

# Chapter 145

## The Bible, the Hymns and Identity: The Prophet Isaiah Shembe and the Hymns of His Nazareth Baptist Church

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### 145.1 Introduction

The Nazareth Baptist Church (Ibandla lamaNazaretha or Nazaretha Church) marked hundred years of existence in 2010 and it can be argued that those have been years of engagement with colonialism, cultural imperialism and the Bible. Isaiah Shembe, who founded the Nazaretha Church in 1910, was an avid reader of the Bible, and his tremendous knowledge of the Bible is amazing because he was not educated in missionary schools. A number of scholars have commented on Isaiah Shembe's command of the Bible. Gerald West states, "That Shembe was familiar with the Bible is plainly apparent to anyone who listens to or reads his hymns and teachings" (2006: 163). One of the earliest scholars to study Isaiah Shembe and his Nazaretha Church, Esther Roberts (1936), writes that Isaiah Shembe was reported "to have been able to cite biblical references by chapter and verse, outwitting most European missionaries" (Quoted in West 2006: 163). What made this even more remarkable, argues West, is that "there is no clarity on whether or to what extent Shembe was literate" (163). West's point that while Shembe "seized" and "reconstituted" the Bible, it "also [took] hold of him, drawing him and his female followers to its narrative [and here I think not just his female followers]" (2007: 498) is validated by the fact that the Bible still plays a significant role in the life of the Church today. In this chapter I look at how Shembe "seizes" the Bible and uses it in his hymns (*izihlabelelo*) to negotiate his own identity in relation to colonialism, pre-colonial African life and missionization. I argue that in the Bible Shembe found, in Duncan Brown's terms, "a mode of spiritual power and personal articulation" (2006: 40–41), which allowed him to imagine himself as a Black Messiah while at the same time celebrating the life of Jesus Christ and rejoicing in being "saved" by him.

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As West has pointed out, there is a dearth of scholarship on Africa's engagement with the Bible: "an important task awaiting an African biblical hermeneutics is a comprehensive account of the transaction that constitute the history of the encounters between Africa and the Bible. While the accounts we have of the encounters between Africa and Christianity are well documented, the encounters between Africa and the Bible are partial and fragmentary" (2003: 65). In the similar vein Roland Boer laments the absence of the Bible in colonial and postcolonial studies, even though there is "perpetual, if not overwhelming, presence of the Bible in colonialism and postcolonialism themselves" (2001: 7). And Duncan Brown, coming from the point of view of literary scholarship, rather than theology and religion, has pointed to the central role the Bible plays in the lives of Africans. Drawing on the assertion made by Terence Ranger, he argues:

Terence Ranger says, "any scholar who aspires today to 'think black' about many of the people in eastern Zimbabwe has to learn also to think Methodist" (1994: 309). While I do explore the specific influences of Methodism below, I would extend that provocative statement further by saying that any scholar who aspires to 'think in black' about the African (sub) continent has to learn also to think biblically. (2008: 81–82)

With its focus on the postcolonial subjects (ordinary readers) as agents who, in their encounter with the Bible produce "readings often at odds with, or resistant to, the normative discourse of the missionaries" (Brown 2009: 12), this work leans towards postcolonial studies. It deals with one of the religious groups that, in the words of Robert Young, "have taken on the political identity of providing alternative value systems to those of the west" (2001: 337). Even though Young's religions that "provide alternative value systems to those of the west" are only Islam and Hinduism, Brown points to the "abundant evidence of other religions, including various forms of indigenized Christianity, expressing "subaltern concerns" (2008b: 3–4).

## 145.2 What Is Postcolonial Studies?

Postcolonial Studies is a complex interdisciplinary theoretical approach, which "involves texts from different times, places, and cultures and whose boundaries often blur. It propounds a myriad of methods and theories, all of which examine literature and its participation in the building, collaboration, or subversion of global imperial relationships" (Dube 2000: 52–53). A Postcolonial hermeneutical approach, writes Jeremy Punt this time,

includes and gives voice to the voiceless, the muted voices of the colonised, the marginalised, and the oppressed. It investigates and addresses disproportionate power relationships at the geo-political as well as subsidiary levels, at the level of the empire and the relationship between the imperial and the colonial, but also at social and personal level of the powerful ruler and the subaltern, to the extent of investigating relationships and interactions between the centre and the periphery (2010: 6).

The amaNazaretha members, and their leader Isaiah Shembe especially, who are the subjects of this study are indeed "the colonised, the marginalised and the oppressed," but not "voiceless" and, therefore, this study does not profess to give

them a voice. Instead it examines the voice of the oppressed and renders it audible to the “oppressor” (both western and native), who, thanks to the work that has been done on the Nazaretha Church (and other African Initiated Churches) is not completely unaware of the presence of this voice. I am also mindful of the significance of Brown’s call for a “South (or periphery) centred” approach to postcolonial studies: “rather than subjecting inhabitants of the postcolony to scrutiny in terms of postcolonial theory/studies, how can we allow the theory and its assumptions also to be interrogated by the subjects and ideas it seeks to explain?” (2009: 9). While this call is laudable, it is unclear who the “subjects” and their ideas are. Is a biblical scholar in the postcolony the same as an ordinary reader of the Bible like Isaiah Shembe? This suggestion seems to imply that there is a certain known point where the “aims and deepest aspirations” (to use Chinua Achebe’s words), of the academic and the ordinary person in the South meet (1989: 44). That said, while Isaiah Shembe’s reading of and engagement with the Bible would definitely unnerve a number of people in the South (both academic and ordinary readers), it is, however, an example of the South centered approach Brown is calling for.

In the similar vein West proposes a refocus of biblical scholarship on the impact Africa has had on the Bible, rather than the impact the Bible has had on Africa. Drawing on Kwame Bediako’s statement that, “Further developments in African Christianity will test the depth of the impact that the Bible has made upon Africa” (1994: 252), West comments that:

Bediako’s statement points to the significant role the Bible has played in the formation of African Christianity. Unfortunately, this formulation perhaps gives the impression that the encounter between the Bible and Africa is in one direction: from the Bible to Africa. The Bible, in this formulation, is the subject and Africa is the object... But, what if we make Africa the subject and the Bible the object? We would then have the following formulation: Further developments in African Christianity will test the depth of the impact that Africa has made upon the Bible. (2000: 29)

The engagement with and transaction between Isaiah Shembe and the Bible that is explored here is epitomized in the “conversation” between Gerald West and a member of the Church in which West had spoken in the launch of *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God* (Gunner 2002) about how Isaiah Shembe was “a remarkable re-memberer of the Bible” (West 2006: 179). The member of the Church rebuked Gerald for his statement, stating that, “We do not interpret the Bible, the Bible interprets us” (179). This interpretation and counter-interpretation, the church’s action upon the Bible and their being acted upon by it, or, this “mutual engagement” (Peel 2003: 1) constitute the relationship between Isaiah Shembe (and his Church) and the Bible which is the focus of this chapter.

### 145.3 A Brief History of Ibandla lamaNazaretha

Ibandla lamaNazaretha is one of the largest and rapidly growing African Initiated Churches (AICs) in South Africa. It was founded by Isaiah Shembe around 1910 in what is now KwaZulu-Natal (Fig. 145.1). Although it started as a local and

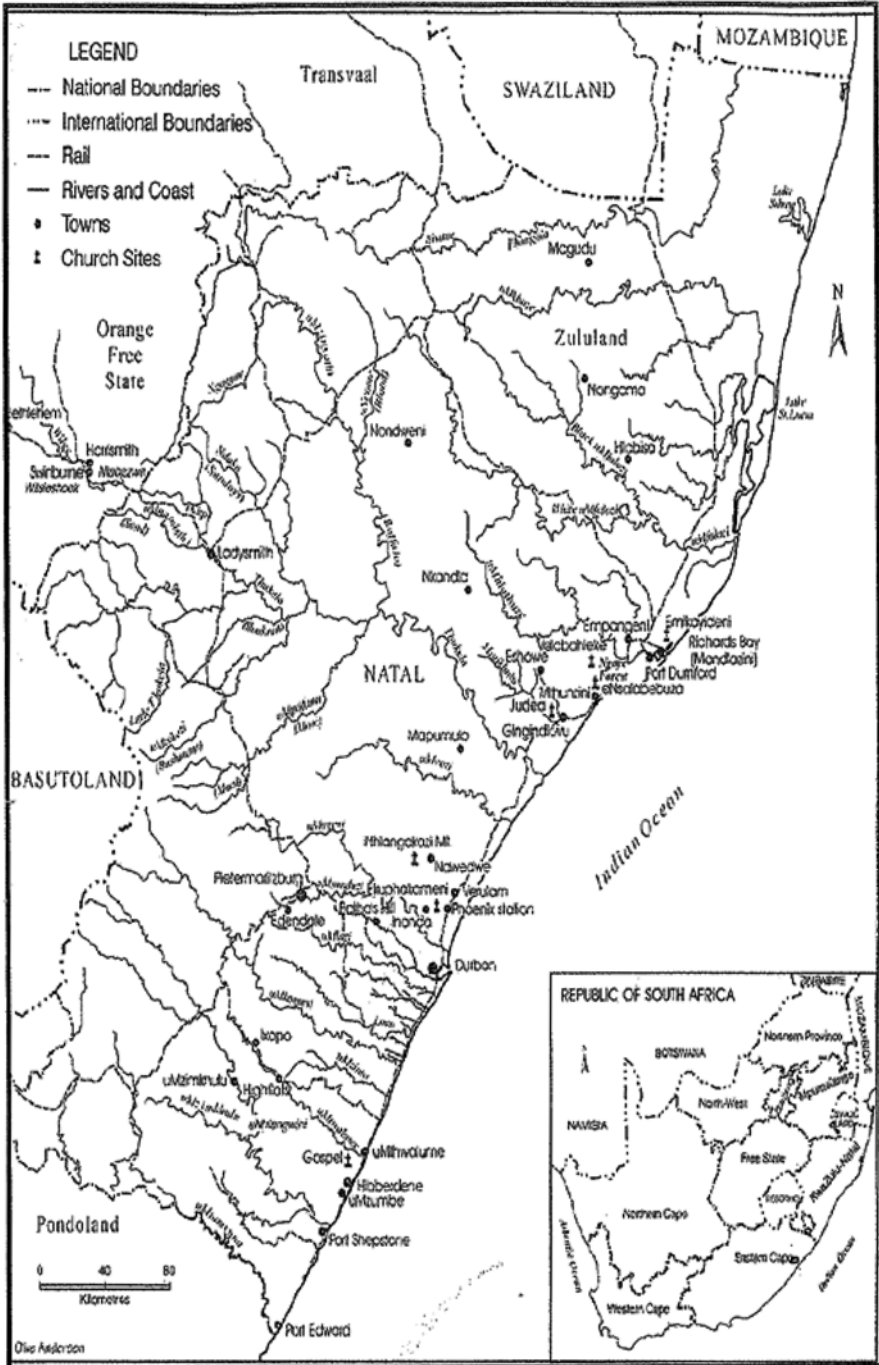


Fig. 145.1 Map of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) in the 1930s and some Nazaretha temples (Map by Nkosinathi Sithole)

ethnically specific church, today Ibandla lamaNazaretha has a strong national following; attracting members from all walks of life across ethnic groups, and has members as far afield as Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The church is rapidly growing in numbers. According to Preacher Sibisi, there are all in all about seven million Nazaretha members. This growth, plus the church's "success in creating a religious presence which is distinctively African," causes Gunner to see it as a "force to be reckoned with in social, religious and political terms" (2002: 1).<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah Shembe forged his church by blending Christian and African forms, many of the latter being downgraded and prohibited in mainstream churches (Fig. 145.2). As Kunene argues, "Whilst keeping the Christian principles the Shembites have retained some of the traditional customs and practices" (1961: 197–198). Isaiah Shembe's theology clashed with that of the nonconformist missionaries, whose intention it was, as the Comaroffs have noted, "to "civilise" the native by remaking his person and his context; by reconstructing his habit and habitus; by taking back the savage mind from Satan, who had emptied it of all traces of spirituality and reason" (1991: 238). Some of the main issues of conflict were African song and dance, polygamy, and recognition of the ancestors. One of the most significant expressive forms in the Nazaretha Church is *umgidi* (the sacred dance) in which the performers' dress includes loinskins, headties and other attire made from animal hides. The sacred dance itself involves the beating of cowhide drums and the singing of hymns or songs composed by Isaiah Shembe, and is arguably an improvisation on the dances that took place in pre-colonial society, which were labelled "uncivilised" and "anti-Christian."

The hymns that were in existence in isiZulu prior to Isaiah Shembe and during his time were mainly translations of the English hymns from Orthodox churches; something which Bengt Sunkler has lamented:

One of the most striking – and disconcerting – examples of the White man's dominance even in his spiritual matters over his Zulu co-religionists is this fact that Zulu Christians have not felt led to express their new faith in the composing of songs and hymns of their own, whereas this is quite common in certain Mission Churches in East Africa. (1948: 193)

B. W. Vilakazi has lauded P. T. Gumede and N. Luthuli for their contributions in the field of hymns in isiZulu for their *Amagama okuhlabelela* (American Board Hymnbook), even though their influence was limited. But Vilakazi's statement that, "After these two there is a great break, up to now. The field of hymns seems to be dead" (Quoted in Gerard 1971: 187), is very disturbing considering

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<sup>1</sup>While the Church has been marginalised in the past, this has changed in the new South African context. The Nazaretha Church has been visited by all the Presidents of the new South Africa and is highly regarded for its upholding of African values. For instance, in 2004, some African Americans came to South Africa supposedly in search of their African roots and the KwaZulu-Natal government sent them to EBuhleni where a cow was slaughtered for them and they took part in the sacred dance. But, it also needs to be noted that the popularity with the politicians has to do with the fact that as more and more people join the Church, the politicians see potential voters in them.

**Fig. 145.2** Prophet Isaiah Shembe (1870–1935), as he appears in a church hymnal



the fact that he was aware of Shembe's hymns but seems to dismiss them as he dismisses the Nazaretha Church itself in the following statement:

The followers of the zionist movement have incorporated into their services most of the first-fruit ceremonial observencies, in the purification of the priest or king, colourful dresses and community singing, mixed with dancing, consisting largely of rhythmical raising of the feet, thundering stamp upon the ground, and a series of grotesque shuffles, interspersed with vigorous leaps by leaders of the groups. This has an attraction for the average Native, and he eagerly supports such a movement, for he has an active part to play, besides the priest. (Quoted in Gerard 1971: 192)

Even though Vilakazi holds this hostile view of the Nazaretha Church, which was common among the educated *kholwa* (believers) of his time, and does not see Shembe's hymns as bridging the gap he has noted in the field of hymns, but he did acknowledge Shembe's achievement. "Shembe composed for his sect a number of

songs. If one reads through a typical one, the VIIIth, one notices the African atmosphere pervading it, in its poetic figures of speech” (1946: 175). So it seems that for Vilakazi these were mere songs, not hymns, because the people who created them and performed them did not conform to the orthodox Christian way of life.

Isaiah Shembe’s contribution was unique in the sense that he created his own original hymns, not ones based on the hymns of other churches. In doing so he drew on pre-colonial African song and the Bible, and used the genre of the hymns to articulate his own feelings and ideas. Gerard has remarked that, “[i]t is in his hymnal poetry that Shembe makes his unique contribution to Zulu literary history” (1971: 188). Reading these hymns as “literary texts of extraordinary power and vision” (Brown 1999: 197), I am interested in the way in which Shembe utilises the Bible in making his contribution and in creating his literary texts.

Isaiah Shembe was a self-taught musician. Bongani Mthethwa, in an interview with Carol Muller, has described Isaiah Shembe as “a great maskanda musician of his time” (Muller 2010, Track 5). He maintains that Shembe would “lock himself inside the room and sing a song and rehearse how to crystallise it, as it were, into dance steps, and then take that and teach it to the people” (Track 5). Shembe was also, still in the words of Bongani Mthethwa, “an excellent maskanda concertina player”; was able to play any instrument he laid his hands on. In the 1920s he started an instrumental ensemble in which the African flutes and the makweyana were played (Track 5).

The hymns that Shembe composed are now published in the Church’s hymnal, which was first published by Johannes Galilie Shembe in 1940. Isaiah Shembe created 219 out of the 242 hymns in the hymnal that J. G. Shembe published in 1940, and that is still used, with some minor alterations, in the EBuhleni Sect of the iBandla lamaNazaretha.<sup>2</sup> The translation of the hymnal has recently been published by Carol Muller (2010). Isaiah Shembe was not educated, so he could not write his own hymns. He had scribes, normally young women members of his church, who would write down the hymns as they “came” to him. I am putting “came” in scare quotes because the belief that is generally accepted that Isaiah Shembe’s hymns came with the messengers of heaven is partly true and I have argued elsewhere (Sithole 2011) that this view deprives Shembe of his creativity and agency. Sundkler has reported that:

[Isaiah Shembe] would hear a woman’s voice, often a girl’s voice, singing new and unexpected words. He could not see her, but as he woke up from a dream or walked along the path in Zululand, meditating, he heard that small voice, that clear voice, which gave him a new hymn. He had to write down the new words, while humming and singing the tune which was born with the words. (1976: 186)

But there are a number of hymns that seem to me to challenge this view as they are related to certain events that actually happened and Shembe created the hymns

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<sup>2</sup>The iBandla lamaNazaretha split in 1977 when J. G. Shembe (Successor to Isaiah Shembe) passed away. J.G.’s son Londa Shembe remained in eKuphakameni with a smaller group of followers while a larger group left with J.G.’s brother, Amos, to create a new home, EBuhleni. Londa added more hymns to the hymnal while Amos did not.

as reflections to those events. A close and contextual reading of the hymns themselves negates the above understanding of the creation of the hymns. Hymn No. 3 is a case in point: it is based on Shembe's prayer before he and his followers took on a journey to Nhlankakazi in 1923. He had been informed by the authorities that he could no longer undertake his pilgrimage to Nhlankakazi without prior permit by the magistrate. When the time had come to go and there was no permit, Shembe decided to defiantly embark on his journey, and before he went, he said a prayer that was to form this hymn:

<i>Nkosi Nkosi bubusise</i>	Lord, Lord bless
<i>Lobu buNazaretha</i>	This Nazaretha Church
<i>Uchoboze izitha zabo</i>	Crush its enemies
<i>Zingabu vukeli.</i>	That they don't rise against it.
<i>Vuka Vuka wena Nkosi</i>	Wake up, wake up, Oh Lord
<i>Mabulwelwe nguwe</i>	Be the one that fights for it
<i>Uzuhambe phambi kwabo</i>	Travel ahead of it
<i>Zingabuvukeli.</i>	So they don't rise against it.
<i>Noma siya entabeni</i>	Even as we travel to the mountain
<i>Owasikhethela yona</i>	You chose for us
<i>Ethiwa yiNhlankakazi</i>	Called Nhlankakazi
<i>Bungakhubeki.</i>	Let it not falter.

Clearly, this hymn speaks to Shembe's situation at the time of composing it. The "enemies" that are spoken about are the state, the police and the missionaries (with the black believers), all those responsible for his predicament. He was here deliberating about his problem of being prohibited to undertake a journey he had undertaken for the last 5 years or so. This then can only have come from his mind, not brought by some spirits. Sundkler's quote above should be understood in terms of the composition of the interview from which it came, viz., a white scholar interviewing a black religious leader (of a church that had for many years been subjected to scrutiny by the state) in a country ruled unfairly by a white government. The statement could have been invoked by Isaiah Shembe and J. G. Shembe to channel people's attention away from the political nature of some of the hymns.

#### **145.4 Isaiah Shembe and the Notion of the Black Messiah**

There is no doubt that Shembe spent some time in his life reflecting on his own identity not just as an African, Zulu or human being, but also as a religious figure of great prominence. It is also apparent that in his endeavours to understand and articulate his own self he found the Bible to be very useful. That he was aware of his (healing) abilities and wisdom is clear from his self delineation in his assertion that, "[i]f you had educated him in your schools you would have taken pride in him. But



that God may demonstrate his wisdom, he sent Shembe, a child, so that he may speak like the wise and the educated” (Gunner 1986: 182). Nellie Wells, “Special Representative” of *The Natal Mercury* and Isaiah Shembe’s ardent admirer who wrote a transcript for a proposed film on Shembe, reports that

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

The popularity that Shembe commanded and the conflict with the missionaries, the educated elites, and the State which resulted from such popularity made it important for Shembe to deal with the question of his identity. On a number of occasions he was interrogated with regards to his identity and praxis. In 1921 he was invited to give his life story to then assistant Magistrate C.N.C Barrett and in 1923 he was interviewed by Magistrate Charles McKenzie in Ndwedwe Court (Papini 1999: 254). He was also interviewed in 1929 by Carl Faye (see Papini 1999) and in April 1931 by the Native Economic Commission. Clearly, in these interviews he told his interrogators what they would like to hear, as in the case of the 1923 interview he said something far removed from his many texts addressed to his followers:

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

While this is clearly a reference to Romans 13, it also echoes Jesus’ words in Luke 20 verse 25, “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” However, in reality, this is not what Shembe encouraged and taught his followers to do. I stated elsewhere (see Sithole 2010), following on James Scott’s formulation, that in the Nazareth Church there is a marked difference between the “public transcript” and the “hidden transcript.” According to these concepts, the above statement in the interview would belong to the “public transcript” while there are a number of other texts (hymns and sermons) that would constitute a “hidden transcript” in which Shembe addresses his followers away from the ears of the authorities (Scott 1990). In these texts he teaches defiance, rather than submission.

The kind of wisdom and powers that Shembe was believed and believed himself to have commanded are close to those which Jesus was believed to have commanded; Shembe was aware of this fact. Thus, in hymn 34 he appropriates the story of Jesus’s birth and uses it to claim that what Jesus was for the Israelites which Shembe is for the Zulus or even Africans:

<i>Kwafika izazi</i>	The wise men came
<i>Ziphuma empumalanga</i>	They came from the East
<i>Zathi uphi lowo</i>	They said where is that one
<i>Oyinkosi yabaJuda.</i>	Who is the Lord of the Jews

Chorus:

<i>Kunjalo-ke namhlanje</i>	It is like that today
<i>Emagqumeni as'Ohlange</i>	In the hills of Ohlange
<i>Nawe-ke Betlehema</i>	And you Bethlehem
<i>Muzi wakwaJuda</i>	Village of Judah
<i>Awusiye omncinyane</i>	You are not the smaller one
<i>Kunababusi bakwaJuda.</i>	Than the rulers of Judah.

Chorus

<i>Lanyakaza iJerusalema</i>	Jerusalem was shaken
<i>Bathi niyayizwa lendaba</i>	They said do you hear this news
<i>Evele phakathi kwethu</i>	That happened amongst us
<i>Efike nezazi</i>	It came with the wise men
<i>Sibutheleni abafundisi</i>	Call for us the priests
<i>Bahlole imibhalo.</i>	To examine the scriptures.

Chorus

<i>Bafike bathi yebo</i>	They came and said yes
<i>Kulotshiwe kunjalo</i>	It is written so
<i>Nawe Kuphakama</i>	And you Kuphakama
<i>Magquma as'Ohlange</i>	Hills of Ohlange

Chorus

<i>Awusiye omncinyane</i>	You are not the smaller one
<i>Kunababusi bakwaJuda</i>	Than the rulers of Judah
<i>Kuyakavela kuwe</i>	From you shall come forth
<i>AbaProfithi</i>	Prophets
<i>Abayakusindisa</i>	Who will save
<i>Umuzi was'Ohlange.</i>	The village of Ohlange.

Chorus

One of the reasons why Shembe read the Bible so extensively as stated above was so that he could use it to defend himself against the people (black church leaders, the missionaries and the state) who seemed troubled by his work. He called on the educated and knowledgeable people to examine the scripture and hoped that they would realize – by identifying the similarities between himself and other prophets – that Shembe himself was a prophet and was sent by God. Thus he begins the above hymn at the time when the wise men were going to see and salute the young Jesus. Shembe emphasises that the wise men came with the question, “Where is that one who is the king of the Jews?” This challenges his enemies to enquire about who and what he is, instead of simply dismissing him as “the madman, son of Mayekisa” (Papini 1999: 251). Rather than following the story of Jesus as it is told in the Bible, at this point he inserts the chorus which makes a statement about himself and places this narrative in the context of South Africa, using a location occupied by only black people (*Ohlange*) to emphasize the fact that he was sent to “save” black people in South Africa.

What Isaiah Shembe does with the Bible here is what West calls “re-membering” the Bible. West argues that ordinary people (as opposed to trained biblical scholars) have their own tools for “reading” the Bible. Their ‘reading’ of the Bible is “more akin to “rewriting” than reading in any scholarly sense” (2003: 78). They reinterpret the Bible (sometimes in the way antagonistic to that of the missionaries) and give it new meaning relevant to them and their contexts. As West goes on to argue, while the ordinary African interpreters of the Bible do not rewrite the Bible as such,

they are [also] not as transfixed and fixated by the text as their textually trained pastors and theologians... The Bible they work with is always an already “re-membered” “text” – a text, both written and oral, that has been dismembered, taken apart, and then re-membered (2003: 78).

The text that is commonly used or appropriated in the Nazaretha Church to confirm Isaiah Shembe’s messianic position is that of Deuteronomy 18:18. While this text was used by Isaiah Shembe himself (as can be seen in his writings) and Church members even today use it, an example of its use by Amos Shembe (Isaiah Shembe’s son and third leader of the Church according to the Ebuhleni sect) will suffice here. In an undated cassette, Amos (known to members as iNyanga YeZulu / Moon of Heaven) preached a sermon in which he dismissed Jesus as white and calls for a black prophet for black people. He told the story of a woman who wanted her children to go to church. The children asked who was to be worshipped and the mother told them it was Jesus. When they asked who Jesus was, and were told that he was white, the children were very angered and disappointed.

“Kanti mama sihlupheka kangaka nje sikhonz’umlungu?” Wadumal umam ‘esepheth ‘incwad’ey ‘esontweni... Zathi “Siyabuza?...Kant’uJesu wumlungu?...Abelungu basihlupha kangaka nje sikhonza bona?...Kwakwenzenjani?Kwakonakelen’e-Afrika mama? Kwakwenzenjan’-uNkulunkul ‘engavez ‘umuntu...” Ngiyoniveze...ves 18 Deuteronomy 18... wa...zibuz-‘ingan’ukuth’akamvezanga ngan’uNkulunkulu uma umunt ‘omnyama kuyisizwe ngempela kushukuthi siqalekisiwe thina mama?...Bafundele phela ngoba naz’ingane zath ‘akufundwe lapho...(Ngiyakubavezela umprofethi kubafowabo. Abe njengabo. Ngiyakubeka amazwi ami emlonyeni wakhe... Uyakukhuluma konke akutshelwa yimina... Uyakuthi ongawalaleliyo amazwi...)Eya! Ngiyakubavezela...Abantu!... Umprofethi...Abantu!... Onjengabo...Abantu!...Hhayi ilokhu u Sheti...iNdiya min ‘alifani nam. UHhay’u Ferguson! Hhay’uFerguson umlungu...no...no...no! Ngiyovez’umuntu kwabakubo ...Akushiw’ ukuthi kwabakubo? ...Ehhe! Kwabakub ‘onjengabo abantu...

TRANSLATION: “Is it true, mother, that we worship a white man as we suffer like this?” The woman was disappointed as she held her books on her way to church...They [the children] said, “We are asking! Is Jesus a white man? The whites abuse us like this but we worship them? What happened? What went wrong in Africa mother? Why didn’t God raise a person?... I will raise for you... verse 18 Deuteronomy 18... he... the children [were] asking, “Why didn’t God raise a person? If black people are a nation it means we are cursed mother”...Do read for them because the children said we should read there<sup>3</sup>...**(I will raise the prophet among your brothers. He will be like them. I will put my words into his mouth. He will speak to them what I tell him and if anyone does not listen to the words)** I will raise for them...the people...the prophet...the people...from their race...the

<sup>3</sup>In the Nazaretha Church there is a tradition of reading the Bible where a person preaching a sermon will not read the Bible for himself, but will ask another person in the congregation. While one person reads from the bible, the preacher would reiterate what is read, sometimes changing some words and emphasizing whatever he feels like emphasizing. Here, I have used the parentheses and bold to show the voice of the person reading for Amos Shembe.

people...he will be like them...the people. Not the...not Shetty... the Indian does not look like me... Not Ferguson...Not Ferguson he is white.. No! No! No! I will raise a person from his race...Is it not said that from his race? Yes! From his race who is like them...

The above text does not suggest who is the Messiah for the black people, but the audience need not be told. They see the “chosen” one sitting in front of them. While Amos Shembe states clearly and openly his relationship to Jesus, that he was white and, therefore, represented the whites, he states in a subtle way Shembe’s position and his relationship to God. He does this through singing verse two of hymn No. 239 (Fig. 145.3):

<i>Ufikile abakhuluma ngaye</i>	He has arrived, the one they spoke about
<i>Aba profithi</i>	The Prophets
<i>Babazani wemadoda</i>	Praise, you men
<i>Babazani zizwe nonke</i>	Praise, you nations

The singing of this hymn serves two purposes here, a common tendency in Nazaretha sermon performance. It is firstly a way of engaging with the audience, allowing them to be active participants in the performance. Secondly, it is a subtle way of making a point: that Shembe (and here he has his father, Isaiah Shembe in mind, even though he was himself believed to be a messiah) is the prophet the children confronted their mother about. It means God has actually done what the children were crying that He had not done.



**Fig. 145.3** Members of the Nazaretha Church in EBuhlemi, near Durban, are at the end of the Sabbath service; the sermon has been preached and they are singing the closing hymn, July 2010 (Photo by Nkosinathi Sithole)

Now back to the hymns. How exactly does Isaiah Shembe “re-member” the story of Jesus’s birth in his hymns? Shembe does this by appropriating a written story and making it a predominantly oral one by renewing it “in a sung context” (Watson 2009: 330) and thus allowing it to be received communally. This rendering of the text in oral form also “Africanises” it because, as Ruth Finnegan has noted, “Africa is celebrated above all for the treasure of her voiced and auditory arts, and as the home of oral literature, orature and orality, and the genesis and inspiration of the voiced traditions of the great diaspora” (2007: 1). The text itself is not ‘borrowed’ as it is from the Bible. Isaiah Shembe omits certain parts and emphasizes others as he sees appropriate for his own purpose. That the story of Jesus’s birth was important to Isaiah Shembe is exemplified by the fact that there are two hymns based on this story. Another hymn telling the story of Jesus’ birth is No. 152 “*Jerusalema Betlehema*” (Jerusalem Bethlehem). Unlike hymn No. 34 where the speaker simply narrates the story, here in the first stanza Isaiah Shembe uses two crucial locales in the story of Jesus’s birth, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, as the addressees. But here too the wise men take the position as the second most important characters in the story. Shembe did not see Jesus as important in and of himself, but what was important was what he did and what he stood for. That is why the name Jesus is not mentioned in this stanza. What is emphasised is the fact that he is the Saviour (*uMsindisi*):

<i>Jerusalema Betlehema</i>	Jerusalem Bethlehem
<i>Izazi zisitshelile</i>	The wise men told us
<i>Umsindisi uselezewelwe</i>	The Saviour is born
<i>Kwelasebetlehema.</i>	In the land of Bethlehem.

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

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

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

The way in which Isaiah Shembe re-members this text (Matthew 2) in each of the two hymns mentioned above is different. Hymn No. 152 seems to be simply a re-telling of the narrative, albeit with certain omissions and alterations of some parts of the text. Hymn No. 34 in contrast is unapologetically claiming the story of Jesus for the amaNazaretha, for the Africans. In hymn No. 34, Isaiah Shembe inserts the chorus that claims that what happened in Jerusalem has happened in Ohlange too. For instance, stanza 3 talks about the stirring of the people in Jerusalem because of

the news that the king of the Jews had been born, and a call is made that the ministers should examine the scripture to ascertain if what was happening was in accordance with what had happened or had been prophesied before. This call is Isaiah Shembe's own and is not part of Matthew 2. Through it Shembe is arguing that he and his work should be judged and examined in terms of what the scripture says. This is probably in response to what Elizabeth Gunner refers to as the 'police surveillance' and to the "Makholwas" (Believers), for whom Shembe's appeal was "very alarming and threatening" (1988: 215).

But what is even more telling is the fact that although the call to examine the scripture is with regards to Jesus' birth and Jerusalem, in Shembe's text, the ministers' examination shows that eKuphakameni (not Bethlehem), in the hills of Ohlange (not of Judah), is not smaller than the rulers of Judah, as the biblical text says about Jerusalem. Here Shembe is claiming that the black people of Africa are God's chosen people as the Israelites were. He says in another of his hymns (No. 101):

<i>Akusiyo iJerusema kuphela</i>	It is not Jerusalem alone
<i>Owayithandayo.</i>	That you loved.

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

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

<i>Nawe-ke Betlehema</i>	And you Bethlehem
<i>Awusiye omuncinyane</i>	You are not the smaller one
<i>Kunababusi bakwaJuda</i>	Than the rulers of Judah
<i>Wena Bethlehemema.</i>	You, Bethlehem.

What seems to attract Shembe to this verse is the idea that the presence of a strong religious leader in a country (as Jesus was to be) raises even the political status of that country. I mentioned elsewhere (see Sithole 2011) that what interested Shembe in the Zulu kingdom was Shaka's idea of a strong, unified black nation, and that Shembe saw himself as filling the position of a leader who could bring about that unity, though differently from Shaka by not using force in order to bring those people together. In short, Shembe saw himself as a Black messiah and he used the Bible to confirm such a claim.

However, Isaiah Shembe's imagined relationship with Jesus was more complex than simply viewing him as an equal who was for the Jews what he himself was for the Zulus/Blacks. In hymn No. 82, Shembe praises Jesus' perseverance in the face of adversity, and the fact that Jesus did not resort to violence of any kind when his enemies abused him.

<i>Mangibenjengawe Nkosi</i>	Let me be like you, Lord
<i>Ekukhonzeni kwakho</i>	In your worshipping
<i>Awesabanga lutho</i>	You feared nothing
<i>Noma bekuhlupha.</i>	Even when they ill-treated you.

<i>Mangibenjengawe Nkosi</i>	Let me be like you, Lord
<i>Noma bekuhlupha</i>	Even when they ill-treated you
<i>Nasekufeni kwakho</i>	Even in your death
<i>Awushongo lutho.</i>	You said nothing.

That Jesus died for all the people's sins Shembe accepts and celebrates in Hymn No. 132:

<i>Bamenywa ngowayelenga</i>	They are invited by the one
<i>emthini</i>	who hung on a tree
<i>Esiphambanweni</i>	On the cross
<i>Emthini wokudelwa</i>	On the tree of the forsaken
<i>Umhlaba wamazama</i>	The earth quaked

<i>Wayevuma ezami izono</i>	He was confessing my own sins
<i>Emthini wokudelwa</i>	On the tree of the forsaken
.....	
<i>Mina ngaphunyuzwa</i>	As for me, I was relieved
<i>Ngowayelenga emthini</i>	By the one who hung on a tree
<i>Senizwile wozani.</i>	Now that you have heard, come.
<i>Ezami zagqitshwa kanye naye</i>	[My sins] were buried with him
<i>Ethuneni, senizwile, wozani.</i>	In the grave, you have heard, come.

## 145.5 Conclusion

Isaiah Shembe's appropriation or engagement with the Bible depends on what he intends to accomplish with a particular hymn he is composing. With the hymns on the birth of Jesus, he tries to negotiate his identity as a powerful healer and religious leader who is constantly violated by the state, the missionaries, and the Black educated elites. While this may seem to be pointing to a claim to be a Black Christ, it is in fact meant to iterate that his predicaments are the same as those faced by Jesus. This becomes clearer in the later hymns (at least according to the order of presentation in the hymnal) where he praises Jesus and wishes to be like him, and when he rejoices in the knowledge that Jesus died for his sins. He thus calls on the people to join him in worshipping Jesus.

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