Isaiah Shembe’s Prophetic Uhlanga

The Worldview of the Nazareth Baptist Church in Colonial South Africa

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In missionary as in all religious history, the impact of the saint, the truly charismatic individual, the prophet, is something of primary rather than marginal weight. 


In January 1915, Isaiah Mdliwamafa Shembe, a middle-aged Zulu man, climbed Mt. Nhlangakazi in the Ndewdwe district of the South African province of Natal. He was not a surveyor, geologist, or even an intrepid hiker, but a Christian preacher and the individual who had founded the Nazareth Baptist Church five years earlier. He was climbing the mountain with the firm belief that he had been prophetically instructed to do so by God. Shembe was fearful to make the climb, due to the mountain’s wild reputation as a refuge for dangerous animals and poisonous snakes, yet felt he had no choice but to obey the prophetic command.¹

Over the course of eleven days, Shembe was visited by a series of preternatural creatures including beautifully clad maidens, apparitions of black and white clergymen, phantoms of the deities of the ancestors, skeletal humans with rattling bones, a giant, and several talking animals including a leopard, a lion, and a snake.² Each, in turn, asked Shembe if he was waiting for them in an effort to lead him off of the mountain, and some even asked to take possession of him. Each time Shembe insistently responded, “No! I don’t know you.” On Shembe’s twelfth day on the mountain he reported that he heard glorious singing, smelled the loveliest of scents, spotted a light in the east, and felt as though his entire body was being filled with energy. The entire landscape, from the mountains and rivers to the trees and the grass, even the dead in their graves, was thrumming with this energy and singing about Shembe, “He is Holy!” It was amid this overwhelming sensory experience that Shembe claimed to have received a vision of God himself. With a roar of thunder and a flash of lightning, God soared toward him upon a white cloud, accompanied by the saints of heaven. Shembe reported that God came and stood before him with a vessel in his hand. He gave Shembe a heavenly meal of communion from the vessel, and then anointed him with the oil of grace. God then told Shembe, “Today, I give you all the authority to go all over the earth and
to preach the message of the Nazaretha Church to all the nations under the sun.... Go now and teach all nations the way of God that leads to heaven, and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Today, I make a covenant with my Brown people. 3)

Shembe understood this particular prophetic event to be the moment of his transfiguration, when God fully and personally anointed him as his special emissary charged with the divine mission to illuminate the path of salvation among his new chosen “brown” people, and eventually all of humanity. 4) Shembe recounted this prophetic tale to his parishioners. Some followers retold the story orally, while others wrote the story in the notebooks that Shembe encouraged the literate to compile. For Shembe and the members of the Nazareth Baptist Church, this story was no legend but a factual account of a real event that demonstrably proved the prophetic might and divinely appointed mission of Shembe. For many scholars, a narrative of skeletons, apparitions, talking animals, and God sailing upon a cloud would sound like a fanciful fairytale generated by a charismatic individual, and a figurative or metaphorical interpretation would be assigned. 5) However, to accurately understand a thoroughly prophetic institution like the Nazareth Baptist Church, for which prophecy underwrites and circumscribes its documentary

Isaiah Shembe on horseback, early 1930s
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record, history, memory, theology, and identity, one must seriously consider, by which I mean treat as literal statements, such prophetic source material. These accounts have defined, shaped, and reified the religious worldview of the founder, the leaders, and the members of the Nazareth Baptist Church.

By prophecy I refer to the process by which an individual believes they have received supernatural communications and convinces others of their validity. It is my contention that prophecy should be considered the Nazareth Baptist Church’s *uhlanga,* if you will, “the source” that originated, defined, shaped, and reified their worldview. In the Zulu creation story, the maturation of *uhlanga,* the original bed of reeds, produced all the features of the universe. The Nazareth Baptist Church’s universe was likewise born from a common source: in this case that font was a prophetic one that stemmed from the prophetic experiences of Isaiah Shembe, the church he founded, the worldview he constructed and articulated and that members embraced and reified.

More than that, the prophetically defined worldview of Shembe and his congregation served them as a particular navigational mechanism through the course of colonial South Africa, and was maintained by their documentary record, history, memory, identity, and theology. Normative definitions of empire, resistance, salvation, theology, and the like, will fail to accurately understand the actions of Shembe and his congregants because their notion of these concepts was informed by Shembe’s prophetic experiences and the worldview they produced. The response Shembe and his congregation had to colonialism was neither resistant nor acquiescent, neither strictly Western nor African, neither exclusively Christian nor indigenous Zulu, but was a unique composite and hybrid response formed largely by Shembe’s prophecies and the faith members had in him and the worldview he articulated. According to the beliefs of church leaders and members, every feature of the universe had a role to play in God’s cosmic plans for bringing about the salvation of Africans (and eventually all of humanity) through the theology taught by Shembe, as they believed God had instructed him to preach. Within this worldview even colonialism and white supremacy were but agents of God’s divine plans in advancing the salvation of Africans. Within the church’s own narrative, empire, politics, the ascendency of whites, the Zulu past, and in fact anything one could name, were all subsumed into the grander, and, from their point of view, much more significant, story of how God’s new chosen people were bringing about the salvation of God’s “brown” people through the prophetic messages of Isaiah Shembe.

The church’s history of itself, from within a prophetic paradigm, reveals a fresh and compelling means of understanding the experience of the colonized within colonial Africa. Shembe, church leaders, and church members endorsed a prophetic account of contemporary Africa that placed their church
at the epicenter of their own history, and subsumed the story of imperialism within it. Scholarly accounts of Africa’s colonial period have traditionally seen the forces of empire and resistance to colonialism as the principle motivations of human actions during this era of Africa’s history. Yet historians would be mistaken to suppose that “everything that happened under colonialism was in some way a result of it.” An emic account of the history of Shembe and his church, indeed, reveals a different view of Africa’s colonial era, one in which colonialism was not the sole or even the chief determinant of the history of the era. Shembe and the Nazareth Baptist Church resolutely accepted colonialism as part of a divine plan, prophetically revealed, that would bring about redemption and salvation for God’s new chosen people, Africans. God, Shembe, and prophecy were the heart of their colonial-era experience, not British colonialism or white supremacist South Africa.

Colonization and Missionization in Eastern South Africa, 1820s–1930s

The peoples of eastern South Africa, like all of Africa, experienced considerable change across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among those changes was the emergence of a Zulu identity, from the 1810s–1830s, during the Mfecane—variously translated as “time of troubles,” “crushing,” “forced migration,” and “total war.”10 During this period, the tiny Nguni-speaking chieftaincy of the Zulu, under the famous king Shaka (r. 1818–1828), violently consolidated a constellation of northern Nguni-speaking peoples and realigned the political, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic landscape of southeastern Africa. Like most every process of ethnogenesis and ethnic amalgamation, the creation of the broader identity of Zulu never erased subethnic ones. As a result, “Zuluness” has experienced numerous contestations since the era of Shaka.

Settlers and missionaries began to arrive in the region in the 1830s and 1840s, not long after the consolidation of the Zulu. Afrikaner settlers striking out from the Cape established the short-lived province of Natalia in 1838 on land taken from the Zulu. In 1842 the British claimed Port Natal, absorbed Natalia, and declared establishment of the colony of Natal one year later. Most Afrikaners in Natal left for Transvaal or Orange Free State, and white British settlers soon began to take their place. The first wave of British settlers in Natal was quickly followed by multiple missionary societies.

The first missionaries arrived in the 1840s from Anglican, Congregationalist, Catholic, and several Lutheran mission societies. While the Zulu state remained intact, the number of converts remained very low. Forbidden by missionaries to swear allegiance to the Zulu monarch or fulfill their military
obligations to the state, Zulu converts became “dead” people or strangers to other Zulu. Most Zulu converts to Christianity prior to the British conquest of the Zulu were those individuals who had nothing to gain from continued membership in Zulu society—criminals, deserters, captives, those accused of witchcraft, and those fleeing disagreeable marriages.¹¹

The Zulu kings after Shaka, Dingane (r. 1828–1840), Mpande (r. 1840–1872), and Cetshwayo (r. 1872–1879), employed appeasement tactics in dealing with the British. While such diplomatic tactics generally worked for Dingane and Mpande, British demands accelerated during the reign of Cetshwayo. After Cetshwayo refused to concede to a thirteen-point ultimatum, the British declared war in January 1879. While the Zulu enjoyed a great victory at the war’s first major encounter, Isandlwana, with more efficient supply lines and superior military technology, the British defeated the Zulu by July 1879. The British divided the former empire into thirteen chiefdoms, annexed Zululand in 1887, and incorporated it into Natal in 1897. Over the next few years more and more land was opened for white settlement; by 1905, the land slated for Zulu occupation was one-third the size of the former Zululand.¹²

The rate of conversion to Christianity began to increase following destruction of the Zulu empire. As precolonial structures diminished in power and resources, the social, economic, and religious allure of the missions grew. As the rate of conversion increased, so too did the number of Africans serving as teachers, catechists, and itinerant preachers. Indeed, indigenous preachers gained many more converts than their European or North American counterparts, as was true globally. As the number of African Christian converts and preachers grew so too did discontent over the lack of leadership positions for Africans within white-led mission churches, resulting in formation of a number of independent churches. Taking inspiration from Psalm 68:31 ¹³ many such churches began to use the term Ethiopia, as a metaphor for ancient Christian Africa, in their names. The term became prevalent enough that scholars picked it up as well, and even today these sorts of churches continue to be identified as Ethiopianist churches.¹⁴ Such churches were almost indistinct theologically from Protestant or Catholic variants of Christianity, yet they possessed an entirely African membership and leadership, free from the control of Western missionaries and denominations.

Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, a number of African Christians began to challenge the theologies of their Protestant, Catholic, and Ethiopianist brethren. Based upon prophetic inspiration and/or biblical exegesis, these dissenting Christians arrived at different theological concepts and practices than those of other Christians. Some of these new churches split off from existing congregations, others formed when members were forced out for their supposed heretical beliefs, while still other churches
were formed almost ex nihilo through prophetic inspiration. Because of the preponderance of the term Zion in the names of many such churches, these churches are collectively called Zionist by scholars. Most possess a common set of characteristics: members believe themselves to be God’s new chosen people; they typically possess a holy city; they accommodate African cultural expressions; and many emphasize prophetic inspiration. Shembe’s Nazareth Baptist Church, while not the first Zionist church in South Africa, was the first to form independently, rather than as a result of a schism from an existing church. The growing theological and ecclesiastical autonomy of Africans, however, was not matched politically or economically. In these realms it was the machinations of the British and Afrikaners that largely determined the fates of black South Africans.

Following the conclusion of the South African war in 1902, the four provinces of South Africa (Cape, Natal, Transvaal, Orange Free State) operated as autonomous British possessions until 1910. As negotiations took place on the future of South Africa, the question of black rights was sacrificed for the sake of political unity and peace among whites. The Union of South Africa was declared in 1910, the same year Shembe founded the Nazareth Baptist Church. From the time the union was formed in 1910 through 1931, South Africa was a self-governing dominion within the British Empire.

After the Statute of Westminster in 1931, British dominions, including the Union of South Africa, gained legislative autonomy, ending South Africa’s colonial status in a constitutional sense. In most other ways, however, South Africa remained colonial until the advent of majority rule in 1994. During this entire period, as Mahmood Mamdani has convincingly demonstrated, all forms of colonial rule, regardless of their name and the metropolitan rhetoric surrounding them (indirect rule, direct rule, assimilation, association), were grounded in segregation, the use of indigenous agents, and the exploitation of ethnic politics. While the South African state was once seen as brutal beyond compare, and therefore an anomalous situation, Mamdani has illustrated that colonialism by any name employed the same institutions and practices of control. While South Africa’s white minority rule outlasted colonial rule of most of the world’s colonies, its chronology is the only aspect that makes it anomalous to the rest of colonial Africa. In the words of Mamdani, “neither institutional segregation nor apartheid was a South African invention.” The bulk of this book’s analysis concerns the 1910s–1930s, when South Africa was both practically and literally colonial. Yet even where the narrative and analysis continues past the 1931 Statute of Westminster, I will continue to employ the term “colonial Africa” in recognition of the fact that: (1) next to nothing had changed for South Africa’s non-white populations after 1931; and (2) whatever South Africa’s constitutional status, the experience of South Africa’s
non-white peoples was much more like that of other colonized peoples than it was not.\textsuperscript{18}

\section*{A Brief History of the Nazareth Baptist Church}

The Nazareth Baptist Church recently passed its centennial anniversary. Space does not allow an examination of the entire century of the church’s history, nor does my narrative and argument concern the entirety of the church’s history. The bulk of this book focuses upon the formative decades (1910s–1930s) during the central leadership of Isaiah Shembe. This was the time when Shembe developed the church’s overall prophetic worldview, which was embraced by the church’s membership and then routinized and institutionalized as the church became one of Africa’s most significant Zionist churches.

The Nazareth Baptist Church emerged within a colonial context due to the determined efforts of its founder, Isaiah Shembe. Both Shembe and church members recount Shembe’s early life as an uncanny one that revealed his distinctiveness even prior to formation of the church.\textsuperscript{19} This special nature was supported through his recounting of how he had received prophecies by a variety of media including visions, dreams, and hearing a voice throughout his childhood. In an effort to find the source of these prophecies, the teenage Isaiah engaged in a period of religious exploration into both Zulu indigenous religion and Christianity. This period of exploration in the early 1900s included attendance at Methodist services and the African Native Baptist Church, an Ethiopianist church led by the Rev. W. M. Leshega. Through this exploration he eventually came to the conclusion that the high god of the Zulus, Unkulunkulu, was the same god as the Christian’s Jehovah, and was the source of the supernatural communications. He also became convinced that other Christians were in serious error concerning their sacramental and soteriological theologies.

Shembe married and began to produce a family, in spite of prophetic admonitions to be celibate. He continued to receive repeated prophetic warnings not to defile himself through sex that eventually culminated in a series of profound prophetic experiences that convinced him to leave his family and preach full time, as he believed God was commanding. Nazareth Baptist Church lore is full of stories of the healing miracles Shembe performed in his subsequent travels.\textsuperscript{20} Shembe worked as an itinerant preacher for four more years before creating his own church.

The moment of the church’s formation was rather unspectacular considering the founder had such an astounding prophetic record. As he had done throughout his years as an itinerant preacher, Shembe brought a number of
converts to an American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions station for further instruction in 1910. The converts were refused admittance because they were in Zulu attire. Unwilling to depart without giving these converts an opportunity to learn more of God, Shembe felt it was his responsibility to care for them. From this point onward he ceased directing converts to existing congregations and instead encouraged them to join his own, and the Nazareth Baptist Church was born. Shembe subsequently had a number of prophetic experiences that affirmed how pleased God was with him and the church, whose congregants were God’s new chosen people, following the path of salvation being illuminated by Shembe through God’s prophetic instructions.

Shembe instituted a new theology based on his prophetic experiences and biblical exegesis. According to Shembe, salvation could only be achieved through strict seventh-day Sabbatarian observance, as this more than any other action of the worshipper demonstrated proper adoration of God. Shembe also instituted a strict code of conduct based upon his understanding of God’s laws, and four sacraments: baptism, communion, ukusina (dance worship), and umnazaretha (uniform). Beyond development of the church’s theology, among Shembe’s initial goals was the purchase of land to build a holy city that would maintain the purity and economic viability of his followers. Shembe purchased thirty-eight acres of land at Inanda (on the outskirts of Durban), and there constructed Ekuphakameni (the exalted place)—a name he said just came to him—and permitted followers to settle there. The church grew modestly, gaining most of its converts from other Christian denominations, and homes (temples) began to appear in many parts of eastern South Africa, principally among Zulu-speakers.

Shembe continued as the central leader of the church until his death on 2 May 1935. He was succeeded by his son Johannes Galilee Shembe. During the era of Galilee the church grew considerably, from around 20,000–40,000 at the time of Isaiah’s death to hundreds of thousands. This growth included many converts from indigenous religions, unlike during Isaiah’s era, and also included expansion into neighboring countries, principally Swaziland and Mozambique. Galilee had a considerable tenure as the head of the Nazareth Baptist Church, remaining in the position until his death at the end of 1976.

The central leadership position was hotly contested between two male descendants of Shembe following Galilee’s death: Amos Shembe (Isaiah’s son) and Londa Shembe (Isaiah’s grandson, and Galilee’s son). Despite intervention by the Zulu King Goodwill, the South African Council of Churches, the Supreme Court of Natal, and the prophetic intercession, via dreams, of Isaiah and Galilee, no compromise was forthcoming and the church split in 1980. The Supreme Court awarded Londa Ekuphakameni and most of the church’s properties, but only 10–15% of the membership followed him.