healing, and underscores the differences and similarities between the Nazarite Church and other Zionist Churches. He says of the hymns: "Shembe's *Hymns of the Nazarites, (Izihlabelelo ZamaNazaretha)*, is religious poetry of great beauty" (1976:186). Also interesting is Sundkler's criticism of Oosthuizen's argument about Shembe referring to himself as God:

I must surmise - there is no proof or argument, only the bold statement - that Professor Oosthuizen takes for granted that the term "the Lord of the Sabbath" automatically refers to Isaiah Shembe personally and to him alone. He does not see that, *firstly*, this hymn is plainly and obviously directed to the God of Adam, Shembe's own noble concept of the God of all men. (192).

Apart from criticising Sundkler's and Oosthuizen's colonialist discourses the book, *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society*, offers a socio-cultural study of the Nazarite Church. The main thesis is that Shembe forged a new Zulu society by blending features of Zulu tradition with Christian elements. This, the authors argue, was made necessary by the colonial invasion and the decline of moral values for Africans due to the changes brought about by colonialism. This book, written by three black South African scholars, two of whom were members of the Nazarite Church,

marks a shift in perspective in the writings about the Nazarite Church.

The scholars who studied the Church after this publication, especially from the 1990s onwards, have tried (and successfully, I would argue) to look at the Nazarite Church as scholars and with no racial bias. This group of scholars is mainly informed by postcolonial studies and attempts to recuperate the voice of the (silenced?) Africans, in this case the Nazarites. Brown states that, “The democratization 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 by colonial and apartheid ideologies” (1999: 1). Gunner (2002) and Hexham and Oosthuizen (1996; 1999) have edited and translated testimonies by the Nazarites. This has allowed them to present their own analyses in the introduction and the ‘voices’ of their subjects in the main text. The reason for this approach is articulated in Muller’s lament that: “Certainly, it will be better for all when the Nazarite women begin to write their own stories, and to represent themselves” (1999: 16). The approach of the above-mentioned scholars is useful because it allows a clear distinction between the two, sometimes, contending voices in the text: the voice of the intellectual against that of the informant. The significance of this is that, as Spivak argues, in revealing the ‘subaltern’, “the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent” (1988: 275). Because these scholars include their input only in the introduction, these texts seem to me to achieve better what Muller claims to have achieved through her work:

Suffice it to say here that, that in some sense, [these women] have represented themselves, not in writing, but through the media privileged by their own community – narratives, dreams, and song – although the

final transmission of the text here is my own. (1999: 16)

What makes Muller's work reflect more of her than it does of the Nazarites is the fact that she came 'up against' the church as a scholar looking for a research topic and that influenced her understanding of the church. She understood the Church of the Nazarites within the framework of her concepts, as Becken argues above. For example, she recounts an interesting narrative by a Nazarite woman and her analysis of this narrative seems to me to imply a "representation of herself as transparent" (Spivak, 1988: 275). In this narrative, a woman tells a story of another woman who once went to u-14 (an overnight meeting of Nazarite women) and when she came back, she found that someone had broken into her house and stolen her things. She then complained to Shembe, "But *Baba* Shembe, how can I go to praise you, where you said we must go as women, when I come home and all my things are stolen?" (Muller, 1999: 241). When this woman returned from u-14 of the third month from the incident, she found that she could not open the door. She then called the neighbours who helped her open the door by force. Inside, they found a man with bags and he told them that he was the one who had stolen the woman's things and he had come to steal again. But when he had taken the things and was about to leave, Shembe appeared and locked him inside.

Muller's analysis of this narrative reflects more about her and her intentions than about the woman who told this story and the woman to whom this incident happened. In her introduction, Muller confesses her feminist connections and her study in the Nazarite Church is particularly concerned with gender issues. It is therefore unsurprising that her analysis is articulated as follows: "To the outsider, this story may seem to have many parallels in the experiences of women of faith all over the

world....There is more to this story than immediately meets the eye, however, particularly as one discovers the use of metaphor in the text. The central metaphor here is that of the house, which I propose represents the female body – the womb specifically” (1999: 242).

For the woman who told this story and all the Nazarite women I have spoken to, the house in this story is not a metaphor for anything. Here, the woman is testifying to Shembe’s supernatural powers and his ‘omnipresence’, as he is believed by the church members to be able to occupy more than one space at the same time. In sermons, and on many occasions in conversations, the Nazarites exchange narratives and testimonies of Shembe’s miracles. As Gunner states, “It could be said that, apart from its presence as an important healing church, Ibandla lamaNazaretha is above all, a church of narratives and testimonies” (2002: 14). These narratives and testimonies are central to all members of the church regardless of gender. This story then, could be appropriated and retold by all members who have access to it, including men, as its central theme is the power of Shembe. The same thing happens with the narratives of near-death experiences. Their importance in the church is that they point to Shembe’s ‘omnipresence’: that he is in this world and in the other world and therefore he is unlike an ordinary human being.

* * *

This project is an attempt towards the self-representation that Muller calls for. I am, however, aware that my position as a member of the group I am investigating does not necessarily make me “a representative consciousness (one re-presenting reality adequately)” (Spivak, 1988: 275). My involvement with these narratives and with the

narrators has its contradictions and challenges. Being a member of the church in one way makes my working with the Nazarites interesting and easy, but in many ways it has created its peculiar problems, including those of allegiance. The Nazarite Church split in 1977 after the then leader, J. G. Shembe, died. There was a succession dispute between J. G. Shembe's son, Londa, and his younger brother, Amos. This led Amos to leave *Ekuphakameni* and establish a new village at *Ebuhleni*. All the Nazarite members who are part of this study belong to the *Ebuhleni* sect. In view of the split in the church, members are very suspicious and it is easy to be perceived as a 'spy' when I conduct my research. One of the head ministers urged me to come with 'my minister', meaning the minister of the Temple to which I belong, if I was to ask him questions relating to the church. The point here is that, if I was a white scholar, or a non-Nazarite, no one would suspect that I may be a 'spy' from the *Ekuphakameni* sect.

Another problem relates to power relations, which tend to be reversed when I conduct my interviews. This is so because most people I have to question for my research are superior to me in terms of position in the church. Asking questions of your superiors in the church is allowed and even encouraged. But the problem in my case is that I ask my questions as a scholar, not someone who wants to know how to live as a member of the church. My position as an educated member is both inviting and alienating to other members. As the church is accused of being the church of the uneducated (I look at this issue in Chapter One), the fact of my education is welcomed. When Minister Ngidi introduced me to minister Mpanza, he emphasised the fact that I was doing a Masters and Mpanza asked, "Is he still a member of this church?"

One preacher who had had a near-death experience, Magumeni Gumede, took some time ruminating when I explained to him my position and asked him to tell me his 'story'. When he had taken a minute or two thinking, he asked me, "*Ufundel'ukuba yini?*" (What do you intend to do when you've finished your studies?). I told him that I wanted to teach at a tertiary institution, and then he said, "Yes! It's high time we ruled this country!". But, to exercise his power as a higher member of the church and perhaps as owner of the narrative I wanted, he simply stood up and left me with the words, "I heard you". I stayed about two hours, hoping that he would tell me his story and it was only in the sermon at one o'clock that he narrated his story. This was very informative for me because I understood that as he told the story to the whole congregation, his position as a superior member of the church was maintained. In a sermon setting, it was not an educated researcher asking questions from an uneducated informant, but it was a preacher addressing the congregation who respected him as an ordained member of the church.

* * *

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter One of this study looks at the importance of the narratives of near-death experiences in the Nazarite Church as a means of defining the collective and the individual identities in the Church. In this chapter I argue that both the questions of group identity and individual identity are important in the Nazarite Church, and the narratives of near-death experiences provide space to the narrators in which they can articulate the imagined identities of the self and the collective. The need to define the self in relation to the collective Nazarite identity stems from the fact that there is a marked difference between the unordained and the ordained members of the church in terms of privileges and power. As the church is

increasing in terms of numbers, there is a tendency to regard the new members as less significant and possessing little knowledge of the religious forms, such as conducting sermons and sacred dance. These experiences provide a nexus for some of the new members to re-assert their importance within the church. The need to define the church in relation to the 'outside' world results from the fact that the church has historically faced opposition from non-members, and the near-death experiences are a way of vindicating the faith and the messianic powers of Shembe.

Chapter Two looks at the poetics of performance in the Nazarite Church with regards to the narratives of near-death experiences. It examines how individual narrators tell their stories in the sermon setting and evaluates the role of the audience in narrative performance. I argue that the performance of the narratives of near-death experiences, like any other performance in the Nazarite Church, depends mainly on the abilities of the individual performer. Experienced and talented performers manage to hold the attention of their audiences for longer periods than the less talented and less experienced narrators. An experienced narrator interweaves many expressive forms characteristic of the Nazarite performances into his or her narrative. These include digressions from the narrative to read from the Bible, the inclusion of song, or bringing another narrative to bear as supplement to the main narrative if the performer feels that the audience is losing interest in his or her story.

In Chapter Three, I provide a close analysis of the narratives in terms of content and try to ascertain whether or not there are common features in these narratives. This chapter shows that although no two narratives are the same, there are similar features in them. These include a journey motif, an encounter with the deceased relatives and a meeting with the 'being of heaven', to mention but a few. This chapter explores the

contexts of these experiences and attempts to ascertain how, if at all, a person's knowledge and expectations inform the way he or she experiences the vision and also the way he or she recollects the events.

The main purpose of Chapter Four is to try to explore whether these narratives are culturally or religiously conditioned. To do that, I compare these narratives with the ones documented in Moody's book, *Life After Life*, and try to ascertain if there are any differences and make suggestions as to the ways in which we can explain the differences which may exist. It will be shown in this chapter that some of the features in the American and the Nazarite narratives are similar, yet they are articulated and understood differently by the experiencers and the narrators. I will argue here that it is difficult to define the Nazarite experiences as either religiously or culturally conditioned because for many narrators these experiences took place when they belonged to other faiths which would have made them expect a different situation than that which indeed takes place.

Chapter One: Identity, Power and the Near-Death Narrative in the Nazarite Church

Isaiah Shembe created his religious movement by blending western and African forms of expression and belief. These include song, dance, narratives of miracles and dreams. The period in which the Nazarite Church was formed is important because it coincided with the beginning of the ideas of the New African and vindication politics in which black educated elites tried to prove the abilities of the blacks by 'mimicking' the whites' way of life. This group tended to reject everything African and strongly embraced western civilisation.¹ The geography of the church was significant in that the headquarters, *Ekuphakameni* (The Exalted Place), were situated near J. L. Dube's Ohlange Institute which was one of the few independent African Schools in South Africa at the turn of the century. The encounter of these two prominent leaders who lived next to each other is well captured in Isaiah Shembe's praise poem:

Undab'ezavel'obala zavel'emehlwen'amadoda

Zibuzwe yizazi kwelaseNanda

UJan Dube umfoka Ngcobo

Lavum'ibhayibheli

Lavum'iTestamente 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

¹ See Couzens, T. (1985)

The Bible consented,
The Testament consented
And he (Dube) was disappointed.)²

This praise poem testifies to the dialogic relationship between Isaiah Shembe and the African elites of his time. I believe that a consideration of Shembe's encounter with the educated blacks of his time is important if one wants to study the questions of identity and consciousness in the Nazarite Church. This is because the ideological conflict shown in the praise poem above influenced and continues to influence the way Nazarites imagine themselves in relation to the outside world.

ILanga LaseNatal, 29 March 1929, reported that, "The children of the maNazaretha are being encouraged to pierce their ears, as it is considered a way of worshipping the Almighty (*Nkulunkulu*)" (quoted in Gunner, 2002: 26). With regards to this article, Gunner correctly notes that, "Clearly, it was implied, it was not a '*kholwa*' way of worshipping the Almighty, and it was not part of the path of progress which the paper, under the conservative leadership of John Dube, endorsed" (2002: 26).

This Nazarite dialogue with non-Nazarites still continues in the present. The Nazarite Church is even now considered by many to be the church of rural, uneducated and unemployed people. Rev. Prince Zulu of UKhozi FM stated in an interview with Carol Muller that the listener interest in the Nazarite service programme on Saturdays had declined, and cited as the reasons for this, "The repetitive nature of the content of

² These *izibongo* are documented in Mpanza's unpublished text, *Ushembe NobuNazaretha*. They are therefore available to many *izimbongi* who recite them in congregations. The translation and all other translations in the text are mine.

the programme; the interpretations of biblical texts that the more mainstream Christian audience found offensive; and the reluctance of the Nazarites' representatives to include more hymn singing in their fifteen-minute program. Overall, he suggested that the difficulties pertained to a lack of formal education on the part of those who conducted the radio broadcast" (Muller, 1999: 127). The perception of the church as backward is epitomised in the myth that was created after Isaiah Shembe had died which continued the ridicule of the Nazarite Church and its members: that Shembe had created artificial wings and attempted to fly, imitating Jesus, and died in the process. This myth spread so far that many people still know Shembe as someone who put on wings and tried to fly.

However, the position of the individual also plays an important role in the Nazarite Church. The rapid growth in number of the members makes the question of power and identity, and the need to define the self in relation to the collective, more significant. The privileges afforded by the position of preacher, evangelist, minister and *umkhokheli* (women leader) have made the notion of being ordained in the church a contested issue. In many Temples there have been clashes and fights over the above positions to the point that the present leader, UThingo (M.V. Shembe), has prohibited any anointing in the Nazarite Church. The result of this is that many of the members who were ordained after this ruling are considered illegitimate.

The fact that the above-mentioned positions are not paid for in terms of salaries may make one wonder why people fight for positions in the church. The church's emphasis on 'respect', which is for traditional leaders, ordained members and elders, sheds some useful light on the importance of holding a position in the Nazarite Church. If an

ordained member of the church visits another Temple, the people of that Temple are supposed to give him or her a 'drink' in the form of sacrifices, to welcome the 'guardian angel' of that person. This can amount to a substantial amount of money depending on the number of people in the Temple.

Taking part in the sacred dances is one of the important aspects of the Nazarite Church. Because there are so many people in the church today, being in the centre of the line is what every dancer wishes because then one is able to hear clearly the singing and the beating of drums which are an important guide to the dancers. If a person is at the far end, it is difficult to hear the song and drums and therefore it is hard to know what to do. Being ordained helps in this case as well because it allows one to enter the line of dancers wherever one wants.

The following texts show how the imaginings of the collective and individual identities impact on the performance of oral narratives in the Nazarite Church. On Friday, 13 August, I met Preacher Bongani Njoko in the homestead of his neighbour with two other men who are not the members of the church. This is important because I believe that the audience influences the way in which a narrator performs his narrative. In this case, there were two people who knew each other, shared a religion, language and culture. This means there was mutual understanding and a feeling of togetherness. There were, however, also two people who did not share our religious views. Although these men were not part of our conversation, they heard what we were talking about and Njoko was aware of that. We were standing as he spoke and I listened, taking as few notes as possible. He took me through his time of illness, which lasted for about a year, and the three weeks he spent in the hospital without getting better.

*Lwase lufika-k'usuku, lolu engihlale ngikhuluma ngalo naseThempelini ngithi
 luyofika noma kubani. Ngaphaphama ngisendaweni enhle...kuneth'imvula
 ewuzamcolo...Lemvula lenayayimhlophe njengeqhwa oKhahlamba. Ngabe sengibona
 odadewethu ababili bakababomkhulu abasebedlulile emhlabeni. Bobabili babekade
 behambe bengagulanga. Bangitshel'ukuthi akufanele ngibe lapha ngoba bona
 basafuna ukuthi ngizobakhulula. Imvula lena yayibanetha sebefana nayo..[...] Ngabe
 sengibona amadoda amabili eza ngakimi. Omunye wayemfishane efake ibheshu
 omunye efake umjija omhlophe nesigqoko esimnyama. Ikhehla lathi: "Uyangazi
 mina?" Ngathi "Cha angikwazi." Lase lithi "Mina ngingumkhulu wakho." Ngathi
 minaumkhulu wami angimazi ngoba washona ngisemncane...lase lithi: "Uyambona
 lomunt'engihamba naye? UShembe lona. Wuyena ongumkhululi lapha kulendawo.
 Ngimcelil'ukuthi akudedel'ubuyel'emhlabeni ngoba sifuna yosisebenzela"...
 Ngesikhathi sebehamba omkhulu nendoda yejaz'elimhlophe, ngaphaphama
 sengifakwe enqoleni ingis'e-motuary. Ngase ngimbozwe ngoplastik'abamnyama
 okumbozwa ngabo izidumbu e-motuary. Ngakhahlela ngakhahlela baze bafik'onisi
 bangikhipha base bengiphindisela e ward-five.Kwasuk'isidumo sengifik'e-ward-five.
 Iziguli zabaleka zicabang'ukuthi ngiyisipoki, ababengakwazi ukuhamba baphakamisa
 izandla bathi abanye ababathathe. Mina manjengangisadidekile ngifuna ukuthi
 ngibuyele ekhaya. Uyaz'into eyayithusa lababantu wukuthingesisikhathi ngifa ngase
 ngikade ngingakwazi ukukhuluma, kodwa manje ngase ngikhuluma noma
 ngangisahamba kabukhuni. Onisi bacabanga ukuthi ngiyahlanya babiza iphoyisa
 uDlamini. Uyamazi lona omude omnyama? Weza nesagila wangishaya ngaso. Base
 bengijova bangibopha ngozankosi ezandleni [...].*

(And then the day came! The one I always tell people in the Temple that it will come

to all of us. I woke up in a beautiful place in which the rain fell sluggishly and unceasingly. The rain was as white as snow in the Drakensberg Mountains. Then I saw my two late sisters of my father's elder brother. They had both died the previous year without getting ill at all. They told me that I needed not be there because they wanted me to liberate them. The rain was falling on them and they were now looking like it....Then I saw two men coming my way. One was short and he wore the loinskin, and the other was wearing a white gown and a black hat. The old man said, "Do you know me?" I said, "I do not know you." He then said, "Me, I am your grandfather." I told him I did not know my grandfather because he died when I was too young. He then said to me, "You see this man I am going with here, he is Shembe. He is the Saviour here. I asked him to let you live again because we want you to work for us on earth..." When my grandfather and the man in the white gown left me, I woke up on a trolley on which I was taken to the mortuary. I was covered in these black plastic bags which are used to cover dead bodies in the mortuary. I kicked and kicked and the nurses arrived, took me out and drove me back to ward five. There was great chaos when I arrived at ward five. Patients ran helter-skelter thinking I was a ghost. Those who could not run raised their hands and asked others to take them. By this time I was still confused and demanding to go home. You know what frightened those people was that, when I passed away, I had long been unable to talk, but now I was talking and could walk although with difficulty. The nurses thought I was mad and called the security guard Dlamini. You know the one who is tall and dark? He came with a knobkierie and hit me. I was then injected and my hands were locked with the handcuffs...)

I believe that Njoko had narrated this story of his many times in sermons, and the message is that Shembe is present in the other world and he is the Saviour, as the old

man said. This is important for the Nazarites because one of the criticisms levelled against them is that they worship an ordinary human being like them. This story, for the narrator, serves as evidence that Shembe is not just an ordinary person. He is the Saviour, he is the Messiah, he is God. Meshack Hadebe stated in his testimony: "But the people of Ohlange, Dube's place, were full of criticism. They maintained that 'Shembe's' people are wicked because they treat Shembe, the man who has come there, as if he is God, as if he is Jesus. Even if he does work miracles and the members don't use medicine, still he is the human being acting as if he is God" (Gunner, 2002: 149).

This piece then is used to define *ubuNazaretha* in relation to the broader community. As soon as a story like this is told it becomes part of the church's cultural capital which any member can use in a sermon or when accused of worshipping an ordinary human being. The church is characterised by the circulation of testimonies like this on cassettes and in written transcripts of sermons, but mostly in conversations and discussions. Nazarites buy the cassettes of testimonies in order to listen to the story as many times as possible so as to be able to re-narrate the story as theirs and also to play the tape for their non-Nazarite friends and relatives who do not want to believe that Shembe is Messiah.

But there are parts of the narrative that become an individual's personal treasure which define him or her in relation to other members of the church. These are not narrated by anyone other than the person concerned. When Njoko had finished what I thought I needed for my project and we had rejoined the other men in conversation, he continued his narrative:

Isimanga-ke Jobe wukuthi emva kwezinyanga ezintathu ngiyikhethile iNkosi, umfundisi uSikhakhane weza ekhaya wathi uShembe umtshela esibonakalisweni ukuthi akahambe eyogcoba umuntu okuthiwa wuNjoko abe wumshumayeli lapha eThempelini. Mina ngamtshela uSikhakhane ukuthi angazi lutho ngezinto zesonto yena wangitshela ukuthi uShembe ufike kuye wamtshela ukuthi ufuna umuntu othiwa wuNjoko amsebenzele... Yilapho-ke la uNkosikazi akhumbula khona ukuthi kambe umkhulu wayetheni ngesikhathi ngishonile. Wathi: "Akazange yini umkhulu athi kwathiwa buya ngoba babefuna ubasebenzele? ..."

(The miracle, Jobe, is that three months after having converted, Evangelist Sikhakhane came to my home and told me that Shembe had told him in a dream that he had to go and appoint a man called Njoko to be a preacher at Estcourt Temple. I told him I knew nothing about the ways of the church but Sikhakhane told me that Shembe had said to him he wanted a man called Njoko to work for him. It was then that my wife remembered what Grandfather had said to me when I had passed away. She said, "Didn't Grandfather say that you were allowed to come back because they wanted you to work for them?"...)

This narrative is as important to Njoko as the first one but it is not as important to the other members of the church because it does not define *ubuNazaretha*. It defines the individual in relation to the group. It means that Njoko was chosen from above for the position of preacher, so that even if he was ordained when UThingo had ordered a stop on new appointments, still he is a legitimate preacher. While anybody could include the former narrative in their sermons, this one will always be narrated by Njoko because it is his way of imagining himself and his position within the church. It is also unlikely that he would have added this part if I had not been a member of the church.

MaGumeni Gumede's testimony is not entirely like Njoko's but it has a number of similar features. He performed his in a sermon on the 14th August 2004 in the Temple at Estcourt. For him, there was no prolonged period of illness and no stay in the hospital. He was walking to his sister's place when he felt like something hit him on the back of his head and his head turned backward. He was still alive and conscious when he was taken home. He heard his father sing "Wake me up Lord, I have been asleep for too long" but did not see him. It was only after one o'clock that Sunday that he saw his father but not with the eyes that he usually saw things:

Ngase ngiyibona lendoda. Ngasibon'isidumbu sami silele. Lath'izwi unгахamb'isidumbu sakho singakangwatshwa ngon'uzoduka. Ngezwa kuthiwa umngcwabo wami uzoba ngoLwesibili ngase ngintanta emoyeni ngilindela lolosuku. Ebusuku ngomsombuluko wez'ubaba wathisebeqala inkonzo yomlindelolo. Entatha weza futhi wathi sekuyoqal'ukumbiwa kwaBhekabezayo. Amadoda afik'emini athi aseqedil'ukumb'ithuna. Ngabe sengikhishwa. Umunt'owayepheth'umngcwabo wami wuMvangel'Ungubane. Babehlabele'u "Ngingumhamb'emhlabeni" bephuma nesidumbu. Ngangindiz'emkhathini ngibuka lefilimu yenzek'emhlabeni. Bathi kusel'abant'abathath'abangakangiboni. Ngathi ngisabuka lokho ngabon'uShembe wath'isikhathi sam'asikashayi. Wath'angibuyel'esidunjini masinya ngoba sebezongifak'ethuneni.

(Then I saw this man. I saw my body lying there. The voice told me not to leave before my body was buried because if I did I would be lost. I heard that my funeral was to be on Tuesday so I floated around, waiting for that day. On Monday evening, I saw my father come to me and tell me that they were starting my memorial service. Early at dawn he came again and said they were going to start digging my grave at

Bhekabezayo. The men came back at noon and said they had finished digging my grave. I was then taken out. The person who was in charge of my funeral was Evangelist Ngubane. They sang "I am a traveller on earth" as they carried my body. I was floating in the firmament as I watched that film taking place on earth. They said there were three people who had not seen me. When they put me down near the grave, Shembe appeared and said my time has not come. He said I should go back to my body soon because they were about to put me to the grave.)

Significant for the narrator is his encounter with the 'being' he calls Shembe. The fact that he met Shembe on his spiritual journey makes Gumede believe that Shembe is not an ordinary human being - He is the Almighty:

*Nqiqinisile mina uma ngith 'uShemb 'uNkulunkulu. Ezulwin 'angibonang' -
omuny 'umuntungabon 'uShembe.*

(I am telling the truth if I say Shembe is God. In heaven I did not see another person, I saw Shembe.)

When Gumede performed his narrative, he had not been given a service to take charge of. It was time for the closing of the service. Njoko, the preacher of the Temple, had asked him to close the service, not to preach or narrate his story. He should have knelt and named a song to close the service with. However, although Gumede knew that he had taken more than enough time, he could not stop without defining his identity within the church:

*EThempelin 'engiphethe kulo, kunamadod 'awu-119 namakhosikazi awu-300.
Ngesikhath 'uNdabezitha wakith 'ehambis 'uhla lwamadod 'eThempelini, uThingo
lwalubuka wase eth ' umshumayeli walendawo akekho kulamagama. Inkosi yabe*

isibuya ibhala igama lami nabanye abathathu ababebancane njengami. Ngesikhathi esephindel'eNkosini, iNkosi yakhomb'igama lami yathi: "Nang'umshumayeli waleliThempeli." UNdabezitha wakhononda wathi ngisemncane kakhulu kodwa uThingo lwathi makangibize.

(In the temple where I am preacher, there are 119 men and 300 women. When our chief sent the list of all the names of males in the temple, UThingo looked at it and said that the man who is the preacher of our temple was not written there. The chief came back and added my name and three other names of men as young as I am. When he took the list to UThingo again, UThingo pointed to my name and said, "Here is the preacher of that temple." The chief complained that I am too young but Shembe told him to call me.)

The response to this part of the text is either quietness or "Hmn", which means the congregation is impressed but is unlikely to 'put that in their bags' and use it in their sermon performances. But it served the performer well because he knew that many people in the congregation were wondering how he came to be a preacher at such a young age. Before the one o'clock service started, some men were talking in Gumede's presence about people who fight for positions in the church, stating their wonder because no one is paid for any position in the church.

The very fact of having experienced 'death' is certainly something to be proud of. The person who has taken the spiritual journey has the experience many people will never have and this gives him authority and popularity in the Church. He or she is the living proof that the Nazareth way is the correct way and is sometimes invited by preachers to tell the congregation about his or her experience and especially to be seen by the congregation. Soon after narrating his encounter with Shembe and his

resurrection, Gumede said:

*Wuyeke lomuntu owavuk'efile. Mhlawumbe sewake wezwa kuthiwa kukhon'-
umunt'owavuk'efile, yimina-ke loyo.*

(This is the person who was resurrected from death. Perhaps you once heard of someone who was resurrected from death, that was me.)

Similarly, Thulani Kunene introduced himself to the congregation as follows:

*Uthi wuye lona owagwinywa yinyoka. Okanye wemfundi wephepha wake wezwa
ukuthi ngomuny'unyaka ngo 1978 kukhona umfana ogwinywe yinyoka
akangatholakala waze watholakala ngakusasa...Kwakushiwo mina! Babesho mina lo!
Akekho futh'omunye!*

(He says this is the one who was swallowed by the snake. Perhaps you newspaper reader once heard that in 1978 a certain boy was swallowed by the snake and was never found only to be found the following day...They were talking about me!...They were talking about this very me! There is no one else!)

Chief Mfungelwa Mchunu's narrative seems to be primarily concerned with testifying to Shembe's powers and does not attempt to define the narrator himself. The reason appears to be that as a chief, he holds the highest position anybody can have in the church except Shembe, and this position is not obtained through the church. A chief gets his position in the area where he rules and comes to the church as an anointed chief, unlike a minister, for instance, who is ordained by the church and therefore owes his position to the church.

Chief Mchunu is about eighty-five years old and he was concerned about confusing

events if he narrated his story. I begged him to tell what he could remember and he told me that he passed away on Saturday at nine o'clock after an illness which started the previous day. His father was a strong believer in Shembe so he sent his younger brother to report to him that his son had died and he wanted Shembe to bring him back. Jozi, the uncle, was sent with two horses and he arrived at EMachunwini in the morning on Sunday. Shembe, referred to as ILanga (Sun), said to Jozi that his brother's son would be resurrected but he had to take a letter to a place called EMachobeni and put it under a rock and do that before nine that morning. Shembe told Jozi that if he arrived there after nine, his brother's son would not be resurrected.

Makushay'unayini kwezwala mina ngikhwashaza, kwezwakala mina ngithimula, kwezwakala mina ngikhwehlela...Ngenkathi-ke beng...bengivula lapha "hhayi..usebhekile lomuntu." Hhaw'iNkos'ubaba-ke waphuma wahalalisa-ke ngob'uyaz'ukuthi yiNkos'eyenze lokhu...Wasehhalalis'ebaleni kwajabula bonk'abantu. Wase kuyikhon'ey'ebandleni-ke elihleli lapha ngenzans'ehlathini ...ngoba phela umuzi wakithi wawusehlathini...eseyobika-k'ukuthi "hhayi, sengiyabonga, seningahamba, umntwan'usephilile." Babe sebehamba-ke... wawa...njalobase beyahamba-ke. Nami-ke ngapha njeng'uluphumil'umphefumulo ngonayini kwazekwayoshay'unayini wasebusuku...kwaze...ngavuka ngonayini wasekuseni,ngiyahamba nami. Ehhe! Ukuhamba kwami... angazi kodwa kahle kodwa ngiyazingiyeZulwini. Ukuhamba kwami nje ngiyazi ngiyeZulwini ngoba sengifile. Lendlel'engiyihambayo nje, ingis'eZulwini. Ngahamba-k'isikhashana.[...]Ngayibona lenkomo. Ukuhamba kwami la...emadlelwen' amahle! Akhon'amadlel' amahle law'okuye kukhulunywe ngawo ngisho nasesihlabelweni kukhon'ukuthi amadlel'aluhlaza...Ngangihamba lapho-ke. Uma ngihamba lapho-ke ngayibona lenkomo...Hhawu! Nans'inkomo? Ngizokwenzenjani? Ngob'eyakwethu nje izele

lenkom 'inebeleliyavuz 'ubisi lana? ...Inkonyane ngathi ngiyaqalaz 'angalibon'-
 inkonyane. Ngathi ngiyaqalaza ngam 'impela ngabheka...ngayibheka nayo
 i..iya..ii..yenz 'angath 'inkonyan 'ayilaz 'ukuthi lilaphi. Hhayi, ngama manje.
 Ngam 'impela ngayibhekisis 'ikhuluphele! [...] Hhawu ngayijabulela lenkomo
 kwath 'angiyibuke! Laqhamuk 'izwi lathi: " Wo ulibele yinkomo yakwen'
 uNtomb 'encane...eyahlabis 'amaNazalettha...mhla ezophendul 'ubaba wakho?" Hhayi,
 ngethuka lapho. Kwangathi kade ngilele bengiphupha ngaqhubeka futhi
 nendlela...Ngathi nje ukuhambahamba indlela ngisekhona lapho kulawo
 madlel 'aluhlaza...ngingakaboni luth 'olunyengisahamb 'indlela nje...kwaqhamuk'-
 ukhozi...olwaqhamuk 'empumalanga...Ukhozi lento lweza kwabasengathi
 yibhalon 'uma iza kimina...e.kwangathi iyibhalon 'ithe isiseduze ngayibon 'ukuthi
 akusil 'ibhaloni ukhozi. Luyandiza...Kodwa luza kimina ngqo!.. Ngqo!..Lwath 'uma
 lufika nje kimina... hhawu lwavele...lwavele lwaphenduka...lwama ngenyawo zalo
 lwaphenduka lwawumuntu. Lwase luba wubab 'iNkosi yasekuphakameni yona le
 ekade kuthunyelwekuyon 'eMaChunwini... Yafike yathi gxume phambi
 kwami...Ngajabula ngibon 'iNkosi!..ngoba njoba ngangihamba nje ngangi-
 khululekile...ngingenankinga. Yafika yangibuza-ke iNkosi yathi: "Uyaphi?" Ngathi:
 "NgiyeZulwini." Yase ithi, "Ehhe ngizele lokho-ke..Ubaba wakho ubesethumelile ethi
 uyakucela ukuba ubuye ngoba uwena wedwa umfana." Ubaba wayeshonjalo
 eNkosini yaseKuphakameni kodwa thina ngangazi sasingabafana siwuleveni.
 NeNkosi yayazi kodwa yayenzela nje ukuthi ngisinde. Yathi ngoba ubusufile isikhathi
 esingaka awuzukuzwa ezindlebeni izinyanga ezintathu...abanye ababe besezwa qobo
 noma babe yizilima uma besebefile kodwa wena sizokwenzel 'umusa ngoba uzothetha
 amacala...ubaba wakho akasezuphil 'isikhathi eside...

(When nine struck, I was heard moving, I was heard sneezing, I was heard coughing.

The time they...they opened me, "*Hhayi!*...this person has woken up". Then my father went out and praised because he knew that it was the Lord who did this. He praised in the homestead and everybody was happy. It was then that he went to the group of men who were waiting down in the forest...our homestead was situated in the forest...he went to report that "No I thank you...you can go now...the child has woken up"...I too this side am travelling as my soul left at nine until nine in the evening...until...I woke up at nine in the morning...I was travelling. Yes! In my journey I don't know for sure but I know that I am going to heaven. In my journey I know that I am going to heaven because I am now dead...I went for a while [...] I saw this cow. My going here...in green pastures... There are beautiful pastures that are sometimes spoken about, even in the hymn book there is mention of green pastures. I was travelling there. As I was travelling there I saw this cow. Wow! Here is this cow? What am I going to do because it's my homestead's, it has given birth and its udder is leaking milk?...I looked around for a calf but I did not see it. I looked around and waited and looked...and the cow acted as if it did not know where the calf was. *Hhayi!* I waited now, I really waited and looked at it closely. It was fat! [...] The voice came and said, "Oh, you are now concerned about your homestead's cow Ntombencane? Which was slaughtered for the Nazarites... when they came to convert your father"...I was frightened. It was as if I was asleep, dreaming... I went on my journey. As I was travelling, still on those green pastures, not having seen anything else...there appeared an eagle which appeared from the East. This eagle thing approached as if it was a plane as it came to me [...] It suddenly changed. It stood on its feet and changed to become a human being. It became father the Lord of Ekuphakameni. The very same that (my uncle) was sent to at MaChunwini. He arrived and landed in front of me...I was so pleased to see the Lord of Ekuphakameni because indeed as I was

travelling I had a feeling of happiness...I had no problem...The Inkosi came and asked me, "Where are you going?" and I said I am going to heaven. Then he said, "Yes, that is why I am here. Your father has sent to me saying that he wants you to wake up because you are his only son"...Father had said that to Inkosi but we were eleven boys. The Inkosi knew but he just wanted me to be healed. He said because I had been dead for this long, I was going to go deaf for three months. He said some people who are resurrected from the dead go deaf for ever and some become fools, but you we will do you a favour because you will be a chief and listen to cases because your father will not live for long now...)

Interestingly, Mchunu did not add a 'sub-text' which defines him as an individual. Having narrated the story of his 'death', he went on to tell me more stories about the messianic powers of Shembe. He told the story of a white man from abroad (probably Britain) whose daughter had a menstrual problem. The white man read about Shembe's healing powers from the newspapers and decided to come and try his luck because all the doctors had failed. When they came to *Ekuphakameni*, the young woman menstruated and her father offered to give Shembe a suitcase full of money which Shembe declined. Later, when this woman came to visit Durban, the sea was overflowing and threatening to 'swallow' the buildings nearby. People were throwing money into the sea and the woman from overseas told the others that the person who could help was Shembe. Shembe was then called and he 'told' the sea to return to its original boundary. The sea obeyed.

These two stories, plus his encounter with Shembe in the 'other' world, cause Mchunu to conclude that:

Hhayi! UShembe yena!...Uphasile manje. Imisebenzi yakh'isimenze waphasa kakhulu...Abanye-ke bathi hhaw'afelan'amaNazaretha?...ahluphekelan'-amaNazaretha?...Akekh'umunt'ongek'ahlupheke. Ngoba mangibheka yen'uShemb'uqobo lwakh'uyahlupheka ngalomsebenziwakh'awenzayo... Uyamhlupha...ngob'umsebenzi wakhe...kufanel'ukuth'awenze...Okushukuthi nomangab'akathand'uzowenza...Akekh'umunt'ongafi! Uyaf'umuntu!Kodw'ikakhulu kithina maNazaleta akufanele sibe Ngabant'abagulayo...Akufanele!..Kufanele nje uNkulunkul'um'esekufun'akubize...Ngob'umthakath'akazukwenza...akuzukwenzeka njengokuthanda komthakathi...ngoba wena ungumuntu kaNkulunkulu. Yizono zeth'ezisibambayo..Ehhe!Ngempela sisuke sithi..sesingabantu bakaNkulunkulu sesazi ngempel'ukuthi masisu...masisuka sithandaza la...umunt'uzovuka...kodwa manje ubuy'uyothinta kweziny'indawo...kweziny'indaw'ezingasafane ukuth'ungabuy'-uyothinta kuzo. Yilokh'okwenz'ukuth'uShembe-ke...ub'umunt'ogulayo wena muntu wakh'uShembe...

(No! Shembe!...he has passed now. His works have made him pass a great deal. But others say why do Nazarites die?... Why do Nazarites suffer?...Nobody will never suffer! Because if I look even Shembe himself does suffer because of this work of his he does...It troubles him...Because it is his work he has to do it...It means even if he did not like it he would do it. Nobody never dies! A person dies. But for us Nazarites we need not be getting sick. It shouldn't happen. What should happen is that if God needs you He should just call you...Because a witch cannot do...things will not happen according to the witch's desire...because you are God's person...It is our sins that hold us. Yes! Really! Because we tend to...being God's people knowing truly that if we...if we pray... a person will be healed. But now you go and touch on other places...in other places where you are not supposed to be touching...that's what

makes Shembe...to be a sick person while you are Shembe's person...)

* * *

In the Nazarite Church, the significance of the narratives of near-death experiences is not rooted in the future or in the past. But the members and experiencers use these experiences to define their present identities as individuals and as a group. These experiences become the church's cultural capital which every member can use in their sermon performances. Yet there are parts of the narratives that define the individual and these can only be told by the person concerned. The need to define the church in relation to the broader society is because the church was not well received and is still regarded as the church of uneducated, unemployed rural people. There are also claims that the Nazarites worship a human being like them. The near-death experiences are one of the ways in which the Nazarites challenge those allegations and confirm their Church. But, these experiences are also deployed to define individual identities in relation to the group. Power relations are involved in this imagining of personal identity.

Chapter Two: The Poetics of Performing the Near-Death Experience

The sermon plays a crucial role in the Nazarite Church as a means of cultural exchange. The Sabbath service involves the reading of the Sabbath Prayer (*Umthandazo WeSabatha*) from the *Nazarite Hymn Book (Izihlabelelo ZamaNazaretha)* and the performance of the sermon service, which is usually delivered by one person chosen by the highest-ranking member of the church present. There are two services every Sabbath, namely, the nine o'clock service and the one o'clock service. Each service takes about one to one-and-a-half hours. The Sabbath Prayer takes only twenty to twenty-five minutes and the remaining time is for the sermon. It is therefore a great challenge for every performer of a sermon to ensure that his or her performance holds the attention of the audience to the end. This is made more difficult by the fact that in most cases the performer does not get a chance to prepare before hand because he (it is usually a man) is chosen only when the time for the service has come or just before that. It is only in the case of great meetings where the whole congregation is gathered that the person to preach the sermon is notified on the Friday evening preceding the day of the sermon. In this chapter I explore the poetics of sermon performance in the Nazarite Church and the role played by the near-death narratives in the sermon. I look at how different performers use their oratorical skills and talent to capture the attention of the audience in the service. I further explore the role played by the audience in performance through engagement with or disengagement from the narrator by the utterances of "Amen", "hmn" and keeping quiet, or even sleeping.

The success or otherwise of the sermon in the Nazarite Church depends largely on

the given performer's verbal strength and talent. The voice alone can be a deciding factor in whether the sermon is good or bad. Good performers use the pitch of their voices, usually ranging from low to high, to create an impact on the audience. Some performers, like Magumeni Gumede, raise their voices to the highest possible pitch, and this helps to keep the audience 'awake'. However, there are many other factors which make a sermon a good one. As Hofmeyr states: " Apart from the dictates of the environment and audience taste, factors like time, place, talent, audience make-up, pre-existing relationship between teller and audience, to mention but a few, shape the total meaning of the event" (1993: 123).

After Magumeni Gumede had presented his sermon at Nkonzenjani Temple at Ntabamhlophe on the 6 November 2004, I visited Preacher Dlamini in his makeshift house to interview him. I found him with Mphathi (Male Leader) Dlamini, and when Minister Sikhakhane joined us for a moment the discussion switched to the sermon that Gumede had preached:

Preacher Dlamini: Ewu! Yasiphakela lensizwa wemadoda!

Male Leader Dl : Amaqabuqab 'omama bengalal 'esontweni ngiyaqabuka ngqa namhlanje.

N. Sithole : Bebengalele?

Male Leader : Lutho. Akulalanga namunye.

Preacher Dl : Akulalanga namunye?

Male Leader Dl : Noyedwa. Amaqabuqab 'angiyazi mina lendaba. Akulalanga noyedwa namhlanje.

Preacher Dl : Yinqa zephela baba?

Male Leader Dl : Ayi bo yinqa zephela. (Laugh).

Minister Sikhakhane: Hhayi bo! Nithini bakithi? Iphela linazo yini izinga?

Preacher Dlamini : Yiwok'impel'amaqabuqabu. Kusuke kwamaqabuqab'uma uzibonile.

Minister Sikhakhane: Hhayi mina ngikhalile. Ngikhalile ngathi kukhon'abant'- abangekho abaningi.

Preacher Dlamini : Hhawu! Hhawu! Ndlebe kawuphathelani!

Male Leader Dlamini : Eyi.

Minister Sikhakhane : Ngathi kukhon'abant'abangekho. Abant'abezwa.

Preacher Dlamini : Banenking'abantu.

Minister Sikhakhane : Abant'abezwa uma ubatshela...

(Preacher Dlamini : Ewu! He served us, this young man.

Male Leader Dlamini : It's a rarity that women don't sleep in the church, I never saw it until today.

N. Sithole : They were not sleeping?

Male Leader Dlamini : Not at all. Not even one.

Preacher Dlamini : Not even one slept?

Male Leader Dlamini : Not even one. It is a rarity, I don't know this! Not even one slept.

Preacher Dlamini : It's the buttocks of a cockroach.

Male Leader Dlamini : *Ayi bo*, it's the buttocks of a cockroach.(Laugh)

Minister Sikhakhane : Hey, what are you saying people? Does the cockroach have buttocks?

Preacher Dlamini : It is indeed a rarity. It is a rarity that you will see them.

Minister Sikhakhane : I was worried though. I was worried that there are many people who were absent.

Preacher Dlamini : Hmn! Hmn! Ear you do not hear for others!

Minister Sikhakhane : That many people were absent. People do not listen.

Preacher Dlamini : People have a problem.

Minister Sikhakhane : If you tell them they don't listen.)

The above text is important for this chapter because it shows the role played by the audience as participants during the performance and as judges after the performance. Gumede's sermon was good and diverting so women did not sleep during his performance. He was able to hold their attention to the finish. But these reviews are not always positive as one can read between the lines in the above text. Some people make their names (unknowingly) as bad performers as much as others establish themselves as good performers. For instance, I had a conversation with Nkosana Chonco after the nine o'clock service at Ekujabuleni Temple at Inchanga on 5 February 2005. Chonco had been in Gauteng for the few past years and he was telling me about the people, especially the leaders, in his Temple in Soweto. He told me of one minister whom he claimed was good at singing but bad at preaching. I was more interested when he offered an example of that minister's worst performance:

Ngeliny' ilanga babekade beyemhlanganweni. Kwasekuthiwa ake ashumayeke ashokuthi bahambe kanjani njengomgcotshwa obeyemhlanganweni. Wasukuma wathi, "E... Bantwana bakaNkulunkulu sihambe kahl' impela safik' emhlanganweni... Sayithola nenkonzo ingakangeni... [...] ngathi kodw'uBaba yini lent' ayenzayo anike lomunt' inkonzo umunt' onensa kangaka? Ngavele ngabon' ukuth' uzosilalisa-ke nje lomuntu..."

(One day they had gone to the meeting, it was then said that he should preach a

sermon as an ordained member who had gone to the meeting. He rose and said, “E...Children of God we had a good journey indeed and arrived at the meeting...and arrived before the service started...[...] I said but what is Father doing giving a sermon to this man who is so slow? I just knew that this man was going to make us sleep”....)

This chapter is particularly concerned with the factors which make a good performance and how the near-death narrative is interwoven with other narratives and testimonies to create a compelling experience for the congregation. Since I have established that Gumede’s performance at Nkonzenjani was good, it would be useful to look at his text closely. I think the main factor in Gumede’s interesting performance was his ability to tell the audience what they wanted to hear and in a language to which they relate, namely, narrative and testimony. Throughout the sermon, Gumede told the congregation that Shembe is God and by means of an interplay of narratives and testimonies, he supported his claim:

Size lapha bantwana bakaNkulunkulu siz’eThembeni. Ithemb’esize kulo lapha linye kuphel’ukuth’uShemb’uNkulunkulu...Ngaphandle kwalelothemba’asiphethe lutho. Akukh’okuny’esikwaziyo’okungale kwalel’ithemba...Akukho futh’okuny’ukuqond’esingabuye sikuqonde ngaphandle kwalel’ithemba.

(We have come here children of God...we have come to the hope. The hope we have come to here is one...that Shembe is God. Beside that hope we have nothing...There is no other knowledge above this hope...There is also no other understanding we can have except this hope.)

The force of the voice which characterises the most part of Gumede’s sermon is not

felt here. The voice is soft and flows smoothly, but the words have an impact because the listener knows that the speaker will tell a number of stories about miracles Shembe performed on his behalf and on behalf of other people. A good and gripping sermon is one in which the performer interweaves stories and testimonies from different people and different places. These have to be narrated alongside the teller's personal testimony to give strength to his text and also to show that he has 'seen' Shembe. Thus, immediately after the above text, Gumede told of how he came to Estcourt. He had left his home at Mhlab'uyalingana because of an illness and, when he was sleeping in a hotel in Ladysmith, he had a dream in which someone told him to go to Estcourt if he wanted to be healed:

*Ngath'uma ngivuk'ekuseni...ngavuk'inyawo...zonk'inyawo seziyalingana
manj'aysavuvukele...Sezibuhlungu kuphela sekuyahambeka manj'ey'uShemb'-
uNkulunkulu...*

(When I woke up in the morning...I woke up and my feet...both my feet are of the same size...not swollen...They are only painful, now I can walk. Hey Shembe is God...)

Many members have a list of stories of miracles Shembe performed on their behalf. The chronological order of their occurrence is insignificant and each sermon performer narrates them as he/she recalls them or according to each story's importance for him/her and its relation to other stories and the whole presentation. This does not mean that there is no sense of time at all. Narrators include dates (if they can) in their performances, but usually they speak about time in terms of years. It is only in relation to the most significant events like the near-death experience that many remember and mention the day, month and year in which the event took

place.

Further on in the sermon Gumede referred back to 1980 when he fell ill and the doctors in the hospital in Nelspruit said he was going to be dependent on a wheelchair for the rest of his life. But in 1981 his father sent him to INyanga Yezulu (Amos Shembe) who gave him *amafuth'abusisiwe* (blessed Vaseline), and after using it for three days he was able to walk again. However, as much as these testimonies are interesting and absorbing to the audience, Gumede knew that none could beat the near-death narrative in its impact on the listener, and therefore he had to choose the time for it strategically. It should not be too early or too late. The significance of the near-death experience is that while anyone may have a story of healing or other miracle that Shembe performed for them, there are very few who have had the near-death experience. Also, those who have had the near-death experience are supposed to have taken the journey everybody is yet to take and in preparation for which many people come to church every Sabbath.

However, it is not simply the near-death narrative that holds the attention of the listeners. Narrative technique also plays a role here. Since the Nazarite Church is, as Gunner asserts, “the church of narratives and testimonies” (2002: 14), it is necessary for every preacher to master the art of storytelling. Gumede used suspense to enhance the listener interest in his sermon. Because he knew that everybody would want to hear what happened in his story of death and resurrection, Gumede kept his audience in suspense by digressing from the narrative now and then. He would stop at any critical moment and start a song, or introduce another testimony, or ask for someone to read the Bible for him. While all these features of the sermon are celebrated, he knew that none is more gripping than the near-death narrative. So he held the

attention of the listener by leaving the near-death narrative unfinished until later.

*...Hheyi kanti kukhon`okungicathamelayo...Ngo 89...esehel'u-89...kwakuwuJuni
uma ngicabanga kwakuwumhlaka seveni ngalelolanga...Ngisemzini wakwadade-
wethu...ee...umkhwenyan'uyahamb'uyenyangeni. Uma efik'enyangen'uth'enyangeni,
"Ngizofu..." Ngikhuluma ngokungena kwami lapha bantwana bakaNkulunkulu...*

(...Hheyi but there was something following me...In 1989, towards the end of
1989...it was June if I remember correctly...it was on the seventh. I was at my sister's
place...e...e... My sister's husband went to the *inyanga*...When he arrived at the
inyanga he said, "I need"...I am talking about my coming here, children of God...)

Here, Gumede was introducing his near-death experience but immediately changed his mind and left it for a while. Perhaps he thought the timing was not perfect. He then decided to locate the narrative within the broader framework of Shembe's miracles which all members use as testimony for their belief in Shembe and the Nazarite faith. It is common practice in the Nazarite Church that a person who visits another Temple will be asked to preach a sermon, and that person is usually told to tell the others of how he or she became a member of the Nazarite Church. This calls for a narration of stories and testimonies of what Shembe had done for that person and others he knows. It is these miracles that cause people to convert to the church and it is the same miracles which make the members say that Shembe is God.

Having introduced the near-death narrative and then suddenly having digressed from it, Gumede displayed his knowledge by referring to Amos Shembe's (INyanga Yezulu) words at *Nyazini* Temple where he had preached about forgiveness. Knowledge of different Temples around the country and 'holding' Shembe's words

are two valuable weapons for any preacher. This knowledge helped Gumede to delay the near-death narrative for another six minutes. When he returned to his near-death narrative, he dramatised the conversation between his brother-in-law and the *inyanga*, using what Bauman and Briggs call meta-narrative. The kind of meta-narrative used here is reported speech and, as they say, “[r]eported speech [enables the performer] to increase stylistic and ideological heterogeneity by drawing on multiple speech events, voices, and points of view” (1990:70).

This is done as follows in Gumede’s text:

Um'efik'umkhwenyan'enyangen'ith'inyanga, “Uyaz'ukuthi laph'emzini wakho kunomfan'ohlala khona?...Lomfan'ohlala khon'unēsiphiw'esihle...e...wuyen'-ozokwenz'ube nenkom'eningi”

Iyabuza lendoda yakwaKhumal'ithi “Kanjani?”

Uthi, “Mawungabulala yen'ungathol'inkom'eningi...”

Ngakithi-k'umuthi wukudla kwakhona...

“Uma nje engafa loyamunt'uzoba nenkom'eningi...Mhla efile ngizozamina...sizomsebenza simphendul'abe yilent'azoba yiyo...akulethel'inkom'eningi...”

Hhaw'ibisithi lendoda, “Kanjani ngoba manje....wumlamu wami

loyamuntu...ngiganwe wudade wabo?”

“Cha ngek'umbulale wena ngizokunik'into...ozoyibek'endleleni bes'uyamthum'-ahambe kuleyondlela...iyomshaya lent'afe...”

(When my brother-in-law arrived at the *inyanga*'s, the *inyanga* said, “Do you know that in your home...there is a boy who lives there?...This boy has a good gift...he is the one who can make you have many cattle.”

This man of Khumalo asked, “How?”

He said, “ If you can kill him you can have many cattle...”

Where I come from ‘muti’ is food...

“If that person can die you will have many cattle...the day he dies I will come...we will work on him and change him to be this thing he will be...he will bring you cattle and you will have cars and everything...”

And then [Khumalo] said, “But how because that man is my brother-in-law? I married his sister?...”

“No, you will not kill him yourself...I will give you something...which you will place on the path and then you will send him to go through that path...this thing will hit him to death.”)

Khumalo, Gumede’s brother-in-law, agreed to take the *inyanga*’s medicine and have his wife’s younger brother killed. It was on Sunday that he decided to carry out his plan. He woke the young Gumede early in the morning and sent him to his other sister who lived nearby. When he took a short-cut, Khumalo called him and urged him to take the way in which he had placed the medicine. As he told this part, Gumede’s voice rose with the story to the climax. When he ran towards his other sister’s place, he heard voices telling him to run and then heard or felt like something was following him. He looked back once and saw nothing; the voices were still shouting “run”, but when he looked back again, the ‘thing’ hit him:

Ngath’uma ngibheka yangishaya lento...Yangishay’ubuso banamathela la ngemuva...ubuso kwajik’intamo ya...yanamathela ngase ngiwa phansi...

(When I looked this thing hit me...it hit me and my face was glued here at the back...the face...and the neck turned and was glued and I fell down...)

At this point the voice was at its highest pitch and the performer knew that the

audience was intrigued. But, in order to whet their appetite, he decided to leave the narrative there for a while and started a song. He sang the second verse of song 239 from *Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha*:

Uyathanda abantwana

Abazisolayo

Uyagcina inhliziyo

Eqinisileyo

(You love the children

Who repent

You protect the heart

Which is faithful).

Another interesting feature in Gumede's performance is his use and interpretation of the Bible in the kind of unorthodox manner that Rev. Prince Zulu complained about. This is a common practice for the Nazarites and is an example of what West (1999) calls 're-membering the Bible'. West states that the way in which ordinary Africans read and interpret the Bible differs from that of their educated pastors and theologians:

Ordinary African interpreters of the Bible are not as transfixed and fixated by the text as their trained pastors and theologians....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 remade and re-membered. (1999:95).

When he finally passed away, Gumede floated around in the firmament for the rest of

that Sunday and the following Monday. On Monday evening, his father went to 'him' (his corpse) and told him that they were starting his memorial service as his funeral was to be on Tuesday. At this point Gumede left the narrative again and this time, he asked to be assisted with reading the 'Book'. Although it is the Bible which everybody uses, the meaning for Gumede, as for many Nazarites, is different. Through the reading that I present below, the Bible is 're-membered' and made an oral text.

It is common in the Nazarite Church that a person asks to have the Bible read for him. When this is done, normally there will be someone reading while the performer reiterates whatever is being read, making changes in the wording if he thinks it is necessary as shown below. I have used bold to differentiate Gumede's voice from that of the man who read for him.

*Kwathi ngoMsombuluko ntambama weza futh'ubaba wathi mntanami
 sesicabang'ukuthi kuqal'inkonzo yakho...e...yomlindelo... kusasa umzimba
 siyowubek'emhlabathini...ey'uShemb'uNkulunkulu! (Amen) Awungifundel'-
 incwadi...1: 13 ivesi...uThithusi; amaGalathiya 4 ivesi lakhona wu 8; amaHebheru
 wu-10, uqale ku 22 uyothath'u 38; uthi 13 ivesi lakhona wu 19; Jakobe 1;7 no
 8...Funda bab'osuyitholile...Eyodwa nje yalezincwadi... Titus 1 verse
 13...(Sizokuyifunda njengoba eseyibizile) Isaya 53 ivesi wu 3...ya...ithi 'Lokhu
 kusho kuqinisile...wobasola kakhulu ukuze baqonde ekukholweni...(Lokhu kusho
 kuqinisile. Ngalokho wobasola kakhulu...) Ithi lencwadi lokhu kusho engikushoyo
 mina ngithi UShemb'uNkulunkulu kuqinisile. Kodwa manje ithi asosolana kakhulu
 ukuze siqonde ekukholweni...(baze baqonde ekukholweni...) Funda baba!
 (...Bangataleli izinganekwane...) Ithi singalalel'izinganekwane zakwaJuda*

(...zabaJuda...)Funda baba (...Nemithetho yabantu...) Abanjani? (...abahlubukayo eqinisweni.) Ehhe... Ngiyabonga hlala phansi...

(Then on Monday my father came again...my father came and said... “E...my son we think we need to start your service...e...your memorial service... Tomorrow we put the body in the earth...Hey Shembe is God...(Amen) Read the Book for me...1 verse 13 Titus; Galatians 4 its verse is 8; Hebrews, it’s 10, start with 22 and then take 38 and then 13, the verse is 19; James 1; 7 and 8...read father...any that you have found...just one of these books which you have found...Titus 1 verse 13...(We shall read it as it has been called.) Isaiah 53 verse 13...yes...it says “these words are the truth...you reproach them so they will be straight in faith” (These words are the truth...therefore you reproach them...) This Book says what I am saying that Shembe is God is the truth. But now we need to reproach each other greatly so we will be straight on faith (...so that they will be straight on faith...) Read father (...So that they will not listen to the fairy-tales...) It says so we will not listen to the fairy-tales of Juda (...of the Jews...) Read father. (...and the rules of the people...) Which people? (...Who desert the truth...) Yes! Thank you, sit down...)

This ‘re-membering’ of the Bible is as interesting to the Nazarites as it is alienating to the non-Nazarites. The meaning of the Bible for the Nazarites is applicable to the here and now, and they have no need to listen to the ‘fairy-tales’ of the Jews. The notion of Shembe being the Black Messiah who was sent by God to serve Blacks as Jesus was sent for the Jews is a strong one and the Bible is used to support that claim.

One other striking thing about Gumede, which contributed to his interesting sermon, was his ability to read the audience and to keep checking if they were still with him. To do this, he kept stating that Shembe is God, and every time he said it the

congregation responded “Amen”. He usually said this after he had narrated a story of Shembe’s miracles. Although the audience was involved in Gumede’s performance from start to finish, at times Gumede thought the congregation was not active enough. For this reason, he found other ways of getting the audience involved. One of those was repetition. He would repeat the same statement in a louder tone if he thought the congregation did not respond the way he wanted.

*Ukhon'uyaphil'akabongw'uNkulunkulu waseKuphakameni (Amen)Ushemb'-
uNkulunkulu! (Amen) E...Noma ungathandi noma uthanda uShemb'uNkulunkulu!
(Amen)...*

(He is alive and well, praise be to the Lord of Ekuphakameni! (Amen) Shembe is God! (Amen) Whether you like it or whether you do not like it Shembe is God! (Amen)...))

At one point in his performance Gumede told his audience that he did not hear them, which meant their “Amen” was not active enough for him:

*Ey'uShemb'uNkulunkulu! (Amen) Hhayi...min'angizwa noma niyezwa yini...
angath'anizwa...Anizwa nina...(Amen) Angath'anizwa...*

(Hey Shembe is God! (Amen) No...I don't get whether you hear me...it is as if you do not hear...You do not hear (Amen) It is as if you do not hear...)

After this he switched to his mother tongue, Thonga. His voice became louder and suddenly he started a song, the well-known song number 83 from *Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha*. But he also sang it in his own language. The congregation was able to sing the song in their language, Zulu, because there was no mistaking the tune. This

also enhanced the interest of the audience in his performance and in him as a person.

At the end of the service, Minister Sikhakhane asked him to sing again the way he had done in his sermon and outside the Temple others asked him to teach them his Thonga language.

* * *

In one of his sermons, from an undated cassette, Amos Shembe (INyanga Yezulu) also uses the near-death narrative as an instance of Shembe's messianic powers and the fact that he is no man like other men. Although he himself was believed to have healing powers (and was even believed to be in heaven and on earth at the same time as one near-death experiencer, Kunene, recognised him as the man he had seen in 'heaven'), Amos in his preaching was referring to Isaiah Shembe. For him, as for many Nazarites, the near-death phenomenon provides a glimpse of life after death and is evidence that every black person will meet Shembe when they have died.

Nom 'uwumfundisi nom 'uyini, nom 'owaliph 'ibandl'um 'umnyam 'uyofic 'uShembe le phambili.

Athi, "Awume mntanami!"

*Wenze njal'enkosikazini yaseShesh'engihlala ngikhuluma ngay'uManzuzan'-
owayelapha...eThemba lapha e eThemba laph'amantombazan'ezoya koguqa khona.*

Ngithi, "We mama"... Yisalukwazi.

"Wemama manje wakholwa kanjani kulelibandla?"

Uthi "Wo mina ngangiyigosa..."

Angazi nam'igosukuthi yini...[...]

"Ngangimkhulu kab'eSheshi mina. Ngagula ngagula kakhul'isikhath'eside ngafa ngeliny'ilanga."

*Waze wavuka ngalezikhathi ngo 3...Sekumbiwe laselimbw'ithuna lakhe selikhawula
la e...okhalo wayeseyavuka laphemuva. Kwathunyelwa kwathiwa,*

"Tshelani la ake nitshela lab'abamb'ithun'ukuthi ake bame kancane."

*Kanti uMaNzuzana... uMaNzuzana lowo uvela kude kabi...usevel'eZulwini. Ngesikhathi
kusukela ngo 9 kuze kuyoshay'u 3 kad'edavuz'ehamb'efun'eZulwini
wakuthol'eZulwini. Uthi uManzuzane kimi,*

*"Ngafika uma kuthiwa kuseZulwini lapha...ngafika kwathiwa nank'umnyango
hamb'ungene khona. Ngasondela ngathol'umnyang'uvuliwe... Umkhul'umnyango
kodw'uvulw'uwafu. Uma ngilunguza kuyabonakala ngaphakathi."*

Wa...m...wawunjenga la! (Amen) Walunguza kancane wabona lokhu!...(Amen)

*Yikuph'akubona? Wabonani? Wabon'int'enje! Phakathi wabon'ukhokho
lwengub'ezimhloph'amaNazaretha ...engabon'ukuthi agcinatphi wathi lungu!
Wath'esathe lungu kwase kuqhamuk'indoda lapha ngaphakathi...yeza yeza yeza
yeza...Ha! Yeyi Bhasob! Ya! Indoda yafike yathi,*

"Kahle-ke, uyaphi?"

"Ngize la eZulwini."

Wathi " Phindemuva lapha."

*Uyalunguz'uyabuka nans'indod'ihleli ematafuleni amakhulu kunaleli...ebhek'-
ilipheny'amabhuku...ibuy'ifun'elinye...Yasiwaval'amabhuku isibuyela kuyena lapha
wathi:*

"Isikhathi sakho asikafiki phindela emhlabeni!"

(Hmn) (Amen)

*Hhayi nisheshisile! Kwakuwuban'owayethi phindel'emhlabeni?...Kwash'uShembe
le!*

(Amen)

Wathi wena Nkosikazi isikhathi sakho asikafiki phindel' emhlabeni! ... Ngith' uShembe ngani? Ngisho ngan' ukuth' uShembe? UNobelungu lo engikhuluma ngaye wahamba waya lapha kwaShangase ezwa kuthiwa umuntu uvule umakoti amehlo... wamthandazela wabona... waya wathi uma eqhamuka uhleli phandl' ubab' egcekeni kwaShangase. Wathi uma ethi gaga! UNobelungu wasehlala phansi wathi nje,

"Hhawu!" Wasehlala phansi.

Ubona umunt' ambona 18 years iminyak' eyishumi neminyak' ewu-eythi. Ngaphambili kokuba afik' ubaba la, wayebonwe yilo Nkosikazi lapha eMatikwe uNobelungu uMaKhumalo. Wathi uma e... ngalesikhathi esho ethi "Hha!" wathula nje ubaba wathi... wathi mayethi

"Hha!"

Wathi "Ehhe!"

Wathi... Naleyo wayibiza le yasePhaphala uManzuzana. Uyaz' uShembe waaa... Wuuuu! Na... Wath' uNobelung' enjenga la wambona lomunt' ambona, "Nangu lomunt' owath' uyeza angingasonti angihlale nangu!"

Wath' ubaba "Sondela!... Wangibonaphi?"

Wath' uNobelungu, "Ngangingafile! Ngakubona ngephupho! Wafika kimi wath' uyeza!"

"Kwasho bani?"

"Kwakuwuwena kwakuwuwe njengoba ngikhona nje..."

Wathi " Ngiyabonga mntanami! Ngiyabonga. "

Waseth' uNobelungu "Ngibhabhadise manje!"

(Whether you are a Minister or whatever you are, no matter which denomination you

belong to, you will find Shembe there. He will say “ Wait my child!”

He did that to the woman of *Sheshi* that I always talk about, Manzuzana who used to be there at Themba...there at Themba where the girls will go to kneel.

I say, “ You mother, now how did you convert to this church?”

She says “Oh, me I was *igosa*...”

I also do not know what *igosa* is [...]

“I was very important at *Sheshi*. I got sick for a long time and one day I died.”

She only woke up at about this time around three...her grave having been dug now reaching here...e... at the waist then she woke up back home. Then it was said that, “Tell the...tell those who are digging the grave to stop for a while.”

Manzuzana that Manzuzana was coming from very far...she was coming from heaven.

Manzuzana says to me:

“When I arrived where it was said it is in heaven...I arrived and they said there is the door; go and enter there. I went on and found the door opened...the door was big but only half-open...If I peep it is visible inside.”

She...m...It was like here!

(Amen)

She peeped a little and saw this!

(Amen)

What is it that she saw? What did she see? She saw something like this! Inside she saw multitudes of the white prayer gowns of the Nazarites...Not able to see where they end she glanced. When she had glanced there appeared a man from inside...he came and came and came....*Ha! Yey Bhasop! Yes.* The man came and said,

“Wait a minute! Where are you going?”

“I came here to heaven.”

He said "Go back there!"

She peeped and looked and saw a man sitting on tables bigger than this one...she looked as he kept turning the books, sometimes looking for another one. And then he closed them and went back to her and said,

"Your time has not come. Go back to earth!"

(Amen) (Hmn)

No you are too early! Who is it that said, "Go back to the world?"

It was Shembe who said that there!

(Amen)

He said "You woman, your time has not come, go back to earth."

Why am I saying it is Shembe? Why do I say that it was Shembe? It is Nobelungu I am talking about here...she went to Shengase's when she had heard that someone had opened the young wife's eyes...Shembe prayed for her and she was healed. She went and as she appeared, father was seated outside at the Shangase's. When she glanced, Nobelungu sat down and said,

"Hha!"

She then sat down. She saw someone she had seen eighteen years, ten years and eight years before father arrived here...he had been seen by that woman, Nobelungu, daughter of Khumalo, there at Matiwane. When she...by the time she said "Hha!" father just kept quiet and said...when she said, "Hha!", he said, "Yes!"

He said...and he also called her... that woman of Phaphala, MaNzuzana. Shembe knows! *Waaa!* When...when Nobelungu was almost there she saw the person she had seen.

"Here is this person who said he is coming, I should not go to church. I should stay, he is here."

Father said, "Come closer! Where did you see me?"

Nobelungu said, "I was not dead! I saw you in the dream! You came to me and said you are coming!"

"Who said that?"

"It was you, it was you as I am here now."

He said, "Thank you my child, thank you."

And then Nobelungu said, "Baptise me now!"

Amos also used the Bible in the same way as Gumede to argue that what Jesus was for the Jews Shembe is for Blacks. The 'Book' he quoted is that of Deutoronomy. He started by telling the story of a woman who wanted her children to go to church. The children asked who was to be worshipped. The mother told them it was Jesus and they asked her who Jesus was. The woman finally told them that he was white and then the issue of racism came in:

"Kanti mama sihlupheka kangaka nje sikhonz'umlungu?"

Wadumal umam'esepheth'incwad'ey'esontweni...

Zathi "Siyabuza? ...Kant'uJesu wumlungu?Abelungu basihlupha kangaka nje

sikhonza bona? ...Kwakwenzenjani?Kwakonakelen'e-Afrika mama? Kwakwenzenjan'-uNkulunkul'engavez'umuntu..."

Ngiyoniveze...ves 18 Deutoronomy 18...wa...zibuz-'ingan'ukuth'akamvezanga

ngan'uNkulunkulu uma umunt'omnyama kuyisizwe ngempela kushukuthi siqalekisiwe thina mama? ...Bafundele phela ngoba naz'ingane zath'akufundwe lapho...

(Ngiyakubavezela umprofethi kubafowabo. Abe njengabo.Ngiyakubeka amazwi ami

emlonyeni wakhe...Uyakukhuluma konke akutshelwa yimina...Uyakuthi

ongawalaleliyo amazwi...)Eya! Ngiyakubavezela...Abantu! ...Umprofethi...Abantu! ...

*Onjengabo...Abantu!...Hhayi ilokhu u Sheti...iNdiya min'alifani nami!Hhay'u
Ferguson! Hhay'uFerguson umlungu...no...no...no! Ngiyovez'umuntu kwabakubo
...Akushiw'ukuthikwabakubo?...Ehhe! Kwabakub'onjengabo abantu...*

("Is it, mother, that we worship a white man as we suffer like this?")

The woman was disappointed as she held her books on her way to church...

"We are asking...Is Jesus a white? The whites abuse us like this but we worship them? What happened? What went wrong in Africa mother? Why didn't God raise a person?"...I will raise for you...verse 18 Deutoronomy 18...she...the children [were] asking, "Why didn't God raise a person? If black people are a nation it means we are cursed mother"...Do read for them because the children said we should read there...(I will raise a prophet among your brothers. He will be like them. I will put my words into his mouth. He will speak to them what I tell him and if anyone does not listen to the words) I will raise for them...the people...the prophet...the people...from their race...the people...he will be like them...the people. Not the...not Sheti... the Indian does not look like me...Not Ferguson...not Ferguson he is white...no no no. I will raise a person from his race...Is it not said that from his race?...Yes! From his race who is like them...)

The above text does not suggest who is the Messiah for the black people, but the audience need not be told. They see the 'chosen' one sitting in front of them. While Amos Shembe states clearly and openly his relationship to Jesus, that he was white and therefore represented the whites, he states in a subtle way Shembe's position and his relationship to God. He does this through singing verse two of song number 239:

Ufikile abakhuluma ngaye

Aba profithi

Babazani wemadoda

Babazani zizwe nonke

(He has arrived, the one they spoke about

The prophets

Praise you men

Praise all you nations).

The singing of this song serves two purposes here, a common tendency in Nazarite sermon performances. It is firstly a way of engaging with the audience, allowing them to be active participants in the performance. Secondly, it is a subtle way of making a point: that Shembe is the prophet the children confronted their mother about. It means God has actually done what the children were crying that He had not done. It is clear from the above texts that Amos Shembe did not share MaGumeni's perception of Shembe as God. In his sermon, he preaches about Isaiah Shembe's messianic powers. Just after the above song, he begins,

"Uyabona wena?" Kushiwo kimi, ...

"Uyabona wena?"

Ngithi "Ya!"

"Awumaz'uShembe!"

Ngithi "E...ubab'uShembe."

"Awumazi!"

"Awu! Kahle wena!"

"Awumazi!"

Ngithi ... "Ya!" ...kulab'abangishumayezayo phela... "Ngiyamaz'ubab'uShembe."

Bathi "WuNkulunkulu lowo!"

"Ngathi kahle wena! Thula wena!"

Wathi "Ngiqinisile"...

[...] Hhay'uShinga wayeth'ushumayeza mina ngiyakholwa...Ngoba nami ngithi uyisithunyw'esikhulu kab'uShembe. Yisithunyw'esikhulu saseZulwini. Uth'uShinga wuNkulunkulu woth'isithunywa wena...

("You see you?" It was said to me.

"You see?"

I say "Yes?"

"You do not know Shembe."

I say, "E...Shembe is my father."

"You do not know him!"

"You stop it!"

"You do not know him!"

I say "Yes"... to those who preach at me...

"I know Shembe, he is my father."

They say, "That man is God!"

"I said stop it!...Shut up!"

He said "It's the truth."...

[...] No Shinga wanted to convince me I believe...because I also say that Shembe is a great messenger. He is the messenger from heaven. Shinga says he is God, you say he is the messenger...)

* * *

In this chapter I have discussed the poetics of sermon performance with the aim of

demonstrating how the near-death narrative is used in the Nazarite Church to engage the audience's interest in the sermon. I have argued that while the near-death narrative is intriguing in itself, the performer's talent also has a role to play in making a sermon successful. I have also tried to show how the near-death phenomenon is understood in the Nazarite Church as providing a glimpse of the life after death and as being proof that Shembe is the Black Messiah and is in this and the other world.

Chapter Three: Recurring Features of Near-Death Experiences

In this chapter I provide a close reading of the narratives as a collective and try to explore whether or not they reveal common features. I argue that although there is no narrative which is entirely like the other, there are a number of similar features in these narratives. Also, there is no one narrative which has all the features that are found in other narratives, and some narratives have more of the features than others. This may be attributed to the length of time a person takes in his or her unconscious state. Below is a model narrative which gives a sense of what these narratives involve.

A person is believed to be dead and is taken to the mortuary or is covered in sheets and placed against the wall while waiting for the funeral. As the family and friends are worried about the person's passing away, the person concerned is involved in some kind of a spiritual journey. In this journey he/she travels through green pastures and sometimes there are obstacles he/she has to overcome before reaching a place with green pastures. Having overcome the obstacles, which may be mountains or rivers, he/she then perceives a huge gate behind which there is a village comprising rondavels and *oguga* houses. At the gate he/she meets his/her relatives or a man in a white robe who tells the traveller that the time for him/her has not come yet. The person then returns and as he/she does he/she wakes up and people are surprised and frightened by the return from the dead.

From this model, there are seven important features that I am going to discuss in this chapter. These are: the journey motif, obstacles, green pastures, the gate, the village,

meeting with dead relatives, and an encounter with a being in the white robe.

Journey Motif

In all the narratives, the experiencer is in, or perceives him/herself to be involved in, some kind of a journey. There is no clear marking of where this journey begins but the experiencer becomes aware of him/herself already in the journey.

Mchunu began the story of his spiritual journey as follows:

Nami-ke ngapha njeng'uluphumil'umphefumulo ngonayini kwaze kwayoshay'unayini wasebusuku...kwaze...ngavuka ngonayini wasekuseni...ngiyahamba nami...

(I too this side am travelling as my spirit left at nine in the evening...until...I woke up at nine in the morning...I am also travelling...)

Although Mchunu did not know anything about his death, in his spiritual journey, he was aware that he was going to heaven:

Ehhe!...Ukuhamba kwami...angazi kodwa kahle kodwa ngiyazi ngiyeZulwini...Ukuhamba kwami nje ngiyaz'ukuthi ngiyeZulwini ngoba sengifile. Lendlel'engiyihambayo nje ingis'eZulwini...

(Yes!...In my journey...I do not know for sure but I know that I am going to heaven. In my journey I know I am going to heaven because I am now dead. This path I am travelling on leads me to heaven...)

Another narrator, Zwane, also took some kind of a journey and was also only aware of it when he had already taken it:

*Nangihamba...e...ngisalanda ngalokhukuhamba kwami...Ngabon'intaba...ngabon'-
abant' abaningi...behamba ngomgwaqo...mina ngalandel'abant'abathathu...Futhi
bengahambi ndawonye lababant'abathathu...belandelana nje bakhwel'entabeni...*

(As I travelled...e...if I tell about my journey...I saw a mountain...I saw many
people...they were travelling on the road...I followed three men...yes...And they
were not walking together these three men...They were just following each other and
climbed the mountain...)

In Zwane' narrating of his story, it seems he did not think of himself as a dead person
like Mchunu above. The same was the case for Mngadi. Mngadi said in his journey
he was looking for his brother and friend who had gone with his radio before he was
stabbed to death:

*Kushukuthi ukuhamba kwami ngihambe ngihambe ngihambe...ukuhamba kwami
manje angithi kushukuthi ngingumunt'onjani?Ongasekho...Sengipolite
manje...ngihambe ngihambe ngihambe...ukuhamba kwami nje ngifuna bani?... Laba
neradio yami...*

(It means in my journey I walked, walked and walked...In my journey it means what
kind of a person am I? Dead!...I am calm now...I walked, walked and walked...In
my journey I am looking for whom? These men with my radio...)

Magumeni Gumede did not go on a journey because a voice told him to not leave his
body before he was buried, because if he did, he would be lost. He then spent the
whole of that Sunday and Monday floating around, waiting for his funeral. When his
funeral was taking place, he was watching from above:

Ngangindiz'emkhathini ngibuka le filim yenzek'emhlabeni...

(I was floating in the firmament as I watched that film taking place on earth...)

An Obstacle

In most cases, the journey is complicated by some kind of an obstacle the traveller has to go through or overcome. This obstacle takes the form of a mountain that has to be climbed or a river to be crossed. Sometimes it is both.

Mngadi found himself having to climb mountains of sand that dissipated when he was climbing, thus causing him to fall back.

Kushukuthi ngingathi kumi kanje...indaw'engangihamba kuyo.

(N.S: 'Uyakhuphuk'uyehla?')

Angihambi kamnandi! Kukhona la angathi kuchithwe khon'uthobol'uyintaba.

Nangifika khona ngiqala ngithi 'Haaaa'-umuke nami...Langi..langi..la la la

ngiqhamuka ngakhona, kube sengath'amanz'amancane nje uyabona? ...

aqhamuk'entabeni...mancane nje, yint'encan'engaka. Kodwa manj'inkan'uma

lungibuyisa lolukhethe lolu, lufike luthi 'Haaa' bese luvala wonke ngiphindele lapho

ngivela khona...Hhayi bese ngigwema futhi, nginyathele khona lasekugqibeke

khona ngithi ngifuna laba mina...

(It means I can say it is like this...the place I was travelling on...)

N.S. : "You climb and descend?"

I am not going smoothly! Some places it is as if black sand is poured to create a mountain. If I get there I start by going *haaa* it flows with me. When I when I, I, I appear that side, it is as if it is just a small quantity of water you see...it flows from the mountain...it is tiny...it is something small...this size. But now the problem starts

when this sand forces me back, it goes *haaa* and then covers everything and then I return back...then I avoid that, I set my foot where the sand has been covered...)

Thulani Kunene encountered similar obstacles in his journey. His was so hard that when he could not go on, he took a rock and sat on it, and cried:

*Kuthe uma ngiphakath'esiswini senyoka min'angazanga lutho ngoba ngasengifile.
Mina ngabona ngihamb'uhambo...Kwangathi ngigijim'ethafen'elinomoy'omnandi
nephung'elimnandi...ngaye ngafik'entaben'eyayiyinde ngendlel'emangalisayo...
Ngithe mangifika kulentaba...ngase ngithi mina hawu Nkosi yami kulentaba
ngizokhuphukelwa wubani ngoba yinde ngapha ayikh'indlela kunodak'-
oluthathay'olunuka kabi...Ngithe ngisasho njalo kwasekuqhamuk'imbali'epinki imbali
kabhoqobhoqo niyawaz'ubhoqobhoqo. Ithe uma ifika lembal'ima [...] Ifik'im'ibuy'-
ithathelel'ihambe....ngothi ngiyilandel'ifik'ime...ibuy'ithathelel'ihambe...Saze
sagibel'entabeni phezulu...Safik'intab'ibekile yenzenje! [...]Uvalile'ufenis'uvalil'uthe
ngci indlel'ayikho. Ayikh'indlela ehamba laph'uthanda khona! Wonk'umunt'-
uyaycabel'indlela[...] Bavimbil'efezela benze nje! Ngathi mina Nkosi yami
ngizohambaphi pho lapha? ...Ngob'ayikh'indawo yokuhamba nomoy'ophuma
laph'uyashis'uyishisandlu! ...Ngathi ngisuka lapho ngangithath'itshe
ngangiqhwakel'etsheni ngabhek'eNtshonalanga. Laph'eNtshonalanga
kugijim'inkungu...Inkung'emnyam'ababeth'abadal'ikhulumis'umuntu eyayithi fu
bayayaz'abadala...Awuboni ngale! Ngathi ngisakubheka lokhu ngathath'itshe
ngahlala kulona ngabheka phansi ngasikhihl'isililo...*

(When I was inside the snake's stomach I knew nothing because I was dead. I saw myself travelling on a journey...As if I am running in a flat area with soft wind with a good smell...until I arrived at the mountain that was extraordinarily high. When I

arrived at this mountain...I said “Oh my God who is going to climb this mountain for me because it is high and this side there is no way... there is mud that smells bad?”... When I was saying that a pink flower called *bhoqobhoqo* appeared...the flower of *bhoqobhoqo*, you know *bhoqobhoqo*. When this flower came and stopped...[...] It stopped and then started to move...As I followed it it stopped, and then started to move...until we were on top of the mountain...We found the mountain steep like this! The fences block the way like this! There is no way which goes where you like! [...] You will remain this side, I know those forests! The fences stand tall like this! I said, “My God where am I going to travel here...because there is no way to travel and the wind blowing here is hot and it’s *ishisandlu* [house burner]?” Then I took a rock and stood on the rock and faced the East...Here in the East runs the fog, black fog, the elders used to say it causes a person to speak, which said “*fuuu*”...the elders know it...You cannot see the other side! When I was watching this I took the rock and sat on it, I looked down and started to cry...)

Zwane also had to climb the mountain but it did not cause him as much trouble as it did Kunene and Mngadi. He just climbed the mountain and then descended, and then climbed again after he had met a certain man:

*...belandelana nje bakhwel'entabeni ngadilika-ke mina ngifun 'ukukutshel'int'-
engayiphupha ngob'angiyikhohliwe namanje...Ngadilika-k'entabeni lapho
kwaqhamuk'ogqok'ingub'ezimhlophe*

(...following each other climbing the mountain and then I descended. I want to tell you what I dreamed because I have not forgotten...I descended from the mountain there and then the man in the white robe appeared...)

What is striking about these narratives is that those who had these experiences when they were members of the Nazarite Church do not mention encountering obstacles in their journeys. Mchunu saw himself travelling in green pastures and saw his homestead's cow which had been slaughtered long before. This caused only a distraction from his journey and when the voice spoke to him he carried on. The same thing happened to MaGurneni Gurnede. Although he did not undertake a journey like the others because a voice came and told him to not leave before his burial, it is unlikely that he would have encountered the same obstacles as Kunene and Mngadi.

Khwela also does not mention encountering obstacles on his journey. Although he says little about his actual journey, which led him to his ancestors, I think that he would have included them in his narrative if he had encountered significant hardships like Kunene and Mngadi, because for those who encountered them obstacles are an important part of the experience. The only hindrance which troubled Khwela was his ancestors who did not want to meet with him because he had died through an accident:

*Ithi lomndeni wakithi, "Yeyi ima lapho!" ...Bese ngimile...Ngiyabuza mina ngithi
"Yini?"...bathi "Wena phela ngek'ungene lapha kithi ngob'uhambe
ngengozi...uhambe ngomphezulu...*

(My ancestors said "Hey you stop there!"...I asked, "Why?" and they said, "You cannot join us because you died through an accident, you were hit by lightning...)

Green Pastures

Some experiencers mention coming across green pastures in their journeys. Some walk through this green grass while others only see it from a distance:

*Ukuhamba kwami la...emadlelwen'amahle! Akhon'amadlel'amahl'okuye
kukhulunywe ngawo nasesihlabelweni kukhon'ukuth'emadlelwen'aluhlaza...
Ngangihamba lapho-ke...*

(My going here...in green pastures! There are beautiful pastures sometimes spoken about, even in the hymn book there is mention of green pastures...I was travelling there...)

When Mngadi had managed to overcome obstacles in his own journey, he was only able to see green pastures beyond the gate. He was struck by the cleanliness in this place where there was no tree or animal, only green grass and rondavels. The only area not green was the plastered path.

*Manje ngingasizwa wubani?...Ngidavuze ngize ngifike kule gate...Eyi green grass!
Kuluhlaza! Uyabona kunoniwe...kunoniwe...kunoniw'impela nje qobo...*

(Now who can help me?...I strode on until I arrived at this gate...Eyi green grass!...It is green! You can see it is clean...It is very clean really...)

In Kunene's narrative, the order of things was opposite to that of Mngadi. His journey started by being smooth and interesting as he ran through flat lands where the wind was fresh with a good smell. This seems to be similar to Mchunu's situation in that both these narrators felt good about this part of their journey. It is possible that if Mchunu had gone on longer, he might have encountered the obstacles that others encountered.

Meeting with Dead Relatives

In many cases people who have had a near-death experience tell of an encounter with

people who are mostly their dead relatives. Generally, it is the people who were not members of the Nazarite Church who encounter their ancestors or people who are likely to be their ancestors or dead relatives. In both Mchunu's and Gumede's narratives there is no mention of the encounter with the ancestors. But Khwela, although he had converted to the Nazarite faith when he had the near-death experience, came across his ancestors first:

1991...Kungolwesine...ngishaywa wumphezulu...Ngingakaze ngikholw'ukuth'-umunt'uyaf'avuke ngale ngayibona lento...usazoyibona futh'engisazoyibona nami...Uma ngibheka ngibon'abantu abaye bath'abant'abadal'amadimoni...bethuk'abantu!...bese ngith'abakin'abanjalo...Cha abakithi...[...]Ngoba ngithe mangihamba...abantu bokuqal'engafikela kubo wumndeni wakith'ongasekho...[...]Mangingale ithi...uma ngifika kubo labantu bakith'abangasekho bathi
"Yey'ima lapho!" Yey' kuyaxoxw'eZulwini kuhle! Angisakusab'ukufa mina...Nom'-ungathin'uthin'anginandab'ungisa kubanti bakithi...

(1991...it was Thursday...When I was hit by lightning...Having never believed that a person dies and wakes up in the other world I saw this thing...you are still going to see it and I am still going to see it...If I look and see people who say ancestors are demons...insulting people!...then I say it is yours who are like that...Not mine [...] Because when I passed away...the first people I met were my dead relatives[...] As I was there they say...When I arrived to them these late people of my home they said "Hey stop there!" Hey in heaven they talk, it is beautiful! I am no longer afraid of dying... You can say whatever you like, I do not care as you are sending me to my relatives...)

Although Khwela's ancestors did not want him to join them because he had died through an accident, when he had been told to return to earth, one of his old grandfathers came to meet him:

Ngabe sengibuya nangibuya ngeza ngeza kwasuk'eliny'ikhehl'elidala lakithi...e...e...eselilidala kakhulu lafike lama lapha lathi, "Hawu sibanibani usulapha?" Ngathi min' "Ehhe" Lathi "Hhaw'ubashiye noban'obani?" Lish'abant'engibashiye la emhlabeni!...

(Then I returned and as I returned I came and came and then one old man of my clan came...He was very old and he said, "So and so you are here?" I said, "Yes". Then he said, "Who did you leave so-and-so with?", referring to people I left here on earth.)

Zwane also met his late mother who was similarly concerned about those he had left behind: his children:

Ngathi nangisesangweni kwaqhamuk'umzali wami-ke...wasethi, "Hhayi...buyelemuv-'uyokondl'abantabakho bazokondliw'uban'abantwan?" ...Ngabuyel'emuva-ke wukuthuka kwami-ke sengiphaphama...

(When I was at the gate my parent came...She said, "No...go back to take care of your children! Who will look after your children?" I then went back. That is when I got frightened and woke up...)

Njoko met his two sisters who had died the previous year and a man who said he was his grandfather. The two sisters were naked and the rain was falling on them. They told him to go back because they needed him to help them. This means he had to come back to earth and to carry out sacrifices for them in the form of goats and cows

slaughtered, or make sacrifices for them to Shembe:

*e...Kwathi-ke ngeliny'ilanga ngampela-ke ngosuku lolo selufikil'usuku lwafika-
k'usuku...e...lol'olufika noma kubani...Hhayi-ke...kwangithatha-k'ukufa-ke njoba
ngisho-ke kwabe sekungithatha-k'ukufa...e...e ngathi lapho sengi...sengihamba-ke
lapho-ke...kushukuthi ngasengifile-ke mina-ke lapho-ke kodwa-ke ngangizibona
...e...e...uyabona u...u...uzibone wena angathi wena uyayibona into kanti
wen'usuhambil'uyabona...Njoba phela ngath'uma ngihamba lapho ngase-
ngibon'odadewethu...bakhon'abazalwa wubabomkhulu ...abasebenonyak'owodwa
bedlulile...abagulanga bona...babelala nje bephila kuyasa ngakusasa sekuthiwa
nang'akasekho...e...uma ngibon'odadewethu lapho...e...uma ngihamba
kulendawo...kun'imvula le engath'uzamcolo...uyabona imvula le...uzamcolo
ongaboni ngapha nangapha uluthuthuv'uzamcolo loyo bese e...e...ngithela kubona
e...a...abembethe nabo...*

(e...Then one day indeed on that day when the day had come the day came which comes to everyone...Then...death took me, as I am saying death took me...e...e...As I was travelling there...It means I had died then but I saw myself...e...e...you... you...you see, you see yourself as if you see something but you have passed away, you see...Because as I was travelling there I saw two sisters of mine...there are those of my elder father...they had been dead for a year...they never got sick...they would just go to bed healthy and in the morning she is dead...e...When I saw my sisters there...e...As I travelled in this place...the rain is falling that which is like *uzamcolo* (continuous rain). You see the rain which...the *uzamcolo* rain in which you cannot see this side and the other side. It is dark this *zamcolo* and then...I came to them...they are also naked...)

When he had left his sisters and they told him to go back, Njoko saw himself in a hall like a school on top of which was a huge serpent that looked as though it wanted to bite him. As he stood there, a short man in a loinskin appeared and introduced himself as his grandfather:

Lelikhehla la la lathi "Uyangazi mina?" Ngathi "Cha Angikwazi" Lathi "Cha kufanele ngoba wazalwa ngingasekho." Ngempela-ke mina bonk'omkhulu nogogo angibazi ngazalwa bengasekho...bonke nabasekhaya nabasekhabomam'uyabona?

(This old man said, "Do you know me?" I said, "No I do not know you." He said, "You should not because you were born when I had died." It is true, I do not know my grandfathers and grandmothers because I was born when they had already died...all even those of my fathers and those of my mother's side you see...)

Mngadi is not sure whether the woman he saw at the 'gate' was his grandmother or not. He told me that he had offered sacrifices for her because he thought it was his grandmother and she was the one who saved him:

Nangithi ngapha kwerondo...Hawu! Nang'ugogo...hhay'owami-ke. Ngeke ngish'ukuth'owami kwakunguye noma kwakungesiye ngob'asibhekananga. Logog'uhleli...the time ngifika lapho ngithola logogo uthwel'isigqoko...hhay-'isigqok'isicholo...esinjengalesikhwam'esibovu esikhulu [...]Ufak'umnazaretha lo wakhaShembe...Uhleli nje ngentombi so... ulokh'ewubamb'ewuthi...Angath'umboz'-inyawo. Uyabona kodwa ngaph'isandla sithe...ubheke kulezindlu...Gog'uzo-ngibheka phela...ukuthi nje mayethi jeqe besengithi, "Sawubona gogo. Ngisacel'-ukubuz'ukuthi abekho yin'abafan'ababil'abafike la?...

(When I looked this side of the rondavel...Wow! There is grandmother...not my own

grandmother though...I cannot say it was my own grandmother because we did not see each other. This old woman was seated....The time I arrived there finding this old woman she was wearing a hat...not a hat, an *isicholo*...like this bag it was red and big...She is wearing the Nazarite prayer gown...she is seated like this like a girl...now and then she held it as if covering her feet. But you see the hand this side is like this...She is facing these rooms...Grandmother will you look at me!...so that if she looks, "Good morning grandmother. May I ask whether you did not see two boys arriving here?..."")

The Gate

Sundkler (1961) states that there are different opinions about the number of the gates in the Zionists' visions of 'heaven'. Some maintain that there are thirteen gates, twelve for whites and one for blacks. Others argue that there are three gates named after the angels who keep them. These are Meshack's Gate, for Europeans only; Shadrack's Gate for the Africans; and Abednego's Gate for the Indians.

In all the narratives I investigate here, there is no mention of different gates. The presence of the gate features prominently in many narratives but there is only one huge gate at which the narrators meet their late relatives and in some cases Shembe. Some of the narrators mention the colour of the gate and others do not.

Zwane says:

*Ngabon'indl'emhlophe...Ngaqond'esangweni. Ngathi nangisesangweni lapho...-
kwaqhamuk'umzali wami-ke.*

(I saw a white house...I headed for the gate. When I was at the gate, there appeared

my parent...)

The gate that Mngadi saw was so tall he could not see its top. But it started as small and grew as he came closer:

Igate yakhona! ...awuyiboni laph'igcina khona...ukuth'igcinaph'igate uyayibona nje incane kodwa manje ukuqhamuka kwami ngiza kuyona nje ngehla kulentaba ngabon'ukuthi okay!yona yinde kodwa uma ngiya ngokwehla yon'iyenyuka...Lapha phezulu iyi-circle kanje. Phezul'ithe!Legate injani? Ivaliwe. Kodwa manje kulul'ukuth'uphume ngapha kwayo ngob'uthango luncane...

(The gate there! You cannot see where it ends! You do see where it ends... it is small but now when I appeared coming to it descending from this mountain I saw that, Okay! It is tall but as I go down it goes up...Here on top it is a circle...On top it is like this!...How is this gate? It is closed. But now it is easy to go this side because the fence is small.)

In Khwela's account, the gate was also big and it was black in colour:

Ngabe sengidlula nangidlula ngaye ngafik'esangwen'elikhul'elimnyama. Mangifika kulelisango kwakukhon'intombazan'eyayihleli phansi...

(I then went on and as I went on I arrived at the big black gate. When I arrived at this gate there was a girl sitting down...)

The Man in the White Gown

In all but one narratives I collected there is mention of an encounter with a man who is referred to by some narrators as Shembe. It is those who were members of the Nazarite Church when they had the near-death experience who refer to this man as

Shembe. Those who were not members were either told in 'heaven' that the man is Shembe, or they only found out later when they met Shembe that he was the man they had 'seen' in the other world. Those who were not members of the Church when they had the experience and were still not converted during the interviews refer to that man as a 'man in the white gown'. Both Zwane and Mngadi met this man and only refer to him as a man wearing a white robe like that worn by the Nazarites. In Mngadi's account, this man had a huge Bible in his hands.

Bese kuqhamuka ngabona...e...e...e phakathi nezindlu...ehhe phakathi nezindlu. Aqhamuke e... lensizwa le ifake osamsoni...abamhlophe lezingcabulela lezi eziwu black and white. Ifake wona futh'umjiva wakwaShemb'uthe ngxi!... Uyabona- k'usamsoni ngiwubona nangabe eqhamuka yen'ephakamis'unyawo. Iza lensizw'- ipheth'iBhayibhel'eligcine ngci!...Hhayi lamabhayibheli...uyabona lel'ovul'izandla zonke...ulibeke la esifuben'ulithe...Iminw'uyibon'iqhamuka ngapha kwebhayibhel'- uyabona. Ize lensizw'ize lensizwa! Iyintshebe!...

(Then appeared I saw ...e...e ...between the houses...yes between the houses...He appeared, this young man he was wearing *osamsoni*...they were white these 'tyre sandals' you see those that are black and white. He was also wearing the Nazarite's prayer gown. It covers his feet. You see I only see the *samsons* when he appeared and moved his foot. As he came this man was holding a Bible which was so big! Not these Bibles... You see the one you open all your hands...he had it on his chest like this... You see the fingers appearing on the sides of the Bible you see... This young man came this young man came...He is a beard!)

Zwane met this man before he came across his late mother. He told him two things he

has not forgotten after so many years:

...Bakhwel'entabeni ngadilika-ke min'entabeni ngifun'ukukutshel'int'engayiphuphu ngob'angiyikhohliwe namanje...Ngadilika-k'entabeni lapho kwaqhamuk'ogqok'-ingubo ezimhlophe njengalaba bakwaShembe wathi, "Khumula lokh'okugqokile!"... wabal'izint'ezimbili wathi ngingazikhonzi...wath'ungakhonz'idwedwe...azizi la idwedwe! Wath'ungabakhonzi futhi laba...(abesifazane)

(They climbed the mountain and I descended from the mountain. I want to tell you what I dreamed because I have not forgotten even now...I descended from the mountain and there appeared someone wearing the white clothes like Shembe people. He said "Take off what you are wearing!"...He mentioned two things saying I should not adore...he said do not adore clothes...they do not come here...He also said do not adore these...(women).)

Njoko saw two men he did not recognise. The one wore a loinskin and the other was clad in a white gown and a black hat. The short man told Njoko that the man in the white gown was Shembe and said he was the Saviour there. Kunene says he saw many people wearing white gowns entering the temple while he stood on top of the mountain watching. Then there appeared a man in a black gown and a black hat. When this man appeared everybody shouted, "Uyingwele!" He is holy!

Ngathula ngabuka...Kuthe mangibuka...kuthe makhathaleni...ngabon'iphuma lendoda...ifak'umjiva way'omnyama nomhelana way'ekhanda wawumnyama...iza lendod'ipheth'i-ambrel'iz'ilingis'umakot'ezongen'emzin'ecochoza kancan'angath-unyaw'uyalubeka...ica...kancan'indod'ingasenhlelekhon'okwalapha...Ngath'-ukubukangath'ukuthi kwa kwa ngath'ukuyising'ebusweni ngath'ukuyibuka...ngezwa

besho bonke bethi "Uyingcwele!" Bawukhuz 'uyingwel' int' ongayazi. Bath 'uma bewukhuza loyingcwele ngezwa nentab' engimi kuyona... yawukhuz 'uyingcwele kanye nayo... namahlahla ngezw' ekhuz 'uyingcwele ngezw' amahlahla 'eqhum' edabuka kabili izihlahla zizimuka kuzamazama yonk' indawo...

(I kept quiet and watched. As I was watching...there suddenly...I saw him come out this man...who was lean as he came out, this man...wearing his black robe and a black hat to match...this man came holding an ambrella. He came imitating a bride coming to her husband's home moving gently as if putting a foot...coming slowly. The man was so beautiful! Then I watched for a while, then then I looked for his face, I watched....(then) I heard all of them saying, "He is holy!" They sang this "He is holy", you wouldn't know ...When they sang this "He is holy." I heard the mountain I was standing on....It sang "He is holy" once as well...and the trees I heard them sing "he is holy" ...I heard the trees making noise and breaking in twos, wobbling and everything was shaking...)

The Village

In most narratives where there is mention of the presence of the gate, there is also some sort of shelter which is beyond the gate. This takes the form of either a big house, or a very large village made of rondavels, sometimes the smaller forms of rondavels called *uguqa*. In an account narrated to me by Preacher Dlamini of the woman who used to be a member of the St John's Church, more *oguqa* were being built in this village for the people on earth who would then be 'called' to heaven when their houses had been finished:

Uthi saye sawelela ngaphesheya... masifika ngaphesheya safic' indaw' enotshan'-

*obuhl'obuluhlaza... Uthi wafica la kwakhiwa khona... wafic'amadoda...amadod'-
ayakh'izindlu lezi zesiZulu agobis'intingo... Uthi nayeth'uphos'amehlo
naw'amakhosikaz'aya-clean'ayashayel'emagcekeni...aya-clean'ayashayel'-
emagcekeni la...Indlu nendlu! Noma angithi umuzi nomuzi kuyakhiwa... Uthi
mangiqhubeka ngibheka wathi "Ubonani?" uthi "Ngabon'amany'amakhosikaz'-
epheka...[...] Wath' "Ubonani?" Ngathi "Ngibona nank'amadod'ayakh-
'akh'izindlu...[...]beneme bonke laba bant'akekh'onjukubele... Uthi wayesethi
"Lalela-ke...labant'abakh'izindlu...yimindeni...ikhandela lab'abasemhlabeni.
Njengoba nakuhamb'umunt'emhlabeni nithi nina indlu yakh'ibisiphelil'eZulwini...
yiloyo naloy'ukhandelwa wumndeni wakh'indlu...inel'ukuphela bese bemlanda-ke...*

(She says, "Finally we crossed to the other side...when we arrived over there we found a place with beautiful green grass...." She says she found where there were people building...she found men...the men were building these houses of Zulu, they were shaping the *izintingo*. She says when she sent her eyes there are women sweeping, cleaning their homesteads...They are sweeping, they are cleaning...Each and every house! Or else in each and every homestead there is building being done...She says if I continue looking, he said, "What do you see?" She says I saw more women cooking...[...] He said "What do you see?" I said "I see these men building, building houses"...[...] All these people are happy, there is nobody who is sad...She says he then said, "Listen! These people who are building the houses....they are families...they are building for those on earth...As you say that when a person dies his house has been completed in heaven...each and every person's house is built by his folks...when it is finished they go and fetch him/her...")

Kunene noticed that in every house was written "*Dumisani UJehova Amen!*". Each house was white-washed and these houses were so numerous they seemed to occupy

all the area within his vision:

*Ngathi ngibhek'eMpumalanga...wonke lomhlaba wawugcwel'amaNazaretha
wodwa...Ephuma egcwele wonk'umhlab'amaNazaretha lana kwakhiwe kucakiw'imizi
yawo imihl'ibhaliwe...Dumisani UJehova Amen!...Nasesangweni kubhaliwe
Dumisani UJehova Ameni!*

(When I looked to the East...all the world was full of only Nazarites...They appeared from all over the world these Nazarites...their houses built and white-washed looking beautiful...written "Praise the Lord Amen!"...and the gate written ... "Praise the Lord Amen!"...)

In Mngadi's narrative, the houses were as numerous as in Kunene's and were also white-washed, but there was not a single human around them. The only people he saw were the old woman who did not want his eyes to meet with hers and the man who approached him carrying the biggest Bible he had ever seen. There was no sign of life except for the two people.

*Ngiqhamu'esiziben'uyabon'int'ongayaz'ukuth'igcinaphi! Kuphel'amehl'ubheka
njengotwandle nje. Nangithi ngiya...yabuy'ingqondo...ngisho...ngehle
ngikhuphuke?[...]Uyabona kube sengathi kusuk'ulwembu luthi...Hhay'akuson'-
isiziba...Amarondo!...Amarondo! Anotshan'obudala kodwa a clean ngaphandl'-
acakiwe ngokumhlophe. Avuliw'iminyango wonke! Uyabona njob'umile nje
uthe!...int'oyibuka njengako Loskop, Bergville uz'uyoshon'eLeSotho...Mawubheka
ngaph'uzuyoshon'eMnambithi...Mawubheka ngaph'uzuyoshon'eHlathikhulu.
Akukho luth'lunye! Akukho mfuy'akukho sihlahla. Akukho lutho nje!
Amarond'intwethule nje.Uyabona nalaw'owabonay'ubon'iminyango nje...*

(I came to a wide river, you cannot see its end! Your eyes fail you when you look...just like the sea. When I...then my mind came back...should I...should I go down or up?...[...]
 You see, it was as if the web was removed like this! No! This is not a river! It's the rondavels. The rondavels! They are thatched with old grass but they are clean on the outside, they are white-washed. All the doors are opened. You see, as you are standing like this...something you see as in Loskop, Bergville, all the way to Lesotho...If you look this side till you reach Ladysmith...If you look this side till you disappear at Hlathikhulu... There is nothing else! No animals and no trees! There is just nothing! It is the rondavels all the way! One after the other! You see, even those you can see, you only see the doors...)

There are some elements which feature in one narrative and not the others. One of these is Gumede's case in which he did not embark on a journey but floated around. Another particular feature in Gumede's narrative is his perceiving his body and all that went on 'in this world' during his unconscious state. Although in Mchunu's narrative there are common features like the journey motif, green pastures, and an encounter with Shembe, there is another interesting feature which relates to the first one: the physical journey taken by Mchunu's uncle to Shembe at MaChunwini. Mchunu's father, Pewula, had sent his younger brother to report to Shembe that his son had died and he wanted him to be resurrected because he had no other son.

Uthi wabona emzini we...e...lapha kwaZondehleke lapha kukhona khon' iNkosi...kodwa kusebuqamamana. Wayibona njint'ekhanyay' eduze kwendlu yeNkosi. Wahlala-ke nje...njalo wahamba-ke nje...Kant'iyon' iNkos' imlindile. Uthi yanele yambona yasimqhweba yathi, ...esekude ...yathi "Woza masinyane Mchunu! Siyakushiy' isikhathi." Uthi "Ngasengigijima-ke sengifik' eNkosini." "Yini

kwenzenjani?" Uthi wasesho-k'ukuthi "Cha hhay'iNkos'ingithumile eNkosin'ukuthi angizoyicel'umntwana wakh'usehambil'uhamb'ekuseni... njal'uhamb'ekusen'izolo...ehhe...ukuth'abuye ngob'akekh'omny'umfan'ukuphela kwakhe." Uthi-ke hhayi wasememez'intombazan'ukuth'ifik'intombazane yafik'intombazane maqede...isi...eNkosini isith'iNkosi "Leth'iphepha masinyane nepensela!" Yas'ibhala-ke. Ubabomncan'akafundile-ke.Uthi-ke wath'...yath'uma imnika lel'iphephan'elincane nje...imidwana nje...ipheph'e...umugq'-owodw'ophelele kwasekub'uwafana-ke...wasethi "Hamb'uyifake laph'eMaChunwini njalo laph'eNtanyana.Kukhon'intaba laph'ethiw'uNtanyana... "Uyifake phansi kwetsh'elinganeth'inge...ingek'ifike khon'imvula." Bakhuluma-ke kuya koseveni. Kukud'eNtanyana lapho...uyamchazela futh'ukuthi uma ufik'unayin'eseshayile wodela...leyongane...loyomntwana wakh'uba...umfowenu ngek'esabuya. Uthi-ke wahamba ngamawalak'ephuthuma laph'eNtanyana...wukuth'umunt'osemncane-kehawu uthi ngo-eyithi nje eseshayil'u-eyithi kancane wafika waseyifaka-ke lencwadi. Kwayikhon'ephumula-ke wathi "Awu! Lomntwan'uzophil'impela ngoba sengiyenzile lent'eshiwo yiNkosi?"...

(He says he saw at the home of...there at Zondehleka where iNkosi was...but it was still far. He just sat...I mean he just went on...but it was the iNkosi waiting for him. He says as soon as iNkosi saw him he waved for him to come, saying...when he was closer...he said, "Come faster Mchunu!You are losing time." He says, "I then ran and reached iNkosi." "What is it? What happened?" He says he then said "I am sent by the chief to the iNkosi to ask for his child. He passed away...he left in the morning...I mean he left in the morning yesterday...yes...that he may come back because there is no other boy, he is the only one." He says he (Shembe) then called

the girl that the girl should come and when the girl had come and then...he...to the iNkosi, iNkosi said, "Bring the paper and pencil fast!" And then he wrote. Now my uncle is uneducated. He says when he, when he gave him that small paper...just short lines...the paper which...one full line...and then it was half a line, and then he said, "Go and put this at MaChunwini, I mean at Ntanyana." There is a mountain there called Ntanyana... "Put it under a rock which does not rain...where...where the rain will not reach it." As they were talking it was close to seven or so. It is far at Ntanyana there...He explains to him as well that " If you arrive there after nine^h has struck...forget it...that child...that baby of your...of your brother will not come back." He says he went faster then hurrying to get there at Ntanyana...being a young man *hhawu* he says just as...at eight...just when eight had struck a little bit he arrived and put that letter. It was only then that he started to rest and said, "*Awu!* This boy is really going to live because I have done what iNkosi told me to do!....")

* * *

In this chapter I have explored the narratives of near-death experiences with an aim of ascertaining whether or not there are patterns and commonalities in these narratives. I have argued that although there is no one narrative which is entirely like the other, there are many common features in these narratives. This is significant, because many NDE scholars believe that the similarity in these experiences is proof that these experiences provide a glimpse of the after life. If the same things happen to many people facing death, it means that these people have undertaken a journey that is awaiting all of us. However, it is important to note that the scholars who espouse a "Dying Brain Hypothesis" also use the point of similarity to support their argument. According to this school of thought, " All the phenomena of the NDE are believed to

be the products of the dying brain; hallucinations, imaginings and mental constrictions that will ultimately stop when the brain's activity stops" (Blackmore, 1993: 4).

Scholars like Atwater (1994) and Moody (1988) have convincingly challenged the dying brain hypothesis.

Chapter Four: The Nazarite and the Global Near Death Experiences: A Comparative Analysis

In this chapter I compare and contrast the narratives collected in this project and those documented in Moody's studies, *Life After Life* (1975) and *The Light Beyond* (1988). I have chosen Moody's studies because he is recognised as a pioneer of the study of the near-death phenomenon (Ma 'súmián, 1995). I hope that a comparative analysis of these studies will help create a sense of credibility for the narratives I have collected because I have argued that these narratives are used by the Nazarites to confirm their faith and mediate their position, and it may be easy for any reader to dismiss them as mere fabrications for individual and communal gain. But if these narratives could be proven to be part of a more global phenomenon, then one cannot easily dismiss them as fabrications by the Nazarites as they would seem to have a wider provenance.

Undertaking a comparative study of these narratives is also important because Moody suggests that they provide a glimpse of the after life, and he cites the startling similarities among them as proof for his 'after life hypothesis'. Although the narratives studied here are a fraction of what Moody worked with, they will shed some useful light on the validity or otherwise of this statement.

While there are similar features between the narratives collected by Moody and the ones I collected, there are also some fundamental differences and these make it difficult to argue without qualification that near-death experiences are similar all over the world and throughout history. But this does not mean that the after life hypothesis proposed by Moody is invalid. I argue that the differences that prevail between the

near-death narratives collected in this study and Moody's are culturally conditioned. Other scholars, like Ma 'súmián (1995), suggest that the differences of interpretation in Moody's near-death experiencers are religiously motivated because a Christian will tend to define the being of light as Jesus while a Muslim will call him Allah, for example. This claim implies that the experiencers are influenced by their religious allegiances and expectations in their interpretation and, perhaps, reconstruction of the experience. This does not seem to be the case with the narratives I collected as I argue below.

My contention is that these experiences are culturally conditioned but not in the way that Sundkler suggests, involving the reversal of the colour bar in heaven. I challenge Sundkler's view because it also implies a 'mental conditioning', and the experiencers in my study do not seem to have experienced what their religious knowledge made them expect. A number of experiencers were Christians, but not Nazarites, during the experience, which means they must have expected to find Jesus in heaven but there is no mention of Him. Two experiencers, Kunene and uNobelungu, converted to the Nazarite faith when they recognised Shembe as the man they had seen in 'heaven', yet they were Christians when the experience took place.

* * *

In his first book on the near-death phenomenon, Moody lists fifteen common elements of the near-death experience. These are reflected in the composite account which goes as follows:

A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to

hear an unfortunate noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long, dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from his unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

After a while, he collects himself and becomes accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a "body", but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before - a being of light - appears before him.

This being asks him a question, non-verbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of a barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with his experiences in the after life and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.

Later he tries to tell others but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly

episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life. (Moody, 1975, 21-23)

In his later study, *The Light Beyond* (1988) Moody had examined more cases of the NDE and this made him change his mind about some of the arguments he made in *Life After Life*:

In *Life After Life* I said that I had never met anyone who had experienced all of these traits while undergoing an NDE. But since writing that book, I have interviewed more than a thousand NDEers and have found several who had 'full-blown' episodes that exhibited all nine NDE traits. (Moody, 1998: 7)

Moody does not explain why he reduced the number of features to nine in his later book. But I think that he removed those features that were not part of the near-death experience itself, such as "ineffability" because this is what near-death experiencers encounter when they have been resurrected. In this chapter I am going to examine the nine elements Moody identified in *The Light Beyond*.

1. A Sense of Being Dead

Moody states that, at first, the experiencers are confused and frightened by what they see and feel. They feel themselves floating around and see their dead bodies with the medical people trying resuscitation. They try to communicate with the people around them and when that fails, they begin to have a better sense of who they are. They become aware of their uniqueness when they realise that they are now dead.

Although there are some minor differences, this element is also prevalent in the narratives I collected. Here are examples:

Mchunu says:

Ukuhamba kwami angazi kodwa kahle kodwa ngiyazi ngiyezulwini. Ukuhamba kwami nje ngiyaz'ukuthi ngiyezulwini ngoba sengifile. Lendlel'engiyihambayo nje ingis'ezulwini.

(As I am travelling I do not know for sure but I know that I am going to heaven. As I am travelling I know I am going to heaven because I am now dead. This path I am travelling on leads me to heaven.)

A voice told Gumede not to leave his body before he was buried and this made him realise that he was dead:

Lase limemeza lelizwi...lelizwi leli engalibon'ebusuku ngalizwa selimemeza futhi:

"MaGumeni!"

Ngathi "Baba."

Lathi, "Ungahamb'isidumbu sakho singakangwatshw'uyoduka!"

Ngase ngibon'ukuthi okushukuthi sengihambil'emhlabeni.

(Then this voice called, the voice which I heard at night. I heard it call again saying:

"MaGumeni!"

I said, "Father".

It said, "Do not leave before your corpse is buried because you will be lost."

Then I realised that it means I have died.)

Kunene felt his soul leave his body when the snake licked him before it swallowed him:

...Okwathi nxa sengihleli, sengiphelelwe ngamandla ngiyibuka lento...Ngabona kungen'ulimi olungaphezu kolimi lwenkomo. Lolulimi lwalungena njengolimi ongathi luwunyazi lijikijeleke...Lolulimi yath'uma iluphosa yaluphonsa maqede yas'ingikhoth'umzimba wonke yangiqal'emhlane. Yangikhotha ngalolulimu lwalushisa! Eyayithi uma ingikhotha ngalo qede ngiyobuk'isikhumba sibe bovu. Kuthe mayingiqal'emhlane yaphinda yawujikijela lomban'ekhanda...yayizishay'izinwele wawungathi ngigundwa nge-razor. Za(zi)ke zikhale zithi "hli" ekhanda. Yawukhoth'umzimba yawuqeda yawuthi nya! Ngawuzw'umphefumul'uphuma kimi. Ngezw'ukuth'angisekho. Ngoba ngezw'uvalo luphuma ngenzwane, nangeziqu zeminwe ngezw'ukuthi angisekho-ke manje sengihambile...

(When I was seated, having lost all my strength looking at this thing...I saw a tongue bigger than that of a cow entering. This tongue entered swiftly as though it was a tongue which is lightning ... When it sent this tongue, it sent it and then licked my whole body starting from my back. It licked me with this tongue - it was hot! As it licked me with it my skin was pulled off and became red. When it had started from my back it sent this lightning again at my head. It licked my hair. It was as if I was shaved by a razor. My hair would go "hli" in my head. It licked the body and finished it completely. I felt my soul getting out of me. I felt that I am now dead...because I felt my spirit leave through my toes and through the pores of my fingers... I realised that I am no more now, I am gone...)

2. Peace and Painlessness

Moody reports that many near-death experiencers describe a feeling of peace and joy in the early stages of the experience. One of his informants describes it thus:

At the point of the injury there was the momentary flash of pain, but then

all the pain vanished. I had the feeling of floating in the dark space. The day was bitterly cold, yet while I was in that blackness all I felt was warmth and the most extreme comfort I have ever experienced...

I remember thinking, "I must be dead." (Moody, 1975: 28-29)

In the narratives I collected, there is a sense in which the experiencer feels peaceful although the sensation is not as significant as in the above case, probably because soon after that the experiencer encounters hardships. For example, Mngadi, who was stabbed to death, mentions a feeling of quiet when he had lost consciousness:

Kushukuth'ukuhamba kwami ngihambe ngihambe ngihambe. Ukuhamba kwami manje kushukuthi ngingumunt'onjani? Ongasekho. Sengi-polite manje...

(It means in my journey I walked, walked and walked. In my journey now what kind of a person am I? Dead. I'm calm now...)

Mchunu also felt happy as he was travelling, although what really made him feel very happy was to meet Shembe, or to realise that what he thought was a plane threatening to hit him was in fact Shembe:

Kwaqhamuk'ukhoz'olwaqhamuk'eMpumalanga...Ukhozi lento yeza kwasengathi yibhaloni uma iza kimina...e...kwangath'iyibhaloni. Ukhozi luyandiza! Kodwa luza kimina ngqo! Ngqo! Lwath'uma lufika nje kimina...hhawu lwavele lwaphenduka lwama ngenyawo zalo...lwaphenduka lwawumuntu. Lwase luba wuBab'iNkosi yaseKuphakameni yona le ekade kuthunyelwe kuy'eMaChunwini. Yafike yathi gxume phambi kwami. Hhawu ngajabula ngibon'iNkosi yaseKuphakameni! Ngoba vele nje ekuhambeni kwami ngangiwumuntu okhululekile. Ngingenankinga...

(The eagle appeared which appeared from the East. This eagle thing came as if it was a plane when it came to me...e...as if it was a plane. When it was closer I saw it was not a plane. It's the eagle. It is flying. But it is coming straight to me! Straight to me! As soon as it arrived to me... well it simply changed... it stood on its feet and changed to become a person. It became Father the Lord of Ekuphakameni, the very same that (my uncle) was sent to at MaChunwini. It came and landed in front of me. I was very pleased to see the Lord of Ekuphakameni! Because indeed in my journey I was a peaceful (free) person. I had no problem.)

3. Out-of-Body Experience (OBE)

The OBE is another prominent feature in Moody's narratives. He states that normally people having the near-death experience perceive themselves looking upon their bodies as if they were spectators. The feeling is akin to watching actors and events in a play or film:

Just then I heard the nurses shout, "Code pink! Code pink!" As they were saying this, I could feel myself moving out of my body and sliding down between the mattress and the rail on the side of the bed – actually it seemed as if I went through the rail – on down to the floor. Then I started rising upward, slowly. On my way up, I saw more nurses come running into the room – there must have been a dozen of them...(Moody, 1975: 35-36).

The OBE as it is described above is very uncommon in the narratives I collected. Although all the experiencers perceived themselves occupying bodies other than the physical ones, most of them did not see their dead physical bodies. It is only Magumeni Gumede who mentions having seen his own body and the people who

were worried about his death:

Kwathi ngowani ngase ngiyibona lendoda kanti bengingayiboni. Ngase ngikwaz'ukuyibona lendoda! Ngasibon'isidumbu silele phansi...Ngababona bonk'abantu...[...] wath'uma ephezu kwethuna bantwana bakaNkulunkulu ngangim'emkhathini ngiyibuka le-filimu yenzeka phansi...

(Then at one o' clock I saw this man while I had been unable to see him. Now I was able to see this man. I saw the corpse lying down...I saw all the people...[...] When he was on top of the grave, children of God, I was floating in the firmament watching this film taking place on earth...)

4. The Tunnel Experience

Many people Moody interviewed mention a feeling of being rapidly propelled through a dark space. They use different words to describe this experience, including: a well, a cave, a trough, an enclosure, a tunnel, a funnel and so on.

Here are examples:

I was in an utterly black dark void. It is very difficult to explain, but I felt as if I were moving in a vacuum, just through blackness... (1975: 32).

Another woman relates the same experience as follows:

...[T]he things around me in the hospital began to get further and further away. As they receded, I entered head first into a narrow and very, very dark passage-

way. I seemed to just fit inside of it. I began to slide
down, down, down. (1975:32)

There is no example or equivalent of “the tunnel experience” in the narratives I collected. This is an example of the main differences between the experiences collected for this study and those documented by Moody and it is not clear to me why this is the case. Since the sample of this study is small, it may be that other people not part of this study have had a similar experience.

5. People of Light

Many of Moody’s informants told him that at some point in their ‘dying’, they became aware of the presence in their surroundings of other spirits or beings. These spirits/beings are the experiencers’ dead relatives. From these beings emanated light which was not painful to the eye, and they communicated with the experiencer telepathically:

I heard a voice, not a man’s voice, but like a
hearing beyond the physical senses, telling me
what I had to do - go back – and I felt no fear of
getting back to my physical body. (1975: 57)

Another informant of Moody’s says:

While I was dead, in this void, I talked to people - and yet, I really couldn’t say that I talked to any *bodily* people. Yet, I had the feeling that there were people around me, and I could feel their presence, and could feel them moving, though I could never see anyone. Every now

and then, I could talk with one of them, but I couldn't see them. And whenever I wondered what was going on, I would always get a thought back from one of them, that everything was all right, that I was dying but would be fine. So my condition never worried me. I always got an answer back for every question that I asked. They didn't leave my mind void. (1975: 58)

This element is common in the narratives I collected although there are some different factors. This feature is similar to the one I called 'Meeting with Dead Relatives' above, except that there is no mention of light emanating from those beings and the communication is not telepathic.

6. The Being of Light

Moody regards the experiencers' encounter with the being of light as the most extraordinary element and states that it has the most profound impact on the individual. The experiencers firstly perceive this as dim light but it gets brighter and brighter until it "reaches an unearthly brilliance"(1975: 58). Although this appears as only a light, the experiencers have no doubt that this is not a simple light. It is a being of light. Its description varies according to the experiencers' religious backgrounds.

Thus, most of those who are Christians in training and belief identify the light as Christ and sometimes draw Biblical parallels in support of their interpretation. A Jewish man and woman identified the light as an "angel".
(Moody, 1975:59)

This is how one Christian informant told the story:

There are not really words to describe this. Everything was very black, except that, way off from me, I could see this light. It was a very, very brilliant light, but not too large at first. It grew larger as I came nearer and nearer to it. I was trying to get to that light at the end, because I felt that it was Christ, and I was trying to reach that point. It was not a frightening experience. It was more or less a pleasant thing. For immediately, being a Christian, I had connected the light with Christ, who said, "I am the light of the world". I said to myself, "If this could be it, if I am to die, then I know who waits for me at the end, there in that light". (1975: 62)

Another experiencer says:

[...] I floated on down the hall and out the door onto the screen porch. There, it almost seemed that clouds, a pink mist really, began to gather around me, and then I floated right straight on through the screen, just as though it weren't there, and up into this pure crystal clear light, an illuminating white light. It was beautiful and so bright, so radiant, but it didn't hurt my eyes. It's not any kind of light you can describe on earth. I didn't actually see a person in this light, and yet it has a special identity, it definitely does. It is a light of perfect understanding and perfect love. The thought came to my mind, "Lovest thou me?" This was not exactly in the form of a question, but I guess the connotation of what the light said was, "If you do love me, go back and complete what you began in your life."

And all during this time, I felt as though I was surrounded by an

overwhelming love and compassion. (1975: 62-63)

The equivalent of the being of light in the narratives I collected is 'the man in the white robe' or Shembe as some narrators refer to that man. However, there are a number of dissimilar details here as well. Although the authority and impact that the being of light have on Moody's informants is equal to those of Shembe in my informants, in the case of my informants the communication was not telepathical and mostly there is no mention of light emanating from the man in the white robe except for Gumede's narrative:

...Kwase kuthiwa kushod'abant'abathath'abangakangiboni. Lweza lwabekw'uhlaka. Lath'uma livulw'ikhanda bantwana bakaNkulunkulu...ngabon'iNkos'iza. Ngabon'umunt'omuhl'eza, e...kushayin'imibani phambi kwakhe...

(...Then it was said that there were three people who had not seen me. My bier was put down. When my head was opened children of God, I saw iNkosi approaching, I saw a handsome person approach...e...lightning shining in front of him...)

Kunene saw a man he had never seen before, but was also amazed at how likeable he was:

Kuthe mangibabuka, kuthe makhathaleni, ngabon'iphuma lendoda...eyayincanyana... yath'uma iphuma lendoda... ifak'umjiv'omnyama. Nomhelane wakhona wawumnyama...iza lendod'ipheth'i-ambrela iza ilingis'umakot'ezongen'emzini, icothoza kancan'angath'unyaw'iyalubala, angath'unyaw'iyalubeka...iza kancan'indod'ingasenhlele kon'okwalapha...

(When I was watching, then suddenly, I saw this man come out...who was lean...

when he came out this man...he was wearing a black robe and the hat was also black. Coming, this man held an umbrella, he came as if mimicking a bride about to enter the groom's home, walking softly as if counting his steps, as if putting a foot...Coming slowly this man was so handsome you cannot know!...)

7. The Life Review

When the near-death experiencers have met the being of light, and he has communicated with them telepathically, he then presents them with a panoramic view of their lives on earth. The people's lives are displayed suddenly before them, and they are given a chance to reflect on or to understand the effects of their deeds. They now have the power to penetrate other people's consciousness and this allows them to personally feel the pleasure or sorrow caused by their actions to other people.

One of Moody's informants says:

After all this banging and going through this long, dark place, all of my childhood thoughts, my whole entire life was there at the end of the tunnel, just flashing in front of me. It was not exactly in terms of pictures, more in the form of thought, I guess. I can't exactly describe it to you, but it was just all there. It was just all there at once, I mean, not one thing at a time, blinking off and on, but it was everything, everything at one time. I thought about my mother and the things I had done wrong. After I could see the mean little things I did as a child, and thought about my mother and father, I wished that I hadn't done these things, and I wished I could go back and undo them.

(1975: 69)

This feature, the life review, is also uncommon in the narratives I collected. In one case where there is something like a life review, the woman concerned was shown the effects of her evil deeds on earth. This woman had died and through her soul she wanted to go to heaven. She had met a person who said he was Shembe who was about to help her cross the river, but before that he spoke to the woman:

Engakawel'emfuleni wathi, "Unal'ithikithi lokuy'eZulwini?"

Uthi wayeseveza lelithikithi lalaphaya angazilinhloboni laph'enkonzweni abekhonzakuyo. Wayesethi, "Akulon'ithikithi lokungen'eZulwini leli. Futh'abanjengawe abangen'eZulwini. Phenduka ngikukhombise..."

Uthi mayephons'amehlo ebheka emhlabeni wabona amakhosikazi...abantu besifazane usho njalo ...bedraya uthango...noma ucing'intenjalo. Behamba ngaphandle...

Hhay'indaw'eyodwa, omunye nangu laphaya uyadraya ngaphandl'isango livalekile akungenek'uyadraya, nomunye nomuny'emizin'yahlukene... Abanye sebeze bazidumbu sebefile... uthi-ke wayesebuza ukuthi, "Mama uyayibona yini lento?"

Uthi lona "Yebo."

"Idalwa yini?"

Wathi, "Angazi."

Wayesethi, "Lababant'obabona bedraya ngaphandle bengangeni ngaphakathi... wena usesemhlabeni ubukhand'umuthi wesicazo, ukhand'ichitho wen'unikez'-abantu...bahambe beyochith'amany'amakhosikaz'emizini yawo. Lamakhosikaz'-owabon'edraya...lababant'obabona bedraya...amakhosikaz'achithek'emizini yawo. Abanye sebaze baf'uyababona lab'asebeyizidumbu? Hhabafa bechithekil'emizini bechithwa wumuthi owawenziwa wuwena abant'ababewuthatha

kuwena... baze bafa befela ngaphandle kwemizi yabo...

(Before he crossed the river, he said, "Do you have a ticket to enter heaven?")

She says she showed him the ticket from there - I do not know how it looks like - in the church where she used to worship.

He then said, "This is not a ticket to enter heaven. And people like you do not enter heaven... Turn around and let me show you!"

She turned. She says he showed her here on earth... She says when she sent her eyes looking on earth, she saw women... women, she said that... moving around the walls... or the fences, something like that, moving about outside. Not in one place, one is there, she is moving around outside, the gate is closed she cannot get in, she is moving around... and the other and the other in different homes. Some are now corpses... She says he then asked, "Mother, do you see this thing?"

This woman said, "Yes."

"What causes it?"

She said, "I do not know."

He then said, "These people you see moving around not entering the homes... you when you were still on earth you made the *muthi* of separating lovers, you made the *isichitho* and gave it to people... they went and... e... e ... they went and destroyed other women's homes (marriages). These women you see moving around... these people you see moving around, they are the women whose homes were destroyed. Some of them have even died, you see those who are now corpses, they are the ones who died having lost their homes because of the *muthi* you made and people took... and they died outside their homes...")

The one instance of an experience where there is mention of a life review is in the

“Story of Zulu of Umlazi, P-section.” This is the title of a one page text (like an obituary) distributed at the funeral of a Mr. Zulu who is said to have passed away some two weeks before his actual funeral on 27th April 2003. He had woken up at about two o’ clock in the morning on Saturday, having passed away on Friday the previous day. He told his family that he had taken a journey to heaven where he met Shembe and:

*Wathi makacule ingoma eyodwa yamaNazaretha wathi baba umsebenzi
ebengiwenza bengingakwazi ukuya enkonzweni. Wayesevula ibhuku wathi alikho
igama lakho lapha, wasemkhombisa into eyiTV lapho wazibona khona ekhula nokona
kwakhe, wayesethi amacala akho akamabi kangako/kakhulu ngizokudedela ubuyele
emuva, ufike utshele abantu ukuthi abaphenduke ngoba kuyahanjwa nabafana laba
ababhemayo baze bangadideki, indlela okufanele bahambe ngaye yileyo
yamaNazaretha.*

(He told him to sing one song of the Nazarites and he responded that father the work I have been doing prevented me from going to church. He then opened the book and said your name is not here, and then he showed him something like a TV where he saw a replay of his life and the sins he had committed. He then said they (the sins) are not too bad, and that he would let him come back to earth. He told him to tell the people to convert because everybody is dying and the boys who smoke that they must not be deceived, the path they should follow is that of the Nazarites.)

8. Reluctance to Return

Many near-death experiencers Moody interviewed found their existence outside their physical beings so attractive that they did not want to come back to earth. Some of them had to choose between the wonderful after life they experienced and their loved

ones they had left on earth.

One experiencer says:

I wondered whether I should stay there, but as I did I remembered my family, my three children and my husband. Now, this is the part that is hard to get across. When I had this wonderful feeling, there in the presence of that light, I really did not want to come back. But I take my responsibilities very seriously, and I knew that I had a duty to my family. So I decided to try to come back. (1975:78)

Moody states that some of his informants felt as if they were made to come back because God or the being of light intended for them to come back to earth to fulfil some mission, as another informant tells:

I say God surely was good to me, because I was dead, and he let the doctors bring me back for a purpose. The purpose was to help my wife, I think, because she had a drinking problem, and I know that she just couldn't have made it without me. She is better now, though, and I really think that it had a lot to do with what I went through.
(1975: 80)

In many narratives that I investigate here, the experiencers were taken in by the places they found themselves in, but many do not mention a reluctance to return to life. In one narrative, Khwela's, it was his great grandfather (who had been dead for a long time) who showed a sense of not wanting to come back. Khwela says that when he told the old man that he had been told by a girl in the white gown to return to earth,

the old man sympathised with him, showing that he did not consider going to earth an enviable thing. Also Njoko, although he too was not negative about coming back, like the above narrator, felt that he was allowed to come back because of the mission he had to accomplish, i.e. being a preacher and making sacrifices on behalf of his late sisters.

Gumede's narrative is akin to those of the above two experiencers Moody interviewed who did not want to come back although not completely. He became so impatient when his family were still preparing his dead body for burial because he was eager to go on:

Ngiyambuka lomuntu bantwana bakaNkulunkulu inhliziyo yami ayisekho kulesidumbu lesi...sengihalela manje kuleyandaw'esengiyilangazelele. Sengilangazelel'ukuya kuyo...Lendlel'engifun'ukuyihamba yinhle kakhulu...

(I watched this man, children of God, but my heart was no longer in that corpse...I was now hankering for that place I was hankering for...I was hankering to go there. This journey I was eager to take is very interesting...)

It is Kunene's narrative that shows a strong reluctance to come back to earth:

*Ngath'uma ngongena phakathi kwalamatshe, kwaqhamuk'ukhokho wam'-
owayezal'umkhulu - uhambe sengimaz'ukhokho. Uhambe ngo 74 ukhokho. Wath'uma
eqhamuk'ukhokho naye wayeqgoke kanje...kodwa waqhamuka
yen'efak'ezobukhokheli, efak'isiphika sakh'esimnyama. Ngambheka ngathi mina,
"Hawu!"*

*Wath'um'efika kimina wathi, "Hawu, umntakaVukayibambe? Ubekwayini lapha?"
Angangamphendula ngathi mina, "Hawu gogo wafak'intezimnyam'uzilile yini?"*

Was'ebhek'eceleni wayesethi, "Hawu, kwangath'ulambile pho?"

Manje mina ngilwel'ukuthi ngimbambe ngob'umuntu owayejwayel'ukunganga.

Ngilwel'ukuthi ngimbamb'uthi yena, "Yeyi! Musukungibamb'ungangibambi!

*Uzokufa! ...[...] *Uzoba necala phuma lapha, buyel'emuva."**

Yen'ukhomb'ukuth'angiphumele ngaphandle mina angifuni ngifun'ukuya lapha

manje, laph'ethempelini lapho kukhona khona loShembe. Sebethule bonk'abantu

*manje sekuthe cwaka neNkosi isithul'iNkos'ibheke phansi...[...]*Manj'uth'ukhokho**

kim'angiyek'angi... "Phindel' emuva njengob'ulapha nje sengiyoyul'icala...

usungilovis'enkonzweni. Ngithi-ke phindel'emuva."

Angangafuna...ngafun'ukugijima ngiyongena kuleliyasango lethempeli. Ngathi

mangizongena baphenduka bonk'abantu bangiphosel'amehlo... amehlo abo

ayeshay'ewumbani. Wangishay'umbani wamehlo maqede ngaye ngawa

ngashay'ungqimphothwe. Wabuy'ugogo wangibiza wathi, "Yeyi wena sukum'uphume

lapha abangen'abangenal'uphawu lwaseKuphakameni."

Ngathi mina, "Khokho luphi nginike!"

Wathi, "Ulushiy'emhlaben'alukho la. Uphaw'okufanel'uze nal'ulushiy'emuva.

Lusemuva lapho lusele khon'alukho la...

(When I was about to enter through those stones, my paternal great grand-mother

appeared - she died when I had known her. My great grand-mother died in 1974.

When she appeared, my great grand-mother was also dressed like this ...but hers was

the attire of *abakhokheli*, she was wearing her black cape.

I looked at her and said, "*Hawu!*"

When she arrived near me she said, "*Hawu, Vuk'ayibambe's child, what brings you here?*"

I did not answer her. I said, “Why grand-mother, you are wearing black, are you in mourning?”

She looked at her side and said, “*Hawu!* Why, you look like you are hungry?”

Now I was trying to hold her because she was a person who used to kiss me. I was trying to hold her and she said, “Hey! Don’t hold me! Do not hold me! You will die!...[...] You will have a sin. Get out of here, go back!”

She meant for me to go out but I did not want to, I wanted to go to that place now, there in the temple where this Shembe was. Everybody was quiet now, it was dead quiet and the iNkosi was also quiet and looking down...[...] Now great grand-mother was saying to me, “Go back, as you are here now I am going to face a trial... you have made me miss the service. Now I say go back!”

I did not want to...I wanted to run and enter that gate to the temple. When I was about to enter, they all turned and sent their eyes to me...their eyes were shining, they were lightning. The lightning of their eyes hit me and I fell down on my back. Grand-mother came and called me, saying, “Hey you, wake up and get out of here! Those who do not have the symbol of Ekuphakameni do not enter here.”

I said, “Where is it great grand-mother? Give it to me.”

She said, “You left it on earth, it is not here. The symbol you have to come with here you left it on earth. It is left where you come from. It is not here...”)

9. Rising Rapidly Through the Heavens

As I mentioned above, many of Moody’s informants mentioned an experience of being in a dark tunnel. Some of them tell of another experience in which they felt as if they were rising rapidly through the heavens. But this also does not appear in the narratives collected for this project and is therefore another example of the differences

between the experiences of my informants and those of Moody's.

* * *

It is clear from the above discussion that although there are a number of features and details that differ between the narratives collected by Moody and those collected for this study, the near-death phenomenon is global - it happens to people all over the world. This means that the narratives of the Nazarite people need to be understood as part of an international phenomenon that can happen to anyone, and not as mere fabrications by people who want to confirm their faith or status. This is even more so because there are two experiencers, Zwane and Mngadi, who were not members of the Nazarite Church when the experiences took place and during the time of the interviews, but their narratives have the same features as those of narrators who are now members of the church.

Conclusion

John Edward, host of a Television programme, "Crossing Over" (shown on SABC 3 on Mondays, 11:30 am to 12: 00 and repeated on Thursdays 10:30 pm to 11:00 pm) acts as an intermediary between the dead and their relatives on earth. Those who want to communicate with their friends and relatives who have passed away contact John Edward and, in his 'reading sessions', he conveys messages from the dead to the living. In his show on Monday 11th April 2005, one woman said, "I wanted to talk to my mother." Her mother had been dead for some time and she hoped that Edward could help her communicate with her spirit. Closing the previous week's programme, Edward had informed his audience, both the studio audience and the viewers, that they should know that the spirits of their late loved ones still prevail among them. He said that if there was anything that remained unsaid when their relatives died, they should know that there was still a chance of communicating with the late family members and friends through gifted mediums like himself. On the Monday 11th show he made the same point when he said the fact that the late relatives make an effort to come through means that they "continue to be with us and to love us when they have crossed over".

The work that Edward does is similar to that done by *sangomas* in South Africa.³ The main purpose of the *sangomas* is to mediate between the people and their ancestors and to tell them what the ancestors want. Although there are many differences in terms of methods used by the *sangomas* and those used by Edward, the work they do is similar. They serve the people who believe that the spirits of their late parents and relatives live on and are watching over them. They believe that

³ There have been some questions raised about Edward's credibility. What is important here is that people go to him because they believe he will connect them with their late relatives, not whether his work is genuine or not.

maintaining the relationship between themselves and their late relatives will enhance their lives because the late relatives now have the power to watch over them and to protect them.

However, there are many people who do not believe in the presence of the spirits of dead relatives, and those who do will always have different opinions about the relationship between themselves and the spirits of their relatives and the relationship of those spirits with other beings in this earth and in the after life. For those who believe in the after life, the work of people like John Edward and the *sangomas* serves as proof of the existence of life after death and the continued connection between the living and the dead. The narratives of near-death experiences that I have examined here are also used as proof of the existence of life after death. People who have had near-death experiences, and a number of scholars who have investigated the near-death phenomenon, believe that these experiences provide a glimpse of life after death.

This study has not tackled the problem of the existence or otherwise of life after death. It has also eschewed the question of whether the near-death experiences are real or they are just the results of the workings of the experiencers' minds in the face of death. The only actuality that has been important to me is that at some point these individuals were supposed to be dead and they did (and in many cases still do) believe that they died. Even more important is the fact that these experiencers did tell what they experienced whether it was real or not. At least three of my informants, Mchunu, Gumede and Njoko, told me their stories more than once and in each telling the facts were the same, which to me suggests they sincerely believed what they narrated.

Although I set out to investigate the phenomenon of the NDEs in the Nazarite Church, two of my informants, Mngadi and Zwane, were not members of the Nazarite Church when they had the near-death experience and during the time I interviewed them. But their narratives do not differ from the ones narrated by those who had become Nazarites or even those who were Nazarites when they had the near-death experience. Only four of my informants were members of the Nazarite Church when they had the experience. The others only converted later. Two of those, Kunene's and UNobelungu's conversions, were related to their near-death experiences in that they converted when they recognised Shembe as the man they had seen in the after life. UNobelungu saw Isaiah Shembe in her spiritual visit to 'heaven' in which Isaiah told her to come back to earth and not to join any church before he arrived. When she saw him at Inanda, she asked him to baptise her right then. The same happened to Kunene. In his visit to heaven he had seen a man who turned out to be Amos Shembe, and when he saw him in the real world he went out to buy himself a prayer gown and from then became a member of the Nazarite Church.

This study has been quantitatively limited by two factors. Firstly, it has been difficult to get as many informants as I might have wished because of the problem of power relations that I mentioned in the introduction and the possibility of being suspected of spying. For example, I overheard two people at the Nhlankazi meeting (January 2005) who have had near-death experiences but could not just approach them without someone to introduce me to them. This means if my study had been well publicised through the leaders of the church, I might have been able to get far more testimonies. Secondly, there has not been enough space and time to provide an extensive investigation of the near-death phenomenon in the Nazarite Church. The scope of

this study, being a short thesis, did not allow for a collection of a large number of narratives and an examination of all the main areas of concern in the study of near-death experiences. Other scholars conducted their studies over long periods of time and were able to gather many testimonies, and as a result their studies carry more weight than this one. For instance, Moody spent about four to five years conducting research, and was able to gather 150 stories out of which he wrote *Life After Life*. Also, P.M.H. Atwater investigated the near-death phenomenon for fifteen years in which she was able to get 700 narratives. The results of her work are contained in *Beyond the Light* (1994). In contrast, this study was conducted in less than a year and comprises only ten testimonies.

The fact that Moody's book, *Life After Life*, was a bestseller, and that John Edward's programme, "Crossing Over" was brought back by SABC 3 after it had been ended some few years ago, means that there are many people in this world who are interested in the question of life after death and what happens when we die. Because of this worldwide interest, I believe that the near-death phenomenon needs to be studied more extensively in Africa as a whole and in South Africa in particular. Such studies will make an important contribution to the already available literature on the near-death phenomenon.

Whether they are real or not, and whether or not they provide a glimpse of life after death, narratives of near-death experiences have a real place in the Nazarite Church. They are deployed by experiencers and members in their imagining of individual and collective identities within the church. In exploring these experiences and the role they play in the Nazarite Church, I believe this study has been able to reveal at least part of the "otherwise hidden forms of consciousness" in this important religious

movement.

Bibliography

Atwater, P.M.H. *Beyond the Light: Near-Death Experiences – The Full Story*.

London: Thorsons, 1994.

Bassnett, S. and Trivedi, H. (eds) *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*.

London/ New York: Routledge, 1999.

Bauman R. and Briggs, C.L. “Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on

Language and Social Life”. *Annual Review of Anthropology*.

19 1990: 50-88.

Becken, H. J. “Introduction.” in Oosthuizen G. C. and Hexham, I. (Eds) *The Story of*

*Isaiah Shembe: History and Traditions Centred at Ekuphakameni and
Mount Nhlankazi*. (Vol.1) (Trans. H. J. Becken) Lewiston/

Queenstown/ Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.

Biesele, M. “ ‘Different People Just Have Different Minds’ A Personal Attempt to

Understand Ju/'hoan Storytelling Aesthetics.” in Duncan Brown (ed)

Oral Literature and Performance in Southern Africa. Cape Town:

David Philip, 1999: 161- 175.

Blackmore, S. *Beyond the Body: An Investigation of Out-of-the-Body-Experience*.

London: Heinemann, 1982.

----- *Dying to Live: Near Death Experience*. New York: Prometheus Books,

1993.

Brown, D. “Orality and Christianity: The Hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of

the Nazarites.” *Current Writing*. 7 (2) 1995: 69-95.

----- “Introduction.” in Brown, Duncan (ed) *Oral Literature and Performance*

in Southern Africa. Cape Town: David Philip, 1999: 1-17.

- Bozzoli, B. *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983*. Portsmouth: Heinmann, 1991.
- Couzens, T. *The New African: A Study of Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo*. Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985.
- Dube, J. *UShembe*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1936.
- Edward, J. *Crossing Over: The Stories Behind the Stories*. New York: Princess Books, 2001.
- "Crossing Over." SABC 3 Program (April 4 and April 11 2005, 11:30 to 12:00 noon).
- Gunner, E. "New Wine in Old Bottles: Imagery in the Izibongo of a Zulu Zionist Prophet, Isaiah Shembe". *Antropological Society of Oxford Journal*. 13 1982: 99 – 108.
- "The Word, the Book and the Zulu Church of Nazareth." in Whitaker, R.A. and Sienaet, E.R. (eds) *Oral Tradition and Literacy: Changing Visions of the Word*. Durban: University of Natal Documentation and Research Centre. 1986: 179-188.
- "Power House Prison House – An Oral Genre and its Use in Isaiah Shembe's Nazarene Baptist Church." *Journal of Southern African Studies*. 14 (2) 1988: 204-227.
- *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God: Writing From the Nazaretha Church*. Leiden/ London/ Köln: Brill, 2002.
- Hofmeyr, I. *We Spend Our Years as the Tale that is Told: Oral Historical Narratives in a South African Chiefdom*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1991.
- *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of the Pilgrim's Progress*.

- Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2004.
- Johnson, R. and Dawson, G. "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method." in Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (ed) *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998: 74 – 86.
- M'asúmiàn, F. *Life After Death: A Study of the Afterlife in World Religions*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995.
- Moody, A. R. *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon-Survival of Bodily Death*. New York: Bantam-Mockingbird Books, 1975.
- *Beyond The Light*. London: Chivers Press, 1988.
- Muller, C. *Nazarite Song, Dance and Dreams: The Sacralisation of Time, Space and the Female Body in South Africa*. PhD Thesis: University of New York, 1994a.
- "Nazarite women, Ritual Performance and the Construction of Cultural Truth and Power". *Current Writing*. 6 (2) 1994b: 127-138.
- *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire: Nazarite Women's Performances in South Africa*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Oosthuizen, G. C. *The Theology of the South African Messiah: An Analysis of the Hymnal of the 'Church of the Nazarites'* Leiden: Brill, 1976.
- *The Healer Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches* Leiden-New York-Köln: Brill, 1992.
- Oosthuizen, G.C. and Hexham, I (ed) *The Story of Isaiah Shembe: History and Traditions Centred at Ekuphakameni and Mount Nhlankakazi* (vol. 1) (Trans. H. J. Becken) Lewiston/ Queenstown/ Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.

- The Story of Isaiah Shembe: Early Regional Traditions of the Acts of Nazarites* (vol. 2) (Trans. H.J. Becken) Lewiston/Queenstown/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999.
- Perks, R. and Thompson, A. (ed). *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Said, E. *Orientalism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978.
- Said, E. "Orientalism." In Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin (eds) *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995: 87-91.
- Samuel, R. "Perils of the Transcript." in Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (ed) *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998: 389- 392.
- Spivak, G. C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Laurence Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988: 271-313.
- Sundkler, B.G.M. *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*. London/ New York/ Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- Zulu Zion*. London: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Vilakazi, A. et al. *Shembe: The Revitalisation of African Society*. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986.
- West, G. *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a dialogical reading of the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.