

Kereke Ya Sefhiri: A Study of a Secret Society in Botswana and South Africa

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*The keeping of the secret is something so unstable,
the temptations to betrayal are so manifold
(Berlin 1906:473).*

Abstract

The difference between esotericism and exoterism is unlike the difference between circles and rectangles. It is also not the difference between the size and relevance of a specific body of knowledge in circulation. It is rather the extent of the circulation, acceptance, understanding, and meaning of a particular body of knowledge, philosophy, or worldview, over the spiritual and socio-political life of diverse categories of people in society.

The infancy of the academic study of esotericism, as well as its interdisciplinary nature, militate against the crystallization of a universally accepted definition of the term ‘esotericism’. The various definitions of the term by researchers consistently relate to their research interests. In line with Faivre’s concern with the forms of thought of esoteric movements (Faivre 1996), as well as the preoccupation that Versluis has with gnosis generation in esoteric movements (Versluis n.d), our study of *Kereke ya Sefhiri* in Botswana and South Africa examines a) the cultural and religious contexts in which Frederick Modise, a gnostic in his own right, generated the underlying gnosis of his secret society, and b) the import of the content of this visionary mystical revelation in the spiritual and social lives of members of this secret society¹.

The study of the Setswana term, *Kereke ya Sefhiri* (*church of a secret*, referring to a Christian-based secret society), is a study of African eso-

¹ For a critique of Faivre’s disregard of the value of gnosis in his characterization of Western esotericism, see Asprem (2014).

tericism in South Africa and Botswana. The principal academic interest in the study of esotericism lies in our quest to identify the fundamental tenets of the worldviews of the specific esoteric society, the eclectic nature of its philosophy, and how this philosophy relates to the orthodoxy of the day (Christianity in this instance). We do so by concentrating on the form of thinking, engendered by esoteric practices. Esoteric groups do not appear or exist within cultural voids. For this reason, by identifying the eclectic or syncretic nature of the fundamental philosophy (*gnosis*) of these groups, we trace the cultural influences involved in the emergence and consolidation of these worldviews and philosophies. This study shows that African esotericism is not always antithetic or subversive of dominant or institutionalized Christianity.

Keywords: Kereke ya Sephiri, secret society, mystical gnosis, initiation, bakgethwa, bakulwane

Introduction

The academic study of esoteric religious cults raises methodological problems². These groups are best studied clandestinely. For example, Anderson's seminal study of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC) has relied on an informant who was clandestinely embedded within the organization (Anderson 1992). In researching the Mwali cult in Southern Africa, I was sometimes forced to use eavesdropping as a method of collecting classified data. Pretending to be an ordinary pilgrim to the shrine of Dula on February 13, 1993, I gained access to the shrine, where the oracle of Mwali spoke from the deep caves of the large hills of Matopo in Southwestern Zimbabwe (Nthoi 2006). When Kefilwe Modise, one of my undergraduate research students at the University of Botswana failed to obtain permission from the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) Headquarters in Moria (South Africa) to research the Church's attitude to the use of modern contraceptives, she had no alternative but to use clandestine or covert data collection strategies (Modise 2004).

² Lindstrom (2015:374) states: 'The study of secrets has posed obvious methodological and ethical problems for ethnographers'.

This article, which uses the biographical approach³, is based on the memories, reminisces, and reflections on my two visits to the International Pentecostal Church (IPC) in 1978, and my observations during the many visits I have made to the Secret Churches in Botswana. Based on my participatory observation, my approach is essentially emic – an insider’s perspective (Murchison 2010; Pike 1999). If you may, call these experiences, memories, and reminiscences a ‘person-centered’ ethnography. Although the biographical approach or life history currently lies at the periphery of anthropological thought, it is nonetheless, useful: ‘It mediates, not too successfully, the tension between the intimate field experience and the essentially impersonal process of anthropological analysis and ethnographic presentation’ (Crapanzano 1984:955).

My Visit to Silo

In 1978, I was a third-year student at the University of Botswana and Swaziland. A ‘sister’ who was my colleague in an out-of-school Christian interfaith camaraderie group (Jesus Generation Movement), invited me to visit her church, the IPHC with its headquarters in Soweto, South Africa. This was not the first time she had invited me without success. This time, I agreed.

We departed Gaborone one Saturday morning with her three siblings and her mother. I was the only stranger on the team. We travelled safely, enjoyed ourselves during the trip, and arrived at 2 pm. There was a large number of believers in the church courtyard when we arrived. There were children and elders, men and women, and people with disabilities. As there was little time before the service began, we proceeded to a large church building where the service was held. We all sat together in the church, and I was quite at ease.

The church service lasted a little over two hours. It was a normal Christian praise and worship session, with a lovely singing of Sesotho hymns and choruses, as well as the preaching of the word of God by several priests, including Modise, the founder of the IPHC – *Ntate (Father)* is his honorific title. Individual testimonials of healing and other experiences were shared. For example, an elderly woman testified about her abandonment of tradition-

³ For more information on the biographical approach in social anthropology, see Kopytoff (1986).

al healing by joining Ntate Modise's church. She showed her beating drum, a bag full of traditional herbs and a fly whisk which she used in her old quarry as a traditional healer. These artefacts were taken away for later destruction.

After the service, we had dinner early, in preparation for what I was told was going to be a night vigil. Around 7 pm, my 'sister' asked me to join other visitors to register before the evening vigil began. This is a normal procedure, I was enjoined. I obliged and joined the long and winding queue to the enrollment office. Everyone who stood in line for the recording was called *bakulwane* or *balwetsi* (*invalids*), a word that surprised and angered me⁴. When I arrived at the office at approximately 11 pm., the officer asked me to explain the purpose of my visit and to list all my illnesses and afflictions. I had none because I had just come visiting, as I had previously done so, on various occasions, at many other churches in Gaborone, Botswana. This, as well as the fact that my hosts had left me in the queue around 7 pm., and had not prepared me for this, exacerbated my anger and frustration.

Upon completion of the registration process, the officer handed me over to two gentlemen, who escorted me to the church where we had had a charming ceremony in the afternoon. They held me firm and tightly, each putting an arm under my armpit, pushing me quickly into the church. The door was shut! They knocked and it was opened just slightly. I heard singing from within. After a brief verbal and whispered exchange, I was ushered inside the building. Once again, the two men pushed me along the aisle to the high altar, where numerous priests and Ntate Modise sat. When I arrived at the altar, the presiding priest asked me which language I spoke. I told him I preferred Ikalanga, my native tongue. To my great surprise, a priest got up and talked to me in perfect Ikalanga. He asked me to publicly confess all my sins before I could be cured and *go fitisiwa* (*incorporation after an initiation*) as *mokgethwa* (*selected and anointed*) to be an authentic member of the church. I refused to do so because I had no sins to confess. He asked whether or not I had ever committed adultery. I told him that I never had. Twice he asked me to confess to committing adultery, and twice I turned him down. He then asked the congregation what was to be done with this obstinate and unrepentant sinner: 'Do we give him a final chance to confess his sins or do we

⁴ See Anderson (1992) for more information on Modise's association of illness and poverty with sin. There is no spiritual healing without the confession and forgiveness of sins.

eject him from here?’ The congregation echoed: ‘Please give him another chance!’ I also heard voices from the congregation imploring me to confess my sins to Ntate so that I could be healed. I confessed that I had committed adultery, for it became clear to me that it was the only sin they seemed to care about.

Thereupon, all the elders on the podium rose and Ntate Modise prayed for me and forgave my sins. The two gentlemen that had brought me into the church were standing by me. They then led me to chairs that were reserved for the newly healed and initiated members of the church on one side of the immense church building. I sat down and started looking around in search of my hosts. None was in sight. Great anger swelled within me at the thought of what I had been subjected to without knowing it. One by one, all the other *bakulwane* were brought into the church. Their sins were forgiven and they also joined the congregation. This went on until around 5 am. on Sunday.

When the process of healing and forgiving sins came to an end, Ntate Modise stepped onto the podium to preach and enthrone the new members. While reading Bible passages, he paused to ask the faithful what they were feeling. To my great surprise, they all cried out that they were burning. I felt nothing at all. Some shouted the word ‘fire’ several times⁵. Ntate Modise then explained that the burning feeling they all experienced was the manifestation of God’s presence among his chosen people (*bakgethwa*). God is fire, and his hidden Name, only revealed to *bakgethwa*, must never be spoken out or used in vain. This is the church’s number one secret. God revealed this Name to Modise, in his out-of-body conversation we shall discuss later. God only reveals himself, particularly his Name, to the righteous and the pure of heart – i.e. his chosen nation. They are the only ones that can know and understand him. This knowledge of God’s hidden Name creates a strong bond between the *bakgethwa* and God⁶. The concept of the Lord’s fear implies that this secret Name is only made known to insiders. This ritual, which involves the

⁵ This is akin to Rudolf Steiner’s first step in the initiation of members in a secret esoteric cult. Steiner states that before this stage, the novice’s perception is concealed by a veil of ignorance: ‘The falling away of this veil for the would-be initiate consists in a process designated as the process of Purification by Fire. The first trial is therefore known as the Fire-Trial’ (Steiner 1947:80).

⁶ For more detail on this issue, see Podolecka and Nthoi (2021).

forgiveness of sins and the healing of every affliction by Ntate Modise, is a rite of passage. It transforms outsiders, sinners, and *bakulwane* (*invalid people*) into *bona fide* citizens of God's kingdom. *Bakgethwa* are the only inheritors of God's kingdom because healing, which in the IPC theology is equated to salvation, is only mediated by Ntate Modise.

The second secret of the church is that only those to whom the secret is revealed by Ntate Modise, must know the secret. Nobody else has the authority to reveal it to a stranger. No one outside the ecclesial circles should be privy to the proceedings of the initiation ritual. To guard against any intrusion, both into the church building while the initiation is in progress, and into the secret, a secret code or password is revealed to novices during the initiation rite. Part of this password includes a special handshake. This special handshake is a recognition sign as *mokgethwa*. These 'signs of recognition such as the password [and the special handshake] go beyond mere recognition of members – they are a means of excluding the unauthorized' (Berlin 1906:485).

The third secret concerns the attire of the *bakgethwa*. The church uniform I saw on arrival on Saturday afternoon – a white pair of trousers, a white shirt and tie that matches either maroon or a dark blue jacket for males, a maroon and white skirt, a matching top, and either a red and white *duku* (headscarf) or beret for women – is different from the attire donned during the Saturday night vigil of members only. The attire donned during the night vigil is a secret. It is only used within the church building. As such, it is not seen, known, or touched by the uninitiated. The newly initiated *bakgethwa* robing ceremony took place later, following baptism in running water. After this induction, the service drew to a conclusion.

The fourth secret of the church is a special formula of prayer which the initiated utter to call for protection in distress. This secret formula, which is revealed to the novice only after the baptismal ritual, was revealed by God to Ntate Modise at his *hierophanic* meeting. A member in distress or difficulty secretly recites the words, 'Water, blood, the burning Spirit, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the God who comes with fire'. Anderson (2000) reports that a 'repetition of these words enables a person to receive healing and protection'. This was later confirmed by Emma Mkhwanazi, a prominent former member of the IPHC (Anderson 2000)⁷.

⁷ See also Mkhwanazi (2021).

A short time later, my hosts came to cheerfully congratulate me on successfully passing through this initiation. They understood how I felt about the whole episode. Nevertheless, they did explain that they were inhibited by their church rules to discuss the nature and process of the rite of initiation outside the church⁸. This is a secret that is only revealed by Ntate Modise. One only learns experientially. They also stressed the need to visit Silo twice more. First, there was a need for me to participate fully in another initiatory ritual, this time as a member, instead of being a novice. This would allow me to observe everything all the way through. This would be followed later by my participation in the combined baptism and coating ceremonies. All is well that ends well!

We drove back to Gaborone. On the way, now as cohorts, we spoke openly of my weekend experiences. I was now a *mokgethwa*, who is aware of the fundamentals of the church. At the end of the following month, we returned to Silo, the seat of the IPHC, commonly called *Kereke ya ga Ntate Modise* (Church of Father Modise). This time, I did not go there as a *mokulwane* (a sick and sinning alien). I attended the regular Saturday Open House as well as the Member Night Watch. At the front door, which is always closed and is occupied by two or three men, I was able to log in with the secret code. I sat among other people who are in a liminal state (an in-between state) – recently initiated but not yet fully integrated into the group because I had not yet undergone the combined baptism and robing ceremonies. All through the night, I watched the confusion, anxiety, and frustration on the faces of all the novices. On the other hand, I was moved by the entire congregation's plea for novices who were unwilling to publicly confess their sins. No matter how many small sins a novice confessed, it was not enough until the sin of adultery was eventually stated unequivocally. The biblical scriptures read in the induction of novices in the morning were the same. It was

⁸ Once more, this is a confirmation of Steiner's prescription. It is the duty of the initiated to guard the secrets of the organization. He states: '[F]or the secret of initiation can only be understood by those who have to a certain degree experienced this initiation into the higher knowledge of existence. You may live in intimate friendship with an initiate, and yet a gap severs you from his essential self, so long as you have not become an initiate yourself. You may enjoy in the fullest sense the heart, the love of an initiate, yet he will only confide his knowledge to you when you are ripe for it' (Steiner 1947:4).

the same for the exhibition of the three fundamental secrets of the church: The secret Name of God, the secret garment of the evening vigil, and the password, followed by the special handshake. All members of my graduating class gathered to measure the sizes of our gowns in preparation for the baptism and robing ceremonies. I never returned to Silo!

However, I did continue my association with family members who invited me to South Africa. I later learned that the mother of my 'sister' was the head of the IPHC in Botswana. As an associate member of this family, I attended several night vigils in Mochudi (35 km north of Gaborone) – Bontleng Community Hall in the city of Gaborone and Mogoditshane Community hall on the outskirts of the city of Gaborone. Due to the large attendance at these vigils, they are normally held in community halls. The night vigils held at satellite stations in Botswana are mainly aimed at the community of fully-fledged members who have already been set up. The induction of new members occurs solely at the headquarters in South Africa.

At the beginning of 1976, I paid a visit to my paternal aunt in Mahalapye, about 200 kilometers north of Gaborone. At that time my aunt was a fully-fledged member of St. John Apostolic Faith Church, an African-initiated church founded by Christine Nku in South Africa. My cousin and I spent countless hours at the fireside, discussing the Bible and singing chorus songs. One day, my aunt told me that during her long observation of me, she was convinced that I had a 'fire' in me. I asked her what she meant by 'fire' in me. She refused to explain herself because I would not understand her. Following my visit to Silo in 1978, I returned to my aunt's home and shared my experiences with her. Joyfully, she got up, hugged me and gave me the special secret handshake that Ntate Modise had taught me. She further explained that the fire that I heard about in Silo is the same fire that she saw in me and talked to me about two years earlier.

I later learnt that my mother (a Catholic until her death in June 2020), my younger sister (a member of the ZCC until she died in 1994), my younger brother's mother-in-law (a member of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa until she died in 1999) and many other relatives had been inducted into what is now known in Botswana as *Kereke ya Sephiri* (a church of a secret). From the above description, it is abundantly clear that *Kereke ya Sephiri* is an interdenominational secret cult that operates within the framework of the IPHC. There are unconfirmed reports that before his death, Ntate Modise advised that the IPHC disbands and that members return to their orig-

inal churches. If the life of the IPHC is effectively co-terminus with that of its founder, perhaps it never was meant to be an established church. What was it meant to be, and what is it?

Definition of Esotericism

Academic studies of esotericism or secret cults began in the Western world in the 19th century⁹. During those days, a cult was regarded as any movement that espoused a heretic philosophy or worldview that was subversive of the orthodoxy of the institutionalized Christian church. This is why, within this context, an esoteric group is a movement whose teachings and philosophy of life is heretical or contrary to the institutionalized Christian dogma. As a result, most of the groups that were surveyed were aligned with Gnostic, Buddhist, and humanist philosophies.

Hence, neither can esotericism exist within authentic Christianity, nor can it be Christian in orientation. This poses enormous problems for studying esotericism in non-European cultures and outside Christianity, where the phenomenon needs to be defined differently.

Of course, scholarship in this area has developed and progressed, leading to significant changes in the conceptualization of the phenomenon, both beyond Western Europe and the European missionary Christianity of the 19th century. Esotericism no longer bears the negativity that it did in its context of Western Europe or in the West African context, in which it became bound up with peripheral occultism or mysticism which, according to the early Western scholarly views, is an aberration of real religions¹⁰.

What does esoterism mean? The term ‘esoteric’ denotes a secret or semi-secret spiritual knowledge (Versluis n.d.:11). If esotericism is linked to ‘religious secrecy’ (Asprem 2014:8), then there is a way in which both Judaism as a religion and Christianity are based on esoteric thoughts and practices. Therefore, the view of esotericism as existing outside or necessarily subversive of Christianity is unhelpful. Deuteronomy 29:29 (emphasis added)

⁹ For more detail on this trend in the study of esotericism see Crockford and Asprem (2018), Geertz (1973), and Hanegraaff, Faivre, Van den Broek, and Brach (2006).

¹⁰ See Tiryakian (1972) for a detailed discussion of the difference between occultism and esotericism.

reads: ‘The secret *things belong* unto the Lord our God: But those *things which are* revealed *belong* unto us and to our children forever, that *we* may do all the words of this law’¹¹. This is a juxtaposition of two types of bodies of knowledge – the one is esoteric, sacred, and confined to divinity and spiritual beings, while the other is exoteric, profane, and readily available to all. This is consistent with Urban’s definition of esoterism, according to which it ‘refers to what is “inner” or hidden, what is known only to the initiated few, and closed to the majority of mankind in the exoteric world’ (Urban 1997:1).

No matter how one defines the term, esotericism involves practices of secrecy that give rise ‘to a wide variety of initiatory societies that seek to conceal their inner doctrines and rituals from the gaze of profane outsiders’ (Versluis n.d.:3)¹². Therefore, without due attention to the ‘visionary gnosis’, or of the ‘via negative gnosis’ generation and dissemination aspect of any esoteric movement, there is no esotericism (Versluis n.d.:12). Based on the importance he attaches to the dimension of gnosis, which Antoine Faivre ignores in his characterization of esotericism, Versluis defines esotericism thus: ‘The word “esoteric” refers to secret or semi-secret spiritual knowledge, including both cosmological and metaphysical gnosis’ (Versluis n.d.:11). Our working definition of esotericism is the actual or claimed possession of elitist or mystical power to access or mediate knowledge that ordinarily lies outside the domain and realm of uninitiated individuals. It is based on our understanding of the terms ‘esoteric’ and ‘exoteric’ in Greek. Esoteric knowledge is secret and hidden, while exoteric knowledge is publicly available.

Whereas esotericism in the Western thinking is distinct from the Judeo-Christian orthodox religion, it is not necessarily the case in Southern Africa. This is highlighted by the results of extensive scholarly research on the cult of the *sangoma* in South Africa and Botswana, which shows the appropriation and incorporation in Christianity, and the African native

¹¹ This is why Blavatsky (1989:3) refers to ‘the esoteric teachings of the Law of Moses’. She further elucidates that ‘every ancient religious, or rather philosophical, cult consisted of esoteric or secret teaching and an exoteric (outward public) worship’ (Blavatsky 1989:5).

¹² Tiryakian (1972:494) succinctly captures this point: ‘But a critical aspect of esoteric knowledge is that it is a secret knowledge of the reality of things, of hidden truths, handed down, frequently orally and not all at once, to a relatively small number of persons who are typically ritually initiated by those already possessing this knowledge’.

worldview on the long-celebrated significance of African indigenous healers. This study focuses on the IPHC, a classic secret society within Christianity, popularly known as *Kereke ya Sephiri*.

International Pentecostal Holiness Church as an Esoteric Secret Society

In his study of Pentecostalism in South Africa, Anderson devotes great attention to Modise's IPHC¹³. Although he correctly noted Modise's claim to the possession of mystical powers emanating from his meetings and conversations with God, he does not consider him as an African esotericist or gnostic like Yelena Blavatsky, the theosophist (Blavatsky 1889). Although he correctly observed that this church has many rituals and secrets that are only revealed to the initiated, he falls short of calling it an esoteric secret society. What is a secret society? Having secrets in an organization does not necessarily make it a secret society because there are very few organizations that do not have secrets¹⁴.

We define a secret society as a society that keeps 'certain of its practices or conceptions hidden from nonmembers, no matter how public or recognized they are as a group' (Podolecka & Nthoi 2021). First, there is no secret society without a secret¹⁵ – a secret society is 'characterized by its secret' (Simmel 1906:483). These secrets pertain to its ritual practices and beliefs (particularly the nature and source of its arcane supernatural powers) that distinguish it from other religious sodalities. These are the secrets upon which secret societies promise 'special knowledge, status, or power to the chosen initiates' (Spence 2020). Second, secret societies exist within and are part of a specific socio-cultural structured community. They always arise and exist 'within an already complete society' (Berlin 1906:485). The purpose and content of their secrets (esoteric knowledge) are the basis of their detachment

¹³ See Anderson (1992, 2000, 2001).

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion on the ubiquitous nature of secrecy in society, see Maret (2016:6 of 28).

¹⁵ We do not subscribe to Maret's view of secrecy as a wicked social problem (Maret 2016:1 of 28). We rather use the term 'secrecy' to denote 'the intentional or unintentional concealment of information' (Simmel 1950:330).

from the larger community of nonmembers and holders of exoteric knowledge.

Third, a religious secret society often has ‘impressive displays, and above all, claims to secret supernatural power’ (Hayden 2018:1). In this regard, therefore, a religious secret society is an ‘exclusive ritual organization’ (Hayden 2018:1). Fourth, membership in secret societies is voluntary and somewhat restricted. No person is born into a secret society. To ensure full concealment of society’s fundamental secrets, there is a demand for the total commitment from members to such societies. To this end, secret societies use threats of death or serious afflictions to befall non-complying members. Fifth, secret societies are characterized by an elaborate and transformative initiation rite. Berlin associates the initiation rite with the first secret of any secret society as follows: ‘As a rule, a solemn pledge is demanded of the novice that he will hold secret everything which he is about to experience before even the first stages of acceptance into the society occur’ (Berlin 1906:488).

Therefore, there are three main characteristics of a secret society other than the mere existence of secrets: a) The secrets are linked to the beliefs and initiatory rituals of the organization; b) the circulation and dissemination of these secrets are limited to initiated members, and c) knowledge of these secrets is the primary basis for the differentiation of rights, power, and privileges of the holders of this esoteric knowledge from those of the holders of exoteric knowledge (i.e. elitism based on secret knowledge possession)¹⁶. We expunge any notion of ‘moral badness’ from our usage of the term ‘secret’¹⁷.

By its very nature, esoteric knowledge flourishes under the veil of concealment to the eyes of non-initiates. The most prolific cover is exoteric culture under which it exists and functions ‘unobtrusively’. Tiryakian captures this point clearly: ‘More relevant is to indicate that esoteric culture is not concretely disjoint from exoteric culture, that it coexists, albeit unobtru-

¹⁶ Berlin (1906:485) observes that ‘[s]ecrecy defines the relationship between him who has the secret and him who does not have it’. This is why Tiryakian (1972:500) describes the initiation of members of a secret society as a process in ‘which the adept increasingly become socialized into the esoteric culture and increasingly dissocialized from the natural attitude of the exoteric culture’. See Faivre (1996) for further detail on the pedagogical functions of initiation rites in secret societies.

¹⁷ For the link between secret and concealment of ‘moral badness’, see Berlin (1906:463).

sively with the latter, or stated differently, that there are many interchanges between them' (Tiryakian 1972:501).

Based on the above criteria, we consider *Kereke ya Sephiri* to be a secret society. It is an interdenominational secret cult within the IPHC, founded by Ntate Modise in 1962. Its monthly night vigils for initiated members at the church's new headquarters in Johannesburg (Zuurbekom) in South Africa, are interdenominational. Consequently, the IPHC, extensively studied by Anderson (1992, 2001), is the public face of this cross-cultural and interdenominational cult. Unlike the American-based International Holiness Church, the major tenets of Modise's IPHC are based on his personality, particularly his healing powers. Whether perceived as the spokesperson of God (*Moemedi*), as the personified Holy Spirit (the Comforter), or as a Messiah (Anderson 2000), Modise is the undisputed repository of secret knowledge and mystical power, derived from his mediatory role, following his divine calling in 1962.

We have already observed that esoteric groups neither emerge nor exist in cultural vacuums. There is a relation between the tenets of their teachings and philosophies and the socio-political contexts of their emergence. In what socio-cultural context did the IPHC emerge? The late 1950s to the mid-1960s in Africa mark the beginning of the African renaissance. This period marked the beginning of Africa's growing unrest and resistance to European imperialism, especially in the cultural component of its life. Among other things, black Africans began to challenge 'the right of the Europeans to impose their cultural-spiritual values on their communities while at the same time attempted to abolish the spiritual and cultural rights of "the natives"' (Nabudere 2001:14). Therefore, this was the period of the reawakening of the black African cultural and political consciousness that gave impetus to the quest for religious and political self-determination and independence. As a result, it was a period of resurgence of African indigenous esoteric movements, such as African indigenous healers and the ancient African cult, who sought to limit the Christianization of African communities. Worldwide, this period marks the ramp-up of Pentecostalism. It was in this sociopolitical context that Modise had his visionary encounter with God that changed his life.

Before founding his church, Modise was a principal pastor in the ZCC, headed by Engenas Lekganyane (Anderson 1992). The ZCC is an African-initiated church, with a strong healing ministry. Very little is known about the real reasons why Modise broke away from the ZCC. Having sev-

ered his ties with the ZCC, he grounded his new church on the claimed emergence or revelation of a new founding principle that highlights its peculiarity (personal and institutional differentiation). This claimed possession of a body of secret mystical knowledge gave rise to the secrets of his church. We therefore concur with Berlin's assertion that 'secrecy intensifies such differentiation' (Berlin 1906:467).

In September 1962, Modise developed a serious illness. He presented complicated afflictions customarily associated with a divine calling, which both Western medical doctors and African indigenous healers failed to heal. His thriving funeral parlor was broken into, and costly equipment was vandalized or stolen. His children from a first marriage died mysteriously. This left him sick, bankrupt, and emotionally traumatized. During his hospitalization, he had a near-death experience, which proved to be the turning point of his spiritual life and led to the birth of the IPHC and the secret cult that operates within it.

This is a classical visionary encounter with the transcendent. Such an experience opens the door to 'direct spiritual insight, either in the hidden aspects of the cosmos or transcendence, thereby producing a "visionary gnosis"' (Versluis n.d.:3). Let us reflect a bit more on the importance of assertions and affirmations of having had visionary experiences. This is important for defining how we encounter the body of knowledge (*gnosis*) generated by these experiences. Esotericism does not exist without gnosis. The term 'gnosis' 'refers to direct spiritual insight into the nature of the cosmos and of oneself, and thus may be taken as having both a cosmological and metaphysical importance' (Versluis n.d.:12). Therefore, narratives of such experiences and encounters are narratives of gnosis generation without which there is no esotericism, for that which is esoteric, hidden, protected, and transmitted, is generated during and through these visionary revelations.

During this visionary experiment, Modise had a 'conversation' with God. God forgave him for all his sins and healed him. Subsequently, God entrusted him to lead his chosen people out of 'Egypt', the house of bondage, to 'Israel', the kingdom of God on earth. In this way, Modise became God's representative on earth (*Moemedi*). God revealed his 'true' Name to him. He gave him specific instructions on how to establish the kingdom. Finally, God revealed to Modise a set of classified information on membership in the kingdom. He was to reveal this information only to members. The account of Modise's divine calling and anointing as God's representative on earth places

him in the category of Gnostics – those who not only have mystical powers, but are first and foremost aware of God’s profound secrets (esoteric acquaintance) or the divine gnosis¹⁸. To borrow Blavatsky’s terms, Modise is, therefore, an African version of *Theodidaktos* (*god-taught*), who is said to have had divine wisdom revealed to him in dreams and visions (Blavatsky 1889). He became one of the few who are ‘permitted to attain knowledge of the secret name of God which Moses learned on Mount Sinai’ (Tiryakian 1972:501). This narrative is part of image construction. Having led a faction that broke away from the charismatic Lekganyane of the ZCC, he had to lay a solid base for his claim to possession of wisdom and power superior to any other. Thus, according to him, it was God himself who chose and empowered him. He alone knows God’s real Name. It is only he who can forgive sins, and it is only he who knows how to pray the Lord’s Prayer. It is only his church that offers true healing. In one of his articles, Anderson notes that there are ‘many secrets’ in the IPHC, ‘that foreigners are not allowed to know [and] secrets that can only be disclosed to members [or that] only the “elect-ed” shall know’ (Anderson 1992:188). These are the secrets that were revealed to us on the day of our initiation into the kingdom.

Benefits of the Secret

What are the benefits and dividends associated with membership in an organization, especially a secret cult? In other words, What is the difference between those who hold secrets and those who are excluded from secrecy? To answer this question *vis-à-vis Kereke ya Sephiri*, we rehearse Ntate Modise’s understanding of his commissioning by God as his representative.

There is no doubt that Modise believed that his divine calling went beyond the establishment of a church. Above all, he saw his major assignment as the restoration of the kingdom of God upon the earth¹⁹ under his direction as ‘King of Kings’. No wonder he always appeared in public in regal attire. He saw himself as God’s tool for the realization of a new world order

¹⁸ For more detail, see Modise (n.d.).

¹⁹ A close analysis of the reminisces of the legacies of the late founder of the IPHC by members, titled ‘The Original Comforter’ reveals that the current church’s principles of the kingdom, which Modise espoused in his lifetime, were obtained from Munroe (2006).

on earth. His church was to become a sub-structure of the structured socio-cultural community in which it exists, but one with which it was to have an antithetical relationship. The possession or non-possession of the secret is what differentiates the esoteric from the exoteric community.

Having received a divine revelation on God's chosen day for the Sabbath, a day dedicated to the Lord, his new church worships on Saturdays. This is in contrast to his former church, the ZCC and other Pentecostal churches that worship on Sundays. However, in keeping with its Pentecostal leanings, he rejected the fundamental principles of Africa's indigenous religions – i.e. the centrality of ancestral cult and the African indigenous healer²⁰. Thus, the African indigenous healer became his 'avowed enemy'. His belief in faith healing, another important trait of Pentecostalism, led to his rejection of 'the use of medicines and prophylactic substances for the healing of sickness' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:25). This is one of the distinguishing features between the IPHC and the majority of African-initiated churches of the African Christian typology in South Africa and Botswana²¹. This went against the pursuit of African religious independence which inspired African resistance to European cultural imperialism at the beginning of the African renaissance period. Following God's miraculous cure, Modise

removed from his house all medicine conventional or unconventional. All symbols related to traditional and ancestry [sic.] worship were thrown out of the house. Idolatory [sic.] symbols in the form of holy water, holy ash and strings were thrown out of the house. What he remained with was his trust, faith, hope and belief in his new-found God and the world order and the civilization he had to implement (Anderson 1992:191).

²⁰ This is a well-known position of Pentecostal churches. See, for example Brainerd and Walling (2018:114): '[A]cross its "various" streams Pentecostalism has largely remained counter-cultural in respect of preserving conventional moral positions, especially those related to sexuality and thus has taken a stand against adultery, sex before marriage, divorce (except on the grounds of adultery), and homosexuality'.

²¹ A distinguishing feature between the IPHC and the other Pentecostal churches is Modise's theology of marriage. The IPHC recognizes and practices polygyny. Marriage in most Pentecostal churches is strict monogamy.

Most of his sermons attacked the veneration of ancestral spirits and the consultation of African traditional healers. He considered ancestral worship to be an abomination to God, and ancestral spirits to be ‘angels of Satan’. Consequently, he sought to reduce church members’ dependence on the ancestral cult and African indigenous healing. Instead, he emphasized faith healing and ‘the gift of healing which operates mainly through him in the IPC’ (Anderson 1992:187). As pointed out in Podolecka and Nthoi (2021), Modise associated affliction with sin. According to this principle, effective healing requires the confession and forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, since he is the only person anointed and commissioned to forgive sins, there is no effective healing outside the IPHC. What are the implications of all these on the benefits for members?

A kingdom is an institution that is founded on a social contract, whereby subjects offer obedience to a ruling authority in exchange for protection and the provision of certain services, rights, and privileges without which social life is impossible. As already mentioned above, the successful completion of the initiation and baptism rites transforms novices into *bona fide* citizens of the kingdom of God. Shared secrets provide members with a specific identity and elevated status. It is part of the processes of identity transformation and development within the church/kingdom as a reference group: ‘A reference group offers individuals a basis for self-definition and self-identification, a way of affirming their personhood as *bona fide* members’ (Hefner 1993:25).

As a result of their knowledge of these secrets, new members are consequently ‘accorded status and allocated space within the context of the group’ (Masondo 2015:92). In this way, they escape all predation risks²² resulting from their conversion and abandonment of African indigenous protection strategies. This is the internal dimension of secrecy – i.e. the formation of a strong internal community of believers bound by the sharing of fundamental cultic secrets. In this regard, therefore, these secrets are anti-predatory strategies. Herein lies the importance of the secret prayer formula for the recital by members in distress. Once safely located in the *habitus* of their new

²² In its wider sense the term ‘predation risk’ refers to all challenges and vulnerabilities to which an individual is susceptible, when outside the corrals of the community. For more information on predation risk, see Shultz, Noe, McGraw, and Dunbar (2004).

faith community (the kingdom), they begin to enjoy the full privileges that go with such membership. Their sins are forgiven, their bodily and spiritual infirmities are healed, and they are protected and liberated from the fear of witchcraft as well as the bullying and capricious vicissitudes of ancestral spirits. Membership guarantees one's prosperity on earth. Their married life becomes very stable because no marriage is celebrated unless the Comforter approves it. On the other hand, secrecy is a productive technique for distinguishing the sub-structure from the larger structured community. This is the external dimension of secrecy, i.e. the quest for detachment from the rest, what Berlin refers to as '*building higher the wall of separation, and therein a reinforcement*' of the uniqueness and superiority of the secret society (Berlin 1906:487; original emphasis).

In most of his sermons, Modise made little use of the term 'salvation' in its spiritualist and futuristic sense. He deliberately distinguished being saved or born again, a common expression in charismatic Pentecostal environments, and being chosen or selected. In the same way, the Israelites were God's chosen people – initiated members (possessors of the fundamental secrets) are *bakgethwa* (God's chosen, favored, and privileged people). In as far as it relates to the secrets of the church, the *bakgethwa* concept establishes and grounds elitism for members, a recognized function of secrets in esoteric movements (Urban 1997). We are therefore dealing with the management and dispersion of power within this religious organization.

The doctrine of *bakgethwa* as God's chosen people and *bona fide* members of God's kingdom, provides a doctrine of escapism from the existing order, with a more refocused attention on a 'reality that transcends that of everyday life, but which is a reality that may be actualized in a historical future by reversing the present order of the world' (Tiryakian 1972:506). This is why Anderson regards the IPHC and its internal esoteric culture as messianic in orientation (Anderson 1992). The other benefit of this esoteric knowledge is the conception of fraternal solidarity, according to which all members are brothers and sisters.

On the other hand, outside this protective corral, there is a life of uncertainty (the image of Egypt as a place of bondage, sin, and suffering versus the image of Israel as the land of milk and honey). There is a constant fear of sorcery, diseases, and poverty. It is life outside the Garden of Eden where God provides for the needs and desires of every human being. The difference between 'us' and 'them' is based on whether or not you know these secrets.

Summary and Conclusion

The pursuit of a pure, true, orthodox, and dominant Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or any other religious tradition, is as elusive a task as a dog's attempt to catch its tail. Neither is it fruitful nor is it a legitimate concern for a social anthropologist. There is no pure Christianity. This is as true, today, in this globalized world, as it was before, when an esoteric movement was readily defined as a peripheral movement that espouses a secret, hidden, and unscientific worldview or philosophical thought that is either heretical or subversive of mainstream Christianity.

No term is more common in the study of Western esotericism than 'eclectic'. Likewise, no terms have been used more often than the term 'syncretic' in the history of Christian thought. However, such a realization has not impacted our indefatigable search for purity and orthodoxy, in a world in which everything is negotiated. Esotericism is still defined in terms of its relation to 'dominant' or 'institutionalized' Christianity as if the paradigm of 'institutionalized' Christianity is a given.

Extending the academic study of the phenomenon of religious esotericism beyond the borders of the Western European context, allows a more profound and perhaps a fresher understanding of esotericism. On the African continent, especially in the sub-Saharan region, esotericism is understood quite differently from its representation in Western studies. First of all, the pluralistic nature of most African communities militates against reaching a consensus on what constitutes an institutionalized religion. Even within Christianity itself, there are different forms of Christianity, like missionary Christianity and African Christianity. Esoteric movements within these disparate versions of Christianity, as well as within the diverse indigenous religions of Africa, inhibit the emergence of generalized and global conclusions about the nature of African esotericism, particularly, their relationship with 'institutionalized religions'.

In line with Asprey's call for analogically based comparative studies on esotericism (Asprey 2014), we compare our exotic data on *Kereke ya Sephiri* with what we already know about Rosicrucianism, an esoteric Christian movement widely investigated in Western scholarship (Churton 2009). Based on its disenchantment with the current order, Rosicrucianism espouses the establishment of a social, political, and religious world order, akin to Munroe's God's kingdom (Munroe 2006). According to Munroe, the 'the funda-

mental message [of the Bible is] about the establishment of a kingdom rulership on this planet from the heavenly realm' (Munroe 2006:16). It is about a sovereign monarch's plan for 'governing earth from Heaven through mankind' (Munroe 2006:16). Consequently, Christ's central message to humanity lies in his teachings on God's kingdom, which differs from the present worldly dispensation (the kingdom of the earth). The kingdom principle includes the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty, love for God and neighbor as the distinguishing features of the kingdom's citizens (that which sets them apart from worldly citizens), and God's demands for an unwavering obedience by the kingdom's citizens as critical for the establishment and governance of the kingdom.

The IPHC has appropriated and incorporated Munroe's principles of the kingdom in the conceptualization of its version of the kingdom principles. Known for its symbol of the cross and a rose, Rosicrucianism, like *Kereke ya Sephiri*, is committed to creating a universal fraternity or the brotherhood/sisterhood of all, based on God's love for humanity. Rosicrucianism, whose members were, in the 17th century, dominated by physicians, pledged to cure the patients without any payment. Likewise, and as noted earlier, spiritual healing of all human infirmities and affliction lies at the heart of the IPHC, whose healing is preceded by the forgiveness of sins. Both movements profess not only to be Christian, but they also claim to herald a new version of Christianity that is based on altruism. They also claim to have the secret of the interior teachings of Christianity.

Therefore, our study of *Kereke ya Sephiri*, a study of an African religious secret society within Pentecostal Christianity, reveals the success of a charismatic esoteric leader in defending Pentecostalism from the assault of African indigenous religions – i.e. the ubiquitous and influential ancestral cult, its theodicy and healing ministry – that gave birth to the emergence of African Christianity. The result of Modise's agency was the emergence of an African-initiated church with Pentecostal leanings. This proves that esotericism in Africa is at once subversive and favorable to 'institutionalized religions'. On the one hand, it is subversive of African indigenous religions and African Christianity as 'institutionalized' religions in Africa. On the other hand, it supports both orthodox and Pentecostal missionary Christianity and European cultural imperialism. Consequently, African religious esotericism operates both inside and outside 'institutionalized religions'.

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