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IMAGES OF ISAIAH SHEMBE
An appraisal of the views of Mthembeni Mpanza

ABSTRACT
Isaiah Shembe, founder of the Isonto lamaNazaretha, has been variously interpreted by scholars of African Indigenous Christianity. Some have called him a Zulu Messiah, others have doubted his sincerity and seen him as a false prophet in the tradition of Mlanjeni and Nongqawuse. Following the collapse of the 'post-Christianity' debate started by the likes of G.C. Oosthuizen, more recent scholarship has explained the significance of Isaiah Shembe not only in terms of the religious tradition he formulated, but also the pervasive spirit that continues to perpetuate the Shembe faith. Some recent interpreters see Isaiah Shembe as a divine figure, perhaps with a stature on par with or even greater than such figures as Moses, Mohammed and Jesus Christ. Mthembeni Mpanza, an influential modern interpreter of the Shembe tradition, holds that Shembe was Holy Spirit, the third person in the Godhead. This essay critically evaluates Mpanza's assertions and considers whether Mpanza is re-creating the Shembe. If so, what is the meaning of such a re-creation in the cumulative tradition of the Shembe faith?

INTRODUCTION
The life and meaning of Isaiah Shembe (1865-1935) has been a subject of intense debate in South African religious and social history. To the White European and Afrikaner settlers in South Africa, Shembe was a Zulu political revolutionary who attempted to use religion to accomplish political ends. He was thus regarded as a subversive element that had to be controlled by the State. However, it was his reinterpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Torah, which attracted the curiosity of missionary scholars. His authoritative presence in the movement he founded led White observers to see him as an impostor, a 'beguiler who had come to distort true Christianity. In the eyes of missionary scholars and preachers, Shembe was a Zulu Moses pretender. He had carefully made himself such by proclaiming that he had entered into a covenant with Jehovah on behalf of the Zulu

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nation. For this reason Shembe was regarded as an Old Testament irrelevance with little or no regard of Jesus Christ. Serious scholarship, on the other hand, has variously categorised him as a Black Messiah; a saviour of sorts sent to the Zulu nation; an unrelenting pioneer of the re-vitalisation of African society through a peculiar emphasis on Zulu nationalism, or a religious genius and ascetic personality who made God real and tangible amongst the Zulus of his time.

Mthembeni Mpanza agrees with all the positive labels scholars and social commentators have given Shembe. But as a second generation follower of the Shembe, and by virtue of the fact that he learned the faith from his mother who was not only a devoted eye-witness of the life and times of Isaiah Shembe, but also an adopted daughter of the Prophet, Mpanza regards himself qualified to interpret the Shembe faith for today’s generation. Mpanza’s main sources are the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the Shembe tradition and the Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha (the Shembe Hymnal).

His conclusion is that Shembe was the divine figure called Melchizedek in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Word in the Johannine tradition. As the Word, the pre-existent Shembe was translated into flesh in the person of Isaiah Shembe. He was the Spirit promised by Jesus of Nazareth to his disciples. According to Mpanza, Shembe’s mission is to confirm the Moses and Jesus traditions by re-igniting a new faith experience – UbuNazaretha – that is a result of the intermarriage of Judaism, Christianity and Zulu cosmology. The reflections of Mpanza are fresh, vigorous and decidedly scandalous to the dictates of conventional Christianity. Mpanza claims that even when he was alive, Shembe was the Holy Spirit. Accounts of believers who saw him in dreams and visions are abundant in the Shembe tradition, and the fact that he has sacred dwellings in the form of mansions in places like Swaziland and KwaZulu-Natal proves that even today the original Shembe is still alive.

A SEARCH FOR THE HISTORICAL SHEMBE

Isaiah Shembe was born in 1865 of traditional Zulu parents at Ntabamhlophe near Estcourt in the Drakensberg region. He, however, grew up away from Zululand at a place called Harrismith among the baSotho of the “Orange Free State” where his father was a landless farm-dweller. His first encounter with Christianity took place while he was on those farmlands. Chidester (1992) points out that Shembe was first converted to the African Native Baptist Church under whose auspices he conducted faith-healing
sessions and open-air-baptisms. Sundkler’s (1948) pioneering study of
Bantu Prophets in South Africa argues that actually Shembe received his
divine call well before he met any missionary. This is confirmed by the
Shembe tradition, now recognised by current scholarship on the Shembe.
Other accounts claim that Shembe was first converted to the Wesleyan
Church. According to some of these accounts that have influenced pheno­
menological approaches in the study of Shembe, he left the Methodist
Church because of a dispute over baptism. Shaped by his social back­
ground and a litany of dreams and visions, Shembe was to become a
powerful religious figure, an enigma of sorts at a time when the Zulu
kingdom had collapsed.

Missionary Christianity had come of age in South Africa at the turn of the
twentieth century. One of its by-products was the proliferation of African-led
churches that had seceded from white-led churches for political reasons.
Sundkler called these churches “Ethiopian” because of their emphasis on
Africa for the Africans, a political slogan denoting African nationalism.
Ethiopian formations, while stressing the African way of doing things,
retained the basic theology and liturgy of their “mother” churches. Alongside
these developments, there arose the Zionist type churches. Their distin­
guishing mark was the great emphasis they put on faith-healing and the
symbiotic dependence on Umoya (Spirit) as the life-force in their creation of
the new community. Although claiming an American parentage, South
African Zionism borrowed a lot from the symbolic world of the African
experience. These symbols were re-worked in the light of the new Christian
faith, thus producing a totally different scheme of faith. Both the Ethiopians
and Zionists were seen as a threat not only to the tendencies of a
segregationist society, but also to the “true Christian faith” as taught by the
missionary churches.

Isaiah Shembe was, therefore, a product of this three-pronged ex­
perience: his unapologetic Zuluism; the Methodism of his time that had
experienced secessions since the 1884 establishment of the Tembu Church
by Nehemiah Tile; and the African Native Baptist Church. The latter was
Ethiopian in origin, having been founded in the tradition of the African
Methodist Episcopal Church. Shembe’s mission was to the Zulu nation, the
children of Senzangakhona. In his long faith pilgrimage he employed a
complex matrix of religious reality that patterned the formal liturgy of
Methodism and the free movement of Spirit of the African Baptists, within a
totalising world-view of the Zulu experience. It is this genius that made
Shembe stand tall at a time when Zulu leadership was seen as a threat to
the white establishment. The uniqueness of the Shembe lies in the fact that
he organised the Zulu nation around a pacifist religious ethic that em-
phasised the creation of an alternative community upon the dual foundation of the Hebrew Scriptures and Zulu customs and traditions.

Irving Hexham (1994), in an attempt to explain who Shembe was, observes that he occupies a place in religious history. What remains to be solved is not whether Shembe indeed occupies this place, for the evidence is abundant in the growing membership of Southern Africans who are attracted to his movement. Mthembeni Mpanza, a current leading interpreter of Isaiah Shembe’s theology and also an influential Evangelist in the hierarchy of command in the Ibandla lamaNazaretha, estimates current membership to be about two million. Hexham (1994:xv) acknowledges (as does Mpanza) that Isaiah Shembe’s conversion experiences were pre-Christian in the sense that he had not seen or heard any missionary of the Christian religion prior to his conversion, but nonetheless he “began a walk with God and over the course of his lifetime received many revelations from God.”

So, who was Isaiah Shembe? What is the nature of this place he occupies in the religious tradition? Does he fall in the same religious tradition or category as Ignatius Lekganyane of the Zion Christian Church, Melika Vilakati of the Swazi Christian Church – Jerico, or John Masowe, Simon Kimbangu, etc.? Or is he in the same Christian tradition as reformers like John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther, John Wesley? To assist western readers, Hexham makes a comparison between Shembe and John Bunyan. His observations need not concern us here. What remains evident is that whether western scholarship labels him a prophet or a Zulu Messiah, the followers of Isaiah Shembe regard him as something closer to God. How close Shembe is to being a God is what this essay will attempt to indicate. The mystery that challenges any academic inquiry is that when one observes Shembe’s followers in worship one senses the pervading presence of the Shembe, the Shembe they seem to behold and experience as they sing and dance and pray.

**ON METHOD**

Sundkler (1961) characterised Isaiah Shembe as a Zulu Messiah with strong African prophetic tendencies. Sundkler’s study was unique in that he allowed himself as a scholar to listen to the testimonies of Shembe’s followers, and then tried faithfully to record, with a minimal degree of interpretation, what he heard. The following quotation illustrates Sundkler’s method:

> Long after his death, and perhaps particularly after his death, the Servant extends his influence. One of Catechist Ngcobo’s relatives states that the Father (here the name
for Isaiah Shembe) came in a dream to his father, a non-Nazarite. The Servant told the pagan dreamer: 'I send you to tell them that they must not say that I am dead. If they say so they are guilty before God. I am not dead. I am still alive. May they not be tired. I shall return. I am still hiding over there, near the mountain.' These testimonies as a rule lead to a conclusion, a final oratorical question which gives the clue to the whole problem. Shembe heals and satisfies and overcomes all evil. 'Then I asked myself: Hhawu, kanti sihamba nobani? Oh, forsooth, with whom are we walking? Could he be any other than God?'

Sundkler's method reveals that to answer any question about Isaiah Shembe one has to observe, listen and appreciate the voices of the followers of this man they call "Our Father." In this scenario the researcher has to shelve any preconceived notions he or she may have of Shembe in particular, or African Indigenous Churches in general. The serious programme of the study is then approached from the point of view of a critical listener that is willing to respect the faith claims of the followers of Shembe, the listener that will ask questions and record these claims without passing judgement. The critical listener will, of course, be aware of the Eurocentric interpretations of African social fact, the unfortunate distortions that African religions were founded on archaic forms of demon worship, and that African Indigenous Churches were thus regarded as bridges back to that pagan past. The listener, having been liberated from Eurocentric persuasions, will on the other hand not yield to a romanticisation or glorification of African social fact as given by some Africanists or similar apologists.

In the study of Shembe, for example, one notices a shift of paradigms, especially from the early writings of G.C. Oosthuizen, who characterised the Shembe movement in nativistic terms as "post-Christian," to the "converted" scholarship that carefully listens to the voices of the followers of Shembe. After listening to Londa Shembe (the Third Shembe, Isaiah's grandson), for instance, G.C. Oosthuizen (1994:xxiv) recorded:

He (Londa Shembe) firmly believed that Isaiah Shembe, his grandfather, had a special place in the celestial sphere. For him, Isaiah Shembe was a messianic figure who had been a messiah to eight other peoples before he was incarnated into the Zulu people. Thus, Londa Shembe saw Isaiah Shembe as a global figure who was born into the Zulu nation at a specific stage of their history to be their messiah. But, in his view, Isaiah Shembe was a cosmic messiah who should not be identified with the Zulus alone.

Oosthuizen's later views may be suspected of suffering from uncritical listenership, or even from an overcompensation of descriptive terms resulting from this scholar's academic guilty conscience of yesteryear. In what reads like theological confusion in the same essay quoted above, Oosthuizen raises a polemic that, in my view, is a 'hangover from what
Absalom Vilakazi, B. Mthethwa and M. Mpanza (1986) and Sundkler (1976) charged him with on the question of God and the Shembe. Oosthuizen had insisted that Shembe had usurped the place of God and Jesus Christ as can be deciphered from the hymns, the *izihlabelelo zama Nazaretha*. In an obvious answer to this charge, Oosthuizen (1994:xxvi) posits that Shembe is neither God nor a black Jesus Christ. He is not a god either. Isaiah Shembe was, and is, a reflection of "Jehovah", for his spirit continues to control the minds and hearts of the believers. Londa Shembe, according to Oosthuizen(1994) “believed that the spirit of his grandfather, Isaiah Shembe, was manifest in his father, Johannes Galille Shembe, and finally, in his own person, thus giving unique authority to his own ministry.”

Vilakazi *et al.* (1986) and Sundkler had questioned Oosthuizen on his seeming Afrikaner missionary motif in his inquiry and on his inadequate knowledge of the Zulu language. He does not answer these charges. Rather he agrees that Shembe is not God, but a reflection, or mirror, of the Jewish God “Jehovah” amongst the Zulus. Oosthuizen’s justification can be found in the predominant strands of Old Testament reconfigurations in Shembe’s theology. I have said that Oosthuizen answers his critics with a confused theological analysis. This can be seen in his failure to make a convincing distinction between the Christian God, that he obviously is talking about, and the Jewish Jehovah. While he agrees with Sundkler and other scholars that Shembe was a messiah, Oosthuizen seems to deny that he was a “black Jesus Christ.” Yet he goes on to underscore the fact that Shembe’s mission “was to restore his people to the previous glory, and this he believed could be done on the basis of God’s presence among the Zulu people in the same way as God had revealed His presence to ancient Israel” (Oosthuizen 1994:xxvii). Sundkler (1961:159) never hesitated to call Shembe a black Christ. Vilakazi *et al.* (1986:39) argued that Shembe perceived himself as a messenger of God to the black people in the same sense as Mohammed was sent to Arabs and Jesus to the Jews.

This sense of messiahship has transcended the South African era of segregation when the land question predominated the white agenda of African dispossession, the apartheid era that enforced with impunity the subdivision of South African land mass into Bantustans and the denial of black suffrage in the political community. My own encounter with a community of amaNazaretha has indicated that the sense of Shembe’s messiahship transcended the 1994 landmark era when black South Africans finally won independence in the country of their birth. David Chidester (1992:124) observes generally of Zionist Churches, that they afford “alternative temporal orientation by referring back to ancient, biblical religious life, but also by looking forward to the imminent return of Christ that.
would establish a new kingdom on earth." While avoiding calling Shembe a messiah, Hastings (1994) argued that the name Shembe appeals to Zulu Christians' (sic!) spiritual consciousness on what God and Christ signify to them.

My argument on method is, therefore, that in order to establish the nature of the unique space Shembe occupies in religious history, we should listen carefully and critically to the voices of the followers in the context of the total economy of Shembe religion. Once we start doing that, we shall discover, first, that Shembe was who he understood himself to be. He did make claims about himself and the nature of his ministry. Later understandings of who he was can be gleaned from the sermons and explanations given by his followers. Second, a critical listener will grapple with apologetic material produced by Shembe's followers in their attempt to recover the Shembe lost in western and other ambitious scholarship. Apologists, as we shall discover, have an agenda to paint a grand view of their subject. As critical listeners we have a challenge to sift through the tomes of theological bombshells and debris with the end-in-view of identifying the untainted nature of the Shembe. I should admit that this exercise, while seemingly exciting, is very difficult indeed. This is because, as the apologists defend their founder-leader, they also seem to discover and recreate him in the process.

What then would an exercise that seeks to discover the untainted Shembe accomplish? Who cares about that Shembe anyhow? Are we not again falling in the same trap of stereotyping African social fact by making it something that fascinates the curiosity of the academic?

Apologetic material on the Shembe is compounded by the biblical foundation of what I have preferred to call the Shembe religion. If Shembe is indeed Holy, and is Spirit, the third figure in the God-head, how does he (or it) manifests itself to the Zulus today? Legendary material on the Shembe indicates that Isaiah Shembe received his tutor ship of the Bible directly from God. Let us agree with this legendary position for a while. But it would appear that the central question is what Shembe did with the biblical revelations he received. If indeed he was a Zulu messiah, sent first to the children of Senzangakhona, (King Shaka's father), and then to Africans and the people of the world generally, why did he build his theological kingdom on the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the concept of the Sabbath, the Ark of the Covenant, and the predominantly Zulu worldview?
Mthembeni Mpanza

On the latter theme, this essay shall attempt to examine the apologetic material on who Shembe was, and is, through the eyes of one Mthembeni Mpanza. After reading some materials written by him, and hearing him on audio tape making presentations, I visited him at his home at Ulundi in KwaZulu-Natal. Arriving there about an hour before the commencement of the Sabbath on a Friday evening, I was to spend the next 40 hours experiencing the spiritual world of the Shembe faithful, the intensity and fondness that the Shembe means to his people, and the Zulu nationalism and pride this fondness instils in the adherents.

Rev. Mpanza is an excited and passionate follower of the Shembe religion. He was so generous with deep theological analysis, an analysis which he clearly owns and cherishes, that he felt spiritually elated as our discussions on the faith progressed. As a keen listener, I had purposed on submerging myself into the teachings and Sabbath rituals as though I had never been a believer before. My sense of critical listenership dictated that I present myself as an uncritical clean slate, something of a challenge to my host. For the whole time that I was with him and his community of believers he could not be intimidated by my academic credentials or mission. He thoughtfully remarked as we were doing some casual shopping after the break of the Sabbath that he sometimes wonders himself if he indeed was a normal person. That was an indication that as we journeyed through the life and meaning of the Shembe, Rev. Mpanza had undergone a sense of spiritual exaltation, a sense that drew him to the presence of the Shembe he continually called UbabaMkhulu, or Grandfather, and the other succeeding Shembes, Ilanga (the Sun) and Inyanga (The Moon).

Mpanza is a born Shembe follower. Her mother was Isaiah Shembe’s adopted daughter. She got the faith directly from the feet of the Servant of Sorrows, and imparted it faithfully to her offspring, of which Mthembeni was to emerge a great teacher and preserver of the tradition. The fact that Mpanza recounts the oral history and stories of the mysterious experiences of the Shembe with such religious fanaticism is obviously due to the fact that he was told these stories as a little child. It was not a matter of believing them. To him they are as natural as being told that water is essential for one’s health.

A careful reading of the writings of Isaiah Shembe – comprising the hymnal, prayers, parables and miracles – reveals that he was not obsessed or preoccupied with explaining who he was. It was enough for him to be known as the servant of Jehovah (isikhonzi sika Nkukunkulu), or, the man of sorrows, always itinerant with no place to rest. Some sources, however,
make an attempt to portray him as a Jesus type. Hexham and Oosthuizen (1996) record accounts by Petros M. Dlomo, Khanya S. Ndelu, Daniel Dube and Masijula Shange, among others, that present Isaiah Shembe as a New Testament Christ figure continuous with the synoptic, Johannine, and apostolic traditions. Petros Dlomo narrates a healing miracle in which Shembe prayed for a dead little girl. The story reminds one of the little girl of Nain that Jesus called back to life. After Shembe had performed the miracle, her parents enquired what they should pay as a token of thanks. Shembe declined to accept anything, claiming that ‘God cannot be paid’ for the acts of grace he does. Dlomo writes (Hexham & Oosthuizen 1996:30):

They asked: ‘Are you then God?’ He said: ‘No; but your child has been healed in His name’ (Acts 7:18-22). They said: ‘But is there not even a small thing by which we could express our gratitude?’ He said: ‘Repent and believe in the Lord, in whom I believe, so that you may be saved like your daughter.’ Then they requested him to stay with them for a few days as their guest; however, he did not agree, because he had no time. He rose and went off still on the same day.

Furthermore, narrating the story of the baptism of Shembe, Ndelu records that when he was in the water, the Word said to him: ‘Shembe, I separated you from your wives and from your cattle, and from all things which are there today; you are my firstborn.’ Another example is the commissioning of Shembe following his baptism. The accounts by Dlomo and Ndelu bear a strong New Testament influence. Shembe is recorded as having responded thus:

Today the Spirit of God works within me: he has clearly spoken by his word, while many do not know Him, and has witnessed, that the people should be baptized in the water. When Jesus was baptized and still standing in the water, the Word said to him: ‘You are my beloved son; listen to him.’ (Matt.3:3-17). When a man likes to work for God, he should ardently desire the gifts that come from the Lord. The man, who is moved by the Spirit of the Lord to preach, does not lack words; and when he will preach to the people, his words will speak in their hearts (Hexham & Oosthuizen 1996:36).

In all the accounts that have been recorded and those that exist in the oral history, the life, teachings and miracles of Shembe bear resemblance to those of Jesus Christ, although with distinct Zulu features and nuances. The above cited cases are products of heavy editorial work by the authors who are obviously biased towards portraying a New Testament Jesus type. It may be a subject of another inquiry if indeed such portrayals should be relied upon. Whereas I am aware of the obvious attempts to situate the Shembe in the Christian tradition because of the callous treatment he received from missionaries and the white establishment in apartheid South
Africa, I am not convinced of the necessity of such attempts. For example, I ask if they do not result in the distortion of the faith Isaiah Shembe came to teach.

But, more importantly, if Shembe is indeed a Zulu messiah, or Jehovah's messenger to the children of Senzangakona, and Jesus was a messenger to the Jews as was Mohammed to the Arabs, why does Shembe so copy the ministry and person of Christ that he runs the risk of plagiarism? I should note in this connection that the childhood accounts of Isaiah Shembe contain legendary material much comparable to that of Jesus Christ. His mother plucked a sweet-smelling flower while still a maiden. She swallowed this flower, preventing it from being taken away from her by other maidens. Tradition describes her as sinless, sincere, respectful and virgin. After swallowing the flower, she heard a voice instructing her: "Sitheya, my daughter, don’t pollute yourself by beer-drinking and premarital sexual intercourse, for you will give birth to the Servant of God!" There were a number of similar incidents in which Sitheya was constantly reminded that she would give birth to the "Lord who will save all the nations."

Accounts of Shembe's youthful days tell of his miraculous acts and numerous conversations with God. They depict him as a strange mysterious figure, ascetic and deeply spiritual. He married four wives, and later abandoned them at the instruction of a voice. He was a preacher and faith-healer whose fame spread to many regions in South Africa. Shembe listened and carried out the instructions he received from these voices. In some cases he struggled with the messages, but eventually he would yield to the demands made. There is no doubt that Shembe must have perceived himself as a special person, a servant, separated and appointed to perform great miracles for the sake of leading the Zulu nation to the true knowledge of Jehovah. Worrying as the accounts that portray him as a New Testament Jesus type are, the followers of Shembe are comfortable with this portrayal. It is a portrayal that did not worry him for, as I shall indicate below, he knew what the difference was between him and Jesus Christ.

David Chidester (1992) describes Isaiah Shembe as having created a new and separate religious order. While his initial followers were attracted by his powers of healing, with time it was “the security and stability that his Church provided in a world that seemed to have been turned upside down by the destruction of the Zulu kingdom, the failed rebellion of 1906, and the widespread dispossession of land that followed the Native Land Act of 1913.” Sundkler (1961) agrees that the land question was so critical during the early development of South African Zionism and Ethiopianism that "apocalyptic patterns of the Zionist or Messianic myths" developed and gained strength. Sundkler (1961:330) notes that the success of each Church
rested on whether it was able to find land for its followers. For this reason the Black Prophet resonated with the Old Testament experiences of the Israelites, a landless people who found divine favour and were promised a land flowing with milk and honey by Jehovah. Explaining the prevalence of the Jehovah principle amongst Zionist Churches, Sundkler argues that a "Bantu Servant" concept developed behind the shield of Jehovah. This Servant was the one who would be called from amongst his kith and kin, and who would be listened to by the people: "The prophet had one ambition upon earth: to find, like Moses, a land for his people, the Promised Land. In fact, when he died, Shembe left an estate of some thirteen farms."

In his prayer for the Zulu nation (Hexham1994:61-65), Shembe asked God, the Thixo of Ekuphakameni, to save the Zulu nation and unite it: His heart was filled with sorrow and sadness as he prayed this prayer. He prayed that the curse upon the Zulus wrought through inheritance from former Zulu kings Shaka, Dingane, Mpande and Cetshwayo, should no longer be remembered. In a bold assertion, Shembe says these Zulu kings were evil. In other words, through and because of their evil deeds, the Zulu nation carried a curse. Then he pleads that the Zulu nation should turn to the new Thixo who appeared amongst the people. A prophet has been raised, Shembe claims, and all Zulus "must look to the new Thixo through whom we will be saved. We must not look to the curses." Shembe here gives the promise that the advent of the new Thixo of Ekuphakameni has taken away the curse upon the Zulu nation, for he is the forgiveness of the Zulus. The prayer shifts suddenly to the land question. A piece of land had been secured near Ntanda, but upon discovering that the purchaser was a black man, the authorities schemed to nullify the deal. Shembe refused to accept the reversal because Thixo had consented to the deal. He testifies in the prayer:

The new Thixo of our ancestors, who never forsook us, was there in the midst of that meeting. He unravelled the counsels of that gathering and today the land of Ntanda is in our hands thanks to the Thixo of Ekuphakameni. Should we not then hold on to him? We and our children? And our chiefs? And our Ndunas? We must hold on to the Thixo who hears whom we have today ... Should we not deeply concentrate our hearts on the new Thixo who has entered into a covenant with us today? Who gave us a prophet who does not have the stain of the teachings of foreign nations?

The theology of the Shembe on the land question is that Zulus were dispossessed and dispossessed because of the sins of their evil ancestors, the Zulu kings cited above. Shembe does not specify exactly what these sins are. However, his distaste of violence might give us a clue since all these kings he cites had proclivities of sorts to violence. Two of his hymns express
this pilgrimage from desolation and destruction to hope and restoration. Gunner (2002:221) has translated them thus:

Hymn 21

Our land is broken into pieces
Not a soul lives in our homesteads
We are widows and orphans
Oh Lord of the Sabbath
Why have you deserted us?

Hymn 46

Arise Africa
Seek out your Saviour
The time is right
The nations are leaving you behind

The name of God, Thixo, is used by Shembe in this prayer in an ambiguous distinction from Nkulunkulu, the Zulu name of God. Thixo is originally a Khoi name of God that missionaries who first preached in the eastern Cape mistook for a Xhosa name of God. Although the early Xhosa people made a distinction between Thixo, the God of the missionaries, and Mdalidiphu or Qamatha, the God of the blacks, the vernacular translation of the Bible carried Thixo, and it was this Xhosa translation that was read throughout the Cape during the heyday of Methodist expansion right up to Zululand before orthography for the other Nguni ethnic groups could be established. In any event, Shembe is not making any deliberate distinction between Thixo and Nkulunkulu who he also refers to as Jehovah. He narrates in the prayer that it was Jehovah who made the revelation that the Ntanda land should be purchased by Shembe. This was relayed as a revelation to him who is the physical embodiment of Jehovah. It was Jehovah, the God of the Land, however, who impressed upon the whites to accede to the deal, despite their decision to renege. When the deal was accomplished, all praise was due to the new Thixo. The emphasis on the new Thixo should be understood as a paradigm shift from Jehovah, the violent God of the Promised Land, as Oosthuizen would agree, to the peaceful Jehovah who has come, through his servant Shembe, to restore land back to the Zulu nation through non-violent means. Shembe was a mere embodiment of Jehovah, the God of the Sabbath and the Covenant, again Old Testament derivatives of the pillars of the Shembe religion as taught and practised by the Zulu nation. He was
the revelation of this God amongst the Zulus, as Sundkler (1961:278-279) was to learn from one sermon:

You, my people, were once told of a God who has neither arms nor legs, who cannot see, who has neither love nor pity. But Isaiah Shembe showed you a God who walks on feet and who heals with his hands, and who can be known by men, a God who loves and has compassion.

Emphasising the servant principle, Shembe evokes his eternal allegiance to the “Great Nkosi”, at his KwaSumisa Prayer of Perseverance (Hexham 1994:103-104). He pledges that he would not commit sin before the God who called him to service. He would remain devoted to him until the very end. He gives us an apocalyptic glimpse of the scene where he will receive his final reward that will be given him not because of his will or righteousness, but because of the grace of the Great Nkosi. In that apocalyptic experience the Elector of the Heavens will decorate him with apparel of the Feast. Like a triumphant soldier, he will be made to ride in a chariot, parading splendid vestments “of the Feast of being – Nkosi.” He will come upon multitudes whereupon climbing down from the chariot, there will be great shouts: “An Amazing Thing has Happened!” The crowds will be amazed to see him vested in the Feast of Khonzekile (the one who is worthy of worship), “the Thixo of the Heaven, the one who is praiseworthy among all the firstborn of Heaven.” This apocalypse of Shembe reminds us about that of John at Patmos. Shembe’s crowds shout about an amazing occurrence, while those of John will shout: “Worthy is the Lamb!.” Both Jesus and Shembe are victorious after having been men of sorrows, preaching and spreading the Word of Jehovah, undergoing various indignities.

Sundkler (1961:281-284) expanded the black Christ dogma of the Shembe by indicating that Isaiah Shembe regarded himself as the “Promised One”, hence occupying a status greater than that of a prophet. In hymn 214 Shembe proclaims that “The Liberator has arrived to the Zulus.” In hymn 60 he sees his coming to the Zulus as an act of God’s grace and righteousness, the Jehovah who has remembered his people. He is the first of “thy way” (hymn 71) and has power to forgive sins (hymn 217). In his theological self-understanding Shembe gradually downplayed the importance and centrality of Jesus Christ. Vilakazi et al. (1986) repudiate Sundkler for having made that observation. The credal hymn 154 Sundkler referred to depicts a Trinitarian belief in the Father, the Holy Spirit and the Holy Assembly of the amanazaretha. Vilakazi does not indicate why Sundkler’s observation was an “unjustified, unsubstantiated jibe at Shembe”, but does explain the Zulu relationship between father and son. The son’s glory can never be exalted to the point of overshadowing that of the father in Zulu
thought. Vilakazi observes that this position is generally adopted by the followers of Shembe, who are not comfortable with the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

The observation of Sundkler, which I endorse, was further supported by Londa Shembe in 1980 during an interview with G.C. Oosthuizen (1994:xxv). I shall quote Londa’s explanation in full:

When Isaiah started you find Jesus, for example, in Hymn 2 which was the first hymn he composed on Mount Nhlangakazi. In many of the songs and early hymns, Jesus’ name appeared but towards the middle period no specific references are made to Jesus, but the references are to “Nkulunkulu”, “uMvelingqangi”, and “Jehovah.” Towards the end, it is neither Jesus nor Jesus Christ but Baba Isaiah himself. Isaiah Shembe in the last hymn states he went to the valley of sorrow/distress, cf. Hymn 219:4. His flock has broken his word. It is now his word that they have broken. One sees here how he has been growing. When one looks at the Ezitsha (objects) that he used for communion, there was a crucifix inside the box which means that he accepted it but gradually grew more into himself. “When the bell rings at nine o’clock”, he said, “you must remember me.” That’s why the services at all the churches and mission stations start at nine.

It is possible that Isaiah Shembe acquired this self-consciousness both from his reading of the Bible and the pressures of apartheid exerted upon the Zulu nation. As Vilakazi et al. (1986:39) state, “Shembe accepted the designation of ‘prophet’ and that his perception of himself, therefore, was that he was sent to the Black people as much as Mohammed was sent to the Arabs and Jesus Christ to the Jews.” Vilakazi et al. (1986) attempt, with very limited success, to indicate how Shembe was sacralised. The authors stress his ability to perform miracles: “The godlike power of giving children to the barren and helping the halt (sic) and the maim (sic) to walk.” There is need to further explain why Shembe’s pilgrimage from being a typical Zulu polygamist to celibacy, why the visions and mountain experiences, made him different from other African prophets of his time. The authors seem to explain his sacredness by virtue of his location amongst the Zulus who needed a “new social ballast” as a result of the destabilisation that had taken place due to white encroachment in South Africa. The case would have been stronger if reference had been made to the “Pre-existent Shembe” who, as I shall elaborate below, was the King who came from the other world (Oosthuizen 1994), to become the King of Kings; the centre and circumference of the church he founded, indeed to be the Moses who would lead the Zulu nation to the promised land. While Shembe taught respect for the authorities, he promoted a deep spiritual sense of resistance (Gunner 2002:7-8) that urged Zulus to desist from worshipping their enemies.
Apartheid was to be resisted in the context of worship, dance and prayer in the presence of the Servant of Jehovah, the King of Ekuphakameni.

The notion of the Pre-existent Shembe is expressed vividly in hymn 71, where the Prophet testifies about the eternal love of Jehovah who loved him before creating the mountains and the valleys. Jehovah anointed and appointed him before the waters were separated and heaven and earth were created. Shembe was created before all else and is thus the Father’s firstborn. It is this notion of the Shembe that fascinated Londa, his Grandson who became the Third Shembe. Mthembeni Mpanza has strenuously developed this idea in his many sermons and writings. Addressing amaNazaretha at the beachfront in Durban on 23 October 2001, Mpanza explained that the name Shembe is not only a surname and first name of Isaiah Shembe given him by his grandfather Nhliziyo. It also refers to the Holy Spirit which dwells in the leadership of the church as well as among the amaNazaretha. It is difficult to understand how Mpanza has come to hold that the name Shembe means Holy Spirit. But his is the predominant view, the oral theology he has received from the tradition. He does not provide a root meaning or origin of this name in the Zulu language, but rather explains it in terms of its religio-sociological significance as defining the person and function of Shembe the Prophet. Quoting a 1931 sermon preached by Shembe, Mpanza points out that he was not a normal person. He could not know who exactly he was for he was with Moses in the wilderness, and when his mission is accomplished, he will return to the firmament “to await for another nation that has deviated from the way of God.” This claim places the Shembe above the tradition of religious leaders like Mohammed and Jesus, as this is his fifth time on earth. He has been to different nations at different times. A day before he passed on in May 1935, Shembe said: "My flesh is tired. It will lie in the grave. But my Spirit shall rise and cover a new flesh. From time immemorial I was born; and forever I shall be."

According to Mpanza, the theology of the amaNazaretha does not emphasize the advent of the Prophet in the flesh per se but the re-descent of the Spirit of the late prophet upon another. Shembe, as a Spirit of God, as a Prophet, does not die. He is omnipresent, almighty and divine. He is everlasting. What dies at Ekuphakameni is Shembe in the flesh, and the Spiritual Shembe continues to live in another successor in the leadership of the amaNazaretha. This view was first enunciated by Londa Shembe, albeit in another dimension. Oosthuizen (1994:xxiv) explains that as a messiah figure Shembe had been incarnated to eight other people before coming to the Zulu nation:

Thus, Londa Shembe saw Isaiah Shembe as a global figure who was born into the
Mpanza explains the pre-existent Shembe in terms of that Word who was God, the Word who was with God in the beginning. This is consistent with hymn 71. Mpanza thus collapses the efficacy of the incarnation and revelation into one when he posits that the Word that was with God in the beginning was the same Word that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush. The Word then appeared as Jesus Christ later in the Jewish tradition. Mpanza is not concerned about why the Jews had to enjoy a double revelation. But as Jesus was rejected by his own, so was Shembe when he suffered persecution at the hands of the white missionaries and colonial masters. Christianity is, therefore, the continuation of Judaism as the Shembe religion (ubuNazaretha) is the continuation of Christianity. That is the meaning of incarnation and revelation to Mpanza. Shembe’s mission was to the Zulus, and here Mpanza’s apology makes interesting reading:

The whole theology of Shembe is to root out religio-centricism so that whilst recognising biblical teachings, but to avoid “God’s step child” mentality which so much prevails amongst African people. The Bible is the model of our religious chastity, it is the background and the basis of our faith; but we are not Israelites, we are not Jews, we are not Whites or Europeans, we are not Indians or Asians; we are Africans, we are in Africa, which is our soil. It is virtually important that in this era of African renaissance we uproot and repel this embedded spiritual neo-colonialism. It is time for the African to seek their new soul, to build themselves in their African style and to long for their own God, and not for God of the foreigners. Shembe taught amaNazaretha to avoid aping everything foreign, but to be soul-searching of our religious and sociological way of doing things, and seek for collegial wisdom to do things the right way as a nation.

In his discourse on *Shembe and the Holy Spirit* (undated pamphlet in Zulu accordingly titled *Ushembe noMoya Ongcwele*), Mpanza carefully tries to prove from Scripture that Jesus was indeed a manifestation of the Shembe, a logical conclusion to the Johannine “Word” principle. The Fourth Gospel indicates that Jesus was that Word which was with God before all else. If Shembe was that Word, then Mpanza is persuaded by logical reason that Jesus was the manifestation of the Shembe amongst the Jews. What Mpanza hastens to argue is that Jesus promised his followers that when his time was up, he would return to the Father to request the Comforter. This Comforter is the Holy Spirit, not the “wind” experience the disciples had on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. Mpanza shows that there are discrepancies between that “wind” experience and the promise Jesus had made in the Fourth Gospel. For example, Peter’s explanation that what had
occurred was a fulfilment of the Joel prophecy further compounded the problem for what Peter quotes from Joel had not actually occurred at Pentecost. According to Mpanza, the Holy Spirit cannot be seen or heard unless it is incarnated in a living being. Shembe was, and is, that being, as Sundkler was to learn about “a God who walks on feet and who heals with his hands.” A God who is known and knowable, who can be touched and have compassion. Mpanza (Ushembe NoMoya Ongcwelé: 17) explains the difference in the understanding of the Holy Spirit between Christians and amaNazaretha:

- The Holy Spirit that descended on the day of Pentecost had no name, yet the Holy Spirit of the amaNazaretha incarnates a living being, and his name is Shembe.

- The Holy Spirit of the Christians is a power of holiness, yet the Holy Spirit of the amaNazaretha is more that this, for he is a spiritual being, an incarnated personality.

- To Christians the name of Jesus never changes. To the amaNazaretha the name receives a new dynamic meaning. Jesus no longer has life, but in the new name he gives life. That is why amaNazaretha call upon a new name of Jesus, and this new name is Shembe.

Mthembeni Mpanza has thus crafted a fresh conceptualisation of the Shembe. He has done this by re-examining the Christian Scriptures with the aim of discovering Shembe in the Christian economy, and further illustrating that, in essence, Shembe is the third divinity in the Holy Trinity. Mpanza has not so far finely systematised his thought, for, as I indicated earlier, his agenda is to reply to critics. Yet by indulging in his decidedly skewed interpretation of the New Testament, he has not only deviated from the conventional view of Jesus the Son in the Shembe thought, but also recreated the Shembe he feels best advances his agenda. These efforts need not be despised by Western trained theologians. Rather, they should be seen as lay attempts to explain the meaning of the Shembe phenomenon in a world dominated by unfriendly Christian discourse, i.e. both the written and the popular unwritten “street” discourse.

In a sense, Mthembeni Mpanza’s attempts are both passionate and reactionary. But in another sense his authoritative voice is bound to set the pace in future within the amaNazaretha circles, if it does not do this already, so that the theology he so passionately advances will be canonised with time. I argue that Mpanza’s voice cannot be ignored by serious scholarship.
Apart from ample opportunities of preaching in major services of the amaNazaretha in the presence of the Fourth Shembe – Vimbeni, Mpanza has self-published his views in booklets, tracts and pamphlets in the Zulu Language. This qualifies his works to be readily accessible to the ordinary umNazaretha. So far there is no indication that his views and expositions are causing problems. This may be because the religion still needs voices that will legitimate its existence.

What stands out clearly is that Isaiah Shembe was not an ordinary person. The mythology around his birth, baptism, visions and miracles developed alongside his public ministry and continued unabated since his demise. Shembe reshaped, and was himself shaped by, the socio-political milieu in which he witnessed. The pressures of his time weighed heavily on his heart; so much so that he developed a self-consciousness of his uniqueness, his source of authority being the Great Nkosi who made him the Nkosi of Ekuphakameni. His non-violent spiritual resistance led him to espouse the view that if Jehovah’s people would heed his laws, observe the Sabbath, the dietary and other codes of conduct, worship Jehovah in true Zulu fashion, the inherent curse manifested in land dispossession would be removed and forgotten. Shembe’s gallant efforts to buy land against odds was testimony to the fact that through Jehovah, the land repossession programme was possible.

This study has indicated that Shembe the Prophet was also growing in self-realisation. The early attempts of Londa Shembe, and currently Mpanza, are a continuation and preservation of that memory of the divine Shembe, the Shembe who was, is, and will be. Gunner (2002:22-23) argues that the “memory-scape” was invented by Shembe himself as he responded to the social dislocation of his time. Mpanza’s memory is, as indicated, a response to the Christian critics who, according to him, do not quite understand their own Scriptures. Writes Mpanza:

The main difference between Shembe and the nowadays Christians is that Shembe knew the Bible through revelation of God, whereas the Christians know God through reading the Bible. What is, therefore, the authority to Shembe is God supported by the Bible, whilst to Christians it is the Bible teaching them about God.

Clumsy as this assertion reads, through these arbitrary distinctions Mpanza makes, he has found a context for expressing a theological programme on the Shembe.

The critics have helped him to search for meaning, using the Christian Scriptures together with the Shembe Hymnal that is the basic pillar of Shembe theology, and the established Shembe tradition, most of which exists in oral form. We should thus take him seriously when he makes socio-
religious statements such as the one he made at the Durban beachfront in the presence of the Fourth Shembe:

UbuNazaretha is a model and a monument of religio-Africanism. Shembe built his church on the sure and firm foundation of Zulu or African social organisation. The chief sociological aim of the Prophet was to build a new purified African society, by modelling on the old, but bringing in a considerable amount of biblical elements, thus building into society new dynamics which would bring about a new revolutionary religious process.

The memory recreated by Mpanza is, in my estimation, well received by the amaNazaretha. He is an educated son of the faith, a dedicated Minister who claims to have got the true faith from his mother's breasts, the mother who as a little girl was legally adopted by Isaiah Shembe as his own daughter. Mpanza is to all intents and purposes a vigorous defender of the faith. We may as well listen to him, for he is teaching us the meaning of the Shembe not just in the context of South Africa's segregation era before 1948, but also in the present day context of a new South Africa and world order described in African Renaissance terms by the South African leadership.

CONCLUSION

An important essay by Professor Dionne Crafford (1996:243) on the "Theology of Religions", while making useful reflections on issues of dialogue as a useful tool for people of different faiths to know one another in multi religious South Africa, unfortunately reverts to the conservative missionary paradigm, that "The heart of the gospel is the coming of God's Kingdom through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. That is the good news which must be proclaimed to adherents of other religions. If it is not done, they will be robbed of the fullness of joy and new life in Christ." UbuNazaretha, as this essay has indicated, is a new form of faith, indeed a new religion, which – while confirming the mission and nature of Moses and Christ – cannot be neatly drawn to the dialogical framework suggested by Crafford. Dialogue, I maintain, is also possible if Christian theologians will listen with appreciation to the judgements of other faiths, especially how those that have developed from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures understand the essence of the Christian faith in the context of the African experience. The Shembe faith was born and nourished within the context of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and the Zulu tradition, but it has matured into a different scheme of faith that appeals for a unique space in the world of major religions.
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