

CHAPTER 16

PROPHETISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on South Africa's contributions to the development of the AIC. By South Africa, we mean the country that bears that name and others within and around the region. South Africa has been the most prolific in producing Indigenous Churches, and their influence spread to other places such as Zimbabwe.¹²³

The rise-of AICs in South Africa started in 1872 with a secession from the Paris Mission in Lesotho, and soon after this, there were founded:

? a Native Independent Congregation Church in Botswana

? a Tembu Church

? a Bapedi Church, and –

? an African Church in Pretoria, all before the end of the 19th century. The secessions were definitely connected with the desire for emancipation not only from the political powers, but also from Mission control.¹²⁴

Sundkler distinguishes two main types of Independent churches in South Africa. The first is Ethiopian, those churches which left Mission churches mainly to show aversion to racial discrimination and white domination. The other is the Zionist, those akin to the *Aladura* churches of West Africa. They are more prophetic in nature. The Zionists are opposed to traditional African and Western medicines as they fight diseases and sicknesses with their own weapons of holy water, holy oil, ashes, baptism and water. The second group is however in the majority. The prophetic movement led by Isaiah Shembe-would be our focal point.

2. Isaiah Shembe

Of the many AIC prophetic figures, Isaiah Shembe stands out as the most influential and charismatic founder/leader of the largest Ale in Natal, South Africa. The Church is known as *iBandla lamaNazaretha* ? Nazarite Baptist Church.

(i) *His Beginning*

Isaiah Shembe was born in 1870. According to his biographer, Shembe's early youth was characterised by serious moral crisis. His first encounter with God started when he prayed on a cattle farm during a thunderstorm. During the lightning that followed, the Word of God came to him to "Cease from immorality (*ukuhlobonga*)!"¹²⁵ The vision came the third time warning him to desist from immorality. In response to this "heavenly injunction," Mr. Shembe divorced all his four wives.

(ii) *His Call*

As many other prophetic figures claim, Shembe experienced God's call in a dramatic way. While working in his farm, another terrifying storm occurred, and the lightning that followed "killed his best ox and burned Shembe, leaving a scar above this thigh."¹²⁶ Another version of his call claimed that he

¹²³ David Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, pp. 22-23.

¹²⁴ B. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* 2nd. Edition (London: OUP, 1961), p. 38.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 110.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*

saw" angels in the form of white doves circling above him at the sea."¹²⁷ For the next three weeks, he was taken ill and God revealed himself to him to obey his Word to become his prophet. This time he was compelled to respond to the call of God. He bade his mother farewell and started off on his prophetic-missionary enterprise. As a mark of implicit faith in God, he refused to apply any medicine on the wounds inflicted on him by the lightning. He claimed: "Jehovah has revealed to me that I must not be healed by medicine, only through His word."¹²⁸ He was cured of the wound.

The prophetic ministry started as he went from place to place in Natal, preaching, healing and casting out demonic spirits through what he called the power of the Holy Spirit. The issue of healing without resorting to the use of medicine affected his attitude towards vaccination for any reason, considering it as "the Mark of the Beast"¹²⁹ Nonetheless, healing was a major part of his ministry which made him popular among his people, as this made him to become a kind of heir of the old Zulu medicine man popularly known as isangoma.¹³⁰

The success that followed his ministry made him to become famous and recognised as a wonder worker in that region. His dazzling appearance was likened to that of the biblical John the Baptist who came to the scene after long time of prophetic silence. Many of course, with nationalistic tendencies saw in him the Messiah who has been appointed by God to break the yoke of oppression imposed on the Blacks. No wonder his church was described as an "Iconic church" because the founder stood like an icon among the African Christian community.

(iii) *The Beginning of His Church*

Initially, Shembe who received his baptism in the African Native Baptist Church in 1909, remained and worked as a minister in the same Baptist Church. In 1911, however, Shembe had some disagreements with the leadership of the Native Baptist Church over the issue of the Sabbath observance. This in all probability was the ultimate point of contention that compelled him to secede from the Baptist Church. It is not very clear why he preferred Sabbath observance to the worship on Sunday. It may not be unconnected with his reaction to anything preferred by the White man. He felt that the White man had a predilection for Sunday rather than the Sabbath observance. Besides, Shembe had special preference for the Old Testament. For example, he preferred the name Jehovah. to God. His central message was "The Exodus event" ? and this later served as the rallying cry for the black people to whom Jehovah is the God of the dispossessed.¹³¹

Thereafter, he started his own organisation that he called *ama-Nazaretha*, the Nazareth. This group later metamorphosed into a church by the name Nazarite Baptist Church ? *iBandlaJamaNazaretha*.

He moved his followers to a village about eighteen miles from Durban. The place is called the High Place ? *Ekuphakameni* which has become the rallying place for the members. They gather there annually in July for their Church festival. This festival has become so famous as it attracts thousands of members and non-members as well. The festival lasts three weeks with participants dwelling in tabernacles. The spiritual exercises include fasting and praying, while dancing follows the celebration. Of course, the festivals have become sources of great revenue for the prophet and his church and other

¹²⁷ Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches* (Leiden/NY/Köln: E.J. Brill, 1992), p. 28.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*

¹²⁹ Apparently, he was referring to the prophetic message in the book of Revelation 13:16 which is not a sign of redemption but of destruction. See also OosthuiZen., *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹³⁰ Sundlder, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, p. 225. See also Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals*, p. 158.

¹³¹ Sundkler, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

prophetic movements in South Africa.¹³² The other sacred place Shembe founded is Nhlankakazi mountain in Natal where members gather for their January festival.

(iv) *The Aftermath of Shembe's Death*

At the death of Isaiah Shembe's death, his first son, Johannes Galilee Shembe succeeded him. He became the undisputed leader as he was referred to as *Ngewele, nkosi yase ekuphakanieni*, that is, "Holy, Lord of the Hill" He was greeted with intense respect like one would do to a traditional Zulu king ? *Nkosi*. While greeting him, members practiced what is known as *ukugagu*, that is, members kneeling to greet him while looking away. J. G. Shembe died on December 19, 1976. He was buried next to the mausoleum of his father on January 2, 1977 with about 60,000 attending his funeral.¹³³

At the death of J.G. Shembe, succession became a serious problem. The third son of Isaiah Shembe, Rev. A. K. Shembe who was 70 years old at the time was chosen to succeed his brother. He was opposed by one of the numerous sons of J. G. Shembe, Londa Shembe, a lawyer, born on April 1, 1945. He based his decision on five different visions he saw concerning his leadership of the church. He also considered his uncle as too close to his father in age that it would be impossible to refer to his younger brother as an "ancestor." In consequence, the spirit of the ancestor- J. G. Shembe would no longer abide with the Nazareth Church.¹³⁴

The Supreme Court at Pietermaritzburg sat on the case on August 1978. The judge, Mr. Justice James referred to the Nazareth church's constitution, part of which reads:

*Should a vacancy occur in the leadership of the Nazareth Church, the Church Council and the Advisory Board shall choose a new leader from the ministers of religion of the Nazareth Church, who must have been a member of either the Church Council or the Advisory Board.*¹³⁵

The old man, A. K: Shembe emerged as the leader. The appeal made to the court on behalf of L. Shembe was rejected. The succession problem has always been with most of the AICs. There is the belief that if the son succeeds the father, the Spirit of God in the founding father will continue to work in the son.¹³⁶ What happened in the case of the Nazareth Church appears to be a paradigm shift.

(v) *Shembe's Contributions*

There are many contributions of Isaiah Shembe to the development of AIC, and in particular the richness of African Christian heritage in South Africa. We will mention few of them.

(a) African Christian Music

Of the many contributions of the prophet-healer, music is one of them. His music enhanced African expressions of Christianity. He composed music that "relied more on the symbols ? of Zulu

¹³² The many other festivals apart from Shembe's group, and their attendant problems attracted the attention of the Zululand government that in January 1982 it ordered restriction of the celebration to 500 participants due to cholera outbreak. For further details, see Hans-Jürgen Becken, "The Mother of Cancele," *Journal of Religion in Africa* XIII:3 (1982): pp. 189-206.

¹³³ James W. Fernandez, "The Precincts of the Prophet: A Day with Johannes Galilee Shembe," *IRA* Vol. 5:1 (1973): 32-53. See also H.-I.

Becken, "The Nazareth Baptist Church of Shembe" in *Our Approach to the Independent Church Movement in South Africa* (Mapumulo, Natal: Missiological Institute, 1976), pp. 101-114.

¹³⁴ H.-I. Becken, "Ekupbakameni Revisited: Recent Developments within the Nazareth Church in South Africa," *IRA* Vol. 9:3 (1978): p 170.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Peter M. Makamba. "African Independent Churches and 1EE," *Int. Rev. of Mis.* Vol. LXXI:282 (April 1982): p.205.

political autonomy, and remodeled autochthonous, traditional musical systems for their liturgical purposes.”¹³⁷ The prophet's music reflected resentment of the missionaries who tabooed traditional culture but who failed to replace the so-called heathen songs of the Natives with that which were relevant to the people's world-view. Shembe was said to have composed "an extensive body of liturgical songs, in part based on traditional genres such as *isigekle*." Erlmann wrote of Shembe that,

To compliment the notion of a truly African form of Christian worship, Shembe also created a new type of ritual dress combining traditional Zulu regalia with white colonial uniforms called *amaScotch*, and a religious choreography (*ukusina*) that drew extensively on traditional *isigekle* dance patterns.¹³⁸

The folklore of the Zulu is well reflected in most of his hymns, those which are capable of lifting the crushed spirits of his followers.

(b) Doctrine of Apartheid

As far as persecution of Christians are concerned, South Africa was considered harsh, particularly when the Christian group gets involved in politics as it was the case under apartheid system. Isaiah Shembe developed an eschatological doctrine of apartheid. As Webster recalled, it was generally believed that “Shembe would stand at the gates of paradise admitting blacks and turning away whites because they had already enjoyed their paradise on earth.”¹³⁹ In other words, there would be reversed, colour bar in Heaven if anything as such' exists! Those who lost their lives as a result of their resistance to racist government would be raised to a life of ease and victory.

(c) Doctrine of Eschatology

Shembe's emphasis on end-time is related to the above doctrine against apartheid. The emphasis is somewhat linked to the physical and emotional trauma his members were experiencing as a result of the harsh apartheid system. If they suffered here on earth, there would be relief in heaven, and the person who holds the key to the heavenly gate is none other than their messiah and mediator, Isaiah Shembe. Sundkler reported some of the sermons that repeatedly stressed the need to strive to enter heaven: “We have come here to buy the key in order to enter Heaven”; or, “Let us seek the key with which to open the gate.”¹⁴⁰ The names of their church and even the city are symbolic of what pertains in heaven, such that those who belong to Nazarite church are automatically saved. Oosthuizen (1967) has provided detailed analysis of the hymns of the Nazarite church through Shembe.¹⁴¹

Isaiah Shembe has become a legendary figure for most Zulu people whose lives were affected by his ministry. Shembe is considered more than a human being because of his influence. There were some members of his church who believed that he resurrected from the dead. Sundkler recorded several testimonies of Shembe's followers who claimed that he was like Jesus who appears to them

¹³⁷ Veit Erlmann, *African Stars: Studies in Black South Africa Performance* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 51.

¹³⁸ Erlmann, *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹³⁹ J. B. Webster, "Independent Christians in Africa," in *Tarikh 9 Christianity in Modern Africa* (London: Longman/Historical Society of Nigeria, 1969).

¹⁴⁰ Sundkler, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

¹⁴¹ G. C. Oosthuizen, *The Theology of a South African Messiah* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967). For a critique of Oosthuizen analysis of the hymnal of the Church of the Nazarites, see B. Sundkler *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists*, (London: Gleemp, 1976; Uppsala: OUP, 1976), pp. 186, 190.

in dream and visions.¹⁴² Rev. Johannes Galilee Shembe, the son who succeeded his father, however disclaimed this notion by maintaining that Shembe was just “dust in the hands of God.” He however, saw nothing wrong in praying in his name.¹⁴³

3. Summary

Isaiah Shembe is a good example of the numerous prophetic figures in South Africa, and similar features as discussed above characterised most of them. Shembe undoubtedly contributed to the enhancement of the Black image and worth through his ministry among his people. The impact of his kind would probably continue to spread under the new political dispensation in South Africa where restrictions suffered under the old apartheid regime are no longer in place.

4. Post-Test

- (i) What factors were responsible for the rise and development of the Nazarite Baptist Church?
- (ii) Comment and elaborate on the early beginnings of *Ibandla lama Nazaretha*.
- (iii) Examine how some natural events and Shembe's natural aversion to the White's imperialism led to the indigenisation of the Nazarite Baptist Church.
- (iv) "*Ibandla lama Nazaretha* is unique in its setting." What are the things responsible for its uniqueness?
- (v) "Like other Indigenous Churches in West Africa, the Nazarite Baptist Church has an indigenous ministry." Do you agree?
- (vi) "A Christian neighbourhood built on the foundation of African culture." How true is this of *Ibandla lama Nazaretha*?
- (vii) Evaluate the contribution of Isaiah Shembe to the development of indigenisation of Christianity in South Africa.
- (viii) "A great Christian exponent of African culture whose name has been immortalised." How is this true of Isaiah Shembe?
- (ix) Discuss the genesis and major characteristics of the Nazarite Baptist Church in South Africa.
- (x) State and discuss the factors and conditions responsible for prophet Isaiah Shembe's specialised interest in the Doctrine of Eschatology.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p. 329 .

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 330.