

# Shembe and the Early Zionists: A reappraisal

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## *Abstract*

The *IBandla lamaNazaretha* (Nazarites) are one of the largest and best-studied African-initiated churches in southern Africa. Despite considerable scholarly efforts, the biography of Isaiah Shembe, who founded the church in 1913, has remained difficult to unravel. Shembe and his successors have maintained that he was a prophet sent directly by God to the Zulu nation, and a large corpus of church scriptures emphasizing this have obscured our understanding of his background. This article argues though, that Isaiah Shembe was neither a prophet (as his believers maintain) nor someone who developed his religious ideas autochthonously (as most academics maintain).

Instead, the decisive factor in the emergence of Isaiah Shembe as a religious leader was his involvement with the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in the Orange River Colony and its leader, John G Lake from 1910-1911. As a member of the AFM who travelled with its leadership, Shembe had the opportunity to examine and study its American-derived tent revival style, which made extensive use of “faith healing” and other orchestrated “signs and wonders” to win over the masses. Shembe also absorbed the rhetorical style of the AFM, which emphasized prophecies and direct revelations.

Three aspects of Shembe’s ministry appear to derive directly from Lake and the AFM: his sense of divine calling, his wide repertoire of faith healing techniques, and his conscious reshaping of his autobiography.

Shembe’s dramatic healing campaigns in Natal, after he struck out on his own in 1911, utilized all three of these key elements from the very start. Shembe’s ideology and evangelical techniques, then, derived from the early “Zionist” missionaries, although he was careful to obscure his relationship with them.

**Keywords:** Isaiah Shembe; John G Lake; Faith Healing; Zionist; Nazarite; Apostolic Faith Mission; Natal.

## **Introduction**

In early 1911 a man of Zulu origins left his home in Harrismith, located in the Orange River Colony, and descended into Natal. As he would later declare, “The Servant Shembe arrived at Natal on March 11, 1911.”<sup>1</sup> Although his qualifications and education were meager, consisting principally of a 1908 preacher’s certificate from the African Native Baptist Church, his mission was a response to a call from “The Voice” that he had received following the recent birth of his son:<sup>2</sup>

The Spirit of the Lord advised Shembe to come down to Natal. Jehova said to Shembe: “A great lord will sit on the throne in the time to come; he will be born by your younger wife. When he will have come, take him and baptize him in the river by threefold immersion. When you will have done this, go out and leave everything behind; go to the land of the East and proclaim there all the commandments which I have given to you. And in doing so, do not carry anything with you, save one gown, a coat, a pair of trousers, a pair of sandals and a hat.

Although short, quiet, and soft-spoken, Isaiah Mdliwamafaezwe Shembe possessed an unusually strong sense of personal destiny. But this unknown young evangelist was never one to announce his own arrival. Instead, some shadowy preachers preceded him wherever he went. One of these men, Nkabinde, told the people of Natal:<sup>3</sup>

Listen, you people of Africa. God has told me, that there is a man coming from heaven, who is not like other human beings. I am like John the Baptist to announce his coming to you. I am not fit to shake hands with him. This man will be the sun to give light to the whole earth: there will be light on the ground and in the sky, under the earth and in the water, and in your hearts; even those who do not like it will see it on that day. And the present rule will cease.

As Shembe arrived in Natal in March 1911 in the wake of Nkabinde’s “prophecies”, he rarely disappointed those who anticipated his coming. As one early eyewitness put it:<sup>4</sup>

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1 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen (ed.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe, II: The scriptures of the amaNazarethu of EKuphakameni*, L Shembe and H-J Becken (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1994), p. 82.

2 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe, I: History and traditions centered on Ekuphakameni and Mount Nhlankakazi*, H-J Becken (Lewiston, Edwin Mellen, 1994), p. 42.

3 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 39.

4 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 41.

When I heard these words, I loved them so much, that I wrote them down to see the outcome of the prophecy. And then I have seen it. Shembe came and united all the tribes in the name of God. I wanted to understand the truth of God. Shembe said to me: Vuniqiniso, come here, I want to show you the hand of Jehova who has sent me.

Then I saw Shembe healing the sick, and I remembered the words of Nkabinde, who had said to me: “Shange, before you will be able to send this your new-born child..., you will see these things by yourself.”

We examined the Scriptures, and we found that they testified to all his deeds: The demons were expelled, the cripples were walking, the barren women got children, and the prisoners were set free like in the time of the Lord Jesus. God may be praised.

After journeying around Natal and performing these miraculous healings in many locations, Shembe began to build up a following. By early 1912 he was attracting negative attention from the authorities.<sup>5</sup>

Despite occasional persecution Shembe was able to found the Nazarite Church (*IBandla lamaNazaretha*) in 1913, which has gone on to be one of South Africa’s largest denominations, and is still the dominant “Zionist” church among Zulu-speakers. Yet despite the fact that the Nazarites are one of the best-documented African religious movements of the colonial era,<sup>6</sup> and also the subject of much study,<sup>7</sup> we know surprisingly little about Shembe’s past. As Sundkler noted, “very little is known of Shembe’s background.”<sup>8</sup>

What will be argued in this article is that Shembe deliberately suppressed discussion of his biography. As he was quoted as saying, “but nobody asks

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5 L Gunner, “Power house, prison house: An oral genre and its use in Isaiah Shembe’s Nazareth Baptist Church” (Unpublished article, University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, 1987), p. 5 and n.8, quoting police correspondence in Natal in May 1912.

6 See the heroic (and still-uncompleted) multi-volume effort translated by H-J Becken and edited by a group led by I Hexham, *The sacred history and traditions of the Amanazaretha* (Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press, 1994). Some other notable examples are L Gunner, *The man of heaven and the beautiful ones of God: Writings from Ibandla lamaNazaretha, a South African church* (Leiden, Brill, 2002); R Papini, “Carl Faye’s transcript of Isaiah Shembe’s testimony and early calling”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 23, 3 (1999), pp. 243-284.

7 D Brown, “Orality and Christianity: The hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites”, *Current Writing* 7(2), 1995, pp. 69-95; J Cabrita, *Text and authority in the South African Nazaretha Church* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014); L Gunner, “Hidden stories in the light of the new day: A Zulu manuscript and its place in South African writing”, *Research in African Literatures*, 31(2), 2000, pp. 1-16; A Heuser, “Memory tales: Representations of Shembe in the cultural discourse of African Renaissance”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35(3), 2005, pp. 362-387; P Landau, *Popular politics in the history of South Africa, 1400-1948* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 182-185; C Muller, *Rituals of fertility and the sacrifice of desire: Nazarite women’s performance in South Africa* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), and also many of the valuable introductions to the works cited in n.6 above.

8 B Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists* (London, Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 163. See also his classic study *Bantu prophets in South Africa*, 2 (London, Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 110-111.

me, from where I came and where I shall go.”<sup>9</sup> His son, also allegedly specially anointed by God in 1911, was equally reluctant to countenance investigation along those lines, and maintained “that he had not had time to do research into their family background and his father’s early years.”<sup>10</sup> Nor have the handful of informants with the potential to shed light on his past provided any information to researchers.<sup>11</sup>

Isaiah Shembe was careful to credit only one man for his religious development – thus William Leshega.<sup>12</sup> The official Nazarite version of their relationship runs along these lines – that Shembe had encountered Leshega as a migrant worker on the Rand. After Shembe returned to Harrismith, Leshega journeyed there to baptize him in 1906 – where the two were photographed. After Shembe showed prowess as a weekend evangelist, Leshega had him ordained as a preacher in the African Native Baptist Church. Shembe then preached for Leshega in Witzieshoek and other areas of the Orange River Colony. The two eventually split over minor doctrinal differences, following which Shembe received his divine calling and started his mission to erstwhile Natal.<sup>13</sup> This version of events has also been followed by Sundkler and by subsequent scholars. Liz Gunner’s efforts to search for archival evidence regarding Shembe’s early life have managed to uncover some extra details, but this research<sup>14</sup> does not call into question the accepted version of events in the critical 1906-1911 period.

There is an obvious and glaring problem, though, with the emphasis on Leshega. Shembe’s theology and evangelistic practices, to put it bluntly, do not derive from Leshega’s in any way. The latter, a prominent “Ethiopian” minister, was an orthodox Baptist, as the name of his church suggests. Nazarite theology and religious practice are clearly not derived from the Baptist Church, which is why the Nazarite church is usually labeled as either being “Nativist” or “Zionist.”<sup>15</sup> None of the existing scholarship on Shembe, from Sundkler onwards, has demonstrated in any specific way how Leshega’s theology specifically influenced the latter. Of all the Shembe-related scholarship,

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9 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 190.

10 Quoted in B Sundkler, *Zulu Zion...*, p. 163.

11 See Vilikazi’s remarks regarding Johannes Mlangeni, A Vilikazi, M Mthethwa, and M Mpanza, *Shembe: The revitalization of African society* (Johannesburg, Scotaville, 1986), pp. 5, 23.

12 On Leshega, see B Sundkler, *Zulu Zion...*, pp. 164-166; L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, pp. 18-21.

13 L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, pp. 31-35; J Dube, *U-Shembe* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter & Shooter, 1936), pp. 26-28.

14 L Gunner, “Power house, prison house...”; *Man of heaven...*, pp. 18-23.

15 B Sundkler, *Zulu Zion...*; A Vilikazi et al, *Shembe...*, pp. x-xii.

only Cabrita has searched for links that Shembe had with Zionists. Recently Cabrita has downplayed Leshega's significance and demonstrated that "during this period the impact of Zion ideas and individuals was far-reaching, and, in particular, exerted a formative influence on the young Isaiah Shembe."<sup>16</sup> This article seeks to extend Cabrita's observations. But whereas Cabrita sees Shembe as having been only indirectly shaped by his Zionist milieu, this article argues that he was profoundly shaped by it. Shembe's "modus operandi" was too sophisticated and too clearly worked out by the time of his departure for Natal in 1911 to have been arrived at haphazardly.<sup>17</sup>

From where did Shembe derive his ideas and practices? We cannot accept Shembe's own assertion that he was in fact a prophet sent directly by God to the people of Natal. It would seem self-evident that Shembe learned from other people, but it was in his own interests to downplay these influences. Why did God tell him to baptize his son by "threefold immersion" in 1911? Why does Shembe refer to communication from God as having come from "the Voice"? Where did he learn to send emissaries in advance of his coming to announce the imminent arrival of a prophet? Why did he refrain from the use of medicine when sick?<sup>18</sup> Who taught him to lay hands on the sick and to cure them, or to expel demons, to raise the dead, or to conduct other forms of faith healing? The evidence is clear that Shembe "always staged dramatic appearances, and was inclined towards a certain amount of exhibitionism."<sup>19</sup> From whom exactly did Shembe learn this impressive stagecraft? It could not have been from Leshega, since as Shembe declared, Leshega and the members of the Native Baptist Church "were not accustomed to the duty of praying for the sick ones—they relied on witch doctors."<sup>20</sup>

There would appear to be only one possible source for these influences, namely the bombastic showman John G Lake and his acolytes in the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM),<sup>21</sup> which was active in the Orange River Colony from 1909 onwards. Lake, an American follower of the original Zionist, John Alexander

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<sup>16</sup> J Cabrita, *Text and authority...*, pp. 100.

<sup>17</sup> See my argument below that Shembe's faith healing techniques were adopted from those introduced to the Orange Free State by the Apostolic Faith Mission. See below pp.14-18.

<sup>18</sup> R Papini, "Carl Faye's transcript", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, p. 281.

<sup>19</sup> E Roberts (1938) quoted in R Papini, "Carl Faye's transcript", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, p. 253.

<sup>20</sup> J Dube, *U-Shembe*, p. 31. I have relied on a 1993 translation by Mandla Ngcobo. Many thanks to Heather Hughes for providing me with this material.

<sup>21</sup> Lake's life is detailed in a botched biography by K Burpeau, *God's showman: A historical study of John G Lake and South African/American Pentecostalism* (Oslo, Refleks, 2004). The best study of the AFM is C De Wet, "The Apostolic Faith Mission in Africa 1908-1980: A case study in church growth in a segregated society" (PhD Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1989).

Dowie, before turning Pentecostal, was probably the foremost religious con man ever to reside in South Africa. During his five-year mission to South Africa, he introduced “speaking in tongues,” “faith healing,” and the use of “signs and wonders” to the masses.<sup>22</sup> Shembe’s short association with him could surely have been crucial factor shaping the early history of the Nazarite church.

### ***Shembe’s murky past***

Isaiah Shembe’s past is often difficult to unravel. Details have to be picked out of the various hagiographic narratives of his early life and calling that he presented regularly to his audiences. These narratives, most of which can be found in John Dube’s *U-Shembe* (1936), are generally held to be unreliable by academics, although they do present Shembe’s background in exactly the way he wished it to be understood. An additional problem is that Shembe’s version of his past as recorded by Dube has also filtered into a large corpus of written Nazarite traditions, most notably in the “Book of the Birth of Isaiah Shembe.”<sup>23</sup> Although Shembe’s portrayal of his early life was constructed primarily to impress his audiences (and is full of telescoping and other forms of dubious chronology as result), he nevertheless provides telling details about his life. Some of these details can be corroborated by a lengthy 1929 private interview with a government employee that is regarded as a far more accurate and far less embellished source.<sup>24</sup>

Shembe was a middling child of a large Zulu family that had left Natal during the 1870s and had settled near Harrismith in the Orange Free State. This move occurred when Shembe was a teenager, and his father made the move to have become tenants for an Afrikaner family named the Graabes.<sup>25</sup> The young Shembe was expected to provide labour to as part of the household. At this stage he apparently went by the name Mdliwamafa, although we have

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22 B Morton, “‘The devil who heals’: Evidence of fraud and falsification in the career of John G Lake”, *African Historical Review* 44(12), 2012, pp. 98-118.

23 Much of this is published in R Papini and I Hexham (eds.), *The catechism of the Nazarites and related writings*, H-J Becken and P Jungen (Lewiston, Edwin Mellen, 2002), although the contents are derived from traditions written down earlier and which can be found in Hexham and Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 1-51. For the purposes of this article I have cited the latter source as well as the anonymous “Histories and Laws”, L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, pp. 57-135, since these versions are earlier and provide the names of the persons who first wrote down the accounts.

24 R Papini, “Carl Faye’s transcript”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, pp. 243-284.

25 R Papini, “Carl Faye’s transcript”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, p. 261.

no idea what he was called by the Graabe family. He seems to have progressed from general farm work to working as a groom as he grew older, and appears to have possessed considerable skill in the raising and handling of horses and other livestock.<sup>26</sup> As he reached maturity, his skills were in demand. He would appear to have become a tenant in his own right on the Graabe's farm, and by the outbreak of the South African War in late 1899 he had several wives and some children.<sup>27</sup>

During the war, Shembe's trajectory changed as he was "displaced" during the hostilities. Thereafter he became increasingly religious, abandoned his family,<sup>28</sup> and spent some time working on the Witwatersrand as a migrant worker.<sup>29</sup> Probably as a result, several of his wives left him for good and remarried, while two others were left primarily to their own devices. When he returned to the Harrismith area around 1906 he became increasingly involved in the Wesleyan church – which he claimed to have attended since his childhood. As his calling to become an evangelist intensified, Shembe was baptized by William Leshega, whose church he had encountered in his migrant years.

Leshega, who allegedly travelled to Harrismith to baptize Isaiah Shembe in July 1906,<sup>30</sup> was the Boksburg-based leader of the African Native Baptist Church. As such, he was a prominent "Ethiopian" minister who corresponded regularly with government officials and otherwise unsuccessfully sought official recognition. His renown as a leading "Ethiopian" minister was such that patent medicine companies paid him to endorse their products in the African press.<sup>31</sup> Doctrinally, it would not appear that Leshega was innovative. A Baptist for a decade prior to establishing his own African-controlled church, he followed Baptist principles until joining the AFM in early 1910. Following his induction into the Native Baptist Church, Shembe then began proselytizing informally in the Harrismith area, apparently with great success. Sometime in 1908 Leshega sent his regional overseer to ordain him as a minister. Shembe then served as a lay preacher for Leshega for two years.

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26 R Papini, "Carl Faye's transcript", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, p. 263; "Histories and Laws", L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, p. 61.

27 R Papini, "Carl Faye's transcript", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, p. 269; I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 16-17.

28 R Papini, "Carl Faye's transcript", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, pp. 273-275; I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 22-24.

29 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 33.

30 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 31; J Dube, *U-Shembe*, p. 28.

31 See ads for "Dr Williams Pills" that ran regularly in *Ilanga Lase Natal* from 1906-1910.

Some preaching was done in Witzieshoek where Leshega had a congregation until 1910, and other evangelizing was conducted on an itinerant basis in Harrismith and elsewhere in the Orange River Colony.<sup>32</sup> Shembe was not particularly prominent within the African Native Baptist Church, and his dealings with Leshega were infrequent. Shembe's own claims, moreover, maintain that he was an autodidact who evangelized on his own initiative.

In early 1910 several concurrent events transpired that would be decisive in shaping Shembe's future ministry. Several members of the Apostolic Faith Mission visited Leshega's church in Boksburg, where they introduced glossolalia and made a very strong impression.<sup>33</sup> In the aftermath of this episode, Leshega and his organization decided to join the AFM. Lake wrote afterwards:<sup>34 35</sup>

A brother Lesheka, with 65 local preachers and 4000 people were received into this mission at this conference [in Bloemfontein, wrote Lake afterwards].

[At this dramatic event,] over a hundred were healed of all manner of diseases, a woman whose thumbs were eaten off by leprosy was healed, and many spoke in tongues.

Shembe, as one of Leshega's preachers in the Orange River Colony, would almost certainly have attended this large-scale Easter tent gathering. Leshega's church then abandoned its Baptist principles for Zionist ones. Thus Leshega relinquished his role as a spokesperson for patent medicines, since the AFM prescribed the use of "Divine Healing" and rejected the use of modern medicine.<sup>36</sup>

Just as Leshega merged with the AFM, his organization in Shembe's region crumbled. Prior to the conference in Bloemfontein, Leshega's unregistered congregation in the Witzieshoek (Shembe's base) location had been closed down by authorities after the intervention of competing missionaries.

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32 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 33-34. The exact date of Shembe's ordination is made clear only by official records in the Kwazulu Natal Archives. L Gunner, "Power house, prison house", p. 5 and n. 8, quoting police correspondence in Natal in May 1912.

33 Anon., "Pentecost among the Zulu and Basuto people in South Africa", *Apostolic Faith*, August/September 1909, p. 1.

34 Anon., "From South Africa", *Upper Room* (May 1910), C Blake (ed.), *John G Lake's writings from Africa* (Dallas, Xulon Press, 2005), p. 31.

35 JG Lake, "Missionary life among the natives", *Apostolic Faith*, March/April 1910, p. 1.

36 The AFM in its early years (following from Dowie) maintained that disease was a physical manifestation of sin, lack of faith, or demonic possession. As a result, church members were discouraged from seeing doctors or using medicines. Prayer and faith healing were the prescribed methods used to drive evil from the body. "Dr Williams Pills" began to use another minister as its endorser in May 1910.



Subsequent efforts by Leshega to reestablish a congregation at Harrismith's Ntabazwe Township (where Shembe was also an on-and-off resident) were also officially thwarted.<sup>37</sup> It would appear that Shembe left Leshega's umbrella as a result of these organizational issues, rather than petty doctrinal matters.<sup>38</sup> With Leshega's congregations extinct, it would appear that Shembe began associating with AFM evangelists.

### ***Lake and Shembe in the Free State, 1910***

This leads us to a speculative discussion of Shembe's activities as an AFM member between April 1910 and his move to Natal in March 1911.<sup>39</sup> It must be noted that neither Shembe himself nor any of his followers ever mentioned his involvement with the AFM in any capacity. Nor is Shembe mentioned by name in any AFM documents (although rank and file African members almost never were in this material). What seems clear, though, is that Shembe and the Nazarite leadership carefully suppressed any knowledge of his involvement with the AFM. There are two primary reasons why he would do so. First, the theology of the Nazarite church derived from Shembe's claim to have been sent as a messenger by God directly to the Zulu people. Therefore he needed to omit discussion of his involvement with John G Lake and the AFM. Second, it is clear that Shembe learned how to orchestrate religious fraud while in the AFM. Lake and his coterie at the helm of the AFM were all consummate con men who relied to some extent on assistants and placemen to aid them in conducting fraudulent faith healings and other cons.<sup>40</sup> Since Shembe wished to provide the illusion that he was performing legitimate "miracles," it was clearly not in his interest to advertise his relationship with the AFM.

John G Lake's AFM was extremely active in the Orange River Colony at the time of Shembe's split with Leshega. The roots of its activities went back to 1904, when John Alexander Dowie's South African overseer, Daniel Bryant, had baptized large numbers of Zionist converts in Harrismith and elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

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37 L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, p. 20, and n. 25. Some rather vague traditions written down in the 1940s place Shembe preaching for Leshega in both Witzieshoek and Ntabazwe, I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 28.

38 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 16, 33-34.

39 I Hexham (ed.), *The scriptures of the amaNazaretha of EKuphakameni: Selected writings of the Zulu Prophets Isaiah and Londa Shembe*, L Shembe and H-J Becken (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 1994), p. 82.

40 B Morton, "The devil who heals", *African Historical Review*, 44, 2012, pp. 109-114.

41 Anon., "Overseer Daniel Bryant's work among the Zulus", *Leaves of Healing* (Zion, IL), 15(25), October 1904, pp. 854-857.

Many of these early converts subsequently moved to a nearby farm controlled by the Zionist preacher EH Mahon. As Cabrita has shown, Shembe knew members of this group and witnessed many of their activities.<sup>42</sup> Following the collapse of Dowie's original Zionist church in Chicago, the newly-arrived Lake was able to bring Mahon and other former Zionists under his own umbrella after 1908 due to his former association with Dowie. Lake's AFM was to create a theology (idiosyncratic to southern Africa) that combined elements of Dowie's Zionist teaching such as "Divine [faith] Healing" and "Triune [threefold] Immersion" with Pentecostal beliefs that had disseminated following the Azusa Street Revival in 1906. After Mahon was brought on board, new evangelists were also dispatched to work in the Colony.<sup>43</sup>

We have to assume that Shembe worked first for Lake during April 1910, immediately following the Bloemfontein conference. We know for sure that Lake and "two native workers" travelled to Witzieshoek and then to other regions of the Free State straight after it ended. Lake was presumably anxious to visit Leshega's former congregation, and to lobby the local authorities to allow it to operate again.<sup>44</sup> Shembe was an excellent choice to be one of these unspecified "native workers" who accompanied Lake. As a former preacher of Leshega's in Witzieshoek, and with no congregation in Ntabazwe to minister to due to continuing official obstruction, he would have been a perfect guide and companion. In July, Lake was also to visit the area for another conference with "workers from Orange River Colony and Basutoland," and then ventured to Basutoland to meet several Zionist chiefs. Therefore, there were plenty of occasions for Shembe (who is known to have preached in Basutoland) to observe and work with Lake.<sup>45</sup>

Many aspects of Shembe's preaching style mirror Lake's, in particular the use of direct revelation and divine calling. Lake had invented, in late 1907, an extensive series of testimonies that maintained he had been called directly by God earlier that year in Zion City to go and preach in South Africa. He

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42 J Cabrita, *Text and authority...*, pp. 99-100.

43 Lake had sent a missionary named Gerald Kretschmar to the Free State in 1908, and took his first trip there in mid-1909. See Anon., "South Africa: Orange River Colony, &c: letter from Bro JG Lake", *Confidence* (Sunderland, UK, August 1909), p. 17. *Confidence*; G Kretschmar, "Africa for Jesus: The great work continues", *Bridegroom's Messenger*, Atlanta 3(4), October 1909, p. 4.

44 Anon., "God's Mighty Movings in Africa", September-October 1910, C Blake (ed.), *Writings from Africa...*, p. 113.

45 C Blake (ed.), *Writings from Africa...*, pp. 117-119; R Papini, "Carl Faye's transcript", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, p. 277; Anon., "Tsa Bafolisi", *Leselinyane* (Maseru), 6 May 1911. Lake also ventured through rural Free State in mid-1909 with a party that included "five white and one native brother" conducting healings and miracles. Anon., "South Africa: Orange River Colony, &c", *Confidence*, August 1909, p. 185.

told these stories on innumerable occasions in the course of his peripatetic duties.<sup>46</sup> These testimonies maintained that as a youngster, Lake had wrestled with God's call to become a preacher for years but did not heed them. By the middle of 1907, though, after years of internal struggle, he finally was "just waiting to be struck by the very 'lightning of God.'"<sup>47</sup>

The Lord brought to my remembrance from my childhood on every occasion when he had tried to woo me and I had turned my own way instead. Oh the many times he had called me when I did not heed... He showed me the lost world, dying souls, the sick and suffering, saying, "all this I did for thee, what hast thou done for me?"....Then the Spirit said, "Will You Go" ..... Then a series of visions of different cities came before me: first, Zion City, IL, where the Glory of God overshadowed the old Dr Dowie tabernacle in Shiloh Park as a heavenly light radiated out over the entire city.... Again, I heard **the voice**, "Will you go?" "Yes, yes" I cried, "if you will prepare and equip me and go with me."<sup>48</sup>

Shembe's annunciation stories derive from Lake's in many key respects. Shembe claimed to have undergone a decades-long struggle with the call of God that began in his teenage years. In some of these conversations with "The Voice" or "The Spirit," Shembe was ordered to pray, to avoid stealing, and to remain chaste.<sup>49</sup> He was also ordered to preach: "The Voice said again: 'this is my congregation of which I told you, that you should administer the meal to them,'" he was told as a teenager in front of a fish pond.<sup>50</sup> Like Lake, Shembe also had an important experience when God transported him out of his body to overlook the earth. On mountaintop, "he was overwhelmed by a deep drowsiness and he fell asleep. In his dream, he saw himself flying in the firmament, and he perceived a small group of people who stood there...there was light over the earth."<sup>51</sup>

Shembe finally responded to God's call to preach after being struck by lightning that "flashed from the sky" and "burned Shembe at the left side of his body." While lying prostrate in a wagon he was told to go to Natal: "There are my suffering people. Go and liberate them from their slavery."

46 B Morton, "The devil who heals'...", *African Historical Review*, 44, 2012, pp. 104-105. Lake had in fact been forced to flee from Zion City following the deaths of three of his sect's members during botched exorcisms.

47 *John G Lake: His life, his sermons, his boldness of faith* (Ft Worth, Kenneth Copeland, 1994), pp. xv.

48 My emphasis. C Blake (ed.), *Writings from Africa...*, pp. 146-147, written down in late 1910.

49 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 7-11. Landau, in his short discussion of Shembe in *Popular politics...*, pp. 183-184, has speculated that Shembe's use of the term, "The Voice" derives from nineteenth century southern African biblical translations.

50 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 10.

51 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 17-18.

Interestingly, Shembe's call also directed him to instruct the Zulu people that "they should no longer drink beer and wine" and that "they should not use medicines," both of which were key AFM tenets.<sup>52</sup> Shembe's lightning story would also appear to echo Lake's descriptions of his first experience of speaking in tongues, "currents of power running through me from my head to my feet... Oh, the sense of power, the mighty moving of the Spirit in me."<sup>53</sup>

There are some other parallels in the dubious testimonies that they made about their early lives and callings. Both claimed to have come from large families where many of their siblings died young.<sup>54</sup> Both claimed to have been healed by God from fatal illness—Shembe was literally brought back from the grave as a toddler, while Lake was cured from "rheumatism [that] was causing his legs to grow out of shape and distort his body."<sup>55</sup> Both also claimed to have left earthly wealth behind to follow God's calling. Lake allegedly abandoned a lucrative business career in Chicago and then gave away his fortune. Shembe, meanwhile, claimed to have abandoned a polygamous household of four wives and many children following once his visions began. Like Lake he then set out to preach with nothing except his clothing.<sup>56</sup>

Lake and Shembe's putative Wesleyan experiences as teenagers and young men are likewise similar. Lake maintained that he had been ordained at a Methodist seminary that had never in fact existed. Shembe's parallel story

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52 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 21.

53 C Blake (ed.), *Writings from Africa...*, pp. 141-142, testimony Lake was giving in 1910.

54 Shembe went so far as to say that "the Spirit" deliberately killed his older siblings so that he would become the first-born. I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 6. On Lake see, G Lindsay, *John G Lake – apostle to Africa* (Dallas, Christ for the Nations, 1972), p. 10.

55 G Lindsay, *John G Lake...*, p. xiv-xv. Lake's healing story, which is anachronistic and is obviously made up, follows closely from Charles Parham's alleged faith cure from rheumatism as a child. See S Parham, *The life of Charles F Parham: Founder of the Apostolic Faith Movement* (1930; repr Baxter Springs, KS, Apostolic Faith Bible College, 2000), pp. 2-7. Parham's rheumatism was ultimately cured by an "electric current" sent from God. G Lindsay, *John G Lake...*, pp. xv. Not my emphasis. My emphasis. C Blake (ed.), *Writings from Africa...*, pp. 146-147, written down in late 1910. I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 7-11. Landau, in his short discussion of Shembe in *Popular politics...*, pp. 183-184, has speculated that Shembe's use of the term, "The Voice" derives from nineteenth century southern African biblical translations. I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 10. I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 17-18. I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 21. C Blake (ed.), *Writings from Africa...*, pp. 141-142, testimony Lake was giving in 1910. Shembe went so far as to say that "the Spirit" deliberately killed his older siblings so that he would become the first-born. I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 6. See also G Lindsay, *John G Lake—apostle to Africa* (Dallas, Christ for the Nations, 1972), p. 10. G Lindsay, *John G Lake...*, p. xiv-xv. Lake's healing story, which is completely anachronistic and is obviously made up, follows closely from Charles Parham's alleged faith cure from rheumatism as a child. C Parham, *A voice crying in the wilderness* (1902; repr Christian Pentecostal Books, 2012), pp. 42-43.

56 G Lindsay, *John G Lake...*, p. 3; and I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 18-19.

is that c. 1890, “he went to church service at a place very near his home.... [And] the White missionary rose and said: ‘Today we shall be led in worship by Shembe, son of Mayekisa.... This was a great surprise, for Shembe had never before led a worship service.’”<sup>57</sup> During this service led by Shembe:

... a mighty spirit came over the people, they vomited their diseases and their poisons out, and all people, who attended the service on that day, were astonished....the Spirit had come from heaven.

Shembe’s description of the aftermath of this obviously invented episode is also very revealing. Soon after, in a dream, he was instructed to read Mark 16: 18-19:<sup>58</sup>

When he waked, he read this Passage: And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues... they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

These anachronistic details must be derived from Lake, who had introduced the Pentecostal concepts of “signs and wonders” and speaking in tongues to South Africa. It’s hardly possible that Shembe could have been preaching “signs and wonders” and “tongue-speaking” in the 1890s, as these concepts were developed following the Azusa Street Revival in 1906. It appears more possible that Shembe borrowed: from Lake’s teachings, and then inserted them into his narratives of his early calling.

Orchestrating “signs and wonders” is not an easy task. Lake himself took a considerable amount of time to become an effective faith healer and religious impresario.<sup>59</sup> In order to be successful, faith healers have to master two different skills. Shembe, during his initial journey to Natal in 1911, showed that he possessed both. Most importantly, faith healers have to know how to create an atmosphere in which placebo cures are likely to occur. Because such a large percentage of physical and mental illness is psychosomatic, faith healers are capable of effecting rapid, if not instant, cures to these diseases if the setting is correct. A large, emotional, expectant crowd free of skeptics is ideal. Hence it was crucial for Lake and Shembe to invent testimonies about their

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57 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 14. For Lake’s claims to have attended a non-existent seminary at Newberry, MI from c.1888-1890, see K Burpeau, *God’s showman...*, pp. 27, 53 n. 27.

58 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 15.

59 Lake occasionally assisted Dowie in performing religious frauds in the 1890s, and received further training from 1901 onwards. Only from mid-1907 do we have evidence of Lake performing faith healings in front of audiences on his own. In South Africa from mid-1908 onwards he showed a mastery of Dowie’s entire range of cons, which he would later pass on to such well-known evangelists such as William Branham and Gordon Lindsey. In South Africa Edward Lion and Elias Letwaba were his major understudies and disseminators of his techniques.

callings. Lake's accounts of his healing from rheumatism, his abandoning of his business career, and his calling by God to South Africa, regularly moved large audiences. The truth, that he had been a small-town contractor drawn to the Zionist message, lacked the relevant dramatic qualities. Likewise, for Shembe, few in any audience would have found much remarkable in his life story of livestock raising, tenant farming, and migrant labour. His embellished narratives were far more moving.

In addition to orchestrating the correct atmosphere through emotional testimonies and hymns, it was necessary for the faith healer to select individuals who were susceptible to a placebo cure. Lake, like Dowie, always had those seeking healing questioned and weeded out. The ideal candidate was someone who believed strongly that God could cure her—non-believers and skeptics were always rejected. Additionally, it was crucial that the candidate had minimal personal knowledge of the faith healer—except by reputation. A sugar pill will no longer relieve symptoms once the subject even suspects that it is not the real medicine. Likewise, faith healers always lose their ability to cure subjects who know them for any period of time.<sup>60</sup>

It was always crucial that both the crowd and those seeking healing had strong expectations that amazing events were likely to occur. On the Rand, the AFM used broadsheets that promised “Baptism of the Holy Ghost with Signs Following,” and “Miraculous Healings” at their services.<sup>61</sup> In rural areas amongst the mostly illiterate peasantry, a different tactic known as “precognition” (that Shembe was to adopt) was used. Here is an episode from May 1910 that he probably took part in:<sup>62</sup>

They felt they should go to Basutoland... The day before they arrived the mother of a native chief had a remarkable dream in which the Lord told her that the next day at 12 o'clock some white men would come of a different religion from theirs, and that they were to receive them in the name of the Lord and that through them the people would be greatly blessed. She went around all over the Kraal and told the people in the morning what the Lord had shown her. Her son was the chief and she also told him. The mother herself had a great internal tumor.

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60 P Scriba, “Placebo and the relationship between doctors and patients”, *Bundesgesundheitsblatt Gesundheitsforschung Gesundheitsschutz* 55, 9 (September 2012), pp. 1113-1117, for a discussion of familiarity and the placebo effect.

61 1908 broadsheet reprinted in R Liardon, *John G Lake: The complete collection of his life teachings* (Whitaker House, 2005), p. 43.

62 C Blake (ed.), *Writings from Africa...*, pp. 92-93. Cf a similar version in [JG Lake], “Signs and wonders following the work in South Africa,” *Apostolic Faith* (Portland, OR) 13 (March/April 1910), p. 1, in which two Africans bicycle ahead and make the prophecy.

At 12 o'clock precisely, the brethren came, as the Lord had saith, and when they came they found the whole Kraal in excitement of expectation awaiting them. The woman was healed. The chief gave his heart to God... Brother Van Schele told me this morning that so far as he was able to know the entire Kraal was saved.

“Precognition” was thus a simple tactic that only required the assistance of a seemingly-unrelated person to go ahead and make a prediction about the imminent arrival of strangers with unusual powers. This tactic was also commonly used in Orange River Colony by EH Mahon, and later on in Basutoland by Edward Lion.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to being able to create the right atmosphere, faith healers also need to become adept at staging “miracles.” A wide range of techniques and variations are required in order to keep repeat audiences interested.<sup>64</sup> Typically “signs and wonders” were staged early in their service, in order to intensify the crowd’s emotions and to increase the subsequent likelihood of placebo cures.

Shembe appears to have acquired the vast majority of Lake’s repertoire. A very common fraud was the “fake cripple,” which had many variations. In the Orange River Colony, the “paralyzed” were brought in front of audiences in wheelchairs, were prayed for, healed, and then were miraculously able to run and leap for the crowd. Similar things happened to “the crippled” that came to the front on their hands and knees. “The dumb,” “deaf,” and “blind” were likewise treated, and spoke aloud or responded to the appropriate stimuli afterwards. A second form of fraud similarly requiring minimal acting skills was the exorcism of the “devil-possessed,” who were brought to the altar in chains or in some similarly dramatic condition. Then the “devils were cast out” by exhortation or by the laying on of hands. In this way sanity was restored to the afflicted.<sup>65</sup> A third method that was a particular favorite of Lake’s was the “distant miracle”—in which the audience was persuaded to believe that the actions and prayers of those present at the service had in fact led to a miracle or healing in a distant location. In this way, Lake and his

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63 B Sundkler, *Zulu Zion...*, p. 65. Sundkler does not make it clear during which time period these two used precognition. Lion was only trained in fraudulent faith healing by John G Lake in 1912. The healing of (unseen) internal tumors, followed by their subsequent “bursting” or “extraction” and then public display was a con used by Dowie, and also practiced many times by Lake across South Africa, e.g. Anon., “Cancer killed instantly”, *Apostolic Faith*, 11 (Portland, OR, November-December 1909), p. 2.

64 For a discussion of the categories of techniques Lake used, see B Morton, “The devil who heals’...”, *African Historical Review*, 44, 2012, pp. 109-114.

65 W Burton, *When God makes a missionary: The life story of Edgar Mahon*, Rev Ed (Minneapolis, Bethany Fellowship, 1961), pp. 33-34; Anon., “South Africa: Orange River Colony”, *Confidence*, August 1909, p. 17.

Johannesburg audiences were able to cure women as far away as England and Iowa, and also through prayer enabled the barren Queen of the Netherlands to have children again.<sup>66</sup> “Supernatural showdowns,” where Lake would confront and defeat “hypnotists” or other diabolical individuals in front of the crowd was also common, as was the extraction of “tumors,” or “blood” from the inside of a sick person’s body.<sup>67</sup> Finally, there was “the raising of the dead,” another technique that Lake introduced. In his services and letters to Pentecostal newsarticles, he claimed to have brought five people back to life while in South Africa. The basis of this con was false ex-post facto claims. For instance, Lake in 1910 was preaching about having raised one Maggie Truter back from the dead the year earlier in Johannesburg.<sup>68</sup> Yet because he had actually been out of town on the day of Truter’s healing, he seems to have been unaware that she had given an account of it the next day the newsarticles. Truter had not in fact died, but had been “in terrible agony.” With her mother at her side, “she prayed for herself. It was then that she recovered.”<sup>69</sup>

By the time Shembe left for Natal in 1911 he was proficient at all these various facets of impressing audiences with “signs and wonders.” Presumably the paternalistic attitude of Lake caused him to leave. While in the Orange River Colony in 1910 Lake had noted: “the idea which some have that natives can Christianize themselves is, I am sure, a mistake. All undeveloped natives retrograde ... when let alone. It takes the better energy of the white man to stir them to activity.”<sup>70</sup> As a result, Lake relied almost exclusively on Afrikaner converts to assume preaching positions in the Orange River Colony. Among African converts only Edward Lion, later the AFM leader in Basutoland, received encouragement.<sup>71</sup> An ambitious Isaiah Shembe clearly realized that he was never going to fit into Lake’s plans. Since the ambitious Isaiah Shembe was not a part of Lake’s plans, he would seem to have decided to establish his own organization.

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66 G Lindsay, *John G Lake...*, pp. 245-246; Anon., “Cancer killed instantly”, *Apostolic Faith*, 11 (Portland, OR, November-December 1909), p. 5.

67 Anon., “The old time power”, *Apostolic Faith*, 11 (Portland, OR, November-December 1909), pp. 2, 6; Anon., “What God is doing in South Africa: Extracts from a letter written by John G Lake”, *Latter Rain Evangel* (Chicago, IL, November 1908), pp. 12-13.

68 C Blake (ed.), *Writings from Africa...*, pp. 160-161.

69 *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 July 1909. See Transvaal Archives Depot SNA 472, NA 2441/10, Hook to Godley 29 July 1910, regarding an official investigation into four “resurrections” in Potgietersrust in 1909.

70 “More news from South Africa—letter from John G Lake”, 1909, reprinted in C Blake (ed.), *Writings from Africa...*, p. 117.

71 On Edward Lion see E Haliburton, “Edward Lion of Lesotho”, *Mohlomi*, 1, 1976, pp. 64-70; C Murray, “The father, the son and the Holy Spirit: Resistance and abuse in the life of Solomon Lion, 1908-1987”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29(3), 1999, *passim*.



All Shembe needed to do to establish himself as a religious leader was to take the AFM's methods to an area where they had not yet been introduced, and to find a couple of assistants to accompany him there. Since the AFM had never proselytized in rural Natal, it was a perfect destination for Shembe. And that was where he went.

### ***Shembe's early journeys in Natal 1911-1913***

Shembe relied on an assortment of AFM techniques during a two-year period of peripatetic evangelizing in Natal before he established a more permanent base at Ekuphakameni. As he journeyed around Natal, he was quickly able to impress sections of the Zulu peasantry and to get them to join his emerging religious organization. If ultimately he was able to fashion a mass religious movement at Ekuphakameni far different from anything ever envisaged by Lake, nevertheless in his early years he relied heavily on what he had witnessed in the AFM.

Shembe went to Natal with two assistants, Johannes Mlangeni and Johane Nkabinde. Using the tactic of precognition, Nkabinde traveled ahead of the Shembe party to prophesy about a "messiah," a "man from heaven" who would follow him. Nkabinde maintained he was a Lutheran priest from the Orange River Colony, and seems to have worked for Shembe in Natal for a considerable time—at least a year or more. Once his services were no longer required, Shembe conveniently arranged for God to transport Nkabinde, like Enoch, directly to heaven.<sup>72</sup> Another, more shadowy prophet named "Mfazwe" also worked for Shembe in the Ndwedwe area, who likewise later vanished after he "died in the land of the north."<sup>73</sup>

Another assistant who Shembe employed was a teenager named Peter Mnqayi, an allegedly "crippled" boy whose ability to walk was allegedly restored at Botha's Hill not long after Shembe began preaching. Mnqayi, who was far taller and far more commanding in speech than Shembe, became a key part of the performances. The latter would speak softly, but Mnqayi would repeat his words in a much louder tone to the crowd.<sup>74</sup> Shembe clearly viewed

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72 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 41.

73 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 47.

74 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 44-46. Shembe's use of the once-crippled Mnqayi mirrors Lake's practice of placing used and discarded crutches all over his altar at his Johannesburg church. The primary effect is to make credulous audiences believe that the healer can render the crippled back to a state of physical prowess.

Mnqayi's presence (the once-"crippled" boy now exuding robust physical health) as a vital element to staging performances. Thanking him publicly much later, Shembe noted:<sup>75</sup>

... you have been carrying the sins of the testimony of those who cast off their sins and cast off their medicine horns and followed Jehovah as the great preacher.

To improve his aura as a "messiah," Shembe developed a new narrative of his early life and calling. He maintained that his family had left Natal in the time of his grandfather, Shembe. During the upheavals of the Mfecane, God had intervened to help the elder Shembe escape north from the wrath of Shaka.<sup>76</sup> In the next part of this narrative, God intervened closely in the life of Isaiah Shembe's mother Sitheya in order to maintain her chastity: "Sitheya, do not pollute yourself in your maidenhood and do not choose a lover, for you will give birth to a servant of God."<sup>77</sup> After the younger Shembe's birth, the Holy Spirit allowed his elder siblings to die and thus give to Shembe the role of eldest son in his family. As a toddler, though, Shembe "fainted and his soul left his body." Before he could be buried, one of Shembe's father's cattle died in the same manner as he had: "we just saw it falling to the ground while it was grazing, and then it perished." The family was told by a local diviner that the life of the cow had been exchanged for the life of Shembe, who was soon resurrected.<sup>78</sup> All these events allegedly took place before his family's actual move north from Natal some forty years later.<sup>79</sup> A whole host of other youthful interactions with "The Voice" were also developed for audiences. The culmination of these invented prophecies have already been alluded to—that Shembe was struck by lightning and received his ultimate mission to become God's prophet to the Zulu people.<sup>80</sup>

Once in Natal, Shembe began to perform miracles, relying primarily on faith healings. His technique was derived entirely from Lake. Those who

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75 "Histories and Laws", L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, p. 77.

76 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 1-3.

77 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, p. 5; J Dube, *U-Shembe*, pp. 6-7.

78 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 7-8; "Histories and laws", L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, p. 57.

79 R Papini, "Carl Faye's transcript", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, p. 261.

80 L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, pp. 57-58.

sought healing were questioned and screened.<sup>81</sup> Shembe then sang the hymn, “How Blessed are the saints up there.” Typically he would ask the supplicant to stretch out their hands with palms up, would seize them suddenly and start praying. He would then ask where the pain was, and touch it himself:<sup>82</sup>

I laid hands on them.

It is recalled that Shembe said:

There was no particular place I put them on, in the Lord’s name. I normally laid my hands on the shoulders of the sick, or on the hands.

Through this method Shembe was able to effect placebo cures of those with suffering from tuberculosis, “hysteria and hiccups,” “bleeding disease,” and the like.<sup>83</sup> As one would expect from placebo cures, the results were somewhat mixed, as Shembe conceded in his private interview with Carl Faye in 1929:<sup>84</sup>

I went supplicating for the many sick, in the name of the Lord. Some were healed, others were helped although they were not healed, some were not healed.

In the course of a faith healer’s career, the unevenness of the results and the decreasing ability to cure the longer they remain in any given location mean that fraud must be resorted to in order to keep the miracles flowing. Shembe, like Lake, used false testimonies to impress crowds. Several—typically young girls—were brought forward to testify to the resurrection of their children or relatives.<sup>85</sup> Others testified to false healings from mysterious diseases. Gertie Mbambo maintained in 1911 that she had suddenly become sick one day, and blood and maggots had started to come out of her nose. In her distress she slept, and Shembe appeared to her in a dream, saying “Gertie, I shall come and pray for you.” She then went and was miraculously healed by Shembe in front of a large audience.<sup>86</sup> Others were induced to declare that Shembe had “unblocked the stone” in their uteri, enabling them to have children.<sup>87</sup>

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81 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 59-60. In this specific instance of a girl seeking healing, “he asked her whether she believed in God” before proceeding, just as Dowie and Lake did. This vetting continued throughout Shembe’s life, see pp. 136-137 how woman named Phumile Maphumulo is screened as she entered Ekuphakameni. For a discussion of the use of entourages surrounding Zionist leaders see J Eberhardt, “Messianism en Afrique du Sud”, *Archives de Sociologie des Religions*, 4, 1957, pp. 40-42, 53-54.

82 R Papini, “Carl Faye’s transcript”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, p. 277.

83 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 59-61.

84 R Papini, “Carl Faye’s transcript”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23, 1999, p. 277.

85 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 46-47, 139. “Histories and laws”, L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, pp. 125-131.

86 I Hexham and GC Oosthuizen, (eds.), *The story of Isaiah Shembe...*, pp. 63-64.

87 I Hexham (ed.) *The story of Isaiah Shembe, II...*, p. 123.

“Distant cures” were also used. Shembe in one service was able to heal Meseni Qwabe, a chief then detained on Robben Island following his involvement in the Bambatha Rebellion.<sup>88</sup> Using some of the chief’s relatives as aides, Shembe was able to cure the far-off chief from a “swollen abdomen” while at Emethandeni.<sup>89</sup> Shembe also staged “supernatural showdowns” with those who were alleged to have insulted and mocked him when he entered Natal in 1911. These “evil” men, now “sick” and unable to walk, would be brought in front of the audience on stretchers. Gunner stated that after Shembe used his amazing powers to confront and then cure the malefactors, from whose bodies a large volume of “red squishy stuff mixed with thick black blood” was emitted. Gunner continues:<sup>90</sup>

A great many people were converted on that occasion because the man of God, Shembe, had revealed himself so convincingly, and his works spoke for themselves that he was indeed a man sent by the Almighty.

## **Conclusion**

The existing scholarship on Shembe and his church has noted the importance of Wesleyan ideas in everyday religious practice. Shembe seems to have grown up a Wesleyan, and he made use of Wesleyan hymnals, tracts, and discourse throughout his evangelistic career. Additionally, it is well known that Shembe incorporated many syncretic practices into his church, most of them deriving from Zulu culture.<sup>91</sup> There can be little doubt that Shembe’s fashioning of the Nazarites along Zulu centric lines played a large part in determining his church’s success in Natal and elsewhere. Neither Wesleyanism nor Zulu culture (nor the influence of William Leshega), though, helps explain Shembe’s emergence in 1911-1913.

The argument in this article—that Shembe obtained his sense of divine calling, his faith healing techniques, and his need to reshape his past from Lake and the AFM—is a new view. Techniques adopted were critical to Isaiah Shembe’s initial attempts to create the Nazarite church. Vilikazi, based on his

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88 For information regarding Meseni Qwabe’s role in the Bambatha Rebellion, see S Marks, *Reluctant rebellion: the 1906-8 disturbances in Natal* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 227-30.

89 I Hexham (ed.) *The story of Isaiah Shembe, II...*, pp. 107-109.

90 L Gunner, “Meshack Hadebe’s testimony”, *Man of Heaven...*, p. 161. In this case of this particular fraud, Shembe actually combined the use the Lake-derived con techniques of precognition, tumor extraction, fake cripple, and supernatural showdown in a highly novel way.

91 J Cabrita, *Text and authority...*, pp. 3-12; L Gunner, *Man of heaven...*, Introduction; Sundkler, *Zulu Zion...*, Ch. 5; A Vilikazi et al, *Shembe...*

1950s research on the Nazarites, concluded that “one of the biggest attractions in the Shembe church was that Shembe was a healer.”<sup>92</sup> Most of the healing appeared to have been staged rather than being miraculous. Vilikazi also notes that the Nazarite faithful “believe in the supernatural credentials of Isaiah Shembe; that he was sanctified by the visions and voices that spoke to him and gave him heavenly power and authority and power to do what he did; and to perform miracles. Isaiah Shembe’s visions and voices have become an important and sacred lore of the church.”<sup>93</sup> Shembe’s sophistication as a healer, apparent from the very beginning of his entry into Natal, makes it obvious that he could not have been a passive, occasional observer brought up in a Zionist milieu. Only somebody who could have taken part in, or observed faith healings up close, could have had his success. Likewise, his reshaped biography, with its echoes of Charles Parham and John G Lake, among others, was highly effective in establishing his charisma.

My reading of the evidence is that Shembe was a naïve, aspiring evangelist prior to 1910. A year, however, spent traveling with AFM evangelists (such as Lake) was transformative. Activities such as interpreting, taking part in staged miracles, and studying from the side lines the new forms of evangelism brought to South Africa by the AFM, led him to see the way for him to become a successful religious leader in his own right. That Shembe’s motivations went beyond the purely religious also seems evident. Dube described a number of sly means by which Shembe obtained money from his followers and believed that obtaining money was Shembe’s primary motivation. The latter “was very clever in extracting money from people.” The history of Shembe and his dynastic successors offer grounds for believing him to be an opportunist who created the Nazarite church primarily for his own and his family’s interests.

Another conclusion that can be drawn is to place the Nazarites squarely within the Zionist tradition. As Sundkler demonstrated decades ago, southern Africa’s Zionist churches were derived from or inspired by John Alexander Dowie’s Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion. While Sundkler always labeled the Nazarites as a “Zionist” church due to certain doctrinal similarities they shared with the rest of the movement, he nevertheless maintained that these similarities did “not” derive from any formal association with Dowie’s church or its AFM successor. Instead, the Nazarite church coincidentally arose independently in Natal at the same time that other Zionist churches

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<sup>92</sup> A Vilikazi et al, *Shembe...*, p. 44.

<sup>93</sup> A Vilikazi et al, *Shembe...*, p. 130.

were springing up in other parts of South Africa.<sup>94</sup> Given that Shembe was involved with the Apostolic Faith Mission for a year before setting off to Natal, his Nazarite movement needs to be located squarely in the Zionist tradition.

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<sup>94</sup> B Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets...*, pp. 48-50.