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Power House, Prison House - An Oral Genre and its
Use in Isaiah Shembe's Nazareth Baptist Church.

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POWER HOUSE. PRISON HOUSE - AN ORAL GENRE AND ITS USE IN ISAIAH SHEMA'S
NAZARETH BAPTIST CHURCH

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This paper seeks to explore the role of that stately yet flexible Southern African oral genre, the praise poem or praises, izibongo, in creating and sustaining consciousness in the crucial early years of Isaiah Shembe's Nazareth Baptist Church. The work of Janzen and MacGaffey has included studies of the transition to literacy and its implications in the Prophetic Churches of the Congo (Janzen and MacGaffey 1974; Janzen 1985) but the BaKongo movements do not appear to have seen the parallel existence of an oral genre alongside the use of writing, and later, print. This has happened, though, in Shembe's Nazareth Church. There has been a transition to literacy but the status and contribution of the oral genre, izibongo, has remained significant.

It is clear that from the early days of the Church there was an emphasis on written records of various kinds. The imbongi 'Magandaganda' Mbuyazi, who joined Shembe's Church in 1918, remembers that Isaiah Shembe had two young scribes, a girl, Sandiwe, and a young boy, Phewa Mbonambi, who accompanied him on his travels and who took down the hymns as Shembe composed them (1). Also, Church members who could write or who had access to an amanuensis kept their own notebooks which contained the hymns, prayers and other material covering such items as sermons, miraculous events, personal histories, observations and testimonies (2). Some of the material in the notebooks and in later typewritten records (3) represents what Janzen, making an analogy with "early Greek historia", defines tentatively as an "ethnographic genre" (Janzen, 1985:248). The hymns, though, with their emphasis on revealed truth and divine inspiration are examples of "gnostic texts" (Janzen and MacGaffey, 1974:27).

In an attempt, perhaps, to codify and give some uniformity to the

Nazarite experience, the Church commissioned John Dube, the Natal politician and neighbour of Isaiah Shembe to write a book on his life. This appeared in 1936 (the year after Isaiah's death), entitled, simply, UShembe but it contained a foreword by Isaiah's son and successor, Johannes Galilee, stating that on some points it was incorrect and misleading. To this day it is spoken of by older Church members more in sorrow than in anger as a book with mistakes in it, and one which cannot to any great extent be used or relied upon. If the attempt to express "the truth" failed in Dube's book, the Hymn (and prayer) book printed in 1940 by J.G. Shembe has served the Church well as a secure base for worship and self-definition. Yet the izibongo which exist with a certain independence outside the confines of literacy have also provided commentary on and celebration of Shembe and the Church. Perhaps their very independence sometimes allows them to indicate a shift in "paradigms" within a religious movement in a way that a "gnostic" text such as the Hymnbook cannot.

There is only one brief reference to a praise poet, (an imbongi) in Dube's book, and that is in his account of Shembe's funeral (Dube, 1936:108) and no direct mention of izibongo in the Hymns. Yet praises were composed for Shembe from the earliest years of his ministry, and appear to have played an important part in the annual July meeting at Shembe's holy village of Ekuphakameni at Inanda, at the January pilgrimage to the holy mountain, Nhlgakazi and at other centres such as Judea in Gingindlovu where the October meeting is held. Azariah Mthiyane, a senior imbongi and a preacher in the Church, remembers hearing the early praise poets when as a young boy he carried his father's baggage to the annual July, January and October meetings and claims that the izibongo which he recites are based on theirs (4). One reason for the survival of izibongo as an oral genre alongside the printed hymns and prayers is that they have provided a different sort of focus of identity and have allowed the expression of a consciousness that was important for the development of the Church. They may have created a source of power that contributed greatly to the growth

and survival of the "amaNazaretha" in an environment that was in many ways a hostile one. Moreover the relationship between the praises and their hostile environment was to some extent a dialectical one. The hostility of various kinds of official power was recreated within the izibongo and used to express the contrary power of Shembe in overcoming them. Indeed the izibongo would seem to constitute a key "dominant metaphor" in the existence of the Church.

The use of conflict and adversity to create a positive counterstatement within a set of praises is a dominant motif in nineteenth and twentieth century Zulu praises. Thus King Cetshwayo's praises have as a central rhetorical statement the defeat of his brother Mbuyazi at the Battle of Ndongakusuka, Dingane's recount with great rhetorical flourishes the demise of "uPiti" (Piet Retief) and his men (5). The praises recited at the funeral of Chief Albert Luthuli in 1967, knock off one after the other some of his main adversaries in the political arena and combine with relish the motifs of courage and aggression and the ever present, infinitely adaptable, cattle metaphor:

Inkonyane kaNdaba ejama phansi kwezinkunzi ezimbili ebomvu nenyama
 WabaLuthuli wajama phansi namaNgisi namaBhunu. [Musho!]
 UJlungwane kaNdaba iSikhukhula sikaNdaba esimehl' amnyama.
 ISigwe esithi singagweb' indoda yase yafa.
 Namuhla yambheka uOswilit Phili, wafa. [MUSHO!]
 Wathi wambheka uMalane, wafa. [MUSHO!]
 Wathi wambheka uStrydom, wafa. [MUSHO!]
 UJuman-jumane inkonyane kaNdaba eyakhanya emkhathini yezizwe.
 Waphontsha phansi abantu baEnglandi
 ememeza phesheya.
 Ladum' izidumo usinele zaduma kwelakithi eGroutvillii.
 Ugaxe 'gijima kamgceleni laze lachitha kwabamhlophe. [MUSHO!] (6)

Calf of Ndaba which stares threateningly down at the two bulls, the
 red and the black,
 That was Luthuli who stared threateningly in the midst of the English
 and Afrikaners! [SPEAK HIM! women ululate]
 Fierce Rager descendant of Ndaba, Strong One of Ndaba with the fierce
 eyes.

Red Bird which can gore a man until he dies.
 Today it glanced at Oswald Pirow and he died. [SPEAK HIM!]
 Then it glanced at Malan and he died. [SPEAK HIM!]
 Then it glanced at Strydom and he died. [SPEAK HIM!]
 Sudden Attacker, Calf of Ndaba that shone in the midst of nations.
 It pierced through to the people of England
 calling out overseas.

The thunder rolled as the lightning struck at our own Grootville.
It hung across the sky, streaking to the horizon and there it struck
amongst the white people. [SPEAK HIM! women ululate] (6)

Chief Luthuli's izibongo at many points echo those of Shaka and also set a royal and heroic continuity for him by linking him to the early royal progenitor, Ndaba. Shembe's praises contain even more finely marked adaptations from and similarities with royal izibongo (Gunner, 1982) thus providing a constant reminder of the deep structure of kingship which as Sundkler has remarked, informed the independent Zulu churches of South Africa (Sundkler, 1961:102,104). In addition, the nationalism expressed in nineteenth century Zulu royal praises is nascent in Shembe's praises, and the emphasis on "kwelakithi kwaZulu" "Our own Zululand" stresses the Nazarites' felt need for "territory" in both a symbolic and real sense. Sundkler points to the general deprivation and oppression in reaction to which many South African independent churches were formed (Sundkler, 1961). Donald M'tinkulu refers to the importance of the land issue to Shembe particularly in the context of the grasping and oppressive Natives Land Act of 1913 (M'tinkulu, 1977: 20). He sees one of the main thrusts of Shembe's ministry as being the drive to acquire security and a land base for his followers. A very elderly follower of Isaiah Shembe who came originally from Umzinto, south of Durban, endorsed M'tinkulu's view when describing the early days of the Church: "Those were turbulent and terrible times and more than anything else Shembe wanted land for his followers" (7). The desire for land and the way in which the izibongo - and the hymns - constitute "dominant metaphors" in response to conflict and opposition can be understood more clearly in the light of the discomfort, unease almost paranoia that Shembe seems to have generated in official circles between the years 1912 and 1922. The extent of official power set against Shembe peeps out from the letters of agitated, irritated, exasperated magistrates, location supervisors, police commandants and ministers of the cloth. The phrase that appears in a number of letters from missionaries is "under no European control". This, it seems was one of Shembe's greatest sins. It is

a "sin" which the praises turned into one of his greatest virtues. Images of natural energy and beauty, power that is both destructive and protective are woven into his praise names. For instance, in what are likely to be early praises, he is praised as:

USihlanguhlangu-gobongwane,
 UMbayimbayi wethu siwuciphile siwulindile.
 UManxeba akalingana nakayise uMsasela,
 USokhabuzela onjeng' amashoba e'nkomo zeZulu.
 ISambane esim' umgodi kasabesawolala,
 kwasale kwalal' abantwana,
 kanti sona sishone besethamba amagquma ne'ntaba zabo.
 Uthe, "Abant' abami salani lapha".
 Uthe, "Ngisahamba ngisakulandela abanye".
 Uthe, "NakwaMzilikazi nakwaMashobane ngowangifike".
 Umlilo ovuthe phezulu kwentaba eNdulinde
 kawabe usacima. (Praises, ls.40-51)

Swift pusher-away of bonds.
 Our Cannon, we trapped it and kept guard over it.
 Wound which is greater than that of his father, Msasela.
 Brisk-mover like the tails of the cattle of the Zulu people.
 Anteater which digs a hole, never for itself to lie in.
 Its young stayed behind and slept there,
 whereas it set out for the hillocks and mountains where its children
 live.

He said, "My people, remain here".
 He said, "I am still on the move, I still have others to fetch,
 I have still to reach the territory of Mzilikazi of Mashobane".
 Fire which blazed at the top of Ndulinde Mountain,
 which did not die down.

Details from some of the official letters concerning Shembe demonstrate how persistent was the opposition he encountered. Police surveillance of Shembe began early in his ministry. As early as 1912, the Commandant of the Natal Police wrote to the Assistant Magistrate at Ndwedwe (the district some forty miles north of Durban where the holy mountain, Nhlankakazi is situated) to report that a "native called John Shembe from Harrismith is preaching on the locations. He has a lot of power over the natives". The diligent officer with scrupulous regard for bureaucratic niceties and bureaucratic control then quotes his Pass Number, and cites his preachers certificate from the South African Baptist Church, dated 1908. He includes a further comment that points to one of the major sources of irritation in following years: "The Makolwas ["Believers" - Mission Church followers] informed me that Shembe was doing a lot of harm as he was

taking Shembe away from their churches" (8).

Much of Shembe's early ministry was in southern Natal in the districts south of Durban, and into Pondoland - one of his praise names, coined when he went north to the (present-day) Richards Bay area was 'Mbombela the Mpondo train'. Here too, official reaction to him was hostile. In September 1915, the magistrate of Port Shepstone wrote a furious letter, full of metaphors of disease and disorder, to his superior the Chief Native Commissioner in Pietermaritzburg. Shembe is described as a "scurrilous fanatic", and the letter continues,

I consider that we should deal with this mischievous growth swiftly and destroy the trouble in its inception root and branch. I ask your authority to forbid this man the right of entry into my district. I earnestly hope you will give all the assistance you can in ridding those concerned of this canker in your midst. (9)

Unfortunately for the Magistrate at Port Shepstone the "mischievous growth" continued to flourish, and it would seem that by this time the first izimbongi (praise poets) Dladla and Shange had begun to create their own verbal counter-messages providing a reply that spoke of and generated a different kind of power. Shembe may already have been praised as:

UMagqalabanzi kadinwa ukuthwala izono zethu.
UMgangathi we'ndlela eziyekhaya,
USiba-gojela ngapha kwentaba,
UMthomb' osela abalungileyo,
UZandla zinemisebe njengelanga,
INgqungqulu elishay' amaphiko phezu komuzi wakithi Ekuphakameni,
USambula-nkwezane kuvel' ukukhanya,
UMqandi we'ndwendwe ungyeka ziyesiHogweni... (Praises, 1s.3-10) (10)

Broad-shouldered one, never tired of bearing our sins,
Opener of the roads heading for home,
Plume disappearing over there on the mountain,
Spring that refreshes the righteous,
Hands that radiate like the sun,
Eagle, beating its wings above our own place at Ekuphakameni,
Scatterer of the fog and there is light,
Checker of multitudes - you would not leave them on their journey to Hell...

By 1921 Shembe's work and that of his preachers seems to have been "disturbing" enough to have reached the office of the Secretary for Native Affairs in Pretoria and Shembe's Church has clearly been under police surveillance for some time. Thus the Secretary for native Affairs, in May

1922 wrote an impatient note to the Chief Native Commissioner in Pietermaritzburg reminding him of a report requested the previous October on a religious sect styling itself "The Nazarenes" which, according to Police information, was carrying on its operations under the leadership of one Isaiah Shembe in the Inanda district (11): A letter had in fact been sent from Pietermaritzburg the previous November to the magistrate at Verulam (which covered Inanda) asking for a report on Shembe and making it clear that he was already well known to the CNC's office: "This sect has given trouble from time to time and is commonly known as the "Shembes" - the leader being a particularly tiresome and undesirable man" (12). Clearly Isaiah was not a popular figure amongst those who were attempting to control "the natives". The phrase "given trouble from time to time" suggests that he and his followers were neither compliant nor submissive and were therefore a source of anxiety to those in authority in the State.

A further brief indication of the way in which Police and State harried and hounded Shembe is contained in a communication from the Deputy Commandant of the S.A Police to the CNC in January 1923. the letter is headed "Religious Movements among Natives"; we are told that "the different sections have been very quiet of late". The writer reports, with some relief one suspects, that a certain Ezra Mbonambi is drinking himself into a stupor at Inanda and then continues, with some complacency, "Shembe will be at Ndwedwe in a few days to hear from the magistrate the views of the Government on the pilgrimage to the Mhlangakazi (sic) Mountain" (13). Again the State is attempting to impose its authority on the wayward prophet and to control his activities, not at his Inanda base (Shembe had purchased his land, known as Ekuphakameni, in Inanda in 1911) but at his other more distant nodal point, the holy mountain of Nhlankakazi some forty miles to the north.

These few letters give some evidence of the intense suspicion and hostility directed at Shembe from the highest official levels. Shembe would

have experienced this through hostile questioning, eviction of himself or his followers and appearance before magistrates, as in the Ndwedwe instance. There were other kinds of officialdom besides the Police and magistrates that were opposed to Shembe and his followers. Ministers of various churches, and as the alert police constable reported in 1912, the "Makolwas" (Believers) themselves sometimes found Shembe's great appeal very alarming and threatening. Here too, agitated letters moved from missionary to magistrate and then from magistrate to Chief Native Commissioner in Pietermaritzburg and in some urgent cases straight to the Chief Native Commissioner. The missionaries' letters tend to be longer than magistrates'; they are also on the whole more emotional. In some cases length clearly indicates the outpourings of a troubled and uneasy heart - caused by Shembe or his preachers and followers.

Reputedly in their correspondence missionaries seized upon and emphasised the fact that Shembe and his preachers were "under no European control". Letters from a Rev. Bridgeman, the Secretary of the American Zulu Mission began as early as 1913 (14), and show how sharp the resentment of the American Board Missionaries was to Shembe's preachings and conversions. Rev. Bridgeman was particularly upset by Shembe's successes near the American Board Mission centres at Amanzimtoti, south of Durban, and near Groutville, north of Durban. He, like other ministers who resented Shembe's influence, turned immediately to State authority in his attempts to neutralise the prophet's work. A flurry of correspondence between Bridgeman, the magistrates at Inanda, Stanger and the Chief Magistrate in Durban all testify to attempts to silence Shembe, and to remove him from their sphere of influence in particular their territory, namely the Mission Reserves. Thus the Chief Native Commissioner despatched letters to the Inanda and Stanger magistrates on two consecutive days in July 1914. In the first he reports Rev. Bridgeman's complaints that "this Native who is under no European Control has been preaching in the Inanda Mission reserve". He continues: "Bridgeman complains very bitterly about the conduct of Shembe

who has apparently taken no heed of any warnings which may have been given to him" (15). In his letter to the Stanger magistrate he mentions a second, fresh complaint from Bridgeman, that-"this Native had not ceased from preaching in the [Mission] Reserves" and a request of advice from the Attorney General on possible action against Shembe (16). The near-desperate Rev. Bridgeman must also have written direct to the Secretary for Native Affairs in Pretoria. Thus we find the Under-Secretary for Native Affairs writing about Shembe to the (long-suffering) Chief Native Commissioner in Pietermaritzburg. The complaint made on this occasion is not that Shembe is preaching on Mission Reserves but that he has a base near one. The more relaxed tone of the Under Secretary's letter is caused perhaps by his safe distance from the scene of action, the clashes of wayward prophets with anxious missionaries in far-away Natal. He passes on Bridgeman's complaint of Isaiah Shembe and describes him as, "A religious Free Lance said to be establishing himself in close proximity to the mission at Amanzimtoti" (17). Shembe's Nazarite base at Amanzimtoti was given to him by the induna (councillor) Bhekisisa Bhengu; Nazarites clashed on a number of occasions with American Board members and, not surprisingly, the Nazarite centre was called "Bhekizitha" ("Watch-out-for-the-Enemies") (18).

The Bridgeman correspondence is clear testimony to missionary resistance to Shembe. The same anxieties and fears, the same efforts to be rid of him and to exploit official channels of control appear in complaints from a Rev. Foss of the (American Board) Umvoti Mission Reserve (19). Here another layer of officialdom is used, namely Inspectors and Supervisors of Locations and Mission Reserves. In a bureaucratic communique by a man with a bureaucratic title, the Chief Inspector of Locations and Mission Reserves informs his subordinate that Shembe, "who is under no European control is preaching on the Umvoti Mission Reserve" and that he must warn Shembe to stop (20). At Umzumbi Rail, south of Durban and near Port Shepstone, a Reverend Kessel was so agitated by the successes of Shembe and his

preachers that he dashed off two letters on April 10 1913, one to the Magistrate at Urzinto and another to the Port Shepstone Magistrate. In one he complains bitterly about "That Native preacher Amos Mzobe who has no white missionary over him but a native man by the name of Isaiah Samule who gets his post at Verulam" (21). The energetic Amos Mzobe is mentioned in another letter as having been to court and also as holding services on "private lands", which afforded him some immunity from jealous missionaries (22). Amos Mzobe himself, in an attempt to work through official channels of power visited a solicitor in Urzinto and tried to get some sort of official clearance for his preaching. He seems to have tried to demarcate his (Nazarite) area of influence from that of the missionaries, and the solicitor acting for him sets this all out quite carefully in his letter to the Acting Magistrate at Urzinto. Mzobe's evangelistic conviction comes through the carefully worded legal letter. He wishes to "preach the Gospel to all Natives who will listen to him...He also preaches in the Locations to all natives who are willing to listen to him...He says he does not go into Mission Stations and Reserves but to the heathen at their kraals outside the Mission Reserves and Stations" (23). There is no record of any favourable reply to this approach, but it shows that Shembe and his followers did in some cases challenge the missionaries on their own ground. Amos Mzobe's very use of legal channels does show though, the extent to which Shembe and his followers were pushed out, harried and resisted as they attempted to preach the Gospel "under no European control".

Eviction was a weapon which the missionaries could and did use when anyone on a Mission Reserve was found to have encouraged or joined the Nazarites. This was the method of attack used against Shembe by the Anglican minister at Isipingo (on the South coast). In 1919 Rev. Chater wrote to the Acting Supervisor of Locations and Mission Reserves, Isipingo, and he in turn passed the letter on to the Chief Native Commissioner. In this case a certain David Mbanbo "has allowed his wife to hold services at their kraal and at other kraals on the Reserves, thereby carrying on the

tenets of one Isaiah Shembe who styles himself Pastor of the Nazareth Baptist Church". The inevitable, almost formulaic, sentence follows: "Apparently Shembe is under no European authority" (24). In a second letter hot on the heels of the first, Chater writes to the Supervisor and records in vivid, blow by blow detail, how he went hot foot to David Mbarbo's homestead together with one of his own catéchists, Philemon Mbarbo, as soon as he heard that Shembe himself was visiting. He did not in fact see Shembe although he believed him to be in another room. Again eviction is urged (25). The correspondence ends without the outcome being known, but the fact that there are no more litanies of complaint recorded from Rev. Chater suggests that he got his way and the eviction took place.

The letters dealing with Shembe and his preachers and followers show how various layers of officialdom and authority interlocked in their attempts to neutralise this 'renegade' prophet. They also, by the very nature of their concern, show Shembe's successes in the first twelve years of his ministry (1910-1922). The many-faceted ideology of control was being matched and countered in a variety of ways by Shembe, and his followers. One such counter-force was the use of izibongo for Shembe, praises which helped shape the distinctive consciousness of Nazareth Church members, and at the same time set this within the broad sphere of an older Zulu sensibility. The rhetoric of conflict so central to izibongo was one which Shembe's praise poets could easily exploit, as they could the linked rhetoric of achievement. As the inbongi Azariah Mthiyane expressed it, Shembe's izibongo are his "iziqu zokushumayela", his "badges of bravery from preaching" (26), like those older badges denoting success over enemies and worn by Zulu warriors in battle. Again, in the manner of izibongo as a genre, Shembe's praises were able to focus on the particular in a very precise way while at the same time creating new imagery. They also exploited general, instantly recognisable, symbols and images such as those pertaining to cattle and to the elements. Shembe's izibongo can thus refer

to particular moments of strife and summon up into the general memory particular moments of tension and glory which therefore become foregrounded in the consciousness of those who hear them and become part of the collective experience of the Church. Although the hymns composed by Isaiah himself refer in a number of cases to "enemies" and although the imagery of the hymns dwells often on "the wilderness" they are not concerned with recalling specific incidents (27). The izibongo were to some extent outside Shembe's control, as was the case with the praises composed for the Zulu kings, and they reflected independent comment and commemoration by the praise poets. The political dimensions of the early struggles are drawn in to the izibongo. They also draw in the fervour of Shembe's evangelism and the sense of excitement at Shembe's innovative preaching of the Gospel. This emphasis on something new and distinctively Zulu is knitted in with a focus on various memorable episodes which were key events in the early history.

In a sense the praises record the fine grain of the experiences of the early days - they call up in the established manner of izibongo, although with a deliberate rein on flamboyant overstatement, specific names and places that are linked with persecutions, conversions and miraculous events. They present the Nazarite view of the events, and others like them, that are fussed over and fumed about in the letters of those in authority in the State and in the Established Churches. The outsiders' conception of Shembe's movement as disease, summed up in phrases such as "mischievous growth" and "canker in your midst" (28) is replaced by the insiders' view of redemption in both a cultural and religious sense. In general terms, the praises define a new centre of consciousness, a new source of power in contra-distinction to that represented by the generally hostile, or at best alien, authority of magistrates, location supervisors, police and missionary bodies.

Shembe's early clashes with authority, and his victory, are recorded in these lines composed by Dladla, the very first imbongi, according to

Azariah Mthiyane. They show how an imbongi could exploit, redirect and reshape a confrontation so that it became a reminder not so much of alien, secular power but of the God-given power of their own leader. They refer to a clash and subsequent court case at Maphumulo. The encounter is set out in terms of journeying, action, conflict and resolution:

UNdaba zehl' eSinothi,
 zayezathini' entabazwe
 zazewel' emzini wenkosi eMthandeni kwamaphumulo.
 Kwaxangazel' amadod' akhona 'thath' izinyawo ayamangala.
 Anahala kumtan' umlungu uSayitsheni uMaqayi,
 wagax' umgaxo waphambanisa.
 Wahloma
 Kwahlangana amehlo wavuma wathi, "I'ndaba zimandi zivele ekithi
 Ekuphakameni". (Praises, Is.13-20)

The stories came down from Sinothi,
 They reached Entabazwe,
 They crossed at the homestead of Chief Mthandeni at Maphumulo.
 The men stood there amazed then they sped around.
 The white man Sergeant Mackay met with no success,
 He strapped on his bandolier, he was ready to fight,
 he attacked.
 Then their eyes met - he said that the affairs of Ekuphakameni were
 "Fine indeed". (Praises, Is13-20)

The lines that follow again express dynamic evangelism and opposition and this time they speak too of missionary antagonism. They use the aggressive martial imagery of fire and yet through word play on the stem "-sha" (meaning "burn" but also "new") suggest something that is spiritually new and innovative and like the inspirational Pentecostal flames. The notion of travelling to "our own Zululand" covers both a real and a symbolic journey. Shembe made many important conversions and founded a number of centres north of the Thukela, regarded as the boundary between the old Zulu kingdom and "esilungwini", Natal, "the land of the white man". Chief Mpukunyoni Mkhwanazi in the area around what is now Mtubatuba was one of these, although here too there was conflict and opposition, in this case from some of Mpukunyoni's councillors who, it seems, could not face the thought of a life without Zulu beer (utshwala), a beverage forbidden by Shembe; the Mthethwa chief north of Empangeni was another important convert, as was the Mjadu chief, Dulela, at Mthunzini. Shembe's incorporation and adaptation of

elements of Zulu culture is celebrated by the praises' reference to "our own Zululand" and by the references to the "decorations and the sharp staves" which were both distinctively Zulu but also distinctively a part of the dress of those belonging to Shembe's Church. His Church presented a new possibility for pride and self-affirmation and the mention of "our own Zululand" emphasises that new mental territory:

Uhlamuke simuke siye kithi kwalakwaZulu
 ngoba uhlamuke nevangeli.
 iVangeli silibone elisha selishis' intaba,
 Kwathi abefundisi nabashumayeli baliphika.
 Bathi akuseliyona iVangeli ekade silishumayela
 baphenya amaDastamente andraBhayibeli abavumela,
 athi, "Kubhaliwe kanjalo!"
 Uhlamuke simuke siye kithi kwelakwaZulu,
 ngob' uhlamuke nevangeli,
 ivangeli silibone eliza namakhosi akithi ohlanga
 esesevunule ngaragwalagwala,
 kunikizel' amashoba efak' izihlohlo. (Praises, Is.21-32)

The Breaker-away, we left and we set out for our own Zululand,
 because he broke away with his holy message.
 The New Gospel which we saw setting the mountain on fire,
 and preachers and evangelists denied it.
 They denied that we had just preached the Gospel.
 They brandished their testaments and Bibles in unison.
 They said, "It is written thus!"
 Breaker-away, let us leave and let us head for our own Zululand,
 because he broke away with the Gospel,
 the Gospel which we saw approaching with our own royal leaders
 adorned with the (feathers of the red-winged) lowrie.
 They gave out the decorations and held the sharp staves.
 (Praises, Is.21-32)

At other moments in the izibongo the reference to conflict is both general and specific. Shembe is seen as a container rather than an initiator of conflict, although in the following praise ("UDumo...", "The Fame...") the notions of elemental power and fame are linked through the use of "fame" and "thunder" which in Zulu share the same root, "-dum-". This is followed by a specific mention of conflict and harassment near Ixopo in southern Natal expressed through the image of a wounded bull:

Umbambi wem'khonto nemicibisholo
 UDum' oluncokazi luyeduma phakathi kwamasango esEkuphakameni.
 INkunzi yakithi abagwaze ngaphansi kweMkomazane,
 izeya ngokushoshela kwezikaMandlane. (Praises, Is.94-97)

Gripper of spears as well as bows and arrows.
 The fame of the many-coloured Calf thunders inside the gates of

Ekuphakameni.

Our Bull which they stabbed below Mkomazane.
It came dragging itself along to the cattle of Mandlane.

Again, at another point in the praises, the themes of disruption and conflict focus on Shembe's trials amongst the Thembu at Phumula, far to the south of his epicentre at Ekuphakameni. The imbongi uses the bull image and a formula ("Kwaze kwasa..." "Until dawn...") always associated with an event of importance:

INkunzi yakithi abayibambe abaphumula kwaPhumula
Kwaze kwasa bebikelana abaThembu bengelele. (Praises, Is.125-6)

Our Bull which they bound, those who were resting at Rest [Phumula].
Until dawn the Thembus discussed the matter and had no sleep.

The holy mountain of Nhlankazi, cause of irritation to officials and the cause of at least one court appearance for Shembe, is associated in the izibongo with supernatural power. This, in typical izibongo idiom manifests itself through the conquering crash of thunder and crackle of lightning. The "victim" is not an enemy but a renowned diviner, Gwabhaza Shangase caught in a power greater than his own. He became a minister in the Nazareth Church:

UMpangalala lingakaphumi
uyowaphangalala phezu kwentaba eNhlango.
Lidunela liphos' imbane phezu kwentaba eNhlango.
Lanthat' uGwabhaza kwabakaShangase,
lamshaya ngamasango asEkuphakameni. (Praises, Is.127-131)

Scatterer of the mist before the sun has risen.
He was yet to scatter the mist on the top of Nhlango Mountain.
The Sky thundered and hurled down lightning above Nhlango Mountain.
It took hold of Gwabhaza Shangase.
It struck him at the gates of Ekuphakameni.

Records of miraculous happenings, or revelations, ("izibonakaliso") also have their place in the izibongo. Thus there is a reference to Urzombe, the area from where the Rev.Kessell wrote with such anti-Shembe fury, and also mention of Urzinkhulu in the Port Shepstone district. One of the most widely known of the miraculous happenings of Shembe's ministry took place at Mzombe where during a severe drought he told people to dig at a certain point and water spouted out. This is commemorated in the brief

but - to the Nazarites - evocative statement:

Ukha 'bumbana phansi kwe'ntaba zoMzumbe,
ngoba ethe esimbe kwaqum' i'phethu kwavel' amanzi. (Praises, Is.123-4)

He drew water from clay at the foot of the Mzumbe Hills,
because even as he dug, up came a spring up came water.

Port Shepstone is commemorated in the oblique shorthand so favoured by composers of izibongo. Shembe drove out some troublesome spirits at Mzimkhulu (in the Port Shepstone district) and this is woven into the praises as:

Indaba ungayizwa ngotokoloshe laseMzimkhulu.
The affair which you can hear of from the hairy dwarf of Mzimkhulu.
(Praises, l.142)

The praises, as these brief extracts show provided a form by means of which Shembe's claims to be a prophet, a servant of God, bringer of a "new" Zulu Church, could be expressed. As Azariah Mthiyane stated, they are themselves a form of worship. The early praise poets and particularly Dladla, adapted the fixed and flexible features of the genre and used them as a vehicle for a new consciousness. The izibongo together with the different medium of the hymns, and the prayers stood in opposition to the kind of control over movement, mind and identity that official authority and the mission churches seemed to demand. Yet the izibongo were selective. To some extent this obviously depended on the whims and inspiration of particular poets - the greatest of all Zulu praise poets, Magolwana is reputed to have said, "This I take, and that I pass over" (29). To some extent, however, what was omitted depended on the selectivity generated by the genre itself. It relished conflict, and could make use of it to great effect. It could exploit images of dynamic movement; it worked best, in a sense, with the polarities of aggression and resolution. Even when embracing innovative notions of compassion, love and sacrifice, as Shembe's izibongo do, the martial, male ambience remains dominant. Possibly, the central place of male experience and the idea of male dominance which permeates the izibongo

of chiefs and kings meant that it was not possible for areas of the early history of the Church to be represented in the praises. To this extent the praises were perhaps both "power house" and "prison house". The izibongo do not mention any of the early history of the Church that touches on the part played by women, and it seems to have been quite an important part. So there were, perhaps, ideological limits beyond which even the izibongo supple as they were, could not go.

Many early converts to Shembe's Nazareth Church were women and young girls. He was accompanied on his early journeys by the young Emma Dlamini and Linna Mhtungwa among others, and in some places women were left in charge of Nazarite homesteads or centres although they were never made ministers. The appeal of his new message, his powers of healing, his disregard for the normal restrictions of movement which Zulu custom imposed on its women, meant that many women defied fathers, husbands or brothers and travelled with Shembe, or travelled to Ekuphakameni and to Nhlankakazi. There is a photograph at Ekuphakameni of the young Shembe dressed in a tunic with a black belt at his waist. The belt was at first worn by men but because so many of the early followers were women it was transferred to the women's uniform and is now referred to as "iforteen" (the day of the month when Nazarite women hold their meetings) (30).

Official letters over a number of years register the anger of husbands and fathers at the influence of Shembe and his Church on their womenfolk. In a number of cases husbands and fathers seem to have resorted - in time-honoured fashion - to beatings in their effort to curb Shembe's influence. In 1915 the irritated Port Shepstone Magistrate, coiner of the epithet "mischievous growth" wrote off to his superior in Pietermaritzburg enclosing two statements dealing with the problem of women joining Shembe's Church. One of these, which is worth quoting at length, highlights again the way in which missionaries used the threat of eviction as a hold over households living on Mission Reserves. It provides insight into notions of husbands' prerogatives and wifely duties in Zulu society at the time, and

most important it gives an idea of the involvement and activity of women in the still young Nazareth Church. A resident of the Denver Zoar Zulu Congregational Mission, Lower Mzimkhulu Division, a man named Sotshobo Mbhele, up before the magistrate for wife-thrashing made the following statement:

I have this day [20 Sept. 1915] been convicted for thrashing my wife because she is continually leaving home without my permission and staying away sometimes two or three weeks. She states that she has been away preaching on behalf of a sect called "The Nazareths" under the leadership of Isaiah Tshembe. Tshembe arrived in this District about two years ago and since then has been preaching at different kraals in the neighbourhood of Umzumbi. My wife and my sisters have been attending these services which are held in the forests and on the hills. I have received notice that I have to leave Denver Zoar farm on account of my wife not attending the church and having joined another. I also understand that Tshembe gets the women to wash his feet. All Tshembe's washing and mending is done at my kraal by my wife which fact goes to show the hold this man has over the women. The women sometimes go away for two or three weeks to Ixopo and Durban to attend meetings. (31)

Whether or not Sotshobo Mbhele's wife was pressured into giving up travelling and preaching, and doing Shembe's washing and mending we do not know. But her case was not an isolated incident. The Rev. Chater of nearby Isipingo was still complaining in 1919 that the wife of one of his Mission reserve residents was holding Nazarite services at the homestead (32). In 1922 a Police Commandant's letter from "46 District" (centring on the area near Isipingo) reported similar complaints from men and chiefs concerning their womenfolk and adds, "I have also received information that the same thing is occurring along the North Coast". It was the loss of control over their womenfolk that most upset the plaintiffs, but the Police Commandant was also worried about the growth of the movement as a whole and ends his letter with an allusion to the Bulhoek massacre of Enoch Mgijima and his Israelites in the Cape the previous year: "This movement is spreading and unless checked may assume proportions similar to the regrettable state of affairs in the Cape Province" (33).

There is evidence therefore that women joined the Nazareth Church in large numbers even in the teeth of opposition from their dominant menfolk.

The intense desire to follow Shembe, the risks such a step involved, and her father's rage are remembered well by Kekana Mhlongo, an elderly member of the Nazareth Church now living at Ebuhleni, Amos Shembe's centre in Inanda. She recalled her father going to the police to report her conversion and the station she gave (Indudutu) is the same as that mentioned by the Police Commandant so the year may have been 1922, or it may have been earlier. Kekana said that she was about fourteen when news came that Shembe was expected at a nearby homestead:

My father said to me, "You mustn't go to that preacher. I was afraid. I didn't want to upset him. Father said, "I will hit you and stab you [if you go]". When they came in the afternoon, I heard it was church time. He [Isaiah Shembe] was with Mlangeni (34).

I said, "Grandmother, it's evening. Let me go and see that minister?". She said, "How can you? They'll be so angry".

I answered, "They will be asleep".

I went through the hedge and got there. The house was at Ebisini, Khasana Sibisi's, and the hut was very full...[on this occasion Mlangeni preached and Shembe lay resting and "groaning"]...I went home before father awoke...At eight in the morning I went to the river. Isaiah Shembe was going across to uMzinto. I looked back and saw a row of people going with Shembe. I heard the words, "Hey, Young Girl, follow me where I am going". I dropped the dishes and wanted to follow him. I heard him again. I got the water and dropped the dish at home. I was crying, I wanted to follow him. I didn't know [how to]. I sat next to the fire crying.

Father said, "Why are you crying?"

My mother said, "Why are you crying?"

"I have smoke in my eyes", I said.

I went out to my grandmother's hut. When I got there I sat and heard the voice again, "Young Girl, let us go and pray".

The voice got inside me like a hurricane. I felt I had to stand up and go...There was an "umhlala" bush beyond the hedge. I knelt and realised Father would see me and ask what I was doing. There was a stream not too far away. I ran to it and was hidden from the homestead and I knelt - I prayed inside, a person did it for me, and then my tears stopped. My heart was still in a whirlwind of despair. I would go to the stream always to pray...[Shembe came back in two months time and this time Kekana took him food].

I took the food into Emma Dlamini where the girls were...I went out and Emma Dlamini said, "Don't you want to see Father?"

I said, "I am afraid".

I went out and didn't see him. I went into the maize field so that my father wouldn't see where I had been. [Then she meets Isaiah and he warns her that her father will beat her.]

he said, "You will have great trouble. Your father will beat you terribly. I will take your spirit and put it in a country you don't know so that the day he hits you - and he will hit you greatly - your spirit will go to where you see a beautiful new country. You will not feel the pain"... [She is baptised]

The day my father heard that I had got in the water and been baptised, he asked me about it. He said, "The love you have [for him] is mine really". And when I was baptised my father cried. He said, "Why did you go to Shembe?"

I was silent.

He said, "Today we separate. I will beat you until you are dead. He beat me greatly but I felt nothing. I felt far away. Everyone cried. The mothers said, "You're killing the child". The stick broke, so he took another one. He hit me once with the second and put it aside. He felt someone restraining him - the mothers held him. There was blood all over my body. I couldn't feed myself. (35)

Kekana's father duly went to the police station at Indudutu to lay a case. She and two sisters were taken to court: The white "Sergeant" who was taking the case was in this instance quite sympathetic and convinced of their religious zeal:

God entered that white man. He said, "I can't separate people from their church. But I will give you a warning. Don't go at night. Mhlongo, [her father] do you hear that? If they go out at night bring them to me.

Kekana did not leave the Nazareth Church but it was two years before her father relented sufficiently to allow her to go on pilgrimage to Nhlgakazi and then to Ekuphakameni:

We would walk on foot to Ekuphakameni [about fort-five miles from Unkomazi], all the girls. They are all gone now, except me. (35)

Kekana Mhlongo's experience was clearly not unique. Yet this rich strand of the participation of women in the early years of Sherbe's ministry goes unrecorded in the izibongo recited by Mthiyane and claimed by him to be linked most closely with the oldest praises. It may be that the roving, selective eye of the male imbongi just happened to pass over all the episodes in which women as a single group featured. Moreover it is possible that the male vision behind the izibongo could find no place for events such as that described by Kekana which provided such a central challenge to male authority. The absence of any such mention in the izibongo may itself have helped erase any corporate consciousness in the Church of the particular involvement of women in those early days. Janzen (1985:226) associates "canonization" with the control of key early written texts belonging to a particular religious movement. Yet in such a confident and resilient oral form as izibongo which has the creation of consciousness as a central function a form of "canonization" may also occur. Experience,

such as that of the early women of the Church, which is suggestive of diversity or of uncomfortably innovative shifts in the social order may be blocked out. It may be that defiant wives and daughters, however devout and however much turbulence they caused, were simply not items that an imbongi could fit into izibongo. The beautiful, innovative and evocative praises of Shembe which Azariah Mthiyane still recites and which provide the Church with a sense of its past and its present say nothing about the women.

In spite of this limitation it is clear that the izibongo - together with the hymns - formed important aspects of Shembe's and his followers' attempts to create a religious movement that was itself a counter culture with its own new centres of power. In a way the early izibongo constituted a powerful reply to those early voices of the State in their attempt to drive him at least into obscurity and better still out of existence. Moreover although izibongo may play a part in "canonization" they also play a role in "the argument of images", "the persuasive discourse generating and regenerating alternatives under conditions of religious pluralism" (Werbner, 1985:260). There is another set of izibongo which have only been performed since Amos Shembe took over leadership of the main section of the Nazareth Church in 1980. These suggest shifts in self-perception much in the same way as the differing praises of Mzilikazi suggest shifts in Ndebele attitudes to their own past and present (36). The newer izibongo which were composed by the elderly imbongi 'Magandaganda' Mbuyazi incorporate some praises to Isaiah but focus on Amos. They say little about conflict and emphasise the extent of Amos's travels, his healing and evangelising, his successes in the Transkei and in Swaziland. He is:

UThanga olwenabe eSwazini
Iwayelwanabela naseLebua.
UThando olwehlela anaMpondo.

The Pumpkin that spread out to Swaziland
it spread further to Lebua.
The Love that came down to the Mpondo.

Both the older praises and these new ones are part of the present

consciousness of the Church. They demonstrate the complex position of the Church today in relation to external State power. The turbulence and conflict which the older praises exploit and recall has perhaps given way to a confident disregard, a guarded co-existence.

NOTES

- 1 Interview with 'Magandaganda' Mbuyazi, Ntambanana, Empangeni, 14 August 1985.
- 2 Many of these early notebooks are still at Ekuphakameni. I was lent one by Rev. Londa Shembe. A photocopy is in the Shembe mss collection in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- 3 The bulk of these are at Ekuphakameni in the care of Rev. L. Shembe. Some are also Bishop Amos Shembe's centre at Ebuhleni. Sundkler has remarked that this "effort of the Nazarite faithful... serves the process of the codification of the messianic dogma" (1961:328).
- 4 Interview with Azariah Mthiyane, Enkayideni, Richards Bay, June, 1976. The praises of Shembe which I quote are those he recited on May 25 1976. In the text I shall refer to them as "Praises". Mthiyane is regarded as the senior *imbongi* and I heard him praise many times at Nhlgakazi Mountain in January 1986 and in July 1985.
- 5 The izibongo of Cetshwayo and Dingane which I have in mind were recited by John Dlamini imbongi of King Goodwill Zwelithini. The izibongo of Cetshwayo were recited on Shaka's Day September 1975 and recorded by the South African Broadcasting Corporation. I recorded those of Dingane on 16 October 1975 at Nongoma. The izibongo of Cetshwayo are also in Cope, 1968, pp.214-229.
- 6 Chief Luthuli's izibongo were not regularly used in his lifetime and according to his former secretary, Masabalala B. Yengwa, izibongo were not often performed at African National Congress meetings in the 1950s. This recording made at Chief Luthuli's funeral was given to me by M.B. Yengwa who also helped with the transcription and translation. I am very grateful to him.
- 7 Interview with Mr Myende, Ekuphakameni, Inanda, January 28, 1986.
- 8 (C)hief (N)ative (C)ommissioner 96 (CNC 1912/917 Natal Police to Ass. Mag. Ndvedwe 21.5.1912).
- 9 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12/30 Mag. Port Shepstone to CNC Pietermaritzburg 22.6.1915).
- 10 These may or may not have been early lines. In some cases when checking transcriptions with Mthiyane he would tell me that certain parts of the izibongo were composed by Dladla. I am making an intelligent guess here that these were composed early in Shembe's ministry by Dladla or perhaps Shange.
- 11 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12/30 SNA to CNC Natal 12.5.1922).
- 12 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12/30 Ag.CNC to Mag. Verulam 24.11. 1921).
- 13 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12 Deputy Commandant South African Police to CNC Natal 16.1.1923)

- 14 CNC 96 (CNC 2155/12/30 CNC to Mag. Inanda 23.7.14). There is a mention in this letter of Rev. Bridgeman having "reported" Shembe to him in Sept. 1913.
- 15 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12/30 CNC to Mag. Inanda 23.7.1914).
- 16 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12/30 to Mag. Stanger 22.7.1914).
- 17 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12/30 Under S.N.A. to CNC Natal 8.4.1915)
- 18 Interview Nkk. Khesani Bhengu, Ebuheni, Inanda, 27 January 1986.
- 19 CNC 96 (CNC 2155/12 Mag. Stanger to CNC Natal 3.11.1913).
- 20 CNC 96 (CNC 2155/12 Chief Insp. Locations to Supt. Whittaker, Umvoti).
- 21 CNC 96 (CNC 2155/12 Rev. G.G. Kessell to Res. Mag. Umzinto 10.4.1913) and CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12 Ag. Mag. Port Shepstone to CNC Natal 11.4.1913).
- 22 CNC 96 (CNC 2155/12 H.Kettle Umtwalumi (sic) to Ass. Mag. Umzinto 17.5.1913). The "private lands" were probably the Nazarite base of Gospel at Mthwalume which was bought from a European at around this crucial time, the year of the pernicious Natives Land Act. Mzobe is mentioned in Dube, (1936:102) as having been made a minister in the Nazareth Church along with Johannes Mlangeni and Petros Mqayi. Both Mzobe and Mqayi later broke away and formed their own congregations.
- 23 CNC 96 (CNC 2155/12/24 L. Jeffery (solicitor) Umzinto to Ag. Mag. Umzinto 13.5.1913).
- 24 CNC 562/19 Ag. Supervisor Locations and Mission Reserves Isipingo to CNC Natal 26.5.1919. The Supervisor quotes at length from Rev. Chater's first letter.
- 25 CNC 562/19 Supervisor Isipingo to CNC Natal 28.5.1919. Supervisor Roach quotes again from another long letter from Rev. Chater with its litany of complaints.
- 26 Interview with Azariah Mthiyane Emkayideni. Richards Bay July 1976.
- 27 See Izihlabelelo zaNazareth, for instance Hymns 1, 3, 17 and 37. The references to wandering and homelessness are more than offset by the centripetal use of Ekuphakameni, "The Elevated Place"; although the Church has now split and Amos's large following have made a new centre at Ebuheni, Ekuphakameni still retains its symbolic role in the hymns as the earthly (and heavenly) centre.
- 28 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12/30 Mag. Port Shepstone to CNC Natal 22.9.1915).
- 29 James Stuart includes it in his description of Magolwana in uKulumetule, 1925, p.106.
- 30 I am grateful to Rev. Londa Shembe for this information.
- 31 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12/30 Mag. Port Shepstone to CNC Natal 22.9.1915). The statement was one of two enclosed with a covering letter.
- 32 See Note 24:
- 33 CNC 96 (CNC/2155/12/30 Dist. Commandant 46 District S.A. Police to Dep. Commissioner S.A. Police Natal 19.4.1922).
- 34 Johannes Mlangeni was for many years Isaiah Shembe's most trusted helper and one of his first ministers. They eventually disagreed and Mlangeni was expelled from the Church. See Dube, 1936, Chapter 20.
- 35 Interview Ebuheni, Inanda, January 27 1986. I am most grateful to Bishop Amos Shembe for allowing me to spend time at Ebuheni in 1985 and 1986 and to accompany members of the Church to Nhangakazi Mountain in January 1986.
- 36 Leroy Vail and Landeg White, "The Art of Being Ruled: Ndebele Praise-Poetry 1835-1971" in White and Couzens (eds.) 1984, pp. 57-8.
- 37 Imbongi Mbuyazi recited the long izibongo in July 1985 on the morning of the last and most important day of dancing and worship. Azariah Mthiyane also recited "his" izibongo at the same time. The occasion was the annual visit to the graves of deceased members of the Church.

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