

Performing the Holy Spirit: Ritualised Manifestations of Faith in an African Independent Church

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Abstract

This research examines the aesthetic manifestations of religious belief, particularly in the Holy Spirit, through consideration of the performative dimensions and ritualised behaviours in the church services of an African Independent Church, namely, the New Gospel Church in Zion of Africa (NGCZA). The significance of specific objects and activities within the sacred context and how these contribute to the performance of belief among the congregants is central to this consideration. Drawing on the ritual performance theories of Turner and Schechner, the article argues that NGCZA church activity is highly influenced by a belief in the Holy Spirit. The results also indicated that religious activity enables an environment that is conducive to the emergence of liminal identities. Enabled from within a ritual frame that guides proceedings, the use of religious objects such as uniforms, clothing and drums facilitate an invocation of the Holy Spirit for the purposes of healing. Religious belief, once enacted, results in highly performative activities and actions within spiritually charged spaces.

The Holy Spirit gives people the mystical and second sense to see things, which is believed to come from the Christian God, and which in former times would have been a sign of possession by ancestral spirits alone; it is also the ultimate authority in divination, and the remedy for spiritual and physical sickness. (Armitage, cited by Anderson 1991: 38)

We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies. (Turner 1990: 1)

Introduction

If one lived on the edge of *Melville Koppies* Nature Reserve in Melville, Johannesburg, the sounds of rhythmic drums would be heard from across the reserve every Sunday afternoon. It is here that about 23 African Independent Church (AIC) congregations gather in their respective circular shaped spaces to participate in their weekly religious rituals. Against the backdrop of the shrubs, trees and rocky paths on the reserve, church members can be seen casually walking and talking, while congregating in their respective church circles preparing to participate in their sacred rituals. While many nearby residents have never actually witnessed the congregants worshipping, they hear the church services and recognize the familiar sounds of drumming and singing. If these residents were to take a stroll on the nature reserve on any given Sunday afternoon, they would witness energized performances in the form of church services. Although these services take place on public land, there is a definite sense of privacy and seclusion from the surrounding neighbourhoods in this outdoor environment.

This article presents an understanding of the nature of religious belief as more than internalised and personal experiences of spiritual phenomena, but as tangible and perceivable sets of actions and activities to all participants and onlookers. While sermons, Bible readings and statements of belief contribute to the ritual proceedings, these verbalised expressions of faith do not dominate, but add to the momentum of the physically charged church services. I argue that expressions of faith are highly performative in the form of faithful, ritualised practices, and the article focuses on manifestations of religious belief through ritual performance.

Aspects of the church services in which participants perform an activity, be this activity dancing, singing, healing, drumming or praying, are considered in relation to the all-important entity of the Holy Spirit. To the NGCZA, the Holy Spirit is not merely a concept but is very real and experiential. Almost everything congregants do in church is fuelled by the intention to invoke the Holy Spirit for the purpose of healing. Considerations relevant to “performed belief” are the signs and symbols, such as the long robes worn by NGCZA members, and the wooden staffs carried by men. These objects, used in conjunction with movement, song and music, facilitate an invocation of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, certain activities and behaviours that occur during the rituals are considered a consequence of an invocation of the Holy Spirit.

The notion of identity existing as a temporary condition within a definite time frame is also briefly introduced with reference to Turner’s (1982) concepts of liminal conditions, leading to the concept of “liminal identities,” those that manifest through ritual performance and exist only during this activity. The content of this article is descriptive of certain elements of NGCZA ritual performance in order to portray belief as that which is *enacted* in a vast number

of ways, and being expressed through physically perceived manifestations, within specifically demarcated spaces. By considering primarily those aspects of activity in the church services which can be perceived, observed and experienced, the article highlights how objects and the human body act as a vehicle to reinforce and express faith.

Historical Context

Over one hundred years ago the first Western Pentecostal missionary, a member of the *Christian Catholic Apostolic Church of Zion* based in Chicago, arrived in South Africa from the USA (Anderson 1991). This missionary, Daniel Bryant, baptized the first group of African converts in South Africa. There were twenty-seven men in this group, and among them were the great founders and leaders of the Pentecostal churches in South Africa.¹ Eventually, due to various political and social reasons, African church members formed breakaway congregations founding what is generally known today as the African Independent Churches (AICs) (Anderson 2000). These breakaway groups emphasized and followed the basic Pentecostal religious teachings of the original group baptized by Bryant (Makhubu 1988). However, the means of expressing religious belief in these breakaway groups were influenced by African cultural modes of expression through dance, song and rhythmic music. According to Anderson, "African Independent Churches are churches begun by Africans in Africa for Africans" (Anderson 2000: xvii). Makhubu (1988: 5) explains that the "AICs are churches that have completely broken the umbilical cord with the Western missionary enterprise."

The congregation relevant to this article is *The New Gospel Church in Zion of Africa* (NGCZA). The NGCZA is one of 23 church congregations that are registered with *The Association of African Independent Churches of Melville Koppies*.² While most congregations consist of only one group, the NGCZA is made up of two groups which meet on Circle 28 and Circle 88 at the Melville Koppies, with Circle 28 being the larger of the two. The NGCZA is made up of men and women of all ages, and is in principle open to all nationalities. However, at the time of the fieldwork, NGCZA congregants were mainly South African nationals with a handful of Zimbabwean members.

Methodology

This study focuses on the NGCZA. Research data was drawn from casual conversations with congregants, open ended and semi-structured interviews, numerous photographs and approximately three hours of raw video recordings.

It was clear from the outset that my presence at the NGCZA services was that of an "outsider". This was due not only because I was not an official

member of the NGCZA, but because I am of a different race to the NGCZA members. Through this, I was also an outsider because of a different ethnicity. The highly subjective spiritual experiences made within NGCZA services seem to be facilitated by the culturally coded and structured procedures of the rituals. My challenge as researcher was to interrogate these experiences through data collection and to interpret this data with a consciousness of my position as an outsider. In addition, I was an outsider because I did not understand the languages that were spoken and used. Although I made use of an interpreter, it is clear that nuances most likely have been lost. For this reason, the use of a performance framework allowed me to focus on interpreting a language of gesture, symbolism and movement as much as the spoken word. Lastly, I was an outsider because I was not actively involved in the ritual proceedings but somewhat conspicuously located on the edges of the proceedings. I made it explicit to the church members before filming that I was going to use a camera or a video camera, both for ethical reason and to reduce my role as a "tourist" researcher and become more of a participant in the process. In order to build up rapport with church members, I often danced and moved to the "music" from where I was positioned, which was greatly appreciated by the congregants. In this way I became a participant observer and gained a "participatory understanding" of the NGCZA ritual services (Conquergood 2004). There was some indication that the church members accepted my presence and my 'otherness': they were willing to allow me into their "sacred space" and one female NGCZA congregant thanked me for coming to their church services saying, "we like to see you around."

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the NGCZA

Receiving the Holy Spirit, or Spirit Possession, is a fundamental practice in the NGCZA church services and is central to the process of healing and prophesying (Anderson 2000). Some church members refer to being "full" or "drunk" when in the intoxicated state of being "possessed" by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the most commonly used word by the members to describe this state of being is "power". Any behaviour or action that cannot be explained rationally by the NGCZA members is attributed either to the intention to receive "power" or to the state of being in "power". Therefore, receiving the Holy Spirit is an endowment of power where the recipient performs extraordinary acts (of power) as manifested through speaking in tongues, visions, prophecy, healing and random, spontaneous behaviour due to possession by the Holy Spirit (Anderson 1991).

One church member said that healing is very important in the church: "the whole service is about healing." The Holy Spirit is the primary ingredient that enables acts of healing and other expressions of power to occur. All of

these manifestations are highly performative and largely interactive for the congregants. Explaining how power works, one congregant said: "To have power, if you lay your hands on someone who is very sick, they can be ok." Other activities such as dancing, praying, clapping, drumming and singing serve the purpose of invoking the Holy Spirit. I call these activities "acts of invocation". At some point, these rhythmically driven activities result in the altered states of awareness described by the word power. The NGCZA congregants believe that the Holy Spirit is always present, not only during church services. One member explained that "the Holy Spirit is always there, even if I am walking down the street, the Holy Spirit is there."

The Holy Spirit in the NGCZA Context

The familiarity of the spirit world in traditional African culture prepared the African Independent Churches to accept the concept of the Holy Spirit (Makhubu 1988). Anderson maintains that: "We may consider the African traditional spirit world to be the fertile ground that prepared the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit ..." (1991: 51). In other words, African Independent Churches were able to transfer the understanding and belief in the existence of the Spirit world in traditional African religious culture to the Holy Spirit. Makhubu (1988: 62) states:

The world of the black person is the world of spirits. So believing in the Holy Spirit is not much of a problem. The belief in the Holy Spirit is a corollary to the belief in spirits of the ancestors.

However, the historical explanations put forward by Anderson and Makhubu above give the impression that the Holy Spirit and ancestral spirits are similar entities. While acknowledging the importance of ancestral spirits, the NGCZA congregants I interviewed distanced themselves from traditional practices during their church services and maintained that the Holy Spirit is not an ancestral spirit, but is an aspect of Jesus and God.

There is a close relationship between theology and performance in African spirituality and in AIC religious practice (Anderson 1991, 2000; Makhubu 1998). "Spirit type" churches such as the NGCZA seldom have an explicitly formulated and formal theology that structures their services and the way in which they engage with their spiritual beliefs (Anderson 1991). The centrality of the Holy Spirit in AIC theology is enacted during church services, and members' responses to their religious beliefs are manifested through the performance of religious expression. The independent churches "have little of an explicit theology ... but they have a praxis and a spirituality in which theology is profoundly implicit"

(Hastings, cited by Anderson 1991: 33). Theology is expressed primarily as an experiential response to religious beliefs, as opposed to primarily a cognitive understanding. Belief is therefore highly *experiential*. A connection between belief and identity filters through the notion of performed theology. Religious beliefs evoke typical responses in the ritual frame of the NGCZA and are made explicit through the performative dimensions of religious practice. One such dimension relevant to the notion of performed belief is the actual physical spaces where activity occurs.

Describing a Typical NGCZA Sunday Service

Upon entry into the circular enclosure where the services are held, the men, who all carry sticks, position themselves seated on the left and the women on the right. This is done primarily to discourage any distractions that might occur by mixing male and females in the circle. Behaviour changes upon entry into the church circle and the normally accepted ways of behaviour outside of church are contained and informed by the formality of entering the ritual circle. This was simply expressed by one member when she said that: “you behave differently in church, you become different ...” At some point, a song or hymn begins that marks the beginning of the church service. Often a male voice begins followed by the beautiful harmonies of female voices. After this initial song, the secretary, who is also a member of the church congregation, reads out loud the Ten Commandments from the Bible. Following this the pastor will deliver a sermon, normally while standing and holding the Bible. I have not seen any pastor actually read from the Bible; instead the women in the congregation take turns in reading various passages from the Bible during the sermon. The time frame of the sermon is approximately thirty minutes.

There are always a few men carrying drums to the church services. Drums are hand-made with leather skins wrapped over a course wooden drum-like frame. During the initial sermon, two or three men remain outside of the circle and make a small fire. The drums are placed on the ground with the skins facing the fire so that the skins become warm and tighten, resulting in a clearer and more consistent tone when played. When the time is right, the skins are tight and the sermon is complete, the drummers enter the circle with the drums strapped around their bodies. A song follows, and according to a church member who said, “... the song first, the drum will follow,” it is the song or hymn that determines the rhythm of the drumbeats. Only a few of the men are responsible for playing the drums, an activity in which they take great pride and pleasure. However, any of the church members are allowed to play should they be interested and able to do so. This is the start of worship time and it is marked by all members standing up in preparation for the more embodied performance of spiritual expression

where spiritual weapons – objects, uniforms, sticks and drums – are actively used in religious activity. The latter part of the church service after the sermon continues for at least an hour and a half, sometimes more than two or three hours depending on the day.

Once the sermon is over, sporadic, soft singing or clapping begins and the drummers secure the drums against their bodies with a thin strap attached to the drum. They enter the circle space and after a few moments begin to beat their drums. Often the rhythm is prompted by a song that the congregation has begun to sing, or from a clapping rhythm from one of the women. The beats, played individually, are repetitive and simple, yet the rhythm becomes more complex when two or more different beats are played together. The sound invokes movement and before long circular dancing begins. While two or three men beat their drums, a chorus of song and hymns penetrate the rhythms, causing some congregants to begin the typical circular dance movements around the perimeter of the concrete circle. The circular patterns of movement that are performed are very precise and the dancers (or worshippers) seem to move in and out of different tempos and patterns together, and with ease. This indicates that the dancers are familiar with set movement patterns scripted into the ritual frame. Typically, the dance patterns consist of the dancers moving in circles in one direction while simultaneously spinning on their own axis and moving in the opposite direction. The movements are repetitive and beautiful to observe. These patterns then change with different hymns and variances in drum tempo and rhythm. Together with the drumbeats and the song, the dancing patterns begin to activate the dancers into heightened states of activity. The dancing, says another church member, “gives me power.” This is manifest in sporadic encounters between members, where sticks are brandished, dancers fall over each other while random and breathy sounds erupt from foaming mouths. In an act of prayer, hands are placed on the sick congregants situated in the centre of the circle surrounded by the circle dancers and sporadic ritual activity. The causes of sickness range from physical ailments, to emotional problems, to the presence of malignant spirits that are haunting the sick person.

During this heightened activity, the prophets, apparently empowered with the Holy Spirit, “see” what is ailing the sick through visions, and what the sick will need to do in order to be healed. These prophets relay these visionary messages they receive from the Holy Spirit during a concluding segment of the ritual. After the drumming, dancing and singing has ceased, each prophet takes turns to speak to one or more of the sick people and relay their insights to them. They do this by laying hands on the sick person while they speak. Normally the remainder of the congregants stand around the circle, like an active audience, and listen to the prophesying that is happening, which may continue for lengthy periods. The suggested remedies include the wearing of particular items of

clothing, prescribed activities such as fasting, or the consumption of various herbs or medicines (Makhubu 1988). Some members exit the circle during the healing prophecies, thereby exiting the ritual frame, both physically and emotionally. At this point the church service winds down until all have exited the circle.

Spiritual Spaces

The west side of the *Melville Koppies* is scattered with a number of concrete, circular shaped platforms that have been built by the local authorities for the congregations to conduct their church services on. These simple platforms can be likened to a performance stage where the NGCZA members perform their rituals. Indeed, these are sacred physical spaces that hold ritual activity contained within a demarcated area. Such performance spaces relate to the word *temenos*, which refers to the classical Greek circular stages considered to be sacralised enclosures (Bowie 2006). Shrubs, trees, long grass and rocks surround these circular spaces. Their location within nature emphasizes the separation of the ritual space from normal social contexts and the concept of a sacred domain applies well to them. From within an African theatrical tradition, as Chinyowa (2005: 27) states,

the idea of the *temenos* is closely associated with the cultural philosophy relating to the "magic circle". In both African material and non-material culture, the circular shape ... symbolizes the people's sense of beauty, nurturance, growth and community.

This indicates that there may be a culturally informed degree of conscious choice in the shape of the circle as the congregants' space of worship. Furthermore, the significance of the circle is that it is symbolic of an African tradition of togetherness (Chinyowa 2005). When I questioned the members of the NGZCA why they worship in circular patterns, a common response was simply, "that's how we worship." Nonetheless, the circle acts as a symbolic and physical container where collective expressions of faith arise *through worship activity*. There is only one entrance into these circular stages, and bushes and rocks surround the remainder of the circumference. Before entering the circle, members have to remove their shoes and place them on the ground outside of the circle. In this action, respect is being shown to the spiritual context of the proceedings. One NGCZA church member explained the removal of the shoes by referring to the Bible:

In my point of view, I think there is passage in the Bible, when God was talking to Moses the tree was burning ... God said: "take your sandals off, because you are standing on holy ground." So I think they take it from there, if you are coming to a holy place you must take your shoes off.

This removal of the shoes is also a symbolic act that reinforces the notion of 'sacred space' and contributes to the separation of mundane ordinary life from the ritual space. It can also be interpreted as the symbolic removal of profane identities that exist in social contexts. The idea of the removal of such identities reinforces the notion of the addition of new identities as represented by, for example, the church uniforms which act as spiritual performance "costumes". By stepping into the circle, the NGCZA members move from the profane into the sacred and liminal domain. Furthermore, shoes do not feature in the NGCZA sacred uniform and are not considered important items in religious activity, unlike, for example, the church uniforms.

Ritual, Performance and Liminality in NGCZA Rituals

The ritual performances of the NGCZA consist of various elements that have been prescribed by the religious culture of its members. Singer maintains that a cultural performance "has a definitely limited time span, a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance" (cited in Bell 2004: 89). Singer, as quoted above, applies the dramatic metaphor to cultural contexts, and his description can easily be applied to the NGCZA rituals. All the elements he describes in the quote above are evident in the ritual performances of NGCZA services. As performances, NGCZA rituals can be highly entertaining to the outsider: the drumming is engaging, with rhythmical clapping and slapping sounds, and melodic songs, chants and hymns. The incorporation of sticks in the energetically charged circular dancing creates added visual patterns of movement. The dancers display facial expressions of focused intensity as they whirl in ordered patterns, directed by rhythmic and repetitive drumbeats, the singing of hymns and clapping. While they whirl and dance, their long uniforms lift at the edges, and the entrancing spectacle begins to move on its own.

Ritual performances serve the purpose of effecting a change in the participants or in the situations in which they live. When changes in people or situations come about as a result of ritual activity, efficacy has occurred (Schechner 2002). In the NGCZA, one of the main intentions behind the ritualized services is to effect change through healing and most activity is centred on leading the church members towards these transformations (Anderson 1991). As a consequence of enacted belief, healing occurs in many performative ways. Healing, for the NGCZA members, is both an activity and an experience and occurs in many different ways: through dance, song, clapping and various forms of physical contact between fellow congregants. More detailed aspects of the significance of healing in the NGCZA services are dealt with later in this article.

A third feature of NGCZA religious services is that all activity is contained

within a ritual framework, including prescribed rules and established patterns of behaviour. Rituals are highly context based and driven by the common intentions, the conscious or unconscious agreements made by the participants (Schechner 1976). Rituals are also based on repetition of fixed procedures that provide a point of reference to evaluate experiences that arise through participation (Schechner 1976). Barbara Meyerhoff (in Schechner 1990: 249) writes that:

Rituals are reenactments, not original occurrences, and they are repetitive and highly stylized. These features control and delimit as well as inspire and arouse strong subjective states.

NGCZA services follow more or less the same procedures each Sunday, and these procedures are characterized by similar manifestations, such as the circular dance movements. The element of repetition exists in, for example, the drumming and clapping, in the continuous motion of the movements, and these experiences occur following a set routine prescribed in the ritual proceeding. It is within this repetitive frame that the conditions for deep subjective states arise. Furthermore, space can be considered a key factor in reinforcing the cohesive and safe environment brought about by the ritual proceedings because the services occur in the same circular platforms every Sunday.

The ritual framework is by no means a rigid set of rules that leads to static outcomes. Although there are prescribed rules for behaviour in the NGCZA that are determined by ritual proceedings, any other forms of behaviours can be sanctioned and accepted as part of the healing process if they are born out of the ritual frame. One NGCZA member explained that when the Holy Spirit is guiding action, then:

You can do anything. You can jump, cry ... anything.

Prescribed behaviours give birth to irrational and random actions and situations that would not be acceptable outside of the ritual frame. In terms of prescribed behaviours, the form of the frame facilitates a freedom of expression and experience within the form, and which is contained by this form. In these situations participants are freed from the structures and norms of ordinary life that influence, determine and dictate behaviour. Turner (1982) calls this liberation "anti-structure" and argues that this only takes place in the ritual space. Anti-structure takes place during a phase in the ritual proceedings which Turner calls 'liminal', where participants of the ritual experience a temporary suspension of structural norms. Turner's concept of "liminality," which he developed from van Gennep's theories on rites of passage (1960), points to the possibility that performed identity may emerge from within the ritual frame. When participants enter into the liminal phase – as in the case of the NGCZA by removing the

shoes or by entering the circular space – they begin to shed the constraints and rules of everyday life. Congregants may experience themselves as being “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony” (Schechner 2004: 79). As one NGCZA congregant explained:

The way I feel if I am in church I feel like another person, and if I am outside the church I feel like another person again. I feel like I am two different people.

Liminal experiences imply a transformation from one state to another, a “transition between two states of more settled or more conventional cultural activity” (Carlson 1996: 20). In these contexts, entities that exist in the spiritual context, such as the Holy Spirit, drive behaviours. A shift in the mind state of an individual, such as a trance state or an altered state, may lead to non-ordinary modes of behaviour typical of the liminal condition.³ In the NGCZA rituals the notion of “liminal identities” applies because the influence of the Holy Spirit on behaviour during ritual process is temporary, and behaviour “normalises” once the church service has ended.

Weapons of the Spirit

The NGCZA members, bearing their spiritual weapons and clad in church uniforms like soldiers preparing for battle against the enemy, gather in numbers on the symbolic battlefield, the circle, in which the service will take place, to ward off evil and sickness through “spiritual warfare.” Makhubu (1988: 85) uses the analogy of warfare when he writes:

Like the elements used in healing, ordinary items ... such as sticks, crooks, a staff, robes, drums and uniforms all have a very deep religious or theological significance ... These are said to be spiritual weapons to fight evil.

Everything the NGCZA members do during their church services, they do with the intention of invoking the Holy Spirit. The belief in the devil or Satan as a malignant and evil spirit is present in the NGCZA. Through the Holy Spirit the congregants seek and pray for victorious outcomes when fighting these evil forces. Various items are used as tools or “spiritual weapons.” These inanimate objects become antennae through which to “receive” spiritual power to fight evil. The focus in this article on objects as spiritual weapons is limited to the uniforms, sticks and drums as they are the most significant and pronounced of the symbolic objects used in the ritual performances. They affect the behaviour of NGCZA members in ways that bear a direct influence on their actions.

Church Uniforms

Perhaps the most significant religious item used by the NGCZA congregants is the attire they wear to the church services. One of the NGCZA members explained the attire with reference to a verse from Isaiah 52:1:

Awake, awake, O Zion, clothe yourself with strength. Put on your garments of splendor...

It may be argued that this verse is a metaphor and that the word "garments" might refer to an attitude or personal characteristic. NGCZA congregants, however, translate the Bible quite literally (Anderson 2000), and this verse is seen as an instruction for members to wear a garment that will aid them in their spiritual activities and warfare against evil. The uniform is made up of a deep blue, full-length robe for men and mostly white, full-length robes for women. It sometimes includes a thick belt, with the name of the congregation inscribed in bold clear letters on the material, worn around the waist or hanging around the neck as a scarf. The NGCZA considers the uniforms a sacred item. The uniforms are perhaps the most identifiable and distinguishable visual symbol in their spiritual armory. The uniform facilitates healing by moving the wearer toward an "anti-structural" psychological state, and by sanctioning for the wearer to behave in a different, out-of-the-normal way (Turner 1982). Almost all NGCZA members questioned indicated that they felt different in some way, or like a different person, when they put the uniform on. One man said: "Even if you watch me on my face when I touch my clothes, you can see that this person is different." The uniform thus holds spiritual power and wearing it means to receive the Holy Spirit. The act of wearing a uniform facilitates the wearer in moving towards a transformative state. An example is the following response regarding the question of the uniform by a female NGCZA member:

When I put on my uniform I leave everything. The time I put on the uniform is the time my mind enters the church ... I become a different person because the way I was doing before changes, everything, then I look different ...

This response also indicates a psychological shift of attitude, self-perception and behaviour through the symbolic notion of "entering the church" when the uniform is worn. By wearing the uniform, the wearer is more easily able to invoke the Holy Spirit.

Sticks and/or Staffs

The NGCZA members often say that they receive "power" from their sticks, which means that the use of sticks allows them to gain access to spiritual strength

found through the Holy Spirit for the purpose of healing. The sticks, which are also sometimes referred to as staffs, are consciously utilized in the patterned movements the NGCZA members perform. As symbolic spiritual props, the sticks serve the purpose of invoking the Holy Spirit and as a powerful spiritual antenna that helps its bearer to "receive" the Holy Spirit. One member, a prophet in the NGCZA, spoke of his stick as an "injection" that is used to inject people with the Holy Spirit and with healing. This filling of the stick with the Holy Spirit manifests through performance in various ways: rhythmic tapping of the stick on the ground, random and sudden movements of the stick in the air, violent swings and impromptu stick-fights, and sometimes even stick bearers striking a fellow ritual participant, usually one who has been identified as either physically, spiritually or emotionally sick. Sticks are an essential complement to the church uniform in that they represent the spiritual weapons that are carried with the "warriors" uniforms.

While most men carry sticks, only a few actually brandish them or hit others with them. Those who do, normally recognized prophets, explain their actions saying that they were "full" of the Holy Spirit. When in these intoxicated states, behaviours and actions are influenced and formed around the use of the sticks to a large degree. The sticks create sound, movement and visual punch and are physically felt by those sick people who may receive a spiritual beating. The sick in turn react, apparently not due to pain, but as a response to the implications of being hit as an identified sick person in that moment. There does not seem to be any objection to being hit; instead the event is understood as a normal and necessary part of the healing process. In this way, spiritual belief is articulated through the behaviour that the sticks facilitate.

The stick is both a powerful symbol of spiritual power for the NGCZA members and a prayer tool used to help invoke the Holy Spirit for healing purposes. A NGCZA pastor explained that he holds his stick when he prays even when he is at home away from the church: "Even when I am in my room I take my stick and pray, always praying with it." This indicates that the stick exerts an influence on behaviour, at least for some NGCZA members, outside of the sacred context of the church services. It also shows the significance of the stick as a prayer tool. One NGCZA member explained that:

There were people in the Bible who were carrying sticks; when they went to pray they carry sticks. So that is why we carry sticks ... It is for praying.

However, in NGCZA services the conception of prayer is not limited to the conventional image of a person kneeling down on the ground with lowered head, although this occurs too. All ritual activity is considered as prayer and any use of the stick is also a form of prayer.

Drums and Drumming

The drums play an important role in establishing and maintaining the momentum for worshippers to project themselves and each other into states that are conducive to receiving the Holy Spirit. In these conditions prayer is taking place and action during ritual activity is affected. Movement is affected by the drums, as is clapping and other sounds made by the dancers. The uniforms, sticks and the drums together make up the spiritual armory that the congregants bring onto the religious battlefield. They are symbolic items that project and facilitate the intention of prayer, worship and healing for the church members. These intentions result in both particular and spontaneous behaviour during ritual proceedings. The implementation of spiritual weapons and their particular purposes are prescribed according to the ritual frame, and the way in which they are used affects the behaviour of participants. This occurs through the sensory impact the spiritual weapons have, through the ways in which they induce altered states in the worshippers, and through their symbolic significance as weapons to fight evil. Spiritual weapons, by influencing behaviour and the way individuals see themselves and others, bear a direct influence on the performance form of spiritual beliefs in the sacred context of the church services.

Meaning and Symbolic Behaviour

In NGCZA rituals, the symbolic significance of spiritual weapons is emphasized through behaviour, and this behaviour is at times also symbolic. On one occasion during a NGCZA church service, two dancing men, upon reaching a heightened moment, began to pound the ground with their sticks around three sick people in the centre of the circle. With the drums thumping and the clattering sound of the sticks being beaten on the ground, a dramatic encounter was created. The spiritual warriors, through the symbolic act of beating their sticks on the ground, were engaged in spiritual warfare by warding off evil, sickness and pain from the identified "sick" people. But the stick did not beat itself on the ground; it was through behaviour and action that the stick was a part of this symbolic encounter.

Inanimate objects may hold a certain inherent symbolic quality in themselves, but they come to life when observed through and in conjunction with action. Symbols, if carried or worn by a participant in religious ritual, become symbols being "performed" and thus also their meaning is being performed. A staff or stick is no more than a piece of wood, but when it is carried and held like a weapon in the ritual context, it immediately takes on the symbolic quality of a spiritual weapon. Spiritual weapons serve as powerful symbols and not as practical weapons. According to Geertz, symbols can be defined as "any object, act, event, quality or relation, which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol's 'meaning'" (1973: 91). The symbolic message of stick

as weapon is communicated through action: it is performed. When a stick is "performed" in conjunction with other symbolic items, such as the uniform, it serves further to articulate the symbolic quality of these other items. The notion of a spiritual warriors' uniform becomes much more striking when observed being performed with a "stick as weapon."

The repetitive, circular dancing patterns of the NGCZA congregants are one of the ways in which they worship. But the dance form takes on a different meaning when the dancers are carrying sticks as they spin in circles. The inclusion of sticks in the movement conveys the meaning of a spiritual war especially since church members know that the sticks serve the purpose of fighting evil intent. Often during the services, the circular dancers erupt into symbolic fighting during which they swing the sticks in the air, beat them on the ground and sometimes also hit other worshippers. I call these types of behaviours acts of invocation because they serve the purpose of invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit which becomes manifest to the participants through their actions and behaviours.

Communication through Symbolic Performance

Prayer is a form of communication and performance, and most activities during church rituals are considered prayer or worship. According to Meyerhoff, "rituals are communicative performances" (1990: 246). Rhythmic drumbeats, the brandishing of sticks and the wearing of uniforms help the NGCZA members to communicate with the Holy Spirit. Drumming creates the momentum to dance and move, which often results in behaviours that are explained by reference to the Holy Spirit. A NGCZA reverend articulated this when he said: "... if you [are] dancing, you see others are falling down[, it means that] you can communicate with the Holy Spirit." An older female NGCZA member said that her uniform gave her "power", a reference to the intoxicating effect of the subjectively experienced presence of the Holy Spirit. All NGCZA members questioned in the research referred in some way to the sticks as tools for spiritual communication. It is common to see some of the healers beating, tapping or touching the sick with their sticks during ritual dance. Those who have been identified as being sick, or who have voluntarily come forward with this temporary identity, sit on the ground in the middle of the spinning dancers. The NGCZA congregants claim that whoever is beaten will not feel pain provided that the Holy Spirit is guiding the action. Through the dancing, members enter altered states where they are able to receive spiritual visions about the sick.

Dreamtime Messengers

On one Sunday afternoon before the church services on Melville Koppies had started, and the NGCZA members were gathering in and around their circle, I

had a very brief but very insightful conversation with three wise old men. These old men were not members of the NGCZA but all belonged to three separate congregations on the Koppies. They were visitors to the NGCZA circle on that day. One was a pastor of his circle and the other two were also experienced and wise in the way of their church. They were introduced to me by my informant, Lucky, who was eager for me to interview them because, he said, “they have been around for a long time.” While we spoke several other men from the NGCZA agreed with what they had to say, nodding their heads and contributing at times. This confirmed to me that, although they were from different congregations, their stories applied equally to the NGCZA. What they shared with me also corresponded to what several other members had said that I had interviewed on the subject of the Holy Spirit. These old men had all been members of the church since the early seventies and were still devoted congregants. I asked them about various church behaviours that I had observed to try to understand the subjective experiences of church members who were “drunk” with the Holy Spirit. Other NGCZA members who were gathered and listening met their explanations with unanimous nods of agreement and amusement.

One of the old men began by saying, “The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God. You need to pray hard for the Holy Spirit to give you power.” He then continued to use a simple metaphor to explain how a person receives “power” through prayer from the Holy Spirit. The spiritual connection between a “believer” and the Holy Spirit, he said, is like a cell-phone that is always switched on: “[w]hen the Spirit rings, you must answer,” he explained. He continued by saying that when one “answers the call”, the Spirit will send a “message.” This message contains the “power” to see visions and prophecies, to heal, to exorcise, and to speak in “tongues”, a spiritual language. Speaking on behalf of the experience of the other congregants who were gathered around him, the old man claimed that by receiving this power “... we become messengers of the Holy Spirit.” The role of the messenger, he added, is to do the work that the Holy Spirit instructs. On a different occasion a NGCZA congregant said something similar regarding the practice of healing: “So the Holy Spirit tells you these things and you tell this person ... you can touch where there is something wrong, and tell what that person must do.” When I asked the old man what the experience of receiving “power” felt like, a second man explained: “It is like a dream.” The third old man added: “it is only possible if you believe it is”

According to these three elderly congregants, a spiritual identity emerges – that of “messenger” for the Holy Spirit – through belief, prayer and intention. The reference to the dream-like quality of their experiences indicates that receiving power from the Holy Spirit results in transformative states that are “like dreams” (Myerhoff 1990: 245). Once the influence of the Holy Spirit subsides, the liminal identity of spiritual messenger falls away.

Acts of Power

In these dream-like states of consciousness, the temporary identity of spiritual messenger is performed in the actions and behaviours of those congregants who carry out the religious protocols prescribed in the ritual process. These protocols I call “acts of power”: actions and behaviour that are spiritually influenced. Fasting, speaking in tongues, acts of healing, receiving visions and relaying these visions through prophecy are typical acts of power and manifestations of the spiritual messenger.

Fasting and Prayer

The experience of “receiving” the Holy Spirit often requires some preparation, and the practice of fasting is one such process. Congregants often refer to fasting as a form of prayer. The practice is inspired by references to the Bible. One woman explained:

That’s the way Jesus was doing it. He went for forty days and forty nights without food and water.

As a form of prolonged and intense prayer for the NGCZA members, fasting serves the purpose of “getting into the power.” Lewis (cited by Schechner 2002: 166) maintains that trance states can be induced by such “stimuli ... and privations as fasting and ascetic contemplation.” The person fasting will normally spend anything from one to seven days in solitude on the Melville Koppies Reserve, sleeping on the reserve and not eating or drinking anything for the entire duration of the fast. Through focused prayer and concentration, the faster is rendered most receptive to the influence of the Holy Spirit. “If you fast more, the Spirit will come,” said one NGCZA congregant. Through prolonged fasting, combined with prayer, a person becomes spiritually sensitive.

When the faster ends the fasts and comes to church, he or she feels like a different person: a transformation has occurred. Speaking about himself coming down from a mountain after a prolonged fast, a NGCZA pastor explained:

Once I come down from there, ah, you can see now this man has changed. I can see anything; even if you think something bad I can tell you what you think.

Another congregant by the name of Thaban and speaking about when he returns from fasting, said: “if you see me when the Holy Spirit comes, you will see this man is not Thaban.” In both of the above responses the congregants expressed an altered self-perception, and claimed that others also perceived a change in their identity. Fasting prepares and enables the congregant to experience the

Holy Spirit during the service and to perform other acts of power (Makhubu 1988).

Speaking in Tongues

The practice of “speaking in tongues” usually occurs during prophetic sessions where one or more of the congregants, sometimes all, will erupt into a nonsensical “language” consisting of utterances, sounds and “nonsense” speech. Schechner (2002: 223) describes “tongues” as “a direct vocalization of the divine that has no verbatim translation.” A NGCZA pastor told me that speaking in tongues can only occur when “you are in that power.” In Western Pentecostalism “speaking in tongues” is usually the first indicator of the presence of the Holy Spirit (Anderson 2000). In the AIC, it

is used for the purpose of revealing the dependence of the speaker upon God. After speaking in tongues ... the prophet usually relates in understandable language what he considers the Holy Spirit to be revealing to him. (Anderson 2000: 50)

Here again, the role of the spiritual messenger is activated. Members explain that their utterances are messages from God, and that the Holy Spirit is relaying these messages through them.

I often witnessed the NGCZA members speaking in tongues. Sometimes it would consist of whispers while they knelt down, illustrating how this is also a form of prayer. During other times one or two members would be praying over the sick by speaking in tongues. Although I could not understand the utterances, it was clear that these were spiritually charged moments. Talking in tongues is also an act of healing and accompanies prophetic visions.

Prophetic Visions and Healing

The NGCZA members claim that a person will be able to have prophetic visions allowing them to engage in healing after they have undergone prolonged fasting. It is also possible to attain this power through the different forms of prayer and worship that are characterized by performative acts of dancing, singing, clapping, and drumming. However, fasting will result in the most profound visions due to the intensified physical and spiritual preparation over a relatively long period. I consider prophetic visions to be temporary shifts in consciousness. One NGCZA prophet told me that congregants who have the power to see visions “can see inside you, like a computer ... the prophet can tell you that baby in your stomach is a boy or girl.” While he assured me that he *did* mean this literally, not all visions are about seeing; they are also about perceiving kinesthetically. Another prophet explained that when he has visions he is able to “see” if a person is in

physical pain. He says that: "If a man, his foot is paining, then I just touching his foot, or his head and I can see what is the pain." The reason for these visions is to determine what is ailing the sick person and therefore to act or instruct appropriately for the purpose of healing.

Dancing is considered a form of healing by the NGCZA members as it facilitates healers to receive healing power. One NGCZA member indicated that while he is dancing he has extrasensory perception. He said:

Sometimes I feel I can close my eyes but I [still] see what I am doing, [even though] my eyes are closed ... and then I don't get lost, I don't bump into anybody. Maybe the spirit is leading me.

The hitting of sick people with sticks is a method of transmitting the healing power of the Holy Spirit to the sick. Exorcism of evil spirits is another form of healing. Sometimes the healer will hit a person because they are "commanded by the Spirit to do that; if there is a bad Spirit on you ... they will chase away the bad spirit by beating you and shaking you." The congregants claim that they do not feel any pain from these beatings as they are of the Holy Spirit. If a congregant who is doing the "hitting" is not genuinely "drunk" then the person receiving the beating intervention would experience pain. The lack of pain from a beating is, thus, an indicator of an altered state of consciousness. This is typical of right brain activity which "loosens a person's ego, dissolving boundaries between self and other, inner and outer" (Schechner 2002: 165). The implications of this for identity are that personal identities merge with others, thereby momentarily rendering congregants open to take on liminal, spiritual identities.

The laying of hands is another common healing practice. Sometimes by simply touching a sick person the healing power of the Holy Spirit is transmitted to the sick. The NGCZA members look to the example of Jesus who would lay his hands on the sick and they would be healed. Church members have many stories of "miracles" and healings that they have experienced themselves or seen through physical contact. One congregant said in an interview:

I had a stomach problem for ten years. When I came to Zion, the pastor, he gave water and prayed for me, and now I'm better. I have been healed.

However, the act of "laying of hands" seems to occur with the intention to receive a vision from the Holy Spirit, in the form of an instruction to the sick person for healing. One NGCZA member explained that, "[i]f I am putting hands on you, then the Holy Spirit tells me that this man is in pain and tells me what he must do." This instruction from the Holy Spirit holds the remedy for sickness. Such a

remedy can be, for example, anything from drinking a glass of water to leaving a husband or wife. Anyone can be a healer in the church, as long they “pray hard” and “fast long”.

Prophesying

Once the prophet has received instruction from the Holy Spirit or has seen the remedy needed for the sick through a vision, his next task is to relay these messages. The proper moment for this arrives towards the end of the service, once the heightened moments of spiritually induced performances begin to subside. As the drumming, dancing and singing subsides or even ceases, the sick will gather in the centre of the circle. The prophets, still deep in trance states, begin to prophesy to the sick and relate their visions to them. Their speech is often fast and energetic and directed towards the person they are prophesying over. Explaining the onset of visions, one prophet explained that:

This thing, it comes from a vision to you, even if you got a pain ... then that vision tells you that there is something here, or that person is sick. Like a snake you can see it.

On one occasion the prophet randomly moved around with a staff in one hand as an accompaniment to his speech. Once he had stopped prophesying, another prophet began in a similar fashion until all the spiritual messages had been relayed. During this time the congregants stood or sat in the circle listening to the prophets’ “stories”. Those listening can often hear grunts, “amens”, “hallelujahs” and other expressions of response from their fellow congregants. The suspense, anticipation and physicality of the ZCC rituals are evident in congregants’ heavy breathing and sweat-drenched uniforms. At this time the church service draws to a close and the congregants casually leave the circle, put their shoes back on and begin to exit the sacred space of their ritual environment. As they walk down a small slope on the Koppies toward the profane, they leave behind the resonance of their spiritual identities in the sacred circle, and the cycle begins once more.

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit is central to the spiritual experiences of the NGCZA. What congregants do, what they wear and how they behave are informed and driven by a central belief in the Holy Spirit. Their religious beliefs are made explicit through the various spiritual behaviours called “acts of invocation” that typify the NGCZA rituals. By invoking the Holy Spirit in ritual activity, the NGCZA members enter into altered states of consciousness that can also be called trance or possession. In these “otherworldly” dream states and transformations, church members take on spiritual, liminal identities, especially those of messengers,

who perform acts of power for the purposes of healing. Liminal identities represent the emergence of aspects of performed faith because they are a product of spiritually charged spaces and temporary ritualised activities. Through the performance of belief, faith becomes a perceptible, experiential activity and is reinforced by what congregants *do* during their church services.

Notes

- ¹ The term "Pentecostal" as a defining form of Christianity is relevant to the NGCZA. According to Anderson (2000), Pentecostalism emphasises "freedom of the spirit," especially the practice of "speaking in tongues." However, Anderson adds that African Independent Churches are not Pentecostal churches in the western sense of the word, but rather that, much like a western orientation, they tend toward Pentecostalism through an emphasis on the Holy Spirit.
- ² The Association of African Independent Churches of the Melville Koppies is in turn registered with the African Independent Churches Committee (Registration No. 20070826).
- ³ The left side of the brain guides logical thought and speech, while the right side of the brain guides tonal and spatial perceptions. In everyday life, the left side of the brain is dominant. Through stimuli found in the NGCZA rituals, both hemispheres are stimulated, resulting in changes of the nervous system and the body (Schechner 2002). See also Turner (1982).

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