Recovered Narratives of an Inter-Cultural Exchange: Gandhi, Shembe and the Legacy of Satyagraha

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The Gandhian heritage of non-violence (satyagraha) was shaped in early 20th century South Africa on the basis of deep religious convictions. Satyagraha, the "search of truth", found shelter in one of the outstanding South African Instituted Churches (AICs), the Nazareth Baptist Church. Its founder, Isaiah Shembe (1867- 1935), experimented with non-violence within the ranks of this AIC and forged it as a leitmotiv of social change over against the most vivid political movements of the time. This genuine Gandhian thought did make theologically reflected inroads into the African consciousness in a context of cultural hybridity. The ways are explored in which Shembe`s Church, today known as imbued with African "traditional" rites, evolved as religiously attractive to interracial (with a focus here on Indian) membership. Reference is made to the yet unknown connections between Shembe and Gandhi. Both were immediate neighbours to Dube, co-founder of what became the ANC. Biographical reminiscences clarify that Shembe`s satyagraha has its specific feature that is grounded in his "long conversation" with militant upheavals in Zulu history.

Social Transition and Cultural Memory

The political economy of South Africa over the last decade has seen waves of massive symbolic production. The transition period from apartheid to democracy has invested heavily, to use Pierre Bourdieu's paradigms, in symbolic values and social capital (Bourdieu 1992: 135). The first period of transition was accompanied by the enthusiastically proclaimed metaphor, the "Rainbow Nation of God" (D. Tutu). It provided a discourse that strongly contested the ideological hegemony of the heresies and cultural prejudices of old. The multicoloured

rainbow symbol visualised a moral consensus of plurality, equality, and tolerance stretching far out into the future. It represented a vision of a society reconciled with the bloodstained abyss of its recent history. Social reality in post-apartheid South Africa in large counteracts this dream – and longed for another symbolic resource: the African Renaissance (T. Mbeki). Its shape is in a state of flux, yet it nonetheless promotes genuine Africanist social values and institutional norms. African Renaissance revitalises long despised, hidden assets of African cultures to achieve social aims. The future will show whether this new pillar of public discourse reflects realities or only short-term political mobilisation (Makgoba 1999; Breytenbach 1998; Johnson 2000).

In all the fluid constructions of post-apartheid identities, religion obviously provides the symbolic resources necessary for the cohesion of a society in transition. The polyphony of religious meaning which offers marks of orientation and legitimises options of social change also guides the political *rites of passage*. From a religious point of view, the empirical social field of present day South Africa seeks a rebalancing of symbolic powers. It validates what were formerly heretical traditions over formerly orthodox strategies of symbolic capital. Apartheid politics, in its close allegiance with certain traditions of reformed theology, misused Judeo-Christian sources as ideological frameworks of segregation. The rainbow symbol is derived from biblical heritage, too, but stands for God's covenant and offer of reconciliation for those having gone through a catastrophic crisis, be it the biblical flood or South African apartheid. African Renaissance clearly redefines this classic Judaeo-Christian vocabulary. It emancipates from the dominant religious rhetoric of the apartheid past a profound imagination of African thought patterns and symbolism in its genuine right. Insofar as African Renaissance opens up a vast African treasure of social meaning, it also allows for some empirical observations in the religious domain.

In pluralistic new South Africa two layers of religious expression are gaining ground which also historically demarcated African worldviews. Both African Traditional Religions (ATRs) and African Instituted Churches (AICs) explore the core resources of oral cultures such as religious festivals, narrations, ritual performances, and, in the case of the AICs, a spectacular setting of sacred space to re-present biblical landscape. While ATRs in South Africa are searching for adequate institutional forms, AICs have long since paved the way for an *ecclesia africana*. In general terms AICs incorporated African elements of material and spiritual culture into their perception of Christianity, a procedure foreign to what was known as westernised, mission Christianity. In dismantling the "religion of the whites" AICs experienced an unprecedented growth from their beginnings in the late nineteenth century, a continuing success story that makes them one of the most dynamic socio-religious phenomena world wide in the decades to come. Onto their recollections of biblical heritage they inscribed their insights of African wisdom. Committed to perpetuating African systems of knowledge and rec-

onciling them with biblical perceptions, AICs were respected as the pre-eminent keepers of cultural memory (Heuser 1999).

One of the most popular Instituted Churches in Southern Africa is *ibandla lamaNazaretha* or Nazareth Baptist Church, founded in 1910 by Zulu-speaking Isaiah Shembe (1867 - 1935). Shembe settled in Natal in the aftermath of the last militant anti-colonial resistance, the 1906 Bambatha rebellion still resonating through the countryside. He established his church headquarters, his holy city of *Ekuphakameni* (the "Elevated Place"), in Inanda outside Durban, in close proximity to John Dube's well-known *Ohlange*-Institute for the promotion of an educated African elite. Shembe soon became famous as a charismatic, wandering prophet performing miraculous healings. He succeeded in covering the whole of Natal and Zululand with a dense net of mission outstations and regional centres, so that within a few years his young movement formed part of the area's religious topography. This church furthermore has unique features of liturgical presentation in music and lyrics incorporating distant African history. The ritual calendar includes regular dance festivals, the church members wearing distinguished attire, and a yearly pilgrimage which is unique in Southern Africa. Since the church`s founding the Nazareth Baptist Church has attracted a manifold African constituency and influenced traditional authorities. In its later years the church established institutional links to the Zulu royal house. A real centre of religious gravity in KwaZulu-Natal, the Nazareth Baptist Church is prominently being proclaimed as the *avant-garde* of the cultural "revitalisation of African society" (Vilakazi/Mthethwa/Mpanza 1986).[1]

One of the most debated themes throughout the AIC history deals with their political roles in social change and in civil society. To summarise, research has largely centred around two issues. On the one hand, colonial archives and mission records unanimously classified AICs as "sects" being "under no European control." This evoked early observers to degrade their spiritual texture and to describe AICs as a mere political body in religious disguise looming the "fear complex" of white South Africans to subvert the pillars of colonial rule by militant means (Loram 1926; Claasen 1995). Still in 1926, Lea, considered a mainline church authority on "native separatist movements" in South Africa, especially characterised the Nazareth Baptist Church as "very active", apparently "anti-white and semi-political" (Lea 1926: 47). On the other hand, AICs nowadays are given a completely different profile. Scholars of African Religion discern a Black Theology that uses a genuine socio-political vocabulary to express an African voice of liberation, from the revivalism of expressive cultural forms in the self-understanding of AICs that tends toward a neglect of institutional political agency.[2] In a concise article Schoffeleers furthermore gives an historical review of the AIC's involvement in liberation movements. He observes that even if AICs showed an early concern for nationalist politics, today they are distancing themselves from it. Schoffeleers correlates their obvious disinterest in

socio-political questions with the emphasis AICs put on ritual healing. He concludes that the serious concern for healing in the religious life of AICs causes their membership to be politically acquiescent.[3]

This hypothesis is not verified by the Nazareth Baptist Church case. The church became and stayed a major although unpretentious player in South African politics from her beginnings. The church-founder Isaiah Shembe was well-known to national hero John Dube, co-founder and first president of the South African National Native Congress (SANNC) that later became the African National Congress (ANC). Dube was privileged to write Isaiah Shembe's first biography (Dube 1936). In more recent years the church was recognised as a potential ally in party politics. In the 1970s differences in anti-apartheid strategies led to the foundation of a movement which took its energy from the restoration of a glorified Zulu past, the Inkatha led by Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Shembe's church was deemed a natural part of Inkatha which later on, after its metamorphosis into the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), became a heavy-weight in the national political arena while proclaiming Zulu principles of political thought. Indeed, from an institutional point of view there occur overlappings in the organisational levels of church and party, other than in the existence of more well-known, traditional authorities in both religious and secular hierarchies. The institutional union of church and party enjoyed the strong backing of Inkatha, especially in rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal where Shembe's church was already deeply rooted. As AICs in other parts of the continent acted as stabilising forces in the transition into the post-colonial era, the Nazareth Baptist Church became a sort of national religious body in the province (Sundermeier 1994: 302).

In the 1990s forces within and outside the Nazareth Baptist Church grew to break church ties with certain political powers. In the process of transformation KwaZulu-Natal evolved into a crisis zone ravaged by politically motivated fringe violence and an undeclared civil war. Nonetheless the church kept its political responsibility. The grip of party politics loosened, the church appeared in the new public role as an impartial mediator in the fragile balance between militant and peaceful conflict management. Since the mid-90s the church has organised mass peace-prayers on a provincial level that have become a constant feature in her religious calendar. The search for consensual methods of policy and for non-violence found its revealing recognition with the appearance of former State-President Nelson Mandela at the funeral of Bishop Amos Shembe (1906-1995), son of Isaiah Shembe and one of his successors in leadership. In October 1995 Mandela, with his influence as Nobel Peace Prize laureate, praised the followers of Shembe for their efforts in abolishing political mistrust and disunity.[4] Or, in the stronger words of Bishop Vimbeni Shembe (born 1933), heir to his father Amos, they attempted to "calm down the killers" and the killing-fields of KwaZulu-Natal.[5]

These statements express a desire to transform persisting violence into a

culture of hope, tolerance and enduring peace. They document in fact a recovery of the political theology of founder-prophet Isaiah Shembe. Shembe's guiding principle of social change was non-violence.[6] In his stance on peaceful methods of conflict solving, Shembe amalgamated several strings of experience: these experiences were clarified through repeated exile which was enshrined in family narratives and in the historical past of his people of origin, the *amaHlubi*. They were caused by the *mfecane*, the large-scale social migrations and wars, that were connected to the aggressive expansion of the Zulu kingdom in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The *mfecane* nourished tremendously the social memory of generations to come.[7] Shembe's conviction of non-militancy culminated as well in the colonial deprivation of land, the Hlubi people in 1873 destroyed as a social body by British troops.[8] Shembe's non-violence is also rooted in the ambivalence of the most vivid political movements of his time, be they unionists or African Nationalists, toward militant upheavals and crossing cultural boundaries in the vision of a future society. These biographical reminiscences allude that Shembe's plea for non-violence grounded in his "long conversation" (Jean Comaroff) in African history.

Shembe forged non-violence as a *leitmotiv* in his ethical thinking drawing upon the specific heritage of an icon in the realm of political philosophy: Gandhi. Shembe also adhered to the Gandhian creed of passive resistance or *satyagraha* – as Gandhi christened his nonviolent "search for truth" and "soul force".[9] In the context of present day nation-building, the Nazareth Baptist Church excavates a historical memory which survived in some degree in public archives and oral church history. In the following section, attention is given to how Gandhian thought made inroads into the ethical consciousness of an AIC, which so far has been interpreted only in terms of Africanness or – even more narrowly – as imbued with Zulu "traditional" rites. Our starting point is the yet unexplored connection between Isaiah Shembe and his peer, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948).

The "South-African Gandhi"

Gandhi arrived in South Africa in 1893 where he stayed for the next twenty-one years. Since the 1860s Indians had immigrated to South Africa in large numbers as indentured workers to be primarily employed in the Natal coastal plantations and mines (Bhana 1991). Some Indians came to South Africa as wealthy Passenger Indians representing trade associations and finance businesses. Gandhi served as a promising young lawyer for this latter clientele. As a co-founder of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) he immediately became active in the political sphere to extend civil and economic rights for the Indian minority in South Africa (Bhana 1997). Returning to India in 1914, Gandhi had already innovated political strategies which became pillars of the anti-colonial liberation movement there. It was in Natal in 1903 that he founded his first ashram, the Phoenix settlement,

organised according to communitarian principles. In Phoenix the idea of passive resistance against state power was born. The first serious experiments in non-violent action against restrictive laws climaxed in 1913. Natal was before long paralysed by waves of non-violent strikes by virtually all sections of the Indian population. A few weeks later and with some political success in hand, Gandhi left South Africa as the hailed, almost mythical, visionary of passive resistance.

Without its charismatic protagonist, non-violent resistance as a strategic concept of political action faded away in South Africa. Preserved in sediments of political culture, it only reached the surface decades later in the wake of the inauguration of the apartheid system.[10] This latent period has been ascribed to a threefold deficit profoundly rooted in Gandhi's South African era. First, Gandhi represented a social elite in South Africa which limited the outreach of *satyagraha*. Second, Gandhi centred his activity strictly, as did Indian politics in general, around a demographic minority. *Satyagraha* thirdly remained culturally restricted to the Indian community with Gandhi himself denying any potential of an African-Indian alliance. Until recently it was stated that Gandhi totally withdrew from his African neighbourhood, that he showed no interest in any particular intercultural communication. According to Gandhi's "limited vision," to use U.S. Mesthrie's terminology, passive resistance was then hermetically sealed in an Indian minority culture, its potential threat to white rule in South Africa fading away. Thus, a transfer of the idea of non-violent resistance from Indian to African constituencies is almost excluded (Mesthrie 1997: 111; Hunt 1996: 259).[11]

But without going into detail Gandhi did establish a relationship with his African contemporaries. After his discovery of *satyagraha* as a normative guide for political struggle, he encouraged the members of his Phoenix ashram consciously to reach out to their neighbours. Two of these African neighbours were indeed the only ones who would have some impact in the historiography of *satyagraha*: Gandhi himself met John Dube on several occasions, and he knew about African prophet Isaiah Shembe, who was building up his holy city in just a stone-throw from the Phoenix settlement. In his account of the "birth of *satyagraha*", Gandhi's private secretary, Pyarelal, mentions an auratic religious talent in close proximity to Phoenix with a new perspective on Christianity as a religion in close contact with African traditions (Pyarelal 1986: 436).[12] Another source from outside the Gandhian circles, German historian of religion, Lehmann, visited *Ekuphakameni* in the early 1950s. His associates confirm a personal acquaintance between Gandhi and Shembe (Lehmann 1955: 184, 186).[13]

Gandhi's appreciation for Shembe shines through his personal judgement on the state of Africanist politics in South Africa. Gandhi advised a delegate of the ANC in 1939 on a policy for South Africa which would overcome the crisis of nationalist acceptance in the African population: "You must not be afraid of being 'Bantuized' or ashamed of ... going about with only a tiny cloth about your loins", Gandhi argues. "You must become Africans once more. ... If I were in your

place, I would not ask a single African to alter his costume .... It does not add a single inch to his moral stature" (Gandhi 1958: 272-274). Gandhi was far from legitimising segregational politics that were already *en route* in South Africa. He most probably was hinting at Shembe, whose lifework was promoted in *Indian Opinion*, the newspaper Gandhi established in 1903 in Phoenix to serve the South African Indian community as an ideological mouthpiece. Shembe's African type of Christianity, as Pyarelal mentions, was therein presented in visualised form, with photographs of religious dances and ritual costumes, including loincoverings. Those were of the only African events ever dealt with in *Indian Opinion*.[14]

Gandhi remained regularly informed about the political and religious kaleidoscope in South Africa until his death. He found reliable mediators in the veterans of the 1913 passive resistance movement staying unlike himself permanently in Natal. The first *satyagrahi* gained the reputation as guardians of Gandhian principles in South Africa. Over the years they tightened the bonds to Shembe. Shechand Ramgobin (1896-1951), who supported the expansion of the Nazareth Baptist Church financially, acted for example as Shembe's translator to European visitors. Another grand figure in South African Indian politics, NIC president Sorabjee Rustomjee (1895-1960), praised Shembe's profile in conflict mediation and as a man uncorrupted by ethnic, cultural or racial considerations. The most intense communication emerged between Gandhi and the family of his second son, Manilal Gandhi (1892-1956). As heir, Manilal Gandhi took over Phoenix in 1916. A politically active figure, he was together with his wife Sushila (1907-1988) considered staunchly representative of the Gandhi tradition. To all of them Isaiah Shembe appeared as a true personification of an African *satyagrahi*. What also impressed them deeply was the religious dignity evident in all his actions. This particularly made Shembe a veritable saint in Gandhi's eyes.[15]

In Gandhi's view *satyagraha* was more than a mere strategy of political praxis, it was spiritually substantive. In an effort to materialise his vision, Gandhi designed everyday life in Phoenix according to religious principles. Manilal Gandhi firmly continued to run the Phoenix ashram in his father's spirit, offering daily communal prayers and interreligious meditations. Phoenix's religious texture of course could never match the sacred aura flowing through the twin settlement *Ekuphakameni*. In his "Elevated Place" Shembe singularly modelled what Gandhi outlined as *satyagraha's* basic goal: to cope with the "diversity in faiths and truths so that people of different convictions may live together"(Chatterjee 1994: 13). *Ekuphakameni* arose in the context of socio-cultural hybridity. It flourished as a scene of intercultural dialogue or, in Sundermeier's terms, convivence, resulting in the Nazareth Baptist Church's own attractiveness for an interracial African-Indian membership. Convivence is Sundermeier's central category in intercultural hermeneutics. He describes it as a "space of communication" where

distinct identities are respected. Convivence defines anew frontiers in the cultural exchange, and broadens the common ground of interculturality. "By translating the experience with a foreign culture (*Fremdkultur*) into one`s own categories of thinking and by searching for parallel structures, analogies, comparable signs and identical symbols, the way to convivence as the goal of practical hermeneutics is paved and is made possible" (Sundermeier 1996: 190).[16] It was Shembe who finally figured as protagonist of an exceptional religious convivence culminating in his "experiments in an independent South African *satyagraha*".

African *Satyagraha* through Convivence

African-Indian social interaction in the first decades of the twentieth century was overshadowed by manifest segregational tendencies. Not only was it almost impossible in the proper political milieu to organise across ethnic lines, "there was very little indeed in the way of assimilation of Indians into African social structure" (Freund 1995: 38). African American Ralph Bunche, 1950 Nobel Peace laureate, visited *Ekuphakameni* in late 1937. In his diary one reads about communitarian life there ending with a surprising observation: although this church adheres to some African customs you at the same time find "many Indians" amongst its membership (Edgar 1992: 308-309). Actually Indians became attracted by Shembe as soon as the Nazareth Baptist Church came into being in Natal. Mission Christianity as a whole tried to build a *cordon sanitaire* around their coastal mission stations in Natal. They avoided contact with the ever greater presence of Indian neighbourhoods overwhelmingly representing Hindu religion. Contrary to this overall picture of religious demarcation, the first Indian followers of Shembe were integrated as full church members from the early twenties. The Indian adherents of Shembe who in their majority as indentured labourers shared a similar socio-economic milieu with African church members, statistically represented the general religious layers of the total of Indian immigrants. Most of the converts formerly were Hindus, and a few were brought up in a Christian background, be it Catholic or a Protestant denomination. Once affiliated with Shembe they experienced a permanent socio-religious integration, supported by a hierarchy within the Indian fold. It was only with the introduction of segregational apartheid laws that the scheme of Indian membership in an African church body was hindered.[17]

Shembe offered to them a religious universe that was, despite phenomenological differences, close to their own experience of Hindu religiosity. From the turn of the century Hindu folk religion figured predominantly in Natal. The performing of sensational dance festivals and ritual processions, including healing ceremonies became ever more significant. Because of its widespread attraction, Hindu folk religion promoted the social cohesion of Indians in their Natal diaspora. In a way, religious life in Shembe's *Ekuphakameni* cen-

tralised those key ritual expressions. The "Elevated Place" crystallised as an intercultural place of communication. The *Indian Opinion* newspaper described the spiritual character of this neighbourhood as "the scene of joy and happiness, singing and dancing and chanting of hymns in praise of God."[18]

Festivals as such, following Sundermeier, are bestowed with a hermeneutical essence. A festival is "a climax of cultural and a focus of religious life" (Sundermeier 1996: 148; also Sundermeier 1999: 75-82). In no other public event do cultures and religions present themselves so intensely. Through their highly sensual priorities, they communicate to participants, whether foreigners or insiders, sense and meaning. The public architecture of *amaNazaretha* church festivals functioned as the osmotic boundary in the African-Indian contact zone. *Ekuphakameni* as *genius loci* of convivence drew Indian participants into the rank and file of the church.

Indian Shembe followers were held in high esteem, being called the "Samaritans" (cf. Lk 10) of the church. They demonstrated practical solidarity with the church in organisational matters and acted as Shembe's political advisors. The 1920s were times of crisis for the Nazareth Baptist Church. In Natal unionists mobilised urban and rural constituencies, the mass movement destabilised the political economy of Natal. A cultural renaissance movement centred around the first Inkatha, role-model for today's Inkatha Freedom Party, recalled the heroes of a glorified Zulu past and revived the memory of the last anti-colonial resistance, the lost Bambatha rebellion of 1906. The politicising effects of all those activities were still intensified by rumours that made militant strategies to secure social and political rights plausible again (Marks 1970; Bradford 1988; Cope 1993).

Those militant options also penetrated the rank and file of the Nazareth Baptist Church. When state authorities in the 1920s tried to confine the religious autonomy of the Nazareth Baptist Church, the idea came from precisely Shembe's Indian advisors to probe uncompromising acts of non-militant resistance. Non-violent resistance rested in the vivid memories of former Indian contract workers who eyewitnessed the 1913 *satyagraha* campaign.[19] For years Shembe manoeuvred with magisterial authorities to protect some of the ritual inventories that were vital identity marks of his church. With the question of healing by faith, thus not through the use of western or African medicine, a long lasting conflict with the state arose. Health officers in 1926 urged the *amaNazaretha* to participate in compulsory programs for mass vaccination. State authority was supported by severe restrictions of religious freedom. Shembe's church faced prohibition against their yearly pilgrimage to their holy mountain, another core element of their spirituality. Unimpressed by sanctions, Shembe alongside his Indian advisors ultimately refused to comply with any state demands. Government bureaucrats deemed it a form of "religious fanaticism". For them it was the first serious defiance of state authority by a "passive resistance movement" since

Gandhi,s time. Administrators believed that the strength of this movement in the given unbalanced political context of the 1920s even bore a threatening potential of a final militant uprising.[20] They still had in mind the Bulhoek tragedy of 1921 when numerous members of an AIC in the Cape were massacred by joint military and police forces as they attempted to claim land possessions. Shembe, fully aware of the drama, opted for a firm demonstration of non-violent efficiency. According to oral church history he redefined his mission to educate his followers from "soldiers of blood" into non-militant "soldiers of God".[21] Within months the movement proliferated into whole regions and influenced other AICs. Thus the Nazareth Baptist Church relaunched non-violent resistance, that was stored in the minds of ex-indentured Indians who were close to the Church or even Church members, as a hegemonic expression in greater sections of the African population.

Noteworthy is that non-violence within the Nazareth Baptist Church had its breakthrough on the matter of faith healing. Faith healing featured in most AICs in South Africa since the turn of the century. It was a particular enactment of New Testament patterns that were largely ignored in mission Christianity.[22] Fernandez suggests that the success of faith healing as a religious phenomenon is also rooted in the African history. Whenever imbalances in the cohesion of African societies occurred, healing movements accompanied the social change offering "clearly bounded and well organised structures. Prophet-healers, then, which have tended to be regarded as very contemporary phenomenon, may be plumbing profound depths and alternate structures in African culture" (Fernandez 1978: 210). Moreover healing was prominent within the Indian folk-religion of the 1920s, as mentioned earlier. In the experience of healing then converged different socio-religious groups and traditions. In the Nazareth Baptist Church healing by faith became the motivating factor for nonviolent resistance. Once non-violence was discovered as an efficient tool for religious autonomy, Isaiah Shembe experimented with it against the most lively political movements of his time. The conflict in 1926 did not boil over but smouldered under the surface until 1944.[23]

Shembe's explorations verify Sundermeier,s assertion regarding the "focal point" of religious convivence. The mediation of culturally different worldviews in the experimental arena of the religious festival can encourage practical hermeneutics (Sundermeier 1996: 148). The Nazareth Baptist Church's efforts to translate Gandhi,s passive resistance into a contemporary concept resulted in an African *satyagraha*. Far beyond the reach of formal politics, and in the somewhat marginal sphere of a nascent church movement, non-violence emerged as the pivotal tool with which to claim religious autonomy and establish it in the wider socio-political arena. Simply put, passive resistance in the care of the Nazareth Baptist Church blossomed on the ground which Gandhi once identified as the genuine realm of *satyagraha*: religion.[24]

Epilogue

For a longer period both Gandhi and Shembe were engraved in the *inter-cultural* memory of the region. They each inspired the fundamental sources of independent, Christian African historiography. Besides in oral history they appear in the repertoire of *amaNazaretha* praise songs *(izibongo)*: allusions are made to the *mnemotopoi* – the sacred places of cultural memory (Assmann, J. 1999: 59) – of *satyagraha*, Phoenix and *Ekuphakameni*. Occasionally the figures of Gandhi and Shembe stimulate conversion dreams or motivate visionary action in African prophecy.[25] Shembe continues to appear alongside Gandhi in the South African *satyagraha* tradition. Mewa Ramgobin, son of Shembe's benefactor Shechand, and political activist in the oppositional United Democratic Front (UDF) in the 1980s, still recognises them as the "walking symbols of their convictions".[25] Nevertheless their common status in social memory decreased over the apartheid years as did the Nazareth Baptist Church's Indian membership. Shembe's genuine political theology of non-violence eventually was cut off from the historical roots of the AIC movement in Southern Africa.

Within the special imperatives of the transitional era into a post-apartheid society, historical remembrance is as an efficient agent in nation building. The vital debate on an African Renaissance urges a re-discovery of hidden identities. It renovates social memory selectively and fuses relevant sediments of meaning to present political motivations. AICs are identified as core resources of cultural knowledge, with Isaiah Shembe portrayed as an iconic Black messiah and his church a purely African-styled religious phenomenon. African Renaissance perpetuates "invented traditions" that have long persisted since the interruption of memory marked by apartheid (Hobsbawm/Ranger 1983).

On the other hand, the present social framework (or "*cadres sociaux*", Maurice Halbwachs) allows for a rise of unexpected residues from cultural memory. What Aleida Assmann calls the "latency period" of memory (Assmann 1999: 132-142)[27] especially bears alternative meaning that was perhaps once invisible or unreadable. It nourishes dynamic layers in social consciousness which overcome the mere functional production of symbolic sense. In practical terms Shembe's succeeding generations offend his reduced image of Africanness. The present churchleaders' intentions of non-militancy break up petrified contours or, as Anderson puts it, "imagined communities" (Anderson 1993) of social reconstruction. Reanimating precisely the ethical nucleus of a past era of convivence, they, consciously or unconsciously, converse with a surplus of cultural memory which was still imprinted in church narratives. Furthermore the practical, political dimension of the AIC belief system still influences their outreach at the turn of the millennium. Political activists now seek, though tentatively, to redirect the present ethical discourse in South Africa toward the Gandhian creed of non-violence. In their revisions of the origins and history of non-violence they credit Isaiah Shembe as Gandhi's contemporary, both in time and in mind.[28]

Conclusion

Democratic South Africa is investing again in an historically stored social capital that obscures the long established, or invented, images of AICs. The case of the Nazareth Baptist Church, throughout her history described as purely rooted in African thought patterns and predominantly attracting an ethnic clientele of *isiZulu* speakers, delineates the *limits* of cultural invention.[29] After a long latent period, the Nazareth Baptist Church once again is inhabiting memory in order to awaken *satyagraha*, an ethical concept once generated in the ritual fluidity of convivence. The Nazareth Baptist Church consequently is now rescuing a hybrid inter-cultural church history, hereticised during the reign of segregation, from oblivion. As in the turmoiled era of the 1920s it is again an AIC that, imprinted in her high potential of healing, brings non-militant convictions into civil society to balance the critical transition period of the post-apartheid era.

Notes

1 Cf. the classic volume by Oosthuizen 1967, and, including rich visual material, Papini 1992.

2 For this discussion, see the influential, although now rather dated, surveys in: Sundermeier (ed.) 1978; Binsbergen/Schoffeleers 1985; Ranger 1986.

3 Schoffeleers draws on Parson's systemic theory comparing AICs with any other healing system.

4 Speech by President N. Mandela at the funeral of Bishop Amos K. Shembe, Ebuhleni, 8th October 1995.

5 Interview 24 July 1996. For insights into the political culture of KwaZulu-Natal see Minnaar 1991.

6 This is elaborated at length in Heuser 2003. The study portrays Shembe's theology within a contemporary African discourse on the correlation of religion and politics. The texture of Shembe's religious thought exhibits a genuine "political poetry of symbol". His experiential chorcography of salvation, to summarize this study, sought to pacify cultural memory through a rigid option of non-violent action.

7 For Shembe's biography, see: Becken 1994 and Hexham/Oosthuizen (eds.) 1996. The recent debate on the historical reasons for the *mfecane* (Hamilton (ed.) 1995) does not replace the hegemonial militancy in the rise of the Zulu kingdom.

8 Shembe's family was closely related to chief Langalibalele under whose leadership the Hlubi were forced by colonial policy management to an uprising (see Wright/Manson 1983).

9 See *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 7, 67. *Satyagraha* is a compositum by Gandhi derived from Gujarati (*satya* - truth, *agraha* - steadfastness).

10 Karis/Carter (1972, Vol. I: 62, 78) suggest that one passage in the *SANNC's* first constitution (on "passive action", chapter IV, § 13) were possibly inspired by Gandhi's *satyagraha* campaigns. Two anti-pass movements in Bloemfontein in 1913 and

on the Rand in 1919 were supported by the recently founded *SANNC*. For background information on the revival of passive resistance in 1946-1948, see Bhana/Pachai 1984: 194-207.

11 For a helpful comment on Gandhi's opinion towards African-Indian relations, see Reddy 1995: 134-139.

12 Pyarelal (1899-1982) accompanied Gandhi from 1920-1948 as his disciple and secretary.

13 The personal relationship between Gandhi and Shembe is also noted in Gandhian family history (letter Ela Gandhi, 1st May 1997).

14 From *Indian Opinion*, 13th November 1936 (appearing in the Gujerati section of the paper).

15 For Ramgobin and Rustomjee, who acted prominently at Isaiah Shembe's funeral in 1935, cf. Zulu-newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal*, 10 May 1935; Interview Mewa Ramgobin, 9 December 1997. *Indian Opinion: Manilal Gandhi Memorial Number, April 1956*, offers rich material on Manilal Gandhi. Gandhi's perception of holiness is characterised by Lester 1996.

16 ("Indem die Erfahrung mit der Fremdkultur in die eigene Begrifflichkeit übersetzt wird und parallele Strukturen, Analogien, vergleichbare Zeichen und identische Symbole gesucht werden, wird Konvivenz vorbereitet und ermöglicht.")

17 This is my own analysis of interviews with (former) Indian church members and of various sources of oral church history and public archives. Roberts encountered about 50 church members of Indian origin (1936: 43). For a detailed analysis of the religious strata of Indian immigrants, cf. Brain 1983.

18 *Indian Opinion*, 10 May 1935. See Brain 1991: 213-214; Hughes 1985: 6.

19 See the biographical sources in: History III Research Project 1984, Documentation Centre, University of Durban-Westville.

20 National Archives Pretoria: NTS 1431 24/214 (I): statements by Health Officer Park-Ross (9 December 1926) and Magistrate Lugg/Verulam (1 October 1929). Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) Young /Natal, 28 August 1931.

21 See Hexham/Oosthuizen (eds.) 1996: 96; See also ibid., 145-150. For an account of the Bulhoek massacre, see: Edgar, R. 1988.

22 Oosthuizen 1987. For a detailed discussion of healing in AICs and its biblical roots, see Becken 1972.

23 National Archives Pretoria: NTS 1431 24/214 (II): Native Commissioner/Mntunzini, 19th March 1946.

24 The religious texture of Gandhian passive resistance is completely overlooked in a recent anthology of non-violence in Africa, Sutherland/Meyer (eds.) 2000. (with chapter 6: 147-208 on South Africa).

25 *Ilanga*, 20 July 1928. An example in case is J.M. Thusi (1880-1964), in 1937 founder of the *Amakhehlane*, the church of the "old men" (du Toit 1996: 659).

26 Interview with Mewa Ramgobin, 9 December 1997. He survived the first letter bomb attack in South African history in 1973. Later banned for seventeen years, Ramgobin today represents the ANC in parliament.

[27] Her characteristics of the "latency period" of cultural memory exceed those of the functional theory of Halbwachs (cf. Halbwachs 1985).

[28] See the initial issue of the periodical *Satyagraha* Vol. 1, No.1, August 2000: 4.

[29] Carolyn Hamilton 1998. Hamilton argues against the more functional analysis that dominates the discourse on the invention of tradition. The power of images lies not, she suggests, in their openness to manipulation, and to imaginative reworkings. Rather it is to be found in the opposite, the historical constraints attached to, in our case, Shembe-historiography or AIC-history in general.

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