

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Joseph Battat
Carole Beaulieu
Mary Beausoleil
Richard Dudman
Peter Geithner
Gary Hartshorn
Kitty Hempstone
Will Knowland
Samuel Levy
Mildred Marcy
Peter Bird Martin
Joel Millman
Edmund H. Sutton
Steven Maly
Warren Unna

HONORARY TRUSTEES

A. Doak Barnett
David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

The Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

SFG-9 1995
subSAHARAN AFRICA

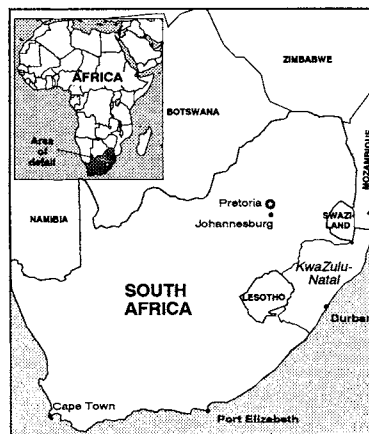
'Shembe' Is the Way

BY SHARON F. GRIFFIN

DURBAN, South Africa

August 1995

Some 30 kilometers north of Durban is a vast, sprawling shantytown called Inanda. It is wretchedly poor and houses perhaps half a million people. Desperate as it is, the valley of Inanda has been home to many outstanding personalities in South Africa's history — educator John Langalibalele Dube, president of the South Africa Native National Congress, which later became the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923; A.W.G. Champion, mastermind behind the Natal branch of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of the 1920s; and Mohandas Gandhi, who developed the political tactic of satyagraha (passive resistance) and in 1904 started a self-help settlement scheme in Phoenix on the eastern edge of Inanda.

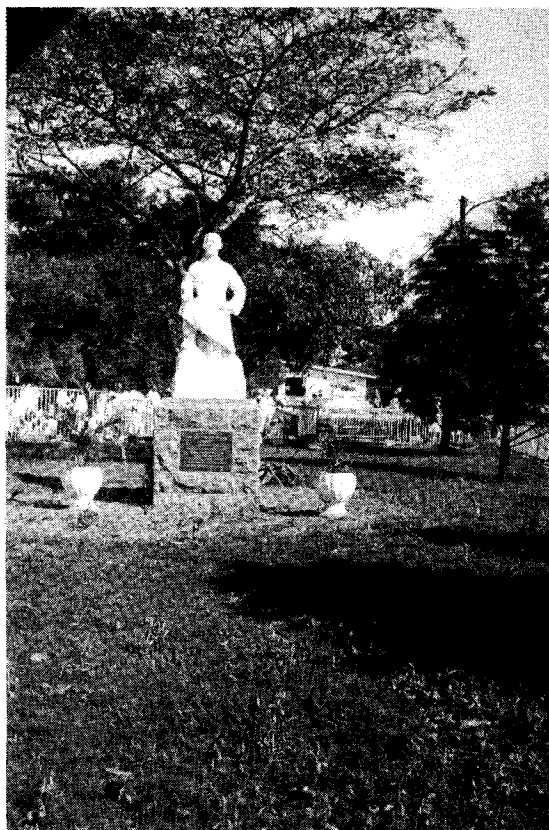


Inanda is also the birthplace of the Nazareth Baptist Church (*iBandla lamaNazaretha*), founded in 1910 by the prophet Isaiah Shembe, a religious and, some say, political leader who believed that God sent him to the Zulus just as He sent Jesus to the Jews and Mohammed to the Muslims. Shembe established his church against overwhelming odds — American and European missionaries resentful of his Africanized vision of religion; legislators and landowners determined to dispossess Africans of their land and labor. Indeed, Shembe formed the church only four years after the crushing of the Bambatha Rebellion, so named because a chief named Bambatha of the Zondi in the Umvoti district in Natal led an uprising against a colonial poll-tax that served to undermine the Zulu homestead economy. Moreover, following the rebellion, the Natal government deposed the Zulu king, Dinuzulu, for harboring rebels.

The colonial onslaught intensified after passage of the 1913 Natives Land Act, which laid down the principle of territorial segregation. The law prohibited Africans from buying or leasing land outside of reserves already set aside for their occupation. So when the prophet rose to prominence, the Zulu people needed healing, and Isaiah Shembe is perhaps best remembered for his power to heal.

Despite the turbulence of yesteryear and now, Shembe's church lives. Today, it is one of the largest black churches in South Africa with a membership of at least 400,000 and perhaps

Sharon F. Griffin is an ICWA fellow studying the language, culture and politics of the Zulu people, of KwaZulu-Natal.



A statue of Isaiah Shembe, the founder of the Nazareth Baptist Church, is located near church offices at the small village settlement of Ebuhleni. A wrought-iron fence prevents viewers from getting too close.

as many as 2.5 million. The religious center of the church is Ebuhleni, which in Zulu means place of beauty. Ebuhleni is a dusty, water-starved village teetering on the slope of a hill within Inanda. On Oct. 8, a quarter of a million Shembe faithfuls gathered at Ebuhleni to bury their spiritual leader, Bishop Amos Khula Shembe, a son and successor to Isaiah Shembe.

I arrived at Ebuhleni at 6:30 a.m. on the day of Amos Shembe's burial with Carol Muller, an ethnomusicologist in the music department at the University of Natal. Carol is a South African who earned her doctorate at New York University on the historical importance of women in the Shembe church. The title of her dissertation is *Nazarite Dance and Dreams: The Sacralization of Time, Space and the Female Body in South Africa*. She collected women's stories, studied the link between ritual performance and women's bodies, and examined the relationship between the church calendar and rituals exclusive to virgin girls. Additionally, she examined why older women join the church.

Less than 20 years ago, Ebuhleni was grazing ground, thick with bush. Now you'll find there church buildings, Shembe's house, a dance ground, a cattle

enclosure, a statue of Isaiah Shembe and lots of huts, most of which are made of plywood, foil-lined packaging material or mud, rock and logs.

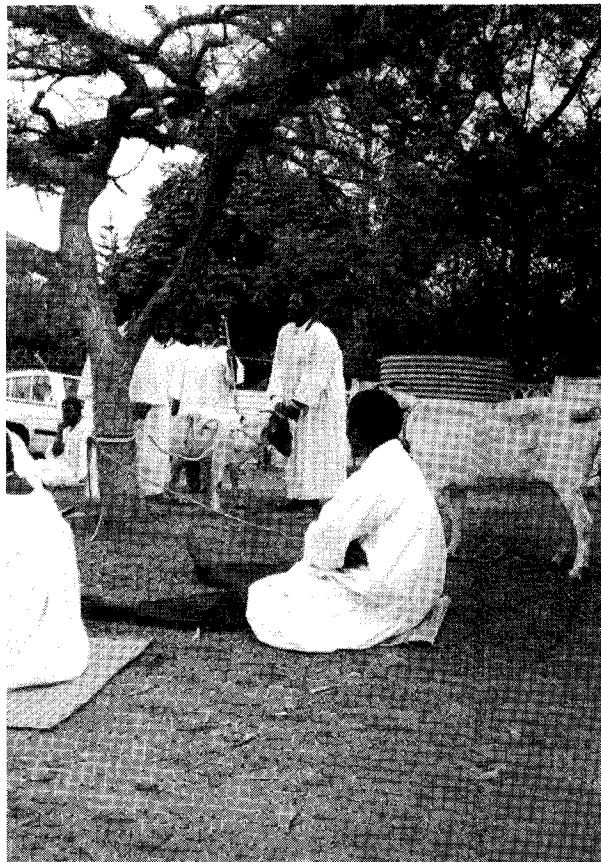
Ebuhleni is considered a holy place. No shoes are worn there. So when I arrived, I removed mine. The practice of going without shoes apparently comes from Moses' experience when he went to the burning bush. God told him to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. Shembe as a prophet to the Zulus saw himself as a liberator, a Moses.

A soft, sandy road leads to the center of the religious village. Parked along the road were dozens of yellow-and-green armored police vehicles. The swarm of police had descended on Ebuhleni for two reasons: 1) President Nelson Mandela would be attending the funeral; and 2) because violence erupted following the 1976 death of Johannes Galilee Shembe, the first successor to Isaiah. At a memorial service a year after Johannes Galilee's death a fight broke out and five people lost their lives.

Also along the road were scores of women balancing buckets of water on their heads or in one or both hands. All had stayed overnight at the village and needed water for both bathing and cooking. Carol



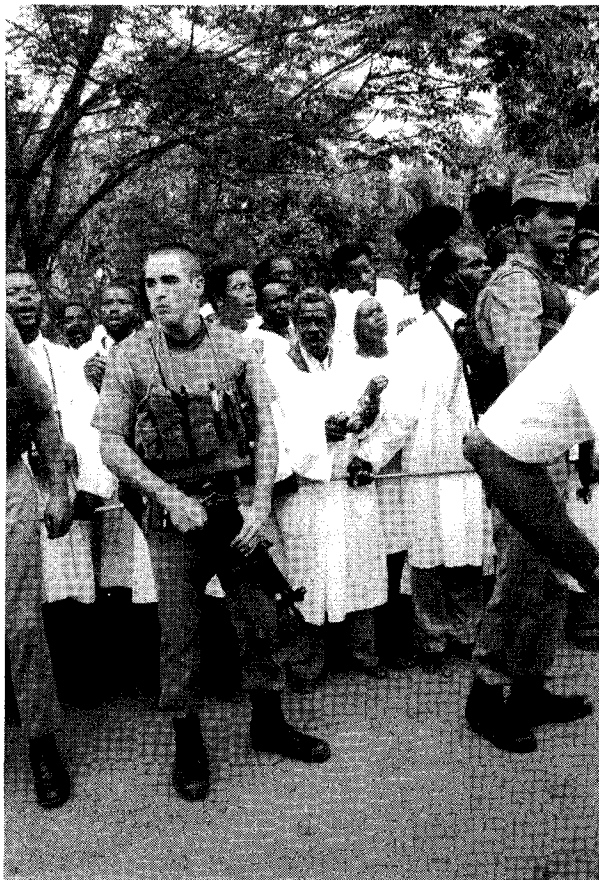
Women from a Shembe temple in the Durban township of KwaMashu prepared food for President Nelson Mandela and other dignitaries who attended the funeral of Amos Shembe. Goat meat was on the menu.



and I entered a tent where women from a Shembe temple in the township of KwaMashu busied themselves with the preparation of food for dignitaries scheduled to arrive later in the day. We slipped on aprons and squeezed behind a table weighted with big pots and bowls. I sliced tomatoes, onions, and green and red chili peppers. A woman introduced as Gugu instructed me to mix the thinly sliced tomatoes into a bowl of lettuce and cucumber. Next I spooned into decorative glass bowls the salads stored in the

pots — beet root salad; a salad of potatoes, green peas and mayonnaise; a salad of diced tomato, onion and chili peppers, and so on. I washed sprigs of mint and arranged them on trays of fried chicken and, when finished with that, I helped carry heavy buckets of rice to the back of the tent, where women stood over boiling iron pots.

This went on until shortly before 9 a.m. when a bell rang, signaling the start of a morning, open-air



An estimated 250,000 Shembe followers attended the funeral of Amos Shembe. Space was so tight that hundreds sat on the roofs of huts.

service. I cleaned my hands and followed Carol to a grassy area where the women of the church pray. (Their prayer area is separate from the men's. The segregation of the sexes in the church congregation is apparently based on traditional patterns of Zulu social organization.)

All there — men and women alike — wore white cloth smocks. Some women also wore white cloth around their shoulders, and young girls draped

white cloth around their heads. White-painted stones marked the literal and spiritual boundary of the praying ground. Devotees entered the ground through a break in the rocks. The women bowed as they entered and so did I. Women outnumber men in the Shembe church, and I cannot guess how many tens of thousands were assembled there on the ground with their grass prayer mats. However many, they were nearly silent in their movements, like cats.



Unmarried girls in the Shembe Church have seven different dancing uniforms that may be worn, while married women have only one dancing uniform. Married or unmarried, all carry a closed shield in the left hand and closed umbrella in the right. These are used in the symbolic fight against evil. Teen-age maidens do not cover their breasts because to do so is interpreted in Zulu culture as hiding a loss of virtue. Unmarried mothers are not allowed to dance for Jehovah.



Carol and I sat some ten rows behind a gum tree with a loudspeaker hanging from it. Behind us thousands of women continued to spread their mats. It seemed to defy logic that so many people in so small a space could move with such discipline as to hardly make a noise. Not only that, but all along the tight pathways in the village and, even on the roofs of huts, men and women left their handbags, luggage and camera equipment out in the open, without the slightest worry that a thief might walk away with their valuables. The order, peace and discipline at Ebuhleni contrasted dramatically with the reality beyond its borders. The province of KwaZulu-Natal is a close second to the province of Gauteng in murder, armed robbery, and motor vehicle thefts, not to mention an up-

surge in gun trading and rape in the first six months of this year. Figures show that in KwaZulu-Natal 96 people are murdered each week and 114 are injured in attempted murders. Inanda is one of the worst areas for crime. Between January of 1994 and March of this year, it had the highest number of reported murders (338) and rapes (276) in the greater Durban area.

Two women seated directly in front of me clutched a Shembe hymnal, *Izihlabelelo Zamanazaretha*. The book contains prayers, hymns and dance songs composed primarily by Isaiah Shembe but also by his son, Johannes Galilee. The hymnal is in Zulu and it was published for the first time in 1940. (A couple of Shembe devotees told me that Isaiah got the songs di-



This woman is wearing some of the beautiful beadwork unique to the Shembe Church. This photo and the two on page 5, were taken at the July festival.

rectly from God through prophetic visions. Like Abraham, he supposedly had direct communication with God.)

From the loudspeaker, I heard the voice of a preacher who led congregants in prayer and song. Women kneeled in an upright position, bodies straight, facing the voice. An overcast sky saved us from the sun's hot hands. A breeze fanned us and tickled the leaves of the gum trees scattered around the grassy area. The praying ended 'round about 10 o'clock when the voice announced in Zulu the premature end of the service. He instructed us to wait for the arrival of President Mandela.

Numbers of outside observers believe that the Nazareth Baptist Church is closely aligned with the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which opposes Mandela's African National Congress (ANC). Whether that is true is unclear, though it is a reasonable assumption. The church officially recognizes traditional leaders, the majority of whom in this province align themselves with the IFP. Indeed, the Qadi Tribal Authority, presided over by Chief Mzonjani Ngcobo, voted to give Shembe the land for Ebuhleni. (Ngcobo was baptized a Nazarite in 1969.) Nevertheless, Shembe

church leaders insist that the church is nonpolitical. Mthembeni Phineas Mpanza is a preacher and church liaison officer. He stood with other men near the house in which Amos Shembe lived. The residence is secured by a concrete wall and wrought-iron fencing topped with glistening barbed wire.

Mr. Mpanza said the church permits its members to vote. However, they are not allowed to get involved in political activities. The church abhors the political killings taking place in the province as a result of the struggle for supremacy between the IFP and the ANC, he said. From 1985 to the end of June 1995, 23,272 people have died from politically-related violence in South Africa. Of these, 12,053 have been killed in KwaZulu-Natal alone.

On the Sunday of the funeral, an estimated 5,000 residents in the Durban townships of Clermont and KwaDabeka blocked entrances to those areas after rumors spread that busloads of Inkatha supporters were coming to launch a branch at a local hostel. In actuality, the IFP had postponed the rally after security forces warned that their resources were overextended because of the Shembe funeral. However, the message apparently did not reach the residents because armed men unaware of the postponement ordered individuals to prepare themselves against an IFP invasion. The Shembe leadership specifically decided against inviting any politicians to the funeral service for fear of just the kind of thing that happened in Clermont and KwaDabeka. Indeed, Mr. Mandela's name did not appear on the official program.

In his speech to the Nazarites, Mr. Mandela, speaking alternately in Zulu and in English, made an appeal for peace. KwaZulu-Natal continues to be ravaged by political violence, he said. "In 1990 when I came out of prison I called on the people in this province to throw their weapons in the sea. I want to repeat that call today, encouraged by the knowledge that even while violence persists, the signs of hope are growing." Mr. Mandela also encouraged Shembe devotees to support police in their attempts to combat crime. Without police, forget any chance of peace in this country, he said, emphasizing that the police of today are not the police of the old apartheid regime. In an apparent reference to the killing of four policeman in the Natal Midlands on Sept. 25, he added that the government will not tolerate such lawlessness. (Between January and August of this year, 44 policemen in KwaZulu-Natal were murdered while doing their jobs.)

Worries about violence and political turmoil aside, extreme reserve characterized the mood at Ebuhleni on the day of the funeral. There were no tears, shouts

God is worshipped through dance and collective prayer in the Shembe church. Nazarite dance is at a measured pace, with tight discipline. Individual self-display is not allowed. The men's dancing uniforms consist of three styles: One form of dress is traditional, with men and boys clad in feathers, fur and skins. Young boys may also wear red tartan kilts with white shirts, long black rugby socks and black boots. Young men and boys also wear black skirts that fall above the knees, white long-sleeve shirts with tasseled hemlines and white pith helmets. At the July festival where these photos were taken Shembe worshipers told me, spontaneously, "Shembe has given us back our culture." I had a hard time reconciling that statement with the white pith helmets and scotch tartan skirts.





Shembe followers attended the funeral heavily armed with camera equipment.

or shows of emotional stress. Such was the case on Saturday, as well. About mid-day Saturday a hearse carrying Amos Shembe's body drove into the village and it was only then that I saw a momentary display of grief. Women kneeling along a section of the road began weeping and saying, "Baba (father) is here." Shembe men designated as crowd monitors moved quickly to silence the women. They raised their hands, without uttering a word, and the women wiped their tears and silenced themselves.

The general quiet at Ebuhleni was in stark contrast to what I witnessed on my first visit there in July. The Nazarites' church year oscillates between two great festivals, the July festival at Ebuhleni, and a January festival on the Nazarite holy mountain, Nhlalakazi.

In July, the faithful gather for a month of worship, dance, healing, baptism-by-immersion and "washing of the feet." An estimated 8,000 participated in this year's festival but it seemed like tens of thousands. Indeed, their sheer numbers overwhelmed me. I felt the way I did when I was a small child and accidentally fell into a pool. Unable to swim, I sank deeper and deeper, drawn under by the forceful sway of the water.

It wasn't the crowd alone that gave me that sensation, but rather the organized chaos happening all around me: It was the beating of drums, the blowing of whistles and the blare of what sounded like hunting horns that pricked my consciousness like tiny needles under the skin. It was the sight of hundreds of "maidens" and older women jammed along the main road selling cold drinks, pineapple, green peppers, white robes, beadwork, straw mats, jars of Vaseline for healing, and photographs of Shembe. It was the slow procession of men in red, pleated skirts squeezing bare-footed pedestrians off the rocky road. It was the thousands of people dancing for Jehovah, all dressed in distinctive uniforms and divided into distinct age groups — unmarried girls, newly-wedded women, old women, young men and old men. It was the startle I got when some 3,000 kneeling people suddenly shouted in waves, "*uyingcwele*," signifying that someone had been healed. (Literally, *uyingcwele* means, You are holy, or Thou art holy.) It was the intensity of the heat, the dust that circled in the air, the grains of sand underneath my feet. It was the newness of everything.

No one knows for sure when Isaiah Shembe was born, whether 1867 or 1870. His teachings combined Christian and Zulu beliefs, and he believed that all verses in the Old Testament referring to Nazarites applied to his people, the *AmaNazarethas*. In particular, his teachings came from the Book of Numbers, Chapter 6. His vision of religion offended not only white religious sects but the emerging black elite of that time. Shembe encouraged his followers to wear their beads and skins, largely for pragmatic reasons — most couldn't afford Western clothing. He also incorporated indigenous African dance into his teachings. Still today, dance is one of the highest forms of worship in the Shembe church.

By all scholarly accounts, Shembe was remarkable. He traveled far and wide in Natal, mostly on foot and by ox wagon, healing the sick and preaching to all who would hear him. In 1916 he established the Nazarite village of *Ekuphakameni*, the Zulu word for an elevated or high place. In 1935, he died from fever after standing for three hours in a cold river baptizing converts. The value of his real estate at the time of his death was estimated at some 25,000 to 35,000 pounds. He owned 13 farms, of which some were only 10 acres, others 800 to 1,000. The acreage has increased since his time.

Leadership passed to his son, Johannes Galilee Shembe, then a teacher at Adams College in Amanzimtoti, which is south of Durban. Johannes Shembe died Dec. 19, 1976 but, unlike his father, he failed to leave a will naming a successor. As a result, court

fight and clashes ensued between Amos Shembe, Johannes' older brother, and Londa Shembe, Johannes' son. The power struggle led to a split in the church. A majority of the congregation supported Amos Shembe; they fled *Ekuphakameni* and established a new Jerusalem about 12 miles away at Ebuhleni. Londa Shembe, an ANC-aligned lawyer, remained at *Ekuphakameni*, though his support base was smaller. He was murdered on Friday, April 7, 1989, shot in the mouth, right shoulder and left arm. He was 48.

Long before attending the closing day of the July festival, I was aware of the name Shembe. That's because *Shembe* is the way bumper stickers read on lots of local taxi-vans. When I asked friends about Shembe, few had positive things to say. Furthermore, they described the Nazarites as poor, illiterate, traditionalist Zulus. That's not my impression, however. At both the July festival and the funeral, I met Shembe followers who are lawyers, teachers, preachers and university students, as well as ones who are domestics and street traders. One of the most pleasant Shembe devotees I met was pregnant journalist named Charity, who covered the funeral for the *Sowetan*, the country's largest daily. In other words, I've found Shembe worshippers to be no more or less poor, middle-class, illiterate or educated than the Zulu population as a whole here in KwaZulu-Natal. Furthermore, not all are Zulus. A small percentage of worshippers are Xhosa and Sotho speakers, and the church claims followers in Cape Province, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. In its early years, the church also claimed a number of Indian followers. Indeed, Johannes Galilee Shembe credited Indians with selling his father land when whites refused. If there are any Indian devotees today, I didn't spot them either in July or at the funeral.

Take Siduduzo Mngadi, for example. He is an evangelist in the church. (Among men in the church, the hierarchy shifts from minister to evangelist to preacher.) The evangelists were easily identified at the funeral by the long, deep-green cloaks they wore over their white smocks. Most Shembe worshippers are born into the church. However, Mr. Mngadi converted almost seven years ago while riding a morning train from the black township of KwaMashu to work in Durban. For years, he said, he ignored the praying and singing Nazarites who often shared a compartment with him. Instead, he liked to read a newspaper. "Why won't they let me have my peace?" he said he often thought to himself. Worse, he said he considered the Shembe adherents as "heathens, primitive."

But then one day he said the newspaper closed (it-

self), "like a butterfly closes its wings." To demonstrate how it happened, Mr. Mngadi put his small hands together, palms open, and slowly folded them. That was the day and the way he said he came to Shembe.

Mr. Mngadi stands about 5 feet 2 inches and weighs probably no more than 150 pounds. His tightly-coiled hair is white with a tinge of yellow and a few stray flecks of gray. He has a white beard and mustache; wears spectacles; and when he flashes his pearl-white teeth looks decades younger than his 60 years. All Shembe men are unshaven, a practice apparently derived from the Bible, Numbers 6:5, which talks about "...no razor shall come upon his head."

Mr. Mngadi's first name, Siduduzo means "the one who comforts." His mother miscarried twice before delivering him; thus, the name Siduduzo. Sadly, both of his parents died before he was one month old. "I only know their pictures," he told me. "My father was very handsome, my mother beautiful." He says they were poisoned.

The surname, Mngadi, means "the one who tends the garden" and Mr. Mngadi ventured to speculate that the reference may be to the garden of Eden. The Shembe evangelist is twice married, the father of four sons and one daughter ranging in age from 28 to five. To hear him speak, however, it's easy to assume that he has only one child — "my little girl," who is 13.

"Are you happy you converted?," I asked during one of our occasional afternoon chats.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I would not change for all the gold in the world."

I chewed on his words and then asked, "But what makes Shembe worth more than gold?"

Mr. Mngadi leaned his head against the back of a couch, and gazed up. "Okay, well," he said, then paused. "Let me say I feel a sense of belonging." Then he added, springing forward, "you know I am a black man."

I shook my head knowingly, as if no further explanation was needed.

Actually, I didn't need more elaboration at that point because of previous conversations with him. Indeed, during our first meeting at his office at a school that trains young adults for jobs in the shipping industry, Mr. Mngadi helped me understand why for him Shembe is the "black man's prophet." He said Jesus was the prophet for Jews,

Twice, Mr. Mngadi has told me about a newspaper story that left a deep impression on him. The article appeared sometime in the 1950s or maybe the early '60s. He can't recall which decade. In any case, he recalled this much: A black man found his way into a Dutch Reform Church. He wandered half-way down a center aisle, and fell down on his knees to pray. The pastor and congregation became outraged at the mere sight of the man and proceeded to beat him mercilessly. Mr. Mngadi offered the story as evidence that the races must worship separately. Blacks must have their own prophet and whites theirs. "Thou shall not worship false prophets," he told me, then added: "I have never dreamed of Jesus. Of Mary. Of Joseph. But I have dreamed of Shembe." And dreams are real in traditional Zulu culture.

On the desk in his office, which doubles as a classroom for students, is a tattered Bible. Mr. Mngadi asked me to turn to Deuteronomy 18, verse 18. I read aloud: "I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him." I lifted my eyes from the page and looked at Mr. Mngadi, who nodded at me, the way a parent does when he or she believes, however inaccurately, that a child's question has been answered.

Next, the evangelist proceeded to make the case that Shembe, like Jesus, was a healer. He told me the story of an Indian woman who sought Shembe's help because she was infertile. Shembe supposedly cured her and the woman gave birth to several children. Mr. Mngadi also related a story from 1918 when supposedly the waters of the Indian Ocean flooded the city. He said Shembe looked out towards the ocean and commanded its water to stay within its bounds. Miraculously, the flooding ceased.

"Turn to St. Mark, Chapter 4, verse 37 to 41," Mr. Mngadi told me.

I read: "And there rose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat unto the ship, so that it was now full. And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith? And they feared exceedingly and said to another, What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

The Nazarites' Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and runs to sundown on Saturday. During this time, no fire is lit, which, in effect, means no cooking. "No tea," Mr. Mngadi said. They don't eat pork, don't drink beer and don't own dogs. Dogs bark in the middle of the night, and Shembe adherents believe that angels visit during the night, bringing blessings, Mr. Mngadi said. Many also do not eat chicken because the bird is considered a scavenger. One of Mr. Mngadi's colleagues recently treated him to a lunch of chicken and chips, and when a chicken bone stuck in his throat he took it as a sign that he shouldn't eat the lowly fowl.

The Nazarites practice polygamy; Isaiah Shembe supposedly believed that European monogamy was an invention of St. Paul. At the funeral, I received a marriage proposal from a married man who is as old as my father, if not older. He declared his intention to pay *lobola* (bride price) and he even offered me a new surname. Mr. Mngadi whispered to me not to worry about the old man's proposal. He assured me that he would hide my whereabouts from the man. "Besides," he said, "I saw you first."

Later, I followed Mr. Mngadi to meet his wife. We walked through a section of the village where women and girls live temporarily during festivals. All residential areas in the village are segregated by sex and age. The path leading to Mrs. Mngadi's hut snaked behind Shembe's house. We passed a cattle enclosure, a building where marriage proposals take place and a mound of trash. We arrived at the hut to find that Mrs. Mngadi was not there. Instead, a large woman lay sprawled out, resting, near the locked hut, which had on its door a sign that said, *Dumisani uJehova*, meaning Praise Jehovah.

Mr. Mngadi and the woman talked for about three minutes in Zulu. As we walked back, I asked him about their conversation. At first, he only told me that she said his wife was not there. When I asked if that was all she said, he answered, no. He said the woman also told him that Bishop Amos Shembe, less than two weeks dead, had already blessed him. He has sent you a new, beautiful young wife, she supposedly said. Your wife will be pleased to have her help. I laughed out loud when Mr. Mngadi told me the woman's words. Days later, however, I paused to consider that Mr. Mngadi often says to me, "I am praying for you." I couldn't help but wonder if maybe the words have a double meaning, specifically, I am praying *for* you.

Isaiah Shembe also introduced circumcision, reviving a custom abolished amongst Zulus by Shaka. He

prohibited premarital sex and promoted chastity as an ideal. (There are lots of unwed mothers in the church, however.) He discouraged the Zulu cattle culture, the use of *muti* (herbal medicine), and *sangomas* (diviners) are not allowed in the church.

Mr. Mngadi also told me that ancestors play an essential role in the lives of *AmaNazaretha*. They are somehow linked to God, who is near, yet far, and the prophet Shembe is sort of a gatekeeper to Heaven. He communes with God and the ancestors. Worshipers whose ancestors were warriors, or murderers, for example, apparently go through a long process of cleansing. Without this cleansing, there's a belief that the living will suffer constant affliction, everything from joblessness to car crashes.

Among the Nazarites, there is a strong crafts-based work ethic and many women in the church support themselves by creating and selling a range of items, not only at festivals such as the one in July but also to tourists along the Durban beachfront. With 400,000 members, the Shembe church conceivably has the potential to economically uplift individuals in the church and, by extension, the church community. After all, devotees make and sell their own garments, beaded ornaments, animal-skin cloth, musical instruments, grass prayer mats, etc.

Begging, a growing industry among whites, blacks, Indians and coloreds in Durban is not allowed by the church. There is a morning prayer in the Shembe hymnal that says, "Grant us diligence, Lord Jehovah, in the works necessary to sustain us. Let not the slumber of indolence be our garb. Be thou not lazy, for laziness is a sin. A lazy person is like unto a dog that goes begging for food from the people. After this prayer, take thou thy hoe and plant what will sustain thee, and desist from begging from others."

President Nelson Mandela praised the church for ritualizing work. He told those gathered at the funeral that to A.K. Shembe and other church leaders spiritual healing alone was not sufficient. The creation of economic assets to better the lives of its people has always been central to the church's work. Critical to its activities has been the principle of self-reliance. This principle remains of importance today, said Mandela, to our national task of building a better life for all.

There is a taboo on medicine in the church. Oddly enough, however, on the Sunday of the funeral two medical emergency vehicles parked near Shembe's house. At least two women who appeared to have

fainted received medical attention. Ordinarily, however, the Nazarites rely on petroleum jelly and water blessed by Shembe to cure whatever ails them. At the July festival, maidens stood everywhere hawking jars of petroleum jelly. The jars costs about \$1, and worshippers paid another 25 to 50 cents to get the Vaseline blessed.

Mr. Mngadi offered to bring me a jar when recently I had the flu. I couldn't help but laugh to myself at the offer. Little did he know that petroleum jelly is not new to me. Growing up in the American South, little black girls like me were polished from head to toe with Vaseline petroleum jelly. No self-respecting mother sent her child out into the world with ashy skin and a dry scalp. And, on a Sunday, even your patent-leather shoes shined with petroleum jelly. How ironic, I thought to myself, that Vaseline has played such a strangely significant role in the lives of so many black people.

Amos Shembe died Monday, Sept. 25, reportedly of heart trouble. He was 89. Some say he had one wife, others say two. No one I spoke with at the funeral seemed to know for sure. (News of a second wife caught Carol off guard; she said she knew of only one.) How many children he fathered is also unclear. In general conversation with some of the Nazarites, I was told that he had three sons but only one is alive today. Then again I was also told that he had many, many children — how many no one knows. Were the other many children girls? I asked. No, people told me. Some were boys. I could only conclude that the children Amos Shembe claimed as sons were from his marriage(s). (Johannes Galilee Shembe, Amos's brother, had more than 50 wives and 100 children.)

Whatever the reality, Amos Shembe's only surviving son, 61-year-old Vimbeni Shembe, was named his successor at the funeral. Rogers Ngcobo, a local liquor-store owner and self-proclaimed family friend, announced the new black messiah to nearly everyone's surprise. Indeed, the day before the funeral I spoke with Mr. Mpanza, the church liaison officer, who insisted that no such announcement would be made. Instead, he said the church leadership planned to name a successor only after examining Shembe's will. If the will failed to name a successor, church leaders would consult to make a decision. Apparently, there was a hidden hand behind the premature announcement. Ngcobo's brother, IFP-aligned chief Mzonjani Ngcobo, supported Vimbeni Shembe. Reportedly, the chief began reminding devotees a few days before the funeral that Ebuhleni was his land.¹

1. Eveleth, Ann. The Politics of Choosing a Messiah's Heir. *Mail and Guardian*. 13-19 Oct. 1995: 7

Already, there has been talk that Vimbeni Shembe is not the right choice. Some church members have met to consider an alternative leader. Most were not aware that he (Vimbeni Shembe) would be a leader, Mr. Mngadi said. He just shot from the blue.

Mr. Mngadi, other evangelists and church leaders met the successor four days after the burial, and Mr. Mngadi described the meeting as exhilarating. It was not his first meeting with Vimbeni Shembe. Mr. Mngadi said he has known him all along, talked with him, without hesitation. Despite that fact, the evangelist said he could not look the new prophet in the eye at the meeting. Instead, he kneeled before him, humbled in his presence.

Isaiah Shembe and his son, Johannes, are both buried at *Ekuphakameni*. White stones mark where they were laid to rest. Amos Shembe's grave is at Ebuhleni. He wasn't buried in the coffin that held his body. Instead, the coffin was broken down, plank by plank, nail by nail, and lowered into the ground. His body was wrapped in ox hide and slid into a space carved in the side of the burial hole. Jesus was not buried in burial clothes, Mr. Mngadi told me. Blankets, sheets, animal skins, a suit and other personal belongings of Amos Shembe were also lowered into the ground. And lo and behold, while all this ceremony took place, it just so happened that thunder and lightning filled the late afternoon sky, just like when Jesus died, Mr. Mngadi proclaimed. □



President Nelson Mandela on the right. Shembe evangelist Siduduzo Mngadi, with white hair and glasses, on the far left. The photo appeared on the front page of the Oct. 9-11 edition of the Zulu-Language newspaper, Ilanga.

KWESOKUNXELE: Ingxenywe yezinkulungwane zabantu abangama-lungu eBandla lamaNazareth (KwaShembe) ebezihambele umngcwabo kaMfu. A.K. Shembe izolo ngeSonto. Bekutheleke abantu ababalelwa ngaphezulu kuka-100 000. **KWESOKUDLA:** UMongame-li wakuleli, uDr Nelson Mandela, kwesokudla esithombeni ubonaka-la nomNtwana waKwaZiphethe, uGedeon Zulu sebeyohlaliswa endaweni abebhelelwe yona ngemuva kokubona isidumbu senkosi yamaNazareth, uMfu. A.K. Shembe. Ongakwesokunxele yinkosi yamaQadi, Inkosi Mzonjani Ngcobo.

- izithombe ngu: BHEKI MAHLABA.

News

Cleric's legacy

Nazarite Church leader dies



A tussle for succession is likely after the death of Mr Amos Shembe (left), leader of the Church of Nazarites, writes **Greg Ardé**, Daily News Reporter

ZULU prophet and leader of the 400 000 strong Church of Nazarites, Mr Amos Shembe, 90, died at his Inanda home this week after heart troubles.

The death of the influential cleric is likely to prompt a leadership tussle in what is considered one of the biggest black churches in South Africa.

Church elder Mr Chancey Sibisi said the funeral and discussion around the future of the church would be held at the weekend.

"We leave the choice of leader in the hands of God. Of course the Holy Spirit can demonstrate to us through symbols who the next leader can be, but it can be difficult because you can't just enthrone anyone.

"Even our leader said when he was alive that if he named somebody to replace him that person would be killed the next day," Mr Sibisi said.

The poor health of the elderly Zulu priest earlier this year compelled thousands of his followers to abandon their traditional pilgrimage to the Nhlankakazi mountain in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

Nazarites annually walk almost 100km from their Durban stronghold near Inanda to the mountain in rural Ndwedwe to reaffirm a vow by church founder Isaiah Shembe, the father of Amos.

Isaiah, a firm believer in the Old Testament, founded eBandla lamaNazareth in 1910. Legend among some of his believers is that he jumped from the mountain, regarded as the Nazarites' Mount Sinai, and survived unscathed.

His son, Amos, was held in equally high esteem by supporters who showered him with countless gifts ranging from luxury cars to thousands of suits.



BOLD KICKER:

Controversy surrounds the manner in which a new leader has been chosen for KwaZulu-Natal's largest African church.

Although Vimbeni Shembe, seen left outside his palace, has been named as the successor to his father, Amos Shembe, who died of natural causes a fortnight ago, the Church of Nazareth is split over the decision. Some members of the congregation refuse to accept the new leader, claiming Amos Shembe had no authority to choose his successor.

The new leader, Vimbeni Shembe, 61, said he was trained as a teacher in the 60s but never practised as one. Instead he had worked as a production controller for an industrial company for 10 years. Mini Shembe, son of Johannes, brother of Amos Shembe and the last Shembe to lead a united church, said he foresaw trouble ahead for the church because of the appointment.

"Amos Shembe was only acting as a regent and had no right to appoint his son.

"Vimbeni was not in line for the throne.

The decision to install him was undemocratic and was the work of one man," he said.

REFERENCES:

Holy Church of Nazareth Baptists: Rise Up and Dance and Praise God. Durban: Local History Museum, 1992.

Khashane, Force and Mthandeni Namba. Shembe, the Church of Miracles. *Pace* Oct. 1995: 20-23.

Morcom, Geraldine M. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Religious and Commercial Significance of Church Adornment in the Nazareth Baptist Church of Amos Shembe.* Diss. University of Natal, Durban 1994.

Oosthuizen, G.C. *Succession Conflict Within the Church of Nazarites*, Durban, 1981.

Oosthuizen, G.C. *The Theology of a South African Messiah: An Analysis of the Hymnal of The Church of the Nazarites*, Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1967.

Oosthuizen, G.C. *Isaiah Shembe and the Zulu World View, History of Religions* 8(1):1-30, 1968.

Preston-Whyte, Eleanor. *Speaking With Beads: Zulu Arts from Southern Africa.* 1994.

Sundkler, Bengt. *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 2nd. ed., London 1961.

Vilakazi, Absolom. *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society* (with Bongani Mthethwa & Mthembeni Mpanza), Johannesburg, Skotaville, 1986.

Watkins, Eleanor. *Traveller's Joy.* London 1948.

Hisham Ahmed. Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

Adam Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Cynthia Caron. With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environment, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the Buenos Aires Herald from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

Cheng Li. An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life with a Medical Degree from Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992. [EAST ASIA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

Author: Institute of Current World Affairs
Title: ICWA Letters - SubSaharan Africa
ISSN: 1083-429X

Imprint: Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Subjects: Europe/Russia; East Asia; South Asia;
Mideast/North Africa; The Americas

Chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise, Institute Fellows are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodical assessment of international events and issues.

ICWA LETTERS

ISSN 1083-429X

ICWA Letters are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755.

The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers with indexes by subscription.

Executive Director	Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator	Gary L. Hansen
Letters Coordinator	Ellen Kozak

Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net

© 1995 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation.

The information contained in this publication may not be reproduced without the writer's permission.

The Institute of Current World Affairs

4 WEST WHEELOCK STREET
HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE 03755

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Lebanon, NH 03766
Permit 130