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## 5 Redeeming Zululand: Placing Cultural Resonances in the Nazareth Baptist Church, South Africa

A praise poem of Isaiah Shembe, who founded the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC) in 1910, calls him the “[b]reaker-away” who “broke away with the Gospel [. . .] because he thirsted for the happiness of the nation.”<sup>1</sup> This nation (*isizwe*, pl. *izizwe*), the people Shembe gathered in his church, cut across African *izizwe*, the pre-colonial socio-political aggregates of descent groups, clans, or chiefdoms. Shembe built his church as a spiritual rival to the Zulu kingdom, whose “royal line of Sensangakhona” he pestered like a “[f]ly which pesters a sore”.<sup>2</sup> The happiness of the new nation depended on the break with mission Christianity, whose representatives “denied that we had just preached the gospel”.<sup>3</sup> Taking the view of the church members or Nazarites, the praise poem implored Isaiah Shembe to “let us leave and let us head to our own Zululand” with the gospel, “which we saw approaching with our own royal leaders adorned with the plumage of the red-winged lourie.”<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning and end, the praise poem refers to Isaiah Shembe as Guqabadele (Kneeler-and-they-be-satisfied), a praise name of Cetshwayo, the last independent Zulu king. In Cetshwayo’s case, it refers to his kneeling on the shield of his half-brother, which ritually ensured his succession as king.<sup>5</sup> By calling Isaiah Shembe “our beautiful Kneeler-and-they-be-satisfied of Ekuphakameni”,<sup>6</sup> the praise links him with the Zulu king, while at the same time establishing the decisive difference, because kneeling in submission to Jehovah is the signature practice that redeems the nation. Redemption in the NBC negated and surpassed but also retained African traditions. The church transcended African “nations” not least by mobilizing Zulu history, and established difference to mission Christianity

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1 L. Gunner and M. Gwala (eds., trans.), *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1991, p. 69.

2 Ibid. Sensangakhona, Zulu chief (1787–1816), was father of Shaka, the first Zulu king (1816–1828).

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 T. Cope (ed.), *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 226.

6 Gunner and Gwala, *Praises*, pp. 67, 79.

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through material culture symbolizing Zulu royalty. As the church reverberated with traditions labelled as “Zulu”, it emplaced its own Zululand in the structure and atmosphere of their assemblies, and partook in the construction of Zulu ethnicity.

“Indigeneity is out; modernity and globalization are very much in”<sup>7</sup> in academic discourse on African Christianity, and recent literature on the NBC has emphasized transnational and Christian influences in its early history.<sup>8</sup> Nazarites, however, cared little about academic fashion, and became more “deliberately and unapologetically Zulu” than ever.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on data collected during fieldwork within the church’s eBuhleni faction from 2007 to 2017, my analysis of imaginary landscapes, spatial structures and atmospheric places in the NBC emphasizes how Nazarite discourse and practice continue to resonate with Zulu cultural traditions and thus relate to identity politics beyond the confines of the religious field.

## A Spatial History

Isaiah Shembe (c. 1870–1935) was a member of the Hlubi, a group of Zulu-speaking Nguni that fled from the violent conflicts surrounding the establishment of the Zulu kingdom in the early nineteenth century and was prosecuted for rebellion in the colony of Natal in 1873.<sup>10</sup> After the dispersal of the Hlubi, Isaiah grew up as a tenant labourer on a white man’s farm in southern Orange Free State. Hailing from a rather high-ranking background – his mother was the niece of the Hlubi chief Langalibalele and his father had been his councillor (*induna*) – Isaiah became the head of a polygamous household after his father’s death.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> J. Cabrita, *Text and Authority in the South African Nazareth Baptist Church*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; A. Heuser, *Shembe, Gandhi und die Soldaten Gottes: Wurzeln der Gewaltfreiheit in Südafrika*, Münster: Waxmann, 2003; J. Tishken, “The Nazareth Baptist Church as Subordinationist Christianity”, *African Studies* 74 (2015) 3, pp. 449–469.

<sup>9</sup> A. Vilakazi, B. Mthethwa, and M. Mpanza, *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society*, Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986, p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> B. Guest, “Colonists, Confederation and Constitutional Change”, in: A. Duminy and B. Guest (eds.), *Natal and Zululand from Earliest Times to 1910: A New History*, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1989, pp. 146–169, at 151–155; J. Wright, “Beyond the ‘Zulu Aftermath’: Migrations, Identities, Histories”, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 24/25 (2006/2007), pp. 1–36, at 11–13.

<sup>11</sup> Cabrita, *Text*, p. 90; E. Roberts, “Shembe: The Man and his Work”, MA thesis, University of South Africa, 1936, pp. 26–27; N. Sithole, *Isaiah Shembe’s Hymns and the Sacred Dance in Ibandla LamaNazaretha*, 2016, Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 1–2.

After the disruptions of the Anglo-Boer war (1899–1902), Isaiah Shembe became involved in revivalist Protestantism. Baptized first by a Wesleyan pastor and then, in 1906, by William Leshega, associated with American Baptist groups, Isaiah left his family, became a roaming preacher and healer, and founded his own Nazareth Baptist Church, or Church of the Nazarites (*ibandla lamaNazaretha*), in 1910.<sup>12</sup> According to Johannes Shembe, Isaiah's son and successor, his father founded his own church because other churches rejected his converts for wearing African clothes.<sup>13</sup> Isaiah was “different from all the other pastors, white as well as black”,<sup>14</sup> because his way to God and salvation was a hybrid one, combining biblical rules with African traditions, a way that “appropriated, translated, re-historicized, and read anew” diverse cultural meanings with “reference to a present time and a specific space”.<sup>15</sup>

Sabbath worship and sacred dance, which had become the church's signature religious observances by the 1920s, produced hybrid distinctions in practice, attracted different sections of the laity, and marked a break with mainline mission churches.<sup>16</sup> When Isaiah healed the sick, intervened with the ancestors and ensured the fertility of the land and the people in the name of Jehovah, he replaced healers, diviners, homestead heads and chiefs, who had been responsible for these services before. Reflecting this double distinction, oral traditions emphasized that Isaiah's spiritual power surpassed that of both Christian and traditional religious experts.<sup>17</sup>

The Church headquarters, called eKuphakameni, the “place of elevation”, became the centre of the specific space of the NBC in the middle of the 1910s.<sup>18</sup> Its location just outside Durban corresponded with the church's early adherents,

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<sup>12</sup> Cabrita, *Text*, pp. 93–97; Heuser, *Shembe*, pp. 149–155.

<sup>13</sup> B. Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists*, London: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge Classics, 2004, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> M. Echter, “Shembe is the Way: The Nazareth Baptist Church in the Religious Field and in Academic Discourse”, in: M. Echter and A. Ukah (eds.), *Bourdieu in Africa: Exploring the Dynamics of Religious Fields*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 236–266, at 242–247; Heuser, *Soldaten Gottes*, pp. 115–117; R. Papini, “Dance Uniform History in the Church of Nazareth Baptists: the Move to Tradition”, *African Arts* 37 (2004) 3, pp. 48–61, 91–93, at 52.

<sup>17</sup> I. Hexham and G.C. Oosthuizen (eds.), *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, vol. 1: *History and Traditions Centered on Ekuphakameni and Mount Nhlalakazi*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996, pp. 106–107, 185–186; I. Hexham and G.C. Oosthuizen (eds.), *The Story of Isaiah Shembe*, vol. 2: *Early Regional Traditions of the Acts of the Nazarites*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999, pp. 15–17, 37, 80, 99–103, 172–173, 222–224.

<sup>18</sup> Roberts, “Shembe”, pp. 30, 53.

marginalized Africans dispossessed of their land and forced into the capitalist economy as migrant workers. From there, Isaiah Shembe's proselytizing travels took him to the south-west beyond the borders of the province of Natal into Pondoland, and to the north-east into Zululand.<sup>19</sup> Both missionaries and African chiefs complained about Shembe challenging their authority, and state agents monitored, questioned and occasionally arrested him.<sup>20</sup> However, freedom of religion and private property curtailed state intervention, and the magistrate of Port Shepstone discovered that he could not stop the establishment of a local base "[i]f the land on which Shembe is said to be building is private property".<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, Isaiah Shembe bought land and built outposts. Despite state restrictions, and thanks to divine interventions, Isaiah owned 14 larger "farms" and 13 "mission stations" at the time of his death in 1935.<sup>22</sup> To a certain extent, he followed the model of mission Christianity in providing land for converts and advocating agricultural development.<sup>23</sup> However, the acquisition of land marked a decisive step in the institutionalization of the church beyond economic factors. Isaiah, who had wandered "in the wilderness, without his own abode, sleeping in the forests",<sup>24</sup> became the leader of an independent religious movement, whose network of temples (*amathempeli*) and homesteads (*imizi*) localized his way to heaven and established a new, spiritual landscape. The sacred places of the NBC outlined a "cartography of social utopia in rural space"<sup>25</sup> and functioned thus as heterotopias, deviant places that constituted "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation"<sup>26</sup> of the spatial order of the state moving towards the apartheid system.

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19 E. Gunner, *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God: Writings from Ibandla lamaNazaretha, a South African Church*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, p. 23.

20 Echtler, "Shembe", pp. 240–242; E. Gunner, "Power House, Prison House – An Oral Genre and its Use in Isaiah Shembe's Nazareth Baptist Church", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14 (1988) 1, pp. 204–227, at 214–218.

21 Pietermaritzburg Archive Repository (NAB), Chief Native Commissioner, Correspondence, Box 96, C.N.C. 2155/12/30–32: 24 September 1915, Chief Native Commissioner, Natal, to Magistrate, Port Shepstone.

22 Roberts, "Shembe", pp. 39–40, 71–74. See Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story*, vol. 1, pp. 51–57, 142–143; *Story*, vol. 2, pp. 93–95, 156–158; C.A. Muller, *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire: Nazarite Women's Performance in South Africa*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999, pp. 192–194.

23 Roberts, "Shembe", pp. 63, 76.

24 C. Muller (ed.) and B. Mthethwa (trans.), *Shembe Hymns*, Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010, p. 51.

25 Heuser, *Shembe*, p. 138 (translation by the author).

26 M. Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics* 16 (1986) 1, pp. 22–27, at 24.

Within this other real space of the NBC, two places were of utmost significance. EKuphakameni, the church's headquarters, the place of "spiritual uplift" or "realized eschatology" emplaced the gateway to paradise<sup>27</sup>:

At the break of day, I shall enter Ekuphakameni.  
 The gates will open upon my entry.  
 I shall sing with joy in the holy village [i.e. holy homesteads: *emizini oyingcwele*],  
 My heavenly escorts will rejoice at my entrance.  
 I shall dance for him who is praiseworthy, I shall not be shy.  
 Lift up, oh gates, lift up that we may enter.<sup>28</sup>

The mountain iNhlankakazi, located about 30 miles north of eKuphakameni in the rural Ndwedwe district, acquired central importance for the NBC in 1913, when Jehovah made a "covenant with my brown people" and invested Shembe with "the authority to go all over the earth and to preach the message of the Nazaretha Church to all the nations under the sun".<sup>29</sup> Together, iNhlankakazi and eKuphakameni located the beginning and the end of the way to redemption established through Isaiah Shembe. As goal of the January pilgrimage and the site of the July assembly, the holy mountain and the holy homestead hosted the most important events in the church's yearly cycle from the mid-1910s onward.

In sociological terms, Isaiah Shembe was a charismatic leader who proved his extraordinary, personal quality by working wonders, with Nazarites telling stories of his miraculous deeds – a major genre within the oral traditions of the church – continuously reproducing his symbolic capital.<sup>30</sup> In addition, he built alliances with African chiefs, who furthered the expansion of the church by providing backing and land in the "native areas", especially in the territory of the former Zulu kingdom, and whom he in turn provided with religious legitimation.<sup>31</sup> With growing success and respectability, Isaiah transformed himself from a threat into a guardian of the system of Zulu patriarchal respect, *ukuhlonipa*, and the NBC into a "storehouse of tradition".<sup>32</sup>

After Isaiah's death in 1935, Johannes Shembe, his son and successor, successfully introduced the concept of hereditary charisma in the form of the singular, spiritual Shembe. However, leadership became contested after Johannes' death in 1977, and Amos, his half-brother, led the majority of Nazarites to a

<sup>27</sup> Roberts, "Shembe", p. 53; Sundkler, *Zion*, p. 197.

<sup>28</sup> Muller, *Hymns*, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story*, vol. 1, pp. 81, 86.

<sup>30</sup> Echter, "Shembe", 246–247.

<sup>31</sup> Cabrita, *Text*, pp. 270–277; B. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, pp. 98–99.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111; Papini, "Move", p. 49; Roberts, "Shembe", pp. 38, 94.

new headquarters, eBuhleni (the “beautiful place”, established in 1980), while Londa, his son, stayed in eKuphakameni. The two factions continued to share iNhlankazi in temporal succession, but after another succession conflict in 2011, the eBuhleni branch moved to a new mountain, iKhenana (Canaan), in 2014. The new places emphasised the status of the current leader as the embodiment of the spiritual Shembe, rather than the foundational acts of Isaiah. At the same time, the routinization of charisma in the NBC increasingly rested on “a reified, patriarchal version of Zulu tradition”.<sup>33</sup>

Looking back at eKuphakameni from eBuhleni, an anonymous Nazarite insisted on the continuity of the symbol of “the heavenly Jerusalem [. . .] constructed of round Zulu huts”, while the July assembly that strengthened church unity over the “tribal boundaries of Zululand” was organized “in analogy with the patterns of the [Zulu] royal residence”.<sup>34</sup> Before turning to the practical construction of the church’s gatherings, I analyse how the NBC transcended the boundaries of tribes, clans or nations (*izizwe*) via the master narrative of Zulu redemption and the mobilization of deep Zulu resonances in its oral traditions.

## Zulu Redemption

For its relation to Zulu nation and kings, the NBCs master narrative is one of sin and redemption, as spelled out by the Sabbath liturgy, performed weekly in all the church’s temples since the 1920s. The teachings address the congregation as Nazarites (*amaNazaretha*), but also as children (*bantwana*) of the house (*ndlu*) of Senzangakhona, father of the first Zulu king.<sup>35</sup> They urge the congregation to keep God’s laws:

Do not behave like your fathers, the Dinganas [Dingan(a) was the second Zulu king, [1828–1840] and Senzangakhomas, our fathers who hardened their hearts. Jehovah eventually punished them in this manner, now today we bear their sins. So then observe Jehovah’s Sabbath.<sup>36</sup>

God is asked to “remember the house [*indlu*] of Senzangakhona and Dingana, which is dispersed, let him gather it from its dispersion. [. . .] Even if you come from all of the countries [*emazweni onke*] under the heavens [. . .] to Jehovah at the house [*emizini*] of Ekuphakameni”, he will accept your gifts only if you

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<sup>33</sup> Cabrita, *Text*, p. 275.

<sup>34</sup> Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story One*, p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Muller, *Hymns*, pp. 24–25, 28–29, 34–35.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

keep the Sabbath.<sup>37</sup> The hymn sung by all oscillates between past and future glory. Jehovah is praiseworthy because “[h]e made us reign over the homesteads [*kwemizi*] of our enemies [. . .], scattered them with the arm that is omnipotent [. . .] led us in the face of our enemies. [. . .] We ruled over the hills and the surrounding mountains”.<sup>38</sup> He is praised because “[h]e protected them by powerful kings [*ngamakhosi anamandla*] [. . .], liberated us [. . .], led them to the hill of Nhlankakazi [. . .], turned their slavery into a kingdom [*ubukhosi*]”.<sup>39</sup>

The theological interpretation is straightforward. The sins of the fathers, namely the Zulu kings, caused the dispersion of their children. Jehovah, whose “mercy endures forever”, offers a new kingdom to those who follow “the ways of the liberator” as transmitted by Isaiah Shembe.<sup>40</sup> Following intervention by the Zulu royal family, the 2005 edition of the hymnal omitted the names in the section on the hardened hearts, but all the other references in the Sabbath liturgy or elsewhere remained, as in Hymn 67, which names all Zulu kings from Shaka (1816–1828) to Dinizulu (1884–1913) as the sinful fathers.<sup>41</sup> The spiritual kingdom of the NBC rejects “the monarch as a unifying symbol for the Zulu nation”, and Shembe as Jehovah’s mediator gathers the people anew at eKuphakameni and iNhlankakazi.<sup>42</sup>

However, in singling out the Zulu kings for his theological reinterpretation of history, Isaiah Shembe privileges Zulu over Hlubi or any other identity in the construction of the new “nation” of Nazarites. The narrative of redemption draws upon biblical traditions, but places them in KwaZulu-Natal, and mobilizes Zulu cultural traditions in order to place Shembe, the lord (*inkosi*) of the NBC, in the position of the Zulu king (*inkosi*). The conquered homesteads of the scattered enemies allude to Zulu military history, and Jehovah mediated by Shembe liberates the Nazarites at the homesteads of eKuphakameni. He protects the people of the house of Senzangakhona through powerful kings (*amakhosi*), the royal ancestors, whose protection of the kingdom the Zulu king ensured through yearly first-fruit rituals (*umkhosi*).<sup>43</sup> With house (*indlu*), homestead (*umuzi*), and kingdom (*ubukhosi*), the landscape of redemption builds

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33, 36–37.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93–95; J. Cabrita, “Isaiah Shembe’s Theological Nationalism, 1920s–1935”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35 (2009) 3, pp. 609–625, at 620 n.75.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 624.

<sup>43</sup> E.J. Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus*, Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1950, pp. 218, 249, 252.

upon pre-colonial Zulu social structure, the NBC takes place in Zululand, albeit redeemed.<sup>44</sup> Despite his critique of Zulu history, Isaiah Shembe nevertheless provided “the cultural symbols that could be organized into a cultural identity”.<sup>45</sup> No matter what “nation” converts come from, the Sabbath liturgy addresses them, in the Zulu language, as the descendants of Zulu kings. To a certain extent, the unity of the NBC rests on its ability to turn Zulu-speaking Nguni and others, such as Swazi, Thonga, or Shangaan,<sup>46</sup> into Zulu. In the following, I explicate the extent to which the NBC resounds with Zulu cultural traditions. In imagination and practice, Nazarites create their own Zululand, thereby contributing to the ongoing construction of Zulu ethnicity.

## Zulu Resonances

The oral traditions of the NBC play upon the master narrative inscribed in the hymnal. In church services, during monthly meetings, and in everyday conversations Nazarites tell stories of the deeds of Isaiah Shembe and his successors. While preaching is largely restricted to male officials, the “theatre of memory” of the oral traditions nevertheless forms “a dynamic, dialogic site for church members, who absorbed sermons and testimonies given during services, reproduced them and made them their own”.<sup>47</sup> While Nazarites also wrote down and collected these stories, practices that Cabrita considers central for the production of authority, in my view the continuing oral performance of the stories not only reproduces the leaders’ charisma, but also connects church doctrine with the members’ life histories.<sup>48</sup> Taking place in the third space of cultural enunciation, the performed stories mobilize select traditions through the positionality of the speaker<sup>49</sup>; in (re)telling them, Nazarites (re-)create the church’s landscape of memory and place themselves within it.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 39–41, 177–180, 217–218.

<sup>45</sup> L. Vail, “Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern Africa”, in: L. Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, London: James Currey, 1989, pp. 1–19, at 11.

<sup>46</sup> Vilakazi, *Shembe*, p. 126.

<sup>47</sup> Gunner, *Man*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>48</sup> Cabrita, *Text and Authority*, pp. 30–31; M. Ehtler, “A Real Mass Worship They Will Never Forget: Rituals and Cognition in the Nazareth Baptist Church, South Africa”, in: A. Chaniotis et al. (eds.), *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual*, vol. 2, *Body, Performance, Agency, and Experience*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010, pp. 371–397, at 381–384.

<sup>49</sup> Bhabha, *Location*, pp. 50–56.



In January 2012, Sibongile, a women's leader (*umkhokheli*), told me the story of the conversion of her father, Sithole.<sup>50</sup> The story hinges on Isaiah Shembe raising Sithole's son from the dead, an intervention that fills Sithole's deserted homestead with his descendants, with Sibongile herself the living proof of Jehovah's mercy for those who follow the ways of the liberator. Her story uses the common motive of childlessness to emphasize the heterotopic character of Nazarite homesteads, flourishing amidst the colonial destruction of Nguni society. It also reflects the expansion of the church in the 1920s, with the miracle taking place at the homestead of the first Nazarite in the territory of the Chunu chiefdom (*emaChunwini*) and Sithole's homestead becoming the second outpost.<sup>51</sup>

However, Isaiah Shembe does not only restore the house of Sithole: he heals the whole Chunu "nation". Explaining that the fighting of the people caused the drought afflicting the region, Shembe took Sithole to the mountain iNtshoza and instructed him to mark the space of a Nazarite temple with white stones. Whenever there was a drought, Sithole should gather people there and ask for rain by singing a church hymn and a hymn of the *amabutho*, the age-grade regiments of the Zulu army. Established before Sibongile was born, this ritual continued during her lifetime. In cases of drought, her father led them up the mountain to ask for rain, they sang, and they would always be late to return home, because the ensuing rain made the rivers flood so quickly.<sup>52</sup>

Sibongile's story relates to the specific historical context of succession conflicts in the Chunu chieftaincy, located in the Msinga district at the former border between the colony of Natal and the Zulu kingdom. It reflects other church traditions that portray Shembe as the bringer of peace and rain to the region.<sup>53</sup> Shembe also climbed mountains to make rain in the Empangeni and Nongoma districts, and the quickly flooding rivers as signs of successful rainmakers are not restricted to the oral traditions of the NBC.<sup>54</sup> Zulu would plead for rain on

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**50** Interview with Sibongile (alias), Homies, 19 January 2012, transcript and translation Siculo Mpungose. In response to my opening question how she became a member, Sibongile told the story in one go, talking for 27 minutes. The way she told the story suggested that she had performed it before.

**51** According to Sibongile, her oldest sister was born in 1926; the raised-from-the-dead brother was the second child.

**52** Interview with Sibongile.

**53** Cabrita, *Text*, pp. 285–292; Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story*, vol. 2, p. 171.

**54** *Ibid.*, pp. 215–217, 239–241. According to one story about a drought of the 1860s, Langalibalele, chief of the Hlubi and rainmaker, made rain for the Zulu king Mpande. The rain came so quickly that it doused the fires on which the sacrificial oxen were being cooked, and flooded all the rivers of Zululand overnight: C.de B. Webb and J.B. Wright (eds.), *The James Stuart Archive*, vol. 4, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1986, pp. 111–112.

“characteristic hills and mountains on which nobody builds” when other means, the chiefs’ intercession with the ancestors, the virgins’ mediation with the sky princess Nomkhubulwane, and the rainmakers’ rituals had failed.<sup>55</sup> In NBC stories, chiefs ask Shembe for rain; he makes rain by having the men and virgins sing “Oh, it is dawn, Zulu nation!”, and he succeeds where Norwegian and Anglican pastors have failed.<sup>56</sup> By making it rain, Shembe replaces the pre-colonial functionaries and bests Christian competitors; he heals the “nations”, brings peace to the people and ensures the fertility of the land – his is a this-worldly redemption. What is striking about the Sibongile story is the way in which Shembe makes it rain, which resonates deeply with Zulu cultural traditions.

At the centre of the ritual prescribed by Isaiah lay the songs, an arbitrary Zulu regimental hymn and the church hymn *Qubula Nkosi*:

We say dance O King  
The son of Mpande we left him at Hlobane  
It is the battle of the elephant’s calf  
We left him at Hlobane.<sup>57</sup>

This hymn was not included in the NBC’s printed hymnal, possibly because of the politically explosive reference to king Cetshwayo, son of Mpande, and “his fight against white domination in the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879”,<sup>58</sup> a reference implying “that the Nazarites were ‘digging too deeply in their tradition’”.<sup>59</sup> Not only does the hymn feature in Sibongile’s story; men sang it when circling Isaiah Shembe’s house at eKuphakameni, and the virgins of the church perform it as part of their *iNtanda* ritual when returning to eBuhleni during the July congregation.<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Gunner suggests that the hymn, referring to “Zulu experience of royalty, of defeat, defiance, and the war”, might be a royal or regimental hymn “put to a new use”.<sup>61</sup> A church tradition relating to the invention of the virgins’ ritual specifies the new use as the acquisition of land in defiance of the laws of the whites. Isaiah Shembe tells the virgins to sing “Drive them away, Lord of the

55 A.-I. Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, London: Hurst, 1976, p. 44. See *ibid.*, pp. 53–56; Krige, *System*, pp. 199, 247–248, 319–320.

56 Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story*, vol. 1, pp. 95–96; *Story*, vol. 2, pp. 215–217, 239–241; Muller, *Hymns*, p. 171.

57 Sibongile mentioned only the line “*Qubula Nkosi okaMpande samshiya eHlobane*”. This is Gunner’s translation of “*Sithi Qubula Nkosi – OkaMpande samshiy’ eHlobane – Uyimpi yezinyane lendlovu – Samshiy’ eHlobane*” (Gunner, “House”, p. 209).

58 Sithole, *Hymns*, p. 99.

59 Muller, *Rituals*, p. 196.

60 Gunner, “House”, p. 209; Muller, *Rituals*, pp. 195–196; Sithole, *Hymns*, pp. 97–100.

61 Gunner, “House”, p. 209.

nation of Mpande. We overcame them at Hlobane”, with the result that “the Whites were overcome, and the farm of Ntanda was obtained”.<sup>62</sup> Carol Muller links the virgins’ practices with Zulu ideas concerning Nomkhubulwane and suggests that the hymn appropriates “an old praise to the Zulu king Cetshwayo [. . .] believed to cause thunder, lightning, and rain immediately after it was sung”, mobilizing “the truly sacred – that which is deeply rooted in the past and contains the heart of traditional power”.<sup>63</sup> Nkosinathi Sithole considers the hymn a lament rather than a praise, in which Shembe asks God to lift “Cetshwayo’s spirit from the valley of sorrow to the place of rest and tranquillity”, a request relating to Zulu rituals raising the spirit of a deceased person (*ukubuyisa*).<sup>64</sup>

With multiple uses and shifting meaning, it might be useful to ask who is speaking. For the genealogy of the hymn, it is important that the Nazarites claim for themselves the voice of the age-grade regiments (*amabutho*) of the Zulu army. Hlobane, a mountain in northern Zululand, was the site of a Zulu victory in March 1879, immediately followed by the decisive defeat by the British at Khambula that “really broke the neck of Zulu power”.<sup>65</sup> While neither Cetshwayo nor any other son of Mpande actually died at Hlobane/Khambula,<sup>66</sup> as suggested by Gunner, Muller and Sithole, Zulu warriors fought there. Returning “from the battle of Hlobane”, warriors boasted in front of Cetshwayo: “By us! [. . .] What did we leave them? [. . .] It is war!” before giving the royal salute “Bayede! You of the elephant!”<sup>67</sup> More important than the intertextual resonances are the ritual functions of the Zulu regiments. They sang their hymns and danced to bring the spirits of deceased kings to their former homesteads, and they performed similar rituals there in case of drought.<sup>68</sup>

When Sibongile told the story of her father in 2012, she positioned herself in the NBC as hailing from the family that ensured the well-being of the Chunu “nation” as a whole. She appropriated the church’s master narrative of Zulu sin and Nazarite redemption and turned it into a story of empowerment through Zulu royal and military traditions. Her father/Shembe/Jehovah made rain by re-enacting on a mountain what Zulu regiments had done at the graves of the Zulu kings, with the addition of a church hymn that recalls the last of the

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<sup>62</sup> Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story*, vol. 2, p. 171.

<sup>63</sup> Muller, *Rituals*, pp. 163–164, 195–196.

<sup>64</sup> Sithole, *Hymns*, p. 99.

<sup>65</sup> J. Laband, *Rope of Sand: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1995, p. 263.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>67</sup> Webb and Wright, *Archive*, p. 147 (“*Ngati!* [. . .] *Si ba tshiye ini?* [. . .] *Impi!*”, *ibid.*, p. 156).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

independent Zulu kings and a battle of the Anglo-Zulu war. In Sibongile's story, Nazarite redemption for the Chunu people, who, like the Hlubi, had tried to avoid incorporation into the Zulu kingdom, includes submission to Zulu cultural traditions.<sup>69</sup>

In another story located on iNtshoza mountain, Isaiah Shembe sent two Nazarites to heal the Chunu people. When the Nazarites reported back, Shembe told them to sit down facing east and dictated Hymn 214:

Our Liberator has come.  
We, the offspring of Dingane, we have heard him.  
The liberator of the Zulu has come.<sup>70</sup>

Shembe explained that he did not only help the living, but also the dead. “Now these people, who died in war, have been liberated. God had dug for them a hole and buried them there on the mountain, and they praised him with this hymn.”<sup>71</sup> God's liberation of the dead Zulu warriors brought them home into the church, just as the *ukubuyisa* ritual brought back spirits of the dead into the homestead, whose entrance typically faces east.<sup>72</sup> Dealing with the ancestors was of central concern in the NBC from early on<sup>73</sup>; today, a pamphlet entitled “Help for the life of the nation” details the ritual proceedings, including sacrifices at the entrance of the homestead and the cattle enclosure (*isibaya*), as in the *ukubuyisa* rituals.<sup>74</sup> With the spatial order of this practical instruction, I turn to spatial practices in the NBC.

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**69** J. Wright, “Making Identities in the Thukela-Mzimvubu Region c.1770–c.1940”, in: C. Hamilton and N. Leibhammer (eds.), *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2016, pp. 183–215, at 196, 201.

**70** Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story*, vol. 2, p. 180.

**71** *Ibid.*

**72** At least according to the structuralist rendition of the Zulu/Nguni homesteads, which opposes up/west/living with down/east/dead (A. Kuper, “Symbolic Dimensions of the Southern Bantu Homestead”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 50 [1980] 1, pp. 8–23, at 13, 20).

**73** Roberts, “Shembe”, p. 98.

**74** B.M. Ntombela, “Usizo Lesizwe Nempilo Yaso”, eBuhleni, 2008, 14-page printed booklet, transl. Zakhona Maduna, pp. 2–6; Krige, *System*, pp. 53, 169–170.

## Spatial Structure

Next to the daily prayers and weekly Sabbath services that take place at the members' homes and local temples, Nazarites gather around their leader, the lord (*inkosi*) Shembe, who travels throughout his realm. About 12 assemblies (*imihlangano*) take place throughout the year, producing the recurring rhythm of church life. Lasting from one to four weeks, ten take place at various locations in KwaZulu-Natal, one in Eastern Cape and one in Gauteng.<sup>75</sup> With the exception of Gauteng, the core territory of the NBC emplaced through the assemblies correlates closely with the area of influence established by Isaiah, who started the gatherings at the holy mountain in January and at church headquarters in July and who also held assemblies at various places in Zululand.<sup>76</sup> Johannes Shembe established the circuit of assemblies when he “started traveling to the whole area preaching the gospel and he married many wives, building the homesteads of Shembe [*imizi kaShembe*]”.<sup>77</sup>

The assemblies of the NBC all follow the spatial order of eBuhleni (see Map 5.1). It is located on a hillside rising towards west. Looking up from the east, where the main entrance is located, the right side is the living area of the men, the left side that of the women. In the middle is the open-air temple, encircled by white stones and shaded by trees. On top of it lies the walled-in area of the leader, including his well-built mansions with green roof-tiles, the tabernacle housing the vessels of covenant, and the graves of former leaders of the eBuhleni section, Amos and Vimbeni Shembe. To the left of the leader's area is the fenced-in section of the virgins. Ebuhleni is an informal settlement, with housing ranging from stone structures with corrugated iron roofs to wooden frames covered with plastic sheeting. In times of assembly, the settlement grows by about one-third in size, with temporary huts and tents added to the west, while keeping to the gender division. During the weekends of July 2008 up to 100,000 people gathered at eBuhleni, and the Sabbath services took place at a new temple located to the west, as the temple at the centre had become far too small to accommodate the congregation.<sup>78</sup>

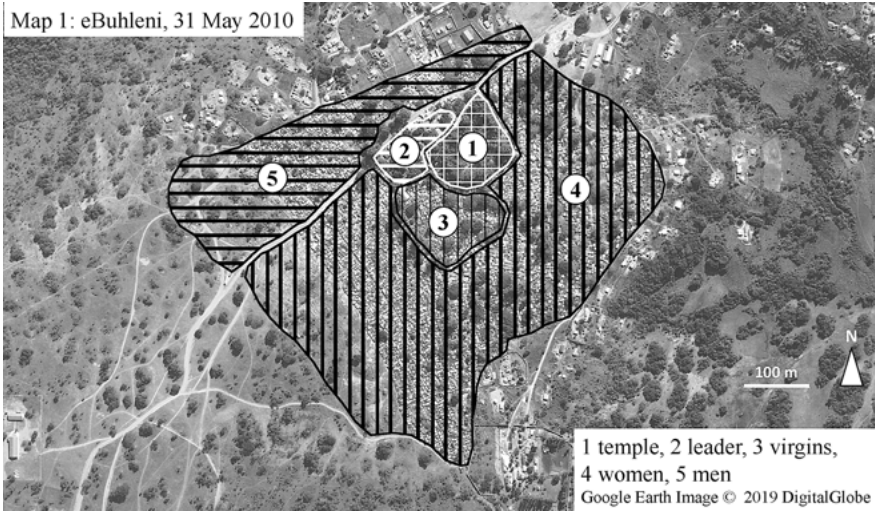
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75 January: iNhlankakazi/iKhenana (KZN), March: Ntabankulu (Eastern Cape), April: eBuhleni (KZN), Zimbakomo (Gauteng), May: Gibisiwa (KZN), June: Linda (KZN), July: eBuhleni, August: Dannhauser, eMzimoya (both KZN), September: eBuhleni, October: Judea (KZN), November: Nelisiwe, eNyokeni (both KZN). Interview with Bhékinkosi (alias), iNhlankakazi, 22 January 2009, transcript Sicelo Mpungose, transl. Sinenhlanhla Mkhize; field notes, 12 January 2017.

76 Gunner, *Man*, pp. xv, 23, 121.

77 Interview with Bhékinkosi.

78 3–27 July 2008, 19–26 January 2009. The number of Nazarites is my estimate.

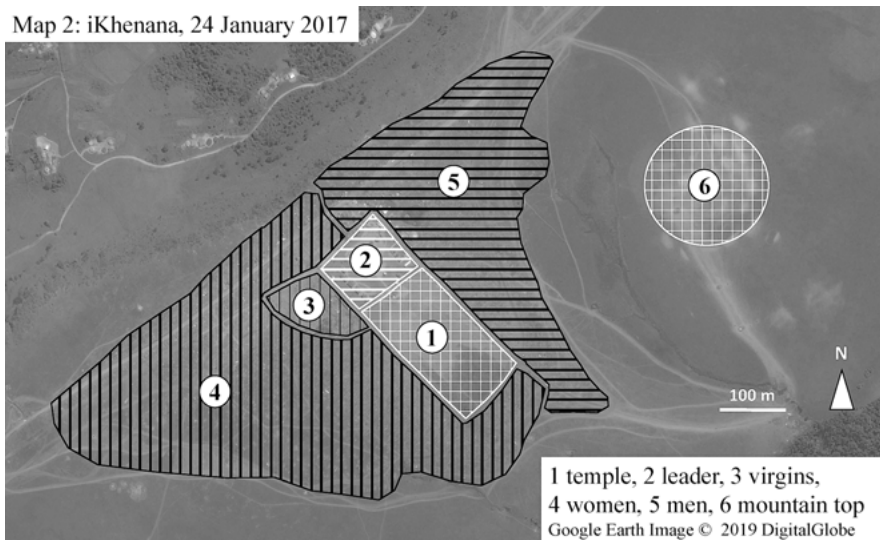


**Map 5.1:** eBuhleni, 31 May 2010.

Other assemblies put the same basic layout in place with little variation. At iNhlankakazi in January 2009, there were no permanent buildings, so the camp consisted entirely of temporary huts and tents. It was located on the eastern flank of the mountain, with a winding road leading up west separating the men's area on the right from the women's on the left. The virgins camped to the left of the central temple, and the leader stayed at the highest, westernmost part of the camp, just below the top of the mountain, where the Sabbath service and the dancing took place.<sup>79</sup> At iKhenana in 2017, the camp was located on the huge top of the mountain, rising slightly to the north (see Map 5.2). On top of the central temple lay the walled-in compound of the leader, featuring seven houses built in the eBuhleni style. To its left was the area of the virgins, enclosed on all other sides by the women's section. The right-hand men's section included the only other permanent building, a large rondavel for the chiefs in the church. The "top" of the mountain, where the Sabbath services and the dancing took place, was located beyond a small creek to the east of the camp.<sup>80</sup> The spatial structure of a gender-divided camp surrounding or facing up to the temple and the leader's compound was also in place at the other assemblies I

<sup>79</sup> 7–19 January 2009.

<sup>80</sup> 12–17 January 2017.



Map 5.2: iKhenana, 24 January 2017.

attended.<sup>81</sup> Likewise, it informed the seating arrangement of all Sabbath services I took part in, not only at the assemblies but also at the local temples.<sup>82</sup>

According to Gugulethu, who met Isaiah as a young girl, the spatial separation of men, women, and virgins has always been a feature of church gatherings, although much stricter enforced in the past.<sup>83</sup> At eKuphakameni in the 1930s, virgins and single women stayed in the upper half and men in the lower, with married couples residing outside the holy village proper, and there was a central grove used for services during the assemblies.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the left-right gender division may have been Amos' invention, peculiar to the eBuhleni branch of the NBC. Looking back from eBuhleni, an anonymous Nazarite emphasized the continuity with eKuphakameni as "the future city of God", as well as with "the Zulu royal kraal" with regard to construction and "religious meaning".<sup>85</sup> This brings us to the genealogy of the spatial structure of the Nazarites' assemblies.

<sup>81</sup> 23/24 August 2008 at Dannhauser, 21/22 March 2009 at Ntabankulu, 17–22 January 2012 at Homies, substituting iNhlankazi.

<sup>82</sup> Numerous Saturdays in 2008 and 2009 at temples in central Durban and Kwa Mashu.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Gugulethu (alias), eBuhleni, 23 July 2008, transcript and transl. Sicelo Mpungose.

<sup>84</sup> Roberts, "Shembe", pp. 53, 58.

<sup>85</sup> Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story*, vol. 1, p. 53.

According to academic reconstructions of pre-colonial Zulu domestic space, the homestead “is built on ground sloping towards the main entrance, which usually faces east, so that the chief hut, besides being at the top end, is also on the highest ground, overlooking the rest of the kraal”.<sup>86</sup> The cattle enclosure at the centre of the homestead “is the Zulu temple, where the spirits of the ancestors are thought to linger, the place where sacrifices take place when the spirits are asked to protect the inmates or thanked for blessings received”.<sup>87</sup> “[A]n imaginary line [. . .] drawn from the gate [. . .] to the great house [. . .] at the apex” divides the wives of the polygamous homestead head, and their houses within the homestead, into two opposing groups.<sup>88</sup> The gender division structures the inside of the houses, with the left being the women’s, the right the men’s side, while the back of the house is the place of the ancestors (*umsamo*).<sup>89</sup>

In the eBuhleni branch of the NBC, Shembe, mediator of Jehovah and the ancestors, embodiment of power, who gathers the collective, takes the place of the great house, which “represents the unity of the homestead, and is the repository of ritual objects and the site of appeal to the ancestors”.<sup>90</sup> The temple, where Nazarites praise and appeal to Jehovah in daily prayers and Sabbath services, takes the place of the cattle enclosure. There was no special place for virgins in the Zulu homesteads, but there was in the residences of Zulu kings, the *isigodlo*, located at the top of the residence, where young women lived, sent by the king’s subjects to serve him.<sup>91</sup> In the NBC, “the only one who is considered clean is the virgin [*inkosazana*]. That is why it is their duty to work for and around the Lord [*inkosi* – king, chief; the title of Shembe]. There are those whom he usually sends around. All these virgins are given to him by their parents in the church.”<sup>92</sup>

As “a kind of effectively enacted utopia”, the assemblies of the NBC represent, contest and invert “all the other real sites” of (post-)apartheid South Africa.<sup>93</sup> Their spatial structure is the “principal locus for the objectification of

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**86** Krige, *System*, p. 42. For contemporary homesteads, see J. Hickel, *Democracy as Death: The Moral Order of Anti-Liberal Politics in South Africa*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2015, pp. 63–72.

**87** Krige, *System*, p. 42.

**88** A. Kuper, “The ‘House’ and Zulu Political Structure in the Nineteenth Century”, *Journal of African History* 34 (1993), pp. 469–487, at 477.

**89** Krige, *System*, p. 46; Kuper, “Dimensions”, pp. 13–14.

**90** Kuper, “House”, p. 477.

**91** Krige, *System*, p. 234; Laband, *Rope*, 65–66.

**92** Interview with Nomhlanhla (alias), eBuhleni, 18 July 2008, transcript and transl. Sicelo Mpungose.

**93** Foucault, “Spaces”, p. 24.



the generative schemes [. . .] underlying all the arbitrary provisions” of Nazarite culture, and living at them “leads to the em-bodying of the structures of the world”.<sup>94</sup> The spatial structure of the NBC bears a Zulu stamp that informs its social practices. As places ordering people and things, the assemblies have agency, like “*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference”.<sup>95</sup> In the embodied experience of the participants, the lived-in places of the assemblies affect them through the force of their atmosphere of respect, hardship, and celebration.

## Atmospheric Places

Atmosphere refers to “the affective mood which spatial arrangements stir in the sensual bodies of their users”.<sup>96</sup> At the assemblies, Nazarites produce and experience an atmosphere of respect, hardship, and celebration through kneeling, walking, and dancing.

Sacralization of place depends on establishing difference with surrounding space. At the assemblies of the NBC, you take off your shoes when entering the camp, and in the case of the holy mountain you have to wear the church gown (*umnazaretha*), just like inside the temples. Living in camp means adhering to rules. Nazarite rules, drawn primarily from the Old Testament, prohibit pork, alcohol, and tobacco, the cutting of hair and wearing of shoes in places of worship, but also demand sitting on “African mats” during services and wearing “African traditional regalia [. . .] during the holy dances”.<sup>97</sup> While Nazarites should follow the rules all the time, social control intensifies at the assemblies. In addition, no one should run or shout, or transgress gender segregation. During the time of my research, men and women interacted rather freely in the common ground of the camps, but in the past, they met only at the times of worship.<sup>98</sup>

Living in the camps, Nazarites not only follow the church rules: they also show proper respect (*ukuhlonipha*). In Zulu patriarchy, the male homestead

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94 P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 89.

95 B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 71.

96 A. Reckwitz, “Affective Spaces: A Praxeological Outlook”, *Rethinking History* 16 (2012), 2, pp. 241–258, at 254.

97 J.M. Vilakazi, speech, Tshwane University of Technology, 8 June 2008, 10-page typescript, pp. 9–10. Vilakazi refers to Numbers 6, 1–2, Judges 13, 4–5.

98 Interviews with Gugulethu and Sibongile.

head occupied the highest position, and primarily young women marrying into the homestead had to follow “proscriptions of action, space and language”<sup>99</sup> that were “indexical of an inferior position of the women in society”.<sup>100</sup> In the NBC, Shembe occupies the position of highest respect. When Nazarites encounter their leader, they drop to their knees and shout “You are holy (*uyingcwele*), Amen!” When Vimbeni and Mduduzi Shembe blessed the afflicted, they received them seated on a chair, flanked by kneeling virgins and church officials, and supplicants approaching on their knees.<sup>101</sup> These expressions of respect go back to the time of Isaiah.<sup>102</sup>

While centred on the leader, respect in the NBC extends to the church hierarchy and to all elders within a patriarchal system. Moving through camp involves gestures of respect whenever encountering people worthy of respect, but also at certain times and locations. At eBuhleni, a ringing bell recalls the death of Isaiah, and everyone kneels and prays. When moving up through eBuhleni, everyone genuflects when passing the statue of the founder and the graves of Amos and Vimbeni. Nazarites kneel before entering any temple, and they kneel during three-quarters of the Sabbath liturgy.<sup>103</sup>

As embodied signals, “gestures may communicate something more [. . .] than do the corresponding words. For instance, to kneel subordination [. . .] is not simply to state subordination, but to display [. . .] that state itself.”<sup>104</sup> At the assemblies, Nazarites continuously display their subordination to Jehovah, Shembe, church rules and *hlonipha* customs. Through their (inter-)action, they create and experience a respectful atmosphere, which turns the assemblies into heterotopic “space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as” society outside “is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled”.<sup>105</sup> The perfect order emplaced at the assemblies creates difference, yet at the same time connects the church to its socio-cultural environment. Nazarite respect reverberates with Zulu patriarchy. This cultural resonance has been regarded as the church’s hallmark since the 1940s,<sup>106</sup> and continues to be a factor of attraction, just as it reproduces

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99 R.K. Herbert, “Hlonipha and the Ambiguous Woman”, *Anthropos* 85 (1990) 4/6, pp. 455–473, at 457.

100 S. Rudwick and M. Shange, “Hlonipha and the rural Zulu woman”, *Agenda* 82 (2009), pp. 66–75, at 69–70.

101 Field notes, 22 July 2008, 15 January 2017.

102 Roberts, “Shembe”, pp. 47, 94.

103 Muller, *Hymns*, p. 29.

104 R. Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1979, p. 199.

105 Foucault, “Spaces”, p. 27.

106 Cabrita, *Text*, pp. 270–277; Sundkler, *Prophets*, pp. 98–99, 111.

the church's reactionary image as part of "the power dynamics of *hlonipha* in contemporary rural and traditionalist homes" that counteract "the constitutional commitment to gender equality" in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>107</sup>

Emblematic of the atmosphere of hardship is the three-day barefoot walk to the holy mountain, the church's "true test of one's spiritual and physical strength – the pinnacle of ritual purity and the positive assurance of entrance into heaven".<sup>108</sup> With Isaiah, Nazarites walked cross-country in one day, using roads, which extended the distance to 30 miles; they walked for two days in the time of Johannes; and the pilgrimage did not extend to three days until the reign of Amos.<sup>109</sup> The moving congregation invited state intervention, and oral traditions mention divine intervention.<sup>110</sup>

In 2009, about 5,000 Nazarites walked to iNhlankakazi, while many more travelled by car, with peak attendance of approximately 50,000 at the weekends. Today, the tarmac roads are hardest on the feet, especially if it is sunny, and the Nazarites pray for clouds, called umbrella, during the journey.<sup>111</sup> Accidents are a problem, and a car smashed a woman's leg in 2009.<sup>112</sup> The path itself forms part of the sacred topography, as it shows the way to paradise and its imprint on the soles of the feet ensures entry into heaven.<sup>113</sup> Nazarites take pride in the tough soles of their feet, acquired in rural life, "herding the cattle of my grandfather as a boy".<sup>114</sup> When Mduduzi conducted the congregation to the new holy mountain iKhenana in 2014, he led on foot, just like Isaiah, which supported the legitimacy of his innovation as well as his claim to be the true lord of the NBC, and it underscored his toughness as a leader in the eyes of his followers.<sup>115</sup>

Hardship at the assemblies extends beyond the walk to the mountain. Life in camp involves the setting up of temporary shelters or tents and the everyday fetching of water, cooking of food, and washing of clothes. While life is not as hard as it used to be, when building materials and food were carried and water was fetched from the river,<sup>116</sup> it still requires a set of "rural" skills that are characteristic of the socio-economic background of many church members and a hardy disposition that forms a valued part of Nazarite identity.

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**107** Rudwick and Shange, "*Hlonipha*", p. 72.

**108** Muller, *Rituals*, p. 12.

**109** Interview with Sibongile.

**110** Cabrita, *Text*, pp. 265, 310, 321; Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story*, vol. 1, pp. 93–94.

**111** Field notes, 23 February 2009.

**112** Field notes, 7 January 2009.

**113** Field notes, 9 January 2009; Muller, *Rituals*, p. 79.

**114** Field notes, 8–11 January 2009, 12 January 2017.

**115** Field notes, 15 January 2017.

**116** Interviews with Gugulethu and Sibongile.

Likewise, exposure to the elements has not changed, and living in the camps entails enduring heat, cold, and wetness. Being “subject to awesome displays of thunder, lightning, wind, and storm” influenced the emergence of Zulu sacred places, and contributes to the atmosphere of NBC assemblies, where storms occasionally lift up tents or tear down habitations.<sup>117</sup> This exposure pertains not only to camp life, but also and especially to the religious practices of the NBC, at least of the eBuhleni branch, where all Sabbath worship and dancing take place in the open air. To endure hours in scorching sun or freezing rain, if not happily then at least without complaining, belongs to the core of Nazarite habitus. This hardiness is a source of pride and marker of difference to cathedral Catholics or plastic chair Pentecostals.

The assemblies’ atmosphere of respect and hardship shapes Nazarite identity. At the same time, church members celebrate their community. As Nazarites from all “nations”, regions, and temples gather around their leader, the assemblies emplace the unity of the church. They offer the opportunity to socialize with other Nazarites, meet old friends, and make new acquaintances. As marriage rules advocate endogamy within the NBC and exogamy on the level of the local temples, the church gatherings are the main sites for the reproduction of the community in a literal sense. While Isaiah did not allow courting at eKuphakameni,<sup>118</sup> Nazarites of the eBuhleni branch look for potential spouses at the camps. On the last Sunday of the bigger assemblies, especially at eBuhleni in July, proposals are made and marriage ceremonies take place. Both courtship and ceremonies contribute to the festive or celebratory atmosphere.

The signature practice of celebrating community in the NBC is the sacred dance. In dancing, Nazarites connect heaven with earth, and the ancestors join the living in praising Jehovah on the “journey to heaven”.<sup>119</sup> Dancing in full attire takes place only at the assemblies, but then rather frequently on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays. Nazarite dancing bears considerable similarity with “precolonial ‘Zulu’ dance”.<sup>120</sup> The attire of the virgins, married women, and older men is neo-traditional Nguni/Zulu; only some of the younger men dance in “Scottish” attire.

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**117** J. Fernandez, “Emergence and Convergence in some African Sacred Places”, in: S.M. Low and D. Lawrence-Zúñiga (eds.), *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Malden: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 187–203, at 189; field notes, 23 August 2008; 16 January 2017.

**118** Roberts, “Shembe”, p. 122.

**119** Sithole, *Hymns*, pp. 69, 187.

**120** *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Established by the 1930s, dancing attire, music, and style made the performance “immediately recognizable as Zulu holy dance (*ukusina*)”, a “Nazarite *bricolage* [. . .] spelling out a biblical creed with African identity [. . .] that had boldly broken with mission and derived (Ethiopian) norms”.<sup>121</sup> Even the Nazarites’ “sacralized (con-)version of a war dance”, signalled by the use of small shields,<sup>122</sup> drew upon pre-colonial precedents, as Zulu regiments, having replaced spears and war shields with sticks and dancing shields, “danced as girls do [*sina*]” when dancing for rain.<sup>123</sup>

When Nazarites dance to heaven, they dance in an atmosphere resounding with Zulu “cultural sensitivity and attentiveness”.<sup>124</sup> Emplacing things and moving bodies, the assemblies of the NBC mobilize and reproduce their own version of Zulu habitus; they affect people beyond the Nazarite community and partake in the ongoing re-creation of Zulu identity in the wider society. When Amos introduced the use of leopard skins for a man’s collar and headdress (*umqhele*) in the 1980s, Zulu king Zwelithini, who had reinvented both as royal attributes in the 1970s, criticized him for using attire restricted to royalty, to which Amos replied that his attire was not from this world, according to church tradition.<sup>125</sup> Today, not only the king, but also politicians like Jacob Zuma or protesters wear leopard skins, just like the Nazarites, and Sjava, a Zulu artist, explained that he named his best-selling album *Umqhele* because you “don’t have to really be a king or be born from a royal family, you can see yourself as a king or queen. Just carry that.”<sup>126</sup>

## Conclusion

Isaiah Shembe commemorated the battle of Ncome/Blood River, celebrated in apartheid South Africa as Day of the Covenant, in his Prayer for Dingana’s Day:

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<sup>121</sup> Papini, “Move”, p. 52.

<sup>122</sup> Heuser, *Shembe*, pp. 224, 250 (translation by the author).

<sup>123</sup> Webb and Wright, *Archive*, p. 117.

<sup>124</sup> Reckwitz, “Spaces”, p. 255.

<sup>125</sup> Field notes, 14 July 2008; S. Klopper, “Mobilising Cultural Symbols in Twentieth Century Zululand”, in: R. Hill, M. Muller, and M. Trump (eds.), *African Studies Forum I*, Pretoria: HSRG, 1991, pp. 193–226, at 194, 212–214; Papini, “Move”, p. 60.

<sup>126</sup> *Citizen*, 23 March 2015, <http://citizen.co.za/news/news-national/349347/foreigners-must-go-home-king-zwelithini/>; *Mail & Guardian*, 18 January 2018, <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-01-19-00-land-reform-bid-enrages-amakhosi>; *Fader*, 23 January 2019, <https://www.thefader.com/2019/01/23/sjava-has-a-contagiously-spiritual-take-on-trap> (all accessed 9 April 2019).

So! There it is! Our blood is upon us as retribution for our sins. Because we have sinned in Jehovah's eyes the beautiful dancing of the young girls of Zululand has been cut short. The beating of the drums has ceased, it is an evil omen from that day to this. The river was full to the brim with old men and the young men were hyenas' food.<sup>127</sup>

It was the destruction of pre-colonial African society, brought about by the sins of the fathers. From this misery, Shembe led the people to Jehovah and to redemption. This narrative of redemption fitted with the religious interest of the African laity of the time, as it justified their status as colonized people.<sup>128</sup> By telling a story of specifically Zulu sin and redemption, Isaiah appropriated the most prestigious African "nation" and established Nazarite unity "over the tribal boundaries of Zululand".<sup>129</sup> No matter what "nation" Nazarites come from, be it Hlubi, Chunu, any other Zulu-speaking Nguni, Mpondo, Swazi, or Shangaan from Mozambique, every Sabbath all Nazarites are addressed in Zulu as "children of Senzangakhona".<sup>130</sup> Speaking "Zulu with a strange accent" when arriving at iNhlankakazi,<sup>131</sup> the Hlubi Isaiah established an institution teaching "deep Zulu" to alienated urbanites.<sup>132</sup>

Redemption and paradise to come are not the only things the NBC has to offer. Nazarites have recreated their own Zululand here on earth. At their sacred homesteads, hardy people show proper respect, beat drums, and dance again. In structure and atmosphere, the assemblies reverberate with Zulu culture. They form affective loci for the creation of Zulu identity that radiate beyond the religious sphere. The "beautiful dancing of the young girls of Zululand" takes place again at the NBC, and the virgins dance to heaven. Yet they also perform a reed dance for their Lord (*inkosi*), just as the Zulu virgins perform one for their king (*inkosi*), with the difference that Isaiah (re)invented the tradition in the 1930s, while the Zulu king Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu did not do so until the 1980s.<sup>133</sup> Isaiah Shembe's poetic language and reinterpreted history provided "cultural symbols" that fed into the construction of Zulu identity, and the NBC emplaced "those 'rediscovered traditions' which emphasized control in the name of 'custom'".<sup>134</sup> Drawing upon and reproducing the "habitus of the homestead",

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127 Gunner, *Man*, p. 69.

128 Echtler, "Shembe", p. 239.

129 Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story*, vol. 1, p. 53.

130 Muller, *Hymns*, p. 29; Vilakazi, *Shembe*, p. 126.

131 L. Gunner, "Testimonies of Dispossession and Repossession: Writing about the South African Prophet Isaiah Shembe", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 73 (1991) 3, pp. 93–103, at 98.

132 See Muller, *Rituals*, p. 196; Sithole, *Hymns*, p. 97 n. 11.

133 Klopper, "Symbols", p. 195; Muller, *Rituals*, p. 189.

134 Vail, "Introduction", pp. 11, 15.

the church's assemblies established counter-sites to the topography of migrant labour, and remained heterotopic with regard to "the principles of liberal democracy" in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>135</sup>

While indigeneity moved out of fashion in academic discourse on African Christianity, the Nazarites continued to partake in the construction of Zulu ethnicity. In the wake of the succession conflict of 2011, Mduduzi, majority leader of eBuhleni, has intensified collaboration with the Zulu king. Since 2013, he has included the royal residence in the cycle of church assemblies, and in September 2016, he opened Zwelithini's "Zulu Kingdom 200 Years Celebration" with a Sabbath service. In January 2017, Zwelithini visited iKhenana, where he endorsed Mduduzi as rightful leader of eBuhleni, three months after the High Court in Durban had ruled otherwise. To the listening Nazarites, the king explained the importance of mountains for the Zulu, who "ask for rain when on the mountain, from Nomkhubulwana", and offered an interpretation of the relationship between Zulus and Nazarites: "[Mduduzi] is your father in spirit; I, as the king of the Zulu nation, am your father in flesh."<sup>136</sup> When Zwelithini entered the Sabbath service, about two-thirds of the Nazarites greeted him with the royal salute: "Bayede! You of the elephant!"<sup>137</sup>

Mduduzi is not merely a Zulu traditionalist. He is the spiritual Shembe, mediator of Jehovah's way to heaven. Yet he redeems Zululand on the way. A true descendant of Isaiah, he is a major player in Zulu identity politics today.

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<sup>135</sup> Hickel, *Democracy*, p. 88.

<sup>136</sup> Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu, speech, iKhenana, 14 January 2017, transcript and translation Brilliant Mdedu.

<sup>137</sup> Field notes, 14 January 2017.