

‘Now we know that the enemy is from within’: Shembeites and the Struggle for Control of Isaiah Shembe’s Legacy and the Church

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Abstract

In 1911, Isaiah Shembe (1865-1935) founded the Nazareth Baptist Church popularly known as KwaShembe (Dube 1936: 29). The church became the first amongst the Zulus to be founded ‘with the quest to restore the Zulu to their glorious past’ (Masondo 2004: 69-79). Today it is the oldest and most respected church founded with the intention of bringing Christianity and the quest for Zulu nationalism and culture together in South Africa. In its early days, the church was faced with much opposition from the missionaries who accused it of misleading people, polluting the gospel and sheep-stealing. Shembe had to continuously defend himself and his church against the external forces that sought to destroy him and his church. As a result, the church has had to walk a fine line, between belligerence and servility throughout the colonial and apartheid periods. However, its history has also been marked by forces from within that have divided the church into what has become seven splinter groups, or factions, that are at war with one another. The power-struggles and fights amongst family members have directly taken a toll on the once great church as each scrambles for a piece of the legacy, prestige, and resources, of the church and its founder. This article mainly examines the factors that lead to the conflicts that have divided the church into the seven groups that are at loggerheads with each other and threaten to destroy its legacy.

Keywords: Shembe, Shembeites, power-struggles, leadership, identity

Introduction

The emergence of independent churches in Africa cannot to be discussed outside the failures of the missionaries to understand and accommodate African culture through processes of inculturation into Christianity, and vice versa, in the last decades of the eighteenth century. The accounts of Johane Marange and Johane Masowe in Zimbabwe, Emmanuel Milingo in Zambia, Nonthetha Nkwenkwe in South Africa and Isaiah Shembe, the founder of *amaNazaretha* in South Africa, fits this assessment well. The research of a variety of scholars have developed interest in these churches which, according to Sundkler's (1976) categorising, fall within the Ethiopian Churches group, because of their emphasis on 'Africa for Africans'. This rationale, explicitly verbalised or implicitly assumed, has been the main cause for the break-away from the mainline or mission churches, and indigenous church formation. However, as history evidences, the initial discontent, have continued to plague these church formations and did not stop once they have achieved self-governance and different forms of independence. They have continued to breakdown into many different internal groups and factions, which have often been characterised by many expensive court battles, and in some cases, loss of lives.

This article is a reflection on the Shembe Nazaretha Baptist Church, which was founded by Isaiah Mudliwamafa Shembe. The reflections here were necessitated by the latest developments of the squabbles in the church related to the succession wrangles that have, since the 1970s, given birth to the current seven factions. These are:

- Ekuphakameni, led by Vukile Shembe;
- Ebuhleni, also known as Ebuhleni Shembe International Church, led by Vela Shembe;
- Ginyezinye, led by Sizwe Shembe;
- Mini Shembe (referring to Galilee Shembe's son Mini, and is not very active, and socially very well defined as a group within the larger Church);
- Tembezinhle, led by Mduduzi Shembe;
- Gauteng Shembe Church, led by Phakama Shembe; and the
- New Nazareth Baptist Church, led by Mthembeni Mpanza (the only leader, who is not from the Shembe clan).

The Shembe Church had been in and out of secular courts on the succession debates since the 1970s but the succession debates can be traced back to 1935, Following the death of Isaiah Shembe. The latest succession struggle started in 2011 giving birth to the Ebuhleni and Tembezinhle movements that are continuing to drag each other to court. The article looks at the historical background of Isaiah Shembe, and the *amaNazaretha* church, factors that lead to the rise of Shembe, the basic tenets, theology, practices, symbols and dress of the church, its significance for self-reliance and healing, the indigenization of Christianity, why people are attracted to the Shembe Church, the status of women in the *amaNazaretha* church, the leadership structures and their politics, the power struggles, and the rise of the different factions in the Church, and the impact of the Shembe Church on the society.

The Historical Background of Isaiah Shembe

The Shembe Church was founded by Isaiah Shembe. He was born in 1867 among the Sotho people of the Free State Province of South Africa, to a Zulu polygamous father Mayekisa, and Sitheya Mlindi (Mzizi 2004: 191). Makeyisa was a landless farm dweller in Harrismith. As legend has it, when Isaiah Shembe's mother was already pregnant, a voice said to her, '*You will bear a son who will be a special messenger*' (Gunner 2004:57). Mayekisa did not grasp the full significance of the words because she was not a religious person. Gunner (2004) also says that, after Shembe's birth, his uncle Nhliziyi, gave him the name Shembe and his father named him Mudliwamafa meaning 'my inheritor'. Shembe styled himself as a biblical character and at his baptism in 1906 he changed his name from Mudliwamafa to Isaiah (Cabrita 2012:440). In his later life he referred to himself as the 'the Servant of Sorrow' *Eskhonzi SenHlupheko* invoking the Isaiah of the Old Testament. Shembe died on 2 May 1935 after standing for three hours in cold water in a river administering adult baptism (Oosthuizen 1968:1). Shembe never went to a formal school. He only learnt to partially read and write later in life (Sundkler 1976:187). Although Shembe had little 'mission education' he was able to cite biblical verses, from memory, outwitting most European missionaries (Muller 1999:45). Gunner (1988) adds that whatever Shembe 'read' was supposedly not through learning, but came to him miraculously.

Historically, it is not clear which church Isaiah Shembe actually attended during his early years. Gunner (2004:17), though, claims that Shembe was

a member of two missionary churches namely the Baptist and Wesleyan Methodist churches. The Wesleyan Methodists influenced his love for Wesleyan hymns (Tshabalala 1983). Shembe later-on moved out of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, because he had disagreed with it, on the issue of baptism (Mzizi: 2004:191). Shembe, then, was baptised through immersion, as an adult, by an African National Baptist Association minister, the Rev. William Leshega (Oosthuizen 1968). The immersion baptism by Leshega had an impact on Shembe. Leshega invited him to his home as a guest, and Shembe stayed with him for six days. He subsequently joined the Baptist Church (Gunner 2004:20). Shembe immediately started to preach the gospel to fellow Africans. His success as a preacher in Witzieshoek was so great that Rev. Leshega came down from Boksburg with two female ministers, to baptise those whom Shembe had preached to, and in many cases healed. Later, during this same visit (1908), Leshega laid hands on Shembe and ordained him as a minister of the African National Baptist Church, authorising him to preach and baptise (Dube 1936). However, Shembe later moved out of the Baptist Church on the basis that, for him, and according to the Bible, the Sabbath¹, was to be a Saturday not a Sunday, and formed his own movement (Shange 2013:37). Gunner (2004) agrees with Oosthuizen (1968) that Shembe was already conducting healing ceremonies at this time, before he became an official member of the Baptist Church. He also functioned as exorcist, driving out demons, gave people holy water as a symbolic substance and medium for healing, and preached under open skies, in kraals and alongside rivers and pool where he would baptise adult converts.

Gunner (2004:57) narrates an event in the Shembe legend, that became a turning point for Shembe. She recounts that when Shembe was still a toddler, he became ill and the next day, in fact died. His father and the men of the area went out to dig a grave for the corpse. While they were still busy, a little boy appeared to them, saying that a cow of Makeyisa's (Shembe's father) has just

¹ According Oosthuizen (1981), the Sabbath Day is often mentioned in the *Izihlabelelo*, the Shemebeite hymnbook, viz. that Jehovah and Shembe restored the observance of the Sabbath to the Zulu nation and the world. The Sabbath is the very key to liberation, as Moses emphasized in the 10 commandments (cf. *Izihlabelelo* 212:2). The Sabbath is the day of resting, prayers, power and a holy day in the extreme – in fact Shembe is revered as the personification of this day (cf. Oosthuizen 1981:42, Muller 1996).

died. Makeyisa asked what had happened to it, and the young boy explained that he just saw it toppling off a flat rock and that it fell to its death (Gunner 2004). The men at the grave sent Lokhuzana Mahlobo to inquire from the diviner as to the significance of these two deaths. The diviner advised them not to be afraid by losing both the child and the cow, but, that the cow's death had brought back the son's spirit (Gunner 2004). As the men were returning home, before they even arrived, the women who had been watching the child's body, saw the cloth which covered Shembe, moving. They looked closely and saw the child quivering and his breath returning. After a moment's hesitation, they sent for the men to stop digging the grave because the child returned to life. After that incident, Shembe was excellent in health (Gunner 2004).

The Call of Isaiah Shembe and the Identity of Shembe

The call of Isaiah Shembe to his life's vocation, can be traced back to an experience at Ntabazwe Mountain in Harrismith (Gunner 2004:17). The mountain is also called Platberg in Afrikaans, meaning (Flat Mountain) and Thabantsho in Sotho (Black Mountain). In his interview with Carl Faye in 1929, Shembe mentions his early years on the farm of Witzieshoek in the Harrismith district, and how he moved to the land on the outskirts of Harrismith, the mountain of Ntabazwe (Gunner 2004). According to Oosthuizen (1981), it is here that Shembe experienced several revelations as a young boy, and that it was through the means of lightning that he received his call. Gunner (2004:24) adds a story about a skeleton among other theophanies. According to Gunner (2004), in 1913, Shembe visited Nhlankakazi Mountain which became the movement's holy mountain, for the first time. At that mountain he was told by the Holy Spirit to form his own church. This place later became his place of annual pilgrimage every first Sunday of the year.

Shembe founded his church in 1911 and named it along biblical lines – *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* (The Nazarenes). He established his settlement in Inanda, a semi-rural area north of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. In time, this became the holy city Ekuphakameni (Magwaza 2011:136). Shembe called his followers *amaNazaretha* and the church *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* after a priestly cult of Nazir in the Book of Numbers (Numbers 6:1-21) (Cabrita 2012:440). *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* sought to revitalise Zulu society through the maintenance, revival and practice of the social customs that were rejected by the mission churches. In addition to Nazir, the term Nazareth according to Shange

(2013: 121) has a number of additional Biblical connotations. Shange argues that most of Jesus' childhood was lived in Nazareth (Matt 2:23). His father Joseph also purportedly took Jesus to Nazareth to keep him safe, thus, Shembe members, like Jesus, return to *amaNazaretha* Church when they are in need of, or seek refuge, and all kinds of safety and protection. Shembeites also believe that Jesus was the first Nazareth member, and Jesus' church, referred to in Acts (Acts 2:4-5), was in fact the first Nazareth Church (Shange 2013).

To the *amaNazaretha*, there are many titles ascribed to Shembe, among which is the claim as to his messiahship. Among scholars these diverse titles did occasion some heated debate at one point (cf. Oosthuizen 1967; Sundkler 1976; and Vilikazi 1986). Since it falls outside the scope of this study, it will not be pursued here. For our purposes, though, it is more important to unpack the different perceptions of Shembe by his followers, and others. In his article of 2004, Mzizi reports that in an interview he conducted with Mpanza, the view is that Shembe was perceived by the Whites and Afrikaners in South Africa, as a Zulu political revolutionary who attempted to use religion to accomplish a political end. His interpretation of the Jewish Torah made the Whites to interpret him as an imposter who had come to distort Christianity. In the eyes of missionary scholars and preachers, Shembe was a Zulu Moses pretender. He made himself such by proclaiming that he had entered into a covenant with Jehovah on behalf of the Zulu people. Mpanza goes on to claim that, to serious scholarship, Shembe should be regarded as a Black Messiah, a Saviour, sent by God to the Zulu nation; or, a religious genius and ascetic personality who made God real and tangible among the Zulu of his time (Mzizi 2004). Mzizi also quotes Mpanza as calling Shembe 'Melchizedek', in terms of the Hebrew Scriptures. For him, 'the word pre-existed Shembe [and] was translated in the person of Isaiah Shembe' (Mzizi 2004). Shembe is also the spirit promised by Jesus to his disciples. When he was alive, he was the Holy Spirit and the fact that he had sacred dwellings in the form of mansions in places like Swaziland and KwaZulu-Natal proves that even today the original Shembe is still alive (Mzizi 2004).

Apart from perceptions by others and his own members, according to Vilikazi (1986: 29), Shembe also perceived himself as a messenger of God to the Black people, in the same sense as the prophet Muhammad was sent to the Arabian peoples and Jesus to the Jews. Hymn 71 of the *amaNazaretha* also refers to the pre-existence of Shembe. In equating Shembe with Jesus, Hastings (1994:503) has this to say,

... this does not mean that Shembe has replaced Jesus theologically; rather he is for the Zulu Christians of the twentieth century a vivid representation of what God and Christ are thought to signify. Christ is not supplanted but represented.

Magwaza (2011:137) points out that in the eyes of some followers, Shembe is also seen as *uMvelinqangi* (God), literally meaning, the one who appeared first and who has intimate contact with the ancestors. Oosthuizen (1968) reports that, some of Shembe's followers refer to him as *ubabamkulu* (grandfather) which means that he can be considered an ancestor or a seer (*oboniswayo*) but, that he was not a diviner, although to perform healing practices was one of his major activities. He is also known as the prophet of God, the man of heaven, God's messenger, or Lord of the *amaNazaretha*. It is obvious that there are many labels ascribed to Shembe among the members of *amaNazaretha*. For some, these ascriptions are quite open-ended, and may be informed, by one's own religious or spiritual experiences (of Shembe).

In his time, Shembe's ministry also caused quite a number of challenges to other Christian churches and organisations in the then Union of South Africa. Some of these problems led some churches to lodge court actions against Shembe, in secular courts. According to SABC News, one outraged African clergyman complained to a District Magistrate of Ndwedwe in 1923 that Shembe was an unscrupulous rival. He was accused of poaching followers and converts, that he was holding rival open air church services at the same time and in close proximity to established churches, and thereby disturbing the peace. His accusers claimed that Shembe consciously poached converts from the established churches, and that this caused rivalry and discontent amongst African Christians (Cabrita 2012). On one occasion, in a Magistrate's court at Ndwedwe district, also indicating his view, Shembe conceded that his followers do come from the established churches, and that when some join *amaNazaretha*, that those who do not join and are left in the established churches feel aggrieved or 'bitter' against him. In their view, he did not 'follow the Christian faith' (cf. Cabrita 2012: 444).

Factors that Contributed to the Rise of Isaiah Shembe and the Shembeite Movement

There are a number of aspects that gave rise to the emergence of Isaiah Shembe

and the Shembeite movement. We have already referred to the ostensive impact of visions of God. In addition, he was motivated by some fellow Zulu, not least, his brother-in-law, Piet Sithole, who was a preacher and a healer, and known throughout the Harrismith district. Sithole is also known for his march to Ntabazwe Mountain to pray for rain during a very dry year. The police protested the march but later relented. It is reported that heavy rain started to fall, on his way back from the mountain, after having prayed for rain (Vezi 1992). Another important influence was the Rev. William Leshega of the African National Baptist Church who baptised him, and also came to baptise his first converts (Gunner 2004). The *third* factor was the socioeconomic and political structures of the Zulu society of his day. Societies were breaking down as a result of de-, and a-culturation, in the wake of the impact of colonising forces, industrialization, and rapid urbanization. The power of the Zulu monarchy had also been seriously undermined by the missionaries. Due to modernization processes, traditional social structures were changing for worse, if not breaking down, especially among Africans.

Fourthly, Hexham (2011:361) notes that, religiously, Africans suffered from Europeans' misunderstandings of African religion and culture. Initially, Africans were regarded as being without religion. This was also often linked to the perception that Africans do not have souls, that they therefore have no religion, from which follows, that they were not human, or at least not fully human. This argument was taken up and further developed in the racist evolutionary ideology of the late 1800s, which stated that Africans were human, yes, but that they have only evolved into a lower stage of the human evolutionary tree. It was also stated that this was why Africans lacked intelligence to develop a religion of their own. It was this chain of arguments that was used to propagate the racist ideology of the inferiority of Africans and the superiority of Europeans. It was this ideology that also formed the framework for the racist rationales for the colonisation and enslavement of Africans, as well as apartheid (Hexham 2011). It was in this socio-cultural space of the de-humanisation and the misappreciation of the dignity and humanity of Africans, that the African Initiated Churches, such as Shembe arose.

Fifthly, according to Shange (2013:37) South African colonizers, including the missionaries and mission organisations, exerted their dominance on the people, land and culture. Culturally, this brought about a forced acculturation and created many psycho-somatic and related health challenges for Africans. Many Africans turned to crime, alcohol abuse and lawlessness.

Traditional culture provided no guidance for individuals and communities struggling for identity and recognition in the rising tide of modernisation and urbanization. African ideas and practices were rejected and many could not relate to or accommodate Western ideologies. According to Brown (2005:93) it was at the point that many African Christians started to realise the cultural impact of Christianity on African culture, that many blacks left the mission churches. This caused a vacuum, in which churches like Shembe arose. More generally, these churches arose within an unstable contextual landscape constituted by the contradictory forces of transactions between traditional Nguni culture, European colonialism, missionary Christianity and an emerging industrial capitalism (cf. West 2007). It was within the midst of the politically and economically culturally volatile impacts of these forces that Shembe and his follower constructed their own social formation, and attempted to seize some semblance of control for themselves, over their own lives. Using the words of West (2007), Shembe was forced to create his own world and inhabit it, drawing on Nguni custom and cosmology, articulated with Euro-Western Christianity.

The Basic Tenets, Theology, Practices, Symbols and Dresses of the Shembe Church

AmaNazaretha have a strong faith in their Bible, hymnbook and catechism. Their Bible is known as the *Book of the Birth of the Prophet Shembe*. According to Cabrita (2012) it was during the time of Galilee Shembe that he organised the texts of Shembe into an official canon. As observed by Cabrita, it is hagiographic in nature, and a continuation of the existing Bible. It is also named the ‘*Acts of the Nazarites*’, suggesting parallels with the New Testament *Acts of the Apostles*. Today this book is often referred to by the church as the *Third Testament*, a continuation of the story of God among the African people.

Besides the Bible, *amaNazaretha* have their own hymns that were composed by Isaiah and Galilee Shembe (Muller 1996). Shembe produced a corpus of hymns *IziHlabelelo zamaNazaretha*, of outstanding poetic quality in isiZulu, many of which are acted out in a variety of self-styled dances (Heuser 2008). Muller (1996: x), also refers to the ‘spiritual’ and ‘poetic’ quality of the hymns. The hymns are remarkable for the way in which they weave together Biblical Christianity, traditional Nguni beliefs and expressive forms with the political context in which Isaiah Shembe and his followers were located at the

time of composition. They also resonate and combine with traditional Nguni praise poetry, which traditionally both honours and critiques political leadership. Drawing on especially the Biblical Psalms, it represents an expressive combination of music, poetic diction, and traditional Zulu culture, which constitutes a unique cultural hybrid.

The *third* basic tenet of the *amaNazaretha* is their catechism. According to Hexham (2001: viii), the catechism represents a reasonable, systematic articulation of the teachings and practices of the movement. The catechism is divided into two sections. Section 'A' contains material attributed to the Prophet Isaiah Shembe, which includes the prayers, parables, directives for maidens and marriage, counsel of the clergy and letters. Part two of this section is the material attributed to the revival law of Galilee Shembe. Section 'B' is the *Book of the Birth of the Prophet*. All the three writings, the Bible, hymnbook and catechism are considered sacred and are revered with high regard by the *amaNazaretha* (Hexham 2001).

According to Oosthuizen (1967:3) the theology of the *amaNazaretha* can best be found in the hymns, which were first published by Galilee in 1940. The movement regard healing as sacred and this is effected through holy water. Preaching in the movement is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The followers are taught that Saturday is a special day for Jehovah and should be observed meticulously. They also teach that Mt. Nhlankakazi, which Isaiah Shembe visited in 1913, is a holy place, and that Ekuphakameni, founded in 1914, is the holy centre or city of the movement. Shembe forbids his followers to take wine, any fermented drinks, eating pork, consuming cooking oil and smoking (Shange 2013). According to Oosthuizen (1981:41), the keys to heaven (referring to Matthew 16:19) in the exegesis and theology of Isaiah Shembe, is one single key, which opens the gate of heaven. As such, Shembe is the representative not of Jesus, but of Jehovah who has given the Sabbath to his people. According to Galilee, the cross of Jesus has no significance. The final destiny of the heart, is Ekuphakameni while that of the wicked heart is hell (Oosthuizen 1967:76). Both Isaiah and Galilee theologise about the heart but in different ways. For Isaiah, the heart is the vessel of God's grace. In contrast, Galilee sees the heart as sinful but has the ability to repent (Oosthuizen 1967:77).

With regard to theology, which is mostly uniformly accepted by all seven Shembe groups, the most notable more recent development is the appropriation of the Jewish Bible, the English Tanakh, as central Scripture, by Phakama Shembe, one of Shembe's grandchildren, and leader of the Gauteng

faction, in 2011. This is in distinction to the Shembe scriptures. According to reports, Phakama Shembe signed a contract with Farrel Shalkoff, the chairman of Bibleo, to supply his church with the Jewish Bibles (Govender 2011). Phakama's view is that, he chose the Jewish Torah because its analyses, insights and explanations are 'sharper' than the Christian Old Testament. He also stated that he found many 'truths' in the Jewish Bible, truths he did not find in the Shembe scriptures. It also contains 'word-for-word explanations' (Govender 2011). By this move, to embrace the Jewish Tanakh, comprising of Torah, the Prophets and Sacred Writings – including the Psalms, Proverbs and the historical books of Kings and Chronicles – at least some Shembeites find their scriptures wanting. It is an indication that at least some, are now doubting their theology, faith and religion, and need firmer foundations. The standard belief, though, is that Isaiah did not borrow from any other faith or religion, for his theology. For them, Phakama's move was an insult to their faith (Govender 2011). Even so, Phakama's actions creates the impression of a quite foundational break, from a very foundational belief, shared by all the factions – see below. It may not augur well for hopes of unity in the future, despite the similarities in beliefs related to the Jewish Sabbath, the prohibition from eating pork, and purification rites. Commenting on Phakama's decision, Ximba² is of the view that despite some striking similarities between *amaNazaretha* and the Jewish tradition, the Shembeites will continue to adhere to the principles laid down by the Shembe (Govender 2011). Some Shembe members though, like Professor Mthokozisi Khumalo, who is an authority on Shembe, hails this move as progressive. His only concern was that Phakama and the Gauteng faction did not consult with the other groups before the decision was made to adopt the Tanakh as scripture (Govender 2012).

AmaNazaretha worship God through prayers as well as rituals, dances, and more particularly, specific kinds of ceremonial dances (Ncwane). And, as in many movements and organisations, where dress gives a corporate identity, this is also the case with Shembe. It is reported that Shembe, in one of his dreams, in 1900, saw men dressed in traditional Zulu garb. The men were singing traditional songs, without notes, in the style of the Zulu oral tradition. Shembe was then instructed to heal and evangelize the Zulu speaking people in the Zululand region in the same dream. It is from this dream that the

² Edward Valemefini Ximba is the General Secretary of the Ekuphakameni faction appointed by Londa Shembe. He is also Londa's Personal Assistant (PA).

amaNazaretha males came to imitate traditional Zulu dress. According to Oosthuizen (1981:38), the Shembe dress code is a symbolic extension of Zulu culture. For the *amaNazaretha*, people should not be ashamed of their traditions, but be proud of it. For Shembe, it was acceptable that older folk, especially those in the kraals, wear the *umutsha* and blankets, while their children could wear modern European clothes. This is in sharp distinction to the missions that propagated a break with traditional dress, and a full embracing of Western dress codes and some of its fashions, especially as appropriated by the different missions themselves. Shembe church members also wear white garments as official and Sabbath uniform. According to Singh and McAuliffe (2012), clothing is used by the church to distinguish rank and social standing. Evangelists wear emerald green Nazareth robes, while ministers wear white robes with black cuffs. Shembe insisted that the wearing of white surplices for church service befits the redeemed heavenly citizens described in the Book of Revelation (7:9-14) (Oosthuizen 1981).

Since the story of God ordering Moses to remove his shoes in the story of the burning bush (Exodus 3), made a very decisive impression on Shembe, he taught that his followers should go barefoot. It is a symbol of regarding the ground as holy (Oosthuizen 1981). When they visit their holy mountain on their annual pilgrimage, they also ascend and descend the mountain barefooted.

AmaNazaretha's clothing itself is also regarded as sacred, especially the so-called dancing uniform. This is based on one of Shembe's prophecies, related to Matsheketshe and translated by Hexham and Oosthuizen (1995). Matsheketshe narrates that Shembe precisely described the dancing uniforms for the women of the *Nazaretha* Church to three ladies, who were then required to sew the garments. He paid them for their services. Women wear shawls and sometimes towels underneath. Shembe told them that the time will come, when all maidens will dress in this way, and that all women will dress in the uniform. They will also wear skin petticoats and topknots on their heads. So, in order to prefigure this time, and to be 'perfect', women were to dress according to his prescriptions (Hexham & Oosthuizen 1995).

The symbols of men among the Shembe followers include carrying Zulu warrior shields and being draped in leopard skin. Some are also urged to wear a loincloth of monkey tails, a leopard skin belt, elaborate headgear with ostrich feathers, and above all a cap of leopard skin slung across their back, shoulders and chests (Sapa 2013). The leopard skins are a symbol of royalty, indicating power, prestige, pride, and beauty (Cabrita 2012). They are trade-

tionally associated with Zulu royalty and chiefs, and their wearing it as ceremonial and religious dress (Joe 2014). Yet, even though they are not kings, these symbols indicate that they are ‘kings at home’ and that they should wear these regalia, also when they go to traditional gatherings³.

Ecclesiastical Leadership Structures and their Politics in the Shembe Church

The leadership structure of the Shembe church is hereditary, especially involving the *Inkosi* (King) of the church. Virtually all the leaders are men, but there is one position reserved for women leaders. Magwaza (2011) gives the hierarchy of the church in a simplified way. The leadership includes the *Inkosi* and this is the position occupied by some of Shembe’s male offspring in the different factions, which is hereditary. Below the *Inkosi*, we have the *Umfundisi* (Pastor) who oversees and manages a district or two. A district typically has 4-6 temples. Below the pastor is the *Umvangeli* (Evangelist). Normally this person is considered a wise man with a good knowledge of the history of the church. He is the source of information and often an elderly person. The evangelist is followed by the *Umshumayeli* (Preacher), a leader at the temple level. He conducts sermons and attends to the affairs of the temple. Below him

³ For obvious reasons, the hunting and killing of leopards for their skins, have also impacted on the leopard population in the country. (Over 1 000 skins were worn at a single Shembe gathering in 2011.) Although many skins are old and are passed down from generation to generation, many new ones are a result of poaching, leading to shrinking leopard numbers (Sapa 2013). This has stirred the ire of wild life conservation groups (cf. Hans 2012), and more particularly, the Africa Leopard Programme, called Panthera (cf. Hans 2012). In a country where leopard-hunting permits are affordable only for the very rich or foreign tourists, conservation groups are in conflict with the Shembe not only about their actual hunting of leopards, but the symbolism itself, which condones and requires leopard hunting for their skins (Joe 2014). Some developments with regard to the production of authentic-looking fake leopard skins have taken place, and these have been accepted by some Shembe (Joe 2014). The textiles are produced in China and shipped to Durban, where they are sewn into the final product (Dickerson 2013). It is reported that the fake skins look and feel like real leopard skins and can last longer (Ncwana).

is the *Umhlambululi* (Ablutionist) who oversees the Friday ablutions or cleansing ritual. He is followed by an *Inkosana* who is a diminutive of *Inkosi*, literally meaning a little king. At the temple level in the absence of an evangelist, he conducts sermons. The last one and the only position held by women is that of *Umkhokheli* (Leader). This is a leader whose leadership is limited to leading women and girls. According to Magwaza (2011), the reason for patriarchal leadership goes back to the Zulu culture where men are the heads of the family and their leadership is regarded as natural. Women always have had to come to terms with this arrangement, regardless of their level of education and influence in society. They cannot be leaders in the Shembe church. Some though dispute the leadership and the leaders' continuation and entrenching of patriarchy, and regard themselves as the 'flock of the invisible sheep' (Magwaza 2011).

The Origins of the Struggle for Control of Isaiah Shembe's Legacy and the Church

By 2015, there were seven Shembeite splinter groups defined by physical fights, hereditary leadership lawsuits and defamation of character lawsuits among some of the factions. Although Isaiah is paralleled with God among the Shembeites, the struggle for his legacy has led to the secularization of the church as well as the institutionalisation of the leadership, in principle departing from its hereditary nature and traditional theology. The struggle for control of the legacy and the control of the church started as early as 1935 after the death of Shembe (Oosthuizen 1981:7). According to Oosthuizen, before Shembe died, he had claimed that his essence would continue to live on in his offspring. This notion of his 'essence' was understood to be his, i.e. Shembe's, specific blending of his version of Judaeo-Christian religion with Zulu culture. So, the argument goes that what is true of Shembe, is also true of Zulu culture, and vice versa (Oosthuizen 1968).

Shembe had three sons, Isaack, Amos Khula and Johannes Galilee Shembe. In contrast to the Zulu culture, which states that the eldest is the descendent air, or titular head, Shembe elected the youngest, Galilee, to be his successor, thereby excluding the eldest son, Isaack, and Amos Khula. Galilee took over the leadership of *amaNazareth*a on 30 July 1935, after the death of his father (Cabrita 2012). This leadership was characterised by factionalism although it was not out in the open, and public. A smaller faction, who wanted

the traditional Zulu tradition to be maintained, where the elder son takes over as leader, formed around Isaac, while the majority favoured the decision of Shembe, to appoint Galilee as leader (Oosthuizen 1981).

For Oosthuizen, there are two main patterns with regard to the appointment of a leader in the independent churches. The first pattern is democratic, based on the choice of the congregation and where the leader is the *primus inter pares* (first among equals). The second pattern is the emergence of a leader, or election of someone, to whom is ascribed the metaphysical symbolism of the chief/ king, often in association with the office of the diviner. This resulted in the prophetic type of leadership (Oosthuizen 1981). Commenting on the Galilee - Shembe type of succession, Oosthuizen found that followers ruminated about this matter in 1935, arguing that the old Shembe had always declared that although the old flesh might die one day, the essence of Shembe remains in the new flesh, indicating the youngest son. He would therefor hand on his mantle of power, to his youngest son. This claim empowered Galilee to take over as the new Shembe. Truth be told though, it was then Shembe himself that in principle caused the discontent, and it was his decision to depart from Zulu custom, that paved the way for the emergence of the future factions. The Zulu tradition was arm-twisted by Isaiah himself, thereby making him the source of discontent, enmity and factionalism in the Shembeite movement, that would follow in later decades.

Galilee brought about a number of reforms in the church using his education, and thereby adding to the leadership and wisdom that his uneducated father established. According to Cabrita (2012) Galilee had a BA Hons and a B.Ed. degree from Fort Hare University. Isaiah Shembe made it a point that his children attend school because he was seeing the difficulty uneducated people experienced in society, everywhere he went, in the spreading of his message. Despite his father's lowly education, Galilee strongly defended him and his theology and legacy over and against detractors. This included John Langalibalele Dube, whom Galilee criticised, for all the inaccuracies and mistakes in his book on Shembe, *Ushembe* (1936). He forbade his followers to read the book. It is said that some of the reasons were that Dube alleged in his book, that, during his lifetime, Shembe was in fact overtaxing rentals, that he was conducting baptism for payment – part of his fundraising for the church – that he, himself was uneducated, that he was extorting money from members as he payed lobola for young girls whom he married, and that he was corrupt and exploitative (Cabrita 2012).

The Struggle for Control of Isaiah Shembe's Legacy and the Church

According to Oosthuizen (1981:7), Galilee also drafted a Deed of Trust before an attorney which reads,

the Titular head shall continue in office during his life time so long as he continues to observe and follow the tenets of the church of Nazareth, but he shall be removed from office should he become insane and convicted of any issue referred to in the first schedule of the Criminal Law and Evidence Act 1917 or upon other grounds which the Supreme Court of South Africa, Natal Provincial Division may regard as adequate.

In addition to the train of events started by Isaiah Shembe himself, this was a further act in a process of the secularizing of the church. Galilee further institutionalized the church in the public domain, by documenting procedures for successors. Firstly, the incumbent should be appointed by Isaiah and Galilee Shembe. Secondly, he should be elected by people through secret ballot. Thirdly, the son of the leader should be the successor. Fourthly, the leader should be appointed through dreams. Dreams play a vital role among the Zulu as it is believed that the ancestors communicate their messages to people through dreams. On this score, the successor himself will be visited by Isaiah Shembe in a dream, appointing him as leader, blessing him, and commissioning him (Oosthuizen 1981:52).

The Death of the Second *Inkosi* and the Beginning of Defined Factions

Galilee died on 19 December 1976. Amos Khula (1907-1996) one of the sons of Isaiah Shembe's, and brother to Galilee, took over as the leader of the church (Miya 2010). According to the principles laid down by Galilee, Amos did not qualify as a leader, thereby leading to an explicit succession wrangle. The altercation created two camps and it also brought with it, grave conflicts within the *Ibandla zamaNazaretha* (Oosthuizen 1981:7). The conflict was between Amos Khula, the cousin brother of the late *Inkosi* Galilee, and Londa (1944-1989), one of Galilee Shembe's sons. The two major reasons that are also believed to be the source of continuous conflict, up to now, are well clarified by Oosthuizen (1981). In his research, he found that Galilee did not overtly choose a successor. He himself, did not appoint Amos. This fact in itself,

created the space for the contestation of the Shembe leadership. The second reason for the contestation, is that, as is the belief among the Zulu, a person who has a son never dies, but continues to live in his son(s). This is the argument from heredity. It is also confirmed by *Izihlabelelo* 220 that states that the father is the extension of his son (Muller 1996).

On the first theory, Amos was the right leader because he knew his father Isaiah since before the latter died. According to him, Isaiah had appointed him to be a leader after Galilee (Oosthuizen 1981). His other claim was that he was present when the church was founded, and that he had close links with Isaiah Shembe (Oosthuizen 1981:50). From within the church itself, Oosthuizen also found evidence, that Londa was ruled out by some elders from being a successor because, he was just a grandson of Isaiah Shembe, and that he did not know Isaiah. Secondly, he was still very young. And, thirdly he had only ordained himself when his father Galilee was already dead. The first point worked against Londa but he used the second point raised by Oosthuizen (1981). Londa argued that, the church is a chief-and-tribe type of social grouping, and that he, as his father's eldest son should inherit the leadership position. He claimed that Amos Khula wanted to make it a democratic church, where someone who was not directly appointed, would become a leader (Oosthuizen 1981). The truth is that with regard to the second point, an argument could be made that favours both Amos and Londa as head or titular head, because they both belonged to the *Inkosi* line who had the power to choose leaders for the *amaNazaretha* viz. Isaiah and Galilee respectively (Oosthuizen 1981). Both also drew their authority from hymn 221 which was composed by Galilee in 1938 which says:

Father, I am your child,
Even though the world is unwilling,
Snatch me from the flames
Lord, may I not be rejected
(Muller 1996:104).

Central to the disagreement in the contestation of the leadership, was the opposing interpretations of reference to 'child' in this hymn, i.e. as to who would be the 'child' of the *inNkosi*. A physical fight broke out between the Amos and Londa factions at Ekuphakameni in 1977, and five people lost their lives (Oosthuizen 1981:11). In the wake of this event, in 1978, the courts

granted an interdict, and the church officially divided for the first time into Ekuphakameni led by Londa and Ebuhleni led by Amos Khula. Professionally, Londa was a law graduate from UNISA, and by the time he was elected, he had completed a Diploma in Theology (Nxamalo n.d.). Londa identified himself with his grandfather Isaiah Shembe. He rejected the notion that the *amaNazaretha* were simply a form of Africanized Christianity insisting that they were an African religion in their own right (Oosthuizen 1981). About ten years later, Londa was however assassinated on 4 July 1989. After his death no-one was named leader of the Ekuphakameni faction until his brother, Vukile, also a son of Galilee, took over the leadership (Miya 2010).

According to Miya (2010) squabbles in the Ekuphakameni faction did not end with the appointment of Vukile as leader. Sizwe, the son of Nkanyezi Shembe who was the eldest son of Galilee, also claimed to be the rightful leader of the church in 2007. Sizwe argued that his father was the customary heir of Galilee's estate (Miya 2010). In Miya's view, in 1977, Nkanyezi was actually declared the heir to Galilee, but, that at that time, the battle between Amos and Londa had already started. Nkanyezi died in 1993 and his eldest son Sizwe became the heir of the estate. In 2007, Sizwe joined the battle in the Ekuphakameni faction, thereby giving birth to a third wing of the Shembe church, called Ginyezinye (Miya 2010). Ginyezinye also claims heredity in terms of Zulu culture, i.e. that the eldest son becomes the sole trustee of his father's estate. According to Miya (2010) Ginyezinye moved out of Ekuphakameni and based their headquarters at Trustfeed outside Pietermaritzburg after a court ruling. At this time, Mini Shembe, another son of Galilee who had been supporting Ginyezinye claimed his share of the heritage too. Sizwe argued that he was the only son of Galilee ordained as priest. However, Mini, again, claimed that when Galilee was alive, he wanted the church to be led by an ordained leader (Miya 2010). Unfortunately, somehow, Mini Shembe died in 2010 and his faction is not very vocal about their identity and heritage (Miya 2010). Mini's faction was the fourth to emerge from the original Ekuphakameni. The others are Ekuphakameni, Ebuhleni and Ginyezinye.

Miya (2011) found that, after some court proceedings on the succession wrangle, the Ekuphakameni and Ginyezinye factions agreed to strip the Ebuhleni faction from the right to use some of the Shembe symbols, hymns and the church style of worship, because Ebuhleni had changed its name to Ebuhleni Shembe International Church. The message was announced at the funeral of Vembeni Shembe in 2011. In April 2011, the Ekuphakameni and

Ginyezinye factions withdrew their case from the Durban High Court, though, and agreed to reconcile (Mbuyazi 2011). In the same year they agreed to join hands, the Ebuhleni faction renewed the leadership battle. The Ekuphakameni and Ginyezinye leaders distanced themselves from the legal battles of Ebuhleni. Vukile, leader of Ekuphakameni, and Sizwe, of Ginyezinye then agreed to consult with King Goodwill Zwelithini, who had agreed to be a witness when the court case was to be withdrawn. They also agreed to invite the Inkatha Freedom Party leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi who was the head of *amakhosi* (the so-called 'Zulu tribal leaders'), because, according to Mbuyazi (2011), sixty percent of *amakhosi* are Shembe followers. They also agreed to invite Zweli Mkhize the KwaZulu-Natal Premier to endorse their decision when the time was ripe.

According to Miya (2010), when factionalism intensified, the Londa faction (Ekuphakameni) expelled the Amos Khula (Ebuhleni) faction from the Ekuphakameni headquarters after Amos refused to relinquish the leadership position. In 1977, Londa was eventually ordained as appointed leader by the Ekuphakameni faction. When Amos was expelled (Miya 2010), he left with a sizeable number of people and settled at Matabulu in the UMzinyathi area that became his 'new Jerusalem'. It is this Ebuhleni faction which currently have squabbles with the Ekuphakameni faction. During his term as *Inkosi*, Amos Shembe was also disturbed by the argument of Vilikazi and Oosthuizen on the leadership battles in *amaNazaretha*, and their apparent factional findings. He also condemned the manuscript of Vilikazi, a fellow Zulu and in 1986 he applied for a court interdict to prevent Vilikazi's book from being published, favouring the conclusions of an Afrikaans Oosthuizen (Hexham 2011:41). Amos died in 1989 and was succeeded by his son Vembeni Mbusi Shembe (1933-2011). It was after the death of Vembeni that the church was engulfed by even further leadership struggles.

Besides the Ekuphakameni and Ginyezinye factions, the other faction that came out of Ekuphakameni is the Gauteng Shembe church led by Phakama Shembe the grandson of Galilee (Govender 2011). According to Govender, Phakama Shembe, was booted out of the original church several 'years ago'. In 2011, Phakama Shembe's church had approximately 250 000 followers in Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Free State and North West (Govender 2011). Phakama is not only a theologically controversial religious leader, but also a political and social commentator. Socially, Phakama spoke at the Israel Solidarity Peace Rally where over 12 500 people attended (South Africa Zionist Federation

2014). This was the second time after 2012. In response to this address in 2012 COSATU wrote to Phakama expressing their dissatisfaction with the way the Shembe church was being used as a tool of apartheid in Israel in the name of God (Craven 2012).

As earlier referenced, the year 2011 also saw another splintergroup led by Mthembeni Mpanza, forming yet another new Shembe church. Mpanza claims that his parents, Velem Mpanza and Landiwe Dube were both adopted by Isaiah Shembe (Mpanza profile accessed 21 September 2015). According to Mzizi (2004:191) Mpanza's mother was adopted at the age of 11 as an orphan. She stayed with Isaiah Shembe until he died and was left in the custody of Galilee Shembe until she was married. In his profile, Mpanza (a former magistrate) states that Isaiah Shembe paid 18 heads of cattle to the Dube family in order to avoid any likely future dispute about lobola when she marries. Mpanza claims that he worked very closely with the Shembe Church and has written much about the church. He further claimed that he was the legal advisor of Amos Khula Shembe. According to the *Sowetan* of 11 November 2011, Mpanza formed his movement called the New Nazareth Baptist Church, in Pinetown to fulfil the dream and vision about the work of the Prophet Isaiah Shembe. Among the divisions that are existing, Mpanza is the only one who is then not from the Shembe family as he clearly notes (Mpanza profile accessed 21 September 2015). The New Nazareth Baptist Church, was launched after Mthembeni Mpanza's fellow priests tried to assassinate him. This division makes it the fifth faction, and, worse still, the coming to the fore of someone who has no direct lineage to Isaiah Shembe, and the Shembe family tree, tradition and leadership theology. This appears to be quite disturbing for many Shembeites, as they are not clear as to how Shembe's heritage could be presented by someone who is not directly related to Isaiah Shembe.

Further Factions: The Shembe Legacy in the Courts

When Amos Khula Shembe, the leader of Ebuhleni died in 1996, he was succeeded by his son Vembeni Mbusi Shembe as pointed out earlier. One notes that, unlike the earlier divisions that were in the Johannes Galilee family part of the larger Shembe family, here, the focus changed to the Amos Khula Shembe family part of Isaiah Shembe's family tree. Vembeni died on 28 March 2011. His church was the richest of all the factions, with over R100 million in trust, and a membership of more than 4,5 million people. In Dhladhla's (2014)

estimate, the membership includes members from Swaziland, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. This perception is affirmed by Sosibo (2013) who also pointed out that the Ebuhleni faction is not only well endowed with congregants, but that it also controls the Church of Nazareth Ecclesiastical Endowment Trust, which holds the church's registered assets. Another significant point to mention is that, at the death of Vembeni, a number of national figures sent their condolences, amongst whom counts President Jacob Zuma (News Reporter - *City Press* 2011). In his message, Zuma states that,

We have learnt with great sadness of the passing of *Inkosi* Vembeni Shembe. He played a key role in the history and development of the African independent churches in the country, and the growth and promotion of indigenous culture and traditions. We also acknowledge *Inkosi* Shembe's contribution to the promotion of self-reliance and social responsibility amongst his followers and the community at large (Clausen 2011).

Within the Ebuhleni faction, Vembeni's death created a rift. The succession dispute started on 3 April 2011 between Vela Shembe, Vembeni's cousin brother, and his son Mduduzi Shembe (Mbuyazi 2011). The two conflicting successors were officially announced to the mourners at the funeral. Mduduzi, the son of the late Vembeni, was named successor by Inkosi Mqoqi Ngcobo of the AmaQadi Clan who according to Muller (1996) is one of the largest Nazarite clans. Sosibo (2013) reports that, at the funeral, Mqoqi Ngcobo asked to be moved up the programme so he could officially welcome guests and dignitaries. But when he took to the podium, he seized the opportunity to announce Mduduzi Shembe, as the successor. Vela Shembe, on the other hand, was named as Vembeni's successor by the late leader's lawyer Zwelabantu Buthelezi (Sosibo 2013).

According to Mdletshe (2011) the heart of the dispute was a document purporting to be a 'Will' left by the late Vembeni Shembe naming Vela as his successor. That document made Vela's relatives and top church elders to reject the Will and instead appointed their own successor. The succession controversy also hinged upon the same factors that played a role in the 1976 squabble between Amos and Londa. Those who supported Mduduzi supported the Zulu custom that the son is in an extension of his father, and that he should be the inheritor. The other side of the controversy as stated by Mdletshe (2011),

was that Vela was coming from the Ekuphakameni faction, and that he should be the leader. The elders who supported Mduduzi argued that when Amos Khula Shembe, was ousted from Ekuphakameni in 1976, he did not leave peacefully. He was welcomed in UMzinyathi by Chief Ngcobo. Two years later, he established Ebuhleni as home to his children. That being as it may, Ebuhleni belongs to his family (Mdletshe 2011). According to Nxele (2015) reporting for SABC, the claim that Ebuhleni is a private property was contested by Tembezinhle arguing that Ebuhleni belongs to the church and not to the private family.

This argument suggests that Vela, being a cousin brother and also coming from a rival faction, had no inheritance in the Vembeni estate, that included taking over the leadership of the faction. Mdletshe (2011) who was following the succession wrangle closely also maintains that those who wanted Vela forged affidavits three weeks before the death of Vembeni because they had their own agenda. Buthelezi, who has been Vembeni Shembe's lawyer since 1995, pronounced that the late Vembeni Shembe came to him in February 2000 and told him that should he die, he appoints Vela as the next leader. He showed evidence that he wrote that down and had witnesses sign the statement. Buthelezi further claimed that Vembeni wrote a letter three weeks later, in his own hand-writing confirming this development (Mdletshe 2011). Part of the letter reads '*I, M.V. Shembe announce that Vela is the next leader*' (Mdletshe 2011). Vela was not only supported by the legal proceedings, but also supported by some key members of the family. For example, the court case of 9 December 2012 confirms that Vembeni Shembe's widow knew that Vela Shembe was nominated to be the successor (News24). According to Vembeni's wife, Vembeni's reason for choosing Vela rather than Mduduzi, was that Mduduzi was born out of wedlock (Mdletshe 2011). Against this argument, we have *Inkosi Qwabe*, speaking on behalf of traditional leaders, who said that Vembeni had told them that he had been called to a meeting by the lawyer, where he was forced to sign 'some documents' he did not know. *Inkosi Qwabe* also disputed the possibility of Vembeni being able to write a letter in the period the lawyer had indicated, pointing out that he, Vembeni Shembe, was too sick to be able to write a letter (Mdletshe 2011). Another perspective, whether the succession dispute was influenced by marital issues, and giving rise to Vembeni's wife's views, remains obscure.

In April 2011, Vela launched an urgent application in the Durban High Court, requesting that he be appointed the sole trustee of the trust and as titular

head of the church. He also launched an interdict to prevent the installation of a new leader, Mduduzi, until the leadership dispute was settled (Mbuyazi (2011). He was also asking the Church Secretary, Chancy Sibisi to hand over all the documents, computer disks and other material relating to the affairs of the church, to him, and that *Inkosi* Nqobo and Mduduzi be restrained from interfering with his anointment and appointment as leader of *amaNazaretha*.

According to Sosibo (2013), the Will nominating Vela, has continued to be the subject of dispute in courts. Michael Irving, the handwriting expert who was brought in to assess its validity, confirmed in the Durban High Court, that the document was authentic. Irving was instructed to authenticate the signature of Vembeni on his deed of nomination dated 11 February 2000. He was given six documents with undisputed signatures of Vembeni which he compared to the signature on the Deed of Nomination. Irving concluded that: the usual characteristics associated with forgery of a signature are not present in the disputed signature. 'This signature reflects natural line quality, rhythm, pen lines and movement of an established signature model pattern' (Sosibo 2013). So, in his assessment, the signatures submitted contain characteristics which have been associated with the signature authorship of a single individual - namely Bishop Vembeni Mbusi Shembe (Sosibo 2013).

Sosibo (2013) who has been following the court proceedings closely, further states that some church members bemoaned the infighting in the Ebuhleni faction which has made it impractical to uphold some of the church's sacred pillars, such as the annual pilgrimage to Nhlankakazi. An interdict issued by the court prevented the Ebuhleni factions from ascending the mountain until the leadership squabble was resolved. Nxele (2015) observes that in church lore, the faithful can only climb the mountain on the instructions of their leader. Going by this understanding, pilgrimage proved to be a big challenge in the Shembe factions. Sbu Shembe, a grandson of Galilee, comments that 'all these court cases are damaging the reputation of the church'. The Amos vs. Londa case (that split Ekuphakameni into two) was never resolved (Sosibo 2013). Sbu was of the opinion that the case should be solved at home. What the church needs is effective administration, and an emphasis on the needs and care for the people, that the people come first. Yet, the leaders have no leadership skills to unify the factions, and there is no appropriate administration and management of the church. Sbu further lamented that, while the church was poor, there was unity; now that it is rich, people are eyeing material gains. For Sbu, Ebuhleni requires sophisticated management and

leadership, yet some of the leaders and preachers are running amok, with a misguided theology, and with some claiming Shembe as God, and others, that Shembe has no relationship with Christianity (Sosibo 2013). The squabbles are still on-going, with Vela leading Ebuhleni while Mduduzi leads the Tembezinhle faction.

What Makes the Shembe Church Attractive to People?

In spite of all the inside squabbles in *amaNazaretha*, the Shembe church remains very relevant in the modern day world. The latest estimated membership of the *amaNazaretha* is more than five million in the Ebuhleni faction alone (Sosibo 2012:1). Most of these members are from Zululand.

Oosthuizen (1981:5) argued that, probably the main reason for the large number of people joining the movement is the doctrine of the Black Messiah-Shembe. Another factor is that *amaNazaretha* draws many women as members, purportedly, because it embraces polygamy and has polygamous marriage laws that cater for the well-being of women in polygamous marriages. In one of her interviews, an interview with a woman from such a polygamous household, Magwaza (2011) found that she joined Shembe, because she was called cruel names, for being unmarried, and that she felt vulnerable. The women reportedly said,

... my sisters were married before me and everyone was wondering why marriage was not coming my way. The church answered my prayers. I am now considered a normal person (Magwaza 2011).

The Shembe church creates the space for polygamy. According to Mzizi (2004: 199), Isaiah Shembe married four wives, whom he all abandoned at the instruction of a 'voice' he heard. Galilee Shembe had plus or minus one hundred wives (Oosthuizen 1981:53).

Thirdly, some Shembe followers affirm that the church and its religious practices cannot be understood outside the traditional Zulu indigenous beliefs, values, ethnicity, religion and culture. There is a sense of cultural belonging in the church, the preaching and singing is in isiZulu, and the liturgy is written in the indigenous language. The central belief system of the church revolves around the question of cultural identity (Oosthuizen 1981). According

to Magwaza (2012) the Shembe church considers itself committed to fostering ‘proper’ Zulu identity and that it gains followers because it blends religion with culture. As such, the Shembe religion restores cultural pride amongst the poorest of the poor, and it encourages people to accept beliefs and practices as part of their religion, that make them uniquely African unlike other churches. Some African cultural practices had been condemned by the Christian missionaries, but the Shembe church has been embracing them, blending it with western ideas to form the evolving culturally hybrid religion that they call *amaNazaretha* (Magwaza 2012). Amongst these count the celebration of Holy Communion, baptism, purification rites, the dancing to the sound of holy drums, and the festivals (cf. Oosthuizen 1981).

Other examples which make the Shembe church unique and attractive to indigenous cultural practitioners include the centrality of animal sacrifices, its claims to heal and guide communities, the centrality of dancing in ritual practices, and the acceptance of the importance of the dream in Zulu culture (cited by Magwaza 2011). Animal sacrifices have connotations related to the mediation of ancestors with the living-dead, and the afterlife. The *amaNazaretha* argue that these rituals have visible and invisible outcomes and, that one of the visible signs is the healing of the sick. With regard to dancing, this is traditionally central to Zulu culture, and in *amaNazaretha* an act of religion. The dance is not just social as in the socialising that dancing brings about, but it has a religious purpose and people engage in it to praise God (Heuser 2008; see also Sundkler 1961). The practice of the dance is called *ukusina*. The centrality of the interpretation of dreams by the isangoma is well-known. Many members of Shembe, claim that they dream about him, and that he directs them with regard to their daily lives. He is not dead and can visit them through dreams to answer their prayers and solve their problems (Oosthuizen 1967:4).

In addition to the reasons already mentioned, it also appears that Shembe is popular with young people. In 2006, one young man said,

the Bible says God will send a prophet like you. In Africa, that someone is of my skin colour, one who speaks my language, and talk to my ancestors in order to solve my problems – that someone is Shembe. Shembe is a holy church from God for black people (Reuter 2006).

There are also claims among the youth, that Shembe provides guidance with regard to education and employment.

One of the most important attractions to *amaNazareth*, especially in modern-day South Africa, is its wealth. It is not only a central issue in the various faction conflicts. In the same way that promises of wealth attracts people to those who 'have made it', it also attracts the poor and needy. According to Dube (1936) in 1914, Shembe had raised enough money from followers to buy a 40 acre plot in Inanda, and named it Ekuphakameni (the Elevated Place). Over a twenty year period, and similarly relying upon donations from converts, Shembe purchased another 40 more farms upon which he settled his church members particularly destitute people, widows and orphans, from whom he received a minimum rent. Despite his criticism of Shembe as already referred to, Dube also appreciatively promoted Shembe as providing a social and economic role model for twentieth century Africans (Cabrita 2012:442). He not only created systems for the poor and destitute. He himself was a man of means, who had thousands of followers, and purchased large tracts of landed property. He became one of the wealthiest Africans of his time, holding about 30 000 pounds in his accounts – a vast amount for the 1930s, especially if you think, that he was an uneducated black man (see also Vilikazi, Mthethwa & Mpanza 1986:43 and 51.)

The Impact of the Shembe Church on Society

The impact of the Shembe church in society, and especially isiZulu culture cannot be overemphasised. Given its significant number of over five million followers, it has secured a share in the socio-political, economic and religious life of South Africa and Africa more broadly speaking. Currently, the latest hereditary leadership case is in the secular courts since 2011 as briefly sketched above. This long and delayed court case keeps many members in a state of turmoil and uncertainty, also impacting society more broadly speaking. In this context, it is understandable that the media has much interest in the squabbles of the church. Yet, as Gandhi has taught us, the media, and the opinions they report, and those they do not, can build and destroy movements. Furthermore, the fact that *amaNazareth* is one of the richest African Independent Churches in Africa, in which we are witnessing these internal faction fighting (Sosibo 2013; see also Dhladhla 2014), in addition to its substantial membership numbers, which cry out for good governance, make for a looming calamity. Its

lack of leadership, administration, and good governance, and general all-round good education and training (cf. du Toit & Ngada 1999), impact its members negatively. Its promotion and catering for polygamous families, cause much social harm, in so far as it implicitly condones multiple sexual relations outside stable relationships. This is leading to the continuous spreading of HIV/ Aids and STDs, among church members, even as there is a significant curbing and downturn of this disease due to conscientisation and education nationally. In addition, this system continues to promote a form of patriarchy that continues to subordinate and subject, women to men, leading to forms of oppression – in contrast to the explicit constitutional values of our country. The fact that leaders have poor education and training, exacerbate this problem. Shembeites follow their leaders at all costs. In the political arena, the situation is not much better, as some leaders openly propagate political agendas in conflict with fellow Shembe leaders. For instance, Phakama Shembe is on record for propagating membership and voting for the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), openly, not only among Shembe, but also the amaZioni, and the Apostolic Churches of South Africa (eNCA 8/4/14). These are just some of the aspects of the conundrum in which *amaNazaretha* finds itself at present. Given its history of factional splits and as these have been compounded with the values propagated by the South African constitution, it does not augur well for the future of the movement, as well as the well-being of its members.

Finally, as the court cases continue, it is evident that the *amaNazaretha* continues to suffer socio-culturally, because of its leadership vacuum. For instance, and in addition to reasons already put forward, when there are court cases, they draw large numbers of followers to the courts. Here, they often clash physically. For example Mosunkutu (2015) reports about two court cases in Durban, where on 28 July 2015, police had to use rubber bullets to disperse the two faction's members. On 29 July, the following day, the ANN7 website showed members of the two factions of the Nazareth Baptist Church arriving at the court precinct wielding a mixed bag of hammers, golf clubs, knobkerries, planks, sticks, baseball bats, hockey sticks and bricks. Chaos erupted when hundreds of members from the two factions, clashed outside court in this video clip, when they tried to enter the courtroom that only seats 50 people (cf. Mosunkutu 2015). Even lawyers' efforts to control the angry crowds proved futile. In the words of one member, the Shembe church had moved 'from faith to fist'. It appears, then, that the church has systematically strayed from its ethos and theology, over the last number of decades.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Shembe church belongs to the Ethiopian type of churches because of its emphasis on the significance of African culture for Christianity, and vice versa. Whereas many studies on Shembe normally refer to three factions, we have shown that there are currently in fact seven. That these factions have formed due to the attraction of power and prestige, as well as the income and wealth of the movement, is not to be doubted. We also pointed out that, in the wake of the splitting into factions, *amaNazaretha* currently face many socio-cultural challenges, not least, due to its failure to mentor, educate and develop an able, capable, proficient, and competent leadership cohort.

These splinter groups have been in and out of secular courts due to the succession struggles since the 1970s. These succession battles can be traced back to 1935, following the discontent that followed the death of Isaiah Shembe, to the latest, starting in 2011. We attempted to provide a brief overview of a very complex history, attending to the themes headlined in this article, viz. the historical background of Isaiah Shembe, and the *amaNazaretha* church, factors that lead to the rise of Shembe, the basic tenets, the leadership structures and their politics, the power struggles and rise of the factions and the impact of Shembe on society. From the discussions above, one is forced to conclude that the future of the *amaNazaretha* as unified movement is bleak. The possible chances of all uniting around and returning to the original Ekuphakameni are very slim, given that the Shembe family is growing day by day, and that all their lives are vested in their inheritance. *AmaNazaretha* is a church of 'the book' and their worship seem to honour Isaiah and Galilee more than God, in fact deifying them. They can also not see themselves joining another church. They believe their future is vested in Shembe and Galilee and in the holy mountain *Inhlangakazi*, and that these are the answers to all the friction in the church. Yet, the church faces serious challenges, and, against this background, certainly, a lack in visionary leadership and the optimum management, administration, and governance of the church.

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