

The Sacrifice of Flesh and Blood: Male Circumcision in Ibandla lamaNazaretha as a Biblical and African Ritual

Nkosinathi Sithole
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

Male circumcision is an African phenomenon that has been in existence for thousands of years, dating back to the pre-colonial era. The Zulu King Shaka (1790-1828) put an end to this practice for the Zulus; but Isaiah Shembe (1870-1935) brought it back. However, the kind of circumcision that Isaiah Shembe reinstated is a hybrid form, combining the pre-colonial ritual practice as a rite of passage and the Israelites' biblical one based on Abraham's covenant with God in Genesis 17:10-14.

Circumcision in *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* (Church of the Nazarites) is a hybrid ritual practice that is in-between African tradition and the biblical text of Genesis. As Muller has noted, Shembe combined "his deep knowledge of the mission bible with his respect for traditional Nguni ways, and with some knowledge of commodity capitalism, he constituted a new and hybrid regime of religious truth (Foucault 1980) in competition with ideologies of the state and Christian mission" (1999: 19). What is of interest for this paper is "a new and hybrid regime of religious truth," rather than "competition with the state and Christian mission." In this paper I look at circumcision in Ibandla lamaNazaretha as a ritual through which the divide between the physical and the spiritual realms is believed to be broken. While it does incorporate both the African traditional practice and the biblical covenant between God and the Israelites, this bridging of the gap between the physical and the spiritual realms is the main feature that makes circumcision in Ibandla lamaNazaretha unique.

Ibandla lamaNazaretha is one of the biggest and rapidly growing African Initiated Churches (AICs) in South Africa. It was founded by Isaiah Shembe around 1910 in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. Although it started as a local and ethnically specific church, today Ibandla lamaNazaretha has a strong national following; attracting members from all walks of life across ethnic groups, and has members as far afield as Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The church is rapidly growing in numbers. According to Preacher Sibisi, there are all in all about seven million Nazaretha members. This growth, plus the church's "success in creating a religious presence which is distinctively African," causes Gunner to see it as a "force to be reckoned with in social, religious and political terms" (2002: 1).

Isaiah Shembe forged his Church by blending Christian and African forms, many of the latter being prohibited in mainstream churches. As Kunene argues, "Whilst keeping the Christian principles the Shembites have retained some of the traditional customs and practices" (1961: 197-198). Isaiah Shembe's theology clashed with that of the nonconformist missionaries, whose intention it was, as the Comaroffs have noted, "to 'civilise' the native by remaking his person and his context; by reconstructing his habit and habitus; by taking back the savage mind from Satan, who had emptied it of all traces of spirituality and reason" (1991: 238). Some of the main issues of conflict were African song and dance, polygamy, and recognition of the ancestors. One of the most significant expressive forms in the Nazaretha Church is *umgidi* (the sacred dance) in which the performers's dress includes loinskins, headties and other attire made from animal hides. The sacred dance itself involves the beating of cowhide drums and the singing of hymns composed by Isaiah Shembe, and is arguably an improvisation on the dances that took place in pre-colonial society, which were labeled 'uncivilised' and 'anti-Christian.'

Polygamy and veneration of the ancestors are amongst the attractions that caused many to join the Church (Oosthuizen 1967: 5), while at the same time creating great concern on the part of the missionaries and the educated elites. Nelly Wells, wife of John Wells, who was the headmaster in Ohlange Institute (Ohlange was situated close to eKuphakameni) in 1924, says that:

Everywhere chapels, churches and schools were emptied as Shembe approached and the people crowded to listen with great joy...then the missionaries waged warfare, because, as they said, Shembe was undoing much if not most of what they had done. (quoted in Mpanza 1999: 56)

When Isaiah Shembe passed away in 1935, his son, Johannes, took over the leadership of the Church. In 1976 Johannes passed away and the Church was split due to the leadership dispute that ensued. Johannes's son, Londa, remained

in eKuphakameni, and Amos, Johannes's brother, moved with a bigger faction to establish a new village called eBuhleni. It is under the leadership of Amos, known to members as iNyanga Yezulu (the Moon of Heaven) that the Church started its rapid growth in membership and expanded beyond South Africa. When Amos passed away in 1995, his son Vimbeni took over the leadership. He led the eBuhleni sect until he passed away in March 2011 and another dispute (which is presently ongoing) ensued between Vimbeni's son, Mduduzi (who is supported by the great majority of the Church), and Johannes's son, Vela.

There have also been secessions in the Nazaretha Church. Phakama Shembe, Johannes's grandson has started his own Church in Johannesburg and Mudliwamafa (Johannes's son) has also started his own known as Giyezinye sect. In 2009, one of the well respected evangelists, Mthembeni Mpanza, started his own New Nazareth Baptist Church, based in Pine Town. With the exception of Mpanza, all these secessions and splits are purely motivated by leadership preferences and have not resulted in significant doctrinal alterations. It is only Mpanza whose teachings regarding the ancestors have drastically changed from what is generally believed in the church (see Sithole 2011).

The research from which this paper is based was conducted between 2008 and 2009 (amongst the eBuhleni members before the 2011 split) as part of a broader project in which I investigated the hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the sacred dance in his Ibandla lamaNazaretha. My methodology included attending church services, especially exclusive overnight male meetings called *u*-twenty-three. These are congregational gatherings which take place every month on the twenty-second and the twenty-third. In these meetings no female member (married women have their own gathering called *u*-fourteen and maidens have *u*-twenty-five) or anybody who is not a member of the church is allowed to attend. The material used in writing this paper is the result of my conversations with members of the church, recorded teachings and preachings in the overnight meetings and my experiences as a member of the church.

My work is based on the amaNazaretha from eBuhleni, as I myself am a member of this group. Being a member of the church offers me a privileged and interesting position because I have unique access to information: I know where to go to find that information, and I do not come upon the church as a scholar first, but I come as a member of the church first and a scholar second. In some ways I see myself as both an insider (member) and as an outsider (scholar). However, the downside of being a member of a church which is divided like the Nazaretha Church is that, while it is useful to have better access to information, I do not have access to other sects. For instance, I cannot go and conduct my research at eKuphakameni (or any other sect) because I will be regarded as a spy, but someone who does not belong to either sect can attend all the places.

I stated elsewhere (see Sithole 2005; 2009) that some of the stories (I was

referring to the narratives of near-death experiences) in the Nazaretha Church, once told, cease to belong to the people who experienced them and become the church's cultural capital that circulates within the church in sermons and conversations. Some dream experiences take that form, depending on what they are about. One such story is of a man who went to be circumcised and when he came back he had a dream. He saw himself in a wild area where he was following a group of people he did not recognize. A voice asked him if he knew the people and he said he did not. The voice then told him that the people he saw were the spirits of his dead relatives. They had been 'living' in the cave for many years because the man's uncle had *thwala-ed* with them (an act of witchcraft which is like sacrificing people to the evil spirits, so that a dead person's soul does not go to heaven or to its ancestors but is kept and used by the person who did the *ukuthwala*). But because this man had been circumcised, he had freed them from his uncle's hold and they were now on the way to heaven.

As this story shows, dreams occupy an important role in the lives of amaNazaretha (members of Ibandla lamaNazaretha) and many of them are regarded as a form of communication with the ancestors (see McNulty 2003; Burgland 1976). But this story also points to the sense in which through ritual practice (circumcision in this case) the divide between the physical and the spiritual realms is broken, so that the sacrifice of blood and flesh of a living person can bring about the liberation of the spiritual beings in their own realm. I suggest that here lies an important motivation for Nazaretha men, through a very painful experience, to sacrifice their own blood and flesh. They do it because they hope to create a heaven for their own relatives who have passed on and at the same time create a heaven for themselves. As the voice in the story mentioned above added: "You too will see heaven if you keep the rules of God."

However, circumcision in the Nazaretha Church is also explained in terms of Abraham's covenant with God in the book of Genesis in the Old Testament. In the 'old' Zulu version favoured in the church (published in 1883; see West 2007), Genesis 17 verses 10-14 details this covenant as follows:

Le si siyivumelwano sami pakati kwami nawe nenzalo yakho emva kwako, eni ya kusi gcina: Baya kusokwa bonke abesilisa bakini. 11 Niya kusoka inyama yejwabu lenu; ku be upau luesivumelwano pakati kwami nani. 12 U ya kusokwa lowo wakini onezinsuku ezishiyagalombili, bonke abesilisa ezizukulwaneni zenu, lowo ozaliweyo endhlini, na lowo otengiweyo ngemali kubafokazi bonke, e ngesiyo inzalo yako. 13 U yakusokwa nokusokwa yena ozalwe endlini no tengwe ngemali yenu, si be yisivumelwano esinganqamukiyo. 14 Owesilisa o nga sokiwe, o nga soki inyama yejwabu lake, lomuntu u ya kukitywa kubantu ba kubo, weqe isivumelwano sami.

[This is my covenant between me and you and your posterity after you, which you will keep: All of your males will be circumcised. 11 You will circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; to be a symbol of the covenant between you and me. 12 He will be circumcised that of you who is eight days old, all the males in your posterity, the one born in the house, and the one bought with money from all foreigners, not being of your offspring. 13 He will be circumcised he who is born in the house and the one bought with your money, it will be a covenant that cannot break. 14 A male person who is not circumcised, who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, this person will be removed from his people, he broke my covenant.]

As the biblical text above shows, circumcision in Israel was meant to be a symbol of a covenant between a person and God, and they had to be circumcised at the age of eight days. In the Nazaretha Church the youngest boy circumcised is at least fourteen years old (which itself is very rare), but it is mostly matured, young men (and grown men) who go for circumcision. This is because this ritual is not just an appropriation of the biblical text but it is also part of an African traditional rite. In pre-Shakan Zulu society young men used to be circumcised in the 'African' way. Here, circumcision was a rite of passage in which young men of a certain age would go to the wild to be circumcised and taught the ways of the tribe and then come back as men. Shaka thought this practice was weakening young men whom he wanted to conscript for his regiments and therefore he put an end to this tradition. As Mkele puts it, "Shaka, having placed Zulu people on the war footing, could not afford to have armies incapacitated by circumcision and stopped it. But, great psychologist that he was, he substituted service in *amabutho*[war regiments] as a condition of entry into manhood. Note that Shaka and his generation were all circumcised" (Funani 1990: vi). So in introducing circumcision, Shembe was both importing a ritual practice from Israel and at the same time reinstating a tradition that had been lost in the time of Shaka.

In the Nazaretha Church circumcision is a new hybrid form that does not fit either the kind of circumcision practised in Israel or the kind practised in pre-Shakan Zulu society and in the present-day South African societies that still practise it. As the first story of a Nazaretha young man who went for circumcision and had a dream shows, circumcision in the Nazaretha Church is linked to African religion in a way that pre-Shakan circumcision and circumcision in other African societies was (and is) not. The next section of this article looks at circumcision in pre-colonial African society, and the last section looks at circumcision in the Nazaretha Church.

Circumcision among the South African Communities

Although there is not enough information about its distribution, circumcision in southern African societies was (and is) more of a social practice than a religious one. Writing in 1936, Krige had this to say about the distribution of circumcision in South Africa: “The present distribution of circumcision cannot be fully plotted out, owing to complete lack of information on many tribes” (Quoted in van der Vliet 1974: 228). She goes on to list ethnic groups that still practiced it. Among these are Xhosa, Thembu, Fingo and Bomvana, some of the Tswana tribes, the Southern Sotho, and the Pedi, to mention but a few. As for the Zulus, van der Vliet mentions that “the Zulu cut the string under the foreskin at about nine years of age, but this is not a ritual occasion” (228).

In most of the African societies in the subcontinent that practised it, circumcision was perceived to be the rite of passage through which a boy becomes a man. As Funani states, “In Africa circumcision is associated with male initiation into manhood” (1990: 22). Nelson Mandela, in his *Long Walk to Freedom*, emphasizes the same fact about the role of circumcision among the Xhosa:

When I was sixteen, the regent decided that it was time that I became a man. In Xhosa tradition, this is achieved through one means only: circumcision. In my tradition, an uncircumcised male cannot be heir to his father’s wealth, cannot marry or officiate in tribal rituals. An uncircumcised Xhosa man is a contradiction in terms, for he is not considered a man at all, but a boy. For the Xhosa people, circumcision represents the formal incorporation of males into society. It is not just a surgical procedure, but a lengthy and elaborate ritual in preparation for manhood. As a Xhosa, I count my years as a man from the date of my circumcision. (1994: 24)

Because circumcision represented incorporation into manhood, Mandela and his fellow initiates were urged to cry, “*Ndiyindoda!*” (“I am a man!”), after the actual operation and it was considered a disgrace (at least by Nelson Mandela) if one succumbed to pain. Mandela admits that the pain he felt was so intense that it took seconds before he remembered to utter the word “*Ndiyindoda,*” and this hurt his feelings:

But I felt ashamed because the other boys seemed much stronger and firmer than I had been; they had called out more promptly than I had. I was distressed that I was disabled, however briefly, by the pain, and I did my best to hide my agony. A boy may cry; a man conceals his pain. (1994: 26)

And also the novices were subjected to different kinds of hardships and ordeals to test resilience against the trials of life and at the same time strengthen them for their future duties of manhood. These hardships included beatings, sleeping on the floor, bathing with cold water (the initiations were normally held in winter to ensure that the wounds healed quickly) and others. Jean Comaroff states about initiation among the Tswana that, “On the evening when the moon of *Mophitlho* (March) was seen all the boys to be initiated proceeded in ward groups to the chief’s court, where they spent the night in song and dance” (1985: 89-90). In the morning the boys were escorted to their lodge in the bush where they were circumcised on the day of arrival. No woman or uninitiated man was allowed to even see the lodge and their presence was considered defiling. Those who did come to the lodge were required to refrain from sexual intercourse for the duration of the initiation because “it was critical that initiates be kept away from the heat generated by adult sexuality” (90). Another important feature of initiation was the education bestowed on the novices. For the Sotho groups, including the Tswana, van der Vliet states that the education emphasized loyalty to the tribe and the values, rights and obligations of citizenship.

Circumcision in the Nazaretha Church

In the Nazaretha Church, apart from the link it creates between the physical and the ancestral worlds, circumcision is also a way of personal cleansing and of creating a way to heaven. This understanding does not tally with either the biblical text mentioned above or circumcision in Xhosa and Tswana traditions. In both the Israelite and African traditions no link is made between circumcision and entering heaven. But since the Bible has a significant place in the Church of amaNazaretha, and Isaiah Shembe “seized and reconstituted the bible” as much as it also “took hold of him and drew him [and his followers, I argue] to its narrative” (West 2007: 494), and because African tradition plays an important role in the church, the question of whether circumcision should be explained in African terms or in biblical terms is a complex one that is hard to resolve. Some members of the church view this practice as a biblical one and want it to be practised according to scripture. As a man called Mlaba said in an *u*twenty-three meeting of February 2008, held in the homestead of the Chunu Chief of Mandleni in Mdubuzweni area near Mooi River:

Njengoba silapha sengathi uNkulunkulu engasisiza siphelele. Bese siya ebhekingqola. Kukhona into eshiwo ngabantu kodwa uNkulunkulu akayishongo. Uma ngabe sifunda incwadi kaGenesisi, uthi uGenesisi ingane uma ngabe kweyomfana iyozalwa, kuphele izinsuku zibe wuseveni, ngalolu luka eyithi, uthi ayihambe iye ebhekingqola iyosokwa. Usho njalo uNkulunkulu kodwa abantu

bathi ayize ibe ndala. Bathi ayifanele ukuthi ingane iye lapha. Okwethu-ke lokho, okwabantu. Ziyaya nje izingane sezindala laphaya?Azifuni, sezazi namalungelo. Sinayo nje ingqekana le ngeke usho ukuthi ayiye le. Kodwa ingane uma iseyingane...akekho zinsizwa njengoba silapha onelungelo lokwenza isono ngoba akayile ebhekinqola. Kukhona yini lapho kushiwo khona wuShembe lokho ukuthi uma umuntu engakayi ebhekinqola yena ukhululekile ukuthi akenze izono?Hhay, asimusukhohlisana. Asiyenzi le nto njengoba uNkulunkulu eshilo. Uthi uNkulunkulu yenza uphawu lube yisivumelwane sakhe. Uma le ngane ingasabi ndala? Uthi uNkulunkulu ingane ayizalwe wunkosikazi, izinsuku eziwuseveni, ngalolu luka eyithi, ayihambe iyokhula. Kodwa-ke okwethu thina bantu wukuthi ingane ayibe ndala.

[As we are here I wish God can help us be complete. And go to Bhekinqola (a place of circumcision in the Nazaretha Church). There is something that is said by people but God did not say it. If we read Genesis, Genesis says if a child is born a boy, he will be born, and after seven days, in this eighth one, He says [the child] should go to Bhekinqola to be circumcised. That is what God says but people say [the child] needs to be grown. They say a child is not supposed to go there. That is of ours, it's of the people. Do the children when they are grown go there? They do not want, now that they have rights. We do have these gangs of children but you cannot tell them to go there. But if a child is still a child... there is no one, young men, as we are here who has a right to commit sin because he has not gone to Bhekinqola. Is it there where Shembe says that if a man has not gone to Bhekinqola he is free to commit sin? No. Let's not lie to each other, let's do this thing as God said. God says create a symbol to be His covenant. What if this child does not grow? God says a child be born by a woman, seven days, and in this eighth one, [the child] must go to *khula* (to grow up). But our [view], we people, is that the child must be grown up.]

But even in this formulation of Mlaba's, the role of circumcision is still linked to the traditional practice of circumcision. His comments about circumcision, for instance, are prefaced by a statement that links circumcision to the notion of completeness that obtains in both the African and the Nazaretha ways of understanding: that if a man has not been circumcised, he is not a man, he is still a boy and he is incomplete. He also refers to it as *ukukhula*, meaning

to grow up, also showing that this practice is seen as a rite of passage through which a boy becomes a man. This shifting understanding of circumcision, from the biblical to the traditional, is common in the Nazaretha Church. In an u-twenty-three meeting of April 2008, Moses Hadebe of Nkonzenjani Temple in Ntabamhlophe near Estcourt, also talked about circumcision as something that Shembe appropriated from the Bible. But in his formulation he also relates circumcision to its significance as an African ritual practice.

Imithetho yalayikhaya inzima kabi ngoba sisenkolweni kaJesu. UShembe wazosifaka ngaphansi kwenkolo kaJesu kodwa abanye abazi ukuthi uShembe wazosifaka ngaphansi kwenkolo kaJesu. Izinkolo lezi eziningi azazi ukuthi safakwa ngaphansi komthetho kaJesu. UJesu wenziwa klini ene seven days. Enezinsuku ezizweseveni wase useyenziwa-ke lowomthetho. Nathi-ke uthe uma efika uShembe wasibuyisela kulowomthetho, wokuthi asibuyele emthethweni kaJesu ngoba singaphansi kwenkolo kaJesu. Ngokufika kwalo mthetho ubungavumi ukuthi noma wubani afunde umbhedesho weSabatha. Kwakufuneka umuntu okhulile. Kukhona ukukhula okwenziwayo kule nkonzo ngoba kuthiwa neNkosi uBabamkhulu watholakala eshleli le lapha kuya khona izinsizwa. Kukhona indawana lapha kuya khona izinsizwa, ziyaqiniswa ukhakhayi ukuba zibe yizinsizwa saka. Manje-ke sasithi uma sifika kwenye indawo eGoli ethi amaXhosa “uyoze ufe uyikhwenkwe njengoyihlo.” Manje-ke sesiyawaphikisa sithi “cha noma ningasho nithi niyoze nife ningamakhwenkwe njengoyihlo kodwa ubaba akalona ikhwenkwe futhi nami angiselona ngoba kwafika uShembe wathi asenze kanje.”

[The laws of this home are difficult because we are in Jesus's religion. Shembe came to put us under Jesus's religion but others do not know that Shembe came to put us under Jesus's religion. Jesus was made clean (was circumcised) when he was seven days old. When he was seven days then this law was performed. Here also when Shembe came he returned us to that law which means we should return to Jesus's law because we are under Jesus's law. Because of the coming of this law it was not allowed for just anyone to read the hymnbook. It had to be somebody who is grown up (circumcised). There is *ukukhula* that is done here, you Nazaretha, in this church because it is said that the *iNkosi Babamkhulu* was found sitting there where the young men go. Now when we used to arrive in another place in Johannesburg the amaXhosa would say “you

will die boys as your fathers.” Now we negate them saying, “no you can say we will die boys as our fathers, but our fathers are not boys and I also am no longer a boy because Shembe arrived and said we should do like this.”]

The last comment Hadebe made about the Xhosa and their circumcision is interesting here and may point us to one possible explanation for Shembe’s reincorporation of circumcision in the Nazaretha Church. It is clear from Mandela’s account, and others, that circumcision among the people who performed it was very important in the constitution of masculine identities, and an uncircumcised man was relegated to boyhood. So, for Shembe who was born a Zulu but grew up in the Free State among the Sotho who still practised circumcision, it is possible that he himself grew up under scorn as someone whose father was a boy and who himself would die a boy as it happened to Hadebe and his fellow Zulus in Johannesburg.

In the Nazaretha Church, as it is the case with the Xhosa according to Mandela, there are certain rituals that exclude everyone who is uncircumcised. Hadebe mentions one of these as reading the prayer in the hymnal. The communion is another ritual for only complete people, and this, for men, means both being properly married and being circumcised. Also, one is not allowed to take part in a number of chores in the church, including the slaughtering of cows for the meeting, if one is not circumcised.

But what seems to be unique in the Nazaretha Church is circumcision as ritual cleansing. The reason why Mlaba emphasises that no one is allowed to commit sin even if one is not circumcised, is that it is considered worse to commit sin when you have been circumcised because when you are circumcised you are believed to be cleansed. You are cleansing yourself and your ancestors, and therefore defiling yourself defiles your ancestors as well, because, as I mentioned earlier, the ritual of circumcision is believed to bridge the gap between the physical world and the ancestral world. One way a man can defile himself and his ancestors is by sleeping with a woman he is not married to. This is called *ukuhlobonga* and is prohibited for any man in the church but is especially emphasised for those who have been circumcised. If a circumcised man engages in pre- or extra-marital sex, his sanctity attained through circumcision is lost. It is equal to “uncircumcising” oneself. As Minister Mthethwa said, drawing on the biblical narrative of Samson:

USamsoni wagundwa wuDelila.Yingakho kungafanele umfana walapha ekhaya alale nokadebenetha. Ngoba uma uke walala nokade benetha uzobuthatha bonke ubustrongi balesi sihluthu, ukade benetha. Abuthathe ahambe. Nokusokwa kwakho kuzosipaya.

Walala nje nokade benetha, finish indaba yakho! Ushaywa wumuntu ngempama uwe. Ulale nokade benetha.

[Samson's hair was cut by Delilah. That is why boys of this church/home should not sleep with *kadebenetha* (women who are not members of the church) because if he sleeps with *kadebenetha* she will take away all the strength of his long hair. *Kadebenetha* will take it and leave. And his circumcision too will be expired. If you sleep with *kadebenetha* you are finished. You will be slapped by a person in the face and you will fall. You slept with *kadebenetha*.] (Personal communication, eBuhleni, July 2008)

Hymn No. 18 in the Nazaretha hymnal also talks about circumcision and links it with ritual cleansing and paving the path to heaven:

*Amaqhawe kaThixo ayazikhethela
Asuke ashije umlaza
Ngokwenele abangcwele.
Ngamukele ngethemba
Gcwalisa inhliziyi yami.*

*Sengihlanjululwe nguwe wedwa
Angisamdingi omunye futhi.
Ngamukele ngethemba
Gcwalisa inhliziyi yami.*

*Abasokwa ngokwenele ngokuyithanda iNkosi
Bachaba indlela eya ekhaya.
Ngamukele ngethemba
Gcwalisa inhliziyi yami.*

*Wesihambi mawungesabi
Uzobelethwa nguThixo
Ngemihla yokuqala neyokuphela.
Ngamukele ngethemba
Gcwalisa inhliziyi yami.*

[God's heroes make their own choices
They tend to leave *umlaza*
As it suits the holy ones.
Receive me with hope
And fulfil my heart.

I've been cleansed by you alone
 I do not need another one
 Receive me with hope
 And fulfil my heart.

Those circumcised enough
 Because of their love for the Lord
 They weed the path to the home.
 Receive me with hope
 And fulfil my heart.

You traveller, don't be afraid
 God will carry you on His back
 During the first days and the last ones.
 Receive me with hope
 And fulfil my heart.]

According to this hymn, being circumcised makes one a hero because it is a very painful experience and one has to overcome fear before one can be circumcised (some people succumb to fear and return from Bhekinqola uncircumcised). But circumcised men are also heroes because if you get circumcised you commit yourself to living a holy life. Living a holy life means you do not eat unclean food like pork; you do not drink alcohol; you do not cut your hair; but most importantly, you do not sleep with a woman who is not your wife. As Mthethwa said above, engaging in pre- or extra-marital sex undoes ("expires it," in his words) your being circumcised and many people have been circumcised more than once (this is not the actual cutting of the foreskin but just cutting the penis to let blood out) because they went to have pre- or extra-marital sex and had to re-do circumcision. It is this "re-circumcision" that shows that circumcision in Ibandla lamaNazaretha is much more than a surgical removal of the foreskin, but a ritual cleansing of the body and the soul in preparation of the spiritual journey to heaven.

Those who join the church already circumcised have to be circumcised again in the Nazaretha way because in being circumcised outside the church they were not cleansed by Him (God of the Nazaretha) as stanza two says. This (cleansing in the Nazaretha Church) is the ultimate cleansing after which one does not need another cleanse. But one must confess before being circumcised so that all his sins (and those of his ancestors) will be cleansed. Thus when we were to be circumcised in 1999 (I was not doing it for research!) we had to start by confessing. We were told to wear our prayer gowns and one after the other we went to the circumciser, who was sitting a few metres away from us, for confessions. Unlike normal confession where you volunteer what wrong you

committed, here the circumciser asked me (and the others I presume) if I had ever slept with another man's wife; if I had ever slept with a white person or a person of another race (inter-racial marriage is prohibited in the Nazaretha Church); if I had ever engaged in pre-marital sex; if I had ever slept with another man; and lastly, he asked if I had ever masturbated.

Where I answered in the negative, he said "God bless you," and if I responded in the affirmative I had to give a fine of between two and six rand. Then he ritually cleansed me. I had come with a flower and a container, which was an empty milk container, with water. I had to hold my hands together and he poured water on them two times, each time telling me to spill it. On the third time he told me to wash my hands. Then I had to hold the flower with both my hands and he held my hands in his and started praying. After this he said "God bless you" and I was ready to go and wait for the final moment.

Cleansing ensures that God is able to come closer to the person and even to carry him or her over to the next life. The metaphor of a traveller, in stanza four, works in two related senses. The first one is that we as living people are only here on earth on a temporary basis, that at some point we will pass on to another realm. This is echoed in hymn No. 137 :

Kuhle inyama yami ihlupheke
Ukuze inhliziyo ikhumbule
Ukuthi akusilo ikhaya leli
Kuyidokodo lomhambi.
 [It is fitting that my flesh suffers
 So that my heart will remember
 That this is not my home
 It is a makeshift room of a traveller.]

But even while we are still here on earth, if we are cleansed by "him alone" we are ensured of an easier and better life in which God will carry our burdens and hardships. Related to this sense is the notion of a traveller in heaven. One of the tropes that characterise the narratives of near-death experiences in the Nazaretha Church is "the journey" in which the person having a near-death experience sees/feels him or herself travelling, sometimes through green pastures and sometimes having to cross rivers and climb mountains (see Sithole 2005). So according to stanza four, if you are cleansed the spirit of God will carry your spirit on the way to heaven. But if you are defiled, you cannot be in close proximity with God. Not even with Shembe.

Now I complete this section by telling the rest of my story of circumcision, hoping to show how this practice is also similar to circumcision in African society. So after cleansing it was time for the actual operation which I think is

the most challenging. There were only four of us because it was Tuesday and many had been circumcised on Saturday afternoon. We enviously watched these initiates moving up and down, limping, due to their wounds, and wearing their towels. Reflecting on that experience now, and each time I visit the initiates at Bhekinqola, I am fascinated by the commitment and determination one has to command in order to stay there till the end. When we went to our initiator to receive two bandages each, one fastened around the waist and the other anointed with some antiseptic that we were to take to the “place of operation,” I could feel my heart pounding and my legs felt like they were going to collapse.

If those who undergo circumcision do it for the love of their Lord/God as suggested by stanza three, it means their love is really strong. And this love is indeed for the Lord/God of heaven whom they are hoping to meet when they pass away. As you are standing there waiting for your turn, you think about pain, you think about death, you think about running away! But the heroes of God make their own choices. The four of us, like the thousands that had gone before us, chose to stay and face whatever was coming. The three of us were singing as one man had gone into the little forest where our circumciser was waiting for us with his razor blade.

When it was my turn (I went in second) I had not thought about safety measures and diseases like AIDS that one can contract if cut with a razor blade that had cut a person who had it. But I was pleasantly surprised when I saw our initiator wearing clean gloves and putting away those that he had worn while ‘working’ on the man who went in first. He also took out a new razor blade. By this time I had lost control of my body. I was very tense and even today I do not know why, and how was it that I was smiling. All I know is that it was not me!

The cutting was so fast and sharp that for a second I did not feel the pain. When it did come it was so intense it felt as if it was not just coming from the cutting of the foreskin, it was as if my body was cut in half. But it lasted for a surprisingly short time. As he was bandaging me, I was feeling the pain one feels from a normal cut. Then, covered in a white cloth that had red spots of my own blood, our initiator gave me my foreskin. I went out of the forest, and as told, looked for little holes that had been dug just outside the forest. I found them and chose one that was to be the grave of my foreskin. I buried it, and as my initiator had instructed me, I said: “*Sala mfana sengiyindoda!*” (“Stay here boy I am now a man!”). And indeed I felt like a man as I went to join the other initiates who had already been circumcised. As I went, with my legs wider apart than usual, I was thinking about God. I was thinking about God the creator who created all things and all that is in it. I was thinking about God who created me and my parents and my grandparents and theirs. I thought about a group of many spirits who might be saved as a result of my pain. I felt spiritually empowered. I was a complete *Nazaretha* man!

Conclusion

Circumcision as a ritual is performed in the Nazaretha Church in a way similar in some senses to the way it was (and is) performed in African societies, but it is also explained in terms of the biblical narrative of the covenant between Abraham and God. It is, however, a new form that is unique to the church because of its combination of the two strands and also because it is given another dimension which does not obtain in both the biblical and the African traditional understandings of circumcision. This is circumcision as a way of cleansing and of paving a way to heaven. It also bridges the divide between the physical and the spiritual realms, as members believe that in being circumcised they can also open the gates of heaven for their dead relatives who failed to get there.

Works Cited

- Berglund, Axel-Ivar. 1976. *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Comaroff, Jean. 1985. *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of South African People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff. 1991. *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Funani, Lumka S. 1990. *Circumcision among the Ama-Xhosa: A Medical Investigation*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Gunner, Elizabeth. [2002] 2004. *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God: Writings from Ibandla lamaNazaretha, a Nazaretha Church*. Leiden: Brill; Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Krige, Eileen. 1936. *The Social System of the Zulus*. London: Longman Greens.
- Kunene, Mazisi R. 1961. *An Analytical Survey of the Zulu Poetry Both Traditional and Modern*. Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Natal, Durban.
- Mandela, Nelson R. 1994. *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. Johannesburg: Macdonald Purnell.
- McNulty, Grant. 2003. *The Functions of Dreams and Visions in Ibandla lamaNazaretha at Inanda*. Masters Dissertation, University of Natal, Durban.
- Mpanza, Mthembeni. 1999. *Izwi Lezulu*. Empangeni: Excellencia Publishers.
- Muller, Carol A. 1999. *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire: Nazarite Women's Performances in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C. 1967. *The Theology of a South African Messiah: An Analysis of the Hymnal of "The Church of the Nazarites"*. Leiden: Brill.
- Sithole, Nkosinathi. 2005. *Testimony, Identity and Power: Oral Narratives of Near-Death Experiences in the Nazarite Church*. Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

- _____.1999. "The Mediation of Public and Private Selves in the Performance of Sermons and Narratives of Near-Death Experiences in the Nazarite Church." In *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives*, pp. 249-265. Edited by Duncan Brown. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- _____.2011. "An African Bible for African Readers: J. G. Shembe's Use of the Bible in the Sermon." *Old Testament Essays*, 24, 1, pp. 208-220.
- Van der Vliet, Virginia. 1974. "Growing Up in Traditional Society." In *The Bantu Speaking-People of Southern Africa*, pp. 211-245. Edited by W.D. Hammond-Tooke. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- West, Gerald. 2007. "The Bible and the Female Body in Ibandla lamaNazaretha: Isaiah Shembe and Jephthah's daughter." *Old Testament Essays*, 20, 2, pp. 489-509.